

in a Tiger's eyes

Most people think of Africa for safaris, but India has one thing that Africa doesn't have ... tigers.



Peak hour in the main road of Zainabad and the cows have right of way. Heads down, the animals tramp along in a dead straight line, kicking puffs of sand into the sunlight, which creates a golden aura around the sacred herd. Our Tata jeep cuts through the dusty cloud, as if the safari has already begun.

In the driver's seat is Dhanraj Malik, the son of the *Nawab* of this former princely state in India's Gujarat. Wearing an orange kurta, matching trousers and a bushman

hat, he doesn't look like royalty but he's the closest thing to a prince in this desiccated corner of the world.

In between building schools and orphanages in the local village, Dhanraj runs the Desert Coursers Camp and takes guests out to the Little Rann of Kutch, one of the most remote wildlife areas in the country. But it's far from a tourist destination, with only 200 visitors last year.

The Rann of Kutch stretches 26,000 square kilometres across the Thar Desert to the frontier of

Pakistan. As the bleakest, driest, hottest region in India, this great sun-baked saltpan is a patchwork of cracked mud flats. We're on our way to the zone of the Indian Wild Ass Sanctuary, and our mission is to track down the endangered 'gudkhar' – the last of India's wild horses.

As we turn off the road into the desert, Dhanraj accelerates across the flat land and the wind rushes through the vehicle. This is a safari without designated tracks or any other tourists. It's rough and raw and exhilarating.



Main: A tiger cub makes eye contact in Bandhavgarh National Park

Left: Demisele cranes take off after sunset at the Wild Ass Sanctuary



Main: Cotton pickers in the fields outside Zainabad

Above: Viewing the endangered Indian wild ass at the Little Rann of Kutch

Left: A local woman in Zainabad

“Gir is the only place
in the world where
you can see pure
Asiatic lions in the
wild ...”

Immediately we spot the nilgai antelope, also known as blue bull, and a mongoose scurrying in the bushes. Further along are two beautiful grey sarus cranes, towering 180-centimetres tall. I see vultures in the sky, kingfishers in the trees, francolin partridges on the ground and a falcon. It's a mish-mash of species, most of which I've never seen before, so I wonder why the wild ass is considered the highlight.

Suddenly the mood changes when Dhanraj announces it is time to find some ass. We rattle and roar off towards for a scrubby mound where the herds are known to congregate. Moments later, he spots three wild

asses on the horizon and launches into top speed. Two run away but we catch up with one, a white and chestnut-brown beauty.

We're doing at least 70kph and the ass is galloping ahead, its ears pulled back from the sheer speed. He changes direction but Dhanraj swings the jeep around as I hold on tight. After another tight loop around the animal, we withdraw from the pursuit, catching our breath, and allow him to rejoin his brothers.

Expecting it to be more like a donkey, I'm struck by the strength and grace of the gudkhur. Of all the thousands of people who come to Gujarat to see lions, it's a shame so few make the trip to the Little Rann. Chasing wild asses is a wild safari in itself.

Lions are found about six hours' drive away in the Gir Forest, a much more popular choice for safaris. Gir is the only place in the world where you can see pure Asiatic lions in the wild, and it's also one of the best spots to catch a glimpse of the elusive leopard. Tragically, six lions were killed by poachers in February and March, bringing their numbers down to 356, but it's better than the population of 20 that existed back in 1913.

The safari is much more sophisticated here, with hundreds of tourists and specific routes assigned to each group. Guides use mobile phones to call each other when they spot a lion, which sparks a sudden rush of jeeps to the site. Typically

the lions are far from the tracks and obscured by the teak trees. Visitors used to be allowed out of the vehicle to have a closer look but this is not encouraged anymore.

My guide decides to bend the rules on my second day when he finds a male cub and escorts me to a bush to hide behind. About 20 other tourists join us and together we make a hell of a racket walking across fallen leaves and branches. The cub is lying down quietly, about 50 metres away. He looks over at us but seems unconcerned so I tiptoe closer for a better view and snap a few photos as he turns to face the camera. I'm not worried about my safety because he looks so relaxed, but the guide calls me back. I haven't even noticed that there's a second male behind the trees. He doesn't have to ask twice.

The next day we find a lion and lioness, but we're confined to our seats. According to the tracker, the lion has walked 18 kilometres overnight to find the female but she will apparently make him wait for three days before they can mate. He looks exhausted and she seems completely uninterested, so we are able to sit watching them for nearly half an hour.

