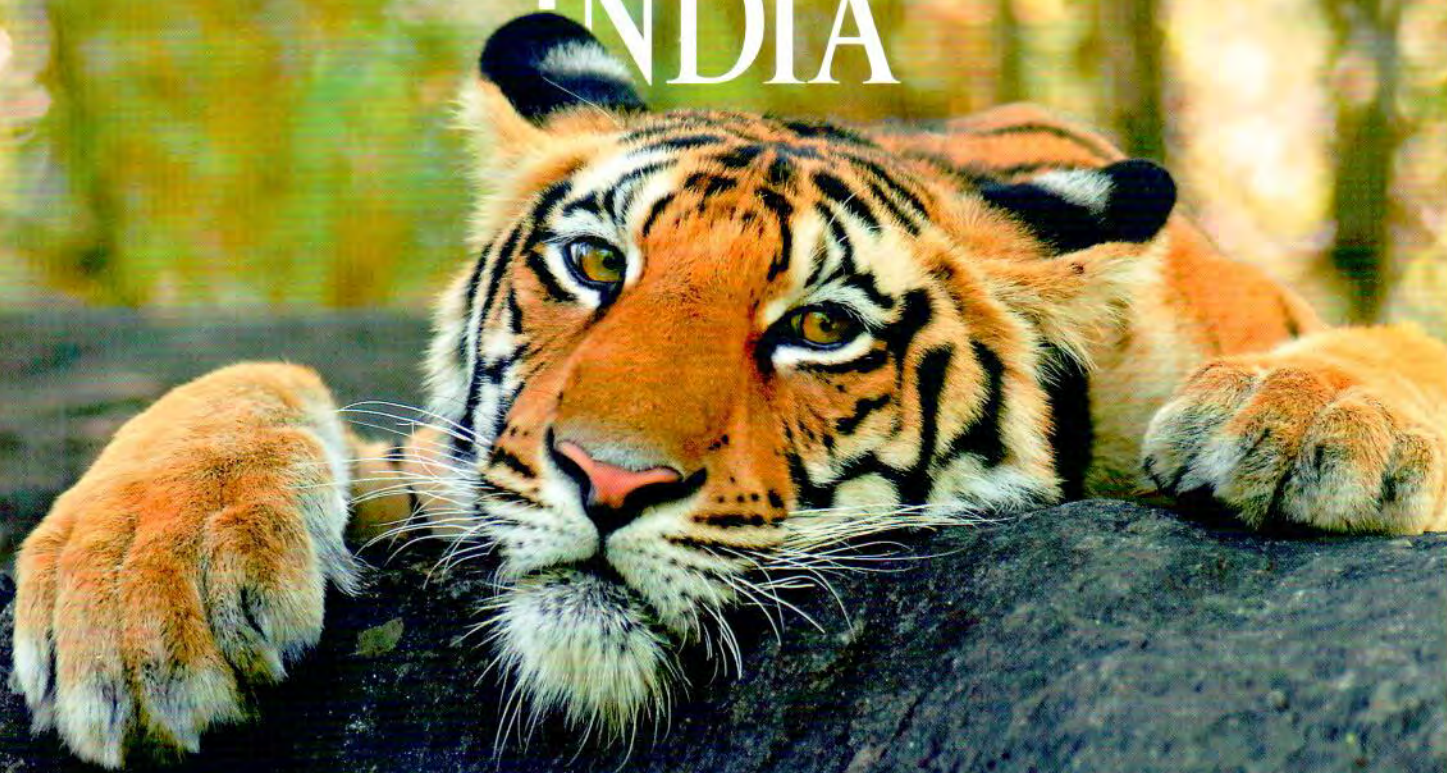


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# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER INDIA



**MADHYA  
PRADESH  
TIGER TERRAIN**

**LADAKH  
DECODING  
LANDSCAPES**

**WHERE  
TO GO IN  
2017**

SEOUL TO MALTA,  
COLOMBIA TO CANADA,  
20 MUST-SEE DESTINATIONS

In Focus | WHERE TO GO IN 2017



# Wild BOUNTY

Thanks to relentless conservation efforts, the tiger population in India is up significantly. Visiting Madhya Pradesh's stunning national parks is one way to keep that number growing

