



Chambal Safari Lodge - Mela Kothi National Chambal Sanctuary, India



Transformation of a 19th century heritage property into an eco-enterprise – a hub for nature and cultural heritage restoration

Mela Kothi - Chambal Safari Lodge is a shining example of how a heritage property can be transformed into a thriving eco-enterprise which is helping to restore and protect the natural and cultural heritage of a previously little-known area. Conservationists Ram Pratap Singh and Anu Dhillon have lovingly restored their 19th century family inheritance. Its surrounding 35 acres near the National Chambal Sanctuary have been transformed into a thriving habitat of woodland, pasture and water bodies. 198 species of birds, mammals and reptiles can now be spotted in and around the property.

Two International Bird Festivals in 2015 and 2016 hosted at the lodge with over 200 experts from 29 countries in 2016 have put the Chambal Valley firmly on the international conservation map to help secure its continuing protection. The lodge's Chambal Conservation Foundation is playing an active role in providing intelligence on wildlife and protecting the gharial population, a critically endangered species.

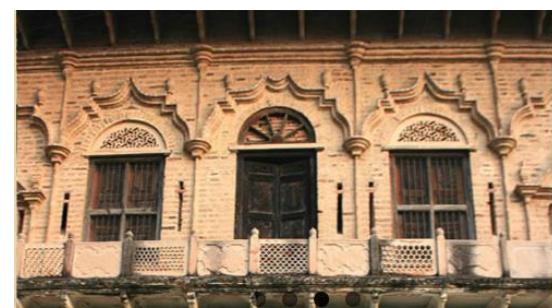


Guests benefit from the lodge's nature expertise with comprehensive checklists of birds, mammals and reptiles to look out for and guided nature walks, river, jeep and camel safaris. The lodge's team is also playing an active role in educating schoolchildren and the local community about nature and wildlife. Its annual Wildlife Conservation Week has attracted close to 20,000 children from Agra and nearby rural schools since 2004.

Birdwatching activities at Mela Kothi

Mela Kothi's enterprising efforts don't stop there. Its Foundation was instrumental in getting nearby Holipura declared a heritage village. It played a key role in initiating the restoration of the Ater Fort and has developed a Heritage Management Plan for Bateshwar, a pilgrimage site, to help the sustainable development of this historic site.

A range of new businesses and livelihood opportunities for local communities have been catalysed with their support including dhabas (eateries), homestays and guided tours. Camel safaris are operated with the help of local camel-owners, marginal farmers who formerly used their camels for ferrying illegally felled timber. The lodge is also part of an innovative 207 km bicycle highway launched in 2016 as a tourism and social outreach project connecting 92 remote villages. A further enterprise initiative is under development for the community using local waste products (rags, paper and agricultural waste) to manufacture handmade paper and generate clean power. Most of the lodge's 32 staff are local, three of them female.



Nearby Holipura declared a heritage village with guided tours opening up new livelihood opportunities for local people.

LED or CFL bulbs throughout the property and star rated appliances are used to minimize energy. The purchase of local produce is a priority to reduce carbon footprint and support local enterprise. Water conservation measures are in place to complement the lodge's rainwater harvesting, natural pathways and planting with indigenous trees and shrubs which help to replenish ground water.



Putting birdlife on the international map and protecting gharials, a critically endangered species on IUCN's Red List



More examples of good practice

		
<p>Heritage property restored; energy conserved through use of LED and CFL lights throughout and star rated appliances.</p>	<p>Guest accommodation built in traditional style using local materials. Trees planted throughout the site help to provide natural cooling.</p>	<p>Locally sourced furnishings are used to reflect local cultural heritage.</p>
		
<p>The lodge's nine years of planting between 2006-2015 drew on indigenous trees and shrubs from their six-acre on-site nursery. In July 2007 alone, 10,000 saplings were planted with the help of 100 local participants.</p>	<p>Water bodies created by the lodge harvest rainwater and aid pisciculture. Further habitat regeneration has been achieved through crafting check dams in ravines.</p>	<p>Restored landscape at Mela Kothi.</p>
		
<p>The lodge offers river safaris and nature walks.</p>	<p>Black buck jeep safaris are also offered.</p>	<p>Birdwatching outings are offered with lodge naturalists on foot and by jeep to see the Sarus Crane Conservation Reserve.</p>

 <p><i>Camel safaris provide a livelihood opportunity for marginal farmers.</i></p>	 <p><i>New enterprises have been catalysed in nearby Bateshwar for guest experiences and local livelihoods. Mela Kothi's Chambal Conservation Foundation has submitted a Heritage Management Plan to encourage sustainable development of this historic site.</i></p>	 <p><i>Nearby Holipura has been declared a heritage village with support from the Foundation and village tours by local residents catalysed to provide new livelihood opportunities.</i></p>
 <p><i>Bicycles are provided to enhance guest experience of the local area on a low carbon footprint.</i></p>	 <p><i>The lodge is part of an innovative 207 km bicycle highway providing a place to stay for cyclists; cycle excursions are also offered for those staying at the lodge.</i></p>	 <p><i>Regular health camps are organised for villagers.</i></p>
 <p><i>Boats and personnel are volunteered to help villages marooned during monsoon floods and relief materials are donated.</i></p>	 <p><i>Participating in the state-wide Dolphin Census in 2012 and 2015, part of the lodge's wider contribution to gathering intelligence on wildlife.</i></p>	 <p><i>Support to the gharial crisis team was provided through their Chambal Conservation Foundation.</i></p>



The Foundation provides ongoing support for census and conservation.



