

The Fabulous Four

Travels through the wilds of Madhya Pradesh

Text and photographs by Stephen Cunliffe

With around 100 national parks, 500 sanctuaries and 38 tiger reserves to choose from, the Indian safari circuit can seem daunting to an uninitiated foreigner. Madhya Pradesh alone accounts for nine national parks and 34 Protected Areas. Add to this the fact that the 2010 national wildlife census revealed only 1,706 tigers surviving in all of India and the enormity of the challenge of locating one of these elusive felines in its natural habitat suddenly becomes glaringly apparent. **Stephen Cunliffe**, a South African wildlife photojournalist and conservationist, went to explore four of Madhya Pradesh's finest wildlife havens in search of these charismatic cats and in the process discovered a whole lot more.

A 'STREAK OF TIGERS' IN PENCH

Ever since I first listened to Mowgli's adventures as a young child, the tales of his amazing escapades in the jungles of India captivated me. A seed was planted and, over subsequent decades, I nurtured a growing desire to emulate Mowgli and enjoy my own adventures in the extraordinary forests of Madhya Pradesh that were so vividly immortalised in Rudyard Kipling's classic *The Jungle Book*. I had to wait 30 years but my lifelong dream was realised in January 2010 when I embarked on my own protracted exploration of the dry deciduous teak forests of the 757 sq. km Pench National Park in search of Shere Khan and the rest of the enchanting *Jungle Book* characters.

A 'streak of tigers', I learned from my guide KT, is a very unusual sight. Fiercely territorial and predominantly solitary, tigers are seldom seen in groups. To view a tigress with her cubs would be a very privileged sighting indeed and I stared intently into the gloomy jungle, unsuccessfully willing the wily predator to break cover.

"I can hear the *mabouts* searching in there," said KT after a while. "Even if this tiger won't come to us, I think the elephants might be able to take us to it."

The next thing I knew we were scrambling up an aluminium ladder onto our designated beast of burden. With a nudge from the *mabout*, the huge creature spun around and whisked us off into the depths of the jungle. Barely 10 minutes later, we emerged into a forest clearing where I was greeted by the piercing stare of Asia's iconic cat. The tigress had eyes of fire that burnt a hole straight into my soul. I had dreamed of this moment for 30 years and I will vividly remember the feeling of awe for 30 more.

The tigress soon lost interest in our arrival and, averting her gaze, she returned nonchalantly to watching her cubs as the four youngsters stalked, pounced and cavorted

around paying little or no attention to our presence. After a couple of minutes of boisterous play, the cubs followed their mother down into a drainage line where the tigress had stashed a fresh sambar carcass earlier. We followed on our elephant and watched the cubs squabble noisily as they began to feast on the deer.

With its sensational tiger sightings and the highest density of herbivores of any park in India, Pench should feature on every safari itinerary. Whether in search of a tiger, or simply craving an idyllic *Jungle Book* experience, a trip to Mowgli-land is the answer.

TIGERS COME TO YOU IN KANHA

Covering 1,945 sq. km. of *sal* forests, bamboo and grassy meadows on the eastern fringe of the Satpura Range, Kanha is one of India's largest national parks boasting a healthy tiger population of around 75. However, after our sensational tiger-viewing in Pench, my wife and I opted to take it easy in Kanha, choosing to soak up the decadent ambience of Banjar Tol, our lodge of choice.

I sipped my beer and gazed over the languid Banjar river while the chef unveiled an extravagant spread of Indian culinary delights for our riverside verandah lunch. Across the water, I observed a family of spotted deer drinking warily while a kingfisher dive-bombed the shallows in a vain attempt to catch himself some lunch. It appeared we weren't the only hungry ones.

With his usual impeccable service, Rafeeq, the butler, cleared the dishes and served dessert before leaving us to bask in the tranquil solitude of an idyllic jungle setting. But when he burst back into our suite out of breath barely two minutes later, I knew something extraordinary must be happening.

"Sir, madam, quickly-quickly you must come with me to suite number six. There is a tiger drinking and soon it will disappear back into the forest."



We grabbed our binoculars and sped off to the veranda of unoccupied room six. Arriving in the nick of time, we saw the tiger slowly getting up from the water's edge, stretching and dissolving back into the jungle. It was a brief glimpse – 30 seconds at the most – but a treasured sighting nonetheless.

LEOPARDS GALORE IN PANNA

A mere stone's throw from the 10th century Hindu temples and erotic sculptures of the Khajuraho World Heritage Site lies the 543 sq. km. Panna National Park, one of the state's smaller and less well-known reserves. Since the untimely demise of its tigers at the hands of poachers, this tranquil park has reinvented itself as a hilly haven for smaller felines such as the leopard and jungle cat, which thrive in its dense mixed forests and open grasslands.

On our first morning drive in the company of naturalist-guide Dipu Sasi, we were busy appreciating some of the park's prolific wildlife – the ungainly blue bull, diminutive Indian gazelle and rare four-horned antelope – when the shrill alarm calls of agitated deer snapped us from our musings. A troop of grey langurs immediately joined in the ruckus. There was little doubt; a predator lurked nearby.

