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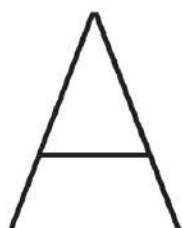


Tigers burning bright

As India celebrates 50 years of its Project Tiger conservation scheme, we visit the reserves of Madhya Pradesh to see how its success has impacted a tiger population that once looked in danger of disappearing

Words **James Draven**





A sambar deer sniffed the air in Madhya Pradesh's Pench National Park. In unison, the surrounding members of its herd, each the colour of rusting iron, stopped grazing from the wind-rippled grasslands. Heads lifted, glistening nostrils flared and all eyes scrutinised the tree line. A languorous grey langur monkey – drunk on fermented mahua fruit and dozing on a fallen branch – opened one eye.

You can often see langurs and sambar together. They have a symbiotic relationship because sambar can detect a predator's scent on the breeze from over a kilometre away; in return, the langurs are sharp-sighted when up in the treetops, and messy eaters too, sloppily dropping half-eaten fruit to the sambar below. Neither makes a conscious effort to help the other, but they are inextricably linked by an ecosystem.

Then the alarm call sounded. An unseen jungle babbler bird, invisible above a thick canopy of leaves, emitted the first signal. Through the bush telegraph the call was taken up by scores of other birds until the hitherto silent forest became a riot of panic and white noise. The sambar deer scattered, and then the langurs – all suddenly sober – zipped improbably up the smooth trunks of teak trees, some with their babies clutched to their chests.

Birds took flight, their maelstrom of beating wings a hailstorm of television interference against the sky. The jungle roared like radio static. Everything was in sudden motion but us; our driver slammed his brake pedal to the floor and our emerald-green Maruti-Suzuki Gypsy 4WD – ubiquitous and identical in India's wildlife reserves – ground to a standstill on the mud-baked track.

"That must be him," whispered our guide, Vanan, who had previously remained silent. I'd nearly forgotten he was there; the wildlife does all the work for him. The alarm call is a guide's best friend but, after several days spent in fruitless search of our quarry across three of India's tiger reserves, I too was attuned to the signals that warned of approaching predators. We spent much of our time stationary: watching, listening, waiting.

It was the end of a long day searching Pench National Park for signs of a Royal Bengal tiger. With little tree cover compared to some of India's more densely forested reserves, I had high hopes that this would be the place where I would finally spot one. About four hours earlier, we'd had a false alarm when we came across a fresh paw print, or pugmark, on the track that was the size of a saucer. Embossed into the dusty ground, on top of the fresh tyre treads of other 4WDs, the tiger must have been incredibly close, but the evanescent cat clearly hadn't cared to stop for tea.

On this occasion, however, we had a bit more luck. From a tangle of undergrowth, which we'd already scrutinised with binoculars and telephoto zoom lenses without discovering anything, a hulking tiger languidly stepped out onto the track. Scowling, with its cover blown and its prey beyond reach, it plodded across the roadway in front of us. Regarding our idling 4WD with house-cat nonchalance, the tiger vanished into the undergrowth on the other side of

the trail, leaving a vacuum in his wake. We exhaled as one. The whole experience had lasted less than ten seconds.

For just a moment, that dusty track was a stage. In the faded pastel hues of the gloaming, in a theatre encircled by packs of bill-print-grey langurs, flocks of grey hornbills and sounders of ash-coloured wild boar, the tiger hogged the spotlight, burning bright as if lit by sodium lamps. But once he exited, stage right, enveloped by the safety curtain of the jungle, my heart dropped from the gods to the foot of the orchestra pit. The wildlife chorus groaned into the distance. The greatest show on Earth was over – for now.

THE EYE ON THE TIGER

I have been besotted with tigers since infancy. So much so that despite being something of a night owl, this trip across India's national parks and tiger reserves had seen me rising merrily each morning at 5am, when it was so cold that my camera lens – trained on dewdrop-bejewelled dawn landscapes and steam-shrouded waterholes – was clouded by my own hot breath.

