

...And To Ranthambhore We Went!



T-19 scouring the surrounding from the Hunting Palace

It was the Sinhala and Tamil New Year holidays and what better time we thought to explore the wilderness of the famed Ranthambhore of India where TIGERS roam... I must say though, it is not for the faint hearted!

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Situated in the Sawai Madhopur district of Rajasthan, Ranthambhore is a 180km drive from Jaipur Airport. We first flew to Mumbai and then took a connecting flight to Jaipur, from there it was a four hour journey by road. Make sure that your driver is taking the right route via the highway if not you will be bumping along small by-roads as the driver tries to reduce the journey by 30km but it is not worthwhile as it is much faster and comfortable if you travel on the highway.

It was the dry season and since Rajasthan is known as the desert city, the dust and sand added to the dryness and unbearable heat of the day. Mornings are usually cooler but will soon become warm. We were in Ranthambhore for three nights and this included five safari tours to the National Park.

Well as I said Ranthambhore is not for the faint hearted, since we were a group of 14 we could not go in small jeeps but had to hire a Cantor, this is a four-wheel drive, which is a combination between a lorry and a bus without a roof. Excited to see the tigers we scrambled into the Cantor and headed towards the National Park. It was around 3.30pm in the afternoon. The roads within the park are extremely uneven with rocks jutting out. You bump up and down and for those who complain that it is difficult to drive in our national parks please visit Ranthambhore, Sri Lanka is heaven! The dust and heat were unbearable. We entered through the ancient gateway of the Ranthambhore Fort and on and on we went scanning the horizons.

The Ranthombhore Fort is massive and surrounds the entire area. You can see sections of it on the surrounding hills. Throughout the National Park you will find ruins of the buildings that had been part of the ancient fort. In medieval India, Ranthambhore was an important Kingdom for the Sultans of Delhi, because it guarded the passage to Central India. While the function of the fort itself changed over time. In more recent years Ranthambhore was the hunting grounds of the Maharajah of Jaipur before it was declared a National Park.

We saw a movement and there... a majestic tiger—T-64 walking gracefully along the bank towards a rock further within the jungle

Herds of Sambar, Spotted deer, vibrant peacocks and crocodiles were shown to us, but we wanted to see TIGERS! We were in Zone 5, we would drive down one path and then another. Mind you, the bumping and thumping and bouncing does not stop. Towards evening we were getting a bit weary as we had not seen any tigers and we were extremely tired since we had flown in only that morning (by air and road a total of more than 16 hours of travelling to reach Ranthambhore). Our tracker was looking intently and then suddenly he pointed and said "Tiger"! Whatever sleepiness we felt disappeared, we all scrambled to see this tiger, he was just visible amidst the trees the bright orange and black stripes striking against the brown background. We were told that he was a male tiger of two years. Then our tracker pointed in the opposite direction and behold another male tiger. Apparently these were the cubs of T-17 a daughter of Machali (the famous tigress of Ranthambhore) who had been killed. As it was close to six and we had to exit the park by 6.30pm, our Cantor rumbled into life and we started on our journey back. Before long there was another shout, and it was a

tigress, the sister of the two tigers we had seen before. We were happy. But that was short lived as our Cantor driver decided to drive like a maniac to exit the park gates by 6.30pm. It was extremely dangerous and we were terrified as the Cantor swerved sharply at bends and cliffs. Such driving is not necessary because if you do get late, you only need to pay a fine.

Next day morning at 6.30am we were ready for our second tour, after a one hour delay due to the Cantor getting late we were on the road heading to Zone 3. We briefly went to Zone 2 and then to Zone 3 where an impressive lake cooled the environs. At one point for saw a number of jeeps stopped at the banks of the lake excitedly pointing at the trees. We saw a movement and there... a majestic tiger—T-64 walking gracefully along the bank towards a rock further within the jungle. All the jeeps got excited and sped towards the point where they thought the tiger would be and yes there he was relaxing on the rock, his back turned to us. What large animals they were!

He slowly walked, with such graceful movements, it was mesmerising. He climbed a small slope and found a good spot to lie down

In the national parks in Sri Lanka, we are used to seeing animals at close quarters, however in Ranthambhore that is not so, except for may be the deer, sambur, monkeys and peacocks. You will need at least a 400mm zoom lens. Since we had both 400mm and 500mm zoom lenses we were able to take photographs of these magnificent beasts. We returned to our accommodation had a small break and lunch and returned back to the park at 3.30pm.

