

Wild & Free

The Pench Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh is home to the wild—big and small, the hunter and the hunted, the dangerous, the beautiful—where there is silence that you only hear in the vast wilderness and the haunting sounds of the jungle.

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The forest held its breath as howl after howl resonated in its deep secret depths. Slowly, the sun sank behind the soaring mahua and teak trees, even as the last howl of a pack of jackals faded into a bottomless void. The forest exhaled and so did we. In the vocabulary of the jungle, the howls of jackals rank low in the hierarchy of threatening calls and sounds.

But the howling chilled us to the bone; awakening something primeval deep down inside us even as it fractured the deceptive peace of the jungle. We were in Pench Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh, where wild dogs, jackals and sloth bears share the stage with the elusive tiger and leopard and often usurp the cats' primary status (there are around 67 leopards and 45 tigers in Pench).

The jackals' howls were like cries of pain—a pack of them on one side of a waterhole were calling out to one of their ilk, stranded on the other side, fairly close to where our safari vehicle stood. The lone jackal had not joined his pack but had waited under a tree, gazing at a frightened baby langur hiding in the leafy branches, shying away from his would-be predator's bright hungry eyes.

The atmosphere in the forest was as taut as a bow string as we waited for a kill or a face-off to happen between the hunter and the hunted. Suddenly, the baby dropped from the tree and scampered away even as a couple of adult langurs pranced around the jackal, defiantly posturing and threatening. The confrontation, almost ballet-like, continued for what seemed like eternity, till the jackal trotted away to join his brethren on the other side and the langurs leapt upwards into the tree in choreographed unison.

The howls stopped as suddenly as they had started, as though a divine conductor had waved the jungle symphony to stop, and the total absence of sound was startling and menacing just like the jackals' calls.

We had started out on a game drive early morning from our luxury Pench Tree Lodge and driven to the Karmajhiri gate where the world seemed still shrouded in the last remnants of a dream. The deciduous forest and grasslands tinged by a wan sun were just stirring to life—birds tweeted as they unfurled their wings and the leaves of the soaring mahua, teak and Indian ebony trees rustled as though sharing ancient secrets with the cool wind.

As our open safari vehicle sped into the forest where the *Jungle Book* might well have unfolded and Mowgli and his wolf friends may have roamed, we inhaled the intoxicating sweet dusty fragrance of the forest. Our Pench Tree Lodge naturalist, Gaurav Dhotre, told us that Pench National Park or Pench Tiger Reserve as it is also called straddles two states – Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Maharashtra, and sprawls over 1,921 sq km. We were on the MP side, which nestles in the lower southern reaches of the Satpura hills.

As the hours slipped away, we sped across the sun-dappled land to gaze at various denizens, large and small. We saw herds of spotted deer peer out from mint-green grassland and langurs that hid in the impunity of tall trees. The scaly white trunks of

the Indian ghost tree, twisted and grotesque, and liana vines hanging like fearful venomous serpents from host trees gave parts of the forest, where the sun could not penetrate, an eerie other-worldly air. Often, the jungle would give way to open expanses of white-and-pink tipped green fountain grass that seemed to rustle with the stealthy tread of a predator on the lookout for vulnerable prey.

A family of muscled gaur (or Indian bison) lumbered across our path as they crossed from one part of the forest to the other to graze. The bulky male, who may have weighed a thousand kilogrammes, gazed at us malevolently as though he deeply resented our intrusion in his domain. We waited for the entire herd to cross to the other side, and, slowly, they melted into the jungle, resembling huge moving boulders as they grazed.

A family of wild boar waddled across in ungainly fashion while butterflies, peacocks and birds flitted around like airborne jewels. The coats of the grey langurs shone silver in the filtered light as they groomed each other. Often Gaurav, who seemed to know the forest like the back of his hand, would switch off the engine, and he and the forest guide accompanying us would examine pug marks and spoor with the concentration of scientists examining microbes under a microscope. We in turn would revel in the intensity of the silence as it pressed down on us, and, briefly, crowded India seemed to be draped in the vastness and impenetrable quiet of Africa!

Yes, safaris are as much about sounds as sightings...the staccato barking call of the *sambar*; the drumming on a tree of a woodpecker; the insistent cooing of spotted doves and the low whistling of wild dogs... But the silent presence of the tiger and the leopard quivered everywhere—in the pug marks and spoor... The drivers of criss-crossing jeeps would consult each other in hushed tones about the likely presence of a predator and we would be off again—zig-zagging across the sun-baked geography of the forest to look for fearsome predators.

But we are not big-cat-centric and prefer to admire instead the large and small creatures that make a forest come alive—the pastel-shaded Indian roller swinging on a tree branch; the magnificent crested hawk eagle; an owlet in a hollow of a tree; migratory black-necked storks from neighbouring Pakistan, high-stepping on the boulders of the almost-dry Pench river; a giant wood spider in the middle of a diaphanous web strung between two trees.

It was after a quiet breakfast in the midst of the jungle that, suddenly, the serene wildlife tableau came alive as a pack of five wild dogs strutted insouciantly into view...black bushy tails swishing, their sleek burnished brown coats, gleamed in the sun. These are formidable killer machines, Gaurav whispered, and can bring down a large *sambar*. A pack of 25 can even fell a tiger. He told us about how he had witnessed a nail-biting chase where two wild dogs brought down a deer and the rest of the pack joined them for a frenzied, carnivorous banquet.

