



Tiger's BURNING plight

Wildlife photojournalist and conservationist **Stephen Cunliffe** spent three years exploring India's finest wildlife havens in search of tigers. Here are his top six spots to locate one of these charismatic cats in their natural habitat.

Tiger populations have reached a critical tipping point. Asia's last 3 200 wild tigers could go either way: survival or extinction. India is the last great refuge for one of the world's most iconic species, yet a mere 1706 tigers, according to the 2011 National Tiger Conservation Authority census, survive there.

With countless wildlife sanctuaries, national parks and tiger reserves, the Indian safari circuit can seem more than a little daunting to an uninitiated foreigner, but here are some wild places that make great starting points for a tiger search.

Exploring Mowgli-land in Pench

Vividly immortalised in Rudyard Kipling's classic *The Jungle Book*, the dry, deciduous teak forests of the 75 800-hectare Pench National Park make it the perfect place to emulate Mowgli and set off in search of Shere Khan.

Sitting atop an elephant, watching the energetic squabbles of four young tigers feasting on a fresh sambar carcass, helped me realise a lifelong dream: to observe a streak of tigers in the wild. With its sensational tiger sightings and the highest density of herbivores of any park in India, Pench should feature on every safari itinerary.

Kanha is king

Covering almost 200 000 hectares of grassy meadows and sal and bamboo forests on the eastern fringe of the Satpura Range, Kanha National Park is one of India's largest reserves and boasts a healthy population of about 75 tigers. It's also home to India's foremost safari lodge. With camps not allowed inside India's national parks, lavish Banjaar Tola enjoys an enviable location overlooking wildlife-rich Kanha. Its 18 luxury canvas suites perch above the languid Banjaar River, tempting safari goers to forgo a game drive in favour of spotting animals from the comfort of private riverside decks.

The lucky ones might see dhole (Indian wild dogs) chase a hapless deer into the river or briefly glimpse a tiger coming down to drink, but everyone can bask in the tranquillity of a picturesque jungle setting.

Making a comeback in Panna

A mere stone's throw from the 10th-century Hindu temples and erotic sculptures of the Khajuraho World Heritage Site lies the 54 300-hectare Panna National Park, one of India's smaller and less well-known tiger reserves.

With the untimely demise of its tigers at the hands of poachers, a recent re-introduction programme returned the king of the jungle to his rightful domain. In the interim, this serene 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.

While Panna's tigers are making a welcome comeback, this scenic and uncrowded national park provides the best leopard viewing in India.

Shere Khan rules in Bandhavgarh

Bandhavgarh National Park is India's premier tiger reserve, with reputedly the highest density of these big cats in the country. This isn't the place to go for jungle solitude, but if it's simply tigers you're after, the 10 500-hectare Tala Zone of Bandhavgarh is unbeatable.

As we sat watching a herd of spotted deer, a male tiger appeared on the road behind our jeep. The stealthy Shere Khan lookalike stalked towards the unsuspecting deer, but just as the powerful feline was setting himself for the final charge, one of the herd sniffed danger. A cacophony of distress calls erupted around our vehicle, as terrified deer bolted for their lives. The powerful cat was left to rue a missed opportunity. He roared twice before padding back into the forest, dissolving into the jungle shadows. >



Tourists watch as a tiger pads into the forests of Bandhavgarh National Park.

Palaces and forts in Ranthambore

The hauntingly beautiful deciduous forests and open landscapes of Ranthambore National Park make it a considerably easier place to spot animals than India's jungle parks, while countless hunting-palace ruins and dilapidated forts give the arid terrain of the 39 200-hectare national park a unique ambience.

With lightning speed, the tigress broke cover from alongside a derelict palace on the edge of Raj Bagh Lake. She charged a herd of startled deer, zeroing in on a rutting male. The deer's

legs hopelessly flayed the air as the tigress clamped her jaws around its throat. Five minutes later the stag was dead and peace reigned over the palace precinct once more.

