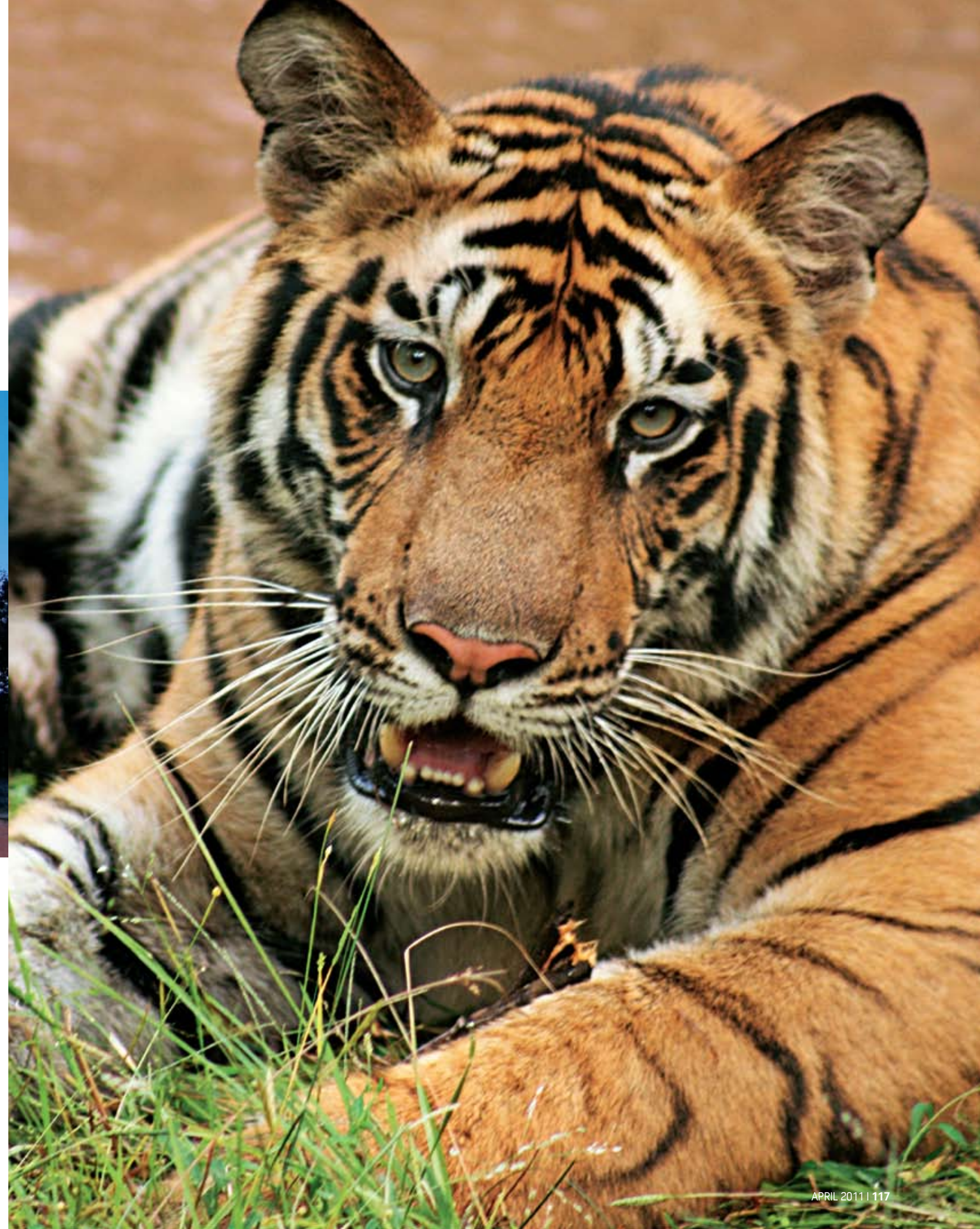




ROCKING & ROARING



KINGS LODGE, BANDHAVGARH



Till you see a tiger in the wild, you don't know what you are missing! The thrill, the adrenaline rush, the sense of triumph...and the look of disdain it throws your way, humbles you, making you feel like a mere human, in the presence of regal magnificence!

