

# IN SEARCH OF THE TIGER

LOOK FOR WILDLIFE IN MADHYA PRADESH, COME BACK WITH A UNIQUE APPRECIATION FOR SIMPLE LUXURY.

Those who live in South India like me, have some level of arrogance about wildlife. Our well-managed national parks, Kabini, Bandipur, Nagarhole and Mudumalai, are thriving, we boast, with an unbeatable variety of flora and fauna. The latest tiger census reveals that Karnataka, with 406, has the largest number of tigers. Uttarakhand with 340 is next, followed by Madhya Pradesh, where I am headed. What Madhya Pradesh has in spades however, is luxury safari lodges. In 2006, luxury African safari company, &Beyond (previously called CC Africa or Conservation Commission Africa) collaborated with the Taj group to launch Taj Safaris: a group of jungle lodges, combining African wildlife expertise with Indian service and architecture. They chose to establish four lodges at Bandhavgarh, Kanha, Panna, and Pench and I visited the two at Pench and Kanha.

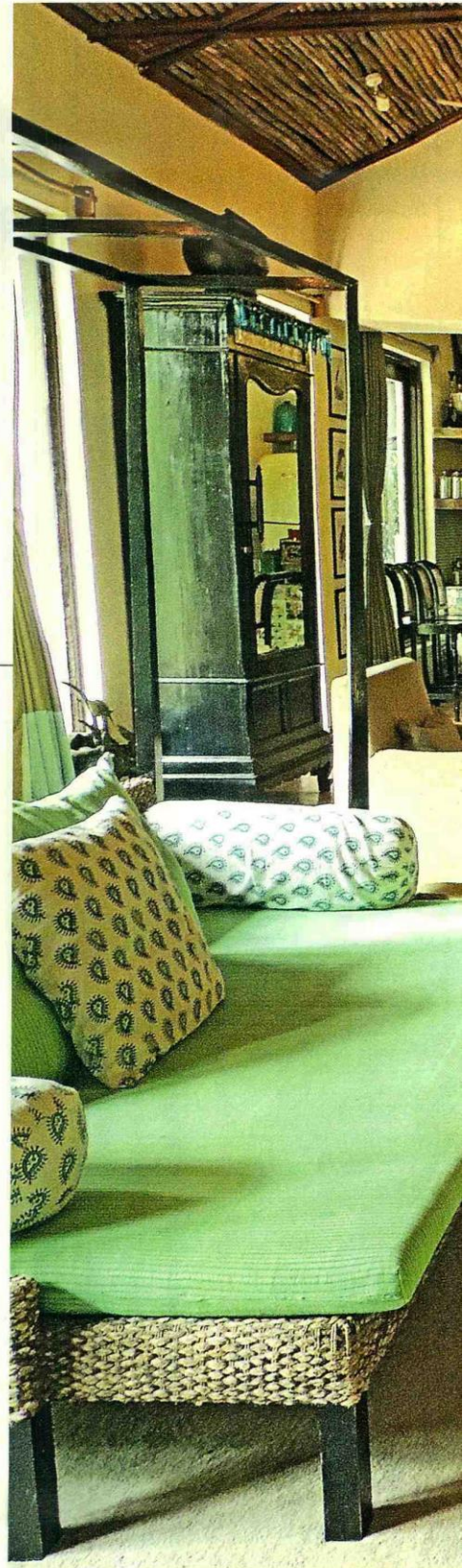
## BAGHVAN LODGE, PENCH

Getting to the Baghvan Lodge in Pench from Bangalore takes a day. I arrive at 6pm in time for cocktails and dinner, and fall asleep to the sounds of the jungle. Luxury safari might seem like an oxymoron, but in fact, for a certain age and type (that includes me), it is the only way to go. These lodges need not be over the top. Luxury can be simple and well-curated,



