


# destination INDIA

A photograph of a pink, domed building with arched windows, surrounded by lush greenery and tall palm trees. A group of people is gathered in front of the building, and a vintage car is parked to the left.


**Ranthambhore Wildlife Reserve  
Journey Into Wilderness**

A photograph of an ornate restaurant interior with red walls, gold chandeliers, and tables set with white cloths and gold chairs.

**Tanjore Restaurant, Taj, Bombay**

A photograph of a large, green, conical hill (a stupa) with a small white building at its base. The hill is surrounded by a low wall and a fence.

**Nepal's Buddhist Circuit**

A photograph of a Lufthansa DC-10 aircraft on a runway at night, illuminated by airport lights.

**Inflight Report: Lufthansa's DC-10**

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# Ranthambore Wildlife Reserve

## Journey Into Wilderness

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**Surprising Rajasthan is desert country  
where lakes mushroom, the green is verdant  
and man's fantasia of dreams has taken  
shape in sandstone and marble.  
Unbelievable too the wealth of forest scrub,  
the number of migratory birds that descend  
here from distant lands, and the tiger,  
crocodile, deer! Impossible Rajasthan!  
Impossible Ranthambore!**

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**T**he Maker in His act of creation took time out to chisel the rocky environs of Ranthambore Himself. Little wonder then that as one drives upto the Jogi Mahal in the heart of the sanctuary, one is overwhelmed with the feeling of finally having **reached!** The spell is cast almost immediately and even though one might break away and leave, the luring force of Ranthambore keeps pulling one back again and again.

Barely six hours away from Delhi by train and some 15 kms from Swai Madhopur, Ranthambore Tiger Reserve offers a unique experience for the city bred. One of the finest wildlife sanctuaries in the country, it is also famous for its legendary 11th century Rajput fortress from which it gets its name.

The starting point for the journey into wilderness is the Jogi Mahal—a small but charming Forest Rest House in typical Hindu architecture. Once in a state of decay, Jogi Mahal has been carefully restored to provide tourist accommodation. It stands next to the Padamla Lake whose placid waters gently lap the building walls when the monsoon rains fill the depression upto the brim. Modern amenities are available with one exception, there is no electricity. But then, in a place like this, the absence of

such a facility only enhances the beauty rather than mar it. For those with a flavour for deep jungle life, there is the Anantpura Forest Lodge, 25 kms from Jogi Mahal.

From the verandah of the Jogi Mahal a panoramic view of the lake and the surrounding hills unfolds. To the undiscerning visitor, the Field Director Mr. Fateh Singh is quick to point out that what looks like a piece of driftwood leaving a trail in the water is in fact a mugger crocodile on the move. This lake is full of them and, in winters, this cold blooded reptilian basks in the sun all day long. Come summers, the crocs go underwater. The lake is populated with several species of fish and the soft backed turtle. The lake also provides an ideal habitat for aquatic birds and becomes a home for many migratory birds in the winter months.

The distant banks of the lake suddenly come alive in the late afternoon as herds of nilgai, chital, and sambhar arrive in groups and batches to either feed or drink in the aquatic eco-system of the Padamla Lake, a splendid opportunity for those with telephoto lens' to photograph all kinds of animals while sitting in one place.

Facing Jogi Mahal and towering over

it is the once invincible fort of the Chauhan dynasty that withstood repeated Muslim onslaughts, succumbing to the enemy only by an act of treason. Today, the precipitous walls, huge gates, crumbling bastions and ramparts, palaces and temples, stand in silent ruinous grandeur. But if the mute stones could speak, they would tell tales of bloody carnage, incredible valour, burning passion, self-sacrifice and a treachery that led to the ruthless murder of a people. This proud Rajput citadel captures the romanticism of a bygone Rajputana. The sanctuary is strewn with ruins, standing even now in graceful artistry, aesthetically blending history with nature.

With the old practice of night spotting now discarded, visitors are obliged to go for a drive by early evening and return before nightfall. One could go either in the spacious van or hitch a ride, if possible, with the Field Director in his jeep, as he goes for his mandatory evening rounds of the forest.

Ranthambore has a typical dry deciduous forest predominated by 'dhok' trees. In April the forest is set ablaze by the 'dhok' trees as they blossom.



Destination India, January '81

som forth in fiery orange. A month later, the forest is splashed yellow when the 'amaltash' bursts into bloom. Otherwise, for most part of the year, Ranthambhore wears a bleak grey mantle. In narrow valleys and hilly passes, 'jam-un' and mango groves abound. The still water pools under their shade form pockets of microclimates and are a favourite haunt of tigers.

