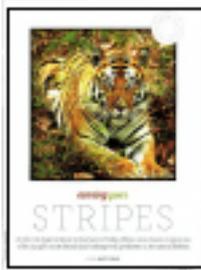


*earning your*

# STRIPES

A trek into tiger territory in the heart of India offers a rare chance to spot one of the jungle's most feared (and endangered) predators in its natural habitat.

WORDS **MATT DORAN**



Bandhavgarh National Park: chital deer rely on a langur (grey monkey) lookout to raise the alarm when a predator approaches

Naturalist Kartikeya Singh has followed the tiger's prints for several kilometres, tracking its path to a deep waterhole. Cutting off the engine, he waits in silence for the telltale crack of twigs on the forest floor.

Then, finally, a deep, guttural roar echoes down the valley. Moments later, the big cat is on show in all its striped splendour, a 220kg miracle of nature. Three fruitless days of tracking are forgiven in an instant as the tourists fight it out for the best view, necks craning from the jeep as the male forces its hulking frame through the bushes.

"Even now, after 15 years out here, I still get as emotional as the first time I saw one," Singh says. "They are so magical, so otherworldly, there is no creature like them on the planet."

However, in India - home to more than half the world's tiger population - this is an experience that must be earned. On the five-hour drive from tiny Khajuraho airstrip to Bandhavgarh National Park in Madhya Pradesh, along a severely potholed highway, the driver dodges people, warthogs, goats, camels and bulls. Upon finally reaching the jungle, the most astute guides are needed to actually spot a tiger. But luxury tour operator Abercrombie & Kent promises

that if Kartikeya Singh is unable to find the beasts, then they simply cannot be found.

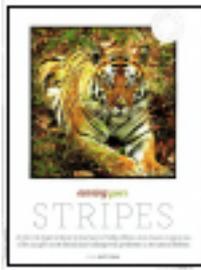
"Look, to the left," he whispers urgently as the jeep lurches to a stop, dust whirling in the rays of the setting sun. "A striped tiger... butterfly!" His guests are only partially amused.

The distractions, though, are worth the trip. Steeped in history, with ancient temples, shrines, forts and hermit caves within tropical forests, steep rocky hills and valleys, Bandhavgarh is one of India's most beautiful reserves.

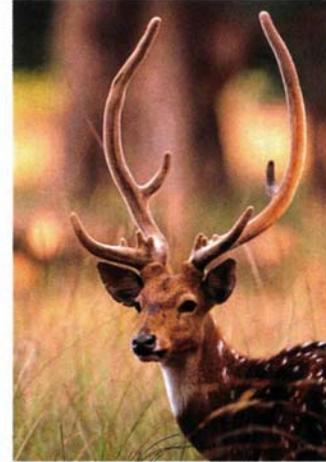
"While the tiger is the main course, there are plenty of entrees here," Singh says. "These forests are home to barking deer, wild boar, nilgai antelope, sloth, Indian bison, wild dog, leopard, rhesus monkey, Indian fox and even bear."

The naturalist has trained more than 800 guards to patrol India's tiger country, mostly locals from small villages. More recently, >

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES



TIGER WATCH INDIA



Clockwise from left:  
game drive, Bandhavgarh  
National Park; adult male  
chital (spotted deer);  
chital in open woodland

THE RESERVE IS  
PROBABLY THE BEST  
PLACE IN THE WORLD TO  
SEE THESE PREDATORS  
IN THE WILD

he spent 1800 hours walking unarmed with Asiatic lions, studying their interaction with local communities.

"We often came eye-to-eye in the wild, just hoping we wouldn't be dinner. The key, of course, is to show no fear." With India in the throes of breakneck development to accommodate its fast-growing population (current estimate: 1.27 billion) habitats are shrinking and tigers and humans are being forced to coexist. "I believe we can find a harmony, it just needs to be sensibly managed," Singh says. "The key to a healthy tiger population is a healthy prey population - the more animals there are in a forest, the more tigers it can support."

