

Nature's *surreal* sights

In search of the legendary Shere Khan and other characters, **Stephen Cunliffe** gets besotted with Pench where *The Jungle Book* was set

EVER SINCE I HAD FIRST LISTENED TO THE stories of Mowgli's escapades as a young child, the tales of his amazing adventures captivated me. The release of Walt Disney's celebrated cartoon film only increased my fascination with the forests and animals of central India. A seed had been planted way back then and, over the subsequent decades, I nurtured a growing desire to emulate Mowgli and enjoy my own adventures in the fantastic jungles that were so vividly immortalised in Rudyard Kipling's classic *The Jungle Book*. I had to wait for 30 years, before embarking on my journey to the Pench National Park in search of Shere Khan and other characters.

Although Pench National Park provided the inspiration and setting for Kipling's masterpiece, it has, surprisingly, remained less

well-known than its more illustrious neighbours Kanha and Bandhavgarh. However, this has only worked in its favour. With an area spanning 757 sq km, it is a small reserve, but don't be fooled by its size, as Pench packs in a real punch.

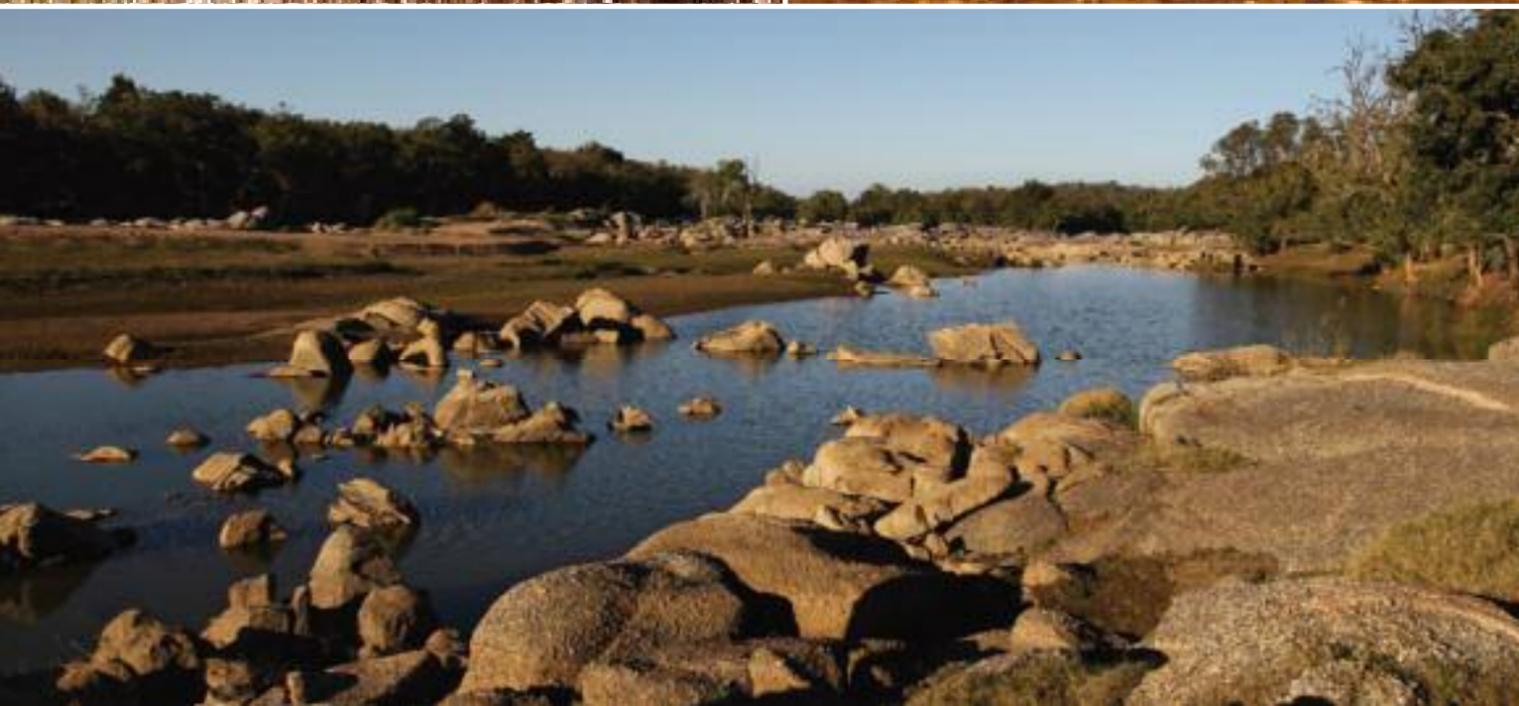
Located in southern Madhya Pradesh, the wildlife-rich haven comprises a relatively open habitat of dry deciduous teak forests that are both strikingly beautiful and ideal for wildlife viewing. The best part of it is that there aren't hundreds of jeeps around detracting from your nature experience.

