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Where To See A Tiger In India

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Sher Bagh



Brat (T19) cooling off on a hot day

In India's Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve, this female tiger, tagged T19, is a Sher Bagh favorite, nicknamed Brat. Photo by Jaisal Singh.

Photo: Picasa

Jaisal Singh isn't exaggerating when he says he grew up in [Ranthambhore](#), the famous tiger reserve that was once the domain of maharajas in northern India. He was brought into the park at eight weeks old by his conservationist parents who went on to document the park's tiger population and he grew up knowing each tiger's face, official designation and nickname. Since opening his [Relais & Chateaux](#) lodge, [Sher Bagh](#), in 2000, he still spends time there when he isn't in New Delhi running his company, [Sujan](#), and overseeing his other camps [The Serai](#) in Jaisalmer and [Jawai](#), a leopard camp opened last year in Rajasthan, plus a palace hotel [Rajmahal](#) that he's renovating in Jaipur for a November reopening. So when I failed in two previous attempts to see tigers, both in this park where an estimated 50+ live, and another, [Pench](#) in India's center, I challenged him to show me one—and the results were better than I could have imagined.

To anyone who's been on safari in Africa, safaris in India will seem markedly different. The hours of entry are strictly controlled—and the park shuts at 6, so you're not doing evening or night drives when you might have better sightings as the animals move around. Enormous open trucks crammed with sightseers vie for space on the paths with the smaller, more typical open jeeps, causing crowding and crowd noise in some areas. Hotels don't always control which vehicles and guides their guests can have so they can't guarantee the quality of experience. Sher Bagh does, though, and with exceptional guides and the long experience of knowing where certain tigers tend to frequent, they can offer the best of all possible viewings. Particularly when Jaisal's schedule allows—for a separate, substantial fee, he'll be on site and serve as guide.

About an hour into our first drive, in the hottest part of the day, we got away from the other vehicles and found T19, known around Sher Bagh as Brat because they've been watching her since she was a particularly bratty cub, taking a break from her three cubs and cooling off in a pond, then eating and rolling around on her back on a rock. We saw her again the next day along with two male tigers known as Ustad and Sultan and an orphaned cub. And on our last day, we watched her hunt and sat breathless as she walked down the road straight at our vehicle and then turned and walked past, more interested in prey than in us. (Tigers only succeed in one of ten attempts, surprisingly tough odds.) Of all the animal sightings I've been lucky enough to have, this face to face was the most thrilling. As a bonus, we saw a leopard on every drive as well.

Back in the camp, it's easy to imagine that you're one of the first to explore this reserve—there's an easygoing, historic overall feel here with 12 large canvas tents with king beds, Edwardian furniture, black and white photos of ancestors, dignitaries and tigers of previous generations (including Brat as a cub playing) plus the modern conveniences: air conditioning units and great bathrooms, a massage tent and a large pool. When the camp reopens for the season in October, there will be two new larger tent suites, one with its own pool, the other with a Jacuzzi and upgraded decor and enlarged bathrooms in the other tents. The excellent meals will remain the same: a European/Indian mix at lunch and Indian thali—a platter of various dishes—style at night, served outdoors under atmospheric, flickering lanterns, and around an open fire.

How to get there: It's a four hour drive from Jaipur and a five hour train trip from Delhi. But the best way is by the private salon car with service by hotel staff that can be arranged as an attachment to the train from Delhi.