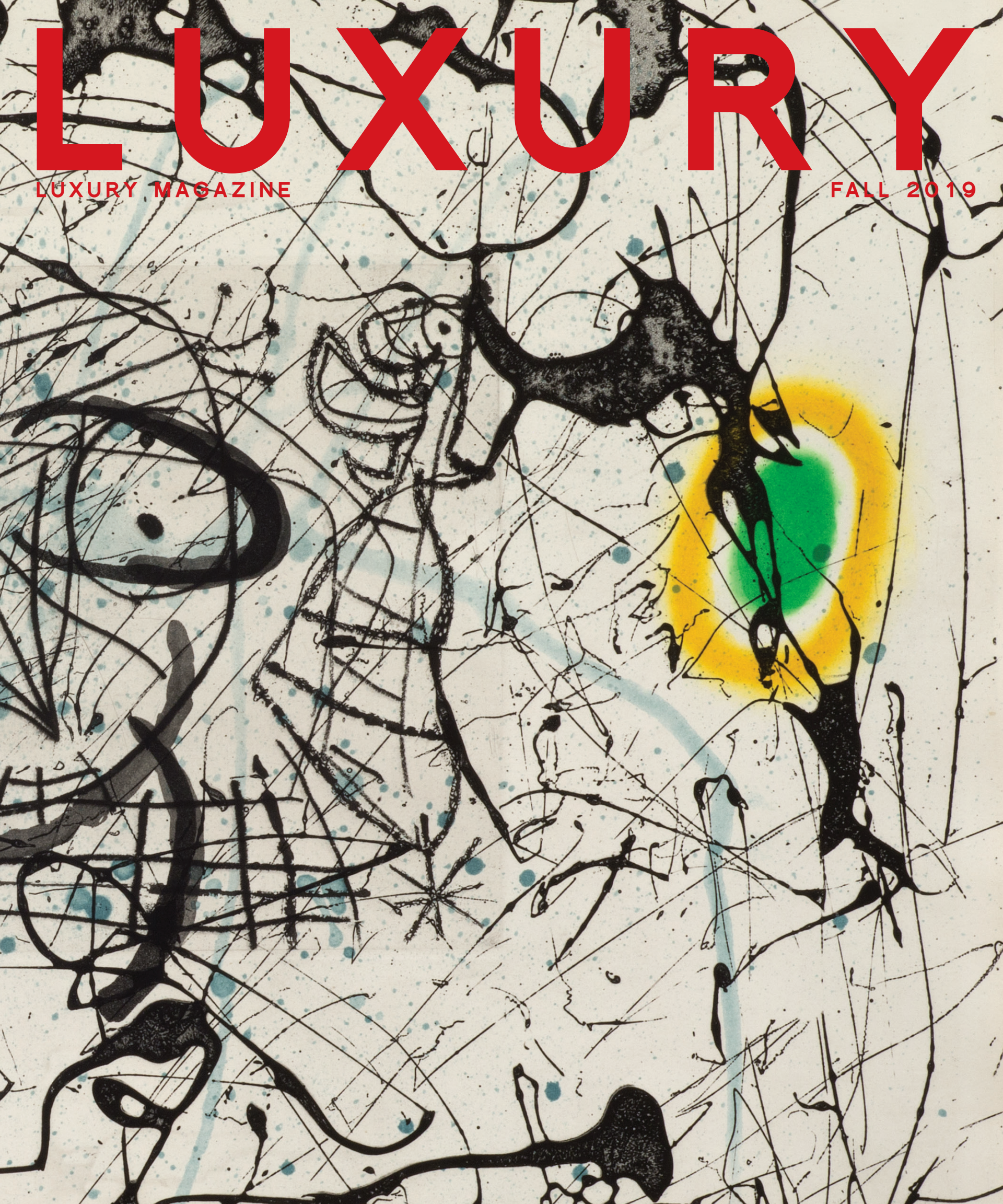


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EYE ON THE TIGER

In India on safari, spotting this elusive, endangered species is a rare bonus.

