

ROARS & TRUMPETS



PHOTOGRAPHS: STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

FRIENDLY VISITORS:
Joining your elephant for an afternoon 'river bath' is a must on a multi-day elephant-back safari in Corbett

With four tourism zones, splendid landscapes and diverse wildlife to choose from, Corbett National Park remains one of the most favourite and frequented parks in India, says **Stephen Cunliffe**

Declared India's first tiger reserve, the picturesque wildlife sanctuary derives its name from legendary hunter and celebrated conservationist Jim Corbett for the key role he played in the park's establishment. The 1318 sq km reserve boasts unrivalled mountainous terrain and a diverse range of animal species to enthral wildlife enthusiasts. Centred on the perennial Ramganga river and presided over by distant snow-capped peaks, Corbett lies nestled in the scenic foothills of the mighty Himalayas. However, what makes this park truly unique is that it offers visitors an excellent chance of seeing both tigers and wild elephants in the same attractive wilderness area.

TRACKING DOWN TIGERS IN BIJRANI

Although the Bijrani range is one of the smallest tourism zones in Corbett, jeeps can access a large number of criss-crossing tracks in this area of the park. While the well-developed road network dramatically improves your odds of tracking down elusive wildlife, the best chance of finding Asia's iconic super-predator is undoubtedly with the assistance and local knowledge of an experienced nature guide. In Corbett, abundant barking deer make the ideal jungle spies and by stopping regularly to listen for alarm calls you further increase your chances of finding a secretive tiger.

After a number of false alarms, I was finding it increasingly difficult to emulate my guide's enthusiasm and certainty about the effectiveness of relying on the barking deer in our quest to locate a tiger. However, his perseverance paid off when one of these diminutive russet herbivores eventually led us straight to a tigress on the hunt. She moved rapidly through the forest, regularly changing direction. As soon as a shrill alarm bark shattered the still evening air, she ranged off in search of less suspecting targets. We frequently lost sight of



ELEPHANT SAFARIS

Corbett remains the only national park in India to permit multi-day elephant-back safaris. During these unique excursions, participants have the opportunity to explore Lohachaur tourism zone in the far north of the park: the least known and seldom visited area in the entire reserve. Upon entering the Dur-gadevi Gate, our elephant plodded languidly down the forest track.

NAVIGATOR

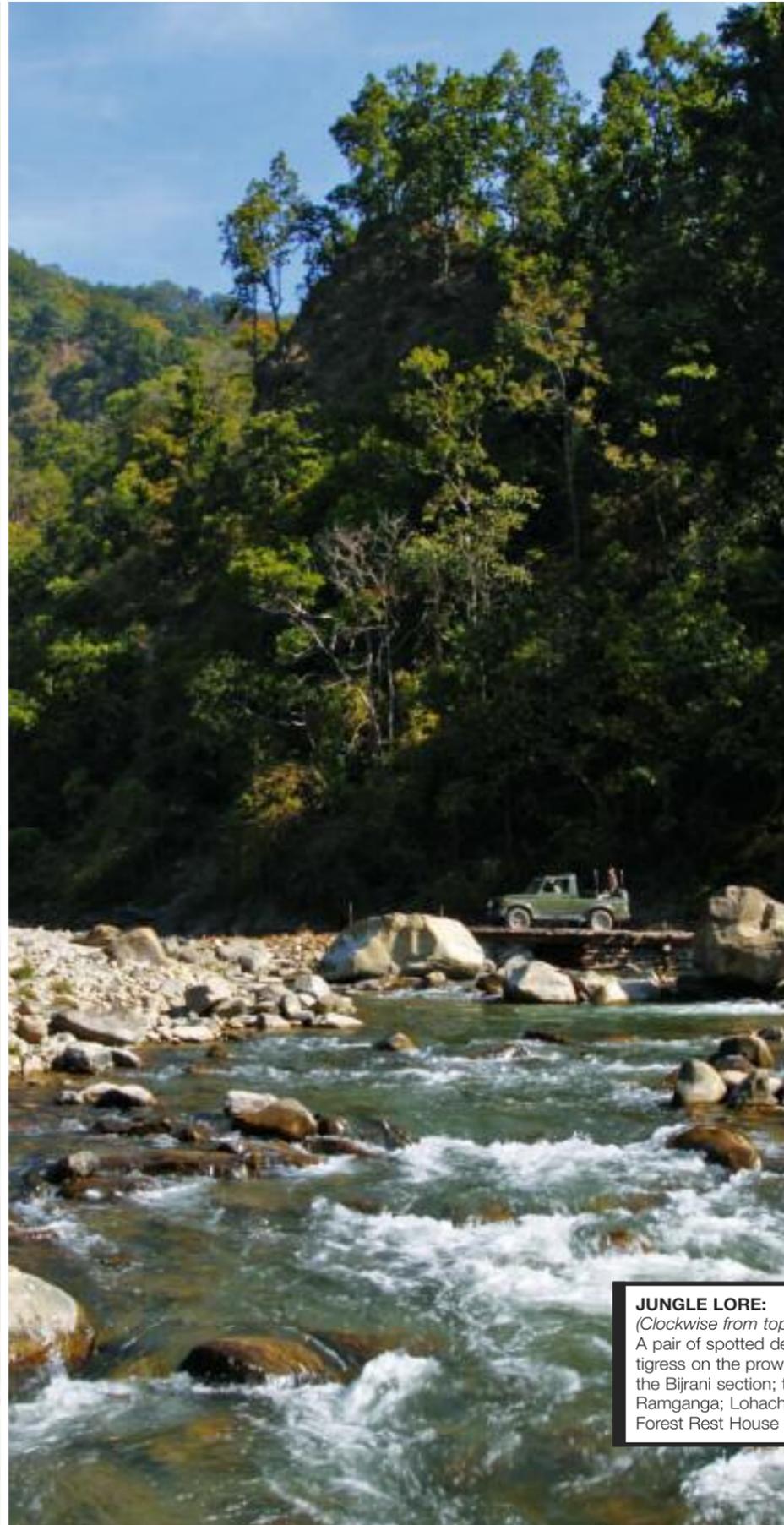
By air: Phoolbagh (Pant-nagar) at a distance of 50 km is the nearest domestic airport. Delhi, at a distance of 300 km, is the nearest international airport.