It was my first morning on the safari and, I sat bright-eyed and bushy-tailed on the open vehicle. It was a brutally cold dawn and I adjusted my woolly hat and wrapped a blanket tightly over my legs. On my lap, a thoughtfully provided hot water bottle

PHOTOGRAPHS: STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



Camaraderie: A spotted deer and a pair of langurs take a sip from a drying up water source



ensured I felt as snug as a bug in a rug, as we whizzed off towards the park gate.

I was as excited as a kid in a cookie store when, at 6.30 am, we entered the park just as the gates opened. My young Taj Safaris guide, Kaustubh Thomare, was bubbling over with enthusiasm and knowledge. He was the perfect accomplice for my first foray into Mowgli-land. His stories enthralled me, while his interpretations of the park enhanced my Pench experience. "Look at those pug marks on the road. It looks like a female tiger and they're very fresh. Keep a sharp eye out on your side of the road," KT instructed.

We had picked up the trail of Shere Khan's mate and I revelled in the experience. My guide continuously talked me through what he was doing and how he was trying to track down the elusive tiger. "I've stopped the vehicle on this fireline to listen for alarm calls," he explained. "This is a regular crossing point for that female tiger whose tracks we saw earlier and I'm hoping that the other animals will help us in finding her and her cubs." 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. As a fiercely territorial and predominantly solitary cat, tigers are seldom seen in groups. To view a tigress with her cubs would be a very rare sighting indeed.

I was staring so intently into the gloom of the jungle that my eyes began to hurt. Suddenly, a series of loud barks shattered the morning silence. KT's excitement was infectious as we sped off in the direction of the chital alarm calls. Soon the deeper alarm snorts of sambar deer joined the cacophony of distress. I willed the tigress to break cover and reveal herself and her sub-adult cubs, but she remained hidden. The agitated deer were clearly telling us that she was close, very close, but she continued to elude us. "I can hear the mahouts searching in there," said KT, "Even if she won't come to us, I think the elephants will be able to take us to her."

With our tigress stubbornly refusing to make an appearance, we decided to drive

Navigator

GETTING THERE

Pench National Park is situated in the Seoni and Chhindwara districts of Madhya Pradesh

By air: The easiest way is to fly to Nagpur followed by a two-hour road transfer north to Pench

By rail & road: The nearest railhead and bus stand is located 30 km away from the park at Seoni, which is connected to most places in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra by good road and rail networks.

Jeeps to Pench are easily available from here

WHERE TO STAY

Baghvan Taj Wildernes Lodge is the premier accommodation option, Tariff: Rs 30,000 onwards, Tel: 022 66011825. The 12 luxurious bungalows with private viewing decks, are situated in a jackal-frequented teak forest on the edge of a streambed

MEMORABLE MOMENT

As our elephant swayed gently, the tigress sat regally watching her four cubs at play, totally disregarding our presence. After a few minutes, they followed the majestic feline into a small *nullah*. The tigress dragged a fresh sambar kill and the cubs squabbled noisily as they began feasting on it. Those 10 minutes in a streak of tigers was a lifetime experience!

A thing of beauty: (facing, clockwise from top left) A pair of Collared Scops owls; a nilgai; a jackal sets off on a hunt; the Pench river; a jungle cat in action

over to the park headquarters where we registered for an elephant safari and a chance to search for the tigress from elephant-back. These grey behemoths are the true off-road vehicles of the bush and sitting way up on their backs provides an unrivalled vantage point for viewing tigers. We were number seven in the queue and, as our turn drew nearer, the excitement mounted. And we were scrambling up an aluminium ladder onto our designated elephant. With a nudge from the mahout, the huge creature effortlessly spun around and whisked us off into the depths of the jungle. It felt surreal to be sitting on an elephant's back as it plodded into the forest, easily avoiding fallen trees and gracefully manoeuvring around rocks and other obstacles.

Barely 10 minutes later, I was greeted by the piercing stare of Asia's iconic cat. The tigress had eyes of fire that burnt a hole in my pounding heart. I had dreamt of this moment for 30 years. And now I was face to face with my very own Shere Khan. It was a moment in time, seared into my memory.

Pench offered much more than just the tiger encounter of a lifetime and I was fortunate enough to experience a whole host of memorable sightings. And sitting on an open flood plain, watching a herd of Gaur languidly traipse across the grassy landscape, was one of those magical moments. On another occasion, we stopped and spent over an hour observing a troop of lively langurs interact and feed cooperatively with spotted deer: a great insight into animal behaviour.

Later, when we came across a rare jungle cat hunting, we sat quietly and watched her stalk and pounce into the tall grass as she attempted to catch birds and rodents for dinner. It was a classic display of typically feline hunting technique.

With the highest density of herbivores in India, Pench should be at the top of the list for any wildlife enthusiast. Whether in search of an elusive tiger, or simply craving an idyllic *Jungle Book* experience, a trip to Mowgli-land is the answer. ■