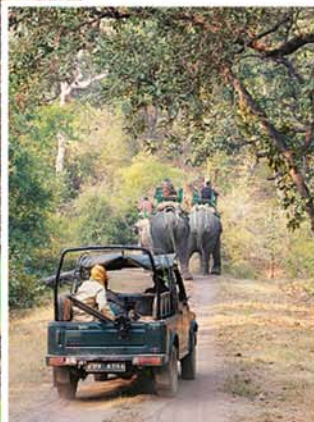




On a tiger trail: (clockwise from left) Two large cubs in their playhouse; an elephant ride is a great way to seek an audience with the tiger; 25 Gypsies gather at the spot where the tigress, with three cubs in tow, made an appearance.



BANDHAVGARH

Stars in stripes

Watch a tiger in the wild to appreciate anew what we stand to lose if poachers continue to get their way

BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

F@k the luck, show us a tiger!" Disguised by a polite smile, these words run through my mind every time a guide at a national park answers a query about the possibility of spotting a tiger with the stoic, "It depends on luck, sir."

At most national parks, this is the standard line guides use to shield themselves even as they prepare a bunch of eager tourists for the eventuality of not seeing a tiger.

You cannot blame them, not after the media discovered the bitter truth that old William Blake's cat is no longer burning bright in the forests of the night. Deforestation and poaching—triggered by the fact that a part of the tiger's anatomy is the Chinese equivalent of Viagra—are steadily wiping out these magnificent striped predators.

Future generations may see the big cat only in streaming videos or behind bars in a zoo but, for now, for you and me and anyone who wants to reel at the sensory overload of seeing a tiger in the wild, there is Bandhavgarh.

So, there we were, 10 of us, at the gates of the park in two Gypsies, the standard mode of transport in the jungle—my family on their first visit, I on my fifth. The day had started with a smiling Manish, Hotel Tiger Den's head waiter, almost breaking down the doors of our four cottages, trying hard to wake us up and trying even harder to infect us with his bright manner, never mind that it

was five in the morning.

Hardly 100m into the park, though, Indresh, our guide and long-time acquaintance, pointed out fresh pug marks. We rounded the corner and spotted up ahead, walking as nonchalantly as a cow on a highway, a full-grown tigress.

Welcome to Bandhavgarh. Other vehicles had also spotted the pug marks and tracked them, and now a pack of Gypsies followed the tigress' footsteps. You are supposed to be very quiet in the jungle, but the sighting evoked a very audible mix of loud whispers, exclamations and sharp intakes of breath. The tigress seemed gloriously indifferent to it all; in fact, she showed us the depth of contempt she had for us, the ogers, as she paused and leisurely relieved herself.

After a while, she disappeared into the foliage and we left her to her own devices and carried on to the elephant camp for a rendezvous with park officials who had been in communication with the mahouts.

For the first hour of the safari, the mahouts are lords of the jungle, the deciders of every tourist's day. They set out at 5am on their lofty mounts, eyes trained on the ground, following pug marks and other been-there signs until they discover the spot where the tiger is chilling out after its nocturnal activities. Then, they use their wireless handsets to inform the forest post of the sighting and describe a point from where visitors may clamber atop the elephant to be taken for an audience with the tiger.

We were allotted our token for

the elephant ride and rushed to the spot where the elephants were waiting. En route, Indresh pointed out deer and birds and we smiled at him condescendingly, urging Ratiban, our driver, to step on the gas and get us to the elephants fast.

Arriving just as a bunch of tourists returned from their 'tiger show' bright-eyed and star-struck—or maybe stripes-struck—it took a few contortions, strained hamstrings and healthy shoves to the backsides for us to squeeze atop two elephants and head into the dense forest.

If you have ever rubbed your hand against elephant hide, you will realize that thorny branches would just caress the pachyderm. As it took the shortest way through the bramble, we had our work cut out protecting hands and faces.

