

I'll never forget my first day in Delhi, on my first visit to India, as a huge elephant and his mahout calmly strolled along one of the main highways with an enormous bundle of leaves (possibly lunch) on his back. Throughout the Indian Subcontinent you will encounter such scenes while wild elephants still roam in large herds in the national parks of Sri Lanka and India. These captivating animals enchant so many visitors that we decided to compile a list of some of our favourite elephant encounters.

FACT FILE

These are just some of the opportunities to encounter elephants, for further details about any of the experiences mentioned please call our Indian Subcontinent Specialists on 01869 276 218.



ELEPHANT ENCOUNTER

Spend a day with an elephant

Serenity is a lovely 1920s estate bungalow situated between the coast and the hill country in Kerala. Here you can meet the wonderful Lakshmi – Kerala's best known elephant. Join Lakshmi for a stroll through the plantation, which produces rubber, spices, fruits and coffee. Elephants eat up to 250 kg of food every day and you will be able to assist the mahout in preparing the huge bundles of leaves and also scrub Lakshmi's back as she languishes in the water at bathing time.

Elephants in the wild

Sri Lanka supports a large population of domestic and wild elephants. One of the best places to see the pachyderm in the wild is by taking a jeep safari in Minneriya National Park. In the dry season, from June to September, enormous herds, sometimes of up to 300, converge on the shores of the Minneriya tank - an ancient lake built by King Mahasen in the 3rd century. A visit at any time of year, however, will be rewarded with sightings. Mothers lead their herd to the water, the whole group taking care to safeguard the baby elephants which are always flanked by adults while the mature males wander the jungle alone.

Be blessed by an elephant

At the entrance to the temple in Tamil Nadu stood a beautiful elephant, her mahout next to her chatting to one of the pilgrims. As I approached she stretched her trunk out to investigate what I was holding in my hands and seemed to be disappointed to find nothing. I thought she was interested in food, maybe a banana or two or even cake, but my guide enlightened me - this was no ordinary elephant but one that was stationed there to give pilgrims visiting the temple a blessing. So, instead of food she was looking for a few rupees in return - I dug out a 20 rupee note from my pocket which she spotted instantly and her trunk made a beeline for it. She took it gently, handed it to her mahout and then waved her trunk over my head in blessing! I couldn't resist it ... a further 40

rupees later I had been blessed three times. I don't really mind whether or not it brings me good luck, I felt very fortunate to spend a little time up close to this wonderful creature.

