

The King of the Jungle.... a few days in the company of...

Imagine sitting round a campfire on a balmy evening sipping a G&T or a cold beer after a long day of tiger trekking whilst comparing tales and photos with fellow travellers. I promise there is nothing better. Who had the closest Tiger, the best photo and who was lucky enough to spot the Leopard or Sloth Bear?



For just a few days ones whole life revolves round this magnificent cat and through two safaris a day, short lectures and sometimes films or slideshows, all thoughts of home and affairs of the rest of the world are far away.

These are all experiences to be had in the luxury of some of the lodges surrounding India's Tiger Reserves. The smells, tastes and colour of India provide a shock to the senses that will



live with you forever, and once experienced, most are hooked for life. India has that effect and for many it demands a return visit.

Ten years of travelling to the subcontinent has only made me want to return more and more frequently, and one or two trips a year is barely sufficient to suppress the hunger I have for new experiences in this great country whether it be high in the snow-clad

mountains of the Himalayas in Assam, the dry barren deserts of Gujarat or the jungles of the south. They all have their own fascination. Nepal and Sri Lanka too are part of this total experience and with the friends I have made in these countries I can feel at home anywhere.

Despite the apparent poverty, the people are friendly and welcome us strangers with open arms and the staff in hotels and lodges cannot do enough for you. The legacy of the old "British Empire" is still very much in evidence if rather frayed at the edges. It is wonderful to be treated as special for once, something that is a rarity in this country.

Part of my passion for India revolves round the diversity in its wildlife and in particular the Royal Bengal Tiger. And herein lays the problem with which I struggle on a regular basis. India is hugely over-populated and



the demands on her land and resources are enormous. Habitat destruction, pollution, wildlife poaching and corruption all add to the demise of one of India's most valuable resource and one of the jewels in her crown, the Bengal Tiger. World numbers are decimated and have declined from an estimated 100,000 in 1900 to 3200 today, whilst in India there are thought to be just 1411 and may be even less.



Left alone, the tiger is very capable of breeding successfully and numbers could increase rapidly. Habitat has been destroyed by the need for grazing, the demand for wood for fuel, but also by fragmentation and wildlife corridors which enabled animals to wander large distances and mix with other populations and have been lost.

However poaching of Tigers and Leopards to satisfy the ever growing demand for animal parts in countries outside of India is the biggest problem of all. Still today with all modern technology available tigers are being poisoned or caught in inhumane spring traps. A tiger which starts off as just a few hundred rupees to the poacher ends up in the hands of the highly organised gangs where they change hands for thousands of dollars. The Indian authorities are putting measures in place to combat the problem but I wonder whether it is too little too late.



There is international will to protect the species and conferences with the 13 countries which have tigers are planned and the aim is to double world numbers by 2022. If action on the ground is as strong as some of the political will displayed by the World Wildlife Fund, the Wildlife Protection Society of India and her own government then may be the future of this magnificent cat is still secure.

In the mean time I will continue to visit this wonderful country with small groups and enjoy and photograph her wildlife, her birds and treasure the scenery, culture and people and sample her food.

John van der Dol

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