

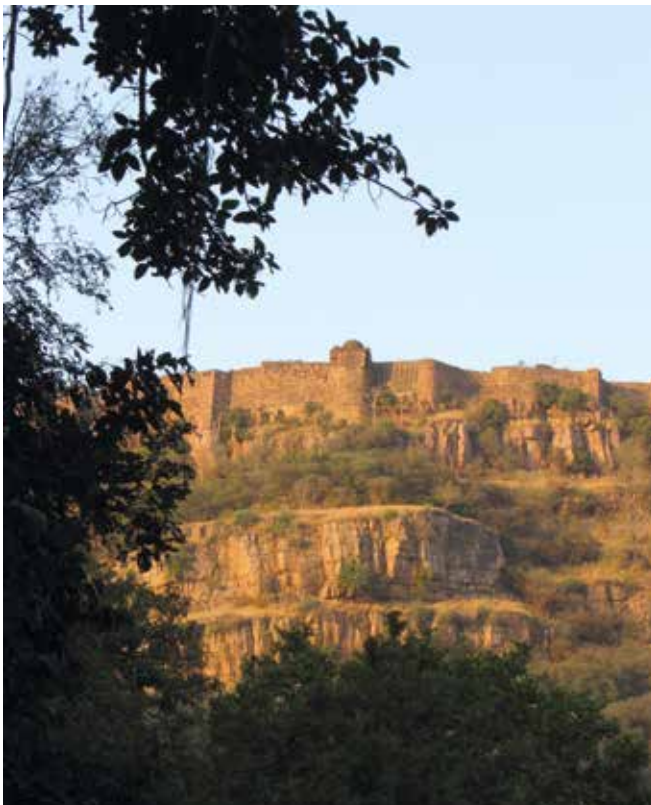
# Ranthambore

By Harriet O'Brien



*The mother tiger crossing the road*

Draped over craggy hills in eastern Rajasthan is a magical belt of jungle that was latterly the hunting ground of the Maharajah of Jaipur. It is grazed by elegant spotted deer, long-horned gazelles, and sambar deer sporting ostentatious antlers. Moustachioed wild boar rootle through its undergrowth, shaggy sloth bears search for honey and berries in its trees, vibrant birds flit around its lakes – amber treepies, iridescent bee-eaters, kingfishers, hornbills and more. In the 1970s it became one of India's prime locations



*Ranthambore Fort*

for tiger conservation and in 1980 it was accorded official park status as Ranthambore National Park. Today 56 tigers are known to prowl the greater Ranthambore region (that's not including the most recent cubs) and although there's still a long way to go in terms of conservation, the park is widely regarded as the place in India where you are most likely to see this most magnificent of felines.

I arrived there hoping – expecting almost – to see a tiger. I left two days later amazed at the tapestry of riches I had viewed.

It was on the second morning that I encountered my desired tiger – and more. A few minutes after our Jeep entered the park in the rosy light of dawn, the alarm call of a peacock resounded through the undergrowth. It came again. And again. So we followed it. As our Jeep passed under the great aerial roots of a banyan tree the cries grew increasingly strident and our guide became ever more alert. Then we rounded a corner of the rough road – and ground to a halt. A tiger cub the size of a cocker spaniel was ambling along the track ahead of us. It stopped, took a perfunctory look at our vehicle, and vanished into the bush.

A quartet of agitated peacocks emerged, scurrying past us in unlikely disarray, coronet topknots bobbing crazily. Just a moment later a big tiger emerged in front of our Jeep. It was so close I could hear it breathing. I hadn't appreciated what an adrenaline rush you get from proximity to a beast of such might and such self-conscious majesty. This was the mother, our guide whispered. Now and then she called out gently to her young in the undergrowth, revealing very large, very long canines as she did so. Evidently unfazed by our vehicle – it was neither meal nor menace – she sat down in the track right in front of our Jeep and remained there for about half an hour, finally moving in response to calls from her young and thereby unblocking our road.

For about three months last year it would have been impossible to see any of this because tiger tourism was banned in India and all the country's tiger reserves were closed. It was a radical ruling by the country's Supreme





*A wild boar*

Court, forcing the authorities of India's national parks to take a considered look at their conservation measures, which had become notoriously slack and ineffective. After intense lobbying on the part of the tourist industry the embargo was lifted last October and tourists were once again allowed into the parks. At the time of my visit to Ranthambore shortly afterwards, new rulings were being put into place and existing regulations more closely monitored.

There are nine tourist zones in the park, each of which strictly admits only eight vehicles twice a day (you book through a local agent or your hotel) and big fines are now stringently imposed if they stray from the agreed area. The vehicles may have a naturalist guide already onboard, but it is mandatory that they also take a park guide – as much to control visitor activities as to offer knowledge about the wildlife. In conversation with several of the guides, I was told



*Who's watching whom?*

the authorities are keen to develop the ethos that visiting the park is very much a privilege rather than a right or even an entertainment, as has been the prevailing mood of many visiting groups. The changes, they added, are giving a great boost to Ranthambore and they were optimistic about the conservation possibilities for the future.

I did indeed feel very privileged on my four excursions in the park as I

explored a spectacular landscape criss-crossed with streams and rivers and dotted with ancient flamboyant trees. We watched eagles soaring overhead, large antelopes lumbered close to our track, langurs gazed at us from the branches of peepal trees.

There was a haunting cultural element, too. For in the midst of the park are the remains of an expansive and

imposing fort. Set in a commanding position at the juncture of the Aravali and Vindhya Hills, Ranthambore Fort was founded in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It was of enormous strategic importance, controlling major trading routes between northern and central India and it became a substantial settlement enclosed by seven kilometres of walls.

Of course as such a valuable prize it was fought over and changed hands many times. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Rajput ruler, Rai Surjan Hada, considered it impregnable. He, however, had reckoned without the might of the great Mughal emperor Akbar who in February 1568, laid siege to the fort. The Rajputs might well have survived this military manoeuvre, but Akbar dragged enormous cannons up to the adjacent ridge. In the face of ferocious bombardments, the Rajputs had no option but to surrender. The Mughals remained in control of the fort until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, famously turning it into a fortress jail and execution ground where prisoners were fed with opium before being hurled from the walls. Thereafter it became the property of the Maharajah of Jaipur and fell out of use.



*A langur keeping a lookout*

With the jungle reclaiming it, Ranthambore Fort is today the most wonderfully romantic site. Tourists can take guided tours during park opening hours, walking round crumbling ruins that are stalked by peacocks – it's the one place in the reserve where you are allowed out of your vehicle. Daylight was fading as we left the fort area on my last day and the battlements had taken on a reddish hue. As we hurried to leave the park before closing time I turned to see a langur monkey, tail curled up dramatically, standing on the walls. It was giving a warning cry that a predator was in the district – a jackal, a leopard, a tiger? The call of the sentry at sundown rang through the air.

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*All photos by the author*