

DISCOVER

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DISCOVER INDIA

Wilderness camps, big cats and a

On a whirlwind trip to Maharashtra, **Lisa Grainger** is awed by the local predators, the silence and the surprising luxury

No sensible person, I was told, goes on holiday to India for a week. The country is made up of almost a million square miles of land, from Himalayan mountains and desert citadels to coastal beaches, and journeys between cities often take days (rather than hours).

So why, then, did I just go there on a seven-day break? Because around Maharashtra one can cram in not just two tiger reserves and an Ayurvedic yoga retreat, but a spot of shopping in Mumbai and stays in the latest upmarket lodges and hotels. For a busy city-dweller, what's not to like about a sun-filled winter break like that?

The state of Maharashtra – which extends from Mumbai and the west coast over the Western Ghats and on to the fertile, volcanic soils of the Deccan Plateau – is the ideal spot for a short break, being right at the heart of India. Its capital is known for its crafts and culture: its hilltops are crowned with 17th-century forts built by the Mughal-defeating Hindu hero Shivaji, and its mountain caves are gilded with glorious frescoes (at Ajanta) and UNESCO-protected underground temples (at Ellora). And in spite of being just a few hours from Mumbai, its parks are thick with deciduous teak and redwood forests, and inhabited by creatures from leopards and wild dogs to the less appealing, aptly named giant wood spider (the yellow-striped females hang from thick golden webs and after mating eat their male counterparts, as I saw).

The forests are also, of course, the home of tigers. A few years ago, poaching was so bad in India that some parks contained none at all and others were closed to try to protect the creatures. In the past year, however, there has been a marked increase in sightings. Figures released last month suggest the tiger population in India has gone up by about a third since 2011 (to about 2,200), and in



A young tiger with its mother in Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve, above. Right: the varied terrain of Maharashtra appeals to big cats



one week I saw three of the endangered cats: one lying on its back, scratching like a kitten, one behind a log eating an enormous sambar, and another padding through long grass, its orange-and-black coat glowing in the dawn light. Seeing them is always extraordinary, but seeing so many in a few days was an unexpected treat. To top it all, in Maharashtra there are now two comfortable camps in which to rest after an early-morning game drive, to ooh and aah at photographs, to learn about their habits from expert guides, and, at the new Jantara Wilderness Camp, to hear about how conservationists are seeking to save the creatures from ever-more-sophisticated poachers. Here, we review two of the best new tiger camps in the region, and a pretty hillside spa at which to relax afterwards.



THE TIGER RESERVE

Very few foreigners visit Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve: a 626 sq km protected area two hours' drive from Nagpur. Although it opened in 1955 as a national park, and was expanded in 1995 into a tiger reserve, it was only in 2011 that a comfortable lodge opened for guests. Svasara Jungle Lodge, just five minutes' drive from the main gate, is far from elaborate: 12 spacious, air-conditioned rooms with simple wooden furniture, spotless bathrooms and dining rooms serving wholesome Indian meals, as well as less-inspiring "Conti" cuisine.

But you don't come here for fine accommodation or gourmet food. In 2012, the tiger population here was estimated to be 65 (two have been killed since), making it one of the most likely places to spot India's biggest man-killers. Two

female tigers with radio collars (named P1 and P2) are seen regularly, as is a male with the (unlikely) name of Leopardface. Visitors are allowed to enter the park between 6am and 10.30am and again from 3pm to 6pm, hence the scrum at dawn of visitors in 15 Jeeps, lined up at the gate to obtain permits to enter. Svasara has two Jeeps of its own, and one naturalist, and once in, cars disperse different ways and at different speeds, depending on visitors' interests. My group of five was happy just to explore the area, so we trundled leisurely through thick forests of teak, crocodile bark, mahua, jamun and bamboo, which in October were thick and green after the monsoon (pretty, but a bit dense for animal-spotting; the best times for animal-spotting are April to June).

At Tadoba Lake, we stopped to

admire spotted deer (chital) as mists rose in the dawn light, and raucous grey langur monkeys whooping as the sun came up. We saw chattering troopies warding off an eagle from their nests; pretty long-tailed drongos, lurid green pigeons and flocks of luminous parakeets; a giant crocodile dragging prey into the water; hefty black-coated bison (gaur) grazing in forests; wild boar speeding across the road. And for 10 minutes, we watched a tiger.

At first, we spotted only her paws and tail flicking above some grass, as she lay on her back, scratching. Then, disturbed by the 10 Jeeps that had gathered, their drivers jostling for prime viewing position and their inhabitants shouting, she got up and padded off into the grass for some peace. Other guests in the camp saw tigers twice in two

