

Culturama

YOUR CULTURAL GATEWAY TO INDIA

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Festival of the Month

This issue is dedicated to the pan-Indian festival of Diwali. Read about its origins and the ways in which it is celebrated



Seeing India
by Devanshi Mody

Jungle Book

The Kabini river laps and leaps into the shores of Nagarhole Tiger Reserve, which resembles a 'naga' or snake curled around the river - and it is from this form that it receives its name. The sinuous national park in Karnataka is perhaps India's best-kept secret. Nagarhole unfathomably generates less excitement than its more famous sibling, the neighbouring Bandipur Tiger Reserve, or close cousin Mudumalai National Park in Tamil Nadu. Indeed, I must confess that I had not heard of Nagarhole - but it turned out to be a showcase of the great spectacle of nature.

The finest prelude to the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve is Shekar Dattatri's acclaimed documentary on it (*Nagarhole - Tales From An Indian Jungle*). It is perhaps the best wildlife documentary I have seen, not for its elegant comprehensiveness but for its visual and musical impact,

which dramatically and mesmerisingly presents Nagarhole's unique jungle life. The naturalists at the Orange County Resort, where I was staying, know how to tell a tale, too. These boys are specialists. Kishan's expertise, for instance, is early morning nature walks along the banks of the Kabini, a flutter with myriad and many-hued birds (and, alas, as many plastic bags and wrappers, all equally colourful). We also explore a termite hill, which Kishan eloquently and appetitely calls 'technically advanced, high-speed real estate'. It is also heated housing, I discover, when Kishan has me insert my hand into the deliciously warm termite home.

Amidst flowers aswirl with dancing haloes of golden butterflies, multifarious birds zigzag our line of vision. Kishan expatiates on their habits and habitats. 'But do you know,' he asks, 'who understands animal behaviour and

THE SINOUS NATIONAL PARK IN KARNATAKA IS PERHAPS INDIA'S BEST-KEPT SECRET - HERE, YOU GET TO EXPERIENCE THE ROMANCE AND THRILL OF THE SAFARI, WHICH IS THE ART OF TRACKING ANIMALS

the jungle best?' My brow arches in query. 'Poachers!' He says, smiling. However, Kishan goes on to reassure me that there has been no poaching in the past 15 years because the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve, which falls under India's prestigious 'Project Tiger', is fiercely guarded. The forest has long been protected, Kishan states with irony, for the British, during the Raj, discovered teak in Nagarhole and declared it 'government-protected' land.

I am intrigued by what look like mammoth mushrooms - they are actually traditional thatch coracle boats, sunbathing with their bottoms up. When I am invited for a mid-morning coracle boat ride, I wonder how these little circular 'boats' will accommodate three people - myself, spunky naturalist Shanmugam and the boatman. Just then, we spot 30 villagers packed onto a furiously paddled coracle. My first 'safari'

is a short excursion when Sanjeev, who specialises in amphibians, shows me the resort's bullfrog pond with its sole survivor, an enormous female that can mate with five males, but sadly is consigned to celibacy as all her lovers have been consumed by snakes. So she pines alone in a palatial pond, whose vegetation is violated by pestiferous snails that are migrated all the way from Europe.

Part of the safari experience is, of course, discovering the regional cuisine over meals that insert themselves between jungle jaunts. After the morning safari, at breakfast, watch the sun spread like a lover over the receptive Kabini as you bask on the banks navigating quintessentially indigenous specialities including healthy maroon *ragi rotis* (made from locally grown millet) and fresh sugarcane juice with a dash of lime and ginger. This is the freshest sugarcane juice you



will find, for sweeps of swaying sugarcane carpet these parts (which are equally swathed in fluffs of cotton). Many local tourists typically spurn the wondrous rural plethora but you would be foolish not to explore the variations on the raw banana (banana stem, flower or fruit turned into rasam or mildly spiced soup, a fried snack called vadai and what not), usually reserved for the more intrepid international tourist. They can handle spice and things get spicier still when an Omani Sheikh's chopper lands, amidst flurried activity, the sole disruption to the serenity of the surrounds.

Post lunch, the afternoon boat safari ventures us into waters flowing uniquely between two tiger reserves - Nagarhole and Bandipur. Lush green landscapes embroider the river's hems as fishes tack in and out of the water like large silver needles. Birds with slender necks and dainty feet pose on stumps and stones. A stork with its flush of pink feathers stands supremely elegant as a string of birds takes off beheld by nesting cormorants on the stunning stark trunks of submerged trees. Suddenly, our guide Narendra spots elephants drinking at the water's edge. I think, 'Wouldn't it be sheer magic if a tiger came out to drink.' But this seems a

tad greedy - the shy, secretive cat isn't wont to grant a brazen audience like the elephants. However, safaris are about suspense, anticipation and luck: anything can happen on a safari if you are lucky. And as luck would have it, Narendra next exclaims, "Tiger!" Indeed. The striped creature in all its majesty makes a dramatic but fleeting appearance as spotted deer elongate in flight evoking a flight of arrows. We watch transfixed as the trademark gold and black stripes of the tiger weave in and out of the woods and then shimmer away...

The sun is dissolving, too. If at dawn the sun seemed a gold coin tossed out of misty gauze, the setting sun thickly daubs the skies with molten gold. On the horizon, with approaching twilight, ancient trees seem stacked like books covered in a dazed dust of a thousand years.

Next day, on an afternoon vehicle safari, which is my final safari, we penetrate deep into tiger territory. This wildlife circuit in the Nilgiris Biosphere, amongst the few knots of forests left in India, once so expansively jungled, boasts the largest Asiatic elephant population (troops of 200 elephants together aren't unusual) and Asia's highest density of prey.



PHOTOS: All photos courtesy Orange County Resorts & Hotels Ltd

Here is where tigers, leopards and wild dogs co-exist, given the abundance of rich food. Burrowing into the forest, where bright yellow flowers fall from trees like golden ringlets and orisels flash up like sprays of gold we observe, beside the natural cover of trees, neatly packed files of teak the British cultivated to fell.

Our naturalist Somashekar points out to us a peacock and announces, 'We started our safari with the national bird of India (the peacock). Hopefully we shall end with the national animal (the tiger).' We see monkeys misbehave, elephants threatening to and samba deer poised regally, but the tiger eludes. Apparently they were once so rampant in this jungle that maharajas would sit around shooting tigers from their lodge veranda (a story the guides love to narrate). Our safari is falling. Then, just before the park's stringently regulated closing time, we hear an alarm call. Our guides with great guile sniff out and uncover the tiger. Unlike on my recent trip to South Africa, where animals are 'on display', here you experience the romance and thrill of the safari, which is the art of tracking animals. ♦

INFO BYTES

Planning A Trip to Nagarhole? Here are a couple of handy pieces of information to get you started:

Getting there: The nearest city to Nagarhole Tiger Reserve is Mysore, which is well connected from most Indian cities by road, air and train. From Mysore, one can take taxis to the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve. In addition, there are buses from Mysore to HD Kote, which is about 30 km away from the Reserve.

Accommodation: Forest rest houses or dormitories and bungalows that offer double rooms are available at reasonable rates - one has to make a booking 15 days in advance with the forest department in Hunsur. Other places to stay in are the Kabani River Lodge or private lodges and resorts in the area.

Best time to visit: The months between September and May offer the best time for a visit. The winter months, from November to February, are an especially pleasant time as the temperature hovers around a comfortable 14°C.