

THE Taj



Madhu Nataraj
at The Taj West End, Bangalore

City Vacations

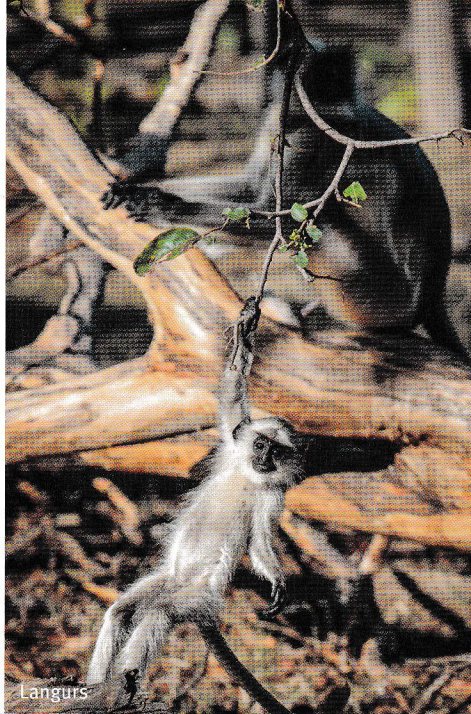
William Dalrymple on New Delhi
Vani Ganapathy on Bangalore
Vidya Gajapathi Raju on Chennai

Dubai by Design

The all-new Taj Dubai Hotel

The Taj Cellar Selection

Saryu Doshi on architecture



Langurs



The Land Rover and Born Free team



Gaur

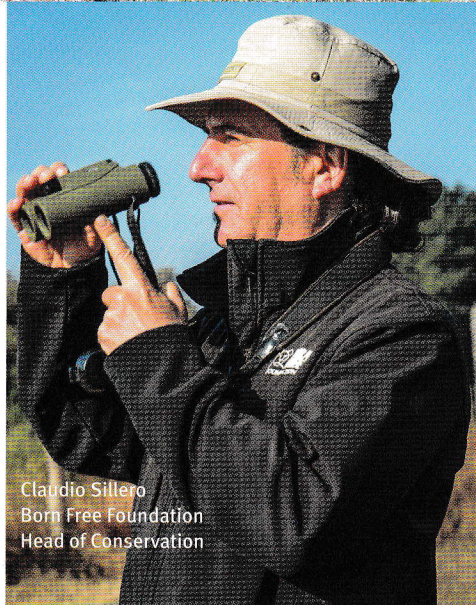


Eagle

Born Free

Safari in Pench

The forests of Pench and Central India are often steeped in history, folklore and literary myth. Some tracts, like Bandhavgarh served as private royal game reserves for the Maharajas of Rewa, and the area is known for its rich biodiversity and density of wildlife. It is a magical landscape too, of forests, undulating hills, jungle pathways, gorges and watery lagoons. They were written about in Akbar's *Ain-i-Akbari* and later in colonial accounts like Strendale's *Seonee — Camp life in Satpura Hills*, Forsyth's *Highlands of Central India* and Dunbar Brander's *Wild Animals of Central India* which explicitly detail nature's abundance. This is, of course, Kipling country and the area seems intensely aware of this fact, finding expression in surprising ways like wall frescoes on tourist lodges inspired by Walt Disney's popular depiction of Mowgli as a wild child.



Claudio Sillero
Born Free Foundation
Head of Conservation

Bill Travers and Virginia McKenna travelled to Kenya in 1964 to star in what was to become a wildlife classic – *Born Free*. The film about an orphaned lion cub led to the formation of the Born Free Foundation 20 years later. In partnership with Land Rover, the Foundation conserves tiger habitat in the Satpuda forests of central India.

Debjani Sen goes on a Taj safari to Baghvan Pench Jungle Lodge and returns to wonder, which is our jungle?

Photographs by **Frank Leavesley**



The Howdah and the Jungle

“In most of our parties... we had some 20 or 30 elephants, and frequently six or eight howdahs. These expeditions were very pleasant, and we lived luxuriously... I have been out with a line of 76 elephants and 14 howdahs. This was on 16th March 1875. It was a magnificent sight to see the seventy-six huge brutes in the river together, splashing the water along their heated sides to cool themselves, and sending huge waves dashing against the crumbling banks of the rapid streams. It was no less magnificent to see their slow stately march across the swaying, crashing jungle. What an idea of irresistible power and ponderous strength the huge creatures gave us, as they heaved through the tangled brake, crushing everything in their resistless progress...” James Inglis as cited in Valmik Thapar’s *Tiger Fire: 500 years of the Tiger in India*.

