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how to spend it

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MATERIAL GAINS
DENIM'S NEW REFINEMENT





SHERE CALM

Wildlife tourism in India may have grown by more than 25 per cent in the past decade, but the tiger - the safari star attraction - numbers just over 1,700. Remarkably, Stanley Stewart catches a glimpse in relative solitude at two emerging camps

In the sprawling tiger reserves of central India, you don't find tigers. Other animals find them for you. The guide motioned for the driver to stop. As the jeep fell silent, a cathedral hush came over the forests of Pench. The wind murmured in the leaves of the teak trees and the liquid notes of an Indian roller poured out of further depths. The guide put his fingers to his lips. Then we heard the alarm call of a sambar - a low, grunting noise - alerting the other animals to danger. Nearby a group of chital, spotted deer, lifted their heads as one. They were not looking at us: they gazed into the forest, ears twitching. A moment later the langur monkeys, high in the canopy, began to bark. "Tiger," the guide whispered.

She did not appear; she materialised. One moment there was nothing, and the next a striped torso was gliding through the long grass between the trees. She moved in padded slow motion, her head perfectly still as her shoulders rolled with each step. The chital watched her intently. Then suddenly, in unison, they swung their heads round, looking in the other direction. A leopard had appeared behind us, crouching on a dead tree trunk, its spots dark in the dappled shadows. Still as a statue, only its tail flicking, it was sizing up the situation - the deer, the sambar, the restless langurs and the tiger - the hunted and the huntress.

Over the past decade wildlife tourism in India, chiefly focused on the tiger, has grown by more than 25 per cent. It's an encouraging figure, because the survival of the tiger in the wild is as much linked to the economic benefits of tourism as it is to good habitat management. But in some parks increasing visitor numbers have led to a cheapening of the experience. In the most popular of India's reserves - Corbett, Bandhavgarh, Ranthambore - there are times when the chaos of an

Indian city seems to invade the seclusion of the parks, as a scrum of jeeps and camera-wielding visitors descend on a sighting location.

Which is what brought me to explore two emerging destinations in India, both easily accessible from Mumbai, that promised tiger tracking without the paparazzi effect. The first is Tadoba, in Maharashtra. A few years ago, only a handful of park rangers had heard of the place. But the building of new lodges, a promising upswing in the tiger population and the habituation of the animals to human presence have meant that Tadoba is now emerging as one of the best "new" locations for tiger tracking in India.

The other is Pench - more familiar ground, admittedly, but with interesting new developments afoot. Straddling the border of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, Pench was the setting for both Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* and the BBC wildlife documentary *Tiger: Spy in the Jungle*. Traditionally, access has been through Turia Gate, where some 40 lodges send a queue of jeeps into the park each morning. But a new camp has just opened on the far side, near Jantara Gate. Jantara Wilderness Camp accesses a much quieter part of the park, allowing guests to experience this splendid tiger reserve in something approaching solitude.

At the beginning of the 20th century, when Indian maharajahs and British officials were still busy gunning down tigers for sport, there were thought to be about 40,000 of the cats in India. By the time tiger hunting was banned in 1970, there were only around 1,800 left. Current estimates hover just above the 1,700 mark. With hunting no longer an issue, there are two pressures on tigers: shrinking habitat and poaching. The tiger reserves - and there are almost 50 in India - are meant to deal with the habitat issues; their underpaid and ill-equipped park rangers are tasked with handling poaching, a problem largely fuelled by the Chinese traditional-medicine trade. For the Chinese, a tiger is a complete pharmacy; there is apparently nothing it



Main image: the Western Ghats, Maharashtra, India. Inset far left: a tiger in Pench National Park. Above: The author on safari there

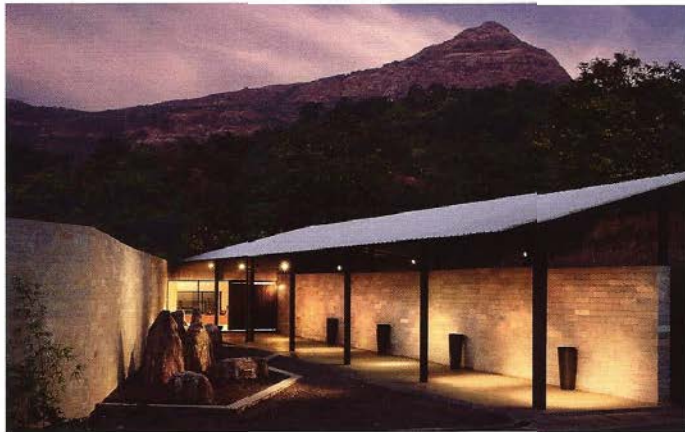
cannot cure. The bones are ground up as a preparation for rheumatism; the blood strengthens willpower; the whiskers are said to alleviate toothache; the eyeballs treat epilepsy; the skin mental illness; the teeth both rabies and asthma; and the testes tuberculosis; while tiger-penis soup is Chinese medicine's Viagra.

The mystique of the tiger is not confined to Chinese medical practitioners. In early western mythology, the animal belonged to the bestiaries of the imagination, the feline counterpart of the unicorn, the griffin and the dragon. As late as the Renaissance it was believed that all tigers were female and procreated by copulating with the wind. For William Blake they were a metaphor for the primitive forces lost to civilised societies. But no one





Clockwise from above: a tent at Jamtara Wilderness Camp. A pool villa at Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa. The hotel's Green Table restaurant



should be fooled into complacency by the languorous cat stretching in the sunlight or drinking charmingly at a forest pool. Tigers are nature's most efficient killers. Their paws are the size of dinner plates, their claws longer than a middle finger; they have been known to remove a human face with a single swipe. A large male over 3ft high at the shoulder is the length of a small family car, weighs up to 500lb and can do 0 to 60 faster than a Fiat Panda. Yet they slip through the forests like ghosts; you could pass within yards of one and not realise it was there. They have night vision six times sharper than our own and can eat 60lb of meat at a single sitting. Lions, smaller and a good deal less ferocious, are only kings of the jungle in jungles where you don't find tigers.

