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The wild life

Watching the tiger by the trail in Land Rovers

Words **Bob Rupani** Photography **Bob Rupani and Marcus Maegle**

Central India is known for its rich forests and abundant wildlife and recently, Land Rover organised a reading of my book *Tracking the Tiger - 50 Days in India's Best Tiger Reserves* at the Pench Tiger Reserve. It was a truly wild yet educative weekend where we went for jungle safaris and saw a great deal of wildlife. We did a lot of off-roading too and visited several very traditional and well kept villages and also a local school that the Born Free Foundation supports. The grand finale was a campfire dinner.

The Discovery Drive in and around the heart of India, started from Nagpur, which lies at the dead centre of our country with the

Zero Mile marker indicating the geographical centre of India. We were introduced to our Land Rovers and driving instructors at the Nagpur airport and then we headed to the Hyderabad-Nagpur highway in order to bypass the city. Later we joined NH 7, the North-South National Highway that connects Nagpur to Jabalpur. At Ramtek there are several old Hindu temples some of which date back to the fifth century. There is also a fort whose fortified walls were built around 1740 and you can see some of these fortifications from the highway itself. Just after we crossed the Maharashtra border and entered Madhya Pradesh, we turned left and drove to Rudyard Kipling's kingdom also known as *The Land of the Jungle Book*.

Yes, the Pench Tiger Reserve is very much The Land of the Jungle Book. Kipling was inspired to write his memorable book by the luxuriant jungles of Pench that still teem with an astonishing variety of wildlife. Remember Mowgli, the pint-sized man cub of the jungle or Bagheera, the black panther? And who can forget Sher Khan, Kipling's inimitable villain.

The Pench Tiger Reserve comprises the Indira Priyadarshini Pench National Park, the Mowgli Pench Sanctuary and a buffer zone. It is situated in the southern slopes of the Satpura mountain range and the Pench River, which is the lifeline of this rich forest and from which this tiger reserve gets its name, splits the park in two. In fact one part (the more visited one) lies in Madhya Pradesh and the other in the state of Maharashtra. While the Madhya Pradesh side of Pench has finer tourist facilities and the wildlife sightings here are also better, a visit to the Maharashtra side is a must because it's stunningly scenic.

This wild world has a glorious history. Its natural wealth and abundant beauty finds mention in *Ain-i-Akbari* which is a record of emperor Akbar's reign. Several other natural history books like Robert Strendale's *Seonee - Camp life in Satpura Hills*, Forsyth's *Highlands of Central India* and Dunbar Brander's *Wild Animals of Central India*, explicitly describe the amazing panorama of nature's abundance in this region. The story of *The Jungle Book* unfolds in the locales of the Pench Tiger Reserve.

A nicely camouflaged scops owl and a crested serpent eagle, just two of many birds that inhabit this region. The grand finale, a campfire dinner, was the perfect end to an amazing drive. Off-road in the buffer zone of the Pench Tiger Reserve





Kipling borrowed heavily from Strendale's *Seonee and Mammalia of India and Ceylon* to capture the region's topography, wildlife and its ways. Mowgli's character was actually inspired by a pamphlet written by Sir William Henry Sleeman, *An Account of Wolves Nurturing Children in their Dens*. This booklet describes the actual account of a wolf-boy captured in the Seonee district near the village of Sant Baori in 1831. Many of the locations in Kipling's book are also actual places in the district, like the Waingunga River with its gorge, the site where Sher Khan is killed, Kanhiwara village and the Seonee Hills.

The Pench Tiger Reserve is rich in its biodiversity and its terrain is defined by hills, valleys and the occasional precipitous slope. Pench is an important ecosystem supporting an abundance of flora and fauna, including a rich variety of aquatic life. Tigers are usually seen around the Pench River where the density of prey population is higher. Interestingly, the reserve encompasses four different forest regions - an extravagance of trees, shrubs, grasses, climbers, weeds and herbs, with teak being the

most prominent of the tree species. Over 1,200 species of plants have been recorded from within the area including several rare and endangered plants as well as plants of ethno-botanical importance. This naturally rich jungle is also the abode of 39 species of mammals, 13 kinds of reptiles, three species of amphibians and over 250 varieties of birds including a host of migratory ones. Amongst the bountiful of birdlife are feathered denizens like the Malabar pied hornbills, Indian pittas, ospreys, grey-headed fishing eagles, white-eyed buzzards, storks, waterfowls, green pigeons and even some endangered species of vulture. Also found here are some 50 species of fish, 30 categories of reptile, 45 types of butterflies, 54 kinds of moths and numerous other insects.

The forest is home to leopards, different species of deer like the *cheetals*, *sambars*, *chausinhgas* (four horned deer) and the mouse deer, *nilgai* (antelope), jackals, wild dogs, *gaurs* (Indian bisons), sloth bears, wild boars and hyenas. The list further includes macaques, porcupines, small Indian civets and palm civets. As protection and

Pench now has approximately 25 tigers and sightings are fairly frequent. In the hilly areas you also find leopards. The Discovery proved very capable off-road. The spotted deer with antlers in velvet



The writer at his book reading event. A local fisherman preparing lunch. Langur monkeys are very playful and they love hanging out. The Born Free team at a local school they support. Jackals usually move around in pairs. A spider that took a liking to the Land Rover Discovery

conservation measures have improved, there are now over 25 tigers in this park and sightings are on the rise. Large herds of *gaur*, *cheetal* and *sambar* are also frequently spotted. Pench now also boasts of several nice hotels and resorts, the best possibly being Taj Safari's Baghvan Lodge, where we stayed.

While the stay at the lodge and the campfire dinner were certainly highlights of this Discovery Drive, even more enjoyable was the off-roading experience in the Rookhad Wildlife Sanctuary. Not many visit this lesser known sanctuary that is just 30km from Pench. The terrain is rugged and hilly and the dirt tracks carve their way through dense jungles. In places the grass was higher than our Land Rovers.

Our convoy comprised of Land Rover Discoverys, Freelanders and Evoques and their all-terrain capabilities were put through a seriously severe test. The Discovery, with its transfer case for lowering gear ratios and suspension with a feature for increasing ground

clearance, was easily the best off-roader. But it was also the biggest and heaviest, so one had to be extra careful on narrow paths and where the ground was not particularly firm. Both the Freelander and Evoque are much lighter and also have amazing all-terrain ability. But they did scrape their bellies a bit on some of the deeper craters and uneven tracks we encountered.

We also did a fair bit of off-roading in the buffer zone of the Pench Tiger Reserve and visited several villages where the Born Free Foundation, along with its partner the Satpuda Foundation, does a lot of work for the preservation of the environment by providing bio gas for cooking which in turn reduces deforestation for procuring firewood. They also educate children on the importance of protecting our forests and the wildlife within and regularly hold medical camps for the villagers. What was really pleasing to see was how friendly the villagers were and how clean they kept their homes and villages. We urbanites have a lot to learn from them. 