

EMBARK ON THE
ULTIMATE WILDLIFE
EXPERIENCE IN INDIA
WITH CC AFRICA AND
TAJ HOTELS RESORTS
AND PALACES...

Out of India

Lions And Tigers & Chital (Lots And Lots Of Chital), Oh My!

MOVING OUT OF AFRICA'S SHADOW, INDIA IS EMERGING AS THE COUNTRY
TO HEAD TO FOR THE DREAM SAFARI.



by Kevin Raub

INDIA • MADHYA PRADESH • BANDHAVGARH NATIONAL PARK • PENCH NATIONAL PARK

To some, a wildlife safari in India may seem a tad ironic. After all, any trip to India is a safari in and of itself, given the varied wildlife that roams the streets here

— in the large metropolitan areas of New Delhi as well as in the tiniest of villages. On two different multi-hour drives through the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, we have countless sightings of langur and rhesus monkeys, peacocks, cattle egrets, donkeys, goats, cows, wild boars, eagles, camels, and wild horses. We even spot an elephant — and all this before entering Bandhavgarh and Pench National Parks, where two new safari lodges are changing the way safaris go down on the Indian subcontinent. I mean, it's a jungle out there.

Indian safaris have always played second fiddle to African ones, with the allure of the latter continent's big-five game dominating Hollywood movies as well as numerous novels the world over. Africa's varied wildlife, luxurious lodges, and private game reserves have historically proved too much competition for India, which traditionally has lacked neither a comparative infrastructure nor an equivalent level of sophistication. But in a new joint venture between Conservation

Corporation Africa (CC Africa) — one of the continent's leading conservation and safari specialists, and which runs more than 40 luxury game lodges in six African countries — and Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces, India's most recognizable hotel chain, \$3 million (and counting) has been plunked down to make over the Indian safari.

For those who may not know, India is home to more than half of the world's

wildlife viewing:
India's hilly open terrain includes many large grassland meadows that offer good chances of Royal Bengal tiger sightings.

century to a downright shameful figure that today is estimated to hover between 2,500 and 4,000. And India holds the distinction of being the only country in the world in which both lions and tigers reside. Intrepid travelers, bear that in mind when you come here and go on safari.

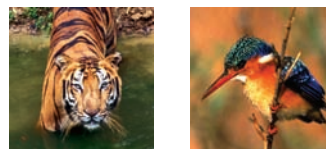
I soon learn, though, that India's national parks are also home to a slew of fascinating animals that I've never heard of (and not just because some of them are referred to



endangered tigers, though its numbers are declining fast. Poaching and other environmental concerns have contributed to the Indian tiger population's plummet from 40,000 at the turn of the twentieth

only by their Hindi names). Do you know what a gaur is? I thought not.

Because of that, Taj and CC Africa have planned five new luxury game lodges in



BANDHAVGARH IS HOME TO THE HIGHEST CONCENTRATION OF ROYAL BENGAL TIGERS IN THE WORLD; AN ESTIMATED 55 OF THEM MAKE THEIR HOME WITHIN THE 450-SQUARE-MILE PRESERVE.

five national parks in India. The first one, Mahua Kothi, just opened in Bandhavgarh National Park, in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. Bandhavgarh is home to the highest concentration of Royal Bengal tigers in the world; an estimated 55 of them make their home within the 450-square-mile preserve. Visiting here is all about seeing the majestic beasts, though the lodge itself ain't too shabby, either. Taj and CC Africa took over the former Churhat Kothi Lodge, let loose Johannesburg-based designer Chris Brown on the property to transform it from a \$300-a-night lodge into a \$600-a-night lodge, and voilà! the first luxe Indian safari was up-and-running.

After a one-hour flight south from New Delhi, it's time to take a white-knuckle, six-hour car ride from Khajuraho, the nearest village with an airport and home to one of India's most stunning sets of preserved temples (and not much else), across Madhya Pradesh. As my co-safarist and I enter through the gates at Mahua Kothi, we are relieved by the 180-degree turn in the landscape. The madness that is India's streets and highways gives way to 12 tranquil clay bungalows, called kutiyas, swathed in a forest of bamboo.

mahua kothi:
Each of Mahua Kothi's twelve charming suites or kutiyas (jungle village huts) are built in the vernacular style of Central India.