by Sarah Khan

Hashim Tyabji, one could say without hyperbole, wrote the book on tigers—literally, a tome with Tigers emblazoned across its cover. In the kind of sonorous baritone you rarely encounter outside movie trailers, he recounts brushes with tigers, snow leopards, David Rockefeller, and Goldie Hawn, and chats with the casual command of a professor about everything from sculpture to American politics to Mughal poetry. Tyabji is part Indiana Jones, part David Attenborough, and at this moment, full killjoy. ▶

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Scenes from an Indian safari.
Opposite from top: Kalinjar
Fort in Uttar Pradesh; palace
ruins on a lake near Suján
Sher Bagh in Ranthambore.



"It's the luck of the draw—come again," he says without effect.

Both a naturalist and wildlife guide, Tyabji has become a local authority on the one animal tourists come to India to see. His charges are on the verge of leaving without glimpsing one, and all he can effectively say is "oh, well."

"It's a privilege to be in tiger country," he says. "If you see a tiger, don't buy a lottery ticket, because you've used up all your luck." At this rate, Powerball might have better odds.

It's no secret that serendipity plays an outsized role on safari in Panna National Park in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh (called "Tiger State" for its six tiger reserves). The rhythms of the wild are resolutely dictated by luck: On a game drive, the group might stumble onto a jungle conclave of elephants, lions, and buffalo by a waterhole, and by that afternoon be convinced that all predators have been driven out of the bush by the relentless cacophony of birds. The first thing any aspiring safarigoer in India dreams about is trailing a streak of tigers through the jungle, and the idea of leaving the Indian wilderness without glimpsing one seems unfathomable—and yet, too often, distressingly probable.

Heading toward the wilds of Madhya Pradesh is no typical safari experience. In Africa, groups often drop directly from the sky into a private reserve, bypassing most cities and citizens altogether; in India, travel is by plane (to Delhi), train (to Gwalior), and automobile (five hours by road to Kuno-Palpur Wildlife Sanctuary). Along the way, quotidian scenes unfold: uniformed children walking arm in arm to school through gilded mustard fields; vegetable sellers hunching over baskets of plump tomatoes and onions; barbers trimming clients in the shade of mahua trees; tractors draped in marigolds whizzing past, blaring Bollywood songs; young boys playing cricket in open fields; old men playing cards at packed tea stalls.

Instead of a VIP flyover, arriving in Kuno-Palpur is an invitation to India's heartland and the first stop on an 11-day mobile camping expedition with Tyabji's Kaafila Camps and andBeyond safaris. Population and cell signal both thin and then dissipate during the approach to camp, a collection of four plush tents overlooking a stretch of the Kuno River where the water is so placid that it mirrors the surrounding cliffs like glass.



"The sites that Kaafila travels to are low on tourist footprint, places where there is no accommodation of any quality, yet there is much to see," says Shoba Mohan, founder of Rare India, a consortium of intimate hotels of which both Kaafila Camps and Sarai at Toria are a part. "It's an explorer's paradise for people who love to dive directly into the soul of a destination."

While it may not be tiger habitat, Kuno is perhaps the closest thing to a private game reserve in India. In Africa, many luxury lodges preside over concessions that only their guests can access; in India, wilderness is public domain, and prime sightings are often bottlenecked with dozens of vehicles. But at this 350-square-mile sanctuary, competition to see spotted deer with antlers as big as humans, jackals circling a carcass, and hyena staring back with intense curiosity is next to none.

Rudyard Kipling set *The Jungle Book* in Madhya Pradesh, and Kuno could be a prototype for the wilderness there—engulfed in a thick silence interrupted sporadically by the chirping of a swallow or the rushing of a river. In a place like India, with 1.3 billion people and some of the world's most polluted cities, silence and clean air are real luxuries—alongside Kaafila's cliffside sundowners and five-course dinners.



