

FINALLY: TIGERS!

Special India/Tadoba Text Mark Loeffers / Photographs Mark Loeffers and Diantha Bos

Near Nagpur, in central India, lies Tadoba Andhari National Park. This not so very well-known nature reserve holds the best chances for spectacular encounters with tigers and other beautiful nature.

It's all about water in Tadoba. In May, the hottest and driest month of the year, it's almost always above forty degrees Celsius. Waterholes become scarcer and smaller, parts of the Andharirivier in the reserve have actually dried up completely.

In this heat, we ride through the forest in our open jeep. Laughing doves fly up from the sandy path, the sunlight accentuating the silver spots on their feathers. We're going to the waterholes, where the animals come to quench their thirst. Near Tadobalake we slow down. Yesterday we saw an impressively large tiger here, napping in the coolness against the background of blooming pink lotus flowers. Only his head was above water. Today we see oriental honey-buzzards sipping water and snakebirds and black ibises, scurrying for food. All birds have their beaks open to cool down. A seven feet long mugger crocodile patrols along the shore. "Swimming prohibited, survivors will be fined," jokes Aditya Dhanwatay, pioneer in the development of and conservation efforts in Tadoba. Tigertrails, his lodge, is located directly adjacent to the reserve. Many animals, including tigers, come on his property, also because of the waterholes he has constructed there.

A carpet of dry white bamboo leaves and brown teak tree leaves covers the forest floor. The bamboo is notably responsible for the new wealth of Tadoba. In 1984 all the bamboo in the reserve flourished at the same time. In Tadoba, this happens once in every forty years. The many thick bamboo bushes that emerged gave shelter to the deer and wild boar, that thereby increased in number. Where many prey animals are, many predators can also live. Dholes, wild dogs, are the first predators that we encounter. In Tadoba you can get very close to the beautiful red dogs. Usually they are timid, but this family group with pups seem unperturbed. The sloth bear with his messy black hair was also very close to us. With his snout to the ground, he is looking for termites. He too ignores his admiring spectators and continues sniffing through the bamboo.

A brown sambardeer, camouflaged behind green bamboo leaves, gives the forest a harsh alarm call. The shrill bark-like sound gives us a scare, and that's exactly the point: this way she warns that there is a predator nearby. A barking deer freezes in her tracks and waits, just like us. The sambar screams again and stamps her hoof on the rocks, another alarm signal. Nature holds its breath and is deadly silent. After a few minutes the danger has apparently gone anyway. The alert deer turns and jumps away.

It's always wonderful to see herds of Axis deer. The females have enchanting black eyes, their calves are very cute and the dominant males are impressive. The same goes for gaur, the rare Indian bison, over a thousand kilos and for the nilgai, the two-meter long horse antelope. Watching grey langur monkeys at play is something we can do for hours, especially when the young ones play chase with each other and jump up and sideways like fleas. But the most exciting is of course the search for the tiger. Overhanging bamboo branches have formed tunnels, sheltering the narrow forest paths. "Here, you can really smell the tiger, he is very close!", whispers Aditya. Although we wait for him tense and in silence for a quarter of an hour, the king of the forest does not show himself this time. A white stripe does flutter past: a paradise flycatcher. He is not alone; over 250 species of birds provide the music in Tadoba and colour the forest, like brahminy starlings, peafowl, changeable hawk eagles, rufous treepies, cattle egrets in orange breeding plumage and yellow and black golden orioles.

The first tigress that we see, is looking for cool water. She inhales the air to check if there are other tigers around, crosses a small island and scans the waterfront at one of the last remaining waterholes in this part of Tadoba. When the tigress slowly lowers herself into the pool, a wave of "oooohhhh" rolls over us from the jeeps behind and next to us. She is indeed a breath-taking sight, this magnificent animal. Her tail curls up while she loosely drinks with her pink tongue. It is so hot this afternoon that she does not even consider hunting the herd of wild boar that also reports at the pool. They drink and roll in the mud. The tigress only turns her head in their direction, so we can admire the white spots on her black ears. After half an hour of bathing and drinking she is ready for the rest of the afternoon. Gracefully she gets out of the bath, into the heat, up a steep hill and out of our scene. We also get going, in search of more large and small natural beauty of Tadoba. That small comes in the shape of a

tree-shrew, a grey mouse-like animal, that hops through the grass with its long tail, towards his hole in the ground. In the last rays of light we see the large, accompanied by alarm calls of deer, a peacock and monkeys: a gorgeous leopard flashes across a clearing in the bamboo, 10 meters from our jeep. This way we want to end every safari!