Inside, katni stone floors and sol-wood-beamed ceilings bookend a cozy retreat full of indigenous arts and crafts from Fabindia, one of India's most tasteful home-furnishings stores — and there's an inviting king-size bed that begs for anything but safaris. It's the kind of place where you could sleep forever.

We are scheduled for our first game drive in the afternoon with our naturalist, Kartikeya. We go over some of the distinct differences between African and Indian safaris. For one, national parks in India are public — there are no

private game reserves — and therefore are open to anyone and everyone. For another, the local guides, whom everyone entering the park must hire, do not carry weapons. (The local guides should not be confused with the naturalists, who are trained and educated by CC Africa, but who still cannot enter the park without a local guide.)

As far as landscapes go, Africa is known for its vast, open savannas and grasslands, while India's parks are more jungly. (Though the word jungle actually derives from Hindi, a jungle is really more of a





forest than what we normally think of as a lush jungle. But Rudyard Kipling's famous *The Jungle Book* was partly based here, so who am I to argue?) It's the last major difference, though, that strikes us as the most surprising: There are no fences along the park's boundaries.

Okay, I'll bite. "So how do you keep the tigers in the park?" I inquire, thinking of the nearby villages our driver left in a trail of dust only minutes before. Kartikeya smiles. "We don't," he says. He tells us that just last month, two local cattle herders were killed by a tiger. With that, we enter the park.

The first thing we see is a herd of chital, a kind of spotted deer that is by far the most common animal in Indian parks. Now, I realize that flying all the way to India to go on safari to see an animal whose cousin can be found in headlights from Connecticut to California might seem silly, but there is one important caveat: Tigers feed on chital. Their warning call, a sort of high-pitched coo, is the first sign that a tiger is nearby. Within the first 15 minutes of the safari, we see about 100 chital. They are everywhere. "I have a feeling I'm going to get very sick of chital," I say to my friend. "I already am," he snaps.

We also start spotting wild boars, which Kartikeya enthusiastically points out. This is especially amusing to us, since wild boars pretty much roam free all over Indian cities. It's like going to a zoo in the States and gawking at pigeons. It's at this point, though, that things quickly get more interesting. Normally, I couldn't care less about birds, with the exception of ones that talk, but an Indian safari could make a birder out of anyone. We spot plum-headed parakeets, black-hooded orioles, and Tickell's blue flycatchers within the first few moments. We riffle through the field guide to find out what we're seeing. It's endlessly fascinating — I'm actually shocked at my own level of interest — but a tiger it ain't.

Then, just as I find myself contemplating membership in the American Birding Association, there's a sudden commotion in our jeep. "Tiger on the road!" is all I hear from Kartikeya as he steps on the accelerator. We're there in seconds, along with about six other jeeps lined up like paparazzi. We were alone only seconds before, and I do a double take to make sure it's actually a tiger and not the future queen of England. "Some of the local guides carry cell phones, even

the setting:
Nestled in the vicinity of the breathtaking Bandhavgarh National Park, Mahua Kothi blends charmingly into the quaint and rustic surroundings.

though it's forbidden," Kartikeya later says in explanation of the surreal *Us Weekly* moment.

Nonetheless, we have a prime spot. The tiger is a nearly two-year-old cub, which is interesting because he is as full grown as any tiger I have ever seen in a zoo. He's about 15 feet away and completely oblivious to the gaping mouths and clicking shutters all around him. As he rounds a tree, he haunches up and begins to slowly creep — gracefully, gorgeously — toward some unforeseen victim. He's stalking.

