



## ***The Jungle Book Experience In The Forests of Pench***

India's first Master of Wine shares her experience of spotting the Royal Bengal tiger at Pench National Park.

By Sonal Holland



A visit to the Land of *The Jungle Book* is enough to see how Rudyard Kipling couldn't help being captivated by the natural beauty and the wildlife at Pench. After spending months under complete lockdown amid the COVID-19 pandemic, when I felt the itch to travel with my family, I decided to get away from the hustle and bustle of city life and chose to be surrounded by the world of Mowgli at Pench National Park in Madhya Pradesh.

Who knew the Land of Akela, the wolf; Baloo, the bear and Shere Khan, the Royal Bengal Tiger, all beloved characters in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* would teach us city folks not only the rules of the jungle but also how to appreciate Mother Nature.

### [Date with the wild](#)

Just 109 km from Nagpur airport, Pench is one of the most accessible forests in India. As you enter the jungle, you feel a sense of immense liberty and freedom. The crisp and fresh air is punctuated by every little sound of the wild—the wind and the swaying trees, the chirping of birds, the subtle sounds of insects, the rustling of leaves and so much more—it's a sensory overload that ensures you breathe and soak in every moment of being in the wild. Everything we were missing this year due to the lockdown, mentally, spiritually and physically, was right there. It was a feeling of being alive like you never have. It was

a year when we came to realise how powerful nature can be. It was also a humbling experience to be surrounded by trees, animals, birds, insects, soil and the lake. It helped us understand how tiny and insignificant we are as compared to the ecosystem that surrounds us in a jungle.

Despite our previous safaris to several Indian and international locations such as Ranthambore and South Africa that were filled with numerous sightings and other exciting wildlife experiences, Pench felt different because of what we had gone through due to the COVID-19 pandemic that brought travel and life to a halt all over the world. For the first time, we realised on this safari, how there's a whole eco-system outside of us that is so intelligent. We caught a glimpse of how nature works and how the various sounds and smells of our surroundings that often pass us by, would in fact lead us to spot the Royal Bengal Tiger.

Nestled in the heart of the state, the Pench National Park, which even holds a mention in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, is one of the most famous wildlife reserves in the country. Named after the River Pence that flows through it, every year, the park welcomes tonnes of wildlife enthusiasts who flock the place just to catch a glimpse of the sloth bear, the Indian wolf, leopards, fox, wild dogs, and many other species, not to mention the Royal Bengal Tiger.

While staying immersed within the serene environs of Pench, we wanted to stay close to nature and enjoy the wilderness, away from the shackles of city life, however, without compromising on safety. The charming Baghvan, a Taj Safari property at Pench National Park offered the perfect hospitality experience for our mood. The first thing that stood out about the property was that while we were able to experience being outdoors, the stay was very private and intimate. Located just five minutes from the Pench National Park, the property includes 12 quaint, standalone suites. Since the size of the property is so intimate, all our experiences were personalised, which made the stay comfortable and memorable. Following the COVID-19 protocols, the hotel serves only *a la carte* menu with freshly cooked dishes served for every meal. Moreover, apart from being a five-star resort with facilities such as an infinity pool overlooking the forest and private rooftop machan and private shower areas, both indoor as well as outdoor; a stay at the Baghvan, Taj Safari - Pench National Park takes one back to the colonial era with its vintage aesthetics. For those willing to travel to Pench, a COVID-19 declaration form and wearing masks at all times throughout the safari is mandatory.

To ensure hygiene protocols are strictly followed, jeeps carry only four to five guests at a time, and every group has a private jeep for their friends and family members only. Cars are also sanitised as they are made to pass a shallow pit filled with sanitiser, so that every time a car went through it, each tire is sanitised before entering the jungle.

While wildlife safaris make for the perfect location to practice social distancing due to the vast, open spaces and limited reservations, it surely makes me believe that local safari hotspots have a strong year ahead. While domestic travel has taken a front seat during the pandemic, surveys suggest that people are also keen on experiential vacations rather than passive holidays. So, if you are planning a getaway, make sure you pick a location off-grid into nature.

An exhilarating wildlife experience that lets you take a pause and reflect on life, I was deeply grateful for a vacation that allowed me and my family the much-needed change of scenery beyond the four walls of our home. Our trip provided the rejuvenation and clarity of mind we had been seeking, and we're looking forward to discovering more local gems and destinations in India and creating meaningful memories in 2021.

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