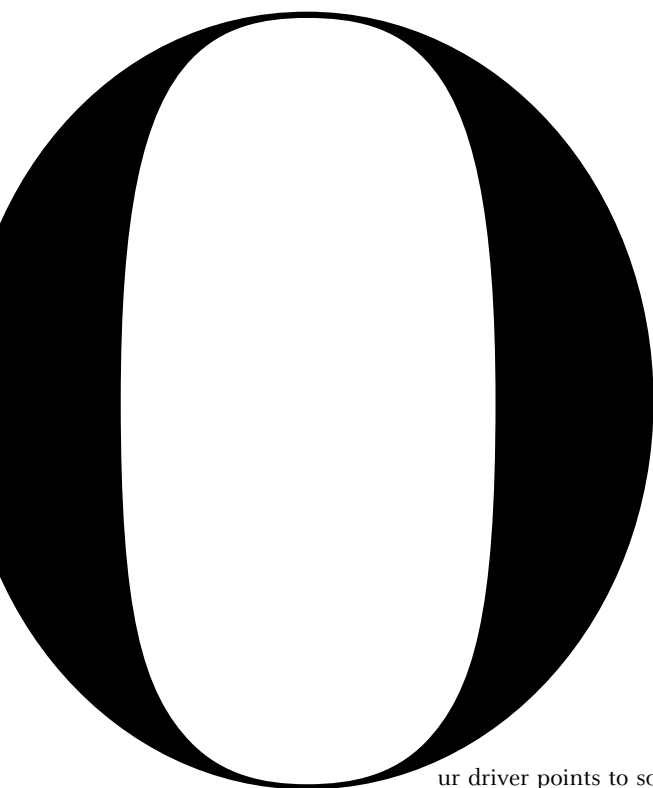


TRAVEL

# THE NEW SAFARI

India, with its magnificent Royal Bengal tigers, now ranks with Africa as an exotic wildlife-spotting destination.

BY MASA TAKEI



ur driver points to something charging through the dead leaves carpeting the forest floor. Dark breast, auburn hackles flowing down to flanks the colour of dried blood. It's the mother of all chickens. Well, technically it's the father, the rooster. But sure enough, right behind him, dressed in austere mottled beige, is the hen. *Gallus gallus*, the Red Jungle Fowl, the bird from which all chickens are said to have descended.

My poultry meditation is disrupted by others in my group anxious to see different wildlife. There's no sating their voracious appetite for viewing the arguably nobler, and definitely more endangered, Royal Bengal tiger. We are in Bandhavgarh National Park, in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh—the same state that provided the setting for Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* and claims one of the highest tiger densities left anywhere.

When we return from our outing, a line of lodge staff awaits at the Taj Hotels resort of Mahua Kothi with trays of lemon water and refreshingly cool, damp towels. Ram, my personal valet, offers to carry the few things I have with me. (Taj Hotels have a two-to-one staff-to-guest ratio and assign one staff member to each visitor for the length of their stay.) As we pass the

**“The striped star of the show exudes undeniable charisma, still reigning over a diminished domain.”**

main lodge I comment on a distinctive scent in the air, something like pipe smoke. “That’s elephant dung,” says hotel manager Neel Gogate, behind me.

Formerly a tiger biologist, Gogate realized that research alone wouldn’t save the tigers, and that involving the local communities in tourism and its spinoff economic benefits could be a powerful way to raise awareness. Project Tiger, launched in 1973, created nine tiger reserves (there are now 27). Yet ongoing habitat degradation and poaching have meant only a marginal increase in numbers.

We pass a groundskeeper manicuring the soft, soundless sawdust paths winding through the sal and bamboo forest surrounding the dozen guest huts that are modern takes on traditional dwellings. Mud- and cow-dung-plastered brick walls in saffron orange echo the surrounding soil. The dung acts as a natural antiseptic and, surprisingly, keeps insects away. Inside, the walls are white lime plaster, and jute carpets cover the red sandstone floor. Decor details are extraordinary: royal guard mannequins standing watch over teak treasure boxes and banana leaf baskets. The light fixtures are antique, the pillows Italian cotton and the bathroom counter is a four-metre slab of sal wood.

