

DESTINATION BANDHAVGARH

chasing after the all-elusive royal



Brinda Suri heads to the Bandhavgarh National Park, with its almost untouched wild landscape, to catch a glimpse of the tigers, and finds that this is easier said than done, even as she realises how humans hound the magnificent animal

PHOTOS: BRINDA SURI



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or the standard tourist, spotting a tiger in its natural habitat at a protected reserve requires no special skills. It's the combination of an attentive driver and a competent guide that performs the required task of picking up signals and alerting. What a visitor needs is lots of luck for that chance rendezvous; or there's always the next best option of intently gazing at 'fresh' pug-marks and furiously capturing it on camera for a boast back home.

Lady Luck and I have never been the best of mates, especially when it comes to tiger sighting. All my attempts at co-

best suited for fauna, making the park an attractive biosphere offering a fair chance of sightings.

The evening safari at Bandhavgarh is a three-hour affair (3pm to 6pm) and our initial forays yielded the usual four-legged creatures. An intriguing fact I learnt during the drive was the deer-primate friendship, with the latter — primarily langur/monkey at this park — helping in gathering food for the kin of deer, who in turn warn them during times of danger. For about two hours we mapped our given route, drinking in the views, listening to jungle calls and the few nuggets the guide rattled off, even as he kept his ears and eyes open for an indicator on the all-elusive one. Mission Tiger almost seemed to be drawing to a close until a passing jeep mentioned a sighting on another path. And then began the chase.

Aju, our young Gypsy driver, swung into action, literally. The 20 km-speed limit in the jungle zone was forgotten as he morphed into Schumacher, throwing all caution to the winds in his race against time. En route, bystanders like the spotted deer, sambhar, neelgai, langur — star attractions till now — were reduced to non-entities. The royal's arrival had been announced and everything else was a blur. As we approached Chua, the spot the tiger was to make an appearance, we were greeted by a swarm of already-stationed jeeps that frantically gestured us to halt in our tracks. They had caught a glimpse of the tiger approaching and no one wanted that chance to be ruined. Silence ruled as the crowd awaited the arrival. Seconds ticked by and no movement was heard. And then in a flash emerged B2, the current ageing monarch of these jungles! He nonchalantly walked passed the jeeps, almost at touching distance, least bothered by the rush of flashing cameras or the excited squeals of children. This was his kingdom and he was gracious with us outsiders. B2 crossed the path in less than 15 seconds before disappearing into a bamboo thicket but that was enough to have the crowd agog. They had witnessed a moment that would be long spoken of. It was my first sighting of an untamed tiger and it took a while to sink in.

On day two we were in the park by 6am. November onwards, mornings are considered a fine time for tiger sighting, as the soft paws of the big cats try avoiding the dew, preferring to walk on mud tracks on which jeeps ply. We had barely manoeuvred a few bends when sharp warning-calls of the langur began. The guide immediately directed the driver to move towards Barua Nullah. He was spot on — we arrived within minutes to find a striped beauty blocking our path. She was young, intense and gorgeous, with determination writ across her face. In comparison, observing the aged B2 yesterday had been a tame, zoo-like episode. We both

factfile

Air: Closest airport is at Jabalpur (164 km/2.5 hrs). **Railways:** Nearest railheads are Umaria (31 km/35 min) and Katni (102 km/2hrs). Convenient trains: From Delhi (MP Sampark Kranti and Gondwana Express); from Chennai (Sangha Mitra Express). **Accommodation:** King's Lodge or Tree House Hideaway (www.pugdundeefaris.com), 0124-4222657-59, 09810253436 **Best time:** The park is open from mid-October to mid-June. Mid-November onwards is a good time for sightings, barring the fortnight or so of intense cold towards the end of December. The harsh summers, though, offer the finest chances of fauna-spotting.

stood still for a while before she made the first move. Her actions had guide Manjeet Singh exclaiming, "You are fortunate to see this tigress. She is Bhitari, who's new to the area and is marking territory," he said, eagerly explaining her moves, as she spray marked and clawed a tree trunk.

Then suddenly she changed her path and began approaching us. Ours was the only jeep in front of her and seeing the majestic advance was quite a feeling. Meanwhile, word had got around the park and soon there was a pile of vehicles behind her too. All of us feverishly clicked our cameras. After a few moments, though, I felt we were akin to paparazzi hounding a femme fatale. I wanted to watch her intently, but not through the viewfinder. However, the temptation to capture the instant for posterity was too irresistible. Her walk towards us was electrifying and I couldn't take my eyes away from her glowing green ones. But as she got closer to our jeep the guide became chary. "Reverse!" he yelled to the driver. "She's hungry and angry. This can turn ugly." We slumped into our seats, with

some among us getting visions of a tiger springing forth! Driver Uttam was a master behind the wheel and just as the tigress came within sniffing distance he swiftly drove off. We watched her from a safer position till she faded out of sight, her gait unflustered and regal, so befitting her stature. It was sheer providence that she chose to tread the route we were on, providing an experience to treasure.

Moments like these are further stimulating when interacting with persons dedicated to conservation of fauna and their habitat. My opting for accommodation at King's Lodge — a tasteful eco-friendly property from the stable of Pugdunde Safari, which also offers the widely-acclaimed Tree House Hideaway in the vicinity — ensured I tuned into absorbing discussions on tigers, trackers, poachers and more. The force behind the Pugdunde group is its founder Shyamendra Singh, an engrossing raconteur of tiger tales, who's been joined in his passion for providing guests a holistic experience in the wild by naturalists Manav Khanduja and Karan Rana. Their properties speak for themselves: no tree has been felled for construction; the wild landscape has been left untouched ensuring a sense of true living in the jungle; and most material used, recycled included, to dress up the snug cottages and lounges is in its natural form.

The cornerstone of my entire experience was one entity: the tiger. It's a shame that it is under attack by humans. Word on conservation needs to spread fast and wide. Chennai-based filmmaker Shekar Dattatri is one such individual with an aim to do precisely that. His documentary *The Truth about Tigers* is a work of commitment and is a must-watch. As he asks, if we cannot save our national animal, what can we save?

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