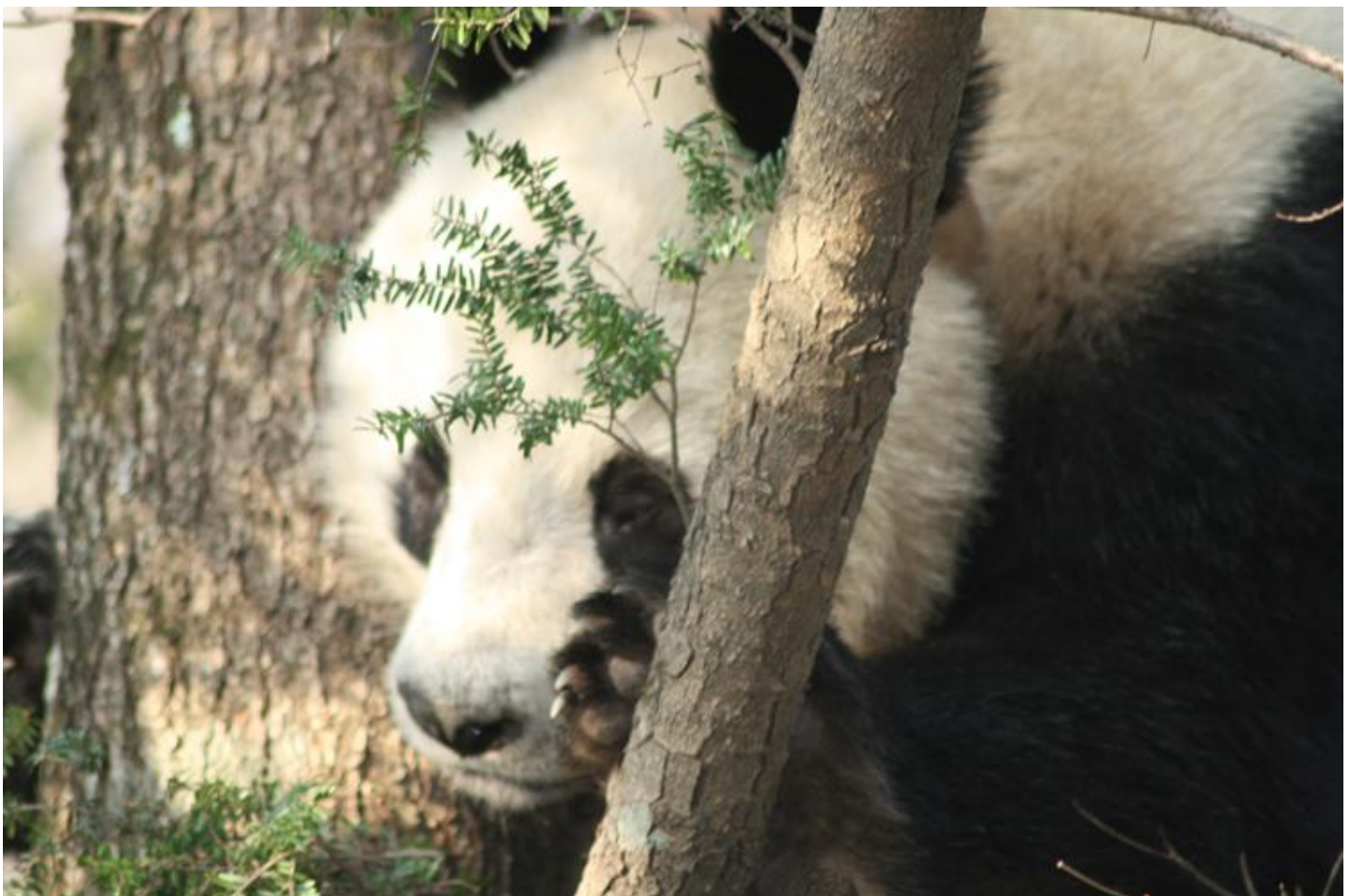


China

IN SEARCH OF WILD PANDA (5-16 MARCH, 2012)