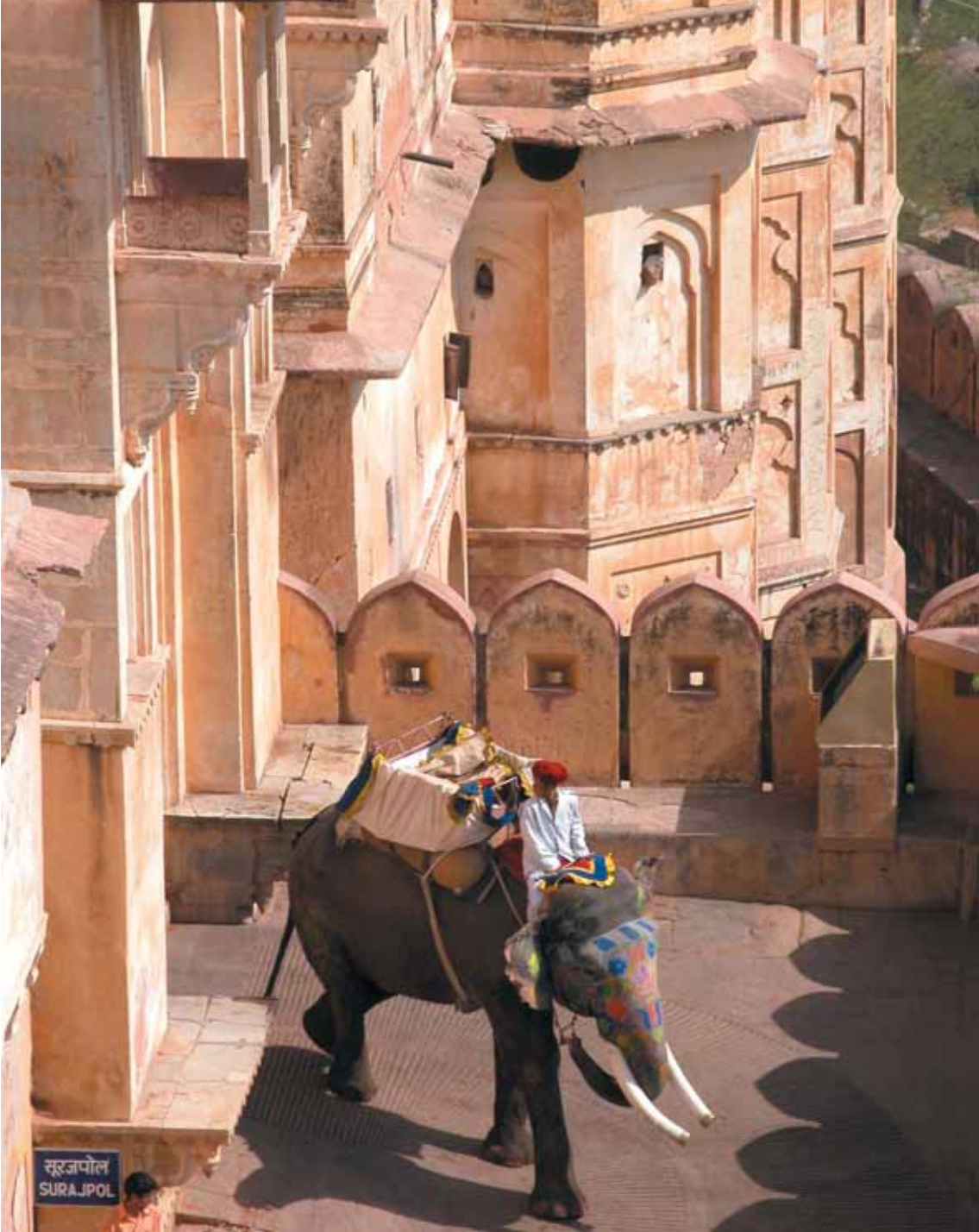
Elephant back game viewing

The elephant is the ultimate off-road vehicle and also the least intrusive way of viewing wildlife. These mighty creatures are still used throughout many of India's National Parks and encountering a tiger close up from elephant back is a humbling experience. During the morning the mahouts and elephants will track game and radio back to one of the checkpoints with details of their findings. You will then make your way to the nearest accessible point and mount the elephant for a closer look. Amongst the parks that offer elephant back game viewing are Kanha and Bandhavgarh in central India. Corbett in the north and Nagarhole in the southern state of Karnataka also offer rides through their buffer zones. Some of the lodges actually have resident elephants and perhaps the most well known is Tara, the elephant from Mark Shand's book 'Travels with my Elephant', who is at the Kipling Camp in Kanha. Although she has now retired and stepped aside for the next generation, you will still have the opportunity to bath her in the river which is a fantastic way to spend an afternoon.

Have a Maharajah moment

The climb up to the Amber Palace and its fort, is best enjoyed from the back of one of Jaipur's gentle giants. The elephants at Amber plod leisurely up the steep ramparts whilst you enjoy the views down to the lake where you are sure to see some of the elephants taking a well earned break and bath. Both in front and behind of you there will be a procession of elephants, with their colourful howdahs and painted faces.

Clare Lovelace
India Specialist



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- 1 Decorated elephant
- 2 Amber Palace, Jaipur
- 3 Elephant back tracking
- 4 Wild elephant, Sri Lanka
- 5 Tara's daily bath