

ADVENTURE





CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE FURRED KIND

Ahead of Walt Disney's reboot of the Rudyard Kipling classic *The Jungle Book*, our writer ventures into Madhya Pradesh in central India to find the Royal Bengal tiger making a comeback.

WORDS | MIKE MACEACHERAN

“S hhh,” says park ranger Guru Yadav, as our jeep pauses on a dusty trail edged with bamboo and soaring sal trees, their branches hung low with sweet-faced langur monkeys. “The signs to look for are paw marks in the sand, rustling grasses, and warning calls from deer.” He cocks his ear to listen for any hint of news, pointing into the thicket as if lining up the crosshairs of a rifle. A sudden movement, or even the slightest whisper in the grass, could mean we are in luck.

A bark rings out, a throaty yelp from a male spotted deer, sending its herd ragged in the oven-hot sunshine. It may be a false alarm, Guru explains, but as we lurch forward with anticipation, past a bower of dense cotton trees, and across a dried-up riverbed, the tiger steps into view, a feverish look in its eyes. It moves with a penetrating, restless purpose, its pupils darting like angry black wasps. It almost feels as though it has been waiting for us all along, sitting in ambush at the end of the jungle path, a brooding, 300kg man-eater with hungry, flashing teeth. The wraith in the grass.

We are in the midst of a pulsating safari, on the hunt for the most enigmatic big cat of them all – the pin-striped Royal Bengal tiger – in the depths of Kanha National Park in Madhya Pradesh. Although frozen in the minds of millions as a brash, colourful character, the big cat is elusive, discreet and hard to spot. Particularly so after the monsoon rains when the elephant grasses are shoulder-high and the meadows are rewarded with triumphant vegetation and rude health.

Guru saw his first tiger in his teens, when the forest dwellers of Kanha used to pray at dusk to safeguard their cattle through the night, the time when a tiger is at its most ruthless. But it was a later, more dramatic encounter, which haunts him to this day.

One afternoon, he was walking through scrub on forest patrol with a fellow ranger when, out of nowhere, a tiger pounced from the refuge of the bushes. “I was a statue,” he says, tapping the chest of his khaki-green shirt to mimic his heartbeat. “It was only a metre away, biting and clawing at my friend.” With no gun for protection, Guru grabbed the first thing he could lay his hands on: a broken branch from a nearby jacaranda. “The wood from the trees saved our lives.”

For all this drama, Kanha National Park, the largest forest preserve ►►



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For all this drama, Kanha National Park is a place few have heard of, let alone had the privilege to visit, despite it being the largest forest preserve in India.

in India, is a place few have heard of, let alone had the privilege to visit. People who yearn to see a tiger in the flesh, at its most raw and primal, have a misguided tendency to safari in Ranthamborne in Rajasthan or Corbett in Himchal Pradesh, national parks within striking distance of Delhi and Agra and its Taj Mahal. Few make it this far south.

It's their loss. Madhya Pradesh is not the India of maharajahs and miracles that so many people seek. It is India with a serious African twist. Here you still find winking veils and the plumage of colourful saris, bangles and beads, sacred cows, honking rickshaw horns, and wonderfully decorated Hindus with moustaches like actors' comic props.

But added to this freight of colour and detail is a compelling swathe of jungle forest that blankets much of the state's southeastern corner, taking in five corridors of pristine wilderness, namely Kanha, Satpura, Bandhavgarh, Panna, and Pench National Parks. Combined, this is the territory of terracotta-roofed huts and laconic villages, dusty, cracked hills crowned with jungle forts – of the sort that first inspired Rudyard Kipling – and a

handful of safari lodges, the singularity of which makes them as rewarding as the wildlife circuses found in the Serengeti or Maasai Mara.

What makes Kanha, and Pench in particular, so distinctive is the sheer diversity of wildlife. A safari here is one in which you may be lucky enough to see multiple candy-striped big cats in just a few days, as well as leopards, sloth bears, macaques, countless chital deer and twittering songbirds. Even rogue hyenas, packs of wild dogs and solitary wolves make this their home.

The slow journey into these parks, along rudimentary, dog-eared roads, also reveals the eternal dilemma of rural Indian life: how to survive and progress, yet retain what has made the fields and forests so beautiful and alluring in the first place.

The following afternoon, feverish after our morning game drive, we retreat to the comfort of Shergarh tented camp in the park's thickly forested buffer zone to watch the afternoon unfold from the shade. For many, India can be a land of procrastination and head-wobbling, but not so at Shergarh, the home of Jehan and Katie Bhujwala and their



children Kai and Ella. The sandy paths between its platformed tents run arrow-straight, the trees are well kept and precise, and the staff are attentive and ever-efficient.

Sharp-eyed naturalist and native Nepali Raj Gurung, who leads the game drives and jungle walks, is just as reliable. He is an encyclopaedia of knowledge, bewildering us with his rapid-fire naming. "That's a rose-ringed parakeet," he whispers. "Look – a white-bellied woodpecker." His ability to spot the minute differences from half a kilometre away is astounding. So too is his unwavering dedication to tracking big cats. His hit rate is one every two days, unheard of in these parts.

The camp itself is a civilised place, a tribute to jungle eco-chic. Our canopy tent, lit by oil lanterns, is adorned with woven rattan furniture and vintage safari photos, and framed by a paved private terrace for sipping iced drinks and counting butterflies. Afternoons are spent enjoying the colonial-era pleasures of mint tea, while nights are for swapping tiger tales on the terrace. After the sun sets, when the stars gather radiant and plump, India's dark magic takes over.

