

For the
Smaller
stuff



Tales from Pench National Park, Madhya Pradesh

A furore has erupted. Much squabbling and name-calling is involved. A monitor lizard is coolly slithering up a teak tree in pursuit of breakfast. The rose ringed parakeets are flapping their tiny wings as fast as they possibly can, zooming around and nipping at the tail of the intruder. The chubby lizard can't quite reach the eggs far within the nesting hole and eventually gives up. A morning in Pench National Park offers incredible scenes just like this one. A baby langur clinging onto a tree stub wailing for mommy, who probably put him there as punishment for being naughty. Wild dog pups chasing away the vultures and kites who gatecrash their family feast.

A peacock displaying his feathers in an attempt to lure a rather indifferent mate.

Of course, your experience in the forest varies depending on the naturalist you're with. But, if you're staying at the **Pench Tree Lodge**, you can be assured of a rewarding safari, during which you learn about every creature of the forest big and small. With a team made up of naturalists with varied interests, like the reptile fiend and snake handler Chinmay Deshpande, the focus here is not just on the tiger. And, if guests seem obsessed with the big cat, the team gently persuades them to appreciate the rest of the wonders of the forest. This is a lovely property from which

All the treehouses at Pench Tree Lodge are made of sal wood and sit 18ft above the ground

to experience the jungle in a very different way. The lodge strives to keep most of the forest undisturbed, so its six treehouses – standing tall in about less than five per cent of the 42-acre property – were built wherever there was a clearing in the savannah-like themeda grass. Each is set under or around mahua trees, so don't be alarmed if you hear things go bump in the night. This potent little flower only blooms just after sunset and in the early morning – which explains the regular thumps on your roof at 4am. Either that, or the civets are out on their nightly stroll.

Get to know your neighbours with a guided nature walk (1.5km) around the property, where more than 100 bird

GREAT FROM
Mumbai, Nagpur

GREAT FOR
Getting to know the forest intimately

GO NOW
To get the lodge to yourself.

species reside, or simply set up camp on the breezy verandah of the restaurant to watch the seven sisters, or jungle babblers, squabble with a crow trying to drink from their water bowl. These noisy birds are so named because they often hang out in groups of seven

and because they're extremely talkative. Hear the savannah nightjars go 'choing choing' after dark and the distinctive calls of the coppersmith barbets and treepies by day. Peer at abandoned termite mounds, admire the intricacy of a praying mantis cocoon, and examine a weaver ant's perfectly-woven nest that the naturalist holds up for you, waiting until you touch the delicate membrane holding the leaves together before informing you that it's made using saliva.

The same route gives you a very different experience by night. The night trail (*free*) offers you a chance to spot the elusive civets, have a (safe) tryst with snakes (about 12 varieties including

1. Return to a cool room and a comfy bed after a hot, dusty safari

2. You might have a golden oriole stopping by your room to say hello

3. The mahua muffins are the perfect accompaniments to your afternoon tea

4. BFFs of the forest: langurs offer aerial advice on predators to deer

5. With views like these, why would you want to go home?

the striped keelback and bronzeback) and have the fun of being outdoors in a jungle camp at night when most others advise you to do the exact opposite. The night trail lets you focus on the smaller, equally amazing creatures like the huntsman spider, who, like Peter Parker, uses webs only to escape and not to trap prey. You also get to meet the adorably-named daddy long legs, and the con artiste pseudoscorpion spider, which changes its appearance as a defence mechanism. The woodland is bursting with stories – all you have to do is stay quiet and listen.

WORDS HARDIKA PANCHAL
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as they might easily tumble down through the railings on the deck.

WHAT TO PACK

Clothes in forest-friendly colours and light, breathable materials, a jacket for the cool mornings, swimmers, sunscreen, sunglasses, hat, a scarf to cover up as it's dusty in the park, books

CLEAN LOO GUIDE

It's easy to find decent loos in the food plazas along the highway. In the forest, there are designated loos at regular intervals.

