



EYE OF THE TIGER

WITH AROUND 100 NATIONAL PARKS, 500 NATURE SANCTUARIES CAN SEEM DAUNTING TO THE UNINITIATED. IF YOU CONSIDER BENGAL TIGERS SURVIVING IN ALL OF INDIA, THEN FINDING A REAL CHALLENGE. **STEPHEN CUNLIFFE** SPENDS NINE MONTHS

AND 38 TIGER RESERVES TO CHOOSE FROM, THE INDIAN SAFARI CIRCUIT THAT THE LAST NATIONAL WILDLIFE CENSUS REVEALED ONLY 1 411 ROYAL ONE OF THESE CHARISMATIC FELINES IN ITS NATURAL HABITAT CAN PROVE A YEAR IN INDIA. THESE ARE HIS FIVE BEST PARKS FOR SPOTTING A WILD CAT





A 'streak of tigers' in Pench

Ever since I first heard the enchanting stories of Mowgli's adventures, the tales of his amazing escapades in the jungles of India captivated me. The release of Disney's celebrated film *The Jungle Book* only increased my fascination. A seed had been planted way back then and, over subsequent decades, I nurtured a growing desire to emulate Mowgli and enjoy my own adventures in the extraordinary forests so vividly immortalised in Rudyard Kipling's classic. I had to wait 30 years but, finally, my lifelong dream was realised when I embarked on my own exploration of the dry deciduous teak forests of the Pench National Park in search of Shere Khan.

Entering the 757km² park as the first rays of sunlight vanquished a brilliant star-studded night sky, our guide Kaustubh Thomare was bubbling over with bush lore and enthusiasm – the perfect accomplice for my first foray into Mowgli-land. 'See those gigantic pug marks crossing the road? It looks like a male tiger and they're very fresh, so keep a sharp eye out on your side.'

We had picked up the trail of Shere Khan and I revelled in the experience. Keeping me in the loop about how he was trying to track down the elusive tiger, KT said, 'I've stopped the vehicle on this firebreak because this spot is a regular crossing point for that male whose tracks we saw earlier, and there is also a tigress with four cubs that hangs around

in this area. I'm hoping the other animals will act as our jungle spies and their alarm calls can help us to find a tiger or five.'

I couldn't believe it – we weren't just searching for a lone tiger, we were in hot pursuit of a whole family! A 'streak of tigers', I soon learned from 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.

As I stared intently into the gloomy jungle, willing the wily predator to break cover, a series of loud barks shattered the silence. We sped off

in the direction of the *nilgai* (blue bull) alarm calls. Soon the deeper snorts of sambar deer joined in. The agitated animals were clearly telling us there was a tiger lurking close by.

'I can hear the mahouts 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.'

We drove over to the park headquarters where we registered for an elephant-back safari. These grey behemoths are the true off-road vehicles of the jungle, and sitting way up on their backs provides an unrivalled vantage point for viewing tigers. We were sixth in the queue and, as our turn drew nearer, so the excitement mounted.

Next thing I knew I was scrambling up an aluminium ladder onto my designated beast of burden. With a nudge from the mahout, the huge

The tigress returned to nonchalantly watching her cubs as the four youngsters stalked, pounced and cavorted around



An early-morning game drive in Kanha National Park, home to around 75 tigers
OPPOSITE A tiger prepares for a dip at Raj Bagh Lake in Ranthambhore Park

creature 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, deftly avoiding fallen trees and gracefully manoeuvring around rocks and debris. Barely 10 minutes later we emerged into a clearing where I was greeted by the piercing stare of Asia's iconic cat. The tigress had eyes that burnt a hole straight into my soul. I had dreamed of this moment for 30 years and will vividly remember it for 30 more.

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

PENCH

➔ **WHERE TO STAY** Baghvan Jungle Lodge, comprising 12 luxurious bungalow suites with aircon and private viewing decks, is spread out along a stream bed in a jackal-frequented teak forest. tajsafaris.com

💰 **COST** From INR 20 000 (about R3 200) per person per night, including all meals, local drinks, game drives and park fees.

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

Tigers come to you in Kanha

Covering 1 945km² 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 in the reserve, this park should be included as part of any Indian safari experience. 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 lavish Banjaar Tola – the flagship safari lodge in &Beyond's portfolio of Indian nature retreats.

I sipped my beer and gazed over the languid Banjaar River, while the chef unveiled an extravagant spread of Indian culinary delights for our riverside veranda lunch. Across the water I saw a family of spotted deer drinking warily, while a kingfisher dive-bombed the shallows in a vain attempt to catch some lunch. We weren't the only hungry ones.

With his usual impeccable service, Rafeeq, our personal butler, cleared the dishes and served dessert before vanishing to leave us basking in the tranquil solitude of the jungle setting. But when he burst back into our suite out of breath 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 binoculars and sped off to the veranda of unoccupied room six. We arrived in the nick of time to see 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 most – but a treasured sighting nonetheless.

KANHA

➔ **WHERE TO STAY** Comprising two intimate, adjoining lodges with nine elegant canvas suites in each, Banjaar Tola Tented Camp overlooks the perennial Banjaar River and lush sal forests of Kanha. tajsafaris.com

💰 **COST** From INR 20 000 (about R3 200) per person per night, including all meals, local drinks, game drives and park fees.

