

close encounters

ANIMAL SIGHTINGS, LUXURY
IN THE WILDERNESS, ELUSIVE
FELINES AND OTHER TALES
FROM A JUNGLE IN RAJASTHAN

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the globe & the gully



The 120-year-old haveli, Castle Jhoomar Baori's terrace commands a stunning view at sunset

(Top to bottom) Rufous treepie. Ranthambore's surrounding hills.



Spending time in the wilderness is an experience like no other. Every moment is unpredictable, teaching outsiders lessons in patience and respect for the ways of the wild. You enter a higher state of awareness, always alert for animal and bird sightings: rarities in our own 'concrete' jungles. We're at the Ranthambore National Park, 14 km from Sawai Madhopur, Rajasthan. One of the largest wildlife parks in northern India, Ranthambore is to wildlife enthusiasts what Coachella Music Festival is to music aficionados. Everyone you meet is fixated on seeing the star attraction: the tiger.

We set out on our first safari at 2.30 pm in an open-top canter. The Rajasthani sun is at its peak, but nothing appears between the wilderness and us. The park is divided into eight zones; Zone 1-6 has tigers aplenty, while the latter two have none. Luckily, we've been assigned Zone 1, raising the stakes of spotting a striped beauty. As the canter makes its way over Ranthambore's rugged terrain, we take in the surroundings, made up of dry deciduous forests interspersed with grassy patches and trees. The game reserve has two lakes, which, we hear, are the best places for animal sightings. But our safari guide tells us Zone 1 doesn't house any of them.

All of a sudden the canter draws to a halt. We spot two varieties of deer (sambar and chital) grazing with their herds. Families of languid langurs sit in the shade of the trees, and peacocks strut around oblivious to our presence. Our guide instructs us to keep quiet, not to take in jungle sounds, but because we might be in the proximity of a tiger. The peacock is sending out an 'alert' call, which sounds like the full-throated mew of a cat. Meanwhile, a herd of sambar looks on in a single direction - with their small tails erect - while sending out calls that, without doubt, sound urgent.

The calls eventually pass and the open-top begins to move again along the bumpy path. We silently hope we'll have a glimpse of the majestic cat as we meander through the jungle. But luck doesn't seem to be on our side today. Still, there are many more safaris to embark on: we'll probably see the elusive cat on one of them.

A massive orange sun sets behind us as we leave Ranthambore. We've chosen to stay at a 120-year-old haveli, Castle Jhoomar Baori, built and maintained by the Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation (RTDC). While there are many luxury properties in Sawai Madhopur, this hotel, atop a hill, is the only one within the buffer area of the national park. That's why we chose to stay there. But Jhoomar Baori is far from basic: its well-equipped, hygienic and spacious rooms command a stunning view of the national park, and the staff epitomise Rajasthani hospitality.

A male chital looks out for his herd



Zone 3 has a paradisiacal feel



On the bumpy safari trail



Ranthambore
Fort made it
to the Unesco
World Heritage
List in 2013

We spot a chital scrambling deeper into the forest. We're so close to the tiger, but are still so far from actually seeing it.

K P Singh, the fiftyish man who runs the hotel, takes it upon himself to relate his trysts with Ranthambore's much-feared tigers. He enthralls us with story after story of dangerous and unexpected encounters as we huddle in rapt attention on a terrace illuminated by the waxing moon. Suddenly, he animatedly signals that he has just heard the call of the tiger. We hear it too. Not one, or two, but three distinct snorting grunts - from three different directions - that emerge from the jungle below. We hear it again, and our pulses are set racing as we dash from one end of the terrace to the other in the hope of a sighting. But it's nighttime and the tigers are at their elusive best.

All those reminiscences of face-to-face tiger encounters appear to have made Singh nostalgic, childlike even. He decides we should take a car down the path leading to the main road. We might, he feels, get a glimpse of at least one of the three creatures of the night. Five pairs of eyes attempt to scan both sides of the path. No luck again, but a thrill nonetheless. Driving back, we notice

two other cars along the otherwise quiet road. Singh tells us that a tiger's call can be heard from as far as 3km away, and it might have drifted towards guests at nearby hotels. The next day, we hear of a tiger sighting on that very road, from a fellow safari-goer.

Besides tigers, the sprawling national park is home to leopards, hyenas, jungle cats, wild boar, bears, marsh crocodiles, neelgai (Asian antelope) and deer. Bird species like the rufous treepie, collared-scops owl, rose-ringed parakeet, red-crested woodpecker, white-throated kingfisher and peacock are also spotted in abundance.

Today, we rise early ahead of our second safari. Driving through the park at 6.30am, we feel positive and rested after the previous night's close encounter. Zone 3 is almost paradisiacal in appearance with the ruins of Pre-Independence Ranthambore Fort looming in the distance, a large lake, and banyan and wild date palm trees. The park was once the hunting ground of the maharajas of Jaipur.

Our guide tells us that a tiger had made a kill the previous night, giving us a high chance of a sighting. We arrive at the site only to spot a sambar deer carcass and the pugmarks of a female tiger. A group of people excitedly tells us about a tiger they'd spotted only a few minutes ago, before it left for a nearby body of water. As we wait and watch, a herd of deer sends out 'alert' calls. Everybody can sense it: the tiger's not far. Two hours and many incredibly beautiful bird sightings later, there's

still no sign of it. There is no point in leaving, says our guide, for the tiger will definitely be back to consume the rest of its kill. Two hours and many incredibly beautiful bird sightings later, there's still no sign of the tiger. It is an elusive animal, indeed. No prizes for guessing why it's the most-feared predator of the jungle.

Back at the hotel we enjoy a sunset yoga session with a spectacular 360-degree view of the hills and the jungle. We stay on the terrace before taking the 4am train to Jaipur. As darkness descends upon the forest, the 'churring' call of the nightjar reaches a piercing crescendo. Then we hear that unmistakable sound again: the booming grunt of a tiger, closely followed by a shuffling noise. We spot a chital scrambling deeper into the forest. We're close to the tiger, but still far from actually seeing it.

It is 3 am when we set out for the railway station and it's our last chance for a prized sighting. But in no time, we are out of the jungle and on the main road. A slight heaviness fills our hearts. We are jolted back to reality as we spot a cat-like animal crossing the road in two swift leaps. We reverse the vehicle, and using the dim headlight beam, we discover that it is a leopard. As we gaze at it, we realise that it is looking back at us. We can barely grasp the reality of it all. While the safaris didn't yield us luck on the sighting front, we have now come face to face with Ranthambore's second largest cat — a young, agile leopard with beautiful spots — perhaps, in the midst of its nocturnal hunt.



A writer who lives to discover, Beverly Pereira can be found enjoying a great meal or a song when she's not creating prose. The art of storytelling, hearing people's tales, painting and reading inevitably inspire her to write more.