Each day Tyabji's team magically transplants camp to yet another idyllic setting. Long drives between destinations are punctuated with stops at the immaculately preserved cenotaphs of Shivpuri and the sandstone temples of Khajuraho, famed for their erotic carvings. Anywhere else in the world, these monuments would be choked with tourists; here, pictures are unmarred by anyone apart from the occasional photobombing sweeper. At Kalinjar, Tyabji walks along the parapets to courtyards where monkeys outnumber tourists and 1,000-year-old wall carvings of Shiva cling to the edge of a cliff.

"You're in the middle of nowhere and then there's this," Tyabji says. "The vitality of this piece is amazing—it's the single most remarkable work of central Indian art."

The Bengal tiger is an Indian icon, a recurring character in centuries of literature and art. But rampant hunting and poor wildlife management led to alarm bells in 1968, when numbers slumped from the hundreds of thousands to 2,500. Recovery began in earnest, but a surge in poaching and a lack of widespread conservation precipitated another steep decline in the mid-2000s, when several reserves, including Panna, >



lost their entire populations. But the tide is finally turning, as Panna is now home to more than 40 and national figures are expected to cross 3,000 when the 2018 National Tiger Conservation Authority census is released.

Moments after crossing Panna's gates, a leopard is seen crouching in the grass. A good omen, perhaps? A leopard is, after all, rarer to spot here than a tiger.

"The good thing about this place is you can be completely non-focused on tigers," says Raghu Chundawat, a conservation biologist and author of *The Rise and Fall of Emerald Tigers: Ten Years of Research in Panna National Park*. He owns the eight-suite Sarai at Toria there with his wife, Joanna Van Gruisen. "The landscape is very diverse—every turn is a new scene," he says. Dense groves of bamboo transition to an ethereal teak forest cloaked in mist with sambhar deer skittering through to fragrant fields of wild mint, hot on the trail of a jungle cat and Indian wild dog. Both are extremely hard to see, says local guide Ajay. "I haven't seen a wild dog at Madhya Pradesh in two months."

For those who want more tiger-tracking opportunities than just Panna, andBeyond offers an optional add-on: Rajasthan's Ranthambore National

Park, where tiger sightings are all but guaranteed. At Suján Sher Bagh, a sumptuous colonial-style camp down the road from the park gates, tiger motifs appear on embroidered cushions and in the photography done by owners Anjali and Jaisal Singh. Guests are occasionally lulled to sleep by qawwali music drifting over from nearby villages.

A game drive into Ranthambore lays out how wildlife and human civilization exist in tandem. Throughout the 150-square-mile expanse, vestiges of the 1,000-year-old Ranthambore Fort still stand. A Mughal-era *dargah* (shrine) still in use lies deep within the buffer zone, as do crumbling pavilions, faded stepwells rising from lakes and forests, and ancient walls woven with emerald leaves. A sepia-tinted archway abutting a thick curtain of banyan vines marks the entrance into tiger territory.

At last, "Tiger! Tiger! Tiger!" guide Ashlesh whispers urgently, spotting one of the park's 60-plus specimens. The tigress Arrowhead strolls lazily to the left of a jeep—unencumbered by anyone or anything, as only a queen of the jungle could be—graciously loping around to the front to grant her audience a better view. Then just as suddenly as she came into view, she's gone.



From top: Rajasthan's Ranthambore Fort; tracking a tiger in Ranthambore National Park; other animal sightings. *Opposite from top:* Sarai at Toria; Kaafila Camps; Rare India's Samode Safari Lodge; a chef at Suján Sher Bagh.

