

CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

This article misstated the location of India's Sariska National Park. It is in the state of Rajasthan, not Gujarat.

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India Safaris, From North to SouthBy *Shoba Narayan*Special to The Washington Post
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Our convoy set off at dawn -- 5:37 a.m., to be precise -- into the Ranthambore National Park in Rajasthan, India. Toting binoculars and cameras, wearing hooded jackets and gloves, and carrying a thermos of hot masala chai, we were searching for that most elusive of creatures, *Panthera tigris tigris*, also known as the Bengal tiger.



Summer brings some 500 Asian elephants to the Kabini River in what naturalists say is the biggest congregation of the beasts on the continent. (Orange County Resorts & Hotels)

Green parrots screeched overhead.

A peacock took flight in hues of purple, startlingly graceful for a bird so big. Spotted deer skittered away. Indian gaur (bison) looked up inquiringly as we whizzed past in our four-wheel-drive vehicles.

Monkeys chattered as they swung through the trees.

The sun rose. An hour passed, then two.

TOOLBOX

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Nothing quite equals the sight of a tiger in the wild. It isn't the frenzied excitement of a rock concert or the whooping delight of a last-minute touchdown. It is quietly overwhelming, if that makes sense. Breath becomes shallow, hair stands on end and skin gets goose bumps.

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My encounter began as most do, with pugmarks, or footprints, by the dirt road. Still in the vehicle, we followed the tracks, aided by the alarm calls of birds and monkeys, racing hither and thither through the undergrowth. Then we saw her, a tigress stretched out in the sun after feasting on a fresh kill. We stopped at a distance, not wanting to scare her away: a nonsensical construct, really, for tigers are "apex predators" that fear nothing but guns. Ranthambore's craggy terrain makes it a good place to sight these secretive, solitary, nocturnal beasts.

We edged closer. Cat eyes, both arrogant and dismissive, took stock of us, eyes that could mesmerize a man. Her name was Malliga, the guide said. Or was it Maya? I wasn't paying attention. Look at the stripe behind her ear, the guide said. Notice the break. That's how we identify her.

There are 32 tigers in Ranthambore, give or take. This erstwhile hunting reserve of the maharajah of Jaipur is now a wildlife refuge, playing host to wild dogs, jackals, sloth bears and various species of deer. Under the auspices of Project Tiger, it is also a haven for the biggest member of the big cats (the other three are the lion, jaguar and leopard), all of which are distinguished from small cats by their ability to roar.

An American couple and I were enjoying the wilderness from a most luxurious vantage point, Aman-i-Khas, the Indian outpost of the lavish Aman resorts.

My tent at Aman-i-Khas, on the outskirts of the park, was about the size of my one-bedroom apartment in New York. Bigger, actually. An open, loftlike space, it was furnished in natural-color canvas and leather with every creature comfort you wouldn't think to ask for. The heated beds, for instance, offered a warm respite after the cold jungle. Each tent had a "batman" who appeared when we rang and conjured up our desires.

And I felt absurdly happy because of an additional amenity: The laundry service was free, or rather, it was included in Aman-i-Khas's stratospheric rates. One of my pet peeves is

luxury hotels that charge \$1,000 a night and then nickel-and-dime you over peanuts in the mini bar or items of laundry. At Aman, you could throw your dirty clothes into the bamboo basket and they would be returned that evening, pressed and perfumed, in time for the game drive. And there was no mini bar in the tent. You could drink the house wine free or pay extra for specialty brands.

Next to Aman-i-Khas are two boutique hotels run by local Indian families. One afternoon I walked down to Khem Villas, run by Goverdhan "Groovy" Singh Rathore and his wife, Usha. Khem Villas is a little more than a year old and made Conde Nast Traveler's Hot List in 2007. At \$400 a night for room and board, it isn't cheap, but it is roughly half of what the Aman group charges.

Rathore grew up in Ranthambore. His father, Fateh Singh Rathore, was the original Tiger Man of Ranthambore, having been involved with Project Tiger from the beginning. The senior Rathore still lives nearby and works to protect the tiger's habitat from encroachment by nearby villagers. He has leased his land to the uber-luxe Oberoi Vanyavilas, another tented camp down the road.

At all the resorts, most guests go on every dawn and dusk game drive to maximize their chance of seeing a tiger. A tiger in the wild looks different from the ones you see on Discovery Channel. Ours was massive, weighing almost 300 pounds and over six feet long. Wildlife conservationists use the term "charismatic megafauna" to describe animals that have great play in popular imagination. The tiger is a charismatic megafauna, as are the giant panda, blue whale and Asian elephant. Humans, by contrast, are not.

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