By Neha Dara

A close-up photograph of a tiger resting on a sandy bank next to a body of water. The tiger is the central focus, lying down with its head turned slightly towards the camera. Its fur is a mix of orange and white, with prominent black stripes. The tiger's eyes are a striking yellowish-orange. The background shows the rippling surface of the water, which is a warm, brownish-gold color. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

MADHYA PRADESH

During summer, tiger sightings are more frequent. The predators are usually found relaxing in the shallows of watering holes like this one in Kanha National Park.

**It was October in Delhi, and the days were getting cooler. The city's air was bad and getting worse by the minute.** I struggled to breathe comfortably, plagued by sinus headaches for the first time in my life.

I had presciently plotted an escape. A short flight later, my husband and I were in Jabalpur on our way to Kanha National Park. As we drove out of the city, brick houses were replaced by mud homes with sloping tiled roofs. Grassy hillsides, still green after the monsoon, were peppered with rocks. Black-brown basalt rocks bent and curved in enchanting shapes. We drove over the grey Narmada that flowed in a wide sluggish arc. The taxi driver referred to the river as "Narmadaji," his respect a nod to the river's status. It is revered as a mother: one who nourishes and occasionally unleashes her wrath in monsoonal floods.

Nature occupies an important place here. Madhya Pradesh is India's most forested state, with about a fourth of its land covered by jungle. The southern half of its map is marked by large, mostly contiguous swathes of green, spreading from Indore and Bhopal in the west to the border with Chhattisgarh in the east. These

jungles are prime tiger territory. More than half the world's tiger population is found in India, and a substantial chunk of this is in Madhya Pradesh. This is great news for my husband, who's hoping to spot his first tiger in the wild. I've been lucky enough to have had many sightings, and I'm more keen on enjoying the jungle and learning more about it. Madhya Pradesh is a good place to do that. In recent years it has seen a surge in boutique, eco-conscious properties geared towards making visitors fall in love with the jungle. Over the week, we will be visiting three of MP's six tiger reserves: Kanha, Pench, and Satpura, each a 4-5 hour drive from the next. Contrary to popular perception, the network of roads connecting these forests is in pretty good condition.

As soon as we reached Kipling Camp, our stay near Kanha's Kisli Gate, we quickly dumped our bags and headed into the park for an afternoon safari. Seven hours after we left our home in Delhi, jostling down a dirt path with tall sal trees rising up on each side, I realise I am breathing freely.

It's a relief to start the next day without the usual rash of early morning sneezes induced by a smog-smothered city. On our dawn safari, when we scour Kanha's landscape for signs of wildlife, I'm the first to smell the odour of a kill, but the predator responsible seems long gone. A mist frames the odd tree that still stands in the open grassland, where a thriving village, now relocated outside the park, once existed. The lone tree is a *mahua*, considered too valuable to cut down. Its fruit is cooked as a vegetable, seeds crushed for oil, leaves woven into plates, and flowers fermented to make country liquor. In the absence of humans, monkeys have first dibs on the fruit, while deer and other smaller animals keep a sharp eye for any they let drop. As our guide and driver Rahim tells us this, the mist lifts, revealing a herd of spotted deer around the tree. Among the chital are a few sambar, their darker coats glistening with a tinge of red. They are several heads taller than the chital, their funnel-shaped ears constantly twitching. When one of us shifts and the jeep creaks, the ears turn in our direction and stop, trying to determine if there is a threat. A few seconds later, the twitching resumes.

Kanha's landscape is dominated by sal trees that rise up straight and tall, looking like stern sentinels. Dew drops from their branches with the pattering sound of soft rain. There are thick bamboo groves with sinuous paths where, any minute it seems, a tiger will softly glide by. There's a mysteriousness to this forest. Driving on its trails in the ghostly dawn light, through clouds of dust that catch the sun, it seems magic is about to unfold. There are no signs of the tiger on our first two safaris though we spot large herds of deer, gigantic bison, vultures and hornbills, kingfishers and babblers. We're happy simply to be in



Morning strolls from Kipling Camp, near Kanha, wind through woods and past tiny streams.



