

# Going On a Tiger Safari in India Is More Than Just a Chance to See the Majestic Animals — It's a Chance to Help Save Them

BY MARY HOLLAND | APRIL 27, 2019



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

“Now is the time when the action in the jungle begins,” says Naratna, my guide, but it's action we won't be seeing tonight. It's after five p.m., the light has dimmed and the temperature has dropped, which means the park will be closing soon. The langur monkeys are still swinging from the trees, their long limbs latching onto faraway branches. Parakeets are still chirping amongst each other. But soon the chirps will die down and the monkeys will lay low; with fifty plus tigers roaming the [Pench National Park](#), no animal is safe tonight.

The park, which is located in the central part of [India](#), is best known as the place that inspired the Jungle Book – something which is reflected in surrounding hotel names like Mowgli’s Den and Bagheera Retreat Resort. I am staying at [Baghvan Lodge](#), which, although less interestingly named, is decidedly more luxurious. The 12-room hotel resembles an old hunting lodge with a lofty main area dotted with pieces of antique wooden furniture and cozy, wood-clad rooms tucked in the jungle. This is the first leg of my trip: a safari followed by a beach experience. Most people who visit India are, understandably, more interested in visiting the [Taj Mahal](#), Jaipur’s City Palace or Hawa Mahal. But as a child of Africa, I came to see tigers and turtles.



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The tiger is the reason most people go to Pench National Park. At 6 a.m., there’s already a line of safari vehicles crammed with tourists eagerly waiting to get inside. But seeing a tiger is rare. Not only is it an elusive animal but, due to poaching, there are [only a few thousand left](#) in the entire country. In the jungle, the bush is so thick, that the best way to track them is by listening for warning yelps from the spotted deer or sambar. Even then, the chances of spotting one are slim.

On our afternoon drive we see monkeys, spotted deer, wild boar, buffalo and sambar. We see parakeets and kingfishers and spider webs so gigantic that birds sometimes get stuck in them. "During monsoon season it happens all the time!" exclaims Naratna. The landscape is otherworldly with towering teak and blinding white ghost trees that turn white in color after shedding their bark. We see hundreds of different plants and birds and animals and webs, but no tigers. "Next time," I say to Naratna.

"Pench offers the whole package," says Tejas Bhoite, general manager of Baghvan Lodge, who can clearly see my no-tiger-sighting disappointment. He's right. The park's emerald, untamed landscape coupled with wild animals like spotted deer and wild dog make the experience entirely rewarding. As someone who grew up going on safari, I know that in the wild you never know what you're going to see. The forest itself is worthy of a trip to the park, as is the impact of sustainable tourism. "We need tourism to help support the park," says Naratna. It's thanks to tourism that the local communities and government can see the positive impact it has. Without tourism, the tigers are at an even greater risk.

Despite no tiger sightings, I can't help but hold out hope for seeing a turtle on my next stop in the Andaman and Nicobar islands. Located in the Bay of Bengal, the journey to the islands is arduous (a two hour flight from Chennai on mainland India followed by a two and a half hour ferry from Port Blair). It's an intricate itinerary which requires very careful consideration (which thankfully, the folks at [Black Tomato](#) worked out for me). But paradise wouldn't be paradise if it was so easy to get to.

Rhadhanagar Beach on Havelock Island, one of the islands in the archipelago, is so untouched that if a ship were to land on the alabaster shores on a quiet day, the passengers would think it was uninhabited. Fringed with dense forest and zero buildings (the government doesn't allow buildings lining the beach), from the shoreline there's little sign of life. But walk a few feet through the jungle path and you'll discover a thriving island alive with locals and tourists.

Havelock is one of the few Andaman and Nicobar islands that is inhabited and allows tourists. Of the 572 Indian islands, only 38 are permanently inhabited, nine are open to visitors. Try to land your ship on the hostile North Sentinel Island (50km from the main island of Port Blair) and the locals (there are estimated to be between 40 and 400 inhabitants) will quickly chase you away with bows and arrows.

Despite being one of the few 'tourist hubs' in the archipelago, eighty percent of Havelock island still remains untouched. For years it served as a backpacker's destination, which attracted those willing to embark on the grueling journey. It was only in February this year that the island received its first five-star property. Hearing about the introduction of a five-star resort opening on an island which is hardly touched by tourism, may sound disheartening. But given the archipelago's fragile ecosystem, there's also a dire need for solid, sustainable eco-tourism. The new [Taj Exotica Hotel and Spa, Andamans](#) offers just that.

Concealed inside the rainforest on the edge of Rhadanagar Beach, the hotel, which sits on a former coconut plantation, has been built to accommodate the natural surroundings. In an effort to regain the natural habitat, numerous types of indigenous plants and trees have been planted. The 50 luxurious villas were constructed using natural material like coconut and are void of any kind of plastic: no throwaway bathroom amenities or water bottles.

Sustainability has been taken into consideration in every aspect, even the simplest details. Onsite, there's a water bottling facility that refills reusable glass bottles, bamboo straws replace plastic, and the napkins in the restaurant are reusable. They're even producing their own biogas and converting yard waste into soil. On the 46.5 acre property – only 30 acres has been built on, the rest is untouched mangroves – there's a sprawling organic garden which grows everything from lemons to cauliflower and forest coriander and cardamom. "We want to create a complete ecosystem within the hotel," says Abnash Kumar, general manager of the hotel.



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On my first morning on Havelock, we go snorkeling off Rhadhanagar Beach. “Look! Look! Turtles,” shrieks Jocelyn Panjikanan, the assistant manager of sustainability at the Taj who is guiding me through the ocean. She’s removed the snorkel from her mouth and is swishing her arm in the direction of the large aquatic creatures swimming below. “Did you see them?” she asks enthusiastically. You’d think it was her first time seeing turtles. I dunk my head under the water and see two giant turtles paddling below me, their flippers moving at a steady pace through the cloudy water. “Yes, yes!” I yelp through my snorkel, with the same enthusiasm as Panjikanan. Only, for me, it is my first time seeing turtles of this size. Suddenly, the disappointment of not seeing a tiger is relinquished and seeing the turtles feels all the more rewarding. In the wild, you never know what you’re going to see.

Much like Pench National Park, Havelock Island relies heavily on sustainable tourism. Tiger and turtle spotting isn’t just part of an indulgent vacation, but an opportunity to support fragile ecosystems that need support now more than ever. “[These properties] provide a platform for sustainability and for us to make changes,” says Panjikanan. Never has a vacation felt so rewarding.