Talking of trees, one cannot miss the 'Walking Banyan' sprawling over an area of roughly 2,000 sq. mts. in front of the Jogi Mahal. Mr. Fateh Singh says that it is second only to the one in the Calcutta Botanical Gardens, both in size as well as in age.

Climbing atop a hill, the Rajbagh Lake below sparkles under the evening sun like a shimmering canvas of Monet. The usual herds of deer and wild boar can be seen feeding by the shores of the lake. Moving further, the open spaces give way to undulating hills as the jeep tracks plough the flat topped hills, a distinctive feature of the Vindhyan Ranges. By contrast, the Aravelli Range in Ranthambhore is characterised by its rugged, rocky nature. The two hill systems converge and overlap each other

in Ranthambore.

Alarmed by the engine sound the grazing chinkaras flash in all directions with great alacrity from their pastures on grassy slopes. The only Indian gazelle, chinkara, is truly a magnificent sight when it is in flight. On the other hand, the startled sloth bears when unexpectedly encountered with, withdraw towards the thick cover in a series of cumbersome movements, repeatedly turning around to ensure they are not

being followed.

Driving through the sanctuary, it is strange to see deserted and decrepit hutments on both sides of the jeep tracks at short intervals. Mr. Fateh Singh explains that the inhabitants had been evicted when the sanctuary was declared a Project Tiger Reserve in 1974. The idea behind it was to make a 'core' area in the Sanctuary which was totally free of any human interference, tree-felling, or cattle-grazing, thus creat