- Privileged insight into wild pandas and their habitat
- Enjoy traditional rural life in a little-changed part of the country
- Tour helps fund Giant Panda conservation in regions visited
- Pioneering and adventurous tour programme
- Steppes Discovery is one of the very few companies that give you the opportunity of seeing WILD pandas



Summary

The Giant Panda is one of the most recognised creatures on earth, yet it is also one of the most critically endangered with only 1700 surviving today in China, when once it ranged from Burma in the south to the outskirts of Beijing in the north. In the last few years, since the banning of logging in 1999, a host of measures are being undertaken to increase the country's conservation efforts. One development is the establishment of basic ecotourism facilities in key areas that offer the opportunity to trek in unique panda habitat. Here too are the last remnants of rural China can be enjoyed.

Overview



This tour to Shaanxi Provinces aims to give a privileged insight into two panda reserves, which up until now have had little tourism. The itinerary allows unique viewing and walking opportunities to track and hopefully view wild pandas in their natural habitat, as well as meeting with traditional rural communities, still practising their ancient agricultural methods, and meeting with the individuals fighting to ensure the survival of wilderness in China. The Reserves of Foping and Changqing were established in the late 1990s for the preservation of Giant Panda protection in the Qinling Mountains, south of Xian, and as such hold some of the best high altitude primary forest and flora to be seen in China. Around 220 species of birds and other endangered mammals including Clouded Leopard, Takin, Goral and Tufted Deer also inhabit the park.

Under the guidance of expert wildlife trackers you will have a very good chance of seeing pandas in the winter time in these mountains, tracking them through thick bamboo forests and mountainous valleys, possibly with snow on the ground, as well as hopefully seeing other animals at this time. While wildlife sightings can never be guaranteed, March is the mating season for Giant Pandas and with a strong chance of snow at this time, the conditions for tracking wildlife are at an optimum.

Furthermore, this trip allows time for exploring traditional agricultural practices, enjoying local cuisine, visiting ancient cultural sites and staying in traditional rural towns. Offering a range of accommodation from a simple park research station to comfortable local hotels, this trip will give you an alternative view of China that few travellers witness in a rapidly changing country.

A contribution is also made to WWF China's Xian office to help with their work in this region.

Please note: This tour is best enjoyed if you are reasonably fit, healthy and active, as trekking and tracking Pandas in mountainous forests can be physically demanding - but well worth the effort. Please do contact us if you would like to discuss fitness levels. Your honesty is paramount but your reward will hopefully be unforgettable.

Itinerary

Monday 5 March

Arrive in Beijing and connect with onward flight to Xian. On arrival you will be met and transferred to your hotel.

This evening you will be welcomed with a dumpling dinner at De Fa Chang restaurant.

Overnight at the 4 Howard Johnson Hotel.*

Tuesday 6 March

After breakfast depart on the expressway travelling south of Xian and into the mountains. Leave the expressway and for another hour drive along a small country road to rural Huayang, a total journey time of about 4.5 hours.



Settle into your accommodation and then take a walk into the nearby countryside ending up at the site on the edge of the town where the Crested Ibis nest.

Overnight at the 3 Grand Qinling Hotel.*

Wednesday 7 - Thursday 8 March

Trekking in the Changqing Nature Reserve.

CHANGQING NATURE RESERVE

Declared a park in 1995, this 300sq km area is famous as the original study area of China's leading Panda scientist and conservationist, Professor Pan and his assistant Dr Lu Zhi (who we invited to England in 2002 to give a talk at the Royal Geographical Society). This stunning park with its broad leaf trees and bamboo thickets, towering peaks, gushing rivers and magnificent single drop waterfalls, was originally a timber concession, but today hosts one of the last remaining places where many species live including Giant Pandas, Golden Takin, Golden Monkeys, Wild Boar, Goral and Tufted Deer, not to mention its famous birdlife such as the rare Crested Ibis, Crested Eagles and the glorious Golden Pheasant. Old logging roads also make this park very accessible and less physically demanding to track pandas in its forests. It is said to have the highest density of pandas in China, at 0.34 Giant Pandas per square kilometre.