But there was another reason for my enthusiasm, as this is a special year for tigers. In 2023, India marks 50 years of Project Tiger, a conservation effort that has ensured now is the best time for sightings of these big cats in recent

memory. Indeed, the number of wild Royal Bengal tigers in India has more than doubled in the 21st century alone.

Prior to this intervention, the situation had become desperate. Despite being the country's national animal, an estimated 80,000 tigers fell victim to hunting in India between 1875 and 1925. Maharajas, monarchs, officials and trophy hunters slaughtered these creatures with guns, snares, poisons and spears. Their heads can still be

found – stuffed, mounted and moth-eaten – on walls, while their skins continue to warm the floors of historical palaces.

This carnage continued well into the 20th century. Prince Philip and Queen Elizabeth were even photographed on safari with a dead tiger, which was reportedly shot by the Duke of Edinburgh in 1961 in what later became Ranthambore National Park – it was the same year he became president of the World Wildlife Fund. The widespread practice of killing tigers for profit and sport led to a sharp decline in their numbers, and by the late 1960s, they were on the brink of extinction in the wild, with some estimating there were fewer than 600 remaining in India.

In 1973, the government, led by Indira Gandhi, initiated Project Tiger, a conservation programme aimed at managing and safeguarding tiger habitats. Additionally, the Special Tiger Protection Force was established to combat the menace of poaching. By the time of India's 2006 census, there were still just 1,411 tigers remaining in the wild; today things are looking far rosier. On 9 April 2023, in honour of Project Tiger's 50th anniversary, Prime Minister Narendra Modi released the results of this year's All India Tiger Estimation, revealing there are now 3,167 in India. That's about 70% of the world's wild tiger population.

Project Tiger's conservation initiatives have involved educating village populations near to the parks on the benefits of conserving the species; remunerating locals who ►

"In the faded pastel hues of the gloaming, the tiger hogs the spotlight"



Predator and prey (clockwise from top left) Pench NP was only a sanctuary back when Project Tiger was launched in 1973 – it is now one of over 50 national parks in India taking part in the landmark conservation scheme; sambar deer are a Bengal tiger's favourite prey, even if their top speed is a good 10kph quicker than their tormentor; the eagle eyes of the grey langur make a great early warning system when scouting for tigers; the ruddy mongoose is a fearsome predator of snakes and even produces its own anti-venom; the Indian peafowl leaves quite the impression; a kingfisher in flight; (previous spread) the real king of the jungle









Law of the jungle (clockwise from top left) Spotted deer have become so successful in Pench NP that their 50,000-strong population is currently being scattered among other parks in India to relieve the strain on the eco-system; a scops owl takes it easy during the heat of the day; India is home to around 70% of the world's tiger population and their number is increasing by 6% every year; a grey langur waits next to a termite mound – an easy-to-find feast; jackals are often seen in the vicinity of tigers because they can scavenge their kills; (previous spread) sometimes you can stumble across tigers when least expected

Previous spread: Above: this spread: Above: James Dwyer



who only socialise to mate, and Kanha is densely forested with evergreen sal trees, which means sightings are far less frequent. If you do spot one, however, you will likely have it all to yourself here.

On our morning excursion we were graced with sightings of the endangered barasingha, colloquially known as the swamp deer, which was rescued from the precipice of extinction through Kanha's dedicated breeding programme. In the afternoon we spotted golden jackals, a ruddy mongoose and the immense gaur – the world's largest, wild bovine species. A male spotted deer, seemingly signifying his victory in combat to the females of his herd, wore a crown of dried grass on his antlers that, when lit by crepuscular rays, glowed with the inner luminescence of a halo.