A leopard looks askance at an unsuspecting spotted deer. Leopards love to sunbathe on the large rocks that dot parts of Pench National Park.

ANJIT DUTTA

the forest, grateful for the clean air, birdsong, and all the green.

Kipling Camp's cottages look like the ones in the villages we crossed en route to Kanha. Inside is a whole other story. Cool stone floors are covered in colourful rugs; high ceilings lined with wooden beams. The back door overlooks a watering hole, where brown and white ducks swim and quack merrily. At the water's edge, among their webbed prints I see those of deer as well.

Belinda Wright, who owns Kipling Camp, is a prominent wildlife conservationist. Her love for Kanha, and strong desire to protect its fauna and preserve its landscape, informs the space. There are no boundary walls, so wildlife can walk through the camp. Deer are frequent visitors and night camera traps have captured tigers and leopards as well. Walking to my room after dinner, I sweep the torch around to find several pairs of eyes reflecting in its light. It inspires me to wake up at 4 a.m. to keep vigil at the sit-out with a cup of hot tea to wrap my cold hands around. I see deer under a clump of trees. A mist dances on the water. As the sky grows brighter, the deer leave and the ducks come out. A racket-tailed drongo calls out, its forked tail framed in the light. I feel I am in a charmed land.

Reluctantly, we leave this paradise and drive to Pench National Park. I nod off, waking occasionally to the reassuring sight of green fields, with patches of forest behind them, and the silhouette of the Satpura hills further back. Whenever I travel to the jungle, I find my routine changes; I wake early for safaris or walks, return to linger over coffee with a book, and nap in the afternoon after a sumptuous lunch. Evenings are a time to explore and learn more about the trees and birds that I never have time for in the city. Bedtime comes early. It is a routine that

agrees with me. In just two days, the tiny knot that usually sit between my shoulder blades, the result of hours spent in front of a computer, is gone.

My husband seems happier too. He's been grappling with a tough decision about his work. Caught in an endless loop of long days, calls that start early in the morning and continue till mid night, he's been unable to gain perspective. I've been pointing out that he is a harsher, angrier version of himself. But here, in the absence of work and cell phone signal, much of that seems to slough off him like a snake's discarded skin.

The path to Jamtara Wilderness Camp goes over one of two little streams that bookend this property near Pench. Here we stay in luxury tents set among tall grass that sway in the afternoon breeze. Close by is Jamtara village. Cobs of corn, which grow abundantly in the area, dry in courtyards. Bottle gourd vines climb wooden trellises and tiled roofs where the vegetables sit like overgrown slugs. The sculpture of a spotted black snake sprawls on the dome of a temple. Taking a shortcut through fields, we cross a raised shelter where someone sleeps at night to guard the fields from wild animals. I wonder who guards the watchman.

Next morning, on the first of our two safaris in Pench, I notice that it is quite unlike Kanha. In this dryer, warmer region trees don't grow very tall. Unlike the sal that dominates Kanha, here teak is king. But the trees are under attack from caterpillars that consume all the chlorophyll in the leaves, only leaving behind brown skeletons of stems and capillaries. One section of the forest is thick with the webs of giant spiders that remind me of a scene from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Unlike the denizens of the Forbidden Forest, these spiders and their



For the visitor, the Indian scops owl (left) can be hard to spot, camouflaging well with the tree trunk until pointed out by a more experienced eye; Marsh crocodiles (right) thrive in the many waterbodies that dot Satpura National Park.





Herds of gaur (left), the world's largest bovine species, roam the jungles of Madhya Pradesh; Satpura National Park is known for its frequent sloth bear (right) sightings.

beautiful intricate webs aren't scary. Instead they indicate the forest's good health.

