

6 Escape

New Delhi, Wednesday February 4, 2009

Treasure to preserve



Nestled in the bosom of the Satpura Hills is Kanha, one of the country's most beautiful tiger reserves. Enjoy its flora and fauna and make friends with Tara

If Bandhavgarh is a jewel, Kanha is the necklace," someone once said about two of India's most beautiful tiger reserves. Both the shadowy forests, replete with bamboo stalks and tall, stately Sal trees sprawl in the bosom of the Satpura Hills in Madhya Pradesh. The difference is that Kanha is much larger than Bandhavgarh. In fact, it strings a few Bandhavgarhs together, as explained by the ornament analogy

This time around, we stayed at the charming Kipling Camp just after Christmas, narrowly missing a visit from Santa who had arrived on an elephant.

Between game drives, at the lunch-table or by the fireside, we chatted with Anne and Belinda Wright, owners of the camp and passionate wildlife lovers of British origin to whom India has always been home. The intrepid Belinda could walk up and tweak the devil's nose, let alone shrivel from threats of nefarious poachers who she is after.

Rich flora and fauna

Over our three days in Kanha, there were moments when, in the open jeeps, we froze despite layers of wool and wind sheeting. On elephant back, we got smacked, whipped, prodded and lacerated by bamboo canes, but it was all worth it, to see a number of regal, visually striking tigers — six in all — alive and well in the wild. On our way



GLOBE TROT
GEETIKA JAIN

back one evening from Bahmini Dadar, a particularly beautiful sunset-viewing spot atop a plateau, we glimpsed a leopard. She was sitting in the middle of the road, and upon seeing the jeep, stood up and bounded athletically into the forest. The sighting lasted a mere three seconds, but it was enough to thrill us to the core. That is what makes the wild so special; it can make a very small unit of time, matter. A flash of red wing, the sighting of a scarlet minivet may last a nano-second, but it is heaven enough, we feel rewarded for recognizing it and stay alert for hours on end with our imagination stoked. Though I never saw wild dogs like everyone else in our group, I visualized them in every meadow, hillside and dirt-road.

Kanha was the necklace, and I chose to wear it, breathing in the white muslin mist that hovered above the grasslands, craning at the spectral Sal giants and smiling at the play of the bamboo-serrated shadows on our faces.

Tara

Bathing Tara, the resident elephant at Kipling Camp in the Banjar



FACT FILE

BEST TIME TO VISIT - November to April, with March and April being the prime game viewing months.

HOW TO GET THERE - Fly or take the train to Jabalpur, where a pick-up car will drive you in two-and-a-half hours to Kanha. The drive from Nagpur is about 5 hours.

STAY AT - Kipling Camp www.kiplingcamp.com on the Kisli side or Shergarh on the Mukki side. Other places are also there.

GUIDES - Rehman at Kipling Camp, Shakir at Tuli Camp.

River was perhaps the most memorable moment for me and my fourteen year old daughter, Aranya. The second the howdah was lifted off her back, Tara ran to the River with obvious delight, dipping her left and right sides and then completely submerged herself. Meanwhile her mahout, Luvkush, was down to his shorts, and began to call her to the edge of the water. "Ma! ma!" Tara ignored him for a while and then stepped up.

Soon Tara lay on her side in the shallows and we waded in, found some flat stones, and joined the communal scrub. Sides, back, legs, and behind the ears we rubbed her as she relaxed to her spa moment. Next, Tara stood up and playfully sprayed us with a trunkful of water. When Luvkush positioned her on some sunny rocks to dry off, all beautiful and glistening, she looked like a famous star. And famous she is, the protagonist of Mark Shand's best-selling book, *Travels on my elephant*. Ever read the book and wonder whatever happened to Tara?



The rising mist (clockwise from bottom) Kanha at dawn, Kipling camp sports a festive look, tiger portrait, Lovekush leaping off Tara, Tara being scrubbed