The sun had started to set on my final drive around Kanha Tiger Reserve. As the light faded, so too did my hopes of seeing a tiger. Satish, our appointed guide for the day, had positively crackled with enthusiasm throughout our safari, but as twilight fell, his eyes glazed. In the tangled sal forests that bordered the roads, it was already nighttime. Our driver, Arun, was winding a sinuous course back towards the park gates. All was quiet, for now.

The soft pads of tigers' feet ensure their movement through the undergrowth is almost silent. While this makes them formidable hunters, it does offer us one advantage: tigers don't like the feel of the forest floor against their

delicate paws, so they will often take to trails that have been worn smooth by safari vehicles.

There had been no alarm calls, no shrieking monkeys, no stampedes foretelling his arrival, but nonetheless there he was. He'd been there all along, an insurmountable distance of a metre away. As he slipped out of the forest and onto the track, it was as if the tiger had pressed the mute button on the wilderness. He brought with him a deafening silence.

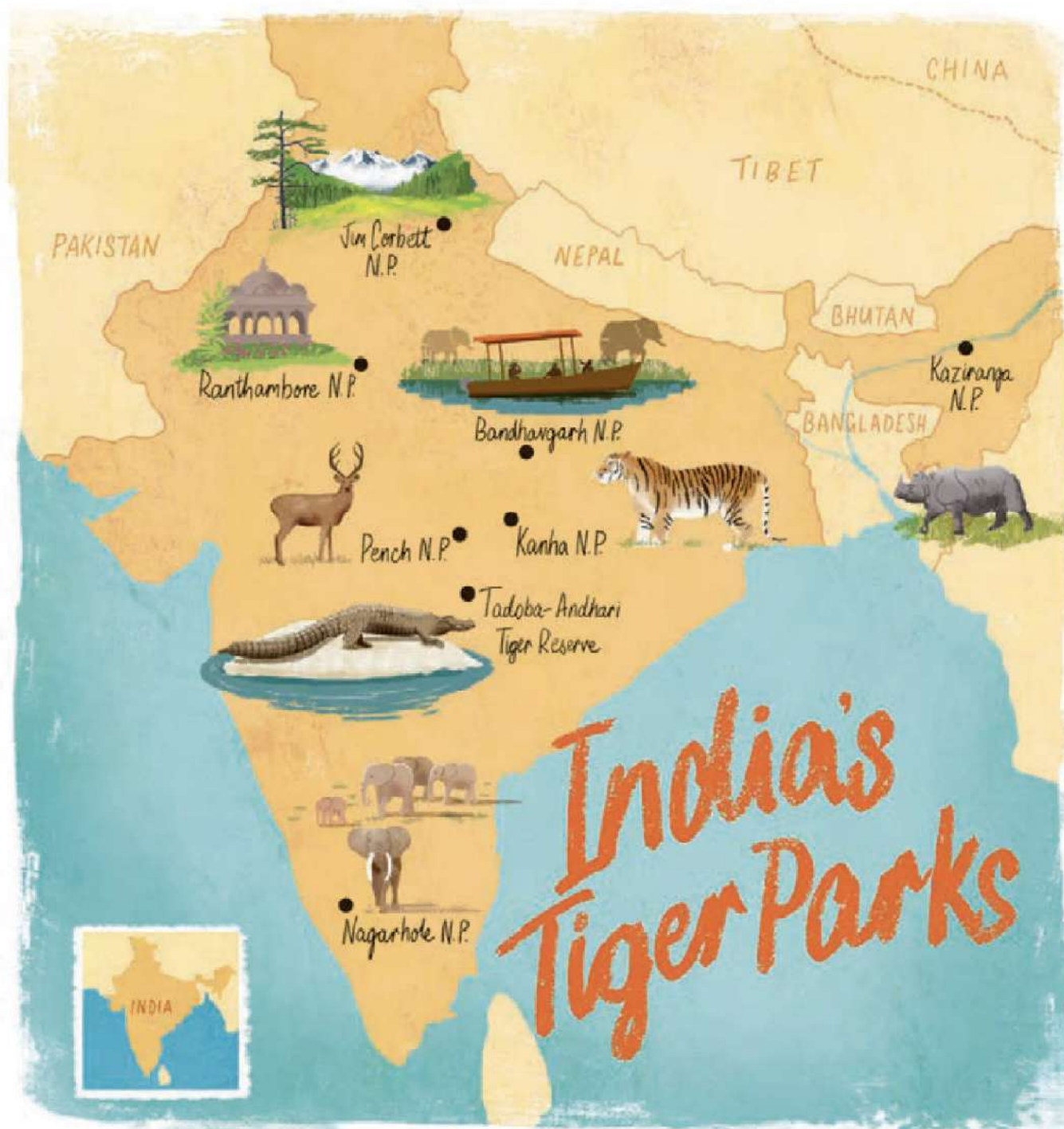
For the past week, across a dozen wildlife drives, I had felt like these tigers had been evading human detection, but he wasn't hiding from us. With king-of-the-jungle confidence, he strode along the pathway towards us, staring straight down the barrel of my camera lens. He was anything but camouflaged; his vibrant coat read much more like a warning. Beautiful and deadly, dangerous and endangered, he seemed to drain the pigment from the surrounding