Our safari commenced right when we were ushered from Nagpur airport on an effortless two-hour drive in a Land Rover to the gates of Pench National Park. Land Rover in its association with the Born Free Foundation has been supporting conservation by using their vehicles to reach wildlife in the most remote locations in the world.

Our fleet was no less special than the large howdahs of elephants of the royalty. In charge was the RR Sport, V6 Diesel with 2996cc engine and 288bhp. The convoy had Land Rover Freelander

Pench National Park



as the head and sweep, along with Range Rover Evoque, Sport and Discovery. The Range Rover Sport we were driving had adjustable height to adapt to off-road conditions and a Terrain Response System which allowed you to set the mode to General, Grass, Gravel and Snow, Mud and Ruts and Sand. We put ours through the ultimate test by taking it through rough, off-road jungle terrain which it handled with ease and passenger comfort.

Sheer visual abundance greeted our first initiation into the forest. The post-monsoon abundance of the landscape is a visual treat of sheer intensity and contrasts. The undulating hills, gorges and rocky outcrops of volcanic rocks juxtapose against the verdant forest, dense shrubbery and fallen leaves. The precious Teak (*Tectona grandis*) may dominate, but Pench also has Sal (*Shorea robusta*) whose leaves are used by the local tribes as medicine.

We felt the harsh, gritty texture of the Crocodile Tree (*Terminalia elliptica*) which stood alongside the Ghost Tree (*Terminalia crenulata*) with its silken, pale, surreal silhouette like an ancient pagan goddess. The trees have provided food and sustenance to the local community for generations, like Mango (*Mangifera indica*), Custard Apple (*Annona squamosa*), Jamun (*Syzygium cumini*) or the Indian Plum, the Acacia Catechu which fills betel leaves, Baja (*Pterocarpus marsupium*), Haldu (*Adena cardifolia*), the celebrated intoxicant Mahua (*Madhuca longifolia*), along with the sacred Frankincense (*Boswellia sacra*) and Pipal (*Ficus religiosa*).

Forests are no bystanders; still props for wildlife. They actively participate in the drama of life and change. The parched teak leaves had turned to russet nets for lack of rainfall; tall leafless trees stood like skeletons in waterlogged lagoons, and parasitic creepers lay lifeless on the forest floor with their nurturing host entrapped in its twisted, gnarled embrace.

Call of the Peacock

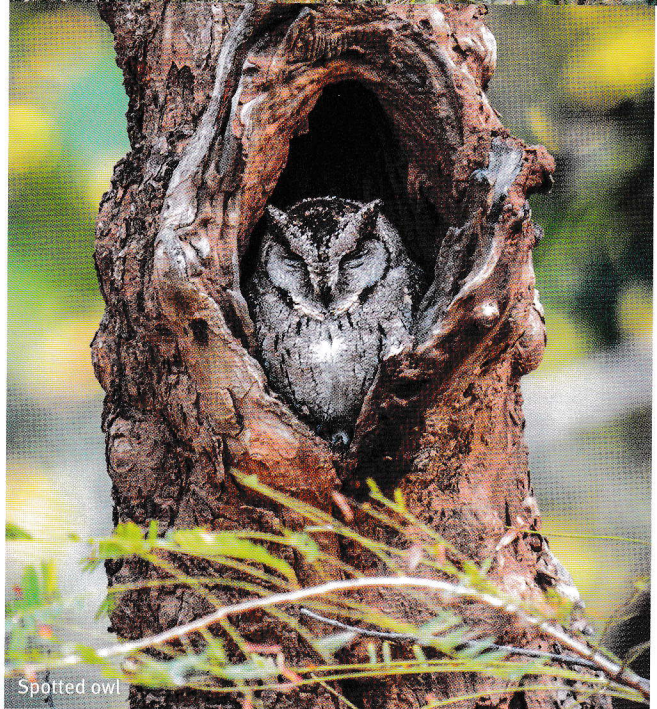
Pench was declared a sanctuary in 1977 and raised to the status of a National Park in 1983 and Tiger Reserve in 1992, making it one of the youngest. An abundance of rainfall has created an ample provision of food all the way up the food chain making it one of the few habitats for the survival of the endangered tiger and leopard.



Sambar



Cheetal or spotted deer



Spotted owl

It also houses the sloth bear, wild dog, porcupine, hyena and a host of birds like the drongo, barbet, bulbul, egret and heron.

As with most visitors to the park, our first encounters were with the beautiful golden spotted deer or cheetals with velvet antlers, feasting on branches and leaves discarded by the langurs who are known fussy eaters. The distinctive langurs, chief primates of the forest here, basked in early winter sunshine on fallen tree trunks, grooming each other. The two seem to share a symbiotic relationship, the langur's keen eyesight helps to raise early predator warnings, and for the same reason, the deer's sense of smell helps the langur flee.

