

TOURISM UPDATE

BANDHAVGARH



PHOTOS BY AJAY SOOD (TRAVELURE)

🔍 **I Spy:** Is it an intruder or a prey? His royal highness is just too content to care; a lazy gaze is all he can spare.

👉 **Advance or Retreat?:** Curious visitors have cut short his nap and now he wonders his next move.

🏆 **All's Fair:** Win or lose, these playful stags slug it out, all in the name of games and friendship. Nothing serious here folks!

Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright...

Bandhavgarh's royal tigers are international stars, with rich history and lineage.

BY BINITA SINGH

Pray... Shoot... Love! To take a little liberty with the famous book and eponymous movie *Eat Pray Love*. Bandhavgarh National Park is unique, for its history, flora and fauna, and the royal sightings. It's ironic that in this erstwhile *shikargarh* of the royals of Rewa, the sighting of the once preyed tiger, has now become an answer to the visitors' prayers. Yes it is true, this game preserve of the Maharajas of Rewa was a famous hunting ground for the rulers and their guests. Today the only shooting that is allowed here is with your DSLR. Bandhavgarh is the royal abode of exotic royal white tigers and the true answer to the nature tourist's prayers. As history would have it, the first white tiger was spotted



by Maharaja Shri Martand Singh of Rewa. He killed the white tigress and three of her yellow/orange cubs, except the white one. All the white tigers alive today are said to be descendants of this white cub, Mohan.

That's all a part of folklore in Bandhavgarh. You can meet Mohan, albeit his stuffed self, at the palace of Rewa royals. What draw tourists from India and abroad in hordes today are Bandhavgarh's famous tiger sightings, not one or two but sometimes more than five, if

you are really lucky and your prayers have been answered. Bandhavgarh calls out to not just tiger lovers but all wildlife and nature enthusiasts, wildlife photographers as well the general tourists. For others, the destination has a heightened meaning as culture, history and archaeology of the place transport the national park from a wildlife destination to something more exotic and intrinsically Indian in spirit. The park is not huge by national standards, but it makes up for the lack of geographical spread by the rich density of its tigers and the vast variety of other wildlife, flora and fauna.

If you are looking for something different from your regular beach holidays this winter, it's time you headed out to Bandhavgarh. The season is just so perfectly ambient for a relaxing holiday in the midst of nature's green. The best time to visit Bandhavgarh is from October to June. If you want to catch a sight of the sloth bear as well, then plan your visit between March and May. Fond of the multifunctional *Mahua* flower that is locally brewed into a fine wine, the sloth bear comes out from its hideout sniffing its sweet scent. Birds and deer are also fond of the *Mahua*, a tree native to India; and the best time for bird watching in this national park is between November and March.

Madhya Pradesh is nature's heartland as well as India's. This centrally located state boasts of nine national parks and 25 sanctuaries. Bandhavgarh is certainly the crown of the tiger state. The history of this park, spread over in 448 sq km, goes back to more than 2,000 years. Though the area itself was declared a national park as late as 1968, it has a fort dating back to more than 2,500 years and monuments of antiquity with interesting folklore surrounding each of them. Before you proceed to unravel the historical layers of the place, take a look around the rich and variant topography. The centre of the park is the Bandhavgarh hill rising 811 metres above sea level. There are small hills all around it that trail into swampy valleys. These meadows are rich in flora and fauna. The gradations of land levels can be distinguished by the vegetation covering them. A revelation for nature enthusiasts, Bandhavgarh possesses a variety of greenery, each growing according to the laws of nature. On the lower points of the hill slopes is a rich covering of Sal forests which gradually changes and merges with the deciduous trees atop the hills and covers

FOUR KEY HIGHLIGHTS

1. JUMBO CATWALK



Elephants make the best mode of transport in Bandhavgarh for a leisurely safari in search of the elusive tiger.

2. LIFE IS GOOD



For this family of langurs, Bandhavgarh, with its rich biodiversity and the idyllic ambience, makes a great place to call home.

3. WHAT'S THAT?

His afternoon nap rudely interrupted, the royal beast looks up to espy unwanted onlookers.



Dance of Divinity: The gathering clouds, the pitter-patter of raindrops, the rolling of thunder are...music to his ears.

the hotter parts of the forest land, mainly south and west. Bamboo however overruns the entire park area. Tala, the abode of the tigers, is at the lowest point.

Have your fill of nature before you move on to explore the hoary manmade objects, dating more than 2,000 years back, in the precincts. Head to the fort, an hour long trek and worth every bit of your effort. The climb to the fort is a journey back in time as you discover the ancient monuments surrounding it. Do take a guide with if you want to know all about the history and mythology of Bandhavgarh. Till 1935, the fort was in the possession of the royals of Rewa. Bandhavgarh Fort finds mention in *Narad Panch Ratra* and *Shiv Purana*, although no living records of the fort have been traced. The fort has been home to various dynasties going back to the 1st century AD, when it was ruled by the Maghas. In the following centuries its residents included the Vakatkas from the 3rd century, after which a number of dynasties ruled the fort including the Sengars from the 5th century, from the 10th century, the Kalchuris and the Chandelas of Bundelkhand after which, in the 13th century, it came in the possession of the Baghels, the ancestors of the Rewas. The Rewas were tricked by the Mughals into leaving the fort in 1617 and Maharaja Vikramaditya Singh was forced to make Rewa his capital.

