In Mowgli’s Land

Stretching across Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, Pench National Park is known for being the inspiration to Rudyard Kipling’s The Jungle Book. Rich in flora and fauna, this teak forest is also a tiger reserve and home to over 285 resident and migratory birds, including endangered species of vultures.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS: SUSHMITA MANDAL

A road trip through the forests of Central India is a treat for nature enthusiasts. As the forest prepares for the parched summer months, it acquires hues of yellow, ochre, russet, and golden. The inimitable dhak or ‘flame of the forest’ (Butea monosperma) provides a flash of fiery orange to the landscape. At Pench National Park and Tiger Reserve too, these are the views that greet you in the month of March.

The park derives its name from the Pench river that divides it into almost two equal halves, flowing north to south as it joins the Kanhan river, which pours into the Wainganga river in Maharashtra. This is the only tiger reserve in the country that straddles two states—Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The forests are located on the southern slopes of the Satpura ranges, comprising mixed deciduous species with teak (Tectona grandis) as the primary species.

At this time of the year, the teak stands bare, forming a cushioned bed of dried leaves. We started with the evening safari that took us down long-winding roads. Looking for the elusive tiger in this landscape seemed less daunting with the trees stripped bare of foliage. But when the guide pointed to a leopard resting in the
thick leafy undergrowth of teak, it was remarkable to see the magnificent animal so well camouflaged against the forest colours. That awe-inspiring moment when I spotted the leopard resting gracefully on the leafy bed will be forever etched in my memory.

Besides the leopard sighting, the forests offered so much more. Driving up to the banks of the Pench river that forms the natural boundary between Chhindwara and Seoni districts of Madhya Pradesh, one can spot the lesser fish-eagle, a flock of painted storks, black-headed ibis, crested serpent eagle, and blossom-headed parakeets. We heard the fish-owl hooting as its hunting day had just begun. Watching a committee of white-backed vultures perched on an ain (Terminalia alata) tree near the Totladoh reservoir was a promising sign of the species thriving in the park. The guide informed us that besides the white-backed vultures, there are four other species including the Eurasian griffon, Egyptian, the red-headed and the Indian long-billed vulture that are found in Pench Tiger Reserve.

Shortly thereafter, we witnessed a mesmerising scene as a herd of chital gracefully crossed the meadow. Towards the end of the safari, we encountered a family of wild boars. The ubiquitous ghost tree (Sterculia urens) dots the forest as one traverses the park. Its white bark contrasts against the dead of the night, living up to its name. During the day, the ghost trees look majestic against the lilac skies with just tiny blossoms at the top ends of its branches. They are both beautiful and eerie, and add to the sublime charm of the forests.

The morning safari began early, in the hope to catch all the activity in the forest as its denizens go about their day. The first-viewed creatures were a family of seven red jungle fowls on the slopes of a small hillock by the forest road. I also came across the ruddy-nosed mongoose by the side of the road, who immediately scurried out of view. White-bellied drongos and flame-backed woodpeckers were all busy gathering food for the day. Families of langur sat under the giant semal or red silk cotton trees, munching on the fleshy semal flowers that were being plucked and thrown down by their family members. Watching a newborn langur cuddling on its mother’s lap was pure joy.

While I enjoyed the various moods and colours of the forest, looking out for birds, and other herbivores, my guide spent time tracking the tiger. As we circled the park, at one point, we came across a pack of dholes (wild dogs), shy creatures that are decreasing in numbers in most parks. I remember my last sighting of a pack of four dholes in BRT Wildlife Sanctuary in Karnataka, five years ago. I was pleasantly surprised to come upon a pack of ten this time, including a few young ones. While the dholes were on a hunt for a wild boar family that was hiding close by, our guide spotted a tiger slowly inching up from the other side of the forest. It was a tigress and...
all our attention shifted to her as she hid behind a tree trunk. And finally, right in front of the jeep, she crossed the road; the dholes scooted away and their hunt of the wild boar was left behind. During this riveting action, we saw the tigress circle about before walking away into the golden grass patches. Was that the crowning glory of the morning safari? Yes and no, because further ahead on that road, the dholes we had encountered earlier had finally managed to hunt down a young spotted deer. A lone jackal came by for a share but was chased away.

We came upon the Beejamatta waterhole, one of the prime locations for spotting tigers. The guide informed us that a tiger in that range had given birth to three cubs. However, we only saw a herd of sambars basking in soft sunlight by the waterhole. The yellowing grass, draped golden by the morning sun, swayed in the gentle breeze, as we waited for signs of a tiger, but none came.

As the safari time was drawing to a close, I saw a few nilgai, several racket-tailed drongo, a white-eyed buzzard, and umpteen peacocks glowing in their blue-green colours against the dry and yellow landscape.

Pench is a healthy, well-managed park teeming with wildlife. The teak forest, being deciduous, sheds its leaves in March readying for the water-starved summer months and conserving its resources until the rains come knocking, draping the forest in a green palette. The undulating forested tracts of Pench are so reminiscent of The Jungle Book that one can almost imagine the characters come alive as one navigates through the landscape. The two safaris provided such a rich peek into forest life, I left promising I will be back in another season to enjoy the forest’s glories.

TRAVEL TIPS
How to get there:
By air: Nagpur, Maharashtra is the closest airport, located at a distance of about 100 km from Turia Gate Park entrance. Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh is located about 170 km from the Karmajhiri Park entrance. Both the airports have flight connections from most major cities in India. As the park is along NH7, it can be accessed by good roads, taking less than two hours from Nagpur and about three-and-a-half hours from Jabalpur.

By rail: Nagpur (Maharashtra) and Jabalpur and Chhindwara (Madhya Pradesh) are the closest railheads.

Accommodation: One can find several accommodations around the buffer areas of the park, near Turia Gate. However, some of the best places are inside the park, managed by the forest department, booked through their website.

Getting in and around the park: Book the jeep safaris online. One can avail safaris on the same day, but there is a limited quota of jeeps allowed. Hence, it is better to book in advance and present the receipt at the counter at the gate from which the safari is to begin.

Best season to travel: The best season to travel to Pench is between mid-October and mid-June. The park remains closed from June 15 to October 15 (there may be slight variation in these dates).