



Eye of the *Tiger*

GABRIEL O'RORKE heads to Kanha National Park in India in the hope of spotting one of the country's remaining 1,706 wild tigers, via brief pit-stops in Delhi and Mumbai

WE ARRIVE IN DELHI mid-morning and, sharing the road with tuk-tuks and water buffalo, we speed along the wide, leafy streets of New Delhi, finally rolling through the grand gates of the Taj Mahal Hotel. Lush and spacious, this is not what I expected from India's capital city. As we're shown to our room, large windows reveal birds of prey gliding over a green city. New Delhi and Old Delhi sit side by side; the former is affluent and grand (albeit still hectic) and the latter is

the 'real India' – i.e. a concentration of colours, smells and people.

Feeling delicate after a night in the skies, we take the day slowly, opting for a city tour to eke out some sort of understanding of the 5,000-year history that crafted this city. After visiting the 16th century Humayun's Tomb, India Gate and the Presidential Palace (the world's biggest presidential residence, with 340 rooms, and once home to the last viceroy Lord Mountbatten) we return to the hotel for supper. Varq, which means gold leaf, is the signature restaurant and Chef Hemant Oberoi's dishes – quite unbelievably – come garnished with 24-karat gold leaf.

“Everywhere I look, there is a photo waiting to be snapped”

The Narangi black cod infused with tangerine quite simply melts in the mouth but most impressive is the mango sorbet which arrives in a cloud of steam created by dry ice.

It's easy to get distracted by India's impressive metropolis – 'the heart of India' as Vik, our guide, calls it – but on this trip at least, city life is just the bread encasing a mouth-watering filling. We are here for a tiger safari and the next morning brings an early wake-up call

for a flight south. Landing at Jabalpur Airport, we commence the four-hour drive to Kanha National Park. Mud houses with terracotta roofs, monkeys,

goats and water buffalo, conical piles of sugar cane in the fields, children three-abreast wobbling along on a bicycle, women carrying pots or piles of wood on their heads, puppies sleeping on the warm tar roads; everywhere I look there is a photograph waiting to be snapped.

The drive passes in a colourful blur and we arrive at Banjaar Tola Safari Lodge. After being greeted by a line of cheery staff bearing cold flannels and lemonade, we make for our tented lodge. Standing on wooden legs ▶

▶ overlooking the Banjar River, the lodge is worthy of Livingstone with heavy wooden furniture, brass taps and wooden floors, all under a canvas canopy. The bathroom is the best part, complete with freestanding bath (which proves indispensable after dusty safaris) and a two-sided basin. It's charming, and very romantic.

After lunch we jump in the open-topped safari truck and trundle along the road to try our luck with the tigers. Kanha is the largest park in Central India, and it's more open than typical jungle terrain. We pass bamboo forests before entering vast grasslands dotted with deer. "India has 1,706 wild tigers," confirms Ramish, our guide. "There are 3,948 globally in the wild." As far as stats go, our chances sound fairly high, so my hopes soar as we drive past monkeys, peacocks, wild dogs and come to an abrupt halt as Ramish spots a sloth bear rummaging around in the undergrowth.

Thick-set with shaggy black coats, these bears eat berries, insects and honeycomb and the one before us seems to have found something particularly tasty.

Soon we find ourselves slipping into the routine of safari; up at 6am for whisky-laced porridge before snuggling up in the safari truck with rugs and hot water bottles. Our stay is to be split between two Taj safari lodges and, as our last morning comes round, still no tigers have shown their stripes. We heard

warning signals and even a mother calling for her cubs through the foliage; fellow guests had sightings and there was even talk of a kill. "It's a matter of luck," says Ramesh, failing to buoy our spirits. After a swim in the pool, and lunch of local fish, corn kebabs, dumplings in kofta, and the ubiquitous dahl, we bid adieu to Ramesh and set off for Baghvan Lodge in Pench.

