



THE WILD ROAD

Madhya Pradesh reveals its stripes to **Kersi Khambatta** as he hops onto his bike and journeys through the heart of India.

Photographs by **Tom Parker**



The fact that Raipur's airport is named after Swami Vivekanand, a gentle, deep-thinking philosopher rather than the usual martyred politician, makes me smile. The good Swami spent much of his life here, in this little state capital in the upper reaches of Chhattisgarh, the point of entry for anyone wishing to go to **Kanha National Park**. It's a four-hour drive across the border into Madhya Pradesh, once a land of swashbuckling bandoliered dacoits with mile-wide Robin Hood streaks, today known to house one of India's largest, densest and most contented populations of the Royal Bengal Tiger.

Chhattisgarh used to be part of Madhya Pradesh once, a massive piece of real estate nestled shoehorned in the middle of India. The road to **Kanha Earth Lodge** makes for a swift journey, even as life outside the car passes in a calm and unhurried manner, the pace of pastoral life plodding on as steady as the clip-clop of buffalo herds; the smells are sweetly rural and a feast of samosas and endless amounts of chai sets us back by a princely ₹30. The honesty and simplicity suck us in, even as, at first, everything seems new and untested. In time, a distinct personality of this state called Madhya Pradesh will emerge, but for now, the best way I can describe it, from the gentleness of the people, their shy smiles and

utter lack of guile, is definitely somewhere-north-of-Maharashtra and definitely not-quite-Uttar Pradesh. Agriculture and miscellaneous industry may be the prime movers of commerce here, but there is no scoffing the dollars and cents that its national parks bring in, which only means one thing — the tiger.

The lodge is well camouflaged, as every self-respecting jungle lodge should be, jumping out at us from the innocuous grove and thicket that we've been seeing ever since we motored deep past new borders and state names. Jungle grows happily around it and sunset is a dazzling affair of golden colours and crisp light. The staff is warm and gracious, full of optimism of tiger sightings, coming from a place of genuine pride at what the state has done for the conservation of the animal. They also love bonfires and al fresco dinners, bless them.

Life teems outside Kanha the next day, in the arctic chill of a February morning. Tourists of all hues, foreign-pale to homegrown-brown, sit swaddled and squirming in jeeps under their resort-loaned blankets and hot-water bottles, trying to dodge an icy pre-dawn breeze that stabs exposed skin. Somewhere in the hazy shadows of dense trees ahead are more than 100 Royal Bengal Tigers spread out over nearly 2,000sq km of protected forest, going about their unvarying rituals of foraging, hunting and procreating, oblivious of day, month or year. →



The writer, Kersi Khambatta, en route to Kanha National Park. Opposite page from left: langurs in Kanha; forest in Kanha. Previous pages from left: an early morning drive in Kanha; a tigress in Bandhavgarh National Park

In the cold of the mornings, a layer of fine, wispy mist sits on the river; through it, you can

see a ghostly fisherman barely breaking water as he carefully lays out a hand-woven net



A fisherman on the Ken River at daybreak in Panna National Park



In the park, at 20kmph, the playful breeze becomes a chainsaw that cuts through blanket and skin and works busily on the bone. I am a tiger-in-the-wild virgin who always feels vaguely violated by smug stories of moms and cubs, of snarling males and fresh kills, and it's really no use telling yourself this is your lucky day. There is no karma, no lucky outfit or sign-from-the-universe juju to tiger spotting. There is, however, a fairly accurate science to it.

Our spotter flicks his eyes here and there, but it's really his ears that are doing all the work. Then, suddenly, he leaps to his feet, alert as a meerkat, and points. Deer call!

The jungle has spoken, through the lips of a quaking herbivore, about an unwelcome guest; stiletto-sharp claws padding earth in the vicinity, velvet pelt giving off the telltale honk of a hungry predator. When we get there, with engines off and humans hushed, the silence is near complete. The forest is a sentient being whose default state seems to be slumber, just a massive organism snoozing through eternity, talking in its sleep: the chirrup of a bird, the howl of a monkey, the apnoeic snort of a wild boar, the slither of undergrowth things and the rattlesnake flutter of shivering leaves. On this canvas of restless stillness, we wait.

