

## Tracking Wild Tigers in Ranthambore National Park, A Luxury Adventure in India

*By Jim Dobson*



Royal Bengal Tiger in the wild at Ranthambore National Park

Her name was Arrowhead, and she approached my jeep with calm curiosity. My breath stopped as she stared me down through her piercing yellow eyes with vague interest, however she was more focused on marking her territory on every nearby bush. The majestic, 300 pound, eight foot long Royal Bengal Tiger allowed me to follow her for a long period of time watching her explore and flirt with the possibility of stalking a spotted deer, but she couldn't be bothered.



My newfound friend Arrowhead as she approached my jeep

Named Arrowhead because of the arrow mark on her left cheek, she is only four years old and has taken over the Zone 3 Lake region of Ranthambore National Park, once ruled by her mother for five years and the largest territory in the park. Bengal tigers are not very social and remarkably territorial, but our presence was just a non-threatening distraction in her daily amble through the forest. Mostly nocturnal she becomes a fierce hunter when the sun goes down, dining on the abundance of buffalo, deer, wild boar, antelope, and other small animals. Just don't cross her with a feisty Sloth bear, tigers usually give up that fight.





Safari VIP style with; (clockwise from top) photographer Nick Starcevic, Micato guides Hem Singh, Subhas Gautam, and the author

One of the most famous National Parks in India, Ranthambore National Park was once the hunting ground of Maharajas and is now a dedicated and well-protected sanctuary for the wild beasts. Sprawling over 100 miles, the Park revolves around the 10th-century Ranthambhore Fort, surrounded by ancient temples and mosques, hunting pavilions, crocodile-filled lakes, and burial tombs succumbing to vines.

The best way to experience Ranthambore is to book directly through [Micato Safaris](#) and nobody else, even Hillary Clinton visited after I left and completed the same VIP experience with Micato. They take care of all arrangements including picking you up from Jaipur airport or driving you from Agra and the Taj Mahal which is what we did, and they provide highly trained Indian guides who are knowledgeable about the land and its people as well as being loved by the guests.

The five-hour drive from Agra would normally be a brutal experience, but with Micato, their comfortable, air-conditioned SUV makes it so much nicer, and with our personal guide Hem Singh along it was a joy to travel through the countryside and small villages and learn so much about the local people and their customs. Being able to veer off from a normally planned and firm itinerary while creating special experiences is something I will remember forever.



### The Oberoi Vanyavilas Luxury Tents

We made [The Oberoi Vanyavilas](#) our base for a few nights, as the spectacular retreat is located less than ten minutes from the famed Tiger Reserve. Situated in the Sawai Madhopur district of southeastern Rajasthan, it is about three hours from Jaipur which is the nearest airport. My advice is to fly into Delhi, see the Taj Mahal in Agra before driving to Ranthambore and then depart from Jaipur. You will have experienced the ultimate voyage that way, and you will have Micato Safaris along every step of the way.

Spread over 20 acres of lush, landscaped gardens while backing up to a wild jungle makes Vanyavilas a special property. As we arrived, we were greeted by one of the most amazing Hotel Managers I have ever met, the charming and gracious Ms. Ratna Malhotra. She is so well loved by many of the guests who have visited in the past, and it is obvious why. Her special attention to each guest and what they want is well planned in advance, and she adds special personal touches to everyone's visit creating magical memories for everyone.





Interior tent at The Oberoi Vanyavilas

The ultra-luxurious Vanyavilas is one of Oberoi Hotel's crown jewels, with its main building designed like an Indian Maharaja palace with marble floors and frescoed paintings throughout. The rambling and expansive property features 25 large glamping tents all decorated in a traditional style with wood floors and large bathrooms highlighting a claw-foot bathtub. The four-poster bed includes crisp linen sheets while the interior ceiling of the tent features embroidered tigers in gold thread throughout. But don't think this is city living, you are in fact very much a part of the jungle with monkeys, sloth bears, and other exotic wildlife sometimes making their way onto the property.

When you arrive at your private and secluded tent, the hotel has created an elaborate marigold flower welcome with your name on the ground at the entrance, a custom nameplate plate also adorns the door. They make you feel instantly at home. Even nightly presents on your bed from Micato and Oberoi make you feel very special indeed. Whether it is custom Indian pajamas or a tiger paw print in crystal, the gifts are created to inspire you to the local customs and culture.



Treatment room at The Oberoi Vanyavilas Spa

We were exhausted from our long drive, so we made sure to experience the beautiful Oberoi Spa for Balinese massages before heading to a special private dinner with the GM, set up overlooking the lily pond. All illuminated by candles and fire torches, a gourmet meal was presented by talented Chef Arindam Saha while local musicians performed on the banks of the water. After our meal, we walked back to our tent listening to the sounds of the jungle which is a bit intimidating to be sure but slept like angels.

We woke up very early around 5:30 am and after a quick breakfast headed off on our private tiger safari. Our Micato guides were waiting for us with the four-wheel drive jeep (Gypsy). Visitors to the park must all use a lottery system which gives them one of 10 set routes to take for the morning with no guarantee of seeing any tigers, but not with Micato Safaris. We were actually given the keys to the gates for all of the routes offering us the ultimate VIP experience and also providing us with much greater odds of spotting a tiger. We were also given exclusive times before opening and after the park closes when there are no other tourists and large buses all converging on a sighting.