jungle. Everything else just faded to grey.

"This is him!" gasped Satish, jiggling in his seat with excitement. "This tiger is young, but he's expected to become the next alpha male in this region."

With juvenile insouciance, the tiger lifted his pink nose – yet to turn brown with age – and sniffed the air, inhaling the sweet scent of some blooms hanging from a tree. For a moment, he luxuriated in the belief that he was the jungle's next monarch. Thanks to the work of Project Tiger over the past 50 years, he may well grow to become just that. ►

"The tiger was anything but camouflaged; his vibrant coat read much more like a warning"



Vital statistics

Capital: New Delhi

Languages: India has 22 official languages, though there are many more.

Population: 1.42 billion

Time: GMT+5.30

International dialling code: +91

Visas: UK nationals require a visa before travelling to India, and may apply for an e-visa (indianvisaonline.gov.in/evisa). Some visitors may be required to apply for a paper visa (indianvisaonline.gov.in).

however, so be sure to check beforehand. In all cases, your passport must be machine readable, valid for a minimum of 180 days at the time of application and have at least two blank pages.

Money: Indian rupees (INR), currently around INR104 to the UK£. Visitors must not bring Indian currency into the country, though you can bring cash or travellers' cheques in other foreign currencies. ATMs are available in all big cities, so it may be easier to withdraw rupees once in India.



When to go

April–June: The heat can be oppressive during this period, but this is the best time to spot tigers, which are drawn to the waterholes.

July–September: Monsoon season. Most parks are closed due to impassable tracks.

October–February: Warm, dry and sunny. This is a popular time to visit, so the parks might be busy during this period.

December–January: Cold mornings and nights, but the parks are less crowded.

INDIA FOOTNOTES



Health & safety

Visitors no longer need to show proof of COVID-19 vaccination or a negative test before travel. A **yellow fever** vaccination certificate is required from travellers arriving within six days of departure from an area with a risk of yellow fever transmission.

Recommended vaccinations for India include **hepatitis A, tetanus and typhoid**. You should also be up to date with all your routine vaccinations and boosters, such as **MMR** and **diphtheria-tetanus-polio**.

While most of India is malaria free, the area around **Kanha National Park** can be a **malarial zone**. Always consult your local travel clinic and ensure you have adequate travel health insurance.



Getting there & around

Many airlines fly direct from London Heathrow to Delhi, including **British Airways** ([ba.com](https://www.britishairways.com)), **Air India** ([airindia.com](https://www.airindia.com)) and **Virgin Atlantic** ([virginatlantic.com](https://www.virginatlantic.com)). Flights start from around £500 return and take 8.5 hours.

After you arrive, **train travel** in India is an experience unto itself, and it's very economical, with extensive networks connecting major cities.