But that was only until we came upon the two big cubs gambolling about at the base of a forked tree. Their winter coats thick and rich, they were still a little shy of the elephant; as the months would go by, they would get used to these beasts and their excited human luggage. The mahout, an old hand at the game, backed up the elephant a bit and, instantly, the cubs shimmed up the tree, both wanting to claim it as solo domain and trying to throw the other one off.

The elephant eased closer to the tree till we were at the same height as the cubs. Taken aback, the cubs paused a moment in their game of one-upmanship and looked straight at us. That, the moment when a tiger fixes its

yellow gaze on you and seems to caress your soul, is the moment you realize that Bandhavgarh rocks. You need a hell of a lot of bad luck not to see a tiger here.

The evening safari has no elephant rides, but the tigers very often oblige thrillseekers by crossing the road, apparently at random. That evening, we heard langurs go ballistic with their warning calls atop the trees and figured that a tiger was on the move. All 25 Gypsies homed in on a spot where the tiger was expected to appear. And soon enough, a tigress, with three cubs in tow, walked out of the scrub and crossed the track, 10ft from the closest car.

Tigers in Bandhavgarh are used to tourists and cars, but sometimes they may be in a foul mood. The next morning, we came across a tigress who was expressing her displeasure—maybe the deer got away?—vocally. To put it bluntly, the full-blown roar is a sound capable of turning bowels to water. For a long moment after it had disappeared into the foliage, there was silence, never mind that almost all the tourists in the jungle were present at the spot.

In the three days that we were in Bandhavgarh, we saw eight different tigers in about 15 sightings. The park does not have an extraordinarily large number of tigers, but the small area makes for a high concentration, ergo spotting possibilities.

Sadly, here too, as in the rest of India, the tigers are under threat. Every time I visit, I hear stories of poaching. If we don't do something about it fast, in a decade or so we could be driving into the park and photographing deer grazing fearlessly, confident in the knowledge there is no tiger around to have them for breakfast or dinner.

Write to lounge@livemint.com



CHILD-FRIENDLY RATING

Animals belong in the wild, not the zoo or on TV. What better way to drive home the first lesson of nature?

TRIP PLANNER

How to get there:

From Mumbai, the closest railhead is Katni. There are multiple trains on this route: The fastest is the Muzaffarpur Express, leaving Lokmanya Tilak Terminus station at 12:15pm and reaching Katni at 5:15am. One-way fare is around Rs1,350 for IIAC class.

If travelling from New Delhi, take the Kalinga-Utkal Express from Hazrat Nizamuddin at 12:45pm and get off the train at Umaria early the next morning. One-way single person fare is around Rs1,200 for IIAC.

From Katni and Umaria, Bandhavgarh is 90km and 30km away respectively. Your hotel will normally arrange a pick-up on request.

Air Deccan flies between New Delhi and Jabalpur, with current one-way fare around Rs2,500. Alternatively, fly into Bhopal (Air Deccan, Jet Airways), with a one-way fare around Rs3,500. Jet also flies from Mumbai to Bhopal (fare around Rs5,500).

Where to stay:

Tiger Den (www.tigerden-bandhavgarh.com); Shalendra Tiwari +91 9810140441) With 18 spacious cottages, its own landscaped gardens and resident naturalists. It is a good place to stay. Expect to pay around Rs4,000 per cottage per day, inclusive of meals and morning and evening safaris. For luxury in the wild, opt for the Taj's Mahua Kotli (<http://www.tajhotels.com/Leisure/Mahua%20Kotli/BANDHAVGARH%20NATIONAL%20PARK/default.htm>). Four nights for two people would cost around Rs60,000.

What to do:

Bandhavgarh is open from October to June. Holidays such as Diwali, Christmas and New Year's are considered high season and prices for entry into the park (Rs40), guide charges (Rs50) and elephant rides (Rs100) double during these times.

Go flora/fauna spotting. Trek up to Bandhavgarh fort, said to be the oldest in the country. Visit Baghel Museum, Bhamera dam or drive 40km to the Chenpur waterfalls.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

