

BANDHAVGARH NATIONAL PARK



Madhya Pradesh, India

Area: 694 sq km core area. 105 sq km restricted tourist area
Best Time to Visit: November to March

Altitude: 410 to 810 meters above sea level
Closed: Monsoon season



Bandhavgarh is a new National Park with a very long history. Set among the Vindhya hills of Madhya Pradesh with an area of 437sq kms, it contains a wide variety of habitats and a high density of game, including a large number of Tigers. This is also the White tiger country. Maharaja Martand Singh captured the last known in 1951. Prior to becoming a National Park, the forests around Bandhavgarh had long been maintained as a Shikargah, or game preserve of the Maharaja of Rewa.

Bandhavgarh has been a center of human activity and settlement for over 2000 years, and there are references to it in the ancient books, the Narad-Panch Ratra and the Shiva Purana. Legend has it that Lord Rama stopped at Bandhavgarh on his way back after defeating the demon King Ravana of Lanka. Two monkey architects, who had engineered a bridge between the isle of Lanka and the mainland, are said to have built Bandhavgarh fort. Later Rama handed it over to his brother Lakshmana who became known as Bandhavdhish "The Lord of the Fort". Lakshmana is the deity of the fort and is regularly worshipped in a temple there.

The oldest remnants of habitation in the park are caves dug into the sandstone to the north of the fort. Several contain Brahmi inscriptions dating from the 1st century BC. Various dynasties have ruled the fort, for example, the Maghas from the 1st century A.D., the Vakatakas from the 3rd century AD. From that time onwards, Bandhavgarh was ruled by a succession of dynasties including the Chandela Kings of Bundelkhand who built the famous temples at Khajuraho.

The Baghel Kings, the direct ancestors of the present Royal family of Rewa, established their dynasty at Bandhavgarh in the 12th century. It remained their capital till 1617 when the center of court life moved to Rewa, 75 miles (120Kms) to the north. Without royal patronage Bandhavgarh became more and more deserted until forest overran the area and it became the royal hunting reserve. This helped to preserve the forest and its wildlife, although the Maharajas made full use of their rights. Each set out to kill an auspicious number of 109 Tigers.

At independence Bandhavgarh remained the private property of the Maharaja until he gave it to the state for the formation of the National Park in 1968. After the park was created, poaching was brought under control and the number of animals rose dramatically. Small dams and water holes were built to solve the problem of water shortage. Grazing by local cattle was stopped and the village within the park boundaries was relocated. The Tigers in particular prospered and the 1986 extension provided much needed forest to accommodate them.



Bandhavgarh Fort entrance



Caves on the fort hill



Searching for the elusive Tiger

The fort still belongs to the Maharaja of Rewa and permission is required to visit it. However, permission is available locally and no trip to Bandhavgarh is complete without making an effort to climb up the fort. There are two ways up on the plateau, a jeep track and a footpath-both steep. It is far easier to see the fort in a jeep. But, journey on foot is far more rewarding. A convenient parking area has been provided on the southern side of the fort in the lush jungle, which surrounds its base. This point is known as Shesh Saaiya, named after a unique 35 ft (11 meters) long statue of reclining Vishnu carved around the 10th century, from whose feet the Charanganga is said to flow.

A rectangular pool of spring water lies just beneath the statue and the path to the main gate of the fort. On the other side of this imposing gateway lie 560 acres (227 hectares) of grassland, over which are scattered turtle-filled tanks and the many remains of the human inhabitants of the fort- from ancient statues to the barracks occupied by Rewa's troops up to independence.

The natural ramparts of the fort give breathtaking view of the surrounding countryside. Vultures wheel around the precipice, which also attracts blue rock thrushes and crag martins. The fort has a small population of Blackbuck, which have been reintroduced and to some extent protected from Tigers in the park below by repairs to the masonry walls at the edges of the fort. Thus Bandhavgarh offers excellent game and bird viewing and a historical interest which most other parks lack.

Within the Park

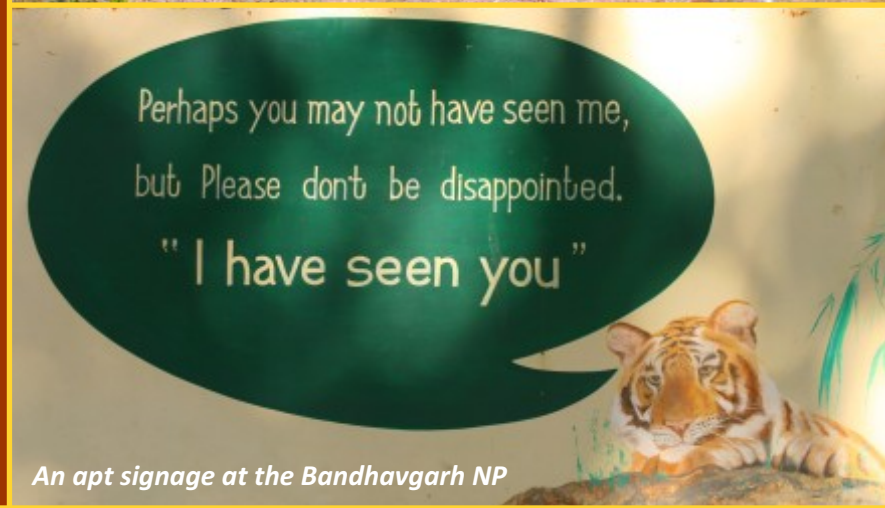
Bandhavgarh is justifiably famous for its Tigers, but it has a wide range of other game. The undergrowth is not as dense as in some northern terai forests, but the best time to see the park inhabitants is still the summer months when water becomes more scarce and the undergrowth dies back.

The most effective way to search for Tigers is on elephant back. Elephants belonging

Indian Roller



Symbiosis



An apt signage at the Bandhavgarh NP

to the forest department and equipped with walkie-talkies can be boarded from a point near the Forest rest house not far from the park entrance. The mahouts are kept well informed of the whereabouts of the nearest Tigers. However there are many tigers in the park and the elephants are able to take you up steep, rocky hillsides and down marshy riverbeds, which are impassable to vehicles.

There are several good weather roads in the park. Jeeps are definitely recommended over other vehicles and can be hired from the Tiger's Den Resort. For both elephants and jeep rides, the hours immediately after dawn and before sunset are best.

Chinkara, still rather shy, can be sighted on the grassland areas of the park. Also to be seen in the grasslands are Nilgai, Chausingha, and sounders of wild boar, as well as the occasional jackal or fox. Muntjac and Sambhar prefer denser vegetation.

The main prey animal, however for the Tigers and the park's rarely sighted leopards are the chital, which now number a few thousand.

There are two types of monkeys common in the park-the Rhesus Macaque and the Black faced Langur. Drives can also reveal jungle cats, hyenas, porcupines, ratels, and a variety of other mammals.

Bandhavgarh attracts many migratory birds in the winter months, including the birds of prey like the Steppe Eagle and a variety of Wildfowl.

There are 32 hills in this part of the park, which has a large natural fort at its center. The fort's cliffs are 2625 feet (800 meters) high, 1000 feet (300 meters) above the surrounding countryside. Over half the area is covered by Sal forest although on the upper slope it is replaced by mixed forest of sali, saj, dhobin, and saja. Winter temperatures (Nov-mid February) vary from almost freezing at night to around 20 degrees C in the daytime. Summer nights are also cooler than the daytime temperatures, which rise to 40 degrees C.

