

On a *royal* trail

Ranthambore Fort's ancient ruins are just the place to spot tigers lazing on a hot summer afternoon, discovers **Stephen Cunliffe**

WHETHER THE TIGER OR THE LION IS THE rightful owner of the prestigious title of the king of the jungle is an age-old debate. And even as the debate rages on, fact is that in the Ranthambore National Park, the tiger is the undisputed king.

The six-seater gypsy bounced along a narrow valley road as we rapidly closed in on our designated zone within the park. Passing under the ancient battlements of the Ranthambore Fort, I craned my neck skywards for a glimpse of the ancient fortification on the hilltop, high above. Passing through the Misradhara Gate, was like a journey into another world altogether. Ancient ruins, many over a thousand years old, lay scattered across the area. Fortifications, temples and the remnants of hunting palaces, combined with a pristine natural landscape of

lakes and rolling hills produced an environment I had never encountered before. The uniqueness of the scenery fuelled the anticipation and excitement in our vehicle, thrusting me back to the era when the Chauhan kings had constructed the magnificent Ranthambore Fort.

The park-assigned guide Vipul informed me that Ranthambore National Park took its name from this impressive 10th century fort. The fort, dominating an entire hilltop at the heart of the park, is named after the two adjoining hills of Rann and Thambhore. Seven kilometres of imposing stonewalled fortifications, strengthened by towers and bastions, encompass a four-square kilometre hilltop fortress that boasts an enviable location with breathtaking views of the park. A thousand years on, the fort still dominates

Royal wait: A tiger, camouflaged in the dry terrain of the Ranthambore National Park, waits on his prey



the scene; only the kings are gone now, leaving the tiger to preside over this kingdom.

I was among one of the more than 100,000 wildlife enthusiasts who visit the Ranthambhore National Park each year in search of that elusive tiger. Sitting in the open-topped gypsy, I followed Vipul's instructions and kept my senses alert. I was surprised to hear him say, "We are much more likely to find a tiger with the help of our ears than with our eyes alone. We need the alarm calls of our forest friends to help us locate where the tiger is hiding." He went on to explain that the dry deciduous forests of Ranthambhore make it a prime location for viewing Bengal tigers in their natural habitat, as the relatively open terrain makes it considerably easier to spot them than in many of India's other tiger reserves.

The 282-sq km Ranthambhore National Park, which is part of the much larger 1,334 sq km Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve, is a flagship reserve for Project Tiger. However, even though tigers are the modern-day rulers of this corner of eastern Rajasthan, their situation remains precarious. Vipul explained, "Severe poaching five years back greatly reduced the tiger population." And when I inevitably asked him how many tigers there are in Ranthambhore today, he responded, "A camera trap census carried out by the Wildlife Institute of India in 2006-2007, showed that there were 31 tigers here, although we estimate this has probably grown to 45 today."

We had stopped and were watching a family of sambar deer feed in the shallow waters of a lake, when the loud grunts of a nilgai (blue bull) brought us back to reality. The alarm calls instantly changed the atmosphere on the vehicle from relaxed to fever pitch. "Let's go!" yelled Vipul to the driver, and we took off in the direction of the distress calls. We soon located the anxious antelope staring towards a thicket not far from a ruined hunting palace. Unfortunately, as we sat listening to the nilgai alarm calls and praying that the tiger would emerge, a downside to Ranthambhore became apparent.

Navigator

Getting there:

By air: The closest airport is in Jaipur, three-and-a-half hours away

By rail: Sawai Madhopur is the nearest railhead and is well-connected by trains to other cities

By road: Sawai Madhopur has good road connectivity with Delhi, Jaipur, Ajmer, Pushkar, Bundi, Kota, Jhansi and Orchha

Where to stay

There are hundreds of accommodation options in and around Sawai Madhopur. Aman-i-Khas, Tel: 07462 252052, Tariff: Rs 40,000 onwards, aman-i-khas@amanresorts.com; Oberoi Vanyavilas, Tel: 223999, Tariff: Rs 37,000 onwards, www.oberoihotels.com are two ultra-luxurious options. Other options include The Taj Sawai Madhopur, Mob: 9214204121, Tariff: Rs 7,500 onwards, is also a good place to stay

MEMORABLE MOMENT

Barely five minutes into the park, we came across a set of fresh paw prints of a male tiger, when the insistent alarm calls of a herd of chital erupted nearby. We took off towards the sound of tiger-induced distress. Very soon, we came face-to-face with a tiger padding gracefully across a clearing before stopping to sniff the air for clues as to where he might locate a meal. His regal presence took our breaths away

Jungle treats: (facing page, clockwise from top) Ruins of a hunting palace; a female nilgai; a crocodile basks by the river bank; a langur; a kingfisher

The incessant alarm calls had been picked up by other vehicles, and we saw one after another descending on the scene in clouds of dust. We all sat waiting, hoping for a glimpse of Asia's super-predator. And for once, she did not disappoint: the beautiful tigress strolled out of the jungle thicket and after glancing at the vehicles, ambled off in the direction of the lake for a quick drink. After noisily lapping up some water, she moved on. I was ecstatic and Vipul was grinning like the Cheshire cat.

By now, we were in the midst of a 'tiger jam', essentially, a traffic jam centred on a tiger! Gypsies and canters cut each other off as they jostled for space and a view of the majestic tigress. A procession of camera-toting tourists desperately sought an opportunity to capture a picture of the queen of Ranthambhore. She, however, walked on nonchalantly, oblivious to the furore that she was creating. Turning towards the ruined palace, she disappeared behind a stone wall and melted back into the jungle.

Our gypsy exploded in excitement as we looked at each another's pictures and discussed how beautiful and relaxed she had been. It is difficult to eloquently capture in words the powerful emotions stirred by a close encounter with India's super-predator. A fellow guest, ecstatic after his first ever tiger-sighting, gushed, "My first wild tiger. It was just so amazing; so fantastic! Now I want to do my bit to help protect all the wild lives of India!" His excitement mirrored my own feeling of jubilation at having been privileged enough to witness the queen of Ranthambhore's jungles.

I found it especially ironic that, in a bizarre twist of fortunes, the hunting palace in the heart of Ranthambhore's zone 3 has, in time, become a popular haunt of tigers. As Vipul elaborated, "During the hot summer months, tigers come here nearly every day to sleep on the cool stone floors of the old palace." It was truly encouraging to see the tigers reclaim control of their rightful domain – the jungle. ■