Three days into our trip into the jungles of Madhya Pradesh, my husband and I are in high spirits. Being outdoors in the sun makes us happy. We spot a pack of eight dholes or wild dogs with angular frames that are full of energy. There is something about their quick movements, the way they cock their heads, that is utterly beautiful. We observe how members of the pack behave with one another, respond to each other. Though called dogs, little about them resembles the domestic animal. Unfortunately, hardly any attention is paid to their conservation. Farmers often kill them, considering them a nuisance.

We're accompanied on our safari by Ajay, a naturalist who grew up in a village near Seoni close to Pench's main entry gate. He shares tales of the forest that are an intriguing mix of scientific facts gleaned from his training and the books he is forever reading, and local lore from his childhood. When we return to the forest for the afternoon safari, Ajay is a man on a mission. He leads us straight to the bank of the Pench River that splits the national park into two. A tiger was spotted making a kill there earlier in the day and he's hoping we will see it too. My husband spots it almost immediately, far away from us across the river. The young female is on her haunches, eyeballing a herd of deer. She's full from the morning's kill though, and not interested. After the deer edge away, she saunters to the water's edge for a drink, her sinuous muscles and feline movements on glorious display.

Over dinner that day, my husband and I chat about our priorities. It is a subject we normally tiptoe our way around, because priorities, despite their all-important status, have a

strange tendency to get muddled. I confess my desire to live in a city where I don't have to think twice before stepping out, because the air is too bad, or it is unsafe to go alone to the few open spaces available. He tentatively voices his conclusion that it might be time to quit his high-profile, taxing job. The troubling, terrifying question is: What next?

The next part of our journey takes us to Satpura National Park, reaching just in time for an afternoon safari. We meet our naturalist Erwin at the park's Madhai entrance, on the bank of the Denwa River. The river cuts a wide arc around the park's northern edge, creating a buffer that effectively omits most man-animal conflicts in the area. During summer, the water level is low enough for jeeps to drive across, but right now that seems difficult to believe. Erwin is from Reni Pani Jungle Lodge where we're staying for the last two nights of our trip. He asks if we have a wildlife sighting wishlist, and for once I do. I want to see a sloth bear, a giant Malabar squirrel, and a leopard, all three considered easy to spot here.

Just inside the park's entrance is a grassland, which we've come to recognise as a sign of a relocated village. In the early 2000s, when India refined its tiger census methods, it was discovered that the celebrated tiger population numbers were quite inflated. Madhya Pradesh lost its status as India's tiger state, and Karnataka took lead. There followed a decade of crackdown on poaching. Many villages were translocated out of parks, reclaiming forest land and animal corridors for wildlife. There is better management of tourism, and according to Nitin Desai, Director, Central India for the Wildlife Protection Society of India, the presence of tourists has also helped to reduce poaching. Poachers are loath to enter

a forest where a safari jeep may chance upon them. Tourism has also created alternative livelihoods.

A large herd of chital and sambar graze in the grassland. Suddenly, a sambar gives an alarm call. Immediately, the entire herd gathers in a tight circle. Ears twitch, feet shift uneasily. The younger ones are protected in the centre. The deer look in one direction, where they detect a threat invisible to us. Erwin suspects there is a predator hidden in the gully beyond. Something spooks the herd and the deer dash out suddenly, stop, and the circle tightens again. Invigorated by the drama, we head deeper into the park, Erwin leading us directly to a spot favoured by sloth bears. We see one almost immediately, however the arrival of another jeep scares it. That's when we see the difference between a government guide and a professional naturalist. The other jeep gives up and drives off. Erwin listens to the jungle for a moment, and asks the driver to head to a certain spot and wait. Sure enough, the sloth bear emerges out of the trees right in front of our jeep. It checks us out, decides we can be ignored, and waddles off to explore the base of a tree. It has a shiny black coat, and looks adorable and cuddly, but also very large.

