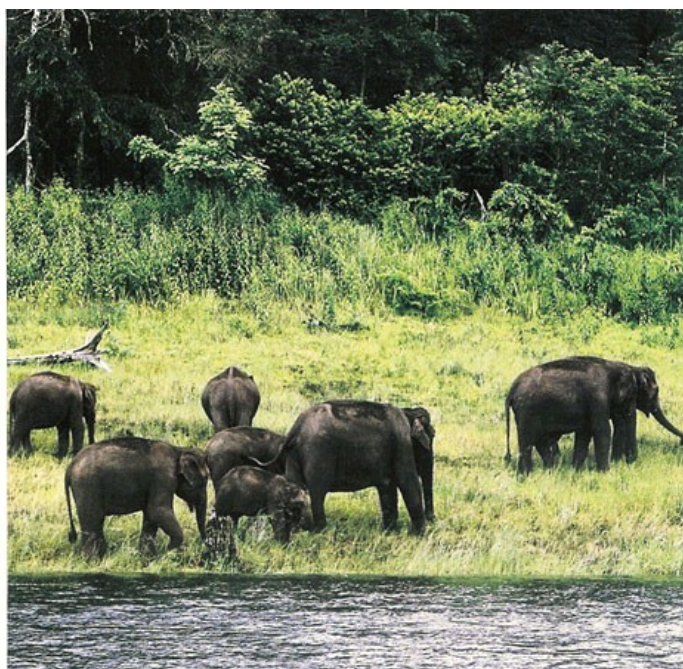


Burning bright

INDIA'S TIGER TRAIL IS GOING FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH, WITH A NEW WAVE OF STYLISH SAFARI LODGES AND TENTED CAMPS

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From top A family of elephant, Chhatra Sagar, Rajasthan. Aman-i-Khás, Ranthambore. Gazelle leap for cover



Seeing a tiger in the wild, even for a split-second, is an unforgettable thrill. The country's legendary Bengal tigers are making a heroic return after near extinction. Dedicated reserves and institutions like Project Tiger have launched a tireless campaign to promote the animal's preservation, and environmentalists and enlightened hoteliers are teaming up to provide eco-friendly safaris in the country's most beautiful national parks and wilderness areas. Follow in the footsteps of the great Moghul emperors and Rajput royalty and go where the wild things are. Tented camps and hunting lodges have a colourful history here, only now the best shooting is done with a camera, not a 12-bore.

Ranthambore National Park in Rajasthan is India's most historic tiger reserve. The tenth-century Ranthambore Fort, scene of many great battles, lies in half-ruined splendour. As far back as the sixteenth century, the great Moghul Emperor Akbar fought in its forests. The much-loved Maharaja of Jaipur held legendary tiger hunts here with Raj royalty like the Mountbattens. The park is wild and rugged, with gorges, lakes, ravines and ancient temples overgrown with vines. Tiger sightings are frequent and there is a wealth of wildlife. Of all the tiger reserves, Ranthambore has the best choice of accommodation.

If Giorgio Armani went camping, Aman-i-Khás is where he would stay. The exceptionally spacious tents are

a designer's minimalist dream punctuated by contemporary furnishings. There is a spa tent for after-safari treatments, a bathing pool and plenty of areas to relax in. Delicious, home-cooked food is served in the large dining tent. Aman-i-Khás has all the glamour you'd expect from Amanresorts and is just right for those who love the great outdoors but hate the thought of roughing it.

Sher Bagh is a delightful camp in a garden setting just minutes from the entrance to the park. Royal tents, originally commissioned for the Maharajah of Jodhpur, set the tone, with sturdy campaign furniture mixing with refined linens. A favourite of Prince Michael of Kent, the camp has superb service. Awake at dawn to find a steaming pot of tea and biscuits to get you going before your morning game drive. As one of the most established camps, Sher Bagh has retained many of the best guides and you are guaranteed an expert introduction to the region's wildlife.

