

Madhya Pradesh: A Pench-ant For The Wild

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“Humans are more of a menace in these parts, the fence was erected to curb instances of unwanted trespassing,” Sagar replied warily to my pressing query about an unsightly, metallic fence that had caught my eye. An aesthetic blot on the landscape, it looked woefully out of place. A naturalist by profession, Sagar seemed to understand my guarded inquiry, and satisfied by the clarification, I resumed my determined quest for an eager glimpse of the local fauna. I was, after all, in Kipling’s fabled country, in the land of the dry deciduous forests of the central Indian heartland, hoping to encounter some of Seoni’s four legged denizens on foot. Oddly enough, Kipling had never set foot in Pench. On the other hand, I’d opted for a first-hand experience, red in tooth and claw.

The jungle became animated just as a jackal advertised its presence with a set of paw-prints, and a nocturnal Asian palm civet followed suit, with a telling fecal trail. A sudden rustle aroused us; it had come from the dry, bush-laden watercourse running below us. We frantically scanned the foliage for movement. We were tiptoeing along the well-beaten trail when Apoorva, the photographer, caught sight of the jackal, which slinked away into the undergrowth before the rest of us could get so much as a fleeting glimpse. To stave off my disappointment, I indulged in a spot of birdwatching to familiarise myself with the avian inhabitants of the area. A few of them were also migratory travellers. The flamboyant Indian pitta, and the sneaky jacobin cuckoo were among them.

Interestingly, while I was pondering over the fanciful prospect of spending my entire summer here (so inspired was I by my feathered friends), a jungle cat emerged out of nowhere and crossed my path. Awestruck by its sparkling golden coat and beguilingly nimble feet, the encounter left me gushing. Sagar suddenly stopped and picked up some fragments from the ground. “Regurgitated bone splinters from an owl,” he said, with his palm held out for us to see.

