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Close encounters

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Mammoth effort giving Tara a good scrub in the Banjar river - Charty Dugdale

Earning one's stripes in Kipling country and building new bonds with the gentle giant Tara

The elephant is lying in the shallow water of the Banjar river. My children have selected stones from its sandy banks and are scrubbing her back. They push at her thick hide with all their strength, sometimes double-handed, then splash water where they have scrubbed. So absorbed are they in their project that they barely speak.

This is Tara, a most venerable elephant — star of the 1991 book *Travels on My Elephant* by Mark Shand, and long-term resident of Kipling Camp. My children only met her yesterday but already strong bonds of affection have formed. “I’m just going to check on Tara...” says my daughter as she dashes away, again, from lunch under the mahua tree.

We have come to spend time in Kanha, at about 940sq km, one of the largest of India’s national parks. I arrive with doubts about how the children (eight and 10) will cope with the long game drives, remembering a trip to Ranthambore years ago when considerable effort was required to keep my youngest from leaping out of the jeep. Enthusiastic practising of alarm calls on one game drive ensured that we saw not a squirrel.

Not so this time. The children are deeply engaged by the wildlife and ask lots of questions of our excellent guide Rahim. According to African safari specialist Robert Ferguson they are at an ideal age, “In general, tweens (8 to 12) are a guide’s most rewarding audience — mature enough to absorb facts and ask questions, yet young enough to be enthralled,” he says.

Kanha is beautiful. Its towering sal trees and lush bamboo seem to complement each other perfectly. A couple of times we find ourselves in a kind of jungle cathedral with bamboo arching loftily over us stretching as far as the eye can see. In many parts, the

forest opens out into wide meadows or maidans — reminiscent of African grasslands — where herds of chital graze, their backs as if flecked with snow. These are areas where Baiga villages once flourished; their inhabitants were forcibly removed in the 1970s.

It is at the edge of one of these maidans that we see our tiger. He's a handsome young male and we find him lying immaculately camouflaged in dried brush close to the road. We gaze at him, mesmerised. As more and more jeeps pull up for his darshan, he couldn't be less concerned, surveying us all with nonchalance, if not disdain. After about five minutes he stands and saunters off, crossing the road between jeeps ahead of us. He moves into a copse of trees and vanishes into the grass.

“You know,” says my daughter, “even when we don't see a tiger, it's still lovely... There are so many other animals.” She is right. We see gaur munching at their cud, wild boar startled from a mud wallow, the lumbering rumps of two sloth bears like smudges in the distance, sambar deer close enough to note the faded black stripes on the backs of their ears, the white piping around them and the tear drop marking under their eyes.

And we see amazing birds: a flash of red and gold as four scarlet minivets dart across a patch of cerulean sky; a crested hawk eagle with a punk hairstyle motionless on the branches of a dead tree; a green bee-eater flying from his branch and returning to it repeatedly, as if unable to decide on a course of action, or possibly in pursuit of a bee.

We also listen: to birdsong (Rahim does such excellent imitations, birds actually converse with him), to the alarm call of a sambar or a langur. And learn: of the friendship between langur and chital, of the tricks the tiger plays in pursuit of the allegedly dim-witted sambar, of the survival of the barasingha deer... near extinction in 1970, their numbers have risen from 66 to around 500. Kanha is their last remaining stronghold.

Kipling Camp, in the park's buffer zone, is part of the forest too, its whitewashed cottages are scattered among sal trees and there is no boundary fence. Chital spring through the camp or pause near the waterhole; pugmarks indicate that a leopard passed by in the night.

Named after Rudyard Kipling — who set many of his Jungle Book stories hereabouts (without ever visiting) — the camp was opened in the 1980s by the British Wright family from Calcutta. Belinda Wright went on to become one of India's foremost conservationists, founding the Wildlife Protection Society of India in 1994. Not surprisingly, the conservation ethos at Kipling is strong. No resource guzzling pool here; if you want to swim, swim in the river with Tara. (You “tread softly in the jungle,” but at zero cost to your comfort.)

Swimming with Tara and seeing a tiger at close range are undoubtedly the highlights of our trip. But after our tiger encounter on the first day, and a fleeting glimpse of one on the second, we don't spot more. Somehow I feel it is a good lesson, a humbling, not always to see.

Late on our final afternoon we are on our way back from a remote area of the park. It is shadowy under the massive trees and we've had to pull on extra layers. Rahim hears it first, and halts the jeep, all senses keen. For as long as we can, we sit in the shadows, listening for the tiger's intermittent growl, wondering if he will come our way.

He doesn't in the end. But just to hear him is more than enough for me.

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