

The endangered Bengal tiger is undoubtedly the most prized and sought after mammal in Asia. PICS/STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

With around 100 national parks, 500 nature sanctuaries and 38 tiger reserves to choose from, the Indian safari circuit can seem daunting to the uninitiated. And if the 2010 national wildlife census is anything to go by (only 1,706 Royal Bengal tigers survive in India), finding a charismatic cat in the wild can prove an ordeal. STEPHEN CUNLIFFE takes up the challenge to bring you a guide of India's five best parks to spot a wild tiger in

THIS selection picked on the basis of a combination of personal experience and reputation of reserves, boasts of some well-known iconic tiger reserves along with a couple of exciting new parks that have only recently burst onto the safari scene. With tiger viewing at its absolute best in April and May, read on for what will work best for you.

## Bandhavgarh, MP Head from: JABALPUR OR KHAJURAHO

THE premier park on the central Indian wildlife circuit is Bandhavgarh — the country's foremost tiger reserve. This is not a place to go to for jungle solitude, but if it's tigers you are after, then 1,167 km square Bandhavgarh is practically unbeatable with its Tala Tourism Zone boasting the highest density of tigers in all of India.

A huge male — a genuine Sher Khan lookalike — was what I desperately wanted to see, and the park 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 taking our penultimate drive and rapidly resigning ourselves to bad luck.

We had casually stopped to watch a herd of ubiquitous spotted deer when a massive male tiger suddenly materialised — as if by magic — right in the middle of the track behind our jeep. We sat dead still, transfixed by the sleek predator gracefully stalking the unsuspecting deer. Passing within five metres of our vehicle, the huge feline was oblivious to our euphoria and remained totally focused on his prey. Classic catlike stalking ensued, with the stealthy hunter freezing mid-stride



A male tiger stalks a herd of spotted deer while excited tourists snap photos in Bandhavgarh's revered Tala Tourism Zone

whenever a deer looked up. As he was setting himself for the final charge, one wary deer sniffed the danger. A cacophony of distress erupted around our vehicle, as the terrified deer bolted leaving the tiger to rue a missed opportunity.

The powerful cat looked at us for the first time and roared twice, before padding back into the forest and melting into the jungle shadows from where he came.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Centred on the original renovated homestead, the 12 charming guest suites of Mahua Kothi sprawl invitingly over 40 acres of wilderness on the fringes of Bandhavgarh. More information at

[www.tajsafaris.com/our\\_lodge/s/mahua\\_kothi/](http://www.tajsafaris.com/our_lodge/s/mahua_kothi/) Email enquiries to [India.reservations@andbeyond.com](mailto:India.reservations@andbeyond.com)

**COST:** High season (Oct 16 – April 15): Rs 32,000; low season (April 16 – June 30): Rs 20,000. These rates are per person per night and fully inclusive of accommodation, meals, local drinks, game drives and park fees.

**WHILE YOU'RE THERE:** For an excursion with great views, take a trip to the old fort situated atop Bandhavgarh hill at the centre of the national park.

## Kanha, MP Head from: JABALPUR

COVERING 1,945 km square of sal forests, bamboo and grassy meadows on the eastern fringe of the Satpura Range, Kanha is one of India's largest national parks. With an estimated 75 tigers residing in the reserve, this park is essential to any Indian safari experience.

After our sensational tiger sighting in Bandhavgarh, my wife and I opted to take it easy in Kanha, choosing to soak up the decadent ambience of the lavish Banjar Tola lodge. We gazed over the languid Banjar River while the chef unveiled an extravagant spread of Indian culinary delights for our private riverside verandah lunch. Across the water, I observed a family of spotted deer drinking warily, while a kingfisher dive-bombed the shallows in an attempt to catch himself some lunch. Rafeeq, our personal butler, cleared the dishes and served dessert before vanishing, leaving us to bask in our solitude. So, when he burst back into our suite out of breath two minutes later, I knew something extraordinary was going on.

"Sir, madam, quickly-quickly you must come with me now. A tiger is drinking from the river opposite Room No. 6, and soon it will disappear back into the forest."

We grabbed our binoculars and sped off to the verandah of the unoccupied room. We arrived in the nick of time to see the tiger slowly getting up from the water's edge and shaking itself off before disappearing into the jungle. It was a brief glimpse — 30 seconds at most — but a treasured sighting.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Comprising two adjoining lodges with nine canvas suites in each, Banjar Tola Tented Camp overlooks the Banjar River and lush sal forests of Kanha. More info at [www.tajsafaris.com/our\\_lodges/banjar\\_tola/](http://www.tajsafaris.com/our_lodges/banjar_tola/) Email enquiries to [India.reservations@andbeyond.com](mailto:India.reservations@andbeyond.com)

**COST:** High season (Oct 16 – April 15): Rs 32,000; low season (April 16 – June 30): Rs 20,000. These rates are per person per night and fully inclusive of all accommodation, meals, local drinks, game drives and park fees.

