

why we travel

EXPERIENCES THAT CHANGE THE WAY WE SEE THE WORLD



Two adolescent tigers in Ranthambore National Park

Tiger Tale

After reinventing snow leopard tourism in northern India, Behzad Larry has set his sights on changing the narrative around the country's most famous big cat. By Mary Holland

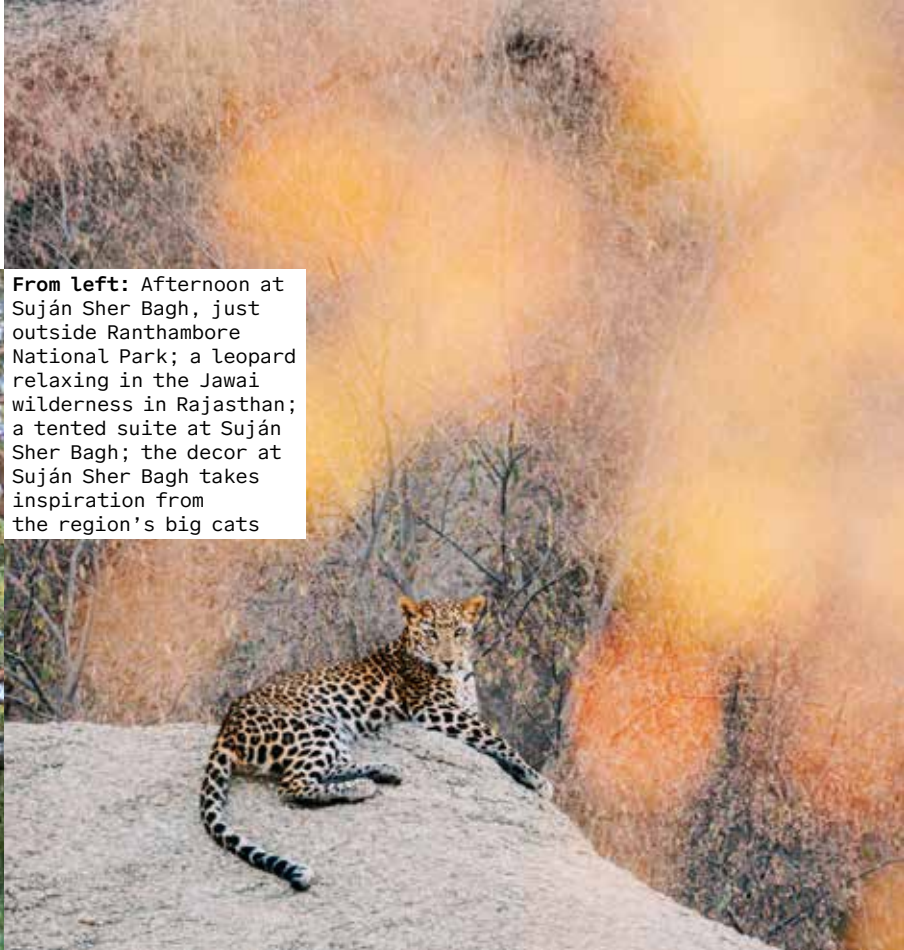
PHOTOGRAPH: ANJALI SINGH

THE TIGER BEFORE US was enormous, with neat black stripes that looked as if they'd been painted on. He prowled along the dusty path, slinking between a handful of safari vehicles, then spun his head around and gave a steely stare to remind us who was in charge. My heart hammered. My stomach lurched. I grew up seeing cheetahs and leopards in South Africa, but nothing could have prepared me for the primal power of this creature. After a few minutes, he sauntered back into the bush.

We had already spent hours in the Ranthambore National Park diligently scanning empty clumps of dhok trees with our →



From left: Afternoon at Suján Sher Bagh, just outside Ranthambore National Park; a leopard relaxing in the Jawai wilderness in Rajasthan; a tented suite at Suján Sher Bagh; the decor at Suján Sher Bagh takes inspiration from the region's big cats



binoculars and passing the time with endless cups of masala chai when we got the radio call that a tiger had been spotted. The driver whizzed us along the weathered dirt road, shifting gears and masterfully dodging bumps while driving at ambulance speed.