But there is a downside to all this good fortune. Until only recently the country's national parks suffered years of mismanagement and a lack of political motivation to deal with endemic poaching. While domestic

1. A large male Bengal tiger sneaking through the grasslands of the Kanha National Park, India.

2. The tiny spotted owl is abundant in India.

3. Bedroom interior of a Kanha National Park lodge.

4. Picnicking in Pench National Park.

5. A solitary fox during dry season.

6. A huge guar bull amongst the trees.



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tourism flourished, animal numbers were crippled by a failure to stamp out the widespread corruption and indiscriminate hunts that – stoked by the belief in the Far East that a tiger’s body has medicinal and aphrodisiacal properties – decimated populations. According to the Wildlife Protection Society of India, 923 tigers were killed by poachers between 1994 and 2010.

“It was so bad that some parks, including Panna, contained none at all,” says Katie, who experienced the plummeting tiger numbers first-hand. “Only the progressive reserves closed to try to prevent an even greater loss.” Sometimes, it is all too easy to forget that not so long ago India’s tiger population was close to being wiped out.

Following international pressure from charities and alliances such as Project Tiger (projecttiger.nic.in) and Travel Operators for Tigers (toftiger.org), hope has returned, and with it some promise.

Figures released this year suggest there has been a sizeable increase in numbers and sightings. The rise, of almost a third from 1,706 in 2011 to 2,226 in 2014, has encouraged campaigners fighting for tiger welfare. Kanha has a stable population of some 75 tigers, while the likes of Panna, following successful relocations from Kanha and Bandhavgarh, now has a steady group of 16.

Such vigilance has brought these parks to the verge of becoming the premier tiger-spotting locations in the world. The newfound sagacity of tented camps is also startling. Camp owners such as Jehan and Katie at Shergarh have co-pioneered a new walking safari in the park’s buffer zone, keeping deforestation in check, while weekly village visits and night safaris at Pench educate locals on the intrinsic value of their neighbours. In Satpura, meanwhile, it is possible to venture into the parks on foot and along the Denwa River by kayak. It’s early days, of course, but it is a laudable step in the species’ survival. The eureka moment for villagers came with the realisation that it doesn’t have to result in casualties. Man and tiger, once rural India’s greatest nemesis, can live happily side by side.

After an early morning safari the next day – tiger sightings (zero), everything else (countless) – we leave Kanha behind, journeying three hours west to the luxury platformed tents of Pench Jungle Camp on the periphery of Pench Tiger Reserve. A quick comparison reveals a greater bounty here, and a more primal tiger-spotting experience. It is only half the size of Kanha, yet has more than double the number of spotted deer. “Tiger food,” says Agam Singh Gokhani, the camps’ chief naturalist, referring to the 40,000 that graze the dry >>

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deciduous forest. “It brings them out into the open.”

When Kipling wrote of Mowgli, Baloo and Shere Khan, he found his inspiration in the contours and dusky kopje peaks of the Seoni Hills that crease the horizon beside Pench. Unlike Kanha, there are few fences, fewer gravelled roads, even fewer tourists.

Later, as we wind our way towards the park gates for a final afternoon safari, the life that Kipling romanticised takes over. It is a rural, pastoral existence unbothered by the frippery of the 21st century, and everywhere, there are vignettes of an old India stubbornly clinging to life. It is in the breezy fields of wheat and children on bikes blowing up dust on biscuit-brown pathways. In the sun-ripened old men in wrap-around *dhotis* by the roadside. And in the harmonious geometry of the paddy fields and mustard flowers. If there is an image of rural India – “lush, emerald green, serene,” as Agam sees it – then this is it.

Ultimately, the recent lack of tigers in India’s national parks is no longer a defeat for the imagination. The likes of Agam, Rajan, Katie and Guru call Madhya Pradesh “India’s beating heart,”

and on safari you are sure to feel its pulse and its rhythm – whether you are lucky enough to spot a tiger or not. Its bloodlines are the rivers and watering holes that give the vine creepers, ferns, and meadows so much life, and the air breathes thick with tropical fruit and the scent of flowers in bloom. Given time, and greater resources, it is hoped the Royal Bengal tiger will remain part of this life-cycle, and part of India’s story, for good. The wraith in the grass, back from the dead. 

For rates, special offers, bookings and all other information about Shergarh and Kanha National Park, contact enquiries@shergarh.com; to arrange a safari in Pench National Park, book a stay at Pench Jungle Camp at penchjunglecamp.com

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Etihad Airways offers daily direct flights from Abu Dhabi to Kolkata. For more information please visit etihad.com or call 800 2324 for package details.



7. A spotted deer on alert in Kanha National Park.

8. A Royal Bengal tiger blends into its surroundings.

EXTEND YOUR ADVENTURE

ITC SONAR, KOLKATA

In marked contrast to the national parks of the Indian hinterlands, Kolkata is a place without solitude. It is a modernised city of go-getters, and prying, curious eyes are everywhere. At a manic pace, the city is carried along by a never-ending flow of rickshaws, scooters and noise.

To take a breather from this, book into the five-star, 238-room ITC Sonar Kolkata, a palatial retreat indifferent to the perpetual honk of horns and persistent street hawkers outside its front door. Like an oasis, it features lily-studded waters, inspired by Bengal’s pastoral landscapes, an expansive spa, and its Dum Pukht restaurant specialises in rich, fruity Bengali cuisine.

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