Later on at Banjaar Tola, the next lodge on our tiger circuit, we trade huts for tents—but we aren’t exactly roughing it. My first night I find a hot bubble bath already drawn, sprinkled with marigold petals and surrounded with candles. A sweating gin and tonic awaits on a hand-hammered brass tray, likely sent by Bishnu, our thoughtful Nepalese barman.

The sun drifts through a veil of wood smoke from the neighbouring village and drops below the horizon. Tonight

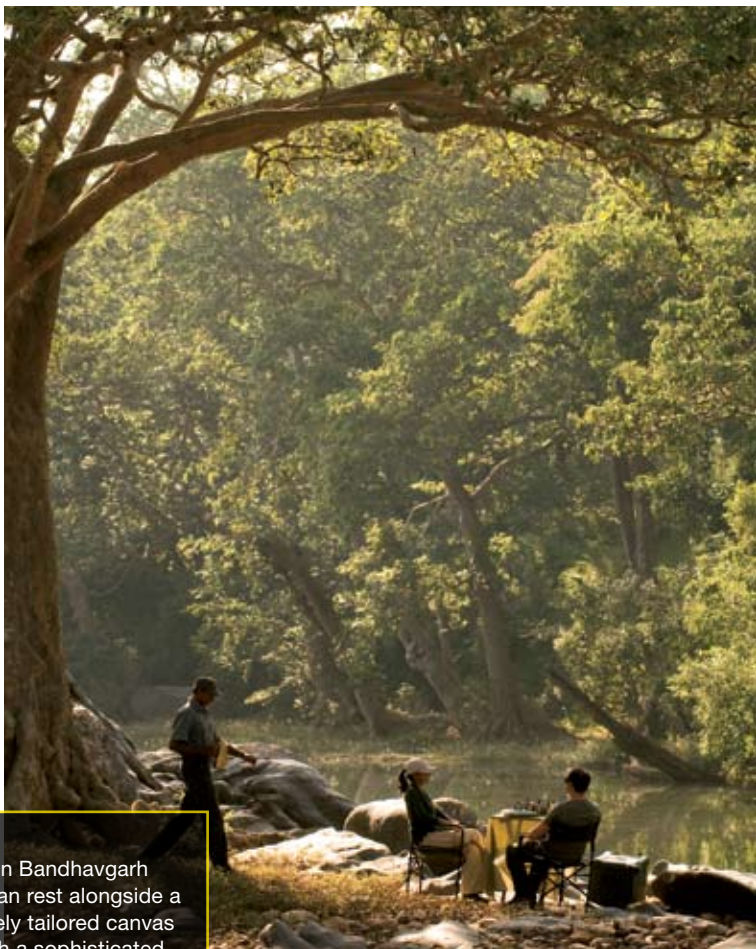
## STAY

Taj Hotels’ four new safari lodges ([tajsafaris.com](http://tajsafaris.com)) in remote national parks are the subcontinent’s new hot spots. Mahua Kothi in Bandhavgarh, Pashan Garh in Panna, Banjaar Tola in Kanha and Baghvan in Pench all provide small, luxury accommodations with every whim catered to. **Tip:** Never land without transportation pre-arranged unless you love unbridled chaos that rivals a stock exchange floor. We used India Safaris & Tours (91-11-2680-7750, [indiasafaris.com](http://indiasafaris.com)).





At Mahua Kothi in Bandhavgarh National Park you can rest alongside a river in an elaborately tailored canvas tent, complete with a sophisticated heating and cooling system. Step inside and it could be a Bollywood penthouse—but, instead of the lights of Mumbai, there's lush forest foliage and a calm river below—the perfect spot for a post-sighting cordial.