Oberoi Vanyavilas is supremely civilised. The tents are really permanent structures with a tented effect created by swathes of hand-embroidered fabric, with tiny gold tigers cavorting about. They are beautifully appointed in colonial style with features such as freestanding tubs, walk-in closets, wood floors and modern amenities including DVD players. Two resident elephants welcome guests to the resort, which rambles throughout serene gardens. Jasmine and incense waft by on the breeze, while a swimming pavilion and spa make this the perfect place for those seeking the excitement of a professional tiger safari with the luxuries of a top hotel.

Off the tiger trail, there are some magical tented camps in lyrical locations that offer a true vision of pastoral Rajasthan. Chhatra Sagar is an exclusive retreat on a private estate about two hours by road from Jodhpur, overlooking a lake teeming with birds. The tents are among the best in India, with every comfort. The charming Nimaj family, who own the camp, are the hereditary landowners, and they take great pride in making their guests feel completely ▶



Clockwise from left A game drive at Mahua Kothi. A sambar deer. The lake at eco-friendly Shergarh, in the Kanha National Park. The Wilderness Camp borders the Thar desert

happy. The Wilderness Camp, on the edge of the Thar desert just south of Jodhpur, rises from the sand like a mirage. The elegant tents flutter in the breeze, providing an exotic contrast with the desert wilderness. The camp is renowned for its horseback safaris.

Deogarh Khayyam is a fascinating enclave of 16 lavishly appointed tents that meander along the banks of a lake in the Aravalli Hills, three hours from Udaipur. Romantic and secluded, this camp makes the perfect base for exploring a beautiful and undiscovered part of Rajasthan.

Madhya Pradesh in central India is home to some of India's finest national parks and tiger reserves. In the past, accommodation has been rustic but that is changing, with three exceptional new 'eco chic' camps.

Taj Safaris, in a joint venture with CC Africa (a wildlife conservation and safari specialist), has recently launched two state-of-the-art lodges that have already earned rave reviews since opening last year, making it onto *Condé Nast Traveller's* 'Hot List'. At both Baghvan, on the border of Pench National Park, and its sister lodge Mahua Kothi, in Bandhavgarh National Park, guests stay in hand-crafted cottages that blend harmoniously with the environment, featuring private courtyards, antiques and handsome textiles. Local wildlife includes nilgai antelope, wild boar, sloth bears, monkeys and hundreds of species of exotic birds. The area was immortalised by Rudyard Kipling in *The Jungle Book*.



Keep an eye out for modern-day Mowglis as you traverse the rugged terrain in open 4x4s with your guides.

Shergarh at Kanha National Park is a very special lodge run by naturalist Jehan Bhujwala and his English wife Katie. Their belief in preserving the environment makes their camp a model of responsible eco-tourism as well as a labour of love. 'We spent a lot of time planning Shergarh,' says Katie, 'and before long we were getting married one sunrise on the edge of our lake!' There are six comfy tents with verandas and attached bathrooms, spread out in a wooded grove.

Along with thrilling game drives in the park (there are 100 tigers in residence) there are the pleasures of elephant rides, cycling to nearby villages, guided walks and living in harmony with nature. As Katie puts it, 'We teach our children numbers by counting stones thrown into the lake, and colours by the abundance of wild flowers and butterflies.' ■



GETTING THERE

- Exsus Travel offers a two-week itinerary taking in Aman-i-Khas, Chhatra Sagar, Deogarh, Baghvan and Shergarh from £3,500 per person including return international flights in economy class, domestic flights, transfers, all entrances fees to National Parks and monuments and a local bilingual guide for excursions. Call 020-7292 5050 or visit www.exsus.com
- Mary-Anne Denison-Pender, founder of MAhout, is happy to offer general advice on visiting off-the-beaten-track India. Call 01295-758150 or visit www.mahoutuk.com