ON SAFARI

andBeyond safaris (andbeyond.com) offers 11-day mobile camping tours of Madhya Pradesh with Hashim Tyabji and **Kaafila Camps** (kaafilacamps.com). Start in Khajuraho, home to a collection of UNESCO World Heritage Site temples. Move to the first campsite at Kalinjar and stay in a comfortable tent appointed with colorful local textiles. Then head to the family-owned **Sarai at Toria** (saraiaattoria.com) lodge at the tiger reserve of Panna National Park for two nights while the campsite relocates near the ancient Kalinjar Fort in Uttar Pradesh at Kuno-Palpur Wildlife Sanctuary in the northern part of the state. For those who want additional tiger-tracking opportunities, andBeyond offers an add-on at one of India's best wildlife retreats, **Suján Sher Bagh** (sujanluxury.com) in Rajasthan's Ranthambore National Park. For other lodging options throughout Madhya Pradesh, check out **Taj Safaris** (tajhotels.com), as well as the **Rare India** (rareindia.com) wildlife portfolio, which consist of more intimate and boutique offerings. Other luxury resorts near Ranthambore include **Aman-i-Khas** (aman.com) and the **Oberoi Vanyavilas** (oberoihotels.com). ▽



IN DELHI

A stopover en route to the Indian bush has it all: history, culture, food, and style.

SLEEP



The Lodhi

An ultra-modern hideaway in the heart of the city, the 111-room hotel has one serious advantage over every other city property: Most rooms come with heated plunge pools (above) and balconies, a welcome treat after a hectic day. Bentleys and Ferraris mill about the parking lot, but ask to have the hotel autorickshaw take you out for a spin. From \$270; thelodhi.com

The Imperial

At this colonial-era grande dame, which originally opened back in 1936, spend an afternoon strolling the corridors. Like a museum, thousands of vintage pictures from across India decorate the hotel. In the Spice Route restaurant, an entire 16th-century temple from Kerala is embedded throughout the elaborately designed dining room, which depicts the nine stages of life and reincarnation. From \$145; theimperialindia.com

EAT

Sly Granny

Khan Market is the city's shopping and dining mecca. That's where you'll find this buzzy new restaurant with an eclectic, witty fusion menu and a can't-miss cocktail list. Try the South Indian-style pulled-chicken tacos, ratatouille calzone, Moroccan chicken flatbread, and sangria in the homey, comfortably cluttered dining room. slystorys.in

Indian Accent

India's best restaurant may have outposts in New York and London, but nothing compares to chef Manish Mehrotra's original (below), located at The Lodhi. The seemingly never-ending tasting menu showcases resolutely Indian flavors in a compellingly modern way. indianaccent.com



SHOP



Nappa Dori

Home to one of India's chicest accessories labels, the Nappa Dori flagship (above) in the Dhan Mill Compound is a sprawling, warehouse-like space filled with the brand's leather bags, wallets, and accessories. When you're done shopping, refuel at their airy Café Dori. nappadori.com

Santushti Complex

This outdoor shopping center feels less like a mall and more like a leafy village, with a handful of shops spread out across lovely gardens. Browse block-print dresses and linens at Anokhi, an assortment of teas at Sancha Tea Boutique, and colorful scarves and tunics at Tulsi. santushtishoppingcomplex.business.site

Good Earth and Nicobar

These sister brands are go-tos for Indian interiors, fashion, and accessories—Good Earth has more traditional, high-end finds, while Nicobar channels a more contemporary, tropical aesthetic. goodearth.in; nicobar.com

SEE

Micato Safaris

Modern New Delhi is the latest in a line of eight distinct cities that have thrived here under various rulers for a thousand years. With a Micato guide, visit historic sites like the 1193-built Qutub Minar tower and the 16th-century tomb of Mughal emperor Humayun; see how thousands of meals are prepared by volunteers each day at the 18th-century Gurudwara Bangla Sahib; and cruise past the grand boulevards conceived by British architect Edwin Lutyens. Then dive into the lively labyrinthine alleys of Old Delhi, take a cycle rickshaw past the 17th-century Jama Masjid, go shopping in Chandni Chowk, and sample piping hot parathas and samosas in Paranthé Wali Gali, a narrow lane that's home to some of the city's best food. micato.com ♦



Counterclockwise From Top Left: Courtesy The Lodhi (2); Kevin Garrett; Courtesy Nappa Dori