

A Family Safari in Satpura

One writer ventures into the wilds of Madhya Pradesh to seek out tigers—and some quality bonding time—with her parents.

— by Shikha Shah

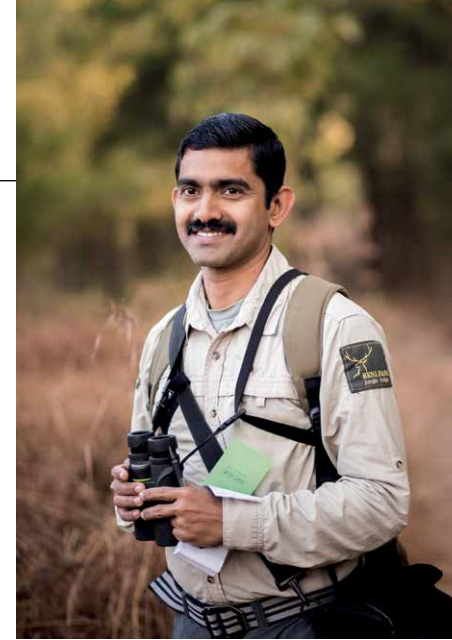
I had almost come to believe that tigers were entirely mythical creatures. How else could I have failed to spot one on umpteen wildlife safaris in some of India's most renowned national parks, where big-cat sightings are almost guaranteed? Still, persistence is a virtue, so January saw me embarking on yet another off-the-grid jungle adventure. This time around, it was the Satpura Tiger Reserve in the highlands of Madhya Pradesh, at the wild heart of central India. And while tiger spotting was at the top of my agenda, so too was the chance for some familial bonding. My parents, both in their sixties, were accompanying me, and we were looking forward to spending a week together unplugged from our devices and daily routines.

An overnight train from Mumbai deposited us at Madhya Pradesh's Itarsi Junction on a crisp winter morning. From there, it was an hour's drive to our lodge—or at least, it would have been, had my father not insisted on stopping at a street stall en route for an early breakfast of *poha* (flattened rice seasoned with herbs and spices) and masala chai. Dad loves his food, and while he's an easygoing traveler, he expects to eat well, even in the wilderness.

Fortunately, good food is among the hallmarks of Bori Safari Lodge. One of two wilderness resorts operated by the Bhopal-based Jehan Numa Group of hotels, the eco-friendly property ticks all the boxes for travelers looking for cuisine, culture, and a healthy dose of nature. It sits on a three-hectare



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NATURALLY GIFTED
Clockwise from left: A naturalist guide at Reni Pani Jungle Lodge; inside a spacious safari tent at the same property; on a game drive with Reni Pani in the Satpura Tiger Reserve; the restaurant at Bori Safari Lodge.



estate amid the fields and pastureland of a small farming village called Dhapada, with just 12 rooms done up in a soothing contemporary style. Reception staff welcomed us with a refreshing lemony cooler before escorting us across a sun-lit central courtyard to our two-bedroom suite. While dad busied himself making French press coffee, mom and I put our feet up on the room's spacious deck, chatting and listening to birdsong.

Early risers with a shared love for taking aimless strolls in the countryside, we ventured out the next morning for a walk through the village with Bori's in-house naturalist, Huzaifa Ali. Our route followed a narrow road fringed by wheat and mustard fields. My mother, a gardening enthusiast, listened, rapt, to Ali's descriptions of local flora as the sweet sound of cowbells drifted on the air.

After a bracing dip in the lodge's small swimming pool, we headed out for an afternoon safari in the nearby Bori Wildlife Sanctuary, which forms the southeastern section of the Satpura Tiger Reserve. A rugged landscape laced with rivers and meadows, this is one of India's oldest wildlife sanctuaries, home to a rich variety of flora and fauna. We spotted chital deer and a majestic gaur (Indian bison) with formidable horns, as well as a trove of chirping and squawking birdlife. Tigers, however, eluded us.

But no matter; back at the lodge, we mingled with fellow family vacationers at a bonfire-lit buffet dinner that kicked off with lively folk dances. Between bites of piping-hot samosas and a succulent Bhopali-style chicken *rezala* stew, we all agreed that, tigers or no, it had been a great day out together.

AFTER A COUPLE OF NIGHTS, it was time to head to Bori's more rustic sister property, Reni Pani Jungle Lodge. A serene two-hour boat ride and short drive connect the two. Our journey through the island-dotted Tawa Reservoir was an adventure in itself, with binoculars on hand for observing kingfishers, herons, eagles, and numerous other bird species.

Spread across 14 hectares of forest, Reni Pani

comprises a dozen cottages and four large safari-style tents, each named for a native bird species. Our tent, called Bulbul, came with a king-size bed and a sit-out area with wooden rocking chairs that overlooked a water hole studded with magenta lotus flowers. I was also pleased to find a partitionable lounge area with a sofa-cum-bed that I could zip shut whenever I wanted some solo time to read, write, or sketch.

For us, disconnecting from technology was part of the draw. No internet connectivity (save in the lodge's small library) and little to no cell reception presented an ideal environment for bonding. The accommodations didn't even have telephones; instead, we got a vintage blowhorn to toot on should staff assistance be required.

Over lunch at the lodge's Gol Ghar restaurant,




Omkar Shelke, one of the resident naturalists, told us, “It’s raining tigers in Satpura this season. Be prepared to have your jinx broken.” My parents and I were thrilled to hear this and looked at each other with childlike excitement.

The next morning, we were up and ready by 5:45 a.m. for the 12-kilometer drive back to the shores of the Tawa Reservoir, where a short boat ride brought us across to Madhai Gate, the main entrance to Satpura. By now, we had learned to embrace the unpredictability of game drives and appreciated the forest for its simple joys: crisp air, the rising sun peeking through dense foliage, grazing herbivores, and the antics of langur monkeys. In this part of the reserve, these come with a backdrop of gushing waterfalls,



narrow gorges, and hills shrouded in teak, bamboo, and acacia. Within a few minutes of entering the forest, we were treated to a rare sighting of a golden jackal. More observant than the rest of us, my father quickly spotted a pair of sloth bears tearing open termite mounds. “A good start indeed,” exclaimed Reni Pani’s “camp host” Sharna Chauhan, who was accompanying us with a park ranger.

With no news about tiger movement, our escorts decided to park the open-topped safari vehicle at a riverside campsite for a picnic breakfast of baked yogurt, veggie rolls, and hard-boiled eggs. We had the spot to ourselves. Just as we were about to pack up and continue our game of hide-and-seek in the forest, Chauhan pointed across the water. “Look,” she whispered urgently. On the far shore, a tigress had emerged from the undergrowth and was now walking gracefully over boulders in the shallows. This, we soon learned, was Fireline, a majestic feline who has prowled this section of Satpura for some 15 years. Mom and I stared open-mouthed as dad fidgeted with his phone’s camera. Seconds later, she vanished back into the trees.

I had finally seen a tiger in the wild. It was a brief encounter, to be sure. But with my folks along with me, I knew the memory of it would last forever. 

Rates at Reni Pani Jungle Lodge and Bori Safari Lodge start from US\$518 a night (jehannuma.com). The Satpura Tiger Reserve opens to visitors seasonally from October through June.



ON THE WILD SIDE

Clockwise from top: Cocktail hour around a campfire at Reni Pani Jungle Lodge; local fauna; naturalists from Bori Safari Lodge can guide guests on walking safaris in the nearby Bori Wildlife Sanctuary.