

Travel

How to tour Rajasthan like a king



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Literally translated, Rajasthan means “the land of the kings”. This north-west Indian state is a place where you can reach out and touch the romantic idea of the East – it’s a region of magnificent palaces, heroic forts and majestic beasts roaming in the wilderness. The traditional “golden triangle” tourist route dips into Rajasthan at Jaipur (the other two ‘corners’ being nearby Delhi and Agra) and, increasingly, travellers are digressing from this beaten path to better explore the colours and sights of the country’s most history-suffused region. We recommend you do the same, and that while there you make use of this shrinkwrapped itinerary...

Stop 3: Ranthambhore

This 392km² national park is famous for its Bengal tigers and dramatic wilderness

Getting there: Sawai Madhopur station is a 2hr10 minute train ride from Jaipur

Stay at: Sujān Sher Bagh



If you didn’t know why tourists flocked to Ranthambhore, you’d be in no doubt the second you alighted at nearby Sawai Madhopur train station. Its whitewashed walls are adorned with paintings of the area’s most famous resident: the Bengal tiger.

While there’s never any guarantee you’ll see a tiger on your visit to Ranthambhore, you can certainly maximise your chances – and ensure you have an unforgettable time while trying – by staying at Sher Bagh.

The experience begins the moment you leave the train station, where, amid the hawkers and the chaos, you’ll be greeted with a pristinely uniformed Sher Bagh driver and butler bearing silver platters with hand towels and refreshments in cut crystal glassware. Then it’s time to clamber aboard the roofless Sher Bagh jeep, wrap yourself in a fleecy blanket and prepare to be transported back into another era.

As the wind whips through your hair and bright lights of Sawai Madhopur give way to a dusty track through the wilderness, you begin to get a sense of what Sher Bagh is all about: a seamless blend of luxury and ruggedness, being at one with nature while simultaneously enjoying exceptional hospitality.



Sher Bagh camp consists of 12 large, hand-stitched white canvas tents arranged in a semi circle layout, inspired by the safari encampments used by royalty and dignitaries in the Twenties. The tents are immaculately furnished with beautifully crafted “campaign style” furniture, a stylistic reference to the pieces used by Edward VIII on his 1921 tour of India before becoming King. Each also has its own comfortable bathroom and sizeable front porch, where you can sit outside on bespoke leather camping furniture. Two of the tents are suites, the finest of which, the royal Burra Sahib suite, boasts its own pool.



Spectacular tiger photographs taken by the couple hang from the walls of the few solid buildings in Sher Bagh – which include a breakfast room, a bar, a boutique shop and a lounge – giving you a taste of what may lie ahead on safari.

Not all guests that stay at Sher Bagh book their game drives through the hotel but, while it’s more expensive, we highly recommend you do so. Firstly, the hotel knows the fiendishly byzantine safari permit system inside out. That means it can not only arrange a private jeep for the standard three-and-a-half hour morning or afternoon safari in one of the national park’s regulated zones, but also has access to extended half-day or full-day drives in which your driver is free to roam across all the zones. Secondly, Sher Bagh uses its own specially-customised jeeps with soft furnishings and added suspension, as well as carefully selected guides and drivers, to make the voyage over Ranthambhore’s rocky terrain extra comfortable and improve your chances of seeing a tiger. Yadd, our guide, had had everyone from Prince Andrew to John Prescott in the back of his safari jeep over the years. Sher Bagh adds a five-star touch to the proceedings by stashing a picnic basket with masala tea, coffee and tiffin in the boot for an in-park refreshment.



Seeing tigers roaming in the wild is a truly magical experience. The population in Ranthambhore is at its healthiest in decades, with more than 60 tigers now calling it home. We were enchanted to watch as one female cub sauntered past and lay down near the side of the track, before going to play flight with her twin sister and then coughing up a furball. On our second foray into the park, Yadd expertly used the sounds of sambar deer warning calls, and scoured the tracks for fresh tiger paw prints, to locate the majestic creatures in a low valley, basking in the sun.

Back at the camp after an exhilarating game drive, a fabulous dinner is served in a different area of the premises each night, from the side of the main pool to the campfire. The breads, cooked in a traditional oven were some of the finest we tasted in India; the jalebi (deep-fried lentil spirals) served with rabdi (cardamom-flavoured reduced milk) was another highlight. Dinner is where Sher Bagh’s intersection of ruggedness and luxury is perhaps at its apex: cocktails and first-class cooking are enjoyed while sitting amid high grasses in the heart of tiger country, the whole area illuminated by hundreds of candles strung from the trees.



Sher Bagh’s immersion in nature means you won’t find high boundary walls attempting to keep the wildlife out, and there’s an outside chance that the camp’s staff will have to engage “T.P.” or tiger protocol while you’re there. A young female named Lightning is known to frequent the camp as, on occasion, is her male suitor. Neither visited while we stayed, though a network of early warning alerts from locals kept Sujān’s charming Vice President and Director of Experiences, Yusuf Ansari, updated on their whereabouts in the area. Camera traps at popular points on the perimeter fence should capture any big cats entering the camp; on our final night, staff were keeping a watchful eye on a leopard lounging near the power generator.

Sher Bagh’s monitoring systems mean that hopefully you won’t come face-to-face with a big cat on camp. But when you wake up in the morning, listen carefully and you may hear the faint sound of little creatures playing on your tent roof (a light patter means squirrels; heavier paws are probably monkeys). The whole stay is like nothing you will have experienced. Leaving was like emerging from a dream.