This is a huge plus to have the park entirely to yourself [when the Tigers come out to play](#).

We were fortunate to see a tiger almost immediately, and we began to follow her. She was a young tigress that had not been named yet, and we ended up hanging out with her for the longest time as she walked along the paths exploring every bush. Sometimes she would rustle up a herd of honking peacocks just for folly, but mostly she kept us entertained with her chores. This is such a rare opportunity to have a Tiger all to yourself for such a long period of time. We were very lucky to be sure. Our guide Hem Singh has amazing luck and has seen Tigers on every one of his 48 years visiting the park, so we were in good hands.



We ended up by a stream where we ate a packed gourmet picnic while spotted deer grazed around us, wild boars frolicked nearby and monkeys swung from the trees. We always kept our ears tuned for the monkey alarm or the Sambar deer barking as a warning of an approaching tiger. The jungle creatures are well organized in communicating a Tigers arrival.



Poolside lunch at The Oberoi Vanyavilas

Almost six hours later we returned to the Vanyavilas with such enthusiasm we needed a cocktail to calm us down. Not every visitor to Ranthambore spots a tiger, and we didn't want to appear too excited in front of the newly arriving guests. We spent the afternoon by the large swimming pool (the only heated pool in the area) while we had a large staff standing nearby to attend to our every need. I needed a break from Indian food, so the perfect Cadillac margarita and quesadilla kept me content while we swam in the warm sunshine.

I took a tour of the property with the resort's naturalist Zeeshan Ali, who showed me all of the species of birds and foliage on the property before escorting me to the top of the Observatory Tower overlooking the property and the jungle. A table with deserts and champagne awaited as the sun went down offering a perfect way to end the day.

I moved on to the hotel bar which is decorated with tiger paintings and artifacts, and had coffee with the most famous veterinary doctor in India, Dr. Rajiv Garg, who cares for the tigers and other exotic animals when they are injured. The game wardens will alert him if there is an injury and he will rush into the jungle to help the animals, most of them from infections, cuts and porcupine quills. He is a hero to many of the animals in the jungle caring for them in their time of need, and I was honored to have met him.



Sundowner cocktails at the Observatory at The Oberoi Vanyavilas

Dinner was overlooking the pool with Hem Singh and his brother in law Balendu Singh, who comes from a Noble Indian family of Bikaner. He was awarded the title of Honorary Warden of Ranthambore National Park by the Government of Rajasthan and is a true expert on the wildlife in the jungle knowing the entire history of the tigers and their lineage. We were so fortunate to have such inside knowledge about the park in preparation for our second day of safari.

Even though we had such great luck with tigers the day before we simply could not resist another day of trekking wildlife in the park. We left early, and after driving around for a while exploring several routes, we came up with no sightings. We drove to the Ranthambore Fort which Mughal Emperor Shah Alam gifted to Sawai Madho Singh I of Jaipur in 1754 AD and eventually maintained as a private hunting preserve. We circled the Rajbagh Lake, the perfect spot for bird watchers while crocodiles floated leisurely along its shores and we visited the stunning Rajbagh Palace, once a Maharaja hunting lodge nestled in the trees.





Rajbagh Lake with Palace, Maharaja's former hunting lodge

We drove for a while until we saw the beautiful tigress Arrowhead sauntering across the main road as dozens of visitors were pulling up in their jeeps to take photos. She casually crossed the road into the jungle, and we were the only people that could follow her since we had the keys to the route, leaving the crowds of tourists behind. We enjoyed amazing private time with her as she explored the woods and tried to stalk a sloth bear before giving up and yawning. And to make the day even more spectacular, we had a rare sighting of a leopard and followed him up and around the road for a long time before he disappeared into the rocks. This was the perfect way to end the most amazing wildlife experience ever, and to have it all to ourselves was a bucket list checked off.



Leopard sighting at Ranthambore National Park

Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve currently has around eighty Royal Bengal tigers, of which there are an estimated thirty-two cubs. Due to the recent increase in the number of tigers, the park is in the process of transferring a few to other parks. The number of sightings has doubled in the last three years. Among the other wild animals at the park are; Striped Hyenas, Sambar deer, Langurs, Jackals, Jungle cats, Caracals, Sloth bears, Indian Wild Boar, Yellow Bats, Indian Flying Foxes, Porcupines, Longeared Hedgehogs, vipers, marsh crocodiles and Mongoose among almost 40 mammal species and over 320 species of birds.

We could have stayed at Vanyavilas for a few more days since it was that much fun and an adrenaline busting adventure like never before. As we departed, the entire staff and the Vanyavilas resident elephant Lakshmi were waiting for us in the courtyard to bid us farewell all waving until we were out of sight. It was time to drive to Jaipur for another adventure, but I was already missing my new feline friends in the jungle.





The amazing staff of The Oberoi Vanyavilas bidding our farewell. (Madhvi Dadhich, Vikas Kumar, Manish Acharya, Rajat Chauhan, Nishigandha Narsingrao Sontakke, Harshul Kain, Saurabh Sharma, Amrita Kaur, Zeeshan Ali, Lokpal Singh Shekhawat, Sachin Kumar J K, Sherap Dorjee Sherpa, Shubham Tara, Akarsh Suresh, Ashish Rana, Rohit Bhandari, Arindam Saha, Adit Grover, Mahout Abrar Ali, GM Ratna Malhotra, Dhruv Moudgil)

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