Back at the lodge, we relaxed on the wooden deck of our cottage cantilevered over a waterhole where dragonflies buzzed and birds got ready to roost for the night. With six tree houses



Formidable killing machines, a pack of wild dogs is capable of bringing down a tiger; (*below*) the jackal, on the other hand, ranks low in its threat quotient, but for a helpless baby langur, a jackal is enough alone



Water bodies at the PENCH National Park are seasonal, meandering in full zest only during and after the monsoon. All wildlife in the forest is centred in and around them, including the *sambar* stag trotting in for a drink and the black-necked crane swooping in for a dip



NAVIGATOR

GETTING THERE

By Air The closest airport is Nagpur, 130 km away. Jabalpur (210 km) is another option, but Nagpur has better connectivity.

By Rail The nearest railway station is Nagpur. Jabalpur is the alternative.

By Road PENCH is located on the Nagpur-Jabalpur highway and can be reached in three to four hours.

STAY

While most private lodges are clustered around the Turia Gate, the boutique luxury PENCH Tree Lodge of Pugdundee Safaris is located near the Karmajhiri Gate and thus offers a supreme sense of isolation. Pugdundee Safaris has luxury lodges in Satpura, PENCH, Kanha, Bandhavgarh, and Panna national parks, which make for a convenient circuit.

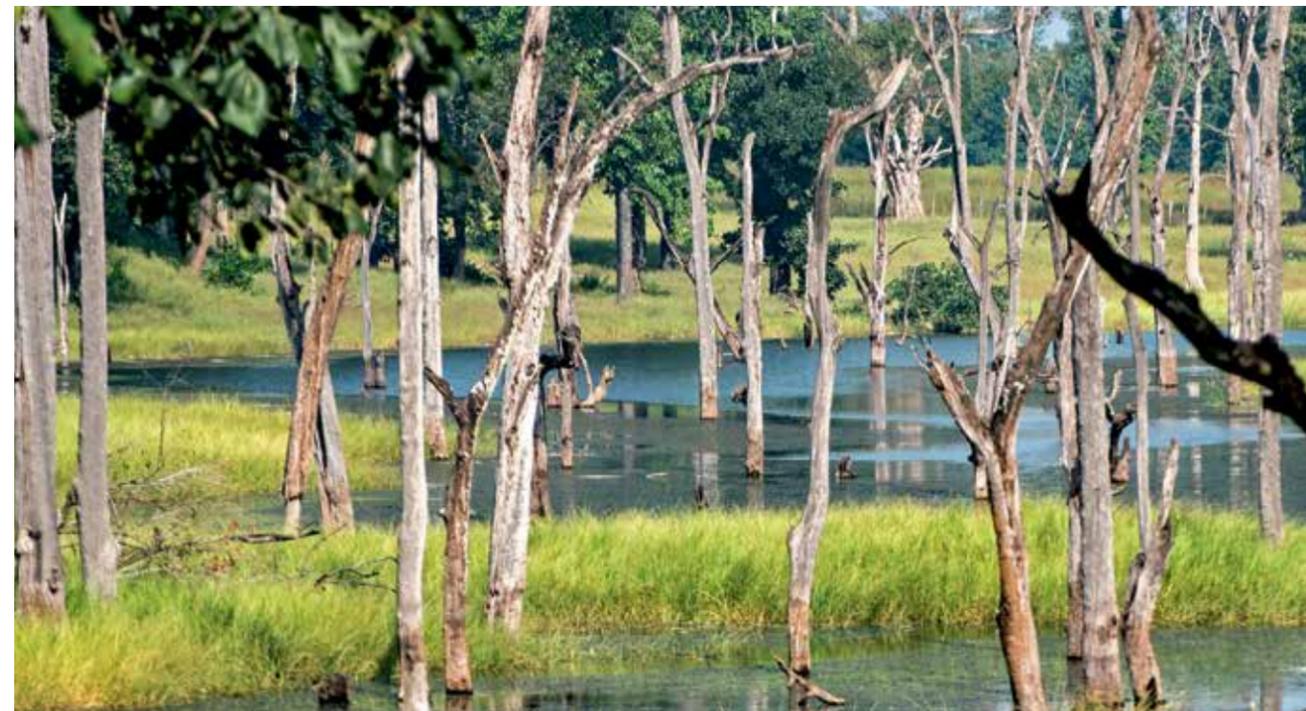
BEST TIME TO VISIT

The park is open from November to June.

EAT

Most travellers dine at their lodges.

CONTACT Visit the official website of Madhya Pradesh Tourism, www.mptourism.com/



on stilts built on top of mahua trees and six cottages, girdled by a vast private wilderness, care had been taken not to fell a single tree when building the lodge.

Come late evening and we were escorted to a farmhouse on the property, near its organic garden—for a convivial dinner with other guests who sat at candle-lit tables, their faces glowing in the light of paraffin lamps strung from trees. As dinner, which was essentially a local fare, sizzled in clay pots on a wood fire

and drinks were served from a bullock cart-turned-bar, we pondered how luxury could dovetail with the wild without ravaging it.

Briefly, we imagined that we heard the howling of the same pack of jackals that we had seen earlier in the day, riding the desolate wind, and a predator on a furtive, agenda-less stroll in the grassland. Sitting in that circle of warmth and light, we knew we were safe, although we were trespassers in their domain. ♦