**WHILE YOU'RE THERE:** Take a guided bird-watching excursions along the picturesque Banjar River.

## Ranthambore, Rajasthan

Head from: **SAWAI MADHOPUR (BY TRAIN)**  
OR **JAIPUR (BY AIR)**

THE hauntingly beautiful dry deciduous forests and open landscapes of Ranthambore make animal spotting considerably easier than in many of India's other jungle parks, while countless hunting palace ruins and dilapidated forts give the arid terrain of the 392 km square national park a unique ambience.

Our vehicle had stopped to watch sambar and wading birds feed in the shallow waters of Padam Talau while spotted deer grazed the green grass along the lakeshore. It was the quintessential peaceful jungle scene... Then, all of a sudden, the eruption of shrill alarm calls snapped us back to reality.

"Let's get going!" yelled one of our party to the driver and we took off around the lake in the direction of the distress calls.

We soon found the anxious deer staring intently into a thicket alongside a derelict hunting palace on the edge of neighbouring Raj Bagh Lake.

With lightning speed the tigress broke cover and charged at the startled deer. The herd exploded in every direction, but she zeroed in on two unwary

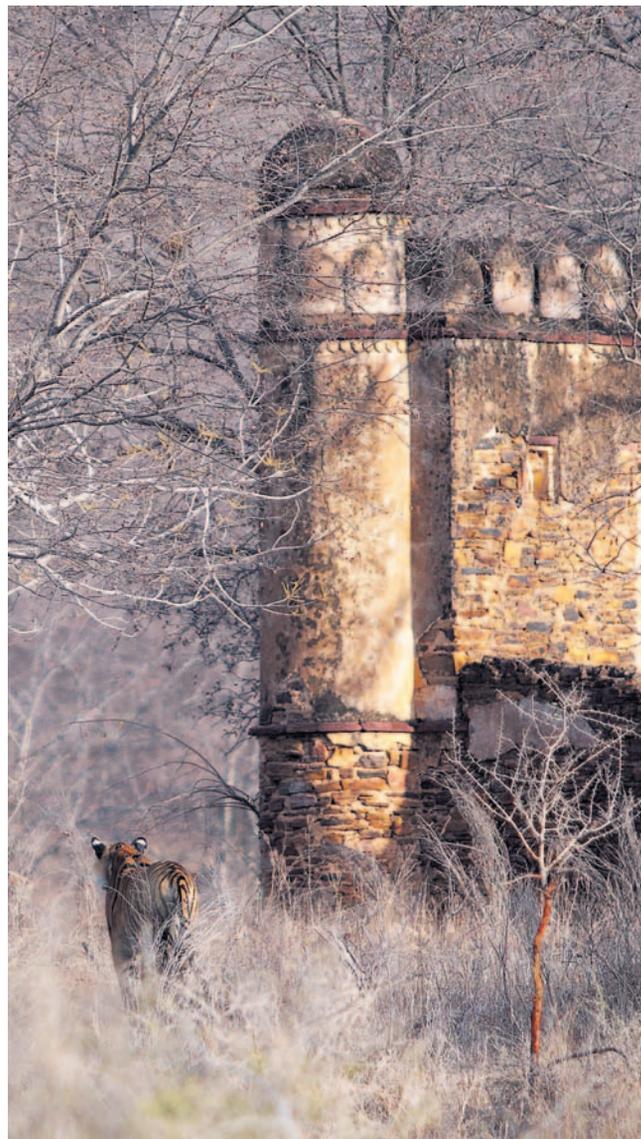
males and was on top of one in the blink of an eye.

His legs hopelessly flayed the air as she went straight for the throat. Five minutes later, the stag was dead and peace reigned once more. After noisily lapping some water, the tigress emerged from the lake to reclaim her prize and dragged the carcass behind the ruined palace to enjoy her feast in peace.

**WHERE TO STAY:** The Khem Villas Luxury Jungle Camp, located in a tranquil setting on the periphery of the park, is Ranthambore's best-kept secret. Further information at [www.khemvillas.com](http://www.khemvillas.com) or email [khemvillas@anokhi.com](mailto:khemvillas@anokhi.com)

**COST:** Room rates start from Rs 8,790. Park fees and activities extra.

**WHILE YOU'RE THERE:** Take a stroll around the stonewalled fortifications, battlements and temples of the hilltop Ranthambore Fort at the heart of the national park.



A tigress strolls alongside the remnants of an old hunting palace deep inside Ranthambore.

## YOUR TIGER SAFARI TRAVEL PLANNER

**WHEN TO GO:** National parks and tiger reserves shut during the monsoon. Although most parks are open from October 16 to June 30, tiger viewing is at its absolute best in April and May, provided you can withstand the pre-monsoon heat.

**WHAT TO DO:** Twice-a-day jungle drives with expert naturalists, guided nature walks, bird-watching excursions and tiger-viewing on elephant back.

**WHERE TO STAY:** A recent joint venture between Taj Hotels and andBeyond (formerly CCAfrica) resulted in the formation of Taj Safaris and andBeyond India. They offer well-trained nature guides and impeccable service in their luxury jungle lodges.