TRACKING PANDAS

Each day drive into one of a number of key areas of the park and stop to walk and see if you can spot pandas and other wildlife. The guides will be able to show you scat and spoor of wild pandas and other wildlife. Furthermore, the chances of seeing pandas are good (though not guaranteed) during the winter months as they are easiest to track with snow on the ground, and also they move down from the high mountains into the lower valleys. This is also the mating period. Pandas are usually solitary animals but during March and early April several pandas can sometimes be seen together, several males following the scent of a single female.



Other activities on these days may include:

- Guided walk of Huayang village old town and traditional farming areas around the park region.
- Discover local plants and traditional Chinese medicines.
- Visits to some of the cultural sites in the area including the Han Dynasty Tangluo Trail, with remains of ancient temples, shrines and roads.
- Visit the new WWF Centre in Huayang village



Friday 9 March



After breakfast retrace your steps to the expressway and after a short drive towards Xian leave it again for the solitude of the mountains following a river valley. Lunch in a very simple local restaurant (or a picnic).

The road ends at Liang Fengya (Cold Wind Pass). Meet the ponies and handlers who will take your luggage into the Foping Nature Reserve, a 2.5 to 3 hour trek along a well-made trail through a beautiful valley (11 km, downhill) to get to your accommodation. You can expect to see signs of wildlife at any time.



Relax and settle into your accommodation.

Overnight in the New Expert Building.

Saturday 10 - Tuesday 13 March



Trekking in Foping Nature Reserve.

For the next four days you will explore this park with your trackers looking for pandas and other wildlife in its many hidden valleys some with trickling streams, high ridges and craggy peaks up to 2500m high. This has to be done purely on foot as the park has no roads and will often be off trail, working your way along streams and through thick bamboo forests, providing both adventure and anticipation. Reasonable fitness and good footwear is essential and warm clothing is required as snow is likely to still be on the ground. Snowfall helps the local guides, most of them former wildlife hunters who live within the park, to track wildlife and pandas in thick bamboo undergrowth.



FOPING NATURE RESERVE

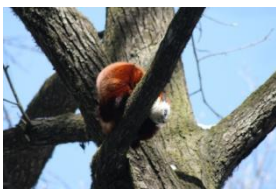
Foping is part of a contiguous area of the Qinling Mountains comprising over 115,000 hectares and today one of the most biologically diverse habitats in China with the greatest concentration of pandas in the world. These mountains are the natural division between north and south China and are the watershed for two of the most important rivers, the Yangtse (Yangze) and Yellow rivers.



Foping borders Changqing and other reserves, including Zhouzhi and Laoxiancheng, and are largely intact. They are only just beginning to open to nature tourism of any sort. Around 27 pandas are said to live within the 'tourist zone' of the park, and a further 100 in core areas, as well as a host of other mammals including Golden Takin and other deer species as well as the little known Clouded Leopard. Its flora is also very special with Chinese Mountain Larch, the Miaotai Maple and Chinese Fir being prominent and one of the oldest tree species in the world, the Ginkgo, though at this time of year they will not be at their glorious best. Over 220 bird species have also been recorded here.



The experience of spending a few days in this untouched wilderness in the company of experts and expert trackers will leave you with a lasting impression.



Overnight in the New Expert Building.

Wednesday 14 March



Say farewell to your guides after breakfast and then hike the 11km back to the entrance to the park (2.5 to 3 hours). It is possible to rent a horse (payment to be made directly to the handler). Plenty of rest stops are possible along the way. At the road meet your transport and drive to the Golden Monkey forest area, a drive of about 1 hour. Now that logging has been banned in the reserves these elusive monkeys are re-establishing themselves in the area.

