



Why We Venture into the WILD

Panna National Park makes for a healing break from the noise and clutter of daily urban life. *By Kalyani Prasher*

WILDLIFE SAFARIS are not the most luxurious holidays one can opt for, especially in India. You wake up earlier than it should be legally permitted on a holiday; the jeep ride inside the park is bumpy; it is either too hot or too cold for the most part; you don't get to take a decent bathroom break for about five hours; and you often end up seeing nothing more than a sleepy peacock and a deer or two. Why do I still do it? Because it is also the only type of holiday that offers a complete break from daily life. Green, quiet, and with no connections to the world outside, the vacation comes with the thrill of seeing the animal kingdom's carefully constructed social order.

Observing the behaviour of different animals in their natural habitats—a deer family chilling in one another's watchful company, or a tiger marking his territory—recharges you in ways no other type of holiday can. In this era of smartphones, it is good to disconnect from your known world and immerse yourself in another, one with its own set of rules. The way of life in the jungle is endlessly fascinating. The predator-prey game is always on, and life is never taken for granted in a kingdom where the king is on the prowl. Panna National Park in Madhya Pradesh is one of these jungles, with about 35 tigers at last count.

While most people visit Panna in search of the

elusive striped cat, the biggest attraction for me is the park itself. One of the most beautiful forests in the country, the gorgeous landscape inside Panna shifts from lush thickets of teak, mahua, and arjun trees, to open meadows of tall grass, and the immensely green Dhundwa gorge, where you can see majestic vultures circling in the sky. On my last safari, I spotted an impossibly large red-headed vulture, a critically endangered species that is rare to see, let alone observe for 15-20 minutes like we did.

Since the forest experience can be rough, it is a good idea to pick a comfortable hotel to return to at the end of the safari. On the recommendation of a friend, I picked the Sarai at Toria. The small hotel is run by a wildlife conservationist couple, Dr. Raghu Chundawat and Joanna Van Gruisen, and its eight rooms are spread over 3.6 hectares of unspoiled, rustic landscape, made even lovelier by the River Ken that flows gently on one side.

The architecture and design of Sarai at Toria is its biggest selling point: spacious, minimal, and cottage-style rooms come with even larger bathrooms, both done up in muted, earthy tones. The thatched roof and fabricated mud exterior of the cottages, coupled with the large fields that surround them, make it seem like you are living in a local village (only with all the mod cons). Everything you see is exceedingly pleasing to the eye, especially the pair of jackals that regularly visited our room.

I spent many hours relaxing by the river, outside the main dining hall, where you eat all your meals with the hotel's other guests. Sharing safari stories with an intimate group of 12-15 likeminded people over home-style Indian or Continental food is a joy itself.

Apart from the jungle safari, I took a bird-watching boat tour on the Ken (comes complimentary with the stay). As the local boatman steered our little ride across the river, we saw a range of beautiful birds—common kingfisher, pied kingfisher, several cormorants, egrets, and so on. The boat ride starts an hour before sunset, and on the return journey, you can see the shimmering sun setting over the



THE DETAILS

GETTING THERE

The closest airport is Khajuraho; Panna is just a 30-minute drive from here.

STAY

Sarai at Toria offers eight independent cottage rooms, each with an attached bathroom, a verandah, and a private courtyard. *Doubles from ₹17,800 per night; saraiattoria.com*

DO

You can book morning and evening safaris through the hotel or at forest.mponline.gov.in. Instead of flying out of Khajuraho, take the Shatabdi train from Jhansi on your return. On the drive from Panna to Jhansi, you can stop at the lovely Orchha Fort and spend an hour or two exploring the town or sit by the River Betwa. The famous Khajuraho temple complex is just a half-hour drive from the hotel and can be done on any day during your stay.



From top: All the guests of the hotel eat in a common space, outside the dining hall; boat safari on the River Ken; a common kingfisher.



Ken—a breathtaking sight that will stay with me for many sunsets to come.

A trip to Panna National Park is full of such memorable moments. Whether it is the quietude of the forest, the stillness of the water, or the refreshing change of scenery, there is joy to be had in every little thing you do, every single day. ✕

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JOAN GRAVELLI/ALAMY; SHUTTERSTOCK; RINDI INDIA/GETTYIMAGES; SHUTTERSTOCK; SHUTTERSTOCK

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF SARAI AT TORIA; LEISA TYLER/CONTRIBUTOR/GETTYIMAGES; YAJUVENDRA UPADHYAYA