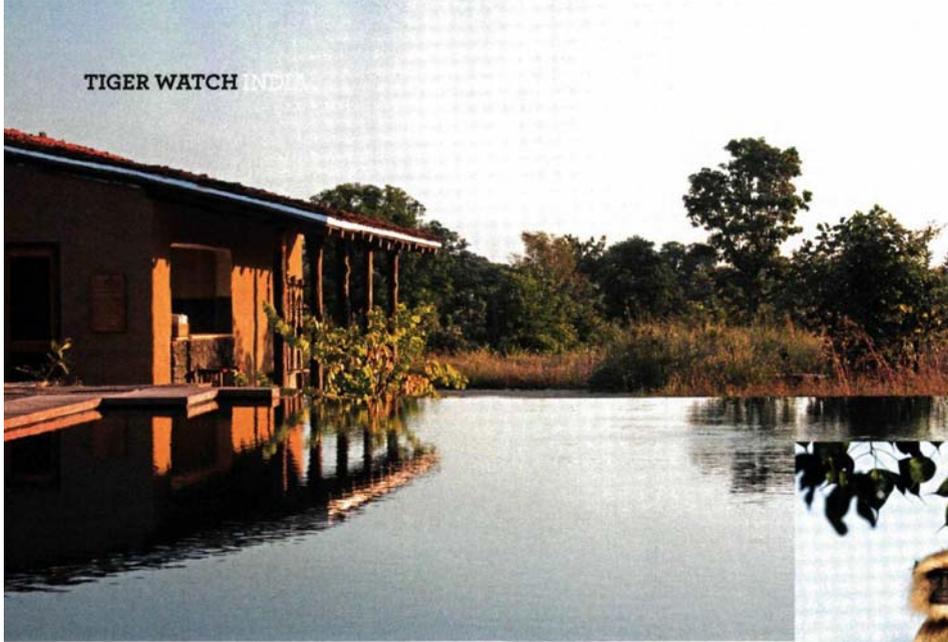
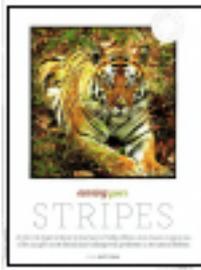
Humans have pushed the big cats out of about 93 per cent of their habitat in India. Deforestation for settlement, firewood and to enable livestock grazing, plus foraging for forest fruits, is ripping apart fragile ecosystems. As cattle eat their food, the numbers of native herbivores dwindle, forcing tigers to kill domestic livestock. In response, the government now provides funding for families to relocate outside a tiger reserve. Forty-one-year-old lentil farmer Kamahl Singh is among those considering the scheme, having recently come face-to-face with a fully-grown tigress in a field. "One of my friends was killed a few years ago," he says. "With more and



more cattle coming into tiger territory, farming in this area has become very scary. But this is our life."

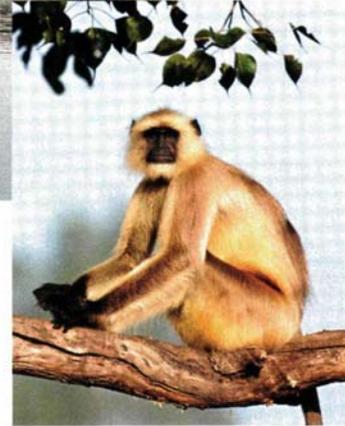
**DEEP IN THE HEART** of India's most tiger-rich reserve, forest guard Moorat Singh is sharpening an axe. Satisfied, he fastens it to his bicycle, ready to set off on patrol. "It's the poachers who are the big threat," the 64-year-old says. "They are heavily armed and they will stop at nothing for every last whisker."

Across India, poacher gangs operate fearlessly and with increasing success. The National Tiger Conservation Authority says poachers killed 48 royal Bengal tigers in 2013, the most in seven years. Over the past century, 97 per cent of wild tigers have been wiped out. Three tiger subspecies (Balinese, Javan and Caspian) are already extinct. And it's estimated that only 1711 Indian tigers remain in the wild. >



**TIGER WATCH** INDIA

**Clockwise from left:  
Samode Safari Lodge;  
Hanuman langur  
monkey; picnic at  
Samode**



"If we are not careful, we will lose our national animal, our heritage," says Yadavendra Singh, the owner of the impressive new five-star Samode Safari Lodge in the Bandhavgarh National Park. Home to approximately 60 tigers, the 450sq km reserve is probably the best place in the world to see these predators in the wild.

Inspired by the lavish safari properties in South Africa, Yadavendra and his brother, Rawal Raghavendra Singh, have invested heavily, erecting 12 opulent villas on the jungle fringe. Gourmet food and a butler service is a throwback to the days when tiger reserves served as hunting grounds for maharajahs. A guest's every conceivable desire is predicted and catered to.

Unfortunately, the area has also become a playground for the professional poachers trapping their way across India and smuggling the prized parts over the borders to Asian apothecaries. Asian medicine ascribes magical and remedial powers to the tiger. In China, tiger claws are used as a sedative for insomnia, teeth to treat fever, while bone is thought to be an anti-inflammatory for rheumatism and arthritis. Babies are bathed in bone broth in the belief that they will grow up disease-free. Nearly every tiger body part is used to treat a lengthy list of maladies, from baldness to laziness to nightmares to poor sex drive. There is minimal scientific evidence of the efficacy of these treatments and yet the black-market value of a tiger can run into the tens of thousands of dollars.

Scientists fear that without sweeping reforms, wild tigers will be gone within a decade. For India's Wildlife Protection Society, the solution is simple: preserve the tiger habitat from human encroachment and deploy a better-resourced frontline force, with more transparent governance, to deter poachers and detect snares. Up against gangs determined to kill the last tiger, many Indians see the challenge as a test of their collective will.

"There is a saying in India that goes right to the heart of this fight," Kartikeya Singh says. "If we cannot save our national animal, then what can we save?"

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SCIENTISTS FEAR THAT WITHOUT SWEEPING REFORMS, WILD TIGERS COULD BE GONE WITHIN A DECADE



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