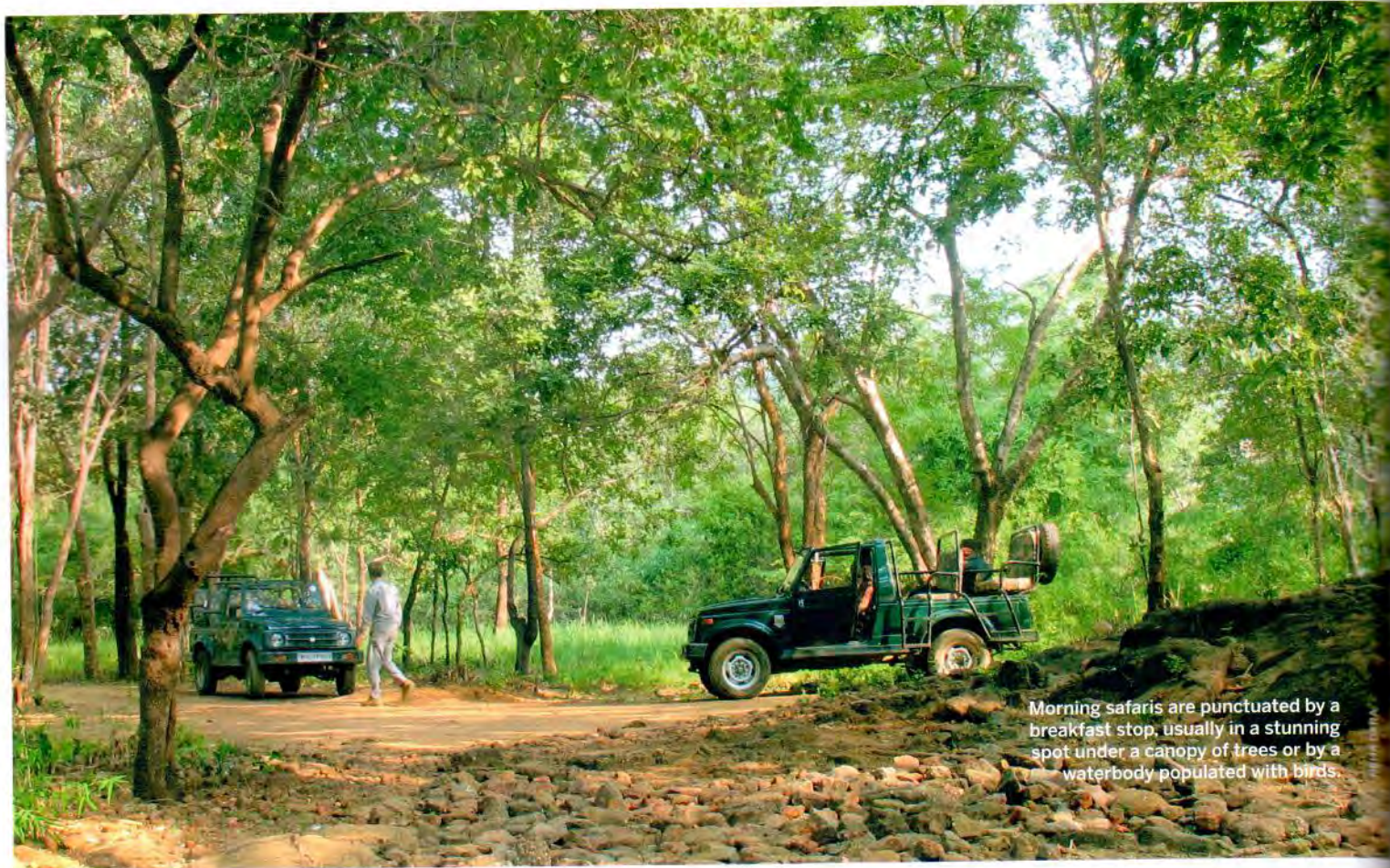
Satpura is unlike both Kanha and Pench. It amazes me how different each forest is, though they are only a few hours' drive from each other. Satpura has a moist deciduous jungle with trees that are greener and taller than Pench, though not as forbidding as Kanha. A prominent tree here is the *saaj*, which has multiple uses. Its wood is turned into furniture, its leaves feed silkworms that produce tussar silk. It has a distinctive bark with a rough pattern, which gives it another name—crocodile bark tree. However, my favourite is the ghost tree, locally called

*kulu*. Tigers are partial to it, leaving claw marks in the soft bark to mark their territory. My eyes seek the tree everywhere; its pale branches stand out among the other darker trees. The *kulu* trunk is covered with a pink skin that peels off in papery layers. It reveals the whitish bark that has a ghostly glow on a starlit night, giving the tree its name.

