



THE 'TIGERLESS' TERRAIN

This wildlife experience isn't a fast-paced manhunt. The Satpura Tiger Reserve balances its paucity of tiger sightings as a jungle filled with unsung creatures.

Text | REVATI AND CHARLES VICTOR



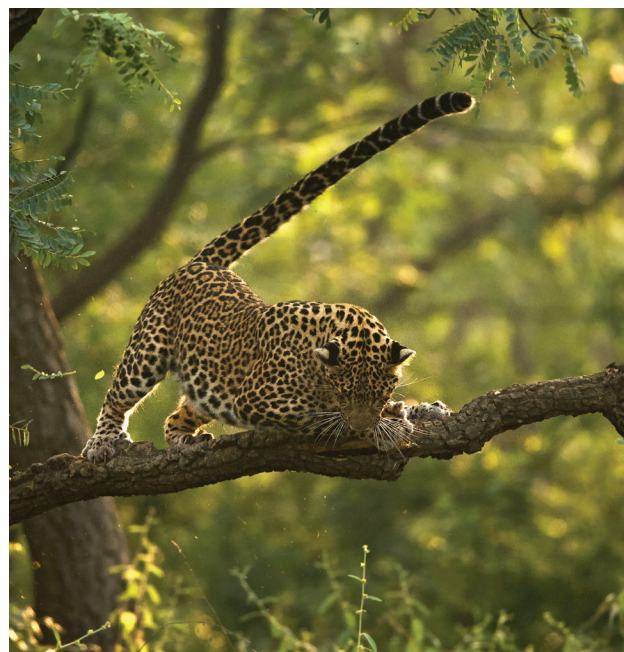
Satpura is approximately 251 km away from Nagpur. GoAir offers direct flights to Nagpur from Mumbai, Bengaluru, Pune, New Delhi, as well as convenient connections. Visit GoAir.in or mobile app for more information.

LEFT:

The Satpura Tiger Reserve more than makes up for its lack of tiger sightings with its fair share of leopards and other wildlife forms

The Satpura Tiger Reserve has a rather deceptive name considering the sightings of the big cat here are rare. In fact, there were just 26 recorded in 2014 against the 80 in Kanha, as per the report by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. And with that, the Satpura Tiger Reserve sets itself apart from other safari experiences in India. In fact, it's the absence of India's feline safari star that makes the Satpura Tiger Reserve a truly special experience.

The Satpura difference begins with the pace. Jeeps rumble slowly through the mixed deciduous forest, stopping frequently to enjoy the winged, hoofed and pawed wildlife that flourishes in this rugged landscape of over 1,300 sq. km. They say a rich tiger population is the sign of a rich and thriving jungle. Satpura — the exception — offers frequent and varied sightings of all sorts of 'tigerless' fauna.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
A nilgai stops and turns towards the jeep track to size up visitors; a leopard looks down from its perch; a herd of *cheetal* roam the reserve leisurely

A GRAND WELCOME

Our safari begins at the Denwa riverbank with a majestic sunrise against the hills of Pachmarhi. With park entry formalities completed at the Madhai entrance gate, we take a boat to the opposite bank.

Next, we set out on our open jeep drive and within minutes, we come face to face with a local celebrity — a rare albino gaur stands out from its deep-coloured herd and stares right at us while we're hypnotised by it.

The foliage begins to thicken, hiding a couple of nilgai who quickly gallop away. A herd of sambar peer into our cameras, while a larger herd of *cheetal* ignores our presence.



**FROM TOP:**

The Malabar giant squirrel, the state animal of Maharashtra, hops from tree to tree for food and rarely sets foot on the ground; the Indian scops owl nests in tree holes where it is well camouflaged

DID YOU KNOW?

The world's smallest wildcat, the rare rusty-spotted cat, is also seen in the Satpura Tiger Reserve.

BREAKFAST IN THE WILD

Safaris begin before sunrise and within a couple of hours, our stomachs start to rumble. As we wolf down sandwiches at a rest stop in the middle of the jungle, there's a flurry of activity in the trees above. Our guide and naturalist from Denwa Backwater Escape where we were staying verifies the find and passes us his binoculars. A Malabar giant squirrel flicks its tail and leaps off its branch, disappearing just as quickly as it appeared. This sighting serves as a reminder that in Satpura, you don't find the wildlife; it finds you.

LOOKING UP

Satpura's location between the Himalayas and Western Ghats makes it a pit stop for migratory birds such as the bar-headed geese and ruddy shelducks in winter. But we

Satpura's location between the Himalayas and Western Ghats makes it a pit stop for migratory birds such as the bar-headed geese and ruddy shelducks in winter.

were here in the summer, so we spotted the elusive Indian pitta making its way through the teak and sal forest on its migratory route. We saw black drongos flit about, peacocks call out across the forest, and greater coucals fly from ground to branch. An almost camouflaged Indian scops owl with its baby quietly peers out from a tree hole. We spotted a variety of raptors, learning to differentiate between the crested serpent eagle, changeable hawk eagle, and honey buzzard.




Manu M Nair/Shutterstock.com; Revati Victor



SURPRISES SPOTTED

We were at the end of our evening safari and were just beginning to wonder about the reserve's reputation as a haven for leopards, when suddenly our naturalist asked the guide to silence the engine. We heard what sounded like a creature choking and retching far off in the distance. That's the langur's alarm call, he explained. At the edge of a cliff, we saw a leopard lounging on a tree branch before it pounced off and sashayed away. We'd barely recovered before we were asked to turn around. We watched as a sloth bear gathered its cubs and skulked away into the darkness. Every cliché about the unpredictable magic of the wild is amplified across Satpura's rugged terrain.

It may seem odd that India's first declared Reserved Forest Area is its most unsung. But if you're looking for a deeper experience in a picturesque setting away from the frenzied tiger-seeking crowds, Satpura's your answer.

A visit here requires a mindset quite different from the regular tiger safari goer's. The excitement of spotting nightjars, owls, and hares in the dark and the occasional flash of eyes glowing through the black foliage is an experience in itself. 

FROM TOP:

Driving, boating, canoeing, and walking — there are several ways to explore Satpura; a sloth bear ushers its cubs to safety; a hare peeks at us quickly before scooting off