The mythological allusions to the fort date it to an even earlier period, the time of Lord Ram. It is believed that enroute to his kingdom after defeating Ravana, he had

stopped at Bandhavgarh and the fort was built by two monkeys who are believed to be the architects of Ram Setu connecting India with Sri Lanka. According to the legend, Ram gifted the fort to Lakshman who became Lord of the Fort or Bandhavdhish. In fact, the place derives its name from *bandhu* (brother) and means brother's land. Visit the temple dedicated to Lakshman, where he is worshipped as the God of the Fort. The manmade caves date back to the 1st century and some of them have *Bramhi* inscriptions dating to 1st century BC. There are believed to be 39 caves and the largest of them, *Badi Gufa*, with nine rooms and many pillars, is believed to have been constructed in the 10th century. Several caves bear embossed figures of animals and humans. There is an unusual 35 ft long statue of God Vishnu in a reclining posture framed against the *Sheshmaaga* behind his head. The statue dates back to the 10th century and it is believed that the *Charangaga* flows from its feet. The imposing *Shesh Saiyya*, as the statue is known, is at the base of the fort surrounded by lush jungles and offers a convenient parking spot.

Take the next lap to the fort on foot. It's a pleasure exploring ancient architectural marvels in the unsullied natural surroundings. The rock carvings dating back to 10th century are a marvellous sight in their green surroundings. These include the various incarnations of Vishnu—22 ft towering statue of Narasimhan (half man half lion); the boar known as the *Barah Bhagwan*; the fish incarnation enshrined in a small temple; the tortoise incarnation and later date incarnations of other gods and goddesses including Lord Ganesh. Do also visit the three 12th century temples. No longer in use now, still their historical and architectural value is immense. Some of the monuments lie off the path, so do not venture off alone while exploring. The fort itself, once you reach it, provides a breathtaking view of the park from the ramparts. Birds fill up the quiet ambience with shrill calls and lilting chirps. Some take off to the clear blue skies as vultures circle overhead. The fort atop the Bandhavgarh hills stands 1,000 ft above the surrounding park. The cliffs of the hill are 800 metre high. A good vantage point, indeed, for a deep breath of fresh air and for a lasting image of Bandhavgarh in its natural splendour. For a closer view, Climber's Point provides a perfect 360 degree aerial view of the park.

FIVE KEY HIGHLIGHTS

1. ALONE IN THE JUNGLE



The solitary bison has to be careful and pricks its ears at the softest sound—time to run?

2. BIRD OF PARADISE



Bandhavgarh's diverse population of birds is a visitor's delight—here a green bee eater.

3. TWO IS COMPANY



A peafowl and a *sambhar* make for strange company. While one steps into the water, the other keeps vigil.

4. SOLITARY SENTINEL

The Indian Roller has a crest and plumes in blue hues.



Huge Family: A colony of bats at the *machan*.

The safari though is best taken as dawn breaks over the park or at dusk when the animal residents come out for the first or last sip of elixir at the park's watering hole. Take an elephant safari and ditch the jeep for real feel hunting. Perched atop the swaying pachyderm, you can hark back to the days when the park functioned as the royals' *shikargarh*. Another advantage of taking the elephant trail is that it can take you into routes that are inaccessible to motor vehicles. Of the four main zones of the park—Tala, Magdhi, Khitauli, and Panpatta—for those on the tiger trail, the first offers the maximum chances of spotting one as it has the highest population of tigers. The guides, who are experts in pug mark detection, will lead you to one. Apart from its famed tigers, Bandhavgarh is also home to more than 30 species of other mammals. There are black bucks in the fort and chinkaras in the park. There are *Nilgai*, wild boar, Indian Bison, *sambhar*, jackal, fox, *cheetal*, black faced *langur*, rhesus macaque, hyenas, porcupines, flying squirrel and some more. Add to it the 250 species of birds (350 unofficially) and the 80 varieties of butterflies, Bandhavgarh Park offers a mesmeric rendezvous in the wild. If you are lucky, you may even sight a leopard—a rare occurrence.

The park offers a grand discovery trail with its biodiversity-rich marshy meadows. Do visit Chakradhara, Sidhababa, Rajbahera and Sehra, all marshy meadows with their own distinct offerings. If you are keen on catching the variety of bird population of the park, head to Gopalpur



and Rajbahera. The richly scented *Kewra* plants will lead you to Ketkiha, where they grow in a marshy patch. Bhitari Bah is a serene spot rich in medicinal plants. Bandhavgarh Park offers a differentiated offering with its amazing biodiversity.

If the morning safari is magical, the evening safari is scintillating. The chirping of the birds heading home after a day's hard work builds into a crescendo warning of the approaching night. No sightseeing activity is allowed at night. However, a night stay at one of the resorts in the midst of the jungle is a lifetime experience. There are tents with glass ceilings to give you the real feel of a night in the jungle—stars, a distant roar, spine-chilling call of the jackals and the hyena, and the rustling leaves of the surrounding trees. It's scary and exhilarating.

After the experience at the fort, the Baghel Museum is a must visit for a flashback on

▲ **Caught Dipping:** The pugmarks betray the tiger, as visitors flock to see it bathe. The watering hole at Bandhavgarh is the favourite hunting ground for tourists with their DSLRs. At dusk and dawn a variety of its animal residents come out of their hidden retreats for a first sip at the break of dawn or a last one before they retire for the night. The tigers especially, are a delightful sight at the watering hole.

Rewa's royals. Before you depart, you may like to check into the Tala village for an experience of rural tourism. The village retains its rustic charm, far away from the hustle and bustle of city life. There are two dams within 20 km distance from the park offering an unhindered encounter with water birds. Do take a drive down to Chenchpur Waterfall, a little over 40 km from Bandhavgarh. You will be mesmerised by the haunting beauty of this water body.

For long after, the memories of Bandhavgarh linger as do the tales of this royal sanctuary and its royal residents, both human and animal. It was the latter that brought this spot to international notice, especially Charger and Sita—the royal tigers of Bandhavgarh owe their lineage to them. Do find out about the unique history of Bandhavgarh tigers when you are there.

Happy hunting! ■