A short flight from Mumbai and a three-and-a-half-hour drive from Nagpur brought me to the borders of Tadoba National Park, 63sq km of sprawling wilderness containing some 50 tigers. The lodges here, such as Svasara, are comfortable without being overly smartened up, while the park has become one of the best places in India for sightings of the big cat.

But the first thing to remember is that it's never just about tigers. It is a thrill to catch a glimpse of them – and you would be very unlucky at Tadoba or Pench not to see one – but sightings are likely to be fleeting. The rest of the time, you will need to content yourself with 33 other mammals, 164 bird species and 30 serious reptiles, from the Indian cobra to the colossal marsh crocodile.

We set off in the jeep in the pre-dawn with binoculars and thermoses of coffee, following a red track between stands of bamboo and copses of sal trees. In the grey light, a wild boar trotted across the road, tail aloft, feet stepping prissily. To our left, where the mists were still melting off the long grasses, a herd of chital watched us pass. Beyond them, I could see a large sambar, its ears turning through 180 degrees as it assessed the morning. And then a massive gaur loomed through a bank of bamboo,

A large male is the length of a small car, weighs up to 500lb and can do 0 to 60 faster than a Fiat Panda. Yet they slip through the forests like ghosts

sporting pretty white stockings. Gaur are the political heavyweights of the animal kingdom; disputes – and there are many – are settled by bellowing at one another.

We emerged on the shores of Tadoba Lake, where I spotted an enormous marsh crocodile, its long, ridged back just breaking the surface of the water. A troop of langur monkeys appeared, their cute faces and silky hair masking a domestic life of considerable violence. Above us a honey buzzard sailed on vast wings. But the morning's highlight was the tiger strolling through a meadow, barely 100m from the road. She looked unhurried in her stately progress – utterly majestic.

It was at Pench, however, that I had the afore-described sighting of a tiger and a leopard at the same time. At Jamtara Wilderness Camp, which only opened last October, the primary joy is its isolation from other lodges – our game drives began at Karmajhiri or Jamtara Gate, where we were often the only jeeps entering the park – but the camp has also brought new standards of luxury to Pench. Furnished with a mix of colonial charm and eastern langur, its 12 spacious tents count as serious safari chic, with bathrooms that wouldn't look out of place in a (rustic) five-star. There is an infinity pool to banish the heat and the dust, while meals are a fascinating journey around the delicate promises of Indian cuisine. An elegant open-sided sitting area – a place of deep leather chairs, piled books and evening cocktails overlooking the park's buffer

evening fire beneath the canopy of a sprawling banyan tree soon became the focal points for guest gatherings.

With its open teak woods, Pench may be an even prettier landscape than Tadoba and we were happy that first morning to have it to ourselves. A family of wild dogs appeared, re-establishing relations after a night's sleep by licking one another. A jackal trotted into view, oblivious to us as it passed within feet of the jeep. A rare scops owl gazed at us from the hollow of a tree. Barking deer barked, a mongoose disappeared into the long grass and a vast nilgai bull scratched its behind on a tree trunk.

In the event, the amazing sighting of a tiger and leopard in proximity, eyeing up the same prey, ended with a whimper, not a bang: after a good deal of crouching and peering, both predators slipped into the forest in search of a less complicated morning hunt, to the massed relief of the grazing chital. For the leopard, it was a question of caution. For the tiger, top of any food chain, it was simply a matter of convenience: a clumsy leopard was likely to spoil her chances.

At week's end, reeling with wildlife sightings, I headed to the Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa (pictured above and left) in the Western Ghats (pictured on previous pages). Only two hours' drive from Mumbai

airport but still deep in rural India, it's an ideal final stop after an adventurous but dusty few days. At this opulent wellness resort an Ayurvedic doctor is on hand to sort out your tejas from your apa, the restaurants will tailor a diet to suit your chakras, a yoga teacher will get you doing great things for your intestine and the spa offers a full range of massages and treatments.

On my last morning here, I climbed to the flat-topped summit of Shillim Peak from which the estate takes its name. The 360-degree views stretched from idyllic farmsteads to the furthest mountains. The winds carried the sounds of the forest below. I could hear the alarm call of deer. Somewhere down there, beneath the canopy, a feline predator was padding through the green shadows, eyes glinting, stalking its prey. Somewhere down there, a wild India improbably persisted – startling and exquisite in this most populous of lands. ♦

INDIA'S NEW STRIPES

Stanley Stewart travelled as a guest of **Greaves India** (020-7487 9111; www.greavesindia.co.uk), which offers a nine-night tour of Pench and Tadoba from £2,450 per person, staying at Four Seasons Mumbai, Jamtara Wilderness Camp, the Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa and Svasara Jungle Lodge, and including return flights with British Airways, transfers and game drives.

Four Seasons Mumbai, 1/136, Dr E Moses Road, 400018 Worli, Mumbai (+9122-2481 8000; www.fourseasons.com), from about £198. **Jamtara Wilderness Camp**, Pench National Park (+9111-2685 3760; www.jamtarawilderness.com), from £350. **Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa**, Pawana Nagar Taluka Maval, Pune 410401 (+9121-1471 2468; www3.hilton.com), from £266. **Svasara Jungle Lodge**, Tadoba-Anhari Tiger Reserve (+9193-7264 0322; www.svasararesorts.com), from about £75.

British Airways (0844-493 0787; www.britishairways.com) flies from London Heathrow to Mumbai twice daily, from £507 return.