Corbett: land of roar and trumpet

Centred on the perennial Ramganga River and presided over by distant snowy peaks, 131 800-hectare Corbett Tiger Reserve boasts unrivalled mountainous terrain in the Himalayan foothills. Corbett is unique in that it offers an excellent chance of seeing wild elephants and tigers on the prowl in the same environment.

Corbett is also the only national park in India to permit multi-day elephant-back safaris. During these excursions, visitors sleep in government-run forest rest houses, deep inside the national park. Camp Forktail Creek, deserved winner of the John Wakefield Memorial Most Inspirational Eco Lodge Award in 2010, lies on the periphery of the reserve and offers serious value-for-money accommodation. ■

Travel planner

Getting there

SAA (www.flysaa.com), Jet Airways (www.jetairways.com), and Emirates Airlines (www.emirates.com) operate reliable international services with connections through Mumbai or Delhi onto Nagpur, Jabalpur and Khajuraho. Although there's no charge for South African passport holders, the standard six-month tourist visa must be obtained before you leave. For more information, go to www.indiansouthafrica.com.

Park information

For more information about India's national parks, check out their official websites • Pench www.penchnational-park.com • Kanha www.kanhanational-park.com • Panna Tiger Reserve www.pannatigerreserve.net • Bandhavgarh www.bandhavgarhnationalpark.com • Ranthambore www.ranthamborenational-park.com • Corbett Tiger Reserve www.corbettnationalpark.com.

Where to stay

In Pench, **Pench Jungle Camp** offers affordable accommodation from US\$60 (R420) a person a night sharing. Tel +91-120-405-2601, email anil@tourmyindia.com, www.tourmyindia.com.



Camp Forktail Creek is an affordable camp in Corbett Tiger Reserve. Rooms start from INR3 250 (R500) a person a night sharing. Tel +91-594-728-7804, email info@campforktailcreek.com, www.campforktailcreek.com.

Kanha offers accommodation at the **Shergarh Tented Camp**. Rates start from INR11 000 (R1 700) a person a night sharing. Tel +91-909-818-7346, email enquiries@shergarh.com, www.shergarh.com.

Panna Tiger Reserve has comfy accommodation at **Ken River Lodge** from INR6 500 (R1 000) a person a night sharing. Tel +91-124-422-2657, email hh@airtelmail.in, www.kenriverlodge.com.

Explore Bandhavgarh from **Samode Safari Lodge** from INR22 700 (R3 490) a person a night sharing. Tel +91-141-263-2407, email reservations@samode.com, www.samode.com.

Khem Villas Luxury Jungle Camp is a tranquil setting on the periphery of Ranthambore park. Rates start from INR9 500 (R1 460) a person a night sharing. Tel +94-140-302-62, email khemvillas@anokhi.com, www.khemvillas.com.

Taj Safaris, a joint venture between Taj Hotels and &Beyond (formerly CCAfrica), offers well-trained nature guides and great service with wildlife experiences and luxury jungle accommodation. These include Baghvan Resort in Pench, Banjaar Tola in Kanha, Pashan Garh in Panna and Mohua Kothi in Bandhavgarh. Rates start from INR21 000 (R3 230) a person and include accommodation, meals and all activities. Tel 011-809-4447, email india.reservations@andbeyond.com, www.andbeyondindia.com.

When to go

India's tiger reserves are closed to all tourists for the duration of the monsoon season, from mid-June to September. Weather and wildlife viewing are optimal in February and March, but if you can take the brutal pre-monsoon heat, tiger-viewing is at its best from April to June.

What to do

Jungle drives, guided nature walks, bird-watching excursions, boat cruises and tiger-viewing from elephant-back. ■

Accommodation price ratings: a person a night, usually B&B, sometimes full board under R250 R251 – R499 R500 – R750 R751 – R999 R1000+