

Hiking in the territory of tigers in Satpura is full of small joys, like savouring silence amid dry brown grasslands and making pit stops by gurgling streams.



CAMPING IN SATPURA TIGER RESERVE REVEALS WONDROUS
LANDSCAPES AND A NEW PERSPECTIVE
BY KAREENA GIANANI



Baked by the summer sun, the leaves of sal

trees crunch like potato chips under my feet. Beyond me are armies of these tall sentinels the Satpura Tiger Reserve is well known for. Some trunks lean tipsily towards others. I have left my group behind for a moment, but I'm far from alone: red ants scuttle up and down tree trunks, the twitter of drongos and orioles blends with the happy babble of brooks. Perhaps, I tell myself, I am being tracked by a stealthy leopard and don't even know it.

This is the core area of the tiger reserve and walking through it plunges me into the wildest heart of a jungle—any jungle—I've seen yet. None of that zipping across designated tracks in the safety of a jeep or returning to a guest house after safaris. I am here for a two-and-a-half-day camping trip across Satpura reserve in the Satpura range. The jungle falls in the hill station of Pachmarhi, which is a five-hour drive southeast of Bhopal. Pachmarhi is a UNESCO biosphere reserve that boasts of a variety of medicinal plants and stunning rocky landscapes. Day 1 of my hike begins with the Forsyth Trail, a 15-kilometre walk that retraces the route British explorer James Forsyth took on one of his explorations of Central India in the mid-1860s.

WILD SIDE

About 30 minutes into the walk, Chinmay, our tireless naturalist, points to a large mound. It is unmistakably man-made; the smoothest of pebbles, stones, and twigs are arranged and placed on it is a rock "dressed" in red cloth fringed with silver tinsel. The local Gond tribe has erected this shrine for their goddess Banjari mata. "They believe she will protect them from predators while they collect firewood," explains Chinmay. I feel a strange comfort in knowing that these woods, which for me are an escape, a distraction from a personal predicament, are somebody's home. The Gonds have long been relocated from the tiger reserve but still consider it their spiritual abode.

Satpura's landscape changes like a fast cutting montage. The forest closes in thickly before suddenly opening up into a yawning ravine. Rocky stretches lead to swathes of tawny grassland, which then give way to startlingly clear streams. In minutes, I feel like I've thumbed through Pantone's swatches

of green, yellow, and brown. I relish the quiet, tuning in and out of conversations. Sometimes my mind rolls to mundane worries I have outside of this forest. I tell them to wait; perhaps the wisdom of these trees is rubbing off on me. Inspired by this centuries-old land that shapeshifts so much, I mentally compose aphorisms about change (none to be shared publicly).

I watch a sambar in the distance coolly going about its day. A few metres away, I spot a rhesus macaque peering at me through leaves before whizzing from one branch to another as if they were trapezes. In a jungle, spotting animals isn't just about looking at them in the eye. Ever so often, it is about joining the dots with the traces they leave behind. Fresh scat of a sloth bear tells me how it feasted on termites for lunch. Recent gashes on trees mean that a tiger or leopard could have stood here minutes ago.

"A nest of weaver ants! They make yummy chutney of them in Chhatisgarh," announces Chinmay, pointing to a football-sized cluster of leaves hanging from a mahua tree. They are sewn together with a white substance. This nest is just one of a few or even a hundred other such homes which are part of one mega construction, a seething city built by a weaver ant colony in this part of the jungle.

I share Chinmay's sense of astonishment when he points out a tree dying a slow death after being attacked by relentless termites; or picks up a beautiful beige-and-brown porcupine quill and tells me how the boys of the local Baiga tribe gift it to girls they fancy. To him, Satpura is a wild wonderland and his own open-air botanical laboratory. It dawns on me that my time in this jungle isn't about keeping eyes peeled for the tiger, but being attentive to every sigh and secret of this wilderness. And hiking is also a good way to patrol the area so poachers remain at bay, says Chinmay.



A typical day in Satpura Tiger Reserve is spent manoeuvring miles of boulders (top), but nights are reserved for swapping stories under the star-spangled skies (bottom).



DHARMENDRA (TREKKERS), PHOTO COURTESY, PUGUNDEE SAFARIS (TENTS)

Come dusk, campsites are set up in the most picturesque parts of the forest's buffer zone, like grasslands or clearings by brooks.

SATPURA'S LANDSCAPE
CHANGES LIKE A FAST CUTTING
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IN THICKLY



The canopy of trees in the tiger reserve brims with birds of every imaginable hue, like the green Jerdon's leafbird and sun-coloured oriole (bottom right); It is never too silly to grab hanging roots and imitate another Satpura resident, the Rhesus macaque (middle); A walk through Satpura's core area means rare proximity to its grandest resident, the leopard (top left). But the experience also kindles an appreciation for other creatures, such as the swift and shy Malabar giant squirrel (bottom left), and the hard-working weaver ants who build complex nests (top right).