Sugatha Menon reminisces about her 'lucky' sightings of tigers in the forests of Kanha and Bandhavgarh

It was a bright morning in Bandhavgarh, MP. The kind of day, that doesn't guarantee any chance of tiger sighting. Tourists keen on spotting the tiger leave for the safari at 5.30 am. In any case, I wasn't going for tiger sighting, my agenda for the day was scaling the Bandhavgarh fort. So there

I was, in an open jeep, accompanied by a naturalist, a guide and the driver. Incidentally, the naturalist and the guide are mandatory if you are entering the forest premise. I spotted a family of wild boars, the first animal sighting after I had landed in Bandhavgarh. I excitedly pointed it out to the guide, and he said, "Madam, if the first animal you've seen is the wild boar, there are chances you will see a tiger." Before I could get too



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excited, Bijoy, the naturalist, brought me back to earth, saying it's just a superstition and not a written rule. I sat back, but not without a small stirring of hope in my heart. We soon reached a grassy land, and because the grass had dried up, we could see the land stretch into miles, and the morning sunlight bathed it in an even golden glow. And suddenly we heard it, the unmistakable alarm calls of the Sambar deer, the sound reverberated through the stillness of the forest, followed by the urgent cries of peacocks. We brought the jeep to a halt, and waited, and there it was, a glimpse of golden yellow and black, the famous stripes, a tiger!

We saw it move through the grass, and then it started coming towards the jeep. Thrill and excitement was now tinged with fear, and yet one wanted the tiger to come closer, for a better look, and there it was less than a feet away from the jeep, and then, it started walking alongside the jeep, we kept pace with it. It then moved ahead walking at the



KANHA EARTH LODGE

slowest pace possible. It would stop, turn back and give a look which surely said, 'C'mon, give me a break, you pests!' And I must tell you of its paws, a tiger's paws are the sweetest; round and big, you want to kiss them! After a bit of walking it decided to have a drink, so it crouched near a stream and began lapping the water. To see a ferocious animal lapping up water with its pink tongue is another heartwarming sight. After that, it took a turn, away from the jeep, and disappeared into the forest. We were too stunned to move. We sat in the jeep transfixed, and soon the congratulations started, "Madam first day mein hi tiger dekh liya! Lucky!" And this luck continued with me throughout my eight-day stay!

I was in Bandhavgarh at the invitation of Pugdundee Safaris, the wildlife lodges group. It was a first for me, Madhya Pradesh, and it was the word 'tigers' that made a cat lover like me jump at the invite. I flew down to Nagpur from Mumbai and covered the rest of the journey by car. Eight hours to get to Bandhavgarh. Yellow fields of arhar dal, dusty villages, teak forests and langurs, was the sight for most parts of the journey. As we neared the forest of Bandhavgarh, expectations started building up. I would peer into the forests, hoping for a glimpse of the

hero of Bandhavgarh forest. The driver encouraged me further, saying tigers do come out on the roads at times! Obviously I don't spot any, and I'm glad they don't come out on to the roads! In no time, we are in Kings Lodge, in the heart of the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve.

Spread out over twelve acres, it is about ten minutes away from the forest or the park as it is called. The lodge has ten cottage rooms and eight still cottage rooms with en-suite bathrooms and overlooking a verdant Sal forest. I reach there at dusk, and given the location of the lodge, it has the kind of stillness that being around a forest brings. Being the city slicker, I am a tad uncomfortable with the quietness and the growing darkness. After being shown around the lodge by the Dutch manager, Erwin Perdok, I am escorted

to my room, a good seven minutes from the main reception area. It's a beautiful cottage on stilts, and whether I look out of the verandah or my windows, I can only see green. The room is cool, with rough stone flooring, bamboo curtains... everything here spells luxury without losing that earthy and natural appeal. Since meals are not served in the room, I have to make my way once again to the main lodge area. I call the reception to have someone escort me. One of the friendly staff boys arrives with a lantern, and we walk from my cottage. This has to be the quickest seven minute walk of my life, I have a feeling of being watched, as all I can hear around me are forest sounds and for a Mumbaikar like me, to say I was disconcerted would be an understatement.

DIAMOND STARS

I reach the hotel area, and find a bonfire on in an open area. All the guests are around it, sharing stories and I notice that most of them are foreign nationals. I settle down with a couple from Nagpur, Shalini and Vipul Gupta, and what delightful company they offer!



