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I travel to learn, eat, golf, and ski, but mostly for travel's sake

The Biggest Trend in Safaris: Tigers

The classic African safari features a huge variety of wildlife on land, water and sky, but the main attractions for most travelers are the big cats: the lion, cheetah and leopard. It is very easy to see lions on safari and possible to view all three species in a single trip. Each has its fans, and all are beautiful and compelling, but none can match the grandeur of the biggest of the big cats, the tiger, which you will never see on an African safari. You have to make a special trip to see the tiger, but it's worth it, because the tiger is that special. The King of the Jungle moniker bestowed on lions is more a case of good marketing than reality – the tiger is not just the king of the jungle, it is the king of pretty much everything.

While the lion sits atop its regional food chain as the apex predator, its place in the natural order is far from carefree, with lions being driven off their own kills by hyena packs, and occasionally being chased away by elephants. The tiger, on the other hand, is a true super predator, not just the top of its food chain but dominant in virtually every respect, with no close number two and nobody to steal its food. There is a recorded incident where a crocodile tried doing just that and the tiger swam out into the lake and killed it. A record tiger clocks in at twice the weight of the average adult male African lion, but besides being by far the largest feline, it is fast, agile and incredibly powerful, both on land and as a swimmer, rare among cats. But most importantly, it is beautiful.

I'm a huge fan of wildlife safaris ([read more about luxury African safaris here](#)) and I've been more than half a dozen times, but no animal I have seen is as breathtaking as the Bengal tiger. It combines the power and dominance of the lion with the perfect coat, beauty and compelling eyes of the leopard, regarded by almost every safari goer who sees one as the most beautiful of Africa's cats. But while leopards are skittish, hiding from lions and hyenas, the tiger hides only from the hot sun, and moves with a palpable confidence rarely seen in nature, one that makes it regal, muscles rippling under its perfect coat, seemingly self-aware of its mastery of its surroundings, something you cannot appreciate in the artificial confines of a zoo. To see the tiger in the wild is to see nature at its most awesome.



You can see lots of animals on wildlife safaris, but it is hard to match the majesty of the Bengal tiger. *Photo: Larry Olmsted*

This is why interest in tiger safaris is growing fast, a next step for many who have tried the classic African version and loved it. But tigers are harder to see in the wild than their three big cat counterparts, solitary creatures with large territories, and absent from Africa. The best place to see them is in India, and the very best place on earth for a tiger safari is Ranthambore National Park and its surrounding protected reserves, where both Queen Elizabeth and President Clinton have visited to do just that. Ranthambore was declared a protected "Project Tiger" reserve by the Indian government in 1970, and it is estimated that around 90% of all commercial images of tigers, from postcards to coffee tables books to magazine illustrations, have been shot here. It is a photographer's dream and semi-permanent home to film crews for National Geographic and similar productions. A 19th century private hunting reserve and country estate for a Maharajah, the 150 walled square miles of the main park is one big historic ruin, full of crumbling temples, buildings, lakes and islands, all overlooked by an ancient hilltop fort, just a perfect setting for such a regal animal.

Tiger viewing is never guaranteed, and it is generally recommended that you go on a minimum of three game drives – and ideally five or six – to give yourself a good chance (they are offered twice daily, morning and afternoon).



Adult tigers are solitary, but until full grown, their cubs and adolescents stay with them in groups. *Photo: Larry Olmsted*

The good news is that while the ancillary wildlife is not as varied or impressive as Africa's, there is the opportunity to see leopard, a safari highlight anywhere, along with deer, Indian wild boar, monkeys, hyena, smaller jungle cats, jackals, crocodile, sloth bears, bats, flying foxes, porcupine, civets, mongoose, lots and lots of peacocks, and many other birds. The better news is that in addition to the finest tiger viewing available, Ranthambore also offers one of the rare opportunities to do a tiger safari in true luxury style.

There are three top tier options here. I stayed at the Oberoi Vanyavilas (as their guest for the magazine article I was doing), which touches the park wall, and features an observation tower so you can stand with a drink in your hand at sunset and look for wildlife. All of the lodging is in large, freestanding, "tented" villas that feature air conditioning and deluxe permanent bathrooms with walk-in showers and oversized sunken tubs. The tented roof design is mainly for atmospheric charm – it does not resemble camping in any way. The Vanyavilas is a full-blown resort with lavish spa, yoga pavilion, fitness center, pool, and excellent restaurant, and I've written here before about [why India's luxury hotel brands – and Oberoi in particular – are among the very best on earth](#).