MEDICAL AID

The lodge has a first-aid kit as well as doctor on call. **Jindal Hospital**, about 38km away in Seoni, is equipped to handle major medical emergencies (00-91-7692-222534; Dalsagar).

FACT SHEET

GETTING THERE

Closest metro: Mumbai (967km)

Closest city: Nagpur (112km)

Closest airport: Nagpur's Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar International Airport (137km)

is a three-and-a-half-hour drive from the property. Go Air, Air India, Jet Airways and IndiGo fly here directly from Mumbai (return fares from ₹ 4,932).

Closest railhead: Nagpur Railway Station (NGP: 113km). Take the daily overnight 12289

Nagpur Duronto (leaves Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus [CSTM] 8.15pm, arrives NGP 7.20am; ₹ 1,335 Third AC) and return by the 12290 Nagpur CST Duronto (leaves NGP 8.40pm, arrives CSTM 7.55am; ₹ 1,335 Third AC).

GETTING AROUND

The lodge can organise transfers from Nagpur airport and railway station (from ₹ 6,000/ one way in an AC car for airport or railway station).

SAFARIS

You must book your safaris slot(s) and buy your entry ticket in advance on the Forest Department website, as only 88 vehicles are permitted into the core zone daily. There is only one zone but entry is from three gates, with the Turia gate being most popular as most resorts are located close to it. You're likely to get tickets at Karmajhiri gate or Jantara gate, which have fewer tickets as well as resorts. The park is open from October 1 to June 15, and closed on Wednesday evenings (<https://forest.mponline.gov.in>; check website for park timings; single permit: ₹ 260; full vehicle permit: ₹ 1,500, vehicle hire [seats six people excluding the guide and driver]: ₹ 2,000; guide fee: ₹ 360).

GOOD TO KNOW

- * You would do well to follow the lodge's rule of not keeping any food in your room – it will be found and promptly consumed by rodents (we lost a chunk of our backpack).
- * Mobile phone network is dodgy at best and available only in a few areas of the lodge. Inside the forest, your mobile phone must be on silent mode.
- * Nature walks and birdwatching are chargeable at ₹ 1,500/ person.
- * Six cottages are under construction to cater to those who can't climb the stairs of the treehouse. They will be at a lower price and are due to be ready by November 2017.

WHERE TO STAY

Pench Tree Lodge: The six treehouses are made from sal wood, which is rubbed with seed oil (and not chemicals) to protect it from termites. Rooms are well appointed, spacious and come with handsome brass fittings. All rooms come with lovely decks from which you can have intimate encounters with drongos and orioles (00-91-124-2970497/ 00-91-8800637711; www.penchtreelodge.com, enquiry@pugdundee.com; Sarrahirri Village, Seoni, near Karmajhiri Gate; Oct – Jun; American Plan from ₹ 20,000 with all meals, Jungle Plan from ₹ 34,000 with all meals and two shared jeep safaris).

WHERE TO EAT

The talented chef Pankaj Fulera surprises you at every meal by putting his own spin on local and continental food. Lunch is usually Indian, while dinner is continental with treats like pumpkin soup, pesto cauliflower with mashed

potatoes, and grilled chicken. The chef also does brilliant Indian fare like stuffed *baingan*, *karela* chips and *makai ki khees* – a popular street snack from Indore. The staff is accommodating of special requests. Many of the ingredients come from the lodge's organic garden that uses natural fertilisers like cow dung. All meals are served in the lovely restaurant and a packed breakfast accompanies you on safari. Do ask the chef if you can sample some mahua flowers from the pantry. Pop the tiny, spongy-textured flower (a bit like the white *jamun*) into your mouth for a burst of sweetness. The chef incorporates this flower into yummy teacakes and muffins too.

SAFETY

Wild boars often wander into the property and snakes abound in the grassy surrounds, so guests are always escorted from their rooms to the dining area and back when it's dark. Do not venture out by yourself. Keep an eye on kids,