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COVER STORY WILDLIFE

# beauty of the beast

The Ranthambore National Park is as much known for its picturesque ruins and lakes, as for the striped resident that roams its jungles, says Maneesha Dube

**M**y tent, one of 12 in Sher Bagh, reminds me of the ones I have seen in black and white photographs taken just before independence. They show my father outside a similar tent ready to set off to tour his district as a young ICS officer. But, my guess is that this is where the similarity ends. Though there are no images of the interior, I am sure that it was not air-conditioned like the ones in this luxury camp, nor would it have had a well-appointed en-suite pucca bathroom. Commode, may be? Appropriately, this luxury camp styles itself as a Raj style tented camp.

I have arrived by train from Delhi after a five-and-a-half hour journey, and after a late light lunch, I find myself enjoying the sounds of the surrounding jungle and views of the Aravallis running through the Ranthambore National Park that lies just beyond the periphery of Sher Bagh. The park's the reason why I am here, with a prayer on my lips, and a hope in my heart that I'll be able to see a tiger, he of the fearful symmetry.

The park, spread over 1,334 sq km, is one of the largest forest reserves in north India, and given the deciduous nature of the forest, the best place to spot the most magnificent of predators, the tiger. The park is home to many other animals, among them the bear, nilgai, chital, cross, civet cats and leopards, and over 350 species of birds. I was happy to spot the rose-ringed parakeet and many other colourful birds I could not put a name to, but like almost every other visitor, I want to see the tiger.

The rhythm of the camp is designed around sanctuary visits. Just like the park, the camp opens in October and closes in April. The pleasant months are October and April; the rest can be cold. Safaris into the park operate between 7 to 10 in the morning and 2.30 to 5.30 in the evening until February. Once the weather gets warmer, visitors are allowed to enter the park an hour earlier in the morning, and an hour later in the afternoon. At most times of the year, blankets and hot water bottles are welcome as the temperature in early mornings and late evenings in the jungle can be in single digits. So, it is advisable to be warmly clad, be cosy under a blanket, with a hot water bottle close at hand. Also, wear muted colours so as not to startle the animals. You will also need a photo ID to enter the park.

**Sher and the Bagh:** (Facing page top) A tiger yawns wide showing his canines; the luxury tents at Sher bagh

### THE LEGENDARY MACHLI

Known as the 'lady of the lakes,' Machli was separated from her parents at an early age. The young tigress was so called because of a mark on her body that resembled a fish. She mated with a male who resided just beside her territory, and gave birth to three female cubs, one of whom was named 'Machli - The Junior'. The father of the cubs, however, died at an early age due to an unknown disease. After this, the elder Machli found the scent of a different male - Bumburam, and mated with him. She gave birth to two cubs, Machli, now almost 15 years old, and left with only one canine, still roams the forests of Ranthambore, and even makes a kill.