Tadoba is in the area of the Gond. The Gond are animists, believe that all living things have a soul, worship the tiger and build small tiger temples for important occasions. They are also closely linked to the forest, which is named after Taru, an ancient Gondking. According to legend, he was slain by a tiger. The Gond say his name with the addition "ba", an expression of respect. Taru-ba is changed into Tadoba.

The main road that runs through the reserve was built 400 years ago by the Gondkings. Along that road we see stone pillars, 5 meters high. In the old days when the king travelled from his fortress in the forest to one of the villages kilometres away, large bells were sounded with ropes that were tied to these pillars. That way the Gond knew that their king was on his way to their village. Many Gondvillages were located in what is now the reserve. The people we today still encounter in the forest with bullock carts, bicycles, mopeds and on foot, will soon live elsewhere. This year, the last two villages will be relocated outside of the park. This is done on a voluntary basis and only if all the villagers agree with the offered compensation. Most Gond have a good relationship with the reserve. They work as nature guides, parkrangers, or in the lodges.

To go and search for tigers further into the forest than is possible on a morning or afternoon safari, we've been given special permission from the Forest Department to stay a whole day in the reserve. Next to a stream we are in luck: a tigress with three cubs. One little one and his mother curiously check us out from behind the bamboo twigs and leaves. Reassured, the family goes back to sleep in the shrub. We wait in the jeep in the blazing sun: the heat will certainly drive the tigers to the water. After half an hour one cub does indeed step into the stream with his mother, to cool off. We have front row seats for the spectacle of the tigers that do not mind us at all and enjoy their rest, have their drink and bathe. We ignore the spectacular splendour of dozens of butterflies, showing their blue, yellow, black and red wings; we can't get enough of our tigers! Then, it becomes even more beautiful. Behind us in the teak forest, red jungle

fowl cackle louder and louder. "That's panic, there's something big coming," says Aditya. And big he is indeed, the 5 year old father of the cubs that crosses to the bamboo where his family is relaxing. A family of 5 magnificent tigers in one day, Tadoba is really very special!

Info: Tadoba Andhari National Park is about a two hours' drive from Nagpur, in the state of Maharashtra. You can fly to Nagpur from Delhi (with Indigo) and Mumbai (with Jetair). There are 10 lodges in Tadoba, including Tigertrails, right next to the reserve. The park is closed on Tuesdays. Entrance to the reserve is 6.000 INR per jeep (about € 85). Also, you pay INR 200 (about € 3) per video camera or per still camera with a lens over 250 mm. Safaris are in the morning (06:00 to 10:30) and afternoon (15:00 to 18:30). When you go on several safaris the chances of seeing more animals improve. With an all-inclusive booking the lodge also takes care of food, drinks, safaris and other activities. Tadoba is open throughout the whole year. The monsoon is in July and August and is less heavy than elsewhere in India. Travelagency All for Nature Travel in Woerden offers sustainable travel for wildlife protection, amongst others to the tigers of Tadoba: www.allfornature.nl

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Tigers better protected

According to the official 2014 tiger census, more than 2200 tigers live in the wild in India. That's 500 more than in the previous census, from 2010. This is due to improved protecting of the reserves and tougher action against poachers, says the Indian government. If these numbers are correct, this means that India is home to about 70% of the wild tigers in the world. The government of the state of Maharashtra, where Tadoba is located, wants Nagpur to become the tiger capital of India. Development of nature reserves and reduction of conflict between humans and animals is given higher priority. That way, tiger numbers are to continue to increase.

Nevertheless, tiger-habitats are disappearing rapidly due to deforestation, the creation of palm tree-plantations for oil and the construction of new roads. This

also causes more conflict between tigers and humans. An even bigger problem is the large scale illegal hunting of the tiger. The largest cat in the world is very much wanted for its fur, a status symbol for the new rich in China and India. Furs bring in huge amounts of money. Other body parts are being used in traditional medicine.

According to Travel Operators for Tigers (TOFT), a wildlife protection organisation by tour operators, tiger tourism to India is essential to the survival of the species. Sustainable tourism is an alternative to poaching and wood chopping and brings employment and money for the local population. That way, the tiger will be left in peace, says TOFT. More information: www.toftigers.org

Interview with Aditya Dhanwatay on pages 34 and 35:

We create space for the animals

Aditya Dhanwatay (1979, Nagpur) has successfully put Tadoba Andhari National Park on the map as a nature reserve and nature destination. Tigertrails is his sustainably run lodge, directly bordering the reserve.