Lions at Gir are protected by a conservation program, started by the State Forest Department in 1965. The 1100-square-kilometre sanctuary is managed by 600 forest officials (as

travelfacts

gettingthere

Singapore Airlines flies from all capital cities (except Darwin) to Singapore with connections to Ahmedabad three days a week. Phone 131 011 or visit www.singaporeair.com.au for information. Qantas flies to Mumbai from Sydney three days a week. Phone 131 313 or visit

www.qantas.com.au

Zainabad is a 2.5-hour drive from Ahmedabad and a 5.5-hour drive to Gir. The drive to Gir from Rajkot Airport is 2.5 hours, or two hours from Diu Airport. For the tiger reserves, fly to Khajuraho or Nagpur. Bandhavgar is a five-hour drive from Khajuraho Airport or eight hours from Nagpur.

Wildlife Safari Consultants organises safaris to India, including the Little Rann of Kutch, Gir Forest and Bandhavgarh National Park and other reserves. For more information, visit

www.wildlife-safari-consultants.com or phone (02) 9939 5660.

wheretostay

Desert Coursers Camp in Zainabad, Gujarat, is friendly and welcoming, with charming ensuite mud huts. Phone +91 9426 372 113 for information or visit

www.nivalink.com/desertcoursers

Near Gir Forest, the Lion Safari Camp has air-conditioned tents with beds and bathrooms. Visit

www.campsofindia.com

Nature Heritage Resort, Bandhavgarh, has comfortable rooms and helps raise funds for tiger conservation. All properties organise safaris for guests and have onsite restaurants that cater to western stomachs. Visit

www.natureheritageresort.com

tips

- Tiger reserves and Gir Forest are closed between June and October. The best times to travel are February and March, for the spring climate, or April and May, which are hotter but offer superb viewing opportunities.
- Visitors can't hire a car in India without a guide/driver, and when you see how people drive there, you'll understand why. Be sure to get the appropriate vaccinations, take anti-malaria tablets and obtain a tourist visa (\$75).
- Currency: At the time of writing, AUD\$1 = 34.45 Indian rupees (INR).

furtherinformation

Contact India Tourism on (02) 9221 9555 or visit www.incredibleindia.org

Wildlife Safari has several safaris in India. Phone 1800 998 558 or visit www.wildlifesafari.com.au Ram World Travel will tailor make an Indian safari to suit you. Phone (02) 9262 1661 or visit

www.ramworldtravels.com

Imaginative Traveller: 1300 135 088;

www.imaginative-traveller.com.au



opposed to the wild ass sanctuary's eight staff), which has allowed the lion population to double. Other animals in the park include 45,000 chital (spotted deer), sambar (swamp deer), nilgai, wild boar, hyena and lots of langur monkeys.

But for most people on safari in India, they have one thing on their mind: tiger. Especially for those who have already done the 'big five' in Africa, the tiger is the ultimate wildlife sighting, and India has an estimated 1500 to 2000 Royal Bengals. The national Project Tiger has been very successful, establishing 27 protected tiger reserves over the past three decades. While tigers have reportedly increased in these reserves, nationally the numbers continue to drop.

I'm at one of the best reserves for sightings, Bandhavgarh National Park, set among the Vindhya Hills in the state of Madhya Pradesh. Sitting on top of an elephant, I've signed up for what is known as the 'tiger show'. Tigers have little fear of elephants or the people mounted on them, so this mode of transportation is ideal for wildlife viewing. Directed by a mahoot, who yells and waves a stick, the elephant moves slowly and gently through sal trees and rows of bamboo.

There are four passengers on my elephant – my guide Manoj, an Australian photographer, Patricia, and a German man with a video camera. It takes less than five minutes to find a young cub walking through the forest. A tiger! Amazingly he leads us to his mother and two other cubs, near the edge of a small cliff. Then it gets better. The family starts circling two wild boars and we can't believe we're about to witness a kill. But the lucky boars run for their lives and the tigers retreat.





Main: A tiger cub opens wide at Bandhavgarh National Park

Left: Visitors to the Little Rann of Kutch are welcomed by a local dancer

Above: A local parrot has a sweet treat in Gir

The elephant takes us down a slope where we get an eye-level view of the tigers on the ledge. They have gathered together, almost close enough for us to touch, and we're all capturing the moment on film. One of the cubs is looking directly at me

and I'm so overwhelmed that I put down my camera and stare into its eyes for a whole minute, knowing I'll remember that image more clearly than any of my photographs. I've forgotten about the wild ass, I barely recall the lions and birds, and I

realise why so many people come all this way for the tiger. ■

• *Louise Goldsbury travelled to India with assistance from India Tourism and Wildlife Safari Consultants.*

Experience the real India

Our style - your experience

- Small groups up to 15 like minded travellers
- Superior boutique accommodation
- Expert Western tour leader & local guides
- Innovative itineraries

To speak to an Asia Specialist
or to order your free brochure
call **1300 367 666**



www.travelindochina.com.au

TRAVELINDOCHINA

VIETNAM

CAMBODIA

LAOS

THAILAND

INDIA

CHINA

TIBET