A return flight from London to Delhi produces **538kg** of carbon per passenger.

Wanderlust encourages you to **offset your travel footprint** through a reputable provider. For advice on how to find one, visit [wanderlust.co.uk/sustainable-travel](https://www.wanderlust.co.uk/sustainable-travel).



Cost of travel

Train travel is very cheap, with extensive networks connecting major cities. It can cost as little as 70p for long-distance journeys, depending on which class you travel. Food is also very affordable; a meal for two in a mid-priced restaurant can cost from around £10.



Accommodation

The author stayed at various properties in the Pugdunee Safaris portfolio, including **King's Lodge** in Bandhavgarh ([kingslodge.in](https://www.kingslodge.in); from £195pn), **Kanha Earth Lodge** ([kanhaearthlodge.com](https://www.kanhaearthlodge.com); from £175pn) and **Pench Tree Lodge** ([penchtreelodge.com](https://www.penchtreelodge.com); from £260pn). Prices include all meals. Pugdunee runs a variety of conservation initiatives, including education funding and programmes for local kids, the banning of single-use plastics in their properties, reforestation schemes and raising money to support wildlife corridors.



Food & drink

Daal bafli is Madhya Pradesh's most famous dish: crispy, baked wheat balls dunked in ghee and served with spicy daal, pickles or curry. Eating **vegetarian** is also often a way of avoiding stomach problems with street food.



What to pack

Bring **binoculars** and/or a telephoto zoom lens for your camera. Loose-fitting, **breathable fabrics** are necessary for dealing with the heat, but it's best to wear long sleeves and trousers to avoid mosquito bites. **Bring layers** and a jacket if travelling in winter.



Further reading & information

India (Lonely Planet; April 2022) – Up-to-date and thorough guide book.
www.incredibleindia.org – Tourism board.
www.wwf.org.uk – Find out more about the dangers that tigers are facing.

The author travelled with Hayes & Jarvis ([hayesandjarvis.co.uk](https://www.hayesandjarvis.co.uk); 01293 762456), which offers a 15-day In Search of Tigers tour priced from £6,711pp. This includes international and domestic flights; three-star and four-star accommodation; the majority of your meals; transfers, including the Agra-Katni overnight train; and day excursions to take in the highlights of New Delhi and Mumbai. The trip offers 13 exclusive safari drives across four tiger reserves: Bandhavgarh NP, Kanha Tiger Reserve, Pench NP and Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve.



Rise of the tiger Recent estimates state that India is now home to 3,167 tigers, which is an increase of 200 in just the last four years alone

TOP TIGER PARKS

1 Jim Corbett NP, Uttarakhand

India's inaugural national park is also the birthplace of Project Tiger. Established in 1936, its marshlands and forests are also great for seeing wild elephants.

2 Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra

Maharashtra's largest reserve has one of India's highest tiger populations, yet it sees fewer visitors than many other parks in Central India, which makes for a more peaceful safari.

3 Kaziranga NP, Assam

Set on the floodplains of the Brahmaputra River, this park has over 100 tigers but was created in 1905 to save the Indian one-horned rhino; it now has the world's largest population of these animals.

4 Nagarhole NP, Karnataka

Officials minimise vehicular impact here by using trucks seating 20-plus people, so some opt to explore by boat instead. This is one of India's top tiger spots, and it's the best place to see Indian elephants.

5 Bandhavgarh NP, Madhya Pradesh

Renowned for its dense tiger population, local lodges often buy entry tickets in advance to offer to last-minute visitors. Landscapes span lush forests, meadows and rocky cliffs.

6 Ranthambore NP, Rajasthan

Protected since 1973, this former hunting ground is now a top tiger reserve. The park's ancient ruins, including an impressive fort, offer a unique setting to spot tigers. **A**

W WANDERLUST RECOMMENDS

There are more tigers in captivity in the USA than living wild in the world. Netflix's *Tiger King* offers a scary insight into the practices of commercial tiger breeders.