*Above: The end of the trial—the tiger!*

*Below: The Walking Banyan with an impressive spread of foliage.*

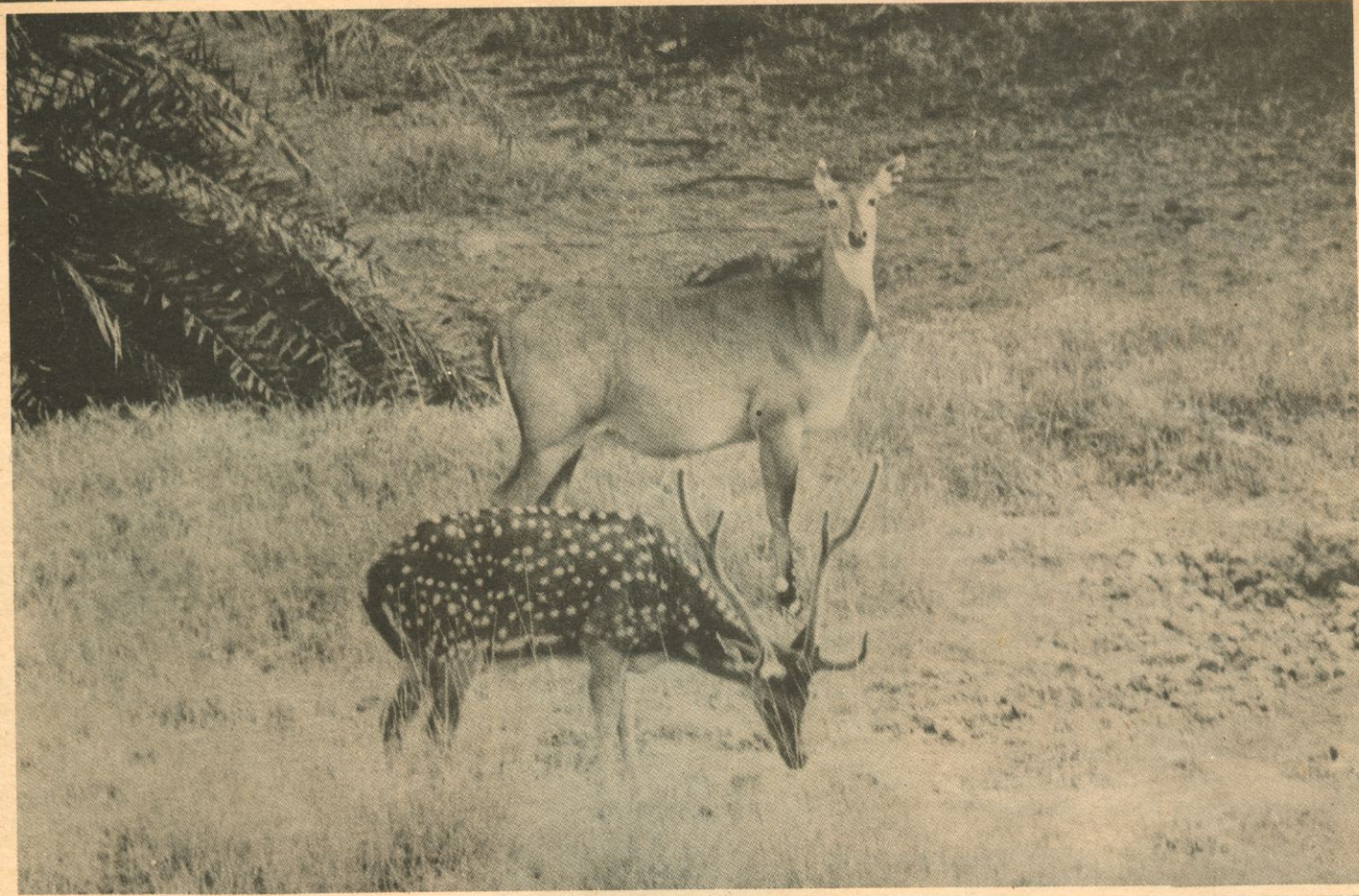


ing a perfect natural habitat for the tiger.

As twilight slips into night an eerie silence descends on the forest. This is the time for the carnivore. Besides the tiger, the panther, wild dog, wolf, fox, hyena and small jungle cats can also be seen in Ranthambore. With a little bit of luck one can come across a stalking panther, a pack of roving wild dogs or perhaps, intercept a jackal on his nocturnal rounds.

It is particularly fascinating to see a pair of red burning eyes suddenly light up in the beam of the jeep's headlights. As the jeep draws closer, the animal takes form. The hyena stares back and then slithers into darkness. As a scavenger this beast faithfully follows the mighty predators to clear off the remnants of their kill. More often than not, sighting of a hyena is an indication of a tiger in the vicinity.

Returning back to Jogi Mahal by a circuitous route, the bait site comes by the side of a stream, where a buffalo calf is tied every night. Under the starry sky, the sacrificial bovine chews its cud, oblivious of its fate.



*A female nilgai and a male spotted deer in Ranthambore.*

In fading, flickering lights, experiences, stories and myths of jungle lore are swapped in amicable gatherings after dinner. Visitors are advised to turn in early for the night because one has to be up and about before sunrise to catch the animals on the move.

The morning drive begins soon after a hot cup of tea and lungfuls of fresh crispy air. It is a rewarding experience to be out in the forest at the crack of dawn and watch a whole new world emerge from the shadows.

Chirpy weavers flit around their colony of nests up in a plam tree and partridges and quails call in high pitched, ringing notes as they flutter about bushes while the 'brainfever' screams insanely without respite. And rising above all these is the trumpeting cacophony of the peacock.

Gradually the light intensifies and the hazy contours now glow vividly in the morning sunshine. In the horizon, silhouetted against a blue sky, the fort stands out in imposing clarity while in front of the jeep an excited porcupine shakes it's quills threateningly before

scampering into a thicket. Perched high atop branches, a troop of langloors (black faced monkeys) forage on tender green leaves, while further down chital and sambhar tread softly through wide open fields of *khus*.

To most who come to Ranthambore, seeing the tiger becomes an end in itself. But the Great Indian Cat eludes all except the chosen few who chance to come upon it unexpectedly. The best time of the year to see the tiger, however, are the hot and dry months of April, May and June, when practically nobody returns disappointed because all water holes dry up and the tiger is forced to come to the few perennial sources of water to drink and cool off from the oppressive heat of the Indian summers. Going around such a circuit then, a rendezvous with the tiger becomes almost inevitable. Just as one least expects it, the jeep comes to an instant jerky halt and a soft murmur of "Tiger". "Tiger" "Tiger" turns the attention in the direction of the pointed fingers.

Half submerged in the limpid pool,

the big striped cat looks on sleepily. Two more tigers magically materialise in the field of vision as they rise from a disturbed siesta in the wild grasses that have camouflaged them so completely. As if to prove that nature can be very deceptive to an unsuspecting human eye, yet two more tigers take shape in the rustling grass. That is the tigress and her brood of four one and a half year old cubs. What an awesome display of feline form and beauty! The cubs crowd together in apprehension as the mother steps out of the water confidently making her displeasure evident by snarling occasionally. Then, almost in a single file, the family moves away majestically into the deeper foliage of the jungles.

Almost always, the end of the trail comes with the sighting of the tiger. But not quite so. The fort is to be discovered as a pre-lunch excursion and the hours to be whiled away in the Jogi Mahal verandah watching the pied kingfisher in a state of meditative trance that pervades Ranthambore.

—Nihal Mathur