Continue the drive back to Xian, stopping for a simple lunch in a local restaurant (or

picnic), arriving in Xian in the early evening. On arrival check in to your hotel. Dinner will be a buffet at the hotel.

Overnight at the Howard Johnson Hotel.

Thursday 15 March



Begin the morning with a visit the famous army of Terracotta Warriors. Qin Shihuang was the first emperor of the Chinese people. A mound of earth protects his tomb and it is believed to be studded with precious stones. When Qin Shihuang died, so the story goes, he wanted to be buried along with his entire army and entourage of servants who were of course still alive. He was persuaded instead to create life-like clay figures of them all, the famed Terracotta Warriors, and today they stand with their horses guarding his tomb as they have done for 2000 years.

After lunch continue to the airport for the flight to Beijing. Met on arrival and transfer to your hotel.



Overnight at the 4 Sunworld Hotel.*

Friday 16 March

This morning you will be transferred to the airport for your departure flight.

All the photographs in this itinerary were taken by Paul Craven of Steppes Discovery on the March 2011 Panda trip.

Stanley Johnson accompanied the March 2011 trip and wrote an article in the Sunday Times Magazine on 17 April, 2011.

Date

2012

5 - 16 March 2012

Main tour

Price:

£3,585.00 per person on a twin/double share basis (excluding international flights)

Direct return British Airways flights can be booked by Steppes Travel. Current fares including taxes are -

£895 - Economy Class
£1575 - World Traveller Plus
£3880 - Business Class

Tickets can be paid for when your final holiday balance is due. This is 12 weeks prior to departure.

Please note that the price is subject to currency fluctuations.

*Based on availability and a maximum of 8 people. We do reserve the right to charge a supplement for running the trip at below this minimum number.

Single supplement:

We do not charge a single supplement if you are willing to share and we are unable to find you a suitable roommate. If you require a single room the cost is £385 per person, but this can only be guaranteed in major cities on this tour. If we have odd numbers of single males and females then a single supplement will be payable.

The price includes:

Chinese domestic flights, air passenger taxes where they can be collected as part of the air tickets, accommodation, all meals - picnic lunches in the reserves / limited alcohol/soft drinks with meals (except lunch on 5 March and dinner on 15 March), transportation by minibus, transfer on arrival/departure (if they fit in with British Airways/internal flight schedules - a supplement may apply for transfers outside these flight timings), government taxes and park fees (including Changqing, Foping & Golden Monkey visit fee), contribution to conservation fund, local English-speaking guides/interpreters where necessary, naturalist to accompany you in Changqing and Foping, professional trackers in the Panda Reserves, Steppes Discovery leader (subject to minimum numbers).

The price excludes:

International flights, travel insurance, visas, meals unless specified, gratuities, extra alcohol and items of a personal nature, (early check in or late check out at hotels).

Important

Visas & Health:

Chinese visas are required by British passport holders to China. If you do not hold a British passport please do contact us for further details.

Please consult your doctor for the latest suggestions on vaccinations or protective health issues or ring MASTA 09068 224100 (premium rate call) at least one month before you travel.

Accommodation & Food:

Accommodation in Beijing (4*) and Xian (4*) and Changqing (3*) is of a good standard with en suite facilities. The Expert Building in Foping is where we hope you will stay. The Expert building has private bathrooms although may not have heating, running water or hot water showers.

Chinese cuisine is served for all meals when in rural areas and can include soups, bread and eggs for breakfast, picnic lunches, and tasty Chinese and Shaanxi cuisine for supper including meat, vegetable, rice and noodle dishes. In cities there is a greater choice including some Western cuisine (buffet on 14 March). Vegetarians can be catered for but please notify us in advance.