In one section of the forest, amongst the treetops, Erwin points out a number of nests. Giant Malabar squirrels make many homes, staying in a different one each night to flummox predators. We spot a pair in the trees, jumping agilely from one branch to another. They are large creatures, and their long bushy tails glow a deep burgundy as they leap with the lightness and grace of ballet dancers.

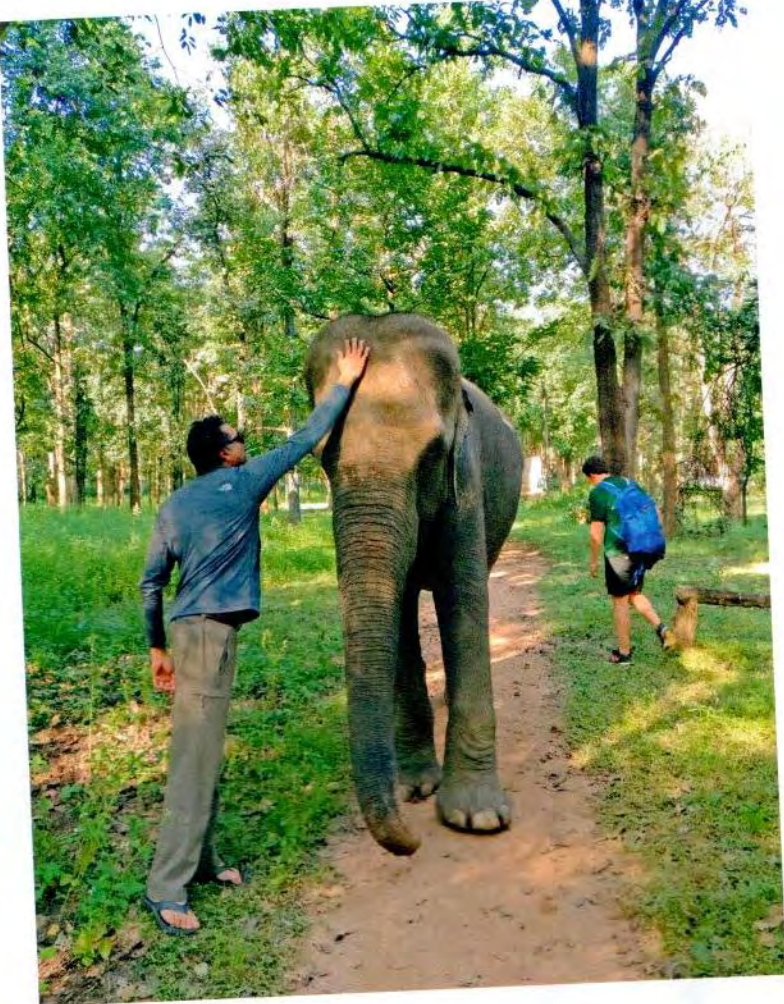
Back at Reni Pani Jungle Lodge, we discover the opulence of an old-world royal outpost, in a setting where the jungle is at our doorstep. To me this is the greatest attraction of the three properties I stay at: Even after leaving the national parks, the jungle stays with me. On our second safari into Satpura, we have no luck spotting a leopard, the last animal on my list. Still, it is four hours well spent. The entry into the park is perhaps the most dramatic of any national park in India that I have visited. Riding up to it in the boat, with the sun coming up behind the Satpura hills and spreading a red glow in the sky, is a memorable experience. Our breakfast stop that day is also the most beautiful one of the week. We tuck into aloo parathas and brownies sitting on rocks overlooking a reservoir surrounded by forest. A swarm of wandering glider dragonflies that Erwin says come all the way from Africa, swirl in the air around us.

