



TIGERLAND 5 STAR

The Taj group is better known for its iconic 5-star hotel chain. But they also manage luxurious wildlife resorts in Madhya Pradesh. Our correspondent sights more tigers in one trip there than most travelers do in a lifetime of tramping Indian jungles.

by TARINI PAL / NICKY RAM { THE OUTDOOR JOURNAL }

“Welcome to my office”, said Ashish, safari guide and environmentalist, as he drove an open 4x4 Maruti Gypsy casually through the thick Salforest. Sunlight dappled the rough track through the broad leaves of these large hardwood trees, native to this country. Large langurs, small black faces in grey fur, screeched from the branches above as we entered the core zone of the Kanha National Park. With 2000 square kilometres of wilderness, it is one of India’s largest protected zones.

Only a few thousand years ago, most of India was covered in such jungles. Then the first farmers appeared, slashing and burning vast swathes of forests along the vast Indo-Gangetic plain, to clear it for crops. Over millennia, areas of wilderness contracted to pockets, and central states like Madhya Pradesh – literally, “Middle State”, in the heart of India, a wilderness filled with Mesolithic rock paintings, stone carvings, ancient caves, rock cliffs, ancient humans, mysterious tribes, and finally, India’s incredible, charismatic, and increasingly endangered predator – the Tiger. Kanha was one of the first nine tiger reserves established as part of Project Tiger in 1973, set up to finally protect the rapidly disappearing predator and its ecosystem.

Banjaar Tola, a Taj Safaris property along the Banjar river, comprises of two camps, each of which has nine tented suites. Designed to protect the pristine environment, each suite is set on a raised platform, and has its own private veranda that offers spectacular views of the forest.

Sometimes, special ‘jungle banquets’ can be had open-air, under the stars, with local cuisine cooked and served in traditional traditional terracotta degs and haandis and served on bullock carts.

The Maikal Hills of the Satpuras - an ancient mountain range, now low and eroded, breaks up the topography of the Park. Hardwood forests are interspersed with sprawling grasslands and thickets of tall bamboo. This are perfect tigerlands, where the shadows of the grass camouflage the big cat from its prey, which were all around us: herds of the chital, spotted deer, quietly grazing in a clearing; and the magnificent twelve-horned deer, the barasingha, the ‘big-horns’ till recently, an endangered species.

Most sightings happen on early dawn drives in the National Park, in their vehicles driven or accompanied by a guide like Ashish. Because of the terrain in India, unlike in Africa, actually seeing a big cat in the wild is incredibly difficult. Just as we were about to give up hope on spotting one, our guide got a call that one had been sighted heading for water. We rushed to a clearing and waited... A large tiger emerged out of the bushes and calmly observed her surroundings. She drank at the water’s edge and then disappeared into the thickets. The park core is closed in the afternoon. But we walked along the Banjar river, spotting egrets, owlets and the rare Indian Pitta, (a medium-sized passerine). Suddenly Ashish got another call - a leopard was prowling only meters from the camp. By the time we reached back, it was gone.



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- 1 The elegantly furnished rooms at Banjaar Tola offered welcome respite from safari drives.
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- 2 A majestic male chital or spotted deer, surveys the horizon.
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- 3 The magnificent vista that we got on our drive in Bandhavgarh.
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- 4 A majestic male chital or spotted deer, surveys the horizon.
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- 5 A majestic male chital or spotted deer, surveys the horizon.
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- 6 Mahouts in search of tigers traverse the park in Bandhavgarh, near Kanha.

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