

India Travel: The celebrity tigers of Rajasthan

By Mike Snow

RANTHAMBORE, INDIA—We would be safe in our jeep, which tigers perceived as too formidable to attack, my guide, Hem Singh, assured us as we entered Ranthambore National Park. But if we got out of the jeep, he warned, we risked the same fate as two local villagers killed by one of the cats only the week before.

A matrix of lakes and razor sharp gorges in the shadow of the Aravalli and Vindhya Mountains, Ranthambore is the perfect backdrop for panthers, caracals, jackals, samba deer and 200 types of birds. But the main draw is the tiger, which marks its territory with a mixture of urine, gland secretions and claw marks on trees and regards most of the other animals in the park as treats if not main courses.

From time immemorial, these legendary orange striped cats have evoked fear, mystique and enormous strength. In Hindu lore, the Goddess Durga rode them into battles to save the world from demons. In early times grateful peasants did their best to protect them. But weaker animals pushed out of their normal rangelands sometimes preyed on humans, triggering a backlash. By 1970, India's tiger population became so depleted that the government outlawed hunting the animals and, to bolster their numbers, in 1973 launched "Project Tiger." Today, roughly half of the world's few thousand remaining tigers reside in Ranthambore and 38 other Indian preserves.

Tigers generally sleep up to 17 hours, mostly during days, according to the ranger who greeted us, and gave me only about a 40 per cent of spotting one of the animals. But as we headed past a welcoming party of gray-tailed mother lemur monkeys nursing their young and peacocks that greeted the morning calm with

boisterous cries that sounded like agitated alley cats, I felt lucky.



Deeper into the preserve, we test drove an area where sambar deer framed themselves in the sprawling aerial roots of a colossal banyan tree, while moorhens, herons, cormorants and black-winged stilts reposed in a nearby pond. When no tiger appeared, we relocated to a lake where a crocodile glided with affected nonchalance past a drinking doe. Still no tiger. As the sun climbed tediously higher, we alternated between one location and another, looking for pug marks and listening intently for the distressed cries of monkeys, birds and other creatures that would signal a cat's presence. Zilch.

Finally, a passing driver excitedly pointed us ahead. After a short but bone-jarring ride we lurched to a halt. With my telephoto lens, I zeroed in on an orange furry head about 150 feet from the road that erratically bobbed up, as if stoked by a bad dream.



The cat's distinctive, fingerprint-like markings belonged to Ustaad (T-24), Hem Singh said, one of the older, weaker cats, and a prime suspect in the killing of two villagers. But Ustaad seemed in no mood to chase down his next peacock or deer.

We broke for lunch at Oberoi Vanyavilas, whose private walled gardens and luxurious "tents" are flush with images of—what else—tigers. Obsession with the cats is so deeply ingrained in the local community that one half expects a maharaja to step from one of the many paintings and join us for a bite. Or perhaps Rudyard Kipling, to exalt legendary hunter conservationist Jim Corbett while ruing depletion of the tiger population by poachers and, in Canada and the U.S., moneyed poseurs who covet tiger skins, photos and other trophies

gleaned from "canned" hunts, as if to prove they do not lead lives of quiet desperation.

Every tiger has its own identification number, Hem Singh explained, and unique stripes and whiskers that differentiate one cat from another, just like Hem Singh's own trademark jodhpurs, hat, boots, and insider knowledge about favorite tiger resting places and watering holes distinguished him from other guides.

This paid off after lunch, when he managed to find "grandmother" Machili (T-16) at age 17, the oldest known free tiger in the wild and, thanks to three popular BBC documentaries, perhaps the most famous. YouTube videos show this celebrity tiger nurturing her cubs, fighting off competitors and killing crocodiles. But Machali appeared to be napping, occasionally bobbing her head above the brush. After waiting in vain for her to make a move, we relocated to another grassy section of the park where we spotted a cub playing in deep grass besides his imposing dad (T-25), Zalim who, following the death of his mate, famously opted to nurture his cubs rather than eat them.

A driver started his engine to arouse the giant cat. Other engines churned. When that didn't work, someone whistled.

"Por favor, silencio!" scolded a visitor.

Then, nearby, came the distressed barking of a sambar deer. Our jeep peeled out as we tried to zero in. As we bumped along, a tiger suddenly darted across the road ahead of us before quickly disappearing into thick forest. On the other side of the road, Hem Singh pinpointed yet another tiger (T-17) mounted royally on his haunches near the crest of a hill. But like the previous tiger, this one, too, soon vanished into the sunset, though not before I managed to snap a couple of shots.

My only trophy was in knowing that tigers in Ranthambore are safe, at least for now. But with poachers and great white canned hunters always

on the prowl and ready to pounce, I could not help but wonder if these majestic creatures, which carried Durga into her epic battles against evil, will ever be truly out of the woods.

Mike Snow is a freelance writer based in Washington D.C. His stay was subsidized by Micato Safaris.

JUST THE FACTS

GOING India closed its nature reserves to tourists in August, concerned that tourism traumatized tigers and damaged conservation efforts. But with greater safeguards for wildlife now in place, many reserves are reopening and tiger tourism in Rajasthan is once again burning bright. The most animals are seen during the hot months of March through to June, when they search for water. The ideal time to visit is in the preceding cooler months. The park is open from October to June for the tourists but check for last-minute changes. A few weeks' notice is generally required for game trip bookings. Micato Safaris (1-800-MICATO-1 offers escorted 2-night luxury tiger trekking trips that include a guide, transportation, meals, and park fees. But low-end trips are also available

ARRIVING Ranthambore is a three hour drive from Jaipur. Train service is available.

SLEEPING There are dozens of hotels to choose from in Ranthambore, and innumerable tour packages. Accommodations can satisfy both shoe-string and high-end visits, ranging from forest guest houses, budget hotels and rest houses to uber-luxurious resorts such as the Oberoi Vanyavilas, where rates go from the low double digits to \$2,670 per night at the Vanyavilas.

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