

Business Standard

At home in the jungle

Kipling Camp, situated in the heart of Kanha National Park, combines conservation best practices with luxurious comfort

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A cheetal doe and her two young ones graze peacefully in the twilight. Two langurs chatter overhead. Are they gossiping about the mother-cub bear duo that frequents this area? We can't tell. Then, somewhere in the foliage, the alarmed whoop of a cheetal breaks the silence. Has it felt the presence of a big cat? Goosebumps prickle my skin as I mull over all this drama in the jungle, sipping mulled wine around a roaring bonfire and playing charades on Christmas. This is the beauty of Kipling Camp in Kanha National Park, situated in the middle of the jungle and certified by TOFT (Travel Operators for Tiger) as one of India's foremost wildlife camps. With no fencing, few lights at night and a strong conservation theme, it allows guests like us to get really up close and personal with the jungle even as it blends effortlessly into it.

"We share this space in the forest with other inhabitants: the wildlife," says owner Belinda Wright. Camp staff tells us that most of their visitors are of the wild kind. Leopards, bears and even tigers often walk in. Founder of Wildlife Protection Society of India, Wright ensures that conservation is a priority in the camp. To a large extent, this gives visitors like us an entirely different experience of the jungles of Kanha.

As soon as we've checked in and eaten lunch after a rather tiring drive from Jabalpur, it's time for the afternoon safari. Our driver Rahim, one of the best trackers and naturalists in the camp, warns that tiger sightings in the afternoon aren't common. Content to just enjoy the beautiful forest, we go anyway. They say that when Rudyard Kipling wrote *The Jungle Book*, he had Kanha in mind. But what many don't know is that Kipling probably never visited this jungle. Instead, he based his book with its remarkably accurate descriptions of Kanha on letters written to him by a lady he's believed to have had a romantic interest in. I can see why.

Kanha epitomises the Great Indian Jungle. Known as one of India's oldest and best maintained tiger reserves, its dense sal and bamboo jungles are punctuated by lovely grassy meadows that stand today where villages once thrived. The villages were relocated outside the jungle and today the meadows provide ample grazing grounds for burgeoning populations of cheetal, black buck, sambar and the animal that has been virtually resurrected in Kanha, the swamp deer (barasingha). All this means more meat on the table for the king of the jungle — the Royal Bengal Tiger.

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The first animal we encounter is a majestic bison grazing in the bushes. Rahim kills the engine to let us take pictures and enjoy the sounds of the forest. No sooner than we start moving, the jeep comes to a halt again. There are fresh tiger pugmarks by the road. Cheetal alarm calls tell us that the tiger is still nearby. Rahim estimates that our best chance of spotting the tiger will be if he breaks cover near the stream just ahead of us. Just as we move towards it, the tiger strolls out of the foliage.

It's a magnificent male who's clearly just eaten a big meal. Unperturbed by our frantic cameras, he walks unhurriedly on the road for a while before spraying urine on a bush to mark his territory. Then he leaves a large stinky mound of poop for us to exclaim over like proud parents before disappearing from view. We stand in silence, awed by what we've seen. Somehow, however many times one sees a tiger, it's not something one can ever be blasé about. As we move into other areas inside the jungle, we are on a roll. We spot barasingha, sambar, wild boar, cheetal, jungle cat, changeable hawk eagle (and its young one which looks like it could be a different species altogether) and a spotted owlet nestled in a tree hollow.

Back in Kipling Camp, we realise it's Christmas Eve. A festive dinner, cocktails

and great conversation with Wright and her mother Anne await us. Anne Wright and her husband Bob successfully ran Kolkata's Tollygunje Club for years. As we enjoy the excellent dinner complete with Christmas pudding and home made brandy butter, I muse that perhaps Kipling Camp's unique brand of luxurious comfort coupled with a strong inclination towards conservation and minimal intrusion comes from the mother-daughter duo's interests. "The thing that strikes me most about Kipling Camp is its resolutely natural assimilation into the jungle," says Freddie Thorp, a young camp volunteer from London. We can't agree more, especially after the wonderful experience of bathing their pet elephant Tara in the pristine river Banjar.

Every afternoon at about 3 pm, Tara must have her bath in the river. She amiably lets the children clamber up her back and the rest of us amble through the jungle to watch. Rescued many years ago from a life in captivity as a begging elephant, Tara is now a much loved pet who seems to believe that she's just a large, happy dog with a trunk. Once at her favourite bathing spot where the Banjar flows slow and deep, she barely waits for the kids to get off before galloping right into the water with a huge belly flop. Thorp and the kids jump into the freezing, crystal clear water with her, making many dives off her back and head before giving her a good scrub. Then she gratefully sprays us all with icy water, and shivering but strangely content, we enjoy the picnic tea packed for us by the camp.

As hours change to days, Kanha weaves its magic on all of us. We start identifying pugmarks and birds, zoological names flow off our lips as glibly as water from a duck's back and instead of watching television, the kids have begun to play charades every evening. All too soon, when its time for us to leave, I turn for a last look at the forest and the camp — last few remaining scraps of nature both, left not only for people like us to enjoy, but to also grieve over how much we have lost in our relentless quest for the trappings of modernity and development.