Suddenly, he springs forward for a chital, though it turns out he is merely toying with it, as his hunting skills are not yet honed. The whole thing leaves us all quite jazzed. "Your first tiger in the wild?" asks Kartikeya. "Oh yes!" we say in unison. "Congratulations," he says. We would see two more by the next day (one from the vantage point of the back of a four-

...THERE'S A SUDDEN COMMOTION IN OUR JEEP. "TIGER ON THE ROAD!" IS ALL I HEAR FROM KARTIKEYA AS HE STEPS ON THE ACCELERATOR. WE'RE THERE IN SECONDS, ALONG WITH ABOUT SIX OTHER JEEPS LINED UP LIKE PAPARAZZI.

ton elephant), along with something called a sambar, whose clever name simply means "animal" in Hindi. I'll raise



the ante here on specificity and say it looks a lot like a moose.

We head out the next morning for Pench National Park, which is about an eight-hour drive to the southwest and the site of the second Taj and CC Africa lodge. Pench doesn't have near the tiger population of



Bandhavgarh, but it is home to a healthy leopard population, 350 species of birds, and a whole slew of other animals that, again, none of us have ever heard of.

Pench differs from Bandhavgarh in that it is a teak forest (as opposed to sal) and, overall, much more dense and far less crowded. It's also India's only interstate tiger reserve, as its collective space crosses the border with the neighboring state of Maharashtra. The lodge here, called

baghvan:
Baghvan's spacious, rustic standalone suites and airy guest areas make a wondrous starting point for your journey into the wild.

Baghvan, is scheduled to open a few weeks after our visit, so we stay at a nearby lodge, where we meet Saruth, who is not only our naturalist but also the head naturalist for all of CC Africa's Indian operations. We pick up our local guide and hit the park. Again, there are chital. Lots of chital. We tell Saruth not to bother, as we saw roughly 5,000 in Bandhavgarh.

Thus, the first spotting at Pench that shocks and awes us is of the Indian roller, a gorgeous bird whose dynamic turquoise wingspan looks Photoshopped — it's that vibrant. At this point, I begin to see my future as a birder. It pains me to think about it, but I assume that will ease with time. Next is our first spotting of the aforementioned gaur, an endangered species that, as it turns out, is the largest bovine in the world. Basically, it's a big, bad bull that has an average weight of one ton. Seeing it is the highlight of our morning drive, which otherwise leaves a lot to be desired from a wildlife standpoint.

The afternoon, however, proves radically different. Things immediately start well: Right after entering the park, we spot a jungle cat, one of the more uncommon cat species in this park. Notoriously shy, he waddles on down the road at a slight hustle when he sees us and eventually disappears into the high grass. Then another curious fellow appears, the nilgai, which is an antelope but looks more like what might result if a horse and a deer had a few too many cocktails one night on spring break. Where do all these odd animals come from?

Just a few minutes later, we glimpse one of the rarest sights in Pench: a rusty-

spotted cat. Only slightly larger than a domestic cat, it darts across the road a few hundred feet in front of us. Saruth hits the gas to catch up, while our local guide says only one word: "Eagle." At first, the significance of that doesn't register with us. We've seen eagles. Big whoop. We continue to track the cat, but he insists: "Eagle," he says, pointing high above, into the trees. Then we realize what is happening. A crested hawk-eagle, a fierce bird of prey, is stalking the cat and is only moments away from pouncing on it with Discovery Channel brutality. Seconds later, he does just that.

He dives straight down, kamikaze-style, and ambushes the cat from above. Luckily, the knee-high grass blocks our view of the initial blow, but as we pull up alongside the kill zone, we see what likely is every bit as haunting. The eagle has a relentless grip on the cat's neck, and the cat is no longer moving. Through binoculars, we see the eagle's menacing, otherworldly eyes — full of sheer, unadulterated yellow terror — as it stares right at us in a motionless trance. I'm horrified yet fascinated.

The standoff — the eagle with the cat, us with the eagle — lasts 15 minutes. The eagle's stare never once strays from us, as if sending a very, very serious warning through the most sinister set of eyes I have ever seen in my life. No horror movie could ever do the moment justice. Is this what bird-watching is all about? If so, I'm out. Were it a non-traceable sack of a million dollars in this bird's death grip, I wouldn't dare make a move toward it. (Sad, I know, but true.) "Shall we go?" asks Saruth. Yes, please.

