

TRAVEL

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Where the tiger makes its last stand

India's national parks protect a large variety of wildlife including elephants, monkeys and some of the world's few remaining wild tigers

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NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, CORBETT NATIONAL PARK, INDIA

Beside the Malani River in northern India, where the plains fold into Himalayan foothills, I saw my first wild tiger. She stalked out of grass yellowed by dry winter weather, crossed a dirt road in front of my safari jeep, traced a ridge and then disappeared into a dense forest.

As her fiery black-and-orange coat faded into shadows, I felt a surge of euphoria. Tigers are one of the world's greatest predators, a muscular cat capable of sprinting 60kph and killing animals several times their size.

The tigress was also a reminder of a natural world quickly being extinguished by mankind. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the world's tiger population has fallen from 100,000 to 4,000 animals.

India has the largest share of the great beasts, but the most recent government survey found only 1,411 tigers. They are threatened by poaching and habitat loss. Many experts fear they will suffer the fate of India's Asian Lion, which remains only in one small wildlife reserve on the country's west coast.

I traveled to India to see both tigers and the landscapes they inhabit. Because adult tigers eat about 5kg of meat daily, they need flourishing wilderness, and India harbors pockets of savannah and forest rivaled only by Africa's great spaces.

In a single visit to an Indian national park, it is possible to see hundreds of wild animals including tigers, elephants, deer, antelope, monkeys, pythons and dozens of beautiful bird species.

I chose to fly to New Delhi, India's chaotic capital, and to visit two parks, each within a half-day's car or train journey. On a recent morning, I left the city's smog and bustle for Corbett National Park, 132,000 hectares of forests, savannahs and river valleys that was declared India's first wildlife refuge in 1936. Besides 160 tigers, the park supports hundreds of Asian Elephants, leopards, otters and some 600 species of birds.

My first stop was Camp Corbett, a clean and comfortable lodge opened in the 1980s by Ome and Suman Anand. The Anands had lived in England and then managed a tea plantation in India's Assam state before buying 6 hectares of



Among the animals that tourists can spot at Corbett and Ranthambhore national parks are, from left, the Bengal tiger, Asian elephant and great white egret.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

forest "to show people from the cities what they're missing," Suman explained.

Knowing I was anxious to stretch my legs, she sent me out for an hour-long walk, a journey that proved to be a test of courage. Tigers and leopards sometimes roam the area, and I had been reading *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, a book by a British naturalist who lived near Corbett in the 1940s and who described hunting tigers that had developed a taste for human flesh. One animal reputedly killed 436 people before it was shot.

Deep Contractor, a wildlife biologist who guided me during a four-day stay in Corbett, tried to ease my anxieties. During six months working in the park, she had met tigers three times on foot. By backing away slowly, Deep fended off conflict.

But as we walked through a pretty forest, she rattled off a series of more ominous threats. Asian Elephants are "really bad news" because they often charge people who venture too close and will "make sure that you die," she said.

Sloth bears, a species that made me think of Winnie the Pooh asleep after eating too much honey, are bad too. "They'll attack people for no rhyme or reason and the worst thing is they attack your face," Deep said. "They'll take your face off."

I was glad to return to the lodge and happy to begin a jeep safari through Corbett the next day. Corbett allows up to 30 jeeps to enter each of six zones daily. We began in Bijrani, an area of

IF YOU GO

» The easiest way to get to Corbett or Ranthambhore national parks is to fly to New Delhi and then travel by car or train. Singapore Airlines, Thai Airways and Cathay Pacific Airways offer flights from Taipei to New Delhi, via Singapore, Bangkok or Hong Kong, respectively. Check with a travel agent for other connecting routes, or search for flights online at www.eztravel.com.tw or www.zuji.com.tw

» From New Delhi, a car or train trip to towns near Corbett or Ranthambhore takes about six hours. Because train schedules change and roads are chaotic, it is best to book through a reliable hotel and to pay for premium train seats or a good-quality vehicle

» **Corbett National Park** is open to tourists from October to June. Bookings for safaris and lodges can be arranged by faxing the park headquarters (+91 5947-251376). Clean, simple double rooms cost US\$40 a night, including meals

» A good four-day itinerary includes two nights at the Bijrani guesthouse and two nights at the more popular Dhikala guesthouse, both within the park, since they offer different landscapes. A driver and jeep seating up to four people can be hired for US\$20 a day plus gas. I hired H.P. Singh, who speaks some English and is an excellent wildlife spotter. He can be reached at [preetisethi73\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:preetisethi73[at]gmail.com)

» To save hassles, it's easiest to have a local company organize travel inside the park. Camp Corbett (www.campcorbett.net) has 16 clean and comfortable cabins for US\$80 per person, including meals. Staff can arrange transportation and trips into the national park. Guidebooks list other nearby hotels and lodges

» **Ranthambhore National Park** is open to tourists from October to June. Safari spots are limited and reservations should be made at least one month in advance through a local hotel. The Ranthambhore Bagh (www.ranthambhore.com, +91 7462-221-728) offers clean doubles for US\$110 per night, including reasonable meals. Several luxury hotel chains, including the Oberoi and the Aman, have properties at the edge of the park

» Indian Safaris and Tours (www.indiasafaris.com) can arrange travel to either park and is recommended by foreigners living in New Delhi

SOURCE: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE AND EZTRAVEL

savannahs and forested hills.

The forests are home to several species of deer and we stopped to marvel at large bucks and troops of Hanuman Langur, a monkey with

gray hair and a dark face that Hindus consider holy.

But most people visit Corbett for its tigers.

To increase our odds, our driver, a

Over the next two days I witnessed the greatest display of natural life I have ever seen. In a sparse forest, we watched a large male elephant eat from the forest canopy. When Singh approached too close, it trumpeted and charged, forcing us to make a hasty retreat.

There were other elephants and packs of jackals and wild boar. Crocodiles lazed beside crystal-clear rivers where otters tussled, and we spotted Indian Rock Pythons as thick as my thigh.

On our final morning, we watched a second tiger cross a curving finger of the Ramganga River, its autumn colors reflected sharply in the clean water.

From Corbett, I headed south to Ranthambhore National Park, a 40,000-hectare refuge in Rajasthan state that is generally regarded as India's most reliable place to see tigers. The park is favored by tourists and last year hosted 160,000 visitors, more than half of them foreigners.

The steady flow of jeeps has habituated its 30-plus tigers to people. Tourists describe tigers rubbing against their cars and seeming to pose for photographs.

Ranthambhore is also favored because the same royalty that built India's most iconic architecture, including the Taj Mahal, erected a large fort that tourists can walk through. (The Taj is only a few hours by car from Ranthambhore, making a good combination.)

I arrived at Ranthambhore with enough time for two safaris and a hike up the fort. I was impressed by the wildlife. Besides a wide variety of birds and deer, I saw a nilgai, or Blue bull, Asia's largest antelope, and a marmot that slunk into undergrowth.

Though Corbett's landscape was more impressive, Ranthambhore's history is more interesting. The next morning I climbed a hill to the park's massive 11th-century fort, which is protected from tigers and other predators by its tall walls.

I wandered through crumbling pavilions and enjoyed sweeping views of steep canyons. While I didn't see tigers, I could sense their presence. A herd of deer twitched nervously. A monkey scanned the savannah from its canopy perch.

Somewhere, hidden within the trees, tigers were hunting.