My cherry-pop moment comes in the shift of light and shadow on the forest floor, as the dusty green

foliage yields and out walks this magnificent animal. Nonchalant as only an apex predator can be.

Authoritative as royalty, unashamed of her riches, her robe of glistening muscle gliding past bowing heads of trees. She enters the foliage on the other side of the road, the bush barely making a whisper of protest as the velvet brushes past it. She comes at us headfirst and the last sight of her is swishing, muscled feline butt. What a show! No more than 15 seconds, all told, but it is a permanent exhibit in the Hall of Goddamn! Moments.

No offense to the boring herbivores, but safaris in India are binary things: tiger, yes!; or tough luck, try again. Warm blood flushes our faces. The day has changed for the better, barely an hour after waking into it. The universe has sent us a sign! Today's going to be fist-pumping good from here on.

An hour later, I straddle a Royal Enfield Classic 500 and head north to **Kings Lodge, Bandhavgarh**, 260km away. A son of the soil accompanies me on his own bike, an earnest chap called Harshvardhan Singh, a name as old and dependable as these hills, a bit like the Enfield itself. There is also a back-up mechanic and car in which Tom Parker, photographer maestro, rides with two spare Enfield wheels. All this arranged by **Pugdundee Safaris** for our jaunt through Madhya Pradesh that includes three national parks and the twisty blacktop that links them. →



A guide scanning the park for tigers in Panna. Opposite page: a tigress in Kanha

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A spotted deer in Panna

Is this it, then, the fabled India of storybooks, the repository of purity and the stripped-bare honesty of living off the land, that quiet place we all yearn for in our collective memory when we get wistful about India?

The ride is rural and beautiful. Young Harsh steers us away from towns and cities, those bleak congregations of traffic snarls and desperate commerce. Instead we get quaint villages called Mandla, Niwas, Shahpura, lush mustard fields of vivid greens and yellows, cosy, whitewashed mud huts, fragrant wood fires, hardy farmers and tiny clumps of waving schoolkids, no pollution and model roads. The distance of 260km flies by, punctuated by dhabha stops under a vast blue sky with mere scribbles of cloud patterns, honest interactions with locals who seem to want for nothing despite not having much of anything and literally the sweetest-smelling air you can find in this country. Is this it, then, the fabled India of storybooks, the repository of purity and the stripped-bare honesty of living off the land, that quiet place we all yearn for in our collective memory when we get wistful about India?

I get the feeling that I am in the nation's centre of gravity, an intangible force that anchors it to the face of the earth, without which it would float away. People call it 'the heart of India'. But somehow, I see it more as a rippling core muscle, an ancient, grizzled veteran that has done heavy lifting throughout history, from Stone-Age settlements, pre-Christian Mauryan Empires, 10th-century erotic art in Khajuraho and colonial literature about its jungles. It all fits: the classic bike, the journey from forest to ancient forest, a guide called Harshvardhan Singh and Madhya Pradesh.

Our last 20km are the outskirts of the enormous **Bandhavgarh National Park**, a continuous winding tunnel of trees so dense you can barely see through them. Kings Lodge, Bandhavgarh is a lot like its Kanha counterpart, another vast Pughundee property, abutting a nature reserve and blotting out cell phone signals (though wi-fi is available if you just have to let the world know where you are).

Bandhavgarh is more the terrain of the Robin Hood brigands, steep climbs and ancient boulders. And we, its newest guests, feel a sense of entitlement: Kanha did it so come on, Bandhavgarh, show us your stripeys. The odds are good, but not great. Always fall back on the science: let the leaf-chompers guide you to the carnivore.

When we get there, wheels spinning, dust flying, wind-chill hacking away at us, a cluster of jeeps is already on the spot. A tigress has just crossed the path and disappeared into the trees. We came late.

A whispered debate is on: she is right there, 20 or maybe 40m in. If she moves, the monkeys and birds will let everyone know. Until then, she'll sit, snooze, chill, contemplate life on the forest floor. She could get up in five minutes or stay there for hours, not giving a damn about the shivering tourists who have come to gawk at her beauty.

