

# BURNING BRIGHT

**I**T WAS intended to be a short holiday for our anniversary. And I fell in love there. It was just before sunset and we were on our first safari ride into the Ranthambhore National Park. We sat and waited by the almost dry lake on one end of the park, watching a herd of deer, all looking anxiously in the same direction. Waiting patiently in absolute silence, we could sense their tension and our driver's excitement.

The only sounds were the alarm calls given out by the deer – their survival instincts had kicked in even though none of us could see any predators at that moment.

And then she revealed herself. She left her cubs at a safe distance and slowly walked towards the waiting vehicles. It was the most exhilarating catwalk ever: she crossed the path,

## GETTING THERE

The closest railway station to Ranthambhore is Sawai Madhopur, well connected from Mumbai. All resorts and hotels are located on the road leading to the national park. There is accommodation to suit all needs and all budgets from small cosy tents to large luxury hotels.

In your search for the elusive tiger, don't ignore Ranthambhore's abundant wildlife and natural beauty. A glimpse of the big cat is just a bonus

text and photographs by **Charukesi Ramadurai**

glorious in her orange and black stripes that shone like burnished gold in the fading light of the evening, and ambled over to the water. She drank some water and lay there for a few minutes, thirst quenched.

Cursing myself for not having invested in a new lens, I borrowed a pair of binoculars from a neighbor and zoomed into her face. Just as I got her into focus, she raised her head and looked straight at me, lazily licking the side of her face.

It was then, at that precise moment, that I fell in love. The 'lady of the lake' then walked through the tall, dry grass and crossed our vehicles again, seemingly oblivious of her gaping admirers, and went back to where she had emerged from just a few minutes ago. Shooting over. Pack up.

## THE PARK

The Ranthambhore National Park is a protected territory spread over 280

sq km of fascinating terrain.

Being a dry deciduous forest, most trees had shed their leaves and the entire region was a riot of deep earthy tones, semi-parched brown and yellow with sudden fresh greens in between and the bright red 'flame of the forest' lighting up against the deep blue sky.

Although Ranthambhore is considered one of the best places to spot the tiger, we were told before setting off that tiger sightings are a matter of chance and more importantly, that there is much more to Ranthambhore than the tiger and therefore, it pays to keep one's eyes open for the rest of the park.

This is sound advice to remember because the park abounds with all sorts of wildlife – from spotted deer, chinkara, sambar and langurs to leopards and tigers.

I am told that the park is also a bird-watcher's delight. The website of

Ranthambhore Bagh (a great source of information on the area), where we stayed, says the park is home to over 40 species of mammals, 320 species of birds, over 35 species of reptiles and over 300 species of plants.

I know of several people who came with us on the safaris and were completely disinterested in anything the guide or driver showed them. Their plaintive complaint: but where is the tiger?

This also brings me to another important lesson learnt. While it is a good idea to keep your eyes and ears open for the tiger, it is best to keep your mouth shut and listen. That helps you soak in the surroundings, enjoy the ride, appreciate the diversity of nature and wildlife inside the park and appreciate rare tiger sightings as bonus.

The tiger is just a beautiful animal, a loner with great elegance and dignity. It is no wonder I fell in love at first sight.

## A NOTE ON CONSERVATION

Ranthambhore became part of 'Project Tiger' in 1973 when the government realised the gravity of the issue of the declining number of tigers and started conservation plans in earnest.

There have been crises of varying dimensions since then, the latest a few of years ago (in nearby Sariska, that threatens to affect Ranthambhore too).

**KEEP YOUR EYES AND EARS  
OPEN AND YOUR  
MOUTH SHUT. JUST LISTEN**





**CLOSE ENCOUNTERS**  
Two langurs watch the safari go by. The park abounds with all sorts of wildlife: spotted deer, chinkara, sambar, langurs, leopards and tigers (top)



A tigress walks past a safari vehicle on her way to the lake (left)

Villagers effortlessly make their way up to the Ranthambhore Fort (right)



Although poaching has not been reported much in the last few years within the protected area of the national park, there are vast areas of forest on either side where the animals move around freely and where there is no "protection" against poachers (who ironically cannot survive in the wild for a day on their wits alone, without their guns and other weapons).

Ranthambhore attracts committed naturalists and tiger-lovers alike. After sighting the tigress, the next best thing for me was to listen to their stories in the long hot evenings. They talked of Fateh Singh Rathore's love for animals and the park itself (he was the first director of Ranthambhore and is the honorary warden now); of tigers and leopards walking on the roads at night, of villages that were once situated inside the reserve and villagers' encounters with wildlife – that were not always ex-

pected or appreciated.

I had the pleasure of riding on vehicles where the driver stopped suddenly (two different times, different drivers) on spotting an offending piece of plastic on the path. I was taken around by guides who pleaded with tourists to maintain silence and not throw their litter into the open.

It is so easy to do your bit to make the lives of the animals more peaceful, if not aid in actual conservation efforts just by avoiding loud clothes, loud noises and litter.

#### THE FORT AND TEMPLE

A holiday in Ranthambhore is incomplete without a visit to the fort from which the park derives its name. The fort, built sometime in the 10th century, stands on top of a hill, huge and forbidding, right in the heart of the protected park area.

After Chittorgarh, Ranthambhore is the largest fort in Rajasthan. As

with all self-respecting forts, the climb up is steep and tiring but the breathtaking views from the top more than make up for it.

Apart from the tourists, the locals climb the fort with great ease regularly to visit the small Ganesh temple inside. Some 500,000 pilgrims are said to congregate at the temple during the Ganesh festival every year.

Once inside, our guide rattled off names with practiced indifference – Hammir, Allaudin Khilji, Rann hill, *Dulha Mahal*... I listened only with half an ear, mostly engrossed in the distant views of the park and the colorful locals who ran carelessly up and down the steps as we huffed and puffed our way up.

We passed through the three main gates and past the small roughly fashioned Ganesh idol where the old and the sick who cannot climb all the way up to the temple offer prayers.

There are several 'sightseeing' points inside the fort including the *Badal Mahal* that, as the name suggests, is open to the sky, and the *Dulha Mahal*, a small terrace from which the breadth of the park is visible. The *Chhatra Mahal*, a 32 pillared palace, is the perfect place to stand late in the evening and watch the sun set in the distance.

Our guide points out deer grazing by the *padam talao* in the distance. We even spot baby crocs lying still as rocks in the water far away.

[brunchletters@hindustantimes.com](mailto:brunchletters@hindustantimes.com)

## GETTING AROUND

Entry into the park is severely regulated. Only 20 jeeps and 20 Caters, all authorised by the government, are allowed into the park for any safari. The Canter rides are far more comfortable than I expected – and feared – but you need to make early bookings, easiest done through the hotel you stay with. The core area (where vehicle movement is allowed) is divided into five zones and each vehicle is allotted a different zone. Each of these zones is different in terrain and topography, and we were lucky to get different zones every time we went in.

If it is cool comfort you seek, the best time to visit Ranthambhore is between November and February. However, the best time for wildlife viewing is the hot summer months. But only the really serious brave the heat and go during that time.

The park is shut from July till October for the rains.

## SAFARI TRAIL

At Ranthambhore, there are two safaris a day. One begins just after sunrise and the other in the early evening. Depending on the season, each safari lasts for roughly three hours and each one can be an interesting experience. The forest takes on a different character every time you go through it, depending on the time of the day and even perhaps its mood. Part of the forest's nature is shaped by the fact that it is the intersection point of two old and varied mountain ranges – the Aravalis and the Vindhyas – each of which has a distinct character.