That evening at dinner we meet naturalist Aly Rashid whose



Morning safaris are punctuated by a breakfast stop, usually in a stunning spot under a canopy of trees or by a waterbody populated with birds.





The writer and her husband sip on chai at sunset (top left), as herds of cattle return to the village from grazing in Kanha National Park's buffer zone; Tara, the elephant (top right) at Kipling Camp, loves to be scratched on the top of her head; Spotting Asiatic wild dogs (bottom) is an amazing wildlife encounter though the creatures are overshadowed by better known predators like tigers and leopards.



ASIAN WILD DOG (Dhole) AT KANHA NATIONAL PARK, INDIA. PHOTO BY AVIJIT DUTTA (2003)



At the various wilderness camps where the writer stayed, the jungle comes right to the doorstep. Jamtara's luxury tents are surrounded by tall grasses.

family owns the property. He lives at the lodge with his wife Shefali Alvares, a Bollywood playback singer, and their daughter. Surrounded by people like Erwin, Aly, and Shefali, who have found ways to live the lives they desire, away from the city, my husband and I begin to feel the weight of an impending decision.

#### THE VITALS

##### KIPLING CAMP

*Morcha Village, Kisli, Kanha National Park*

The tiled roofs of the 12 cottages make them look like local homes. But there the similarities end. Inside, they exude comfort with four-poster beds and rugs. Meals are a mix of local and continental. Guests can get a drink at "BARasingha" ([www.kiplingcamp.com](http://www.kiplingcamp.com); doubles from ₹26,000, includes all meals).

##### JAMTARA WILDERNESS CAMP

*Jamtara Village, Chindwara, Pench National Park*

These luxury tents set among tall grass are tents only in that everything can be disassembled in the monsoon. The interiors are luxurious with wood furniture and bright rugs. Evenings begin with snacks around a bonfire ([www.jamtarawilderness.com](http://www.jamtarawilderness.com), doubles from ₹22,000, includes all meals).

##### RENI PANI JUNGLE LODGE

*Reni Pani Village, Sohagpur, Satpura National Park*

Set amongst 30 acres of trees and a seasonal spring, the 12 cottages exude old-world opulence. The meals, featuring Bhopali cuisine, are exemplary. Owners live on-site, lending the experience a personal touch ([www.renipanijunglelodge.com](http://www.renipanijunglelodge.com); doubles from ₹18,000, includes all meals).

In the wonder and curiosity evoked by the jungle, we'd forgotten about the concerns that dogged us in Delhi. Now, knowing that in 24 hours we will be back in the city, they occupy centre stage again. The conclusion is evident to both of us: Serious action is called for. We take a decision to work towards moving out of Delhi. Perhaps we will not be able to move to the mountains as we'd like or to the jungle as the people around us have, but we can find middle ground: a place that permits us to have the quality of life we desire. In the jungle, perspective is easier to find.

The next morning, I make a video of our river crossing into the park. It is a moment I want to preserve. After the decision of the previous night, I feel a glorious lightness of being. The colours are brighter, a fragrance rides in the air. On our safari we hear alarm calls and drive in their direction, only to be told by a jeep we encounter that we just missed a leopard. Skilfully predicting the animal's route, Aly heads off, but the leopard seems to be moving fast and we miss it again. The direction of the gaze of a sambar still on alert gives us the next cue. This time, we drive to a spot and wait in expectant silence. And then it happens. The leopard walks onto the dirt track; a lithe creature moving with menacing grace. We see it mark its territory by scraping a tree with its claws. Then it continues down the path, and into the trees, with a parting look at us. One that seems to bear approval. ●

**NEHA DARA** is the Deputy Editor of *National Geographic Traveller India*. She is happiest trotting off the beaten path, hiking in forests, scuba diving, or exploring local markets.