I hadn't expected this moment to come. The last time I'd traveled to India on a safari, I didn't see a single tiger. To increase my odds this time, I'd come on this weeklong cat crawl through Rajasthan and Central India with Behzad Larry, the founder of Tiger Safari Co. A lifelong feline enthusiast, Larry has built a reputation over the past decade on his knack for finding the elusive snow leopard during expeditions in the northern Indian region of Ladakh with his company Voygr. He's only recently moved into tiger tourism. Born in Madhya Pradesh, the Indian state with the most tigers, Larry has always been captivated by these animals. He remembers going on road trips with his father and staying at rest houses in the rural countryside: "My dad would tell me stories about tigers. I remember having this feeling that there was something watching us." The resident cooks and caretakers would regale him with tales about how a tiger had taken a goat or cow. "Even if you didn't encounter one, you'd hear about them," he said.

Despite his fascination, Larry was hesitant to



enter the tiger tourism industry, which is dominated by legacy operators. “You’re fighting an uphill battle against titans who’ve done it for 30 years,” he said. And he’s made it more challenging by bringing the same responsible travel focus to safaris in Rajasthan and Central India that he applied to snow leopard tourism in the north, in part by funneling earnings into conservation efforts.

“Conservation in India is a very new concept,” Larry told me as we drove out of the park, the sun casting a golden glow over the ebony trees. Hunting wasn’t banned until 1972. After its abolition, wildlife tourism skyrocketed, but not without problems. Receding forests and accelerating development led to greater rates of human-wildlife conflict. And many operators were more focused on making a quick buck off big cat trips than helping preserve the animals’ habitat or investing in the increasing numbers of people living nearby. This is something Larry hopes to change. He has pledged 20 percent of his profits to conservation organizations and works only with hospitality brands that share his values. “Dollars that come from tiger safaris must go into the surrounding communities,” he said.

Larry has also relished the opportunity to connect travelers with a place he knows deeply. “I’m finally using all of my connections, which

were of no use to me operating in the very north of the country,” he explained when he collected me at Delhi’s Indira Gandhi International Airport on a muggy night a few days before our first tiger sighting. What he meant became clear to me over the next few days: Larry has access to the best gates, zones, permits, guides, and forest department officials, all of which are essential to a successful tiger safari. One night, sitting around a campfire at Suján Sher Bagh, we overheard a couple complaining about a foreign tour operator that had booked them at a gate a 45-minute drive away. I kept my head down. By then we had already seen four tigers, and we had early-morning access to the park through a much closer gate.

Suján Sher Bagh is a throwback camp on the edge of the Ranthambore National Park where the tents, set under peepal trees, have director’s chairs, canvas-covered patios, and giant brass bathtubs. Its owners, Anjali and Jaisal Singh, have developed their own reputation as pioneers in the Indian luxury-meets-conservation space. On the first leg of our trip, we stayed at another of their properties, Suján Jawai, a tented camp about three hours south of Jodhpur that is surrounded by reforested farmland. Big cats, including active wild leopards, as well as antelopes and wild boars, have returned to the area. “Suján’s antipoaching success and push toward sustainability are exactly the kinds of initiatives we want to support,” Larry said.

For our final two nights, we traveled to Madhya Pradesh, where we checked in to Jamtara, a pared-down wilderness camp in the buffer zone—a government-mandated eco-sensitive borderland meant to mitigate human-wildlife conflict—around Pench National Park, a forested tiger reserve credited with inspiring *The Jungle Book*. The camp is low-key, with 10 simple tented rooms on a dry riverbed. Its founder is Amit Sankhala, the grandson of Kailash Sankhala, who was known as the Tiger Man of India and whose work as the first director of Project Tiger, a wildlife conservation program that began in 1973 to help increase the animals’ population and restore their habitat, laid the foundation for tiger conservation in the country. Pench is dense with thick bush and towering teaks, making tiger spotting especially tricky. We had the reserve almost to ourselves and spent hours careening along the rutted roads, passing wispy foxtail-like grass and tall trees crawling with rhesus monkeys. We didn’t see a tiger that day, but I’d been told one had visited Jamtara. Prints had been found pressed into the muddy path. Even though I didn’t see a tiger this time, I had the sudden feeling one was watching me. It was enough of a thrill to know it was out there somewhere. 