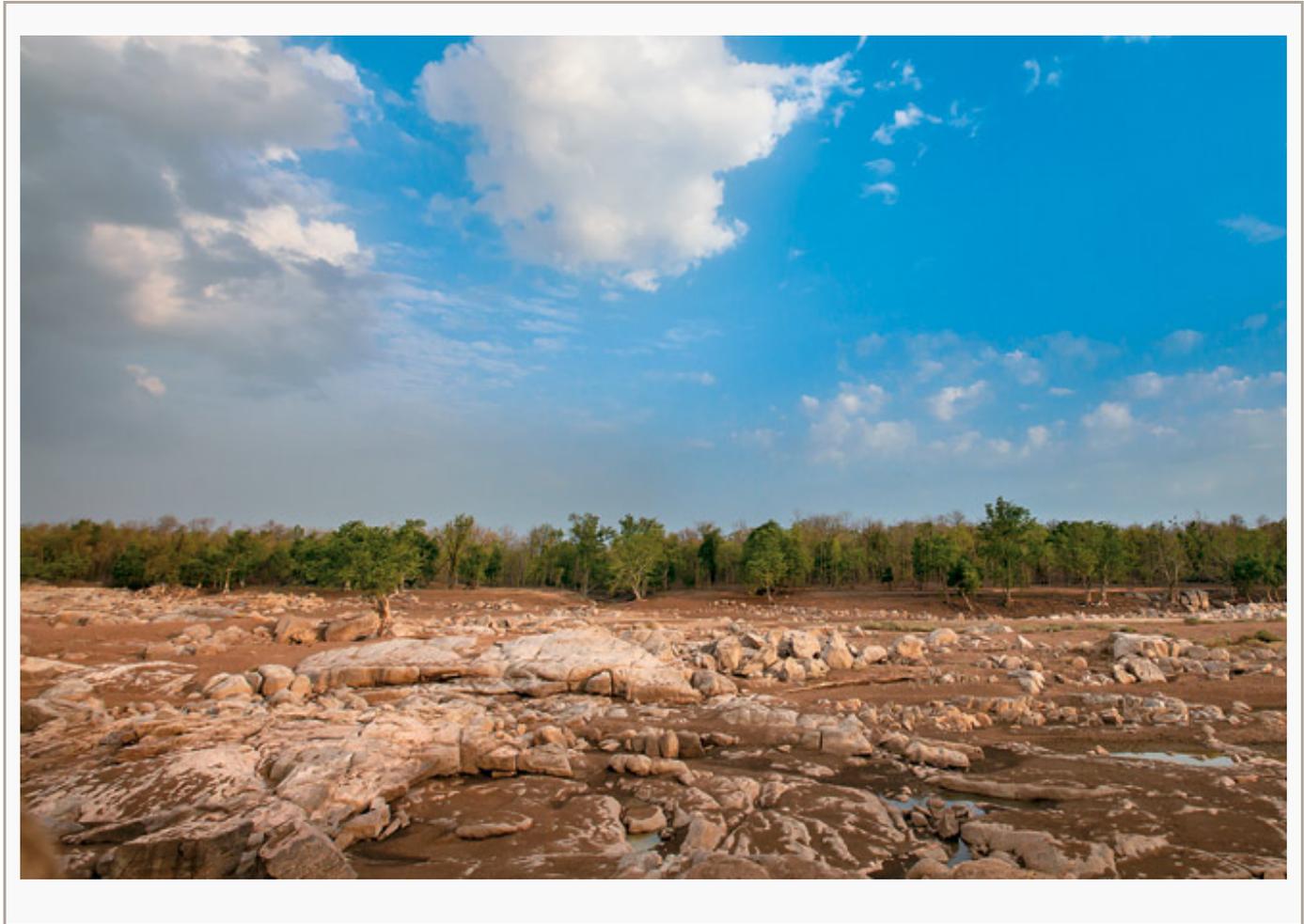


My past experiences have taught me that there's usually a gaping disparity between the sterilised environs of a lavish safari lodge and the authentic, in-house wildlife experience it promises. So I was a bit sceptical when I arrived at Pench Tree Lodge. After the welcome drink, a heady concoction of watermelon and beetroot that helped me shed my somnolence, I was escorted to the dining area for a chat with the manager, Amit.

The lodge's claims weren't marketing gimmicks. This was an eco-lodge that, much to my delight, genuinely walked the talk. Trees that interfered with their construction plans were skirted and not felled; the haphazardly designed dining floor offered some evidence of it. Water bowls provided relief for thirsty birds, flax oil and not pesticide was the preferred insect-repellent, grasslands were being allowed to flourish amidst the property. Best of all, a tree frog and a flashy peninsular rock agama greeted me as I climbed the steps to my tree house. Lest you think otherwise, there was no compromise with creature comforts either. The room was as plush as it could get, equipped with a snug bed, a wooden desk and ultrasonic rodent repellent. The tree house was the perfect balm for a jaded traveller's soul. Glass doors separated the balcony from the room so, despite the heat, I could vicariously savour the soothing ambience of the treetop verandah, while being tucked in my bed in an air-conditioned room.

Snakes had laid claim to parts of the property and some were of the highly venomous variety, such as the deadly spectacled cobra and the notorious Russell's viper. As a result, we were strictly instructed to not leave our cottages after sundown without informing the staff. After polishing off a plate of delectable methi-chicken and roti at dinner, Sagar and I set off to scout the same trail we had used for our afternoon walk. I was a little edgy at first, as the trail had taken on an altogether different character and it seemed to bear no semblance to the one I had traversed only a few hours ago. What was, in the light of day, a benign pugdundee was now a sinister and unnerving labyrinth, the vegetation ominously closing in on us from both sides. The nocturnal residents were out in force; the unmistakable six-spotted beetles were engrossed in their nightly chores of scouring the ground for edibles, least perturbed by us giants walking past. An astonishingly well-camouflaged stick mantis patiently awaited repast atop a rock, and

legions of fire ants, known for packing a potent bite, hogged parts of the trail. They made me even more wary. While I traipsed around the parading ants, a bizarre invertebrate sped across the trail and abruptly came to a halt. Sagar identified it as a scutigera, a 30-legged centipede. As he was speaking, the scutigera shot into motion as abruptly as it had stopped and swiftly retraced its steps across the road, nearly running into me in the process. With my flashlight firmly on it, I was tracking its seemingly aimless progress when a tarantula the size of my palm clinically ambushed the unsuspecting critter. I had witnessed an electrifying and rare natural moment, and with my pulse still racing, I went back to bed.



‘A great plain dotted with rocks and cut up by ravines’, is how Kipling had described Pench. The jungle looked parched as our rattling jeep hurtled past, and the vegetation was completely missing in most places. It had been raining on and off for the past few days, but the withered teak trees were craving for more than just the occasional spell of rain. The first safari started off with a bang; a couple of minutes into our drive, a spectacled cobra flaunted its semi-flattened hood before slithering away into the undergrowth. Snake-sightings on a safari are exceptionally rare and cobra sightings even more so, but the telephoto lens-wielding tourists behind me were clearly unimpressed. I knew it was only a matter of time before the “tiger dikhao” refrain would be vehemently hurled at the guide. The jungle might have been reeling under the heat but for tiger-obsessed, shutter-happy tourists, these were optimal conditions for big cat spotting.