The other resident deer, sambar, is a somewhat more shy cousin and we occasionally saw a couple of dark brown females camouflaged behind the rusty tall grass. On our final evening, the stag did finally make an appearance — majestic, dark with impressively sculpted antlers. As the sun came down in the forest, bathing the landscape in gold, and temperatures plummeted suddenly, we saw a nilgai



Baghvan PENCH Jungle Lodge



The lobby

feasting on the last vestiges of his dinner before retiring for the night. A wild boar made a fleeting appearance through the luxuriant undergrowth as did the jackal, who I almost missed, and quite suddenly we were confronted by the commanding presence of the gaur who refused to budge from our path. My personal favourite was a pair of owls of unusual beauty snuggled in a tree hole peering out with “ghostly eyes” at the darkening world outside. Our car had disturbed a pair of peacocks, and one broke into an awkward flight across the tarmac. You can never be oblivious to a peacock’s stunning beauty, no matter how many times you see one. Our guide told us that the peacock always signals the arrival of the predator. We waited for the call and the predator of choice.

Our anticipation for the tiger grew stronger with each successive foray into the reserve, and every rustle of the leaf, every shadow that fell, and every craggy broken log on the ground fuelled our increasing excitement and expectant glances. We tracked every possible clue — the paw prints, scratch marks on the trees, the sight of fresh tiger dropping, the nervous calls of the langurs, the flight of the birds, and finally the call of the peacocks. A tigress was at large with her three growing cubs and we waited for her arrival at her favourite spots of recent sightings and at the water holes where her prey come to drink. With our car engine switched off, we listened to the sounds of the forest and the sounds of silence — deep, sensuous, unadulterated, even spiritual. Pure bliss! She did not oblige us, choosing instead to retreat deeper into the forest,

her sanctuary. **Bob Rupani** who launched his book *Tracking the Tiger* recently, writes that mankind is divided into two, those who have seen the tiger in the wild, and those who have not. By now, it did not matter which camp I belonged to, the pristine forest was enticing enough. I felt complete!

The Camp

During the viceroyship of the Mogul princes... and also at a later period among some of the Mahratta chieftains, it was customary for these great men, and their numerous attendants, to pitch their tents in unfrequented tracts... Their encampments, especially of the Moguls, were extensive and magnificent; there they entertained their friends in a sumptuous manner... which sometimes lasted several weeks. (James Forbes as cited in Thapar’s Tiger Fire)

We set up camp in the lovely Baghvan PENCH Jungle Lodge, part of The Taj Group’s luxury jungle safari lodges. Built by the side of a nullah, or river bed where wild animals are known to stray into, the central lobby has a large open feel with French windows and patios that invite the outdoors in. Nature here is king! Dinner is often served in the covered deck which overlooks the river bed. The precincts have been left deliberately unaltered with unpaved forest paths leading to the individual suites, each with its own private forest.



Rustic-charm room

(www.tajsafaris.com)



Bush dinner under the Mahua tree



Bathroom greenery

The guest accommodation comprises a large bedroom with a connecting open courtyard where you can choose to have an outdoor shower and a spacious dressing room-cum-bathroom. A stairway leads upstairs to a machan reminiscent of treetop watch stations in a jungle hunt, and here you can sleep under the stars in modern-day luxury. The rooms have unfussy, whitewashed walls accented with exotic metal ware, subtle forest shades of upholstery and oversized paintings. The attention to details is thoughtful but understated like the large apothecary bottles housing the shampoos and lotions redolent with scents of Indian honeysuckle and other exotic forest flowers; the two brilliantly-coloured glass bottles with old fashioned squashes on the coffee table; the torches to help you navigate in the dark and the generous supply of sketch pencils should you be so seized by the urge to draw.

Dark tones of teak, large tiled antique chests and cupboards from another era, botanical prints on the walls give the central guest area a classic feel of a gentleman's hunting lodge, broken suddenly by touches of the whimsical, like a pink-tinted ceiling fan and a contemporary stylized tiger print rug in an otherwise traditional bedroom, black chandeliers, and a charming pair of 1950s' retro-style fridges in the lobby kitchen, adding some visual drama and fun to the whole look.

The Picnic

"Knowing that the party would be very thirsty after their shooting ramble, the caterer, to give them a refreshing surprise, had a quantity of tamarind-and-honey sherbet prepared, which was pronounced delicious by all, and entirely superseded Bass and other drinks... The smoked deer's tongues, venison steaks, fried fish, curry and jerked neelgye made into bhurta, left nothing to be desired..."