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The World Wildlife Federation estimates that there are about 1,850 Royal Bengal tigers in the wild, about 1,400 of them in India. The number has plummeted by 90 percent in the past century.

we sup under the mahua tree, tables lit by a dozen kerosene lanterns suspended from its widespread branches, feasting amid the throb of drums and crash of hand cymbals as members of the local Baiga tribe dance and sing in hopes of a good monsoon.

We all appreciate that we're now in an oasis of calm amid the sensory overload of India. When we first arrived, just riding along the highway felt like a human safari. I saw a family of four aboard a motorcycle, sari fluttering, a little boy asleep on the gas tank. Another family of eight thumped down the road, balanced on the struts of an agricultural irrigation pump on wheels. And always around us the alarm calls of the urban jungle: the honking of horns. *"Une heure de paix sans klaxons!"* [One hour of peace without horns!] wrote one weary visitor from Paris in the re-sort guestbook.

The next day's dawn brings the cooing of doves and hooting of something more insistent. It's chilly enough that we appreciate the hot water bottles wrapped in grey flannel and matching wraps waiting for us in the Jeep. Half an hour later, morning cold forgotten, we sit in the park, listening intently for intermittent alarm calls breaking the regular murmur of the jungle. Our young naturalist guide, Hada, sporting an impressive handlebar moustache, cocks his head and identifies the distant animal warning calls. The mewing of a spotted deer, the barking of langur monkeys, all potentially indicating predators on the prowl.

### PROJECT TIGER

In 1973 the World Wildlife Fund partnered with the government of India in an attempt to curb the precipitous decline of Royal Bengal tigers in the wild. The result, Project Tiger, has been instrumental in creating wildlife reserves and fostering education among the local population about habitat degradation as well as learning about protection measures against these still formidable predators. Their tiger reserves now cover 1.14 percent of the entire country, and they've doubled the number of tigers in the wild since the project's inception.

The goal is to double the population of tigers again to 7,000 by 2022, which coincides with the next Year of the Tiger. To find out more about Project Tiger, visit [projecttiger.nic.in](http://projecttiger.nic.in).

Perhaps a leopard or a sloth bear or, what we all can't get enough of, a tiger.

Acting on what he's heard, Hada shifts the Tata turbo diesel engine into gear. Customized with tiered seating, it has no bad seats; it's as if we're on a floating section of an IMAX theatre and have drifted into the screen. We roll past a flock of brilliant green Alexandrine parakeets, which rise with a screech, and a

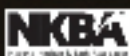
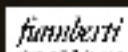
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Baghvan puts an end to the idea that heading into the bush means sacrificing creature comforts.

peacock (the national bird), its full fan on brilliant display. A mohawked wild boar rolls in the mud and some swamp deer lock horns. Several gaurs—immense wild cattle that are so massively muscular they look like they might tip forward—raise their heads when they hear a warning call nearby.

Then we come upon the regal apex predator. Rather, we have come upon the herd of Jeeps that commonly surround it—there are thirty or so other vehicles, jostling for position, a veritable Delhi-style traffic jam. Some humans jabber like monkeys and yell; others shush for quiet. We, the most rapacious beasts in the jungle, on our best behaviour. The big cat saunters out of the forest, barely paying heed to the staccato fire of camera shutters and awed whispers. The striped star of the show exudes undeniable charisma, clearly still reigning over its diminished domain. The tiger's silken coat ripples over languid feline movements. Its gaze, alternately nonchalant and unsettlingly intense.

Despite these qualities, or because of them, the crouching tiger may be outlasted by the humble chicken. I've travelled halfway around the world to luxuriously trespass into the big cat's domain and have become philosophical about my safari. The mother of all poultry may have had a direct impact on our everyday lives, but it's the tiger's continued existence that has implications for our souls. *wl*