By rail: Ramnagar, 15 km away, is the nearest railway station connected to Luc-know and Kathgodam.

By road: Dhikala, the main entry to the park, is 15 km from Ramnagar. The route from Delhi spans Hapur-Murababad-Ram-nagar.

WHERE TO STAY:

Lohachaur Forest Rest House; visit www.jim-corbettnationalpark.com



JUNGLE LORE:

(Clockwise from top left) A pair of spotted deer; tigress on the prowl in the Bijrani section; the Ramganga; Lohachaur Forest Rest House

OUR GUIDE'S PERSEVERANCE PAID OFF WHEN A BARKING DEER EVENTUALLY LED US STRAIGHT TO A TIGRESS ON THE HUNT. WE FREQUENTLY LOST SIGHT OF HER AS SHE MOVED RAPIDLY THROUGH THE FOREST, REGULARLY CHANGING DIRECTION

her, but my seasoned naturalist guide had an uncanny knack of being able to predict where she would next emerge from the jungle and we enjoyed one fabulous sighting after another as he successfully relocated the graceful feline time-and-again.

ELEPHANTS IN DHIKALA GRASSLANDS

Dhikala is the largest and most popular of the tourism zones in Corbett with the photogenic Ramganga Reservoir and surrounding grasslands giving it a deserved reputation as a wildlife hot-spot not to be missed. Although the big floods of 2010 caused widespread siltation of these well-known grasslands, the grassy areas that remain still saturate with elephants each spring.

I visited Dhikala in late March as the herds began to drift out of the forest and congregate in the food-rich meadows. Presided over by the skeletal remains of dead trees, the open grasslands exude a haunting beauty and it was a surreal experience to sit and watch the countless elephants shovelling trunk-loads of grass into their gaping mouths in a seemingly never-ending quest to satisfy their voracious appetites. As the grey behemoths fed, they inadvertently disturbed families of stocky hog deer causing them to scamper between the grass tussocks. There is, however, far more to Dhikala than its famed elephant-frequented plains.

In the company of my naturalist guide, I paid a visit to the renowned Croc Pool. This cliff-top lookout doubles as an excellent brunch spot, and as I munched on a sandwich and slurped my orange juice, Vrushal eagerly pointed out a slew of basking *gharials* and giant catfish swimming in the clear pool down below. But he unwittingly saved the best for last. As we departed the pool and drove towards the Sarapduli Forest Rest House, we rounded a corner and found ourselves face-to-face with a majestic male tiger as he padded down the road. ■