(Customs' Officer from The North West Provinces of India as cited in Thapar's *Tiger Fire*)



Sleeping under the stars in the guest room machan

Chef Vikram Shinde follows a Pick and Make approach to his food. Most of the salad ingredients are freshly picked from the Lodge's organic garden and dressed just before serving, and the simple lettuce salad with balsamic dressing served for lunch was surprisingly full-flavoured. Guests from the city expect a more "homemade" taste, so the food is light, unfussy and flavoursome. His cuisine is dominantly Vidarbha in inspiration which is reflected best in the Maharashtrian thali he serves for dinner. As guests go out on long rides for the safaris, Baghvan packs a picnic lunch for them to carry. Some of the little touches that personalize the experience were the delicious bite-sized portions of smooth fruit compotes made from their garden papayas and local seasonal pineapples served at the breakfast table and generously proportioned homemade cookies in see-through glass jars which you can help yourself to with their delicious Italian coffee.

The culinary highlight of our trip has to be the Bush dinner under the Mahua tree. We came upon a magical land lit only with suspended lanterns from the branches, with two large bonfires on the ground to keep the evening chill at bay. All around us, as far as the eye could see were miles of still, inky darkness. For an enchanting evening, we felt like a royal party back from a jungle excursion, celebrating the spoils in a timeless world. The courtly cuisine was kababs and breads fresh from the tandoor, and gently simmered stews and curries in clay pots which always impart a very special flavour.

Mission Tiger

Colonial literature was focused on the elite elements of the history of the shikar amongst the British and the Maharajas of India as it became increasingly symbolic, a ritual for displaying dominance over nature and what was considered a lower social order. John MacKenzie's history classic, *The Empire of Nature* laid the foundations for this perspective when he argued that the shikar constituted propaganda: "it showed the emperor, king, or lord exhibiting power, enjoying the privilege that went with it and asserting prestige within widespread territorial bounds."

Tigers are entirely dependent on conservation today and occupy only seven percent of their historical territory, facing many threats from depletion of habitat to poaching. The Satpuda landscape is viewed as the largest contiguous tiger habitat in the world and hosts around 300 tigers.

The Satpuda Landscape Tiger Programme was born out of a partnership between Born Free Foundation and the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit at the University of Oxford. The Taj Group has been in active participation with them providing hospitality and support to the multiple groups involved.



Kababs hot from the tandoor

Born Free Foundation shares a long relationship with Land Rover ever since they became a team during the making of the 1966 classic wildlife movie *Born Free*, which featured the vehicles. Though recently launched in India, they have continued to play a role in wildlife conservation including in the Satpuda region by donating vehicles for multiple uses, in this case for setting up two mobile health and education units. We saw some of their community initiatives in the buffer region of the Tiger Reserve where people's lives are most critically affected by conservation efforts. A school, health centre, and several other projects have promoted sustainable livelihoods to reduce the tiger-human conflict. Professor Claudio Sillero, a conservation biologist from the University of Oxford involved with the Born Free Foundation, spoke of the need to first resolve the conflict between wildlife and human interest in order for conservation to succeed. That requires the building of awareness and trust in the community and looking after their welfare.

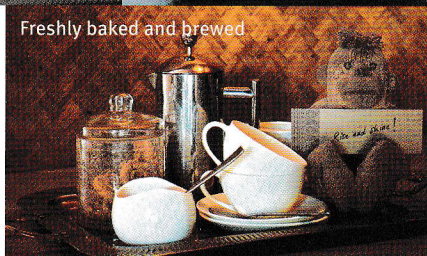
Jungle Remains

Our journey to Pench took us through many experiences. It was all about animals in the wild and conservation; about testing iconic Land Rovers on scenic forest trails and highways; about village kids from the local school performing a play with conservation as a theme on a makeshift stage; and a young wife in a charming village of the buffer zone cooking a meal on bio-gas; it was about the legendary Taj hospitality, and sleeping under the open skies listening to calls of the wild and the unfamiliar. In the end, it was about this much larger, all-encompassing identity, the Jungle. It had been Kipling's Jungle too, perhaps the symbolic contrast to the colonial idea of civilization, the City. But, even to Kipling the Jungle was a lot more complex; it offered a view of an alternate civilization where Mowgli learns to live and grow up; a kind of passage of reawakening. In Mowgli's symbolic leaving of the forest and losing the love of "Mother Sky" and all the animals who nurtured him, the Jungle is equated to Paradise and takes on an almost biblical significance. I am now left to wonder, which is my Jungle? 🏠



A thali

"Homemade" taste



Freshly baked and brewed