Most of the regular water sources were now bone-dry. The Pench River had been reduced to a few isolated pools of water, and that’s where we found the first signs of the predator. A chital started to call out in alarm, followed by a langur, till both the sentinels of the forests were sending distress calls in unison. But when half an hour of quiet patience had amounted to nothing, I decided to switch my attention towards a lone sambhar fawn standing steadfast in the middle of a water hole, not twitching a muscle. Thoroughly baffled, I turned to Mahesh, our naturalist, for answers. “It’s trapped,” he said, with a slight hint of pity. Apparently it had unwittingly stepped into loose, wet soil and

now had its feet glued to it.

We weren't the only ones to notice that something was amiss. A pair of jackals had also seen the beleaguered sambhar, and although they too seemed a bit puzzled initially, they didn't wish to squander the chance of an easy meal, especially with a tiger lurking nearby. It wasn't long before one of the jackals gingerly made its way to the pool's edge. And just as we thought that it was game over for the young sambhar, it stumped us all, and leapt out of the water! We were left truly confounded. Why put yourself in such a precarious position in the first place? The jackals of Pench have made quite a name for themselves for being unusually bold and tourist friendly. Here, you might mistake a congregation of jeeps for a tiger sighting, and then find out that it's some wily jackals that are the centre of attention.



Next in line were jackals' larger and more handsome cousins, the wild dogs, commonly known as dholes. A pack was animatedly sating their hunger pangs by stripping clean a two-day-old chital carcass. Known for being endurance hunters, dholes chase their prey over vast lengths, but in this case it seemed like the dholes had help from an unexpected quarter—a fence. The carcass lay close to a fence put up by the forest department, to encourage the unhindered sprouting of grass. It had, quite literally, turned out to be a dead end for the fleeing deer. The tiger, however, remained a no-show, as none of the 50 or more big cats that call the 758 sq km park home obliged us with a darshan. My hopes were now pinned on the afternoon safari, my final attempt.



Although the chef had done his bit to keep our spirits high by dishing out mouth-watering delicacies like a Lebanese eggplant preparation, the second safari started on a damp note. The rains were conspiring to keep us out of the park, but to our collective relief they relented just in time.

We were quite content to simply be in the park, invigorated by the recent downpour. While we were lazily soaking in the forest's newfound lushness, a tiger's low growl instantly snapped us out of our torpor. Mahesh chose to park the jeep at a slightly elevated bend, that gave us a wider view. From then on, each minute passed by in anxious anticipation. The tiger called once again and this time the growl came from behind us. It was on the move and we needed to hurry. Mahesh quickly reversed the jeep and we knew that we had started to close in on it, although it wasn't in our sights yet. The moment that we had all been desperately waiting for arrived, for there was the tiger, crossing the gypsy track. It was the humungous Rayakassa male, "possibly Pench's largest and most dominant male tiger," said Mahesh. It continued to cross the road, paying no heed to us. His majesty's royal gait had me transfixed. 'Mesmerising' doesn't cut it; the sight was nothing short of transcendental.

Back in the lodge, while returning from a village walk on my final morning, Sagar and I heard a sharp rustle emanating from a stack of dead leaves behind us. A closer inspection of the leafy litter revealed absolutely nothing, and just as I thought the search was in vain, Sagar screamed "snake!" and pointed towards a beautiful ribbon-like bronze-back tree snake that glided deftly through the intermingling branches, and was soon out of sight. Ironically, just a few moments before, Sagar and I had discussed our chances of seeing a snake in the daytime, and he had dismissed the possibility outright. It was a once-in-a-blue-moon sort of occurrence. The last couple of days at the Pench Tree Lodge had been sublime. Be it the seamless fusion of their superior hospitality and the lodge's thriving natural setting, the perpetually jovial staff or witnessing the heart-thumping battle of the fittest, it's not an experience I will forget. In the wild, coming off second-best means having to pay with your life. In such a scenario, it always helps to remember the age-old jungle saying that my experience at Pench had drilled into me—expect nothing but

the unexpected.

The Information

Getting There

The nearest airport to the park is Nagpur (92km). The drive takes close to 2.5hrs. There are also overnight trains from Delhi and Mumbai to Nagpur.

The Lodge

Accommodation in Pench Tree Lodge (Jungle Plan â?1 24,000 per night; rate varies according to season; inclusive of stay, all meals, two safaris, walks, guide fees; +91-9810383711, pugdundeesafaris.com) is in 6 stilted deluxe tree houses, which are close to the dining and recreational spaces.

What To See & Do

Activities organised by the lodge include nature walks, village visits, and gypsy rides into the park. You can also opt for a cycle ride through neighbouring villages, or take part in a tutorial on organic farming. Others also choose to go for a guided walk through a night trail within the confines of the forested property.