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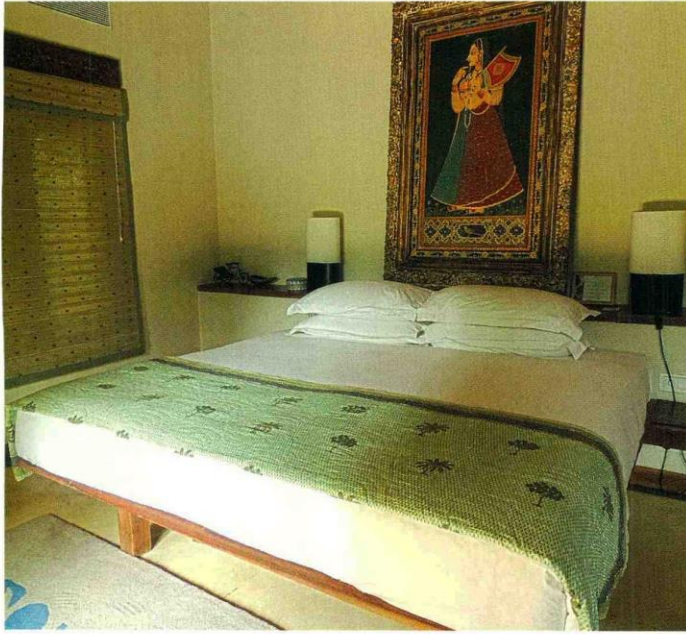






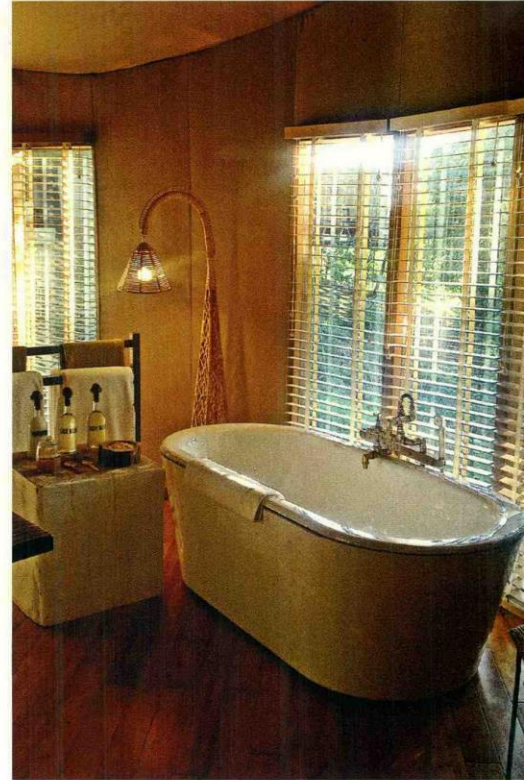
THE LOBBY AT BAGHVAN  
LODGE, PENCH.





▲  
THE ROOMS ARE  
SIMPLE AND ELEGANT

▶  
THE TUB BATHS AT BANJAAR  
TOLA ARE AN INDULGENCE



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equally about what is absent as what is present. Here is what my room doesn't have: television and Internet connection. An outdoor wooden deck offers a view of the jungle and a yoga mat for those who wished to stand on their heads and spook the flying birds. The bathroom, about the size of my city bedroom, has indoor and outdoor showers and the requisite fragrant toiletries. Curious in the room and throughout the lodge are Bastar metal sculptures, giving a sense of place to an otherwise anonymous space. There is tea and coffee, but also homemade herb concentrates that can be mixed with water and drunk as juices. Breakfast is inside the park. The naturalist lays out a tablecloth on the jeep's hood and serves us sandwiches, parathas, tea and coffee. Lunch is a thali that includes home-grown salads, and a few local recipes such as a delicious sweet and sour brinjal. Dinner is more expansive with a cocktail hour, socialising, and multiple courses.

### BANJAAR TOLA, KANHA

After two days in Pench (still no tiger) I drive four hours to BanjararTola, the tented camp outside Kanha. I have stayed at others wildlife lodges: Aman-i-khas and in Af-

rica. Most mask a lack of imagination by calling it minimalist design. BanjararTola's tents are spacious and full of local objects: bells, metal sculptures, bamboo baskets, and textiles. The bathroom has old fashioned brass fittings that remind me of palaces and my grandparents' home. The bed overlooks the river and the body polish turns my skin to silk. What distinguishes both Baghvan and BanjararTola is the service. As soon as I arrive, I am assigned a butler who takes cares of every need, even ones that I don't articulate. I return after dinner on a cold night to find that Dharamveer, my butler at Banjarar Tola has drawn up a perfectly hot bubble bath. At Pench, umbrella-toting butlers arrive when there is a drizzle; dietary preferences are noted and catered to without fuss. No obsequiousness, just unobtrusive service. I didn't see a tiger at Kanha but I got the greatest gift that travel confers. For four days, I lived in a world where I was denied email, Facebook, and phone service and I did not miss any of it. This is true luxury. The tiger would have been a nice bonus, but one thing that wildlife teaches you is humility. Money cannot buy everything and certainly not a tiger-sighting. I'll just have to go back.