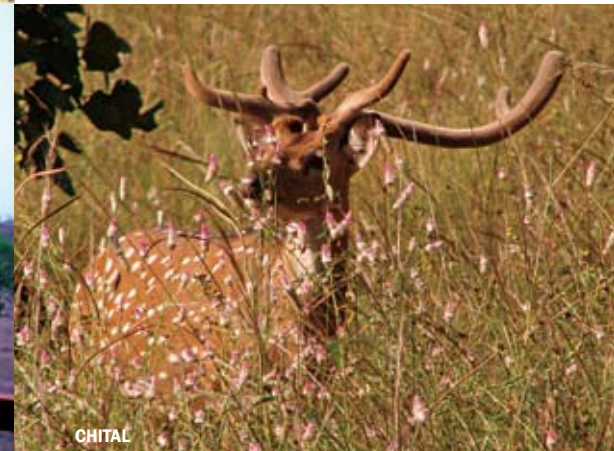
LANGUR



JUNGLE FOWL



VERANDAH OF KINGS LODGE



CHITAL

Vipul has been coming to Kanha and Bandhavgarh since he was eight. His camera contains wildlife photographs that any photographer would give an arm and a leg to shoot! Added to this are his entertaining tales of the kind of tiger enthusiasts he has encountered



A TREE HOUSE

Just when I was getting used to the earlier property, I moved to the Tree House. I set off for a stay at the Tree House Hideaway, at Bandhavgarh, another property of Pugdundee Safaris. This place certainly takes time to get used to, especially if you are on your own. With your family, or your gang of friends this place would be ideal, perfect for a romantic twosome, too.

There are five tree houses on this property, in an area of 21 acres of forest. Once again the city slicker heart beats at a faster rate envisioning the idea of spending the night! Featured as one of the 20 Fabulous Boutique Hotels in India by *The Observer* and one of the 12 top Jungle Tree Houses on Earth by *Sunday Times UK* and one of the 100 best retreats in India by *Outlook Guide Book*, the tree house truly lives up to



over the years and his experiences. The evening passes by, I look up and realise I am sitting under a canopy of stars, like diamonds scattered over black velvet. I drink in the sight, knowing it's something I am not going to see in a long time! After a wonderful meal, I am escorted back to my room, and surprisingly the dark cover of the forest en route holds little fear for me, and my cottage already feels like home!

Next morning, I am awoken by birdsongs, I step out into the verandah and am greeted by my most loved fragrance, burning dry leaves. I sit there, take in the birdsongs, the breeze, the fragrance, the whispering of leaves, the smell of fresh earth... instant rejuvenation. Therapy for the city-weary soul.

THE BANDHAVGARH FORT

If tiger is the animal that rules the forests of Bandhavgarh, the Bandhavgarh Fort is what one can call as the landmark of the place. The first sight of the fort inspires awe and wonder. Of course, after the aforementioned exhilarating tiger sighting before the fort trek, we were in high spirits and trekked up effortlessly. It was only when I looked down that I realised how much ground I had covered. The trek starts at Shessaiya or the bed of Sheshnag for Vishnu. This is an idol built more than 1,000 years ago and is still worshipped by the villagers. This statue marks the

beginning of the trail that leads to the ten incarnations of Vishnu atop the fort. As one treks up, the sight below gets more and more enchanting.

The fort built by the king of the Baghel Dynasty is truly worth a visit. Because of the presence of all ten incarnations of Vishnu here, the fort is considered to be very sacred by the Hindus. Vehicles aren't permitted up here, so the fort is an ecological treasure: rare medicinal plants, flowers, grass species, butterflies, insects and rare varieties of birds flourish here, of course with the king, the tiger!

I spend a blissful three days at Bandhavgarh. After the first tiger sighting, I spot more tigers and also revel in the sighting of rare birds, looking up different species of plant life, and rare trees. What stood out is the Indian Ghost tree, it has a luminescent bark and branches, that glow in the dark, thereby earning the name. It's a tree that stands out amidst the greens and oranges, adding a dash of the dramatic to the forest palette.

The forest is thriving with wildlife and what I've only seen on the Discovery Channel is actually being enacted in front of my eyes. I must say the Forest Department is doing a great job. Of course there is the usual poaching, but in spite of it all, it feels good to see the guides, the drivers, the locals, observe the rules and live in harmony with nature.



TREEHOUSE HIDEAWAY



THE WATERING HOLE NEAR THE TREEHOUSE

The treasures of the forest were laid before us, like a jeweller showing off his best gems

II jade TRAVEL

it all. The lodge is run by a charming couple, Vidyotama and Bhanu Pratap Singh. The icing on the cake is that the lodge has a watering hole frequented by wild animals. Much to my delight, I meet the Nagpur couple, the Guptas, once again over here, and that enhances my great stay experience.

