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GOURMET TRAVEL 2008

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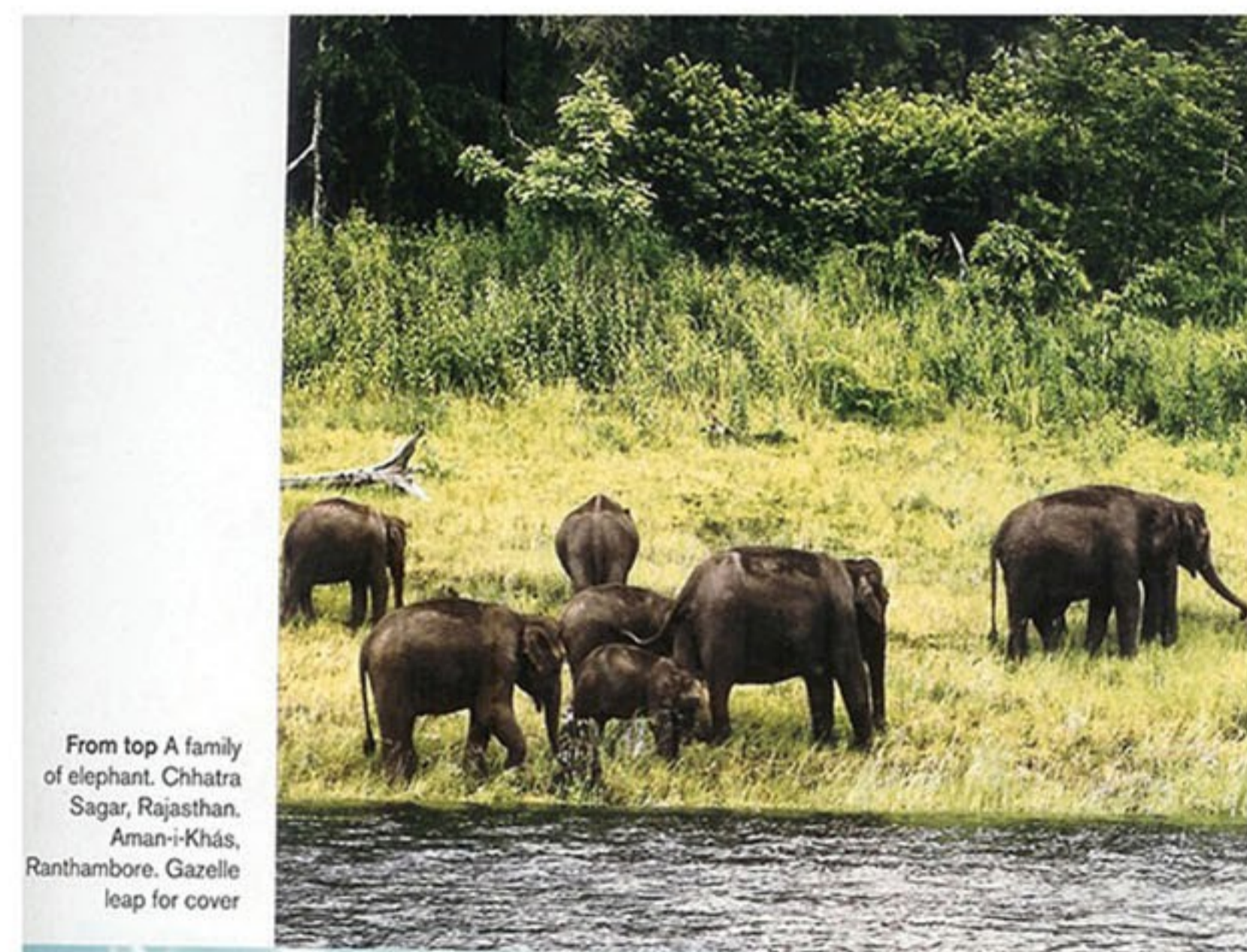
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 PROMOTIONS



Burning bright

INDIA'S TIGER TRAIL IS GOING FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH, WITH A NEW WAVE OF STYLISH SAFARI LODGES AND TENTED CAMPS

WORDS HALLIE CAMPBELL



From top A family of elephant, Chhatra Sagar, Rajasthan, Aman-i-Khas, Ranthambore. Gazelle leap for cover



Seeing a tiger in the wild, even for a split-second, is an unforgettable thrill. The country's legendary Bengal tigers are making a heroic return after near extinction. Dedicated reserves and institutions like Project Tiger have launched a tireless campaign to promote the animal's preservation, and environmentalists and enlightened hoteliers are teaming up to provide eco-friendly safaris in the country's most beautiful national parks and wilderness areas. Follow in the footsteps of the great Moghul emperors and Rajput royalty and go where the wild things are. Tented camps and hunting lodges have a colourful history here, only now the best shooting is done with a camera, not a 12-bore.

Ranthambore National Park in Rajasthan is India's most historic tiger reserve. The tenth-century Ranthambore Fort, scene of many great battles, lies in half-ruined splendour. As far back as the sixteenth century, the great Moghul Emperor Akbar fought in its forests. The much-loved Maharaja of Jaipur held legendary tiger hunts here with Raj royalty like the Mountbattens. The park is wild and rugged, with gorges, lakes, ravines and ancient temples overgrown with vines. Tiger sightings are frequent and there is a wealth of wildlife. Of all the tiger reserves, Ranthambore has the best choice of accommodation.

If Giorgio Armani went camping, Aman-i-Khas is where he would stay. The exceptionally spacious tents are

a designer's minimalist dream punctuated by contemporary furnishings. There is a spa tent for after-safari treatments, a bathing pool and plenty of areas to relax in. Delicious, home-cooked food is served in the large dining tent.

Aman-i-Khas has all the glamour you'd expect from Amanresorts and is just right for those who love the great outdoors but hate the thought of roughing it.

Sher Bagh is a delightful camp in a garden setting just minutes from the entrance to the park. Royal tents, originally commissioned for the Maharajah of Jodhpur, set the tone, with sturdy campaign furniture mixing with refined linens. A favourite of Prince Michael of Kent, the camp has superb service. Awake at dawn to find a steaming pot of tea and biscuits to get you going before your morning game drive. As one of the most established camps, Sher Bagh has retained many of the best guides and you are guaranteed an expert introduction to the region's wildlife.

Oberoi Vanyavilas is supremely civilised. The tents are really permanent structures with a tented effect created by swathes of hand-embroidered fabric, with tiny gold tigers cavorting about. They are beautifully appointed in colonial style with features such as freestanding tubs, walk-in closets, wood floors and modern amenities including DVD players. Two resident elephants welcome guests to the resort, which rambles throughout serene gardens. Jasmine and incense waft by on the breeze, while a swimming pavilion and spa make this the perfect place for those seeking the excitement of a professional tiger safari with the luxuries of a top hotel.

Off the tiger trail, there are some magical tented camps in lyrical locations that offer a true vision of pastoral Rajasthan. Chhatra Sagar is an exclusive retreat on a private estate about two hours by road from Jodhpur, overlooking a lake teeming with birds. The tents are among the best in India, with every comfort. The charming Nimaj family, who own the camp, are the hereditary landowners, and they take great pride in making their guests feel completely ▶