

Wildlife spotting at
Bori Wildlife Sanctuary

Bengal Hanuman langurs

WHERE THE WILD THINGS THRIVE

We ventured to the belly of India to get up close and personal with the animal locals of one of the country's most underexplored sanctuaries.

Words: CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

As our jeep entered the gates of Bori Wildlife Sanctuary, I could hear the myriad sounds of the forest coming to life after a quiet and cold night. The towering teak trees and the reddish sandstone rocks along the mud trails seemed to gleam with promise in the muted sunlight of the early morning. An Indian paradise flycatcher flew in front of us, his long white tail fluttering tantalisingly. A family of chital (spotted deer) looked up from their morning meal of fresh grass to stare inquisitively at our jeep. Langur monkeys screeched as they swung playfully from treetop to treetop.

In other words, it was business as usual in the central Indian forests.

As a travel writer, I hate the phrase 'hidden secret', but Bori Wildlife Sanctuary gives fresh meaning to that tired cliché. It is one of the oldest forest reserves in India, but also among the least known and explored. Only nine safari jeeps are allowed

Only nine safari jeeps are allowed
entry each day

into this reserve in the Hoshangabad District of Madhya Pradesh state of central India every morning and evening. This made exploration a more intimate and enjoyable experience, even in peak season. In the other parks I have visited, the sounds of the forest must compete with those made by the chattering of excited humans and roaring jeeps. But not here.

On top of that, I was staying at Bori Safari Lodge, with just 12 spacious cottages built over 7.5 acres of land close to the forest. For a city slicker like me, being in the forest is to be completely free and without a care in the world. And this newish property served up oodles of barefoot luxury within a wilderness setting while it offered much-needed solitude and space to unwind.



Chital (spotted deer)



Gaur (Indian bison)



Royal Bengal tiger

MEETING THE LOCALS

Located in the southern end of Satpura National Park, Bori is counted among India's most significant biodiversity zones, with over 250 bird species. The undulating hilly terrain also makes this the ideal habitat for leopards, which coexist with other mammals including spotted deer, antelopes, sambar deer, striped hyena, sloth bear, gaur (Indian bison), and wild dog.

But it is for the superstar, the majestic Royal Bengal tiger, that most visitors come to this sanctuary. And it was with this hope that I had also woken up at the crack of dawn and made my sleepy way to the sanctuary gate, just a few minutes' drive from the lodge. With me on the safari jeep were my husband and the lodge's senior naturalist Shivraj Singh, who drove expertly with his ears and eyes open for animal and bird movement.

And there was plenty of that. A bushy-tailed giant squirrel here, a sleepy jungle owl there, a handful of Indian rollers doing backflips mid-air. Close to the streams, we spotted a couple of common

kingfishers, whose insipid name belies its brilliant blue plumage. After that, a black furball in the bushes, which turned out to be a sloth bear carrying two babies on her back, scurrying into the thickets at the sound of our jeep. And then, a massive gaur—weighing over 1000kg and capable of taking down an adult tiger in combat—chilling along with her calf, who gave me a disdainful glance before looking away.

These sightings were delightful, but my heart was still going—where is the tiger? We didn't have long to wait though, with Machli making an appearance soon after, sunning herself in the open meadows close to her favourite pond. Machli, meaning fish in Hindi, gets her name from her fondness for water—which is why Shivraj knew exactly where to look for her. Did luck have anything to do with it? Perhaps.

We watched in quiet fascination as she turned this way and that to feel the sunlight on her skin, in the languid manner of a holidaying sunbather in the south of Spain. After several minutes of this, she closed her eyes and went into a sun-kissed slumber as most cats do, and that was our cue to move on. We drove back to the lodge in happy silence, hugging this special forest experience close to our hearts. 📍



Watch over 250 species of birds

TRIP PLANNER

①

TRAVEL

The nearest airport is at Bhopal, from where Bori Safari Lodge is 154km (3 hours' drive) away.

②

ACCOMMODATION

Bori Safari Lodge (jehannuma.com/bori-safari-lodge/) is the boutique jungle property from the Jehan Numa Hotels group, known for their commitment to conservation and sustainability, and focus on responsible tourism practices.



③

ACTIVITIES

Apart from morning and evening game drives, the lodge offers a walking safari, visits to the local village, and a sundowner experience near the river.