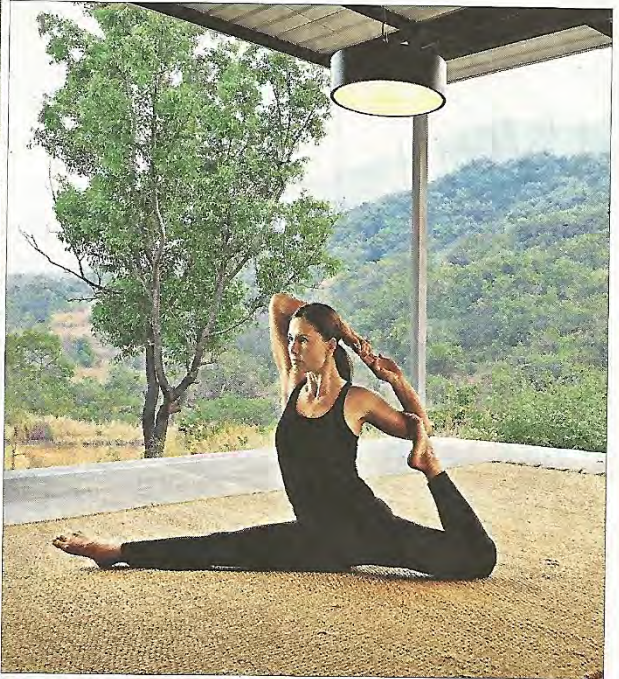
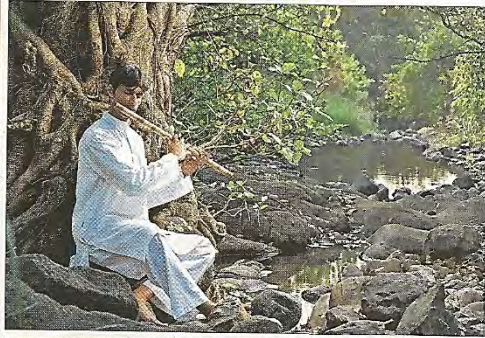
days, and a leopard once – which, in a country with only 2,200 striped cats left, is good going. You don't see them in peace here, but this park has the highest density of tigers per square mile anywhere in India, so the chances of a sighting are relatively high.

THE BUSH CAMP

In a country where tiger numbers dropped from 50,000 at the turn of the 20th century to a low of just 1,400 in 2008, the fate of the animal is a political issue as well as a conservation matter, and a duty to save them is passed down through generations.

So it's only natural that, when the hotelier and conservationist Pradheep Sankhala died, his son Amit felt that he had a moral duty to continue not only his father's legacy, but that of his grandfather, Kailash, who with

calming spa in the Indian hills



Indira Gandhi started Project Tiger in the Seventies.

As well as running his father's two jungle lodges in Kanha and Bandhavgarh, Amit has started his own camp, on the little-visited northern edges of Pench National Park. Refreshingly, Jamtara feels more like a smart African safari camp than an Indian lodge. Ten airy tents designed by well-known hotelier Dhruv Singh have been erected in the shade of a forest, each with a spacious deck made of salvaged boatyard wood, a king-size bed with crisp white linens, a large bathroom with water heated in wood-burning stoves, and Art Deco chairs and handsome desks salvaged at sales from Indian embassies and the Supreme Court.

In the intimate dining rooms, two long tables, each made from the single trunk of a mango tree,

The Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat has an outdoor yoga pavilion, far right; unspoilt forest, top, and modern, minimalist villas, above

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are overhung with hip, unshaded eco-bulbs illuminating the sensational Indian dishes cooked by Dhruv's chef wife, Shree.

There's an infinity pool, a library and a living area for hanging out between safaris; a big space under an ancient banyan tree for cocktails around a firepit; and, for those brave enough (which, given that I visited in giant-spider season, did not include me), two "star beds" on platforms from which to admire the Milky Way from a netted four-poster – and, possibly, to see passing tigers.

Although the forest here feels ancient and exquisite – filled with towering teak and crocodile bark trees – it is the silence and the isolation that is the biggest treat. Compared with the south side of the park, which has 42 camps near its gates, the north side has just three camps, which can

send into the park a maximum of seven cars.

Accompanied by a sharp-eyed local tracker, and the camp's enthusiastic and knowledgeable naturalist Avijit Dutta, we soon spotted leopard tracks (friends in another vehicle saw the actual cat), a tiger munching on a sambur behind a rock, a black-backed jackal trotting down a road, and three red-haired wild dogs, as well as scores of exotic birds and, one night, an enormous python. The camp manager, Dimple Bhatt, also offers butterfly, flower and star walks, imparting her extensive knowledge with insight and flashes of wit.

On our second night, we also walked into the local village, with one of the 10 villagers the camp employs – something that Amit is keen to encourage. "The whole idea is that this becomes more

than just a tiger experience," he says. "It's about the community, and getting back to the style of safaris where what mattered was the wilderness." Drinking masala chai in a homestead, and watching women dry corn, pick vegetables and herd cows decorated with beads, flowers and paint for Diwali, was as memorable – and as photogenic – as the wildlife.

THE SPA RETREAT

Probably the most surprising thing about the Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa is not its contemporary stone, steel and glass architecture or its glorious food – perfect masala dhosas at breakfast and moreish Goan fish curries at night. It's the scenery.

Set within 350 acres, on a private estate of 3,500 acres, the retreat is surrounded by India's soaring volcanic Western Ghats:

steep hills thick with deciduous forest through which to trek or ride a mountain bike, or to admire from the outdoor yoga pavilion, the spa's glass-walled tea room or one of two vast infinity pools.

What is particularly rare about this spa is that there is lots to do. Spa treatments – of which there are dozens – are administered by therapists with calming personalities and a thorough knowledge of Ayurveda. Guided walks are offered into the Ghats behind the hotel, surrounding farmland or cliff forts half an hour's drive away. The hotel will this spring start community initiatives at its Shillim Institute, from dancing to pottery (none was available when we stayed) and, when their stables have been built, will offer horse rides. For those who like a more sedentary stay, there is a library to dip into,

and private pools in many of the 66 modern, comfortable villas in which to swim.

Our stay wasn't perfect: in spite of the willing and friendly staff, telephones often didn't work, hot water failed, post-monsoon maintenance felt shoddy and several of our party's rooms had incursions (of ants and mice). But the new general manager had only arrived three days before us, so strange operations (such as 6am calls to ask what time we wanted to be woken up), he assured us, would soon be a thing of the past.

© Greaves India (020 7487 9111; greavesindia.co.uk) offers a nine-night trip to central India from £2,325. The price includes return flights with BA, b&b accommodation at the Hilton Mumbai and Shillim Retreat & Spa, full-board lodging at Svasara and Jamtara, and transfers.