I set off early morning for a tiger safari and witness one of the best wild life dramas. We spot this tiger (by now, spotting a tiger at every safari is de rigueur for me), he walks past us and then disappears into the wilderness. We wait, hoping the tiger comes back, but what do we see? A wild boar comes along, oblivious to the fact that it might soon become lunch. He strolls along sniffing and suddenly pauses mid-air. His hair on end, he smells death in the air, and then we witness a marvel of nature, a survival tactic. Instead of walking on all fours and thereby giving

The Kanha National Park is the original Kipling country so fondly written about by Kipling in *Jungle Book*



RECEPTION AREA OF KANHA EARTH LODGE



KANHA EARTH LODGE



CHAMELEON



WILD GAUR

KANHA EARTH LODGE BONFIRE



away his presence, he lifts his feet and starts walking on one! He does this for a small length and then takes flight! Saved! What a captivating sight it was! This scene was the highlight of the day, and then it was a treat of wild peacocks, chitals, rare birds, ant hills, the treasures of the forest were laid before us, like a jeweller showing off his best gems.

GOND ARCHITECTURE

I set off for Kanha. My destination being, the Kanha Earth Lodge. I fall in love with the property at first sight. My cottage is beautiful and along with being tasteful has the warmth of a welcome. I love the verandah which overlooks, what else? A lovely green area, and I instantly decide that this is where I will be spending my mornings, reading and sipping on warm milk. I discover soon that it is not to be, I have a wake up call for 5.30, as the safari leaves at 6 am. Meanwhile I also discover from Karan Rana, the man overseeing Kanha Earth Lodge and

who also is a naturalist of repute that the lodge is spread across a forested area of 16 acres and adjoins the buffer zone of Kanha in a small tribal hamlet. Set deep within the jungles in the Banjar Valley, it shares a lot in common with inhabitants of the jungle. The architecture of the lodge is inspired by the Gond tribal villages situated on the fringes of Kanha. Workers from the tribal community were employed for the construction.

I set out for the forest. 6 a.m. is pretty cold in the forest, but the early morning sun rays filtering through the thicket of trees, is a sight perfect pictures are made of, it highlights everything around so beautifully. The Kanha National Park is the original Kipling country so fondly written about by Kipling in *Jungle Book*. The park is the only home to the rare hard ground Barasingha, in addition to that of the tiger, leopard, sloth bear, gaur, wild dogs, deer, cats and over 250 bird species. The magical forest is rich in flora, and has around 800 species

of flowering plants. There are also an abundance of fruit trees, sal and bamboo trees.

TIGER SIGHTING

Once again tiger sighting is the highlight of my delightful stay here. As we move around the forest, we see other jeeps lined up. We head towards the spot. There is an air of anticipation. Drivers whisper the magical word, "Tiger." This word can make a fleet of jeeps on a safari wait till the cows come home! We wait, patiently, silently, and suddenly the peace is smashed to smithereens by loud roars.

There is a wave of excited whispers as two of the most magnificent creatures, a tiger and a tigress, are spotted. The tiger is in hot pursuit of the tigress as she is refusing to mate – that explains the loud growls.

They are oblivious to the line of jeeps and dive over a stream and then disappear into the wild. The

jeeps wait for them to come out but no such luck. We decide to take another route, avoid the traffic! We are rewarded for our detour decision, and we see one of the most beautiful creatures, as endangered as the tiger, the Barasingha in the middle of a pond, it dunks its head in and comes up with some water plants on its majestic antlers. Kanha is the only place to spot the Barasingha.

After a long day in the jungle, I get back to the lodge to a bonfire and a barbecue. There is a group of NRIs from UK and I am part of a heady discussion of politics, movies, wildlife and food, I relax.

It's my last day in Kanha, and in the jungles. As I leave for my last safari here, I am secretly gloating, that I've been luckier than most of the tourists here. Every time I have gone to the jungle I have spotted a tiger. I thank my stars and wonder if it's my love for cats that made it all possible. But for some reason I am certain on the last day I will not spot any.

A PRAYER FOR THE TIGER

I have a pleasant day in the jungle, rare birds, animals, termite homes, tiger pugmarks, the dance of a large flock of peacocks, a gaur heading dangerously close to the jeep...all this leaves me happy and satiated. And as we turn to head back to the lodge, I can't believe my eyes... A mother with three cubs! I pinch myself to check if I'm dreaming. Of course, by cubs, I mean three strapping males much larger than the mother. We trail them, as they walk along, circling their mother and playfully pawing each other, almost like giving hi-fives. It's a scene that makes me teary. I look at the happy family, which human being has the heart to kill these awesome animals, what kind of a mind can destroy such animals? In spite of their ferociousness, they have that innocence and vulnerability and it is clear that they mean no harm to humans but it is humans they have to steer clear from. I send up a fervent prayer, to keep them safe and may they outlive humans on this planet! 🙏