In 10 years' time Tadoba has become a successful tiger reserve. How is that possible?

AD: There were a few tigers in Tadoba and from a tourists point of view it was not very interesting. But in 1984 all bamboo plants flourished at the same time in the reserve. Gradually and surely in the last decade this caused considerable natural changes in the forest. It was becoming denser and that provides the animals with more protection. Thus therefor many more animals came and people started to see the reserve differently.

How many tigers are there in Tadoba and what other unusual animals can you find here?

AD: In 2014 we counted about 120 adult and young tigers, that are often seen. We have many sloth bears and about 30 leopards. In Tadoba you regularly see mugger crocodiles and there are at least 280 species of birds.

What is the secret of the success?

AD: The natural revival and renewal that the reserve has given itself since the mass flowering of bamboo, has ensured that visitors now enjoy the wildlife and the beauty of nature. More and more tourists are now discovering Tadoba.

Your father bought a piece of land here 30 years ago. Why and what was it like then?

AD: My father wanted to have a little house on the edge of the forest. He was interested in nature. This land was completely barren, no trees, no vegetation, nothing. Late last century, we decided to let guests come stay here on a commercial basis and we started reforesting the area, in collaboration with the villages here. My father's company restores areas that have been destroyed by mining. Our engineers started by guiding water here and to ensure it stayed here. Then we created waterholes, grassland and woodland, just like it is in the reserve.

Today, that area is the successful Tigertrails Jungle Lodge in Tadoba. What makes you proud?

AD: We have created more space for nature and for the animals. The nature of Tigertrails has become a safe passage between the 2 parts of the reserve for the animals. Last year, for the third time, tigers were actually born on the terrain of Tigertrails. Our guests virtually stay in the reserve itself. The guided walks on our property are in the same habitat in the reserve. They can also see the animals from special wildlife viewing huts and from elevated platforms in our forest. And we have placed video cameras, including near our waterhole at 100 meters from the rooms. Guests can see tigers, wild boar and honey badgers come to drink, from our dining room.

How do you see tourism and nature conservation successfully merge?

AD: Tourism is essential to the protection of wild animals. It shows people what beautiful natural wonders we have so close by. If they appreciate that, they also

want to protect the forest. When tourists visit Tadoba that provides attention via internet, the media and also from politics. That brings money, which ensures that the reserve can be better cared for and thereby even more visitors come here. Tourism is a catalyst for improvements in Tadoba.

Tigertrails stands for sustainable tourism. How do your guests notice that?

AD: The sustainability has come gradually and quite naturally. From the beginning we hired people from the villages nearby and processed our compost and waste properly. We also recycle all our water, including from our pool. We do not do our hotel-laundry here, but in Nagpur, in order not to pollute nature in the reserve.

You are an active member of Travel Operators for Tigers (TOFT), that awarded Tigertrails with the award for Most Inspiring Lodge in India. What does that mean to you?

AD: TOFT is an international group of people from the travel industry that have the same vision on tiger protection, wildlife conservation and travel. Foreign travel agencies, travel agents in India and lodges in National Parks in India are members of TOFT. The organization strives for sustainable nature tourism on social and environmental level. The award is a pat on the back for the lodge, the confirmation that we are doing well and must continue in this way. That way, Tigertrails is an example to others. I hope to inspire other lodges to work the same way.

More information on www.tigertrails.in

Text with the photos on page 35: Aditya Dhanwatay on the veranda of Tigertrails, the award-winning lodge with pool: "More and more tourist discover Tadoba".

Text with the photographs and quote:

P 30: Photo: Tigress with a sleeping cub relaxedly drinks with her pink tongue.

P 32: Photo: Tigress seeking refreshing coolness in the water. Tadoba has many species of birds, like (from left to right) a black ibis, a serpent eagle, a paradise flycatcher and an Indian roller.

Photo on the right: Report in and you're of into the park.

P 35: Photo: Dholes, wild dogs, are the first predators that we encounter. Later, also slothbears.

P 36: Quote: Jungle fowl cackle: that's panic, something big is coming...

Photo: The Gond people that we can now still see with bullock carts, soon will live elsewhere.

This is a translation of the article "Eindelijk: Tijgers!", published in the Dutch magazine Azië Magazine ("Asia Magazine") edition 156, September 2015.

The article and the translation are by Mark Liefers; the photographs by Mark Liefers and Diantha Bos.

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