

Panda Adventure With Nigel Marven

5 x 60'

EPISODIC BREAKDOWN

1. National Treasures

Nigel kicks off the series alongside the 8,000-strong Terracotta Army, and then strolls atop the 4,000 mile-long Great Wall of China. These are the best-known man-made symbols of this vast land, but Nigel wants to showcase the nation's natural wonders: pandas and other inhabitants of the remote bamboo forests.

Wolong National Nature Reserve is 770 square miles of forest, and the best place in the world to get alongside pandas- 150 live here, some in near-wild conditions, others in captivity so they can take part in the breeding programme. Nigel meets the staff and their charges. The earthquake of May 2008 destroyed many pens and some pandas escaped- we'll see how the facility has been rebuilt and meet cubs born in the midst of disaster who are now thriving.

Nigel will also befriend Lang Lang, a pregnant panda. We'll follow her over several months to see how she copes with birth, and how she raises her valuable cub.

2. Precious Lives

Having met the pandas at Wolong, Nigel turns his attention to some of the other creatures that share the bamboo forests. He plunges into a freezing mountain stream to wrestle with a 30-kilo, four-foot Chinese giant salamander, the largest of its kind in the world. Underwater photography shows the amphibian gobbling up fish and frogs by creating suction with its gaping mouth.

The crested ibis was thought extinct until 7 birds were discovered in 1981. Now, the Crested Ibis Reserve at Yangxian is home to over 500 of them.

The colourful golden snub-nose monkey is only found in China, around 10,000 of them make the high mountain forests their home. They spend the vast majority of the time in the trees, so Nigel has to use climbing ropes to get close to them.

Back at Wolong, our panda Lang Lang has given birth to twin cubs. The babies only weigh 150 grams and are totally dependent on their mother. Nigel will return soon to see how the family are doing.

3. Search for the Wild Panda

No wildlife presenter has ever got alongside totally wild pandas, but Nigel is on a mission to find one. With only 1,600 pandas remaining in the wild, spread across thousands of square miles, it's a tall order. Nigel enlists the help of a team of Chinese guides for an expedition through the forest.

On the way, there's exciting detours. The team reach the summit of Taibai Mountain, at almost 4,000 metres it's a barrier between north and south China. En route, the team are guests at a monastery where the monks tell stories of yeti sightings.

On the lower slopes, takin antelope are feared. They can be a metre tall at the shoulder and weigh over a third of a ton. Nigel has to climb into the bamboo to avoid a charge from one. Then, success: the team get alongside a shy wild panda, perched high in the canopy chewing on leaves. Back at Wolong, there's drama as captive panda Lang Lang stops caring for one of her cubs. Nigel learns how the scientists there act as surrogate mothers, and takes a turn to feed the cub.

4. Autumn Colours

Autumn is painting the forests of eastern China in stunning red and yellow hues. At Wolong, Lang Lang is faring well. It's been three months since Nigel's last visit, and the twin cubs are now starting to crawl, roll and play with each other. One cub is still entirely dependent on mum for food, the other is still being bottle-fed. Neither will start nibbling bamboo until they're half a year old.

There's one enigmatic forest mammal that our host is yet to meet: the red panda. Despite its name, these cuddly creatures aren't closely related to giant pandas- they're not even bears. To meet one, Nigel has to use specialist gear to climb high into the forest canopy.

In Foping Reserve Nigel meets more amazing mammals. The nocturnal red and white giant flying squirrel is the largest of its kind and can glide for 400 metres on a 'wingspan' of 60 centimetres. Asiatic black bears can weigh a quarter of a ton, and despite 90% of their diet being vegetarian, they are known to hunt domestic livestock.

5. All Grown Up

Nigel looks back on his months in China, and spends his last few days with Lang Lang and her cubs. He also visits other panda mothers at Wolong to see how Lang Lang's cubs will develop. Within a few months they'll be eating bamboo, and at a year old they'll weigh nearly 50 kilos.

Nigel also joins scientists to see how re-introduced pandas are doing. This is a new, cutting-edge process to see whether captive-bred bears can be used to top-up the wild population. As they trek through the forest they pass jousting golden pheasants. Eventually the radio-trackers locate a female panda- she seems to be in good health- a sure sign that the work at Wolong could help bring the panda back from the edge of extinction.

On the way back through the forest, Nigel dwells on the wildlife he's met on this expedition – the takin, black bears, snub-nosed monkeys and giant salamanders have taken his breath away. It's with great sadness that he boards a plane to the UK, but he's excited to think that for generations to come, Lang Lang's cubs and their descendents could be roaming wild in the immense bamboo forests of China.