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TIGER TIGER BURNING BRIGHT

Tadoba National Park is a good place to eyeball a tiger, make friends with gazelles, deer and bison and of course, the enchanted forest, writes Gustasp and Jeroo Irani

He glared at us with all the ferocity that his 500kg muscled bulk could muster. Suddenly, the Indian bison pawed the ground and charged, stopping a few feet from our jeep. He was mean, yet majestic in his wrath. We had gate-crashed his domain and backed off, but only after photographing his huge girth and displeasure. We were in Maharashtra's Tadoba National Park, one of the 29 Project Tiger reserves in India. A three-hour drive from Nagpur, this confrontation with the *gaur* unfolded in this forest. The forest opened up for us its sunlit grasslands, avenues of bamboo groves, tall broad-leaved teak trees, the bone-white ghost tree, the scaly crocodile bark trees... The undergrowth rustled with unseen menace and creepers climbed host trees and clasped them in vice-like hold.

A sambar stag with magnificent antlers posed for our camera, like a seasoned model. Spotted deer skipped away like ballerinas after a curtain call, and birds whistled joyous greetings. A kite hovered in the sky like a helicopter and then plummeted on an unsuspecting prey. Meanwhile, Bhautik Desai, the naturalist from Svasara Jungle Lodge, examined the tiger pugmarks like a doctor checking a patient. The sambar's alarm call was a sure sign a tiger lurked close by; and then we saw the tigress called Choti Tara. She crossed the road with lithe grace, a healthy-looking feline in her prime, who seemed to



Tigress Choti Tara in the grasslands



A nilgai looks curiously at the camera

be conscious of her good looks, yet indifferent to the awe that she inspired in her audience. After the big cat slipped away with typical insouciant grace, we gazed at the small creatures that also give life to a forest — giant wood spider; wide-eyed owl, tawny-orange tiger butterfly, Oriental Magpie-robin, and plum-headed parakeets.

We stopped for breakfast on a hilltop clearing and heard our naturalist telling the tales of the tigers of Tadoba. Stories included that of Maya, the most popular tigress of this forest and her courtship with Matkasur, the alpha tiger. His reign was cut short after a huge fight with Gabbar, another territorial tiger.

We returned to Svasara Jungle Lodge, a 12-acre forest retreat studded with orange orchards, with 12 rooms in a single creeper-draped row. We rested, acutely aware of the

Photographs: Gustasp and Jeroo Irani

FACT FILE

Travel: Nagpur is the closest airport and railway station.

Stay: There are a number of budget lodges and homestays. Svasara Jungle Lodge with its scenic location and superior standards is the best option.

Safaris: Can be booked in advance online.

More details: Visit Maharashtra Tourism at www.maharashtratourism.gov.in



The Indian bison or Gaur

jungle beyond that probably held its breath as the big cats slept, satiated after a night on the prowl. In our afternoon safari, we came across two chital stags, antlers

locked, battling for mating rights. It was in this part of the forest, where soaring teak, Indian ghost trees and bamboo groves created a tangled canopy that we learnt to appreciate the smallest of God's creations — a colony of flaming red fire ants, plump, painted sand grouse, a long-tailed rufous tree pie.

Back at our lodge, we huddled around a bonfire to exchange encounter stories. Deep in the forest, its denizens were engaged in the ruthless games of hunter and prey.

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