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Travel: The wild wild west!

A safari through Ranthambore National Park both keeps you in the moment and takes you back in time

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Isheta Salgaocar
Hindustan Times



Ranthambore codes its tigers with the letter T and a number against the letter so as to keep track of them (Isheta Salgaocar)

There is a particular familiarity that Ranthambore National Park holds for me: you can at once feel at home and entirely foreign. It is the land of the tigers, their kingdom and their fiefdom. The lack of city sounds at first feels disconcerting and strange, there is no cellphone network for kilometres, artificial light is scarce and built up structures are few. You could as easily have tigers walking through historic relics from the 12th century as swimming through one of the park's lakes. There is no other place that offers that landscape which weaves history with nature.

Resigning oneself to the will of the forest is a prescription no doctor can give you, yet it makes one feel more alive than ever

but even more so being one with yourself. From the point that you enter the park gates from the magnificent Jogi Mahal gate, which stands in the shadows of the fort, to leaving the park

One of the reasons I possibly come back to Ranthambore is because I do feel it is a haven: it coerces you to live in the moment and ignore the noise. The park gives you a feeling of coming home and being one with nature,

just shy of sunset it's almost as though the world beyond doesn't exist; it's a detox for the mind and a jigsaw puzzle for the senses.

In the moment

Being cut off from the world of cellphones and screens most certainly helps, but there is something about being in the jamun tree grove in Ranthambore or traversing the lakes around Rajbagh, which make you want to leave behind that busy life and just focus on the now. At the risk of sounding like a self-styled self-help evangelist I will say that it forces you to just be present. Being in that raw environment, you see things as they are in their true form. Nature holds a mirror up to you, making you question your own place in the larger universe. At once humbling and disconcerting, it forces a conversation with yourself.



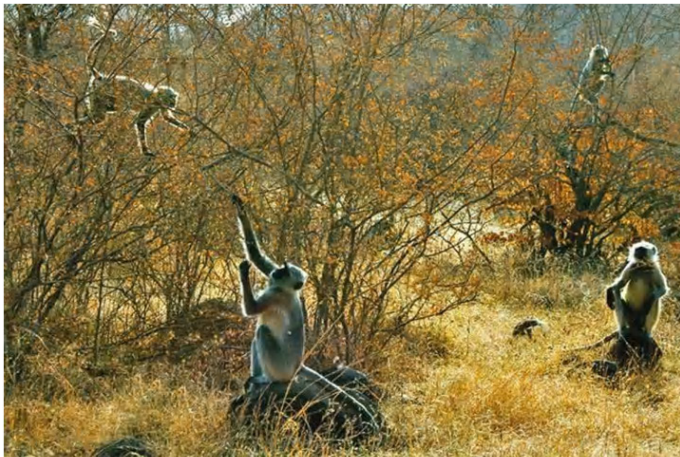
The park wakes and sleeps for us visitors from sunrise to sunset. There's a semblance of life perhaps as it was meant to be, and probably as it was. Ranthambore once served as hunting grounds for the Mughals; the winds here blow with stories of the past; the trees hold secrets of men and tigers alike. Tracking tigers, listening to the forest, picking up different scents, looking beyond the obvious and defeating nature's camouflage skills – it is a glimpse possibly into the rhythms and lifestyles of our ancestors. A childlike excitement takes over as you hear the spotted deer alarm-call when they see a tiger in the vicinity, often echoed by the peacocks warning their mates of the danger around them, and then attempt to find that tiger. One may not always successfully find one, but half the thrill is in the chase.

Being human

Over the last few years, Ranthambore has been a place I retreat to in search of solace. A large part of this is the existence of Sher Bagh, a lodge run by Anjali and Jaisal Singh's Suján Luxury, which offers all the comforts one might want in a luxurious yet conservation-focused setting, entirely lit by lanterns at night and with rooms roofed by hand-stitched tents that allow the forest orchestra to serve as your alarm. It is my version of an ideal pilgrimage, allowing for exploration and self-discovery; a cleansing only nature can offer.

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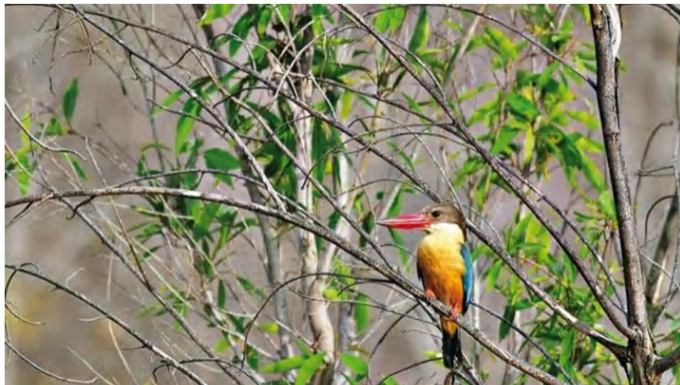


Monkeys often serve as the broadcasting network of the jungle (Isheta Salgaocar)

In many ways, I return to this park for purely selfish reasons but these safaris are also where someone as structured and impatient as I am learned that sometimes in life you need a plan that allows for flexibility, that patience can actually be a virtue. There is no on-demand service here: you wait your turn, you try and use all your senses to find a tiger.

One may not always successfully find a tiger in the forest, but half the thrill is in the chase!

others where it seemed the forest was fast asleep and not even a peacock showed a feather. There's no instant gratification within that world, and just because you showed up doesn't mean a tiger will show too: there is no guarantee whatsoever.