Our sense of entitlement recedes as the minutes tick. We chat in whispers to fill up the empty moments. The drivers and guides, they all come from nearby villages; the man behind the wheel could easily have been, at one point, a poacher, but the park has given him reason to drive a jeep and conserve, not skulk with a gun and kill. The ka-ching of tourist coins may not be deafeningly loud, but it is steady. Incidents of poaching have decreased and poverty has been alleviated; people now understand that this animal is the life-blood of their survival. Tiger numbers are up and increasing.

There is a park elephant in the vicinity carrying on with its independent tiger-tracking and data-gathering activities. A low, rumbling growl suggests the tiger has seen it before we have. We hear some heavy-footed galumphing, guided by a mahout, and then! A screech of birds taking wing, and a burst of excited monkey chatter.

And she emerges, roused from her solitude and daydreams, looking for a quieter place to resume both, and she walks barely three feet in front of our jeep, scowling beautifully, like a diva busted by paparazzi. She shows us her two-inch canines and perfect dental hygiene. Then, it seems, she says, "To hell with this" and leaps up the opposite embankment in a single effortless spring, uncoiling her body for one second of sheer athletic fluidity and grace. And she is gone, with one more moonshot of her gorgeous butt. Madhya Pradesh, you beauty! You've taken me from virgin to two in a row!

The next stop is **Panna National Park**, 240km of heartland on a sweetly thundering Enfield away.

This ride, much like the previous one, continues to be a string of sweet imagery stuck in time forever, rural perfection that remains unchanged. Harshvardhan, that son of the soil, as stolid as the earth around him, is the face of new Madhya Pradesh. Aspirational, dynamic, hard-working, pulling himself up by the bootstraps to go places his father might not have dreamed of. A couple of years ago, he took Orlando Bloom on a look-see tour of →



A boat safari on the Ken River



his state—everything from jungle lodges and stripey-spotting to the erotica of Khajuraho. He doesn't make a huge thing of it; he says it almost shyly. He wishes to go to Puducherry and learn French; big biker communities from France land up regularly, he explains. A little cultural exchange can't hurt his chances at a shot at a different life.

Panna is where Pugdundee started, building its first resort on the banks of the Ken River. If Kanha and Bandhavgarh were polished gems, modern jungle lodges with swimming pools and spas, **Ken River Lodge** is clearly the rough-cut diamond prototype that kick-started it all. The wooden deck overlooking the river, with massive tree trunks growing through it, is high up on my Top 10 list of places in the world that any writer should go to write. In the cold of the mornings, a layer of fine, wispy mist sits on the river; through it, you can see a ghostly fisherman barely breaking water as he carefully lays out a hand-woven net. Perfectly eroded rocks form little islands on which hardy trees grow and birds come to roost. If there is one thing this understated property screams, it is location!

Go on a tranquil avian-spotting boat ride and a white-knuckle night safari through the nocturnal realm of hunters and hunted, both magnificent experiences. When it's finally time for bonfires and whiskey, steaming pakoras and night stars, you

reflect back on the last few days, on three national parks and the terrain that links them: a state raw, open and exposed in the middle of India, yet sparingly touched by dusty gentrification, gently taking a stand against ruinous modernity, fighting the odds to preserve the wilderness and the most beautiful of wild cats. You think of the people here, of their heartland compassion, heartland manners and heartland need to hold on to as much good as they can for as long as they can.

Harshvardhan Singh has become a friend now; we leave him tomorrow. Orlando or us, we ask? Whom did you have more fun with?

That blush, then that shy smile, utterly genuine and incapable of artifice, and the reply: definitely you two. It says something about us, the fact that we scoff, wink and chuckle and bet that he says that to everyone. 🍷

A trip similar to the writer's can be arranged through Pugdundee Safaris.

GETTING THERE

Fly direct to Raipur from major Indian cities with IndiGo (www.goindigo.in) or Jet Airways (www.jetairways.com). Staff from Pugdundee Safaris will meet you there. (www.pugdundeefaris.com; ₹79,000 per head on twin-sharing basis, including meals, biking and some safaris).



Dinner at Kanha Earth Lodge. Opposite page from left: a guide at Panna; a native elephant used to track tigers at Bandhavgarh