➔ **WHILE YOU'RE THERE** Take a guided bird-watching excursion along the river.

Shere Khan in Bandhavgarh

The third not-to-be-missed reserve on the central Indian wildlife circuit is 1 161km² Bandhavgarh. This is not a place one goes for solitude, but if it's tigers one is after then Bandhavgarh is unbeatable, with its Tala Tourism Zone having the highest density of tigers in India. ▶

Having already been spoilt with our earlier tigress sightings, a huge male – a genuine Shere Khan lookalike – was what we desperately wanted to see, 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 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 spotted deer, a massive tiger suddenly materialised – as if by magic – in the middle of the road right behind our jeep. We sat still and watched the sleek predator gracefully stalk the unsuspecting deer. Passing within five metres of the vehicle, the 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.

As the tiger was setting himself for the final charge, one of the wary herd sniffed the danger. Sounds 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 shadows.

BANDHAVGARH

WHERE TO STAY Centred around the original renovated homestead, 12 charming guest suites at Mahua Kothi sprawl invitingly over 40 acres of wilderness on the fringes of Bandhavgarh. tajsafaris.com

COST From INR 20 000 (about R3 200) per person per night, including all meals, local drinks, game drives and park fees.

WHILE YOU'RE THERE For great views, take a trip up to the old fort atop impressive Bandhavgarh Hill at the centre of the park.

Lady of the Lake in Ranthambhore

The beautiful, dry deciduous forests and open landscapes of Ranthambhore in Rajasthan make spotting animals 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 392km² national park a unique ambience.



Tiger-viewing atop elephants is the best way to spot the cats – here at Corbett Tiger Reserve in the Himalayan foothills
BELOW A luxury suite at riverside Banjar Tola in Kanha Park



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

PHOTOGRAPHS STEPHEN CUNLIFFE; GREAT STOCK

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 the startled deer. The herd exploded in every direction. She zeroed in on two unwary rutting 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.

RANTHAMBHORE

WHERE TO STAY The Khem Villas Luxury Jungle Camp, in a tranquil setting on the periphery of the park, is Ranthambhore's best-kept secret. khemvillas.com

COST From INR 8 790 (about R1 400) per room. Park fees and activities are extra.

WHILE YOU'RE THERE Stroll around the stone-walled, hilltop Ranthambhore Fort.

Himalayan tigress of Corbett

Centred on the Ramganaga River, 138km² Corbett Tiger Reserve boasts 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. With no off-road driving or walking allowed inside the tiger reserves of India, the best chance of finding

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 the sudden eruption of shrill alarm calls snapped us back to reality.

'Let's get going!' yelled our guide Subash to the driver, and we took off around the lake in the direction of the distress calls. We soon

TRAVEL NOTES INDIAN TIGER SAFARIS

WHEN TO GO India's national parks and tiger reserves are closed during monsoon season (mid-June to September). The weather and wildlife-viewing is optimal in February and March, but if you can stand the brutal pre-monsoon heat, tiger-viewing is at its absolute best in April and May.

VISA South Africans require a visa to visit India. It is free but must be obtained before departure. Contact the High Commission of India, 012-342-5392, indiainsouthafrica.com

CURRENCY The Indian rupee. INR6.25 = R1
NEED TO KNOW In addition to binoculars, camera and a torch, bring sunblock, sunglasses and a hat. Neutral-coloured clothing is encouraged on walking safaris. Also take along a dose of patience, because bureaucracy and traffic can be painfully slow.

HEALTH India is a low-risk malaria area, but dengue fever is more prevalent. Do not drink the tap water and practise rigorous personal hygiene. India is a safe country, free from violent crime – the worst one may encounter are pickpockets or street scams in the cities.

RECOMMENDED SAFARI OPERATOR A recent joint venture between Taj Hotels and &Beyond resulted in the formation of Taj Safaris and &Beyond India. It offers well-trained guides, impeccable service, interactive wildlife experiences and luxury jungle lodges, all in central Madhya Pradesh state. They are also reliable ground handlers for lodge transfers and travel in India. In South Africa, call 011-809-4300, andbeyondindia.com
READ THIS Vivek Menon's *Mammals of India* (Princeton Field Guides) and Jim Corbett's

Asia's elusive super-predator is with the help of an experienced guide and stopping regularly to listen for alarm calls.

In Corbett, the abundant 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, but his perseverance paid off when one of these diminutive russet herbivores later 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 lost sight of her, but Harish had an uncanny knack of being able to predict where she would emerge from the jungle next, and we relocated her time and again.

CORBETT

WHERE TO STAY Camp Forktail Creek, with three tents and six traditional-style huts on the edge of the reserve, is an award-winning eco lodge. campforktailcreek.com

COST INR 5 200 (about R830) per hut or tent per night. Includes all meals, but park activities and game drives are extra.

WHILE YOU'RE THERE Corbett is the only park in India to permit multi-day elephant-back safaris, where one sleeps in restored forest rest houses inside the park. ●

Man-Eaters of Kumaon (Oxford India).

GO THERE British Airways flies to Delhi and Mumbai from London. Internal flights connect to Jabalpur and regional towns. ba.com