I've had drives into the park where it felt like the tigers were popping out of the woodwork and if you took your eyes off the dust roads for a second you may trample their tails. And

Different species of birds are a regular sight in Ranthambore (Isheta Salgaocar)

The forest and being on safari has taught me the art of being patient (sometimes to no avail and not a tiger's tail in sight) and that there is a wonderful calm in letting go in a situation which is entirely beyond your control. Resigning oneself to the will of the forest is a prescription no doctor can give you, yet it makes one feel more alive than ever before. When a tiger looks at you, you almost feel she is gazing into your soul. At that point, it's just you and your opposable thumbs to defend yourself and that humbling feeling of being a human in the tiger's world is unparalleled.

Burning bright

As the sun rises overhead, the forest awakens with birds chirping and shaking the dew off their feathers, and the herbivores springing to life now that the light is in their favour again.

Ranthambore codes its tigers with the letter T and a number against the letter so as to keep track of them. One winter morning a few years ago, as we set out in search of T19, chital (Indian spotted deer) snorted their alarm calls in the distance, followed by the monkeys. Monkeys often serve as the broadcasting network of the jungle making a jolly racket about everything, and especially when they see a predator. The peacocks followed with their shrill alarm calls, and the cacophony between the three continued for some time until our forest guide judged the direction they were looking towards, and manoeuvred the jeep towards it. These sounds became more frequent and could only mean a tiger was near.



The park offers a landscape that weaves history with nature (Isheta Salgaocar)

From the point you enter the park gates to leaving it, it's a detox for the mind and a jigsaw puzzle for the senses

As we meandered around the lakes, listening for alarm calls, which by now had quietened down a bit we assumed the tiger had stopped to get a pulse of the forest. We turned the corner, entered an emerald green patch of

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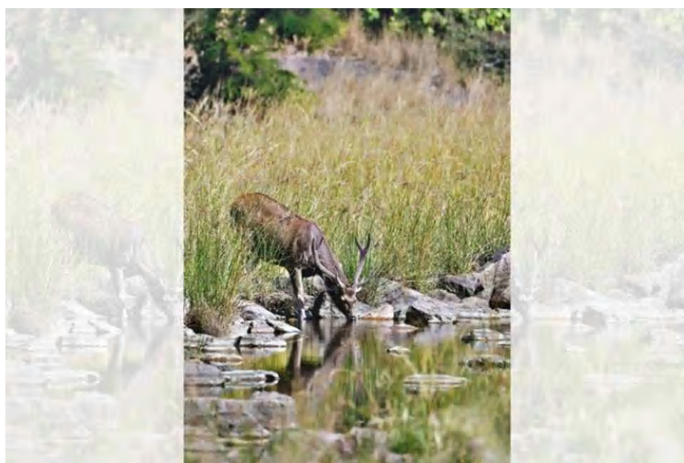
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forest, when something moved and shone like a jewel: an orangey-brown coat which blended in with the surroundings but, once you saw it, stood out in sharp contrast. There she was: T19 aka Brat.

She emerged out of the greens, alarm calls trailing her every step, as though announcing the arrival of a queen and calling for all creatures to beware her presence. The bush and foliage seemed thick yet she made her way through them like it were freshly-mowed grass: where she walked the path began.

Colours of the earth

Although seeing a Ranthambore tiger is a spiritual experience for me, the drives through the park's various zones (there are 10 in total and only 20 percent of the total land area is open to the public), moving from the dusty roads with spotted deer grazing, to the lush green groves, to the lakes, and through what seems like four or five different topographies, you're left amazed at all that nature has to offer. The behaviour of the park and everything within changes with the seasons, and what might be verdant green in October after the monsoon seems arid in the Rajasthan May heat. Summer enables the flame of the forest trees to glow, the blossoms lighting up the forest with bright orange. The various creatures within adapt to the change in temperatures, access to water and fodder. It reminds me how ill-equipped we are without our air conditioning, fans and refrigeration.



Witnessing the deers and hearing their alarm calls is a spiritual experience (Isheta Salgaocar)

I came back to Ranthambore this March and our first afternoon safari drive had some wonderful moments with three individual tigers – one in an evergreen tree grove that was so lush it looked photo-shopped, one in water at the base of banyan tree so massive the tiger seemed dwarfed, and a third whom we almost missed. Having thoroughly enjoyed the tiger sightings, we made our way back to the park gates to exit, conversation dripping with joy and excited smiles across our faces. As we drove back, out of nowhere, with no alarm calls within hearing, there sitting on the side of the road was a male tiger: just minding his own business,

trying to get some respite from the flies on his nose. His gorgeous eyes turned towards the jeep, as uninterested as we were excited, and then went back to his grass throne. If my friend A hadn't actually turned to that side of the road at the split second that we drove by, we might have missed him. That is also the forest, you only see what it allows you to see; only the rules of nature apply here.



The forest teaches one the art of being patient (Isheta Salgaocar)

"Whenever we touch nature we get clean. People who have got dirty through too much civilisation take a walk in the woods or a bath in the sea. Entering the unconscious, entering yourself through dreams, is touching nature from the inside and this is the same thing, things are put right again," wrote Carl Jung. There is perhaps no better place to experience this feeling than in Ranthambore; I always leave fulfilled, having fed the soul, yet yearning to return.