Presentation on World Turtle Day in the lodge to raise awareness.



Wildlife Week celebration and awareness camp for students has attracted close to 20,000 children from Agra and rural schools since 2004.



Conservation briefing for school students.



Forestry probationers training camp held at the lodge.



International Bird Festivals in 2015 and 2016 attended by experts from 29 countries in 2016 have put the Chambal Valley on the international conservation map.



An exhibition of more than 200 photographs and paintings complemented interactive workshops and talks at the Festivals.



A well-maintained library within the lodge on the region's natural and cultural heritage is provided to educate guests.



Guest briefing materials include a checklist of birds, mammals, reptiles and butterflies to look out for.

		
<p>Wine bottles are used as water bottles in the dining area to reduce plastic waste. Reverse osmosis purified water is provided to guests.</p>	<p>Waste is segregated around the property into biodegradable and non-biodegradable waste with well-maintained composting pits for organic waste.</p>	<p>Portable solar lighting is used to reduce energy consumption; LPG is used as fuel for cooking instead of wood. Solar lamps, torches (flashlights), and candles are provided in all the rooms.</p>
		
<p>Guests are encouraged to conserve water.</p>	<p>Aerated water taps, low-flow showerheads and dual-flush systems are used to conserve water.</p>	<p>Refillable ceramic bottles are used for herbal and bio-degradable toiletries in the washrooms.</p>
		
<p>An emergency exit plan is provided in each room.</p>	<p>A fire extinguisher is provided by the chemical store room.</p>	<p>Noise-free and less-polluting diesel generator sets have been installed to ensure control of noise pollution and emissions. The generators are not used when there are no guests.</p>

Mela Kothi – Conservation Flying Alongside Eco-tourism



Indian Skimmer, one of over 300 species of bird documented in the Chambal Valley.

Six acres of land at their lodge was set aside for a forest nursery to supply indigenous shrubs and trees for a planting drive between 2006-2015. In July 2007 alone, 10,000 saplings were planted with the help of over 100 local participants. The lodge now boasts a checklist of over 198 species of birds, reptiles and mammals. Water bodies and check-dams in nearby ravines harvest rainwater and recharge groundwater. The team's expertise has been shared with forest range offices to benefit local people and reduce their dependence on the Sanctuary.

The Foundation has been actively assisting the Gharial Crisis Management and WWF at a field level since a crisis in December 2007 saw massive deaths of this critically endangered species in the Chambal River, home to half of the world's population. Every year, it identifies and provides protective covers for gharial and mugger nesting sites. It is also working with WWF on a Chambal river basin management plan.



Participating in the Gharial crisis in 2007.



Children taking part in Wildlife Week celebrations.

It plays an impressive role in nature education and conservation awareness. Nearly 20,000 children from Agra and local rural schools have participated in the Foundation's annual Wildlife Conservation Week which involves talks, competitions and visits to Protected Areas near Agra including the National Chambal Sanctuary. Awareness camps and interactive meetings are organised in partnership with the Forest Department for local communities to strike a balance between divergent needs.

Two UP International Bird Festivals organised at the lodge in 2015 and 2016 in partnership with the UP Forest Department raised the profile of this little-known valley to help secure its continuing protection. Over 200 experts from 29 countries were involved in 2016 including representatives from WWF, BNHS, Bird Life International, Wildlife SOS and the Nature Conservation Fund. Interactive workshops and talks were complemented by bird ringing demonstrations and an exhibition of more than 200 photographs and paintings. Over 2000 people attended in 2015 and 2016 including over 400 school children in 2015 and 500 in 2016.



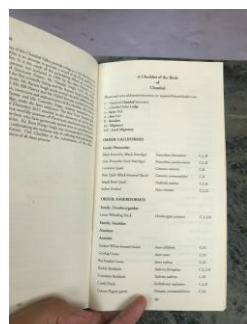
International Bird Festivals with speakers from 29 countries in 2016.



Participating in the state-wide Dolphin Census in 2006, 2012 and 2015.

Intelligence on wildlife is regularly provided to national and international conservation organizations. The Foundation worked with the US Peregrine Fund in 2006 to identify vulture nests in the Chambal Valley and contributed to the state-wide WWF, Forest Department Dolphin Census in 2006, 2012 and 2015. It participates in and hosts the team for the National Chambal Sanctuary's annual census carried out by the Forest Department and

WWF. Detailed scientific listings of bird, mammal and reptile sightings have been compiled which are revised and updated each year. Listing of flora has also been initiated.



Checklists of birds, mammals and reptiles

The Foundation supports and contributes to the Forest Department's anti-poaching activities and efforts to eliminate illegal sand-mining operations. The lodge's boats are used for patrolling and a check-post has been created at a vital junction reducing the incidence of both these threats. Central to the lodge's approach is also helping establish and revive eco-development activities bringing new employment and economic benefit for the local population to ensure their participation in conservation and protection efforts. The foundation is actively involved in eco-tourism policy and setting guidelines for carrying capacity in the Sanctuaries and National Parks of Uttar Pradesh to ensure sustainable development.



Ongoing support for gharial conservation is helping to ensure this critically endangered species continues to thrive after the Gharial crisis of 2007.



2015, 2016 - International Bird Festival success story.

Compiled by TOFTigers October 2019 | For press and publication enquiries contact: editor@toftindia.org

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