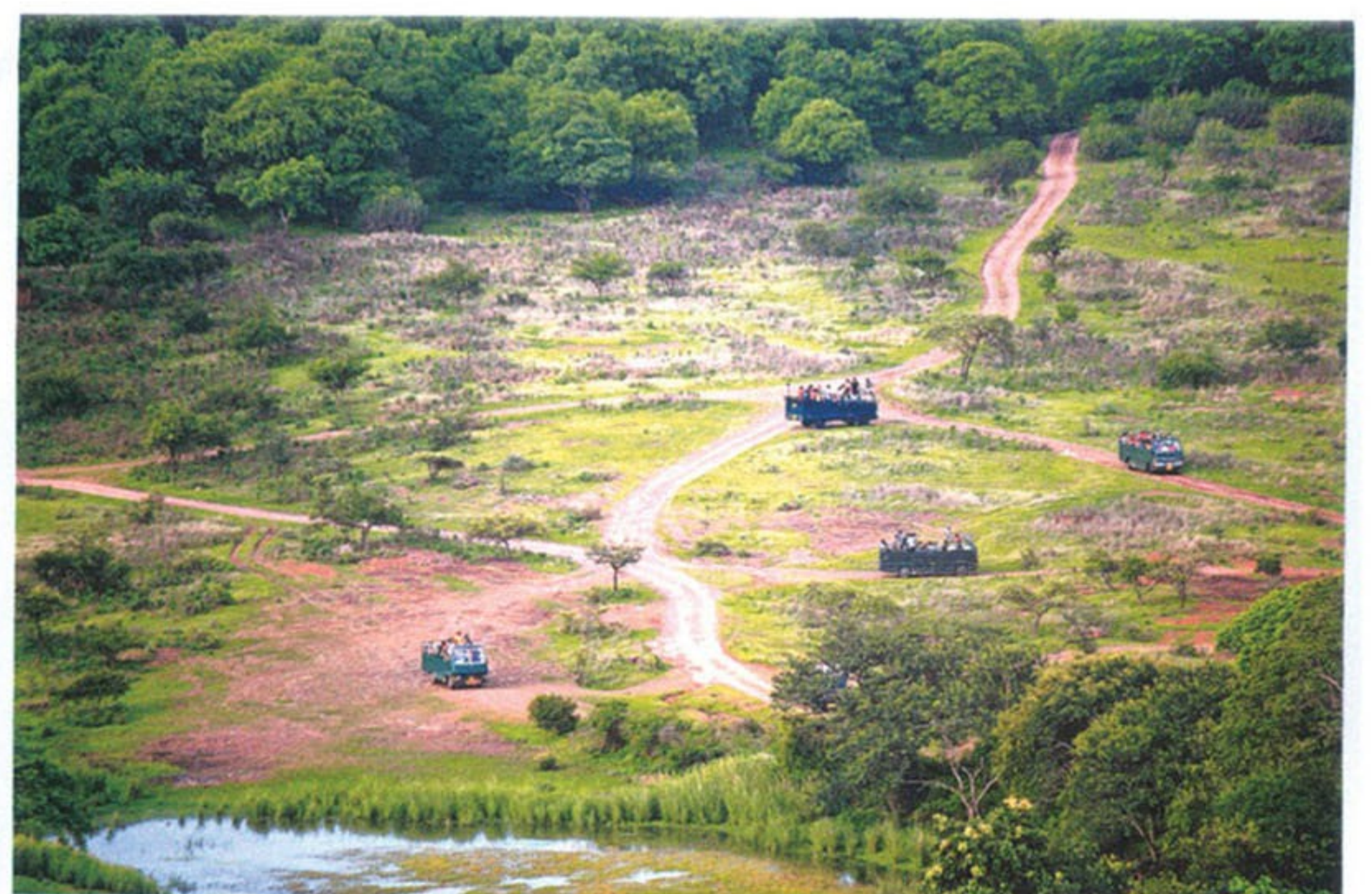
### THE BEGINNING

Established as the Sawal Madhopur Game Sanctuary in 1955 by the central government, Ranthambore was declared one of the Project Tiger reserves in 1973. It became a National Park in 1980. In 1984, the adjacent forests were declared as the Sawal Man Singh Sanctuary and Keladevi Sanctuary, and in 1991, the tiger reserve was enlarged to include both the above-mentioned sanctuaries. Ranthambore is one of the best places in India to see tigers in the wild.

### THINGS TO DO IN RANTHAMBORE

Visit the Padam Talao, a beautiful lake known for its water lilies, the famous Jogi Mahal and an ancient banyan tree. Rajbagh Talao is the most picturesque lake in the park. Malik Talao is another small lake yet attracts large species of birds, and is home to a lot of crocodiles. The Ranthambore Fort stands on top a hill, so be ready to trek up. The Raj Bagh ruins, a reminder of the royal shikars of old times, lie between the Padam Talao and Raj Bagh Talao.

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### NAVIGATOR

#### GETTING THERE

**By air:** Jaipur, at 180 km, is the nearest airport from Ranthambore.

**By rail:** The park is around 11 km away from the Sawal Madhopur railway station that was on the Delhi to Mumbai trunk route.

**By road:** A good network of buses connect Sawal Madhopur, the nearest town from Ranthambore, to all the major cities within Rajasthan. Though the frequency of direct services is not very good. Mostly, you have to first take a bus to either Tonk or Davla.

#### WHERE TO STAY

Sher Bagh, Sherpur - Khibpur, District Sawal Madhopur, Rajasthan. Tel: 07462 252120, 252119. reservations@sanluxury.com; www.sanluxury.com

**OTHER OPTIONS:** Varanवास (Toll free 1800 112030; reservations@obbaro

group.com. The Pugmark (Tel: 07462 25205/06), Tiger Machan (Mob: 9826249679), Aman-vikas (Tel: 252052)

#### FOR MORE QUERIES

ranthambore@sanluxury.com. The Ranthambore National Park is open from October 1 to June 30. Rest of the time the park is closed for visitors.