**RECOMMENDED SAFARI OPERATOR:** andBeyond India is a highly recommended and a reliable ground handler for arranging wildlife safari reservations, lodge transfers and travel logistics in India. Further information at [www.andbeyondindia.com](http://www.andbeyondindia.com) or email enquiries at [india.reservations@andbeyond.com](mailto:india.reservations@andbeyond.com)

**WHAT TO CARRY:** In addition to binoculars, camera and a flashlight, take along sun block, sunglasses and a hat. Neutral-coloured clothing is encouraged for wildlife safaris. Carrying a copy of Vivek Menon's Mammals Of India will enhance your safari experience.

## Pench, Maharashtra

Head from: **NAGPUR**

THIS not-to-be-missed tiger reserve in central India is somewhat new and very special. Ever since I first listened to the enchanting stories of Mowgli's adventures as a young child, the tales of his amazing escapades in the jungles of Pench captivated me. I had to wait 30 years to emulate Mowgli, and enjoy my own adventures in the extraordinary forests that were so vividly immortalised in Rudyard Kipling's classic, The Jungle Book. But, finally, my dream was realised when I embarked on my own exploration of the dry deciduous teak forests of the 757 km square Pench National Park.

Before I knew what was happening we were scrambling up an aluminium ladder onto an elephant. With a nudge from the mahout, the huge creature deftly spun around and whisked us off into the depths of the jungle. It was a surreal feeling to be sitting on an elephant's back as it rhythmically plodded through the forest, skillfully avoiding fallen trees and gracefully manoeuvring around rocks. Barely 10 minutes later we emerged into a forest clearing where I was greeted by the piercing stare of Asia's iconic cat, with eyes of fire.



A satisfied tiger licks his chops after feasting on a sambar deer at Pench National Park

The tigress soon lost interest in our arrival and, averting her gaze, returned to nonchalantly watch her cubs as the four youngsters stalked, pounced and cavorted around with total disregard for us. 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. Our elephant followed, and we watched the cubs squabble noisily as they began to feast.

With its sensational tiger sightings and the highest density of herbivores in any park in India, Pench should feature on every tiger safari itinerary in India.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Baghvan Jungle Lodge, comprising 12 luxurious bungalow suites with AC and private viewing decks,

is spread out along a stream bed in a jackal-frequented teak forest. More information at [www.tajsafaris.com/our\\_lodges/baghvan/](http://www.tajsafaris.com/our_lodges/baghvan/) Email enquiries to [India.reservations@andbeyond.com](mailto:India.reservations@andbeyond.com)

**COST:** High season (Oct 16 – April 15): Rs 32,000; low season (April 16 – June 30): Rs 20,000. These rates are per person per night and fully inclusive of all accommodation, meals, local drinks, game drives and park fees.

**WHILE YOU'RE THERE:** Stretch your legs on an informative nature walk available in the buffer zone surrounding the national park.

## Corbett, Uttarakhand Head from: **RAMNAGAR**

CENTRED in the Ramganga River, the 1,380 km square Corbett Tiger Reserve boasts an unrivalled mountainous terrain presided over by distant snow-capped peaks in the Himalayan foothills. Corbett is unique in that it offers an excellent chance of seeing both tigers and wild elephants in the same environment.

In Corbett, your best chance of finding Asia's elusive super-predator is with the help of an experienced guide and stopping regularly to listen for alarm calls. Barking deer are the ideal jungle spies. Our guide, Harish explained, "These tiny jungle creatures are

my forest friends and have helped me find more tigers than I care to admit."

After a couple of false alarms, I was finding it increasingly difficult to emulate our guide's enthusiasm and certainty about the effectiveness of relying on barking deer in our quest to locate a tiger, but his perseverance paid off when one of those diminutive russet herbivores led us straight to a tigress on the hunt. She was moving fast and 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 soon lost sight of her

but Harish had an uncanny knack of predicting where she would emerge from.

The moral of the story — never underestimate the worth of a seasoned guide leading you on your safari.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Camp Forktail Creek with its three tents and six traditional-style huts on the edge of the Corbett Tiger Reserve was the 2010 recipient of The John Wakefield Most Inspirational Eco Lodge Award. More information at [www.campforktailcreek.com](http://www.campforktailcreek.com) Email enquiries to [info@camp-forktailcreek.com](mailto:info@camp-forktailcreek.com)

**COST:** Rs 5,200 per cottage or luxury tent per night. Cost includes all meals, but park activities and game drives need to be paid for separately.

**WHILE YOU'RE THERE:** Take a multi-day elephant-back safari for a unique Indian wildlife experience. Corbett is the only park in India to permit long elephant excursions that let you sleep in restored forest rest houses inside the national park.



In the Himalayan foothills of the Corbett Tiger Reserve, an alert young tigress goes in search of food for her two young cubs.

[smdmail@mid-day.com](mailto:smdmail@mid-day.com)