

A TIGER AND MOUSE GAME

TWO SAFARI RESORTS IN KANHA AND PENCH
NATIONAL PARKS SHOWCASE WILDLY DIFFERENT
SIDES OF MADHYA PRADESH'S JUNGLES

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Both Kanha and Pench are tiger reserves but there is a lot more to see here, from the sambar (facing page), which can be spied ambling all over the parks, to the Indian roller (1), Indian scoups owl (2), spotted roosting on trees, jackals (3) and the ubiquitous long-tailed shrike (4).

It had been a dismal evening for Harpreet “Happy” Dhillon. He veered his open-air green Gypsy to a halt outside a crowded ticketing window in Kanha National Park. Lanky, bearded and soft-spoken, he was a naturalist from the Kanha Earth Lodge, my home in Madhya Pradesh for three days. Happy had driven me and my companion—photographer Riddhi Parekh, on her maiden wildlife assignment—all across the park in search of a memorable tiger sighting.

That evening, we had concluded our final drive in the Kisli Zone, where we had missed seeing a cat by seconds. Three days. Zero tigers. I was certain that Happy was kicking himself.

As soon as we were out of one of the park’s two main entrances, a fellow guide yelled from across the ticket counter, “Happy, *tune tiger dekha?*” Happy smiled—the kind of tight smile that threatens to dissolve into a scowl—and shook his head. Then, the knife-twist. A guide handed Happy a smartphone. “Wasn’t this T2?” he asked, as we stared at the photo of a tiger blankly. Happy, outsmarted once, was not to be outdone again. “No,” he assured the man. “I think it was one of the new male tigers.”

Before any further argument ensued, we sped off. Happy was, as Riddhi and I noted, perhaps quieter than usual on that ride.

Kanha Earth Lodge

Any semblance of disappointment he felt was unfounded. Over three days, we had seen plenty to send us back chuffed: a lonely black buck grazing in the distance, jackals frolicking mid-siesta, a parade of barasingha antlers in motion.

I had caught my breath a lot. Wintry morning drives

across Kanha can do that to you. The park’s scenery changes dramatically. Swaying sal trees, quiet streams, muddy swamps, bamboo thickets—the landscape unfurls like nature’s own flipbook.

My residence—the Kanha Earth Lodge, in the outer reaches of the park’s buffer zone—was so artfully conceived that I felt it was one with the greater ecosystem of the park. Comprising 12 luxury cottages, fashioned after local tribal architecture, the lodge evoked an outdoorsy western ranch in spirit, albeit with Indian aesthetics. The stone setting in the walls was asymmetrically precise, while the wood furniture inside and outside the 12 terracotta-roof cottages—sinewy and graceful.

Covering 16 acres of land, the property included an organic garden, an infinity pool and a main cottage where guests trickled in to lounge by a huge fireplace. A central chandelier-lit hall in the cottage hosted lunch and dinner, typically rustic preparations such as the *gond thali* and *laal saag*.

Kanha Earth Lodge had all the bells and whistles of a plush wildlife getaway but there was an emphasis on teaching guests about the forest. Evening entertainment—or edutainment—was usually a wildlife documentary, aired on a projector above the fireplace.

The lodge’s manager, Bharat Mandhyan, had been a naturalist for years, overseeing birding tours all across India. “At Kanha, you will have a wonderful time, yes. But hopefully, you will also learn something about wildlife,” he told me.

It was our last night at the lodge and we were being treated to a bushfire dinner under the stars. Digging into kebabs, we laughed off our consecutively unsuccessful tiger



At the Kanha Earth Lodge (left), rooms bear the hallmark of local architecture inspired by the homes of the Gond community; Although summer is the best time for sightings at Kanha (middle), mornings in winter can be stunningly picturesque; Pench Tree Lodge, spread over 40 acres, has six tree houses (right) and six cottages suitable for larger groups.



chases. The next morning, we were to leave for Pench Tree Lodge, nearly three hours from Kanha along the route to Nagpur. “Let’s see if we have better luck in Pench,” my friend said. I remembered our naturalist’s crestfallen face from earlier that day and crossed my fingers.

