

Exploring the Realm of the Tiger in the Footsteps of Rudyard Kipling

By Celine Fortin, 27 April 2015

Who hasn't read 'The Jungle Book' as a child, and dreamed of being Mowgli and living in the wilderness? So it was with huge anticipation and excitement that I visited the two of the places that fed Kipling's imagination – the tiger reserves of Kanha and Pench – although he never actually set foot in either location, and only learned of them from a friend.

The minute we headed out with an expert naturalist guide on a private safari into Kanha's luxuriant forest – composed of sal and bamboo trees, plus the odd legendary banyan – I felt as if I had stepped into Mowgli's wonderland.

We heard the alarm call of black-faced monkeys first, then spotted fresh paw prints in the sandy ground. As we waited, a herd of white spotted deer started behaving nervously. At the sound of branches cracking in the bush, our guide stated confidently that this was a female tiger who earlier this year had given birth to two cubs, which should be close by.

The bush fell silent and we drove a little further, peering into every thicket until our guide suddenly pointed to a small, dark opening in a stand of bamboo. There we glimpsed the stripes of an adult female taking a nap out of the hot sun. Yelps of excitement from the jeep in front alerted us to two six-month-old cubs playing, chasing each other before disappearing into deep jungle – a magical sight!

Another of Kanha's highlights is meeting Belinda from Kipling Camp, the first camp ever built here, and her beloved elephant Tara. Something of a legend in Central India, Belinda is passionate about wildlife and has dedicated much of her career to wildlife photography and filming documentaries for National Geographic. An Executive Director of Wildlife Protection Society of India, she is now active in wildlife protection and anti-poaching enforcement, and sits on the Wildlife Board where she can influence major decisions – particularly those involving the campaign against tiger poaching.

This requires close involvement with the local community, as tigers occasionally attack cattle, which roam freely in the buffer area



adjacent to the park as there are no fences. Although the government compensates farmers for any losses, few know this, and even fewer have access to a computer or are able to complete the appropriate form online. Even then, it may be a long time before any money is paid. Meanwhile a poacher may approach the farmer and offer a fraction of the sum in ready cash to be shown the spot where the cattle were killed, so as to track the tiger from there. Belinda's role in raising awareness, helping farmers, and ensuring that they receive the compensation they are due has helped to significantly reduce the conflict between humans and animals.

Visiting Belinda in her lovely eighties-style camp beside a waterhole, which is run as an NGO with British volunteers in their Gap Year, and meeting her old friend, Tara, a sixty-year-old female elephant, is an experience that will stay with

me forever. Children and adults alike will love taking Tara to a pool in the river for her daily bathe, as I did, and helping to scrub her and give her a pedicure to stop her nails and skin from cracking.

Kanha is also widely known for its large population of sloth bears, and its incredible birding – there are more than 350 species here.

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