During this afternoon session, it was T-24 that we saw in Zone 2. Again, it was the large number of vehicles surrounding the area that drew our attention. T-24 was inside a cave, he was relaxing and trying to sleep. For a moment I could not see him and then I realised I was looking right at him. He was just a few steps away and I must say he was MASSIVE! With vehicles surging towards him to get a better look, he did not seem disturbed but at one point he made a movement with his paws. Our tracker said lets go and we did. After an hour or so we returned to the location and now T-24 was outside the cave almost sunbathing in the open area. As a couple of our guys got a bit more enthusiastic to get the perfect shot, our tracker gave a warning saying that T-24 had killed three people.

We watched him from a distance and after awhile he got up and walked further

inland, maybe from all the people around and the view was beautiful. He slowly walked, with such graceful movements, it was mesmerising. He climbed a small slope and found a good spot to lie down. The vehicles could not go near him, we reversed and went to a better vantage point. We watched him for hours and decided to call it a day.

At 6.30am the next day we headed to Zone 1, which is a forest area. It is much cooler than the other zones, but as it was the dry season all the leaves had fallen off the trees and it was very brown and dry. It was almost like parched land. We did not see any tigers in this zone and there was hardly any other animals as well. At one moment we stopped for about 15 minutes in anticipation of a tiger, but many of us fell asleep in the somewhat comforting breeze of the morning.

Throughout the park all the rivers had dried up with just large boulders remaining. I could not help but wonder how the animals survived.

We returned to our accommodation and wondered whether to go on the afternoon safari as well. We wanted to see more tigers, so with hope in our hearts and dust in our mouth, we ventured at 3.30pm back into the National Park and this time to Zone 2. Our tracker had told us that the best zones to see tigers are Zone 2 and 5, we were happy that we were going to Zone 2. We arrived at the lake, in the centre is an island with the ruins of an ancient hunting palace. Many jeeps had stopped and were looking at the tall grass on the banks of the lake. A herd of deer was grazing a short distance away. Through the grass a moving orange patch could be seen, yes it was a tiger having his afternoon nap (he could be seen only through binoculars and long range lenses). All of us were waiting for him to get up and drink the water from the lake. But it was almost as if he was playing with us; he would roll on to the side, then he would lift his paw, then again lie down... We all kept urging him to get up. A group of peacocks cautiously went towards him to quickly turn away to mind their own business! We were waiting for quite sometime when all the other vehicles decided to go to another area. As we too reversed and headed in another direction, one of our guys in the group who was watching the tiger suddenly shouted and said that there was another tiger just behind the one we had seen. He had seen this second tiger jump.

We all started shouting in pleasure soon to be “shooshed” by our tracker, what were we excited about? THE FOUR CUBS HAD COME OUT!

As we went back to where we were before, there was another gasp, we were like “what?” and there a larger than life tiger was crossing the lake. What raw beauty and strength! We quickly reversed the vehicle to a better vantage point. He was lying on the grass relaxing near the cooling breeze of the lake. Before long a sambur that was close to us made a warning call, we looked at him wondering... And then another guy in our group pointed at the Hunting Palace and what a sight! T-19, another daughter of Machali, was almost queen like on the pavilion. The shadows and the lighting created the perfect setting. She scanned the waters below and lied down for a while, then she disappeared. Little did we know that she had four cubs with her.

We returned to watch the male tiger who was relaxing, he was T-28 and father of the cubs. From across the water we saw T-19 approaching the water and lying down to cool herself. Soon T-28 cautiously walked towards her and there was a moment of ‘love fight’ as our tracker aptly described their play. Now both of them were near the water of the island and they went in for a moment. We all started shouting in pleasure soon to be “shooshed” by our tracker, what were we excited about? THE FOUR CUBS HAD COME OUT! Oh, what a sight! It was a pleasure to watch this little family. The little ones came to the water while their mother lied a few metres away. What is really unique about tigers is that the fathers too have become protective of their cubs.

We were at a very good vantage point and not disturbed by other vehicles. We watched as the cubs played with each other and their parents. As the sun started to recede in the background T-19 and T-28 took their cubs inside to safety. This was definitely a perfect ending to our trip.

Would I visit Ranthambhore again? Well... time will tell.