Clothing:

Sturdy walking boots or winter lined rubber boots with good grip; woolly hat and sun hat, long johns and good winter jacket/trousers (non-rip if possible), long-sleeved shirts and sweatshirts (it will be cold in the mountains, likely to be minus 5 to plus 10 degrees centigrade); conservative clothing in general, small medical kit, money belt, universal plug, torch (wind up or with spare batteries). Small day sack for water bottle, picnic, reference books, binoculars and camera gear is essential.

Fitness & Altitude:

With its challenging walking opportunities in mountainous terrain, it is advised that you are reasonably fit and healthy and enjoy walking. Some walking exercise prior to participation would be very worthwhile and this should include rougher terrain and hill walking. You will be spending time at higher altitudes than you may be used to although you will not be trekking to the highest elevations. However, as you will be spending lots of time stopping and exploring the rich flora, the walking will be at a pace which allows you to enjoy the trip and, where necessary, within a small group of similar physical aptitude.

Weather:

These trips have the key focus of seeing Pandas in some of the most beautiful of China's wildernesses, and the best way of ensuring this is by going between November and April each year. This is winter, when snow brings the Pandas into lower valleys and trackers are able to track the movements of these creatures much more easily. It will be cold in the mountains, likely to be minus 5 to plus 10 degrees centigrade.

Panda Tracking

Though we make no guarantees that you will see pandas on this tour the chances are very good, given the length of time you are in the field. Some pandas are comfortable in the presence of humans and it is not unknown for them to go to sleep while being watched!

During the early spring trips (March/early April), if you are lucky, you can hear and watch small gatherings of pandas as several males will follow single females for the purpose of mating. They are otherwise solitary animals.

Please also note that due to the aims and nature of the tour, the itinerary is subject to change depending on prevailing conditions at the time. It is important to remain flexible when travelling in rural parts of China.

The itinerary may be subject to alteration due to unforeseen circumstances, local conditions or schedule changes. While Steppes Discovery will make every effort to provide the itinerary as presented this is sometimes not possible and your patience and understanding are requested if the itinerary should change.

Our commitment



An unavoidable consequence of travel is the emission of carbon dioxide into the high atmosphere and while Steppes Discovery takes measures to reduce the carbon footprint of its holidays, regrettably it is not yet possible to make them carbon neutral. If you are able to, we suggest you consider offsetting the carbon emission of your long haul flight by using Rainforest Concern's Forest Credits scheme. Details can be found at www.forestcredits.org.uk

Rainforests have a central role to play in the slowing of climate change and yet we are removing forests from the planet at a faster rate than they can grow back. Rainforest Concern supports projects that look to preserve the forests that we have rather than replanting new ones, working to safeguard biodiversity and local communities and in so doing mitigate climate change.



We have raised significant funds in support of the world's leading wildlife and conservation agencies, researchers and experts, and increased awareness of travel and conservation through newsletters, lectures and consistent media coverage. Furthermore we have voluntarily spearheaded collective action campaigns such as Travel Operators for Tigers in South Asia.

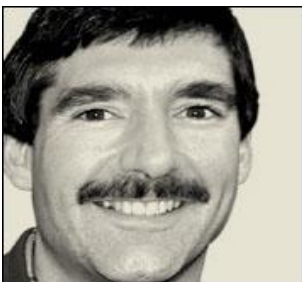


World Wide Fund For Nature

The trip was put together after consultation with WWF China (Xian Office). Each trip will contribute to a fund that supports long term conservation initiatives in the regions visited.

Now come along and see for yourself. With us it won't cost the earth!

Want to discuss this trip?



Please call Paul on 01285 643333 or email Paul@steppestravel.co.uk for more details or to reserve your place.

There are few areas that Paul does not know in China and he has visited China's Wanglang Panda Reserve in the Sichuan Province and Changqing and Foping Panda Reserves in Shaanxi Provinces. Paul accompanied the March 2011 Panda trip and all our clients saw Wild Pandas on this departure. His expertise also lies in designing custom made travel itineraries throughout China, North Korea, Indo-China, Central Asia, Iran, Russia, Mongolia, the Caucasus and Pakistan.