The other choices are no slouches. There is the boutique Aman-i-Kas, from well-known luxury operator Aman Resorts, which has just ten luxury tented units and a spa.

The Vivanta by Taj Sawai Madhopur Lodge is a historic property with traditional hotel rooms. Vivanta is the slightly less opulent sub-brand of renowned luxury chain Taj Hotels. Fortunately India's tiger population has been rebounding after pressure from poachers and the government's official count was over 2,200 last year, up 30% since 2011. These are scattered across more than three dozen parks, and in addition to Ranthambore, great places to see tigers include Bandhavgarh National Park and Kanha National Park.

I visited India on assignment for a travel magazine, and had the opportunity to choose the outfitter to organize my trip, and the choice was easy. I picked [Micato Safaris](#), which I have traveled with four other times and written about in these pages before ([read here](#)). Micato is regarded by many in the luxury travel industry as simply the best in the world at what it does, which is a 50-50 mix of scheduled itineraries (or "catalog departures") and bespoke custom trips. The company has won the title of World's Best Safari Outfitter from Travel + Leisure Magazine a record nine times, along with tons of other industry accolades (National Geographic Traveler's Best Outfitters on Earth, Saveur Magazine's Best Culinary Travel, etc.).



It is operated on a different model from that of African safari camps, a confusing public/private hybrid that allows neither camp operated nor personal vehicles, and instead, relies on a third party fleet of licensed rangers – some better than others, but you’d be hard pressed to tell unless you already knew. The park is sub-divided into zones, each limited to a small number of these vehicles per day, distributed via a sort of lottery system. While I believe that having an expert put together your luxury African safari is the best option, in India it’s the only viable option. To put it frankly, it is a long way to go to not see tigers, and having someone who knows what they are doing handle your visit greatly increases your odds. We saw more tigers in three days than any of the fellow guests I spoke to at the hotel. In general, India’s safari infrastructure (other than the deluxe hotels here) is less mature

As a super predator, the tiger exudes confidence in its every step. *Photo: Larry Olmsted*

But to be fair, there are other good luxury safaris specialists who can plan excellent trips to Africa. However, India is a much different story – Micato, a longtime India expert, has little real competition in the luxury tiger safari market, where they are as dominant as the tiger itself. Because most leisure travelers go to India to see the Taj Mahal, Udaipur and palaces, Micato’s catalog trips to India visit these, while their tiger safaris are custom, often as an extension of a non-wildlife India vacation. The company’s custom trips are definitely pricey, but this is a case where you get what you pay for: deep expertise, meticulous planning, and a completely turnkey, worry free trip that begins when you step off the plane and ends when you step back on. Unlike most tour operators that utilize local subcontractors, Micato has a full set of offices, staff and vehicles in India, where it does a huge amount of business, and where the company’s family founders trace their roots. This is why most of the top tier luxury cruise lines use Micato to operate their India ground excursions and extensions.

But most importantly, they are extremely well connected, in a country where connections are paramount: Micato guests are treated like royalty at hotels and attractions, get access to otherwise private experiences, and they are especially adept at “managing” the mysterious and somewhat gray area access to the National Park. The rules and processes for visiting Ranthambore and securing game drives are extremely convoluted, and admission to the park very limited.

than Africa’s, and even getting to the park on your own is a challenge, a couple of hours from Jaipur on some of the most frenetic roads you can imagine. **It is certainly possible to do the trip solo, and lots of people have, but if hassle free luxury travel is what you want, call Micato or a top travel agent (read “Why You Need a Travel Agent”)** and have everything from your airport pick-up to domestic flights, tours and hotels expertly arranged, whether you combine it with the Taj Mahal and other sights or go just for the safari. The best way to see the tiger is to be like the tiger – stress free.



A former Maharajah's estate full of ruins, Ranthambore National Park is a stunning backdrop in which to view Bengal tigers. *Photo: Larry Olmsted*