Dipu threw the vehicle in reverse, yelled for us to hold on tight and roared off in the direction of the distress. Two hundred metres down the track he cut the engine and listened intently. The langurs were calling out continuously, the spotted deer were going berserk and now the deeper booming alarm calls of sambar augmented the racket. "It must be a tiger or a leopard and very close," squealed Dipu. Once again we took off down the track. Suddenly, as we rounded a bend, he slammed on the anchors and simultaneously hissed 'leopard' as we skidded to stop mere metres from a majestic cat crouching alongside the road and eyeing us warily.

Over the next couple of days Dipu successfully tracked down and treated us to no fewer than four different sightings of these graceful and supposedly elusive cats. Panna, a scenically attractive and uncrowded park, is the undisputed domain of the secretive leopard.

In Kanha, the glorious evening sun provided the perfect lighting for a common langur *Presbytis entellus* silhouette (previous page), captured by the author during his travels through four national parks in Madhya Pradesh. The elusive tiger *Panthera tigris* (top) made more than one appearance in the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve. In Panna and Kanha, he was able to see some of the parks' endangered, but less sought after, species such as this jungle cat *Felis chaus* (middle) gracefully bouncing through a field and a mugger crocodile *Crocodylus palustris* (bottom) sunning itself on a rock in the Ken river.

WHILE YOU'RE THERE

IN PENCH: Stretch your legs on an informative nature walk available in the buffer zone surrounding the national park.

IN KANHA: Take a guided birdwatching excursion along the Banjaar river.

IN PANNA: Sign up for a boat trip along the picturesque Ken river and gawk at prehistoric-looking marsh muggers and a plethora of water birds.

IN BANDHAVGARH: For an excursion with great views, take a trip up to the old fort situated atop the impressive Bandhavgarh hill at the centre of the national park.

SHERE KHAN IN BANDHAVGARH

The fourth not-to-be-missed reserve on the central Indian wildlife circuit is 1,161 sq. km. Bandhavgarh: the country's premier tiger reserve. This is not a place you go to for jungle solitude, but, if it is tigers you're after, then Bandhavgarh is unbeatable with its Tala Tourism Zone reputedly having the highest density of tigers in all of India.

Having already been spoilt with spectacular tigress sightings in Panch and Kanha, a huge male – a genuine Shere Khan lookalike – was what we desperately wanted to finish off our safari with and Bandhavgarh delivered in royal style.

After some relatively quiet days with only a distant sighting of a sleeping tiger on a far off hill, we were on our penultimate drive and rapidly resigning ourselves to the fact that our incredible good fortune was finally at an end. Instead of racing around the park in search of tigers, we opted instead to use our time to observe and appreciate the reserve's other diverse denizens.

On one such occasion, when we had pulled over to watch a herd of ubiquitous spotted deer, a massive tiger suddenly materialised – as if by magic – in the middle of the road right behind our jeep. We sat dead still and watched the sleek predator gracefully stalk the unsuspecting deer. Passing within five metres of the vehicle, the huge feline was oblivious to our euphoria, and remained completely focused on his prey. Classic catlike stalking ensued, with the stealthy hunter freezing mid-stride whenever a deer looked up. However, as the tiger was setting himself for the final charge, one of the wary herd sniffed the danger. A cacophony of distress erupted around our vehicle, as the terrified deer bolted for their lives leaving the tiger to rue a missed opportunity.

The powerful cat roared twice, padded silently back into the forest and melted into the jungle shadows.

INFO-TRAVEL:

WHEN TO GO: Madhya Pradesh's national parks and tiger reserves close to tourists for the duration of the monsoon. The weather and wildlife-viewing is optimal during February-March, but, if you can withstand the brutal pre-monsoon heat, tiger-viewing is at its absolute best in April and May.

GETTING THERE: Kingfisher, Indigo, Jet Airways and Indian Airlines all operate regular connections through Mumbai and Delhi to Nagpur, Jabalpur and Khajuraho. All the reserves are also well connected by road and rail.

WHERE TO STAY: All the parks have budget and luxury options. Go to www.sanctuaryasia.com for more information.

WHAT TO DO: Tiger-viewing from elephant back, guided nature walks, birdwatching excursions and twice-daily interpretive jungle drives with expert-trained naturalists (The author used and highly recommends Taj Safaris).

WHAT TO BRING: In addition to binoculars, camera and a flashlight, bring sun block, sunglasses and a hat. Neutral coloured clothing is encouraged on walking safaris.

READ THIS: Vivek Menon's *Mammals of India*.



The stunning landscapes of the Panna Tiger Reserve (top) leave most visitors spellbound. It is also home to the secretive leopard *Panthera pardus* among other endangered animals such as the blue bull *Boselaphus tragocamelus* and four-horned antelope *Tetracerus quadricornis*. The writer was extremely lucky to come face-to-face with four different leopards during his time at Panna. Safari rides in Kanha (above) yielded a plethora of sightings but as the author soon discovered, he did not even have to leave his room to spot a tiger!