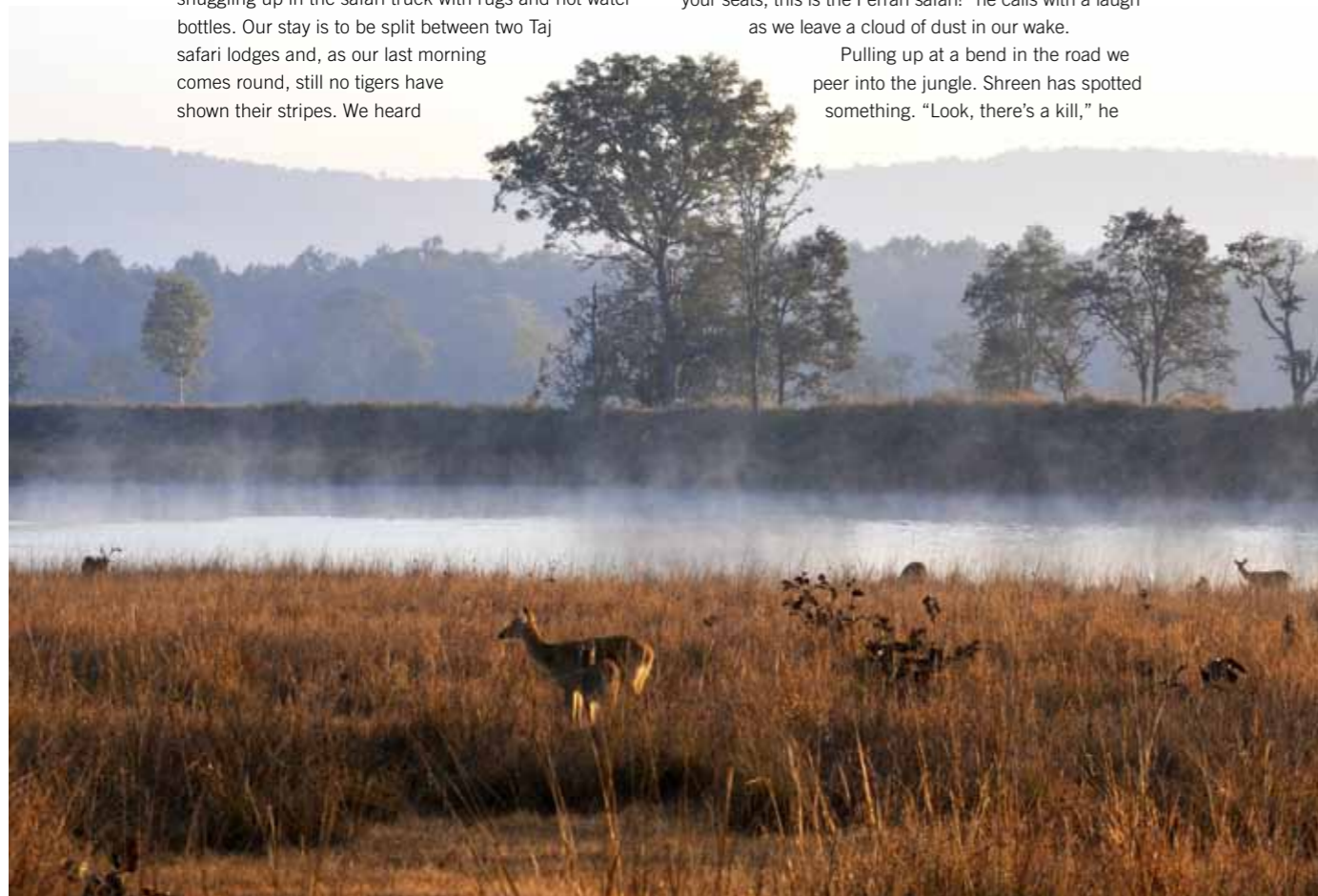
We arrive late and, after hot honey, ginger and lemon, make our way through the undergrowth to our suite. The bathroom and bedroom are connected by an outside walkway and the first floor is monopolised by a large day bed which our butler (yes, our butler) can prepare for a night al fresco. The next morning starts at 5.30am and before the sun has had a

chance to rise we find ourselves at the gates of the tiger reserve. True 'Kipling country', the place where Rudyard based his tale of Mowgli the man cub, the jungle is noticeably denser. This is going to be it; I have a feeling.

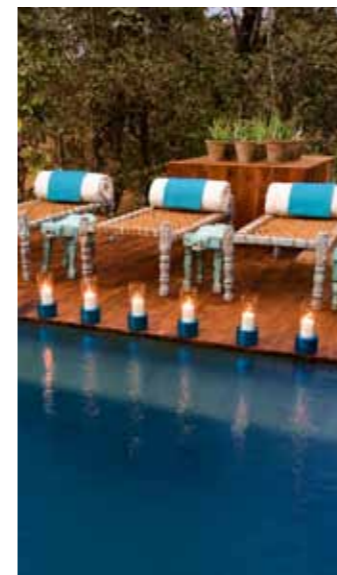
Again, monkeys line the road, cleaning each other – nit-picking to be precise – and making us laugh with their human-like features. Our guide, Shreenidhi, suddenly stops the 4WD. He has heard warning sounds. "Hold on to your seats; this is the Ferrari safari!" he calls with a laugh as we leave a cloud of dust in our wake.

Pulling up at a bend in the road we peer into the jungle. Shreen has spotted something. "Look, there's a kill," he

India has 1,706 wild tigers so our chances sound fairly high; hopes soar as we halt abruptly



Photography: Gabriel O'Rorke



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says as we pull out binoculars. And sure enough, there's a red flash of flesh underneath a tree. But no stripes stand out. Each outing passes like this; tiger fever peaks and troughs while monkeys, deer, guar and passing elephant safaris keep our cameras clicking. On our last safari, I stare into the jungle willing with every ounce of my being for a tiger to show itself. We pass a truck and the driver gives word of a sighting ten minutes' away. One of the passengers says there are three of them. I can hardly contain my excitement. One is all I need...

We speed along the small tracks until finally we pull to a halt. Shreen points through a window in the undergrowth and my eyes focus on a large rock topped by three sleeping cats. Three no less! The only thing is, these cats have spots not stripes. They are leopards, a mother lying with her cubs, cleaning one another. A feeling of awe runs through me. It seems we will not see a tiger, on this trip at least. These endangered creatures are known for being elusive, "burning bright, in the forests of the night", but their presence is palpable even if they don't show themselves. We saw paw prints aplenty, heard calls and apparently a tiger sneeze – not many people can lay claim to that! If their shy nature helps to protect these endangered creatures, then I am happy for our lack of sighting (although I can't promise that I won't come back and try my luck again).

The next morning we fly from Nagpur to Mumbai for our last night. From the depths and mystery of the jungle to this busy, buzzing city we are dropped from one world to another. The Taj Mahal Palace hotel is our destination in this city of 13 million people, a beautiful, opulent building on the waterfront overlooking the Gateway to India. As we settle down to supper by the swimming pool, our trip seems like a sepia-coloured dream. Thank goodness for photographs. ■

THE ESSENTIALS

Enchanting-Travels and Taj Hotels offer a wildlife and city break of nine nights and ten days from £3,215 per person based on two people sharing. All domestic flights, breakfast, airport and hotel transfers, private city sightseeing, activities, safaris, fees and taxes and a 24-hour point of contact are included. Safari lodges are on a full board basis.

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