Pench Tree Lodge

Kanha Earth Lodge was all wood and warmth; Pench had a lighter, modern touch. A total of six airy and spacious lofts, raised on Mahua trees, the whole place revelled in its rough edges—grass blades poked and prodded at you, as you walked along its narrow pathways that led to the treehouses.

“I am feeling the pressure,” said Chinmay Deshpande, the man who was to be our guide for the next few days. Word of our misfortune with tiger spotting had reached Pench and now, Chinmay, studious and assured, was determined to strike gold.

Alone in my treehouse, I walked onto the deck and surveyed the view—40 acres of dry wilderness. Each of the six treehouses were at a significant distance from each other. So I only had the immediate company of my avian neighbours to look forward to. In the daytime, nature’s seclusion felt more welcome than wary.

Night was a different matter. We were warned to never step out of our treehouse without a flashlight; any impromptu solitary adventures were discouraged. “There can be snakes here sometimes,” Harish Arya, lodge manager revealed, casually waving out to the woods.

During our walk at dusk though, there was no unexpected

slithering to be heard. Chinmay was keener on spiders, shining his light on a geometric web, woven by an orb spider, caught between two twigs. He stuck his forefinger into the web, “Look how it sticks in the centre but seems to be invisible as it expands towards the edges,” he whispered in admiration. “This is how they catch their prey.”

A Sight For More Eyes

Back at the pool and dining centre, Chinmay doled out more food for thought with a slide show about Pench’s main attractions—prime among them, a legendary tigress called Collarwaali. “She is quite bold and doesn’t care if tourists are around or not,” he offered. She wouldn’t mind us then.

Through dinner, as we wolfed down chef Pankaj Fulera’s eclectic fusion menu (*makai ki khees*, chicken ravioli, beetroot halwa), the conversation remained tiger-focussed. “Pench is a dry and deciduous park,” Chinmay noted. “There’s more room here for tigers to cohabit without getting into conflicts with each other. Unlike Bandhavgarh, where the density of tigers has risen to the point that the cats are competing with each other for territory.”

For nearly the first three hours of our safari drive next morning, the park seemed unusually silent. Chinmay tailed a few paw marks along mud-strewn trails, snapping his head every time he heard a “call”—signs given out by other animals of a predator in sight.

It was 11 a.m. An hour to go before the drive wrapped up. We were settling down for breakfast at Pench’s famous Alikatta square when the Gypsy in front of us revved up and drove off.

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A knowing glance passed between the guides of both vehicles.

“Quick, we have to go,” Chinmay said. Steering his vehicle as fast he could, he rammed us straight into a long dusty lane with lantana outgrowth on both sides. We were late. Ahead, a stream of 4x4s were backed up, one after the other, tourists standing up on the backseats and drivers’ seats looking to one side. “*Woh rahi*,” one of them shouted. Chinmay stood up, gestured to us, “Look, you see her... Collarwaali?” Unfussed by the hoopla, the tigress had crossed the road, her striped behind disappearing into the bushes.

On our way back to the lodge, we received a message from Happy: a “great” cat sighting at Kanha. Everyone’s luck, it seemed, had turned. 🐾

ESSENTIALS

Kanha Earth Lodge is nearly 6 hr/262 km from Nagpur airport (www.kanhaearthlodge.com; doubles from ₹19,000, including meals and taxes).

Pench Tree Lodge, near the Karmajhiri gate of the Pench National Park, is 3 hr/111 km from Nagpur airport (www.penchtreelodge.com; doubles from ₹21,000 for treehouses, ₹19,000 for cottages, including meals and taxes). Safaris cost ₹8,500 per jeep for a group of four.