A MOVEABLE FEAST

In the distance, I see a long wooden table and cushy chairs arranged at a clearing under a tree. It is lunchtime, and a small team of staff from our lodge, Denwa Backwater Escape, meets us near a cool shallow pool. We gratefully accept small luxuries: hand sanitizer is slathered liberally, cold towels are pressed on to grimy faces, chilled cola cans are popped right and left. I heap dal and some rice flecked with coconut and raisins on to my plate, feeling full only after my third helping of crispy *bhindi* tossed in spices and *aamchur*.

The feast has no soporific effect on Chinmay. He tells us that next up is a steep descent. I'm terrible at them, I want to beseech shrilly. Yet I tell no one that the last time I trekked down a steep descent, I rolled down like tumbleweed. I emerged covered in muck, weeds in my hair, and my pants torn in strategic places.

"Don't think. Don't teeter between rocks. Keep going," says Manav, a fellow trekker who grew up scaling snowy mountains in Uttarakhand. I peer at the path below: it's not a trail but a once-trodden path at best, amid rambling weeds and rocks slick with wet mud. This, I think dramatically, is *Planet Earth*. And my current spirit animal is the Nubian ibex getting down dizzyingly steep slopes of the Arabian Peninsula's mountains. I have none of its soft cloven hoofs; one misstep and I'll fall right into the belly of the valley.

I start gingerly, but slowly I push at the limits of my nature and try not to think; really not think. I keep my eyes open but don't linger looking for the best footholds. I wouldn't say I descend with ease, but I do develop a rhythm. The proof that there's always a way out is all around me. This jungle may be at the mercy of the elements, but it puts up a hell of a fight and survives. So, up or down, there's a path. Always.

That evening, our home pops up at the foot of a hulking mountain like a magic trick. Khaki tents are kitted out with soft beds. Makeshift bathrooms are fitted with open-air showers—hot showers!—for a bath under the skies.

Laltains are placed along this buffer zone campsite like fairy lights. A bonfire sputters to life. Frogs croak throatily over the concert of cicadas, and the aromas of seekh kebab and peppery potato eddy in the air. My legs smart from all the hiking, and the horror stories we exchange are spookier than the plot of *Stranger Things*. But I can't stop grinning every time I look up at the stars blinking in the night sky like glittered confetti.

CLOSE CONNECTIONS

There's an unmistakable closeness among us when we set out the next morning. D.K., a Delhi-based businessman, thoughtfully clears prickly bushes for the person walking behind him; Manav offers to carry backpacks when he notices someone's tired. And Chinmay reveals why he became a naturalist instead of an engineer. He fervently loves snakes, and grew up spotting them in his hometown of Nashik. But a few years ago, while rescuing a cobra, its bite almost killed him. He decided life was too short to crack computer codes

instead of mating calls, so he came to Satpura. "What didn't kill me made me surer of how I wanted to spend the rest of my life," smiled Chinmay.

This day is full of startling discoveries. Or perhaps it is just me who is more present, tasting every detail. I coo over the delicate red sundews whose surface is covered in what look like dewdrops. But these are badass carnivorous plants and the "dewdrops" are deadly globules that lure insects. I spend some quality time making faces at a Malabar giant squirrel perched on a tree branch. All this while, the smallest of rustle tells me that a leviathan of the Satpura range might be looming large.

And suddenly they are all around: boulders. Fifteen kilometres of rocks that will put up a fight as we cross them. I am not daunted, and attribute this cheeriness to the terrain; miles of stunning pink and purple sedimentary rock that looks like swirling waves frozen in stone. True, I cross some boulders in the most unladylike ways: clambering over them on all fours, clutching at plants for support, even spraining my ankle. But I learn that all that matters right now is putting one foot after another; not the craggy cliffs I leave behind, nor the emerald streams that lie ahead.

Our pace isn't adequate, and we cross the jungle in semi-darkness for a full 45 minutes. My mind turns trickster. Shadows seem like lurking beasts and the quiet feels like a precursor to doom. For the first time, I see the forest as a brutal place.

Later that night, we huddle around the bonfire for one last time. We aren't just co-travellers; we trust each other. We hauled each other up every time someone froze among massive boulders and steep cliffs. We speak of our childhoods, lost loves, and healing hearts until we run out of wood for the fire. We are vastly different people, but tonight in this forest we explored together, we have the same stories. ●

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THE VITALS

The best time to camp in Satpura Tiger Reserve is November to March. The Denwa Backwater Escape lodge organizes 1-3-night luxury camping trips to Satpura. The trek traverses through its core area, and camps are set up in the buffer zone. Expect twin beds in roomy tents, hot showers and dry pit toilets, and delicious meals made from local produce. **Stay** The lodge lies in the Madhai area in south Madhya Pradesh, 60 km/1.5 hr northwest from the entry point of the Forsyth Trail. Overlooking the backwaters of the River Denwa, the lodge's 8 cottages and 2 treehouses offer memorable views of grasslands. All accommodations have large sit-out areas perfect for curling up with a book and watching the sunset. (www.denwabackwaterescape.com; doubles from ₹18,000; luxury camping from ₹20,000 per person per night). **Getting There** The closest airport to Denwa is in Bhopal (170 km/ 4 hr northwest). Itarsi railway station (70 km/ 2 hr west) is well connected to major cities.