

# GIR NATIONAL PARK

*In pursuit of the King*

GUJARAT, INDIA



Area : 1412 sq km

Temperature Range : 10 degrees C in winter to 43 degrees C in summer

Best time to visit : October to June



Most people think of lions as strictly African beasts, but only because they've been killed off almost everywhere else. Ten thousand years ago lions spanned vast sections of the globe, and so did people, who—as they multiplied and organized—put pressure on competitors at the top of the food chain. Now lions hold only a small fraction of their former habitat, and Asiatic lions, a subspecies that split from African lions perhaps 100,000 years ago, hang on to an almost impossibly small slice of their former domain. India is the proud steward of these 300 or so lions, which live primarily in 1,412-square-kilometer sanctuary.

The **Gir National Park**, India is situated in the western state of Gujarat and covers an area of 1412.13 sq.kms. Due to extensive game hunting, the Asiatic lions were almost vanished from India. However, then Nawab of the erstwhile princely state of Junagadh realized the threat the lions faced and initiated massive conservation efforts. The **Gir National Park** came into existence in 1965 and since then has been the last refuge for the royal Asiatic lions. Today, the park is home to almost 359 Asiatic lions. Gir is fortunate to have as many as seven perennial rivers that flow through the forest. Gir does not have very dense forest and mainly consists of dry deciduous, thorny and scrub types of vegetation with teak being a major plant present in the forest.

Scraggly, brown, dry and thorny. Gir, the last bastion of the Asiatic lion, is a beautiful but harsh teak dominated habitat. Far from the stereotypical vision most people have of forests in the tropics, Gir is anything but 'lush'. It is, nevertheless, one of India's most precious and vital biodiversity vaults. A semi-arid wilderness emblazoned by rust, beige and the occasional scarlet, when the flame of the forest and silk cotton trees are in bloom, Gir brings to mind visions of distant Africa, despite the fact that it lacks the extensive grasslands of the Masai Mara. Yet, something in these ecological circumstances proved to be just what the lions needed, for it is only here, in relatively small fragments of forests, supported by 'poor quality' teak, that one of the world's rarest large cat survives.

Though the Asiatic lion is an elusive creature, a morning safari awards a good chance of seeing it, in contrast to a hot afternoon safari. One of the best routes to take for a safari is Sasan-Khokra-Sisvan-Devadungar-Gambliamba-Kamleshwar Dam-Mindholiwada-Sasan.

The lions exude vitality, and no small measure of charm. Though the gentle intimacy of play vanishes when it's time to eat, meals in Gir are not necessarily frenzied affairs. For a mother and cub sharing a deer, or a young male relishing an antelope, there's no need to fight for a cut of the kill. Prey animals are generally smaller in Gir than they are in Africa, and hunting groups tend to be smaller as well. The lions themselves aren't as big as African lions, and they have shorter manes and a long fold of skin on their undersides that many lions in Africa don't have.



Morning Jeep Safari through the NP

A mating couple



Two male lions in Gir



Two lionesses on a hunt



Perpetuating the species is no easy work—lions copulate about 500 times for every litter produced. Once a female entices a male to mate, it's over quickly, and the female may discourage dawdling by growling and clawing at her mate. The process repeats after a brief interlude.

Apart from the Asiatic lions, the other major wildlife of Gir National Park, India includes a healthy population of leopards, wild cats, hyenas, desert cat and ratel. Gir is considered as one of the best places to sight the shy and elusive leopard. Gir provides a great treat for the birdwatchers as it consists of about 300 species of birds. There are about 37 species of reptiles found in the park. One of the major features of Gir is the Interpretation zone created in Devalia. The prime reason for the creation of Devalia is to reduce the tourism pressure on Gir as well as encourage ecotourism. Since the Gir National Park does not constitute of the demarcation of tourism zone and core zone, it is necessary to curb disturbances extensively. The Devalia zone is a small are, which comprises of a few lions along with some herbivores. This allows the tourists to observe the behavior of the lions without disturbing the forest.

Within the sanctuary, there are numerous human settlements of cattle herders called "Maldharis". There are also places of Hindu worship and pilgrimage and sulphur springs at Tulsi Shyam and Kankai Mata. At the edge of the park there are good populations of Indian Gazelle, protected by the religious sentiment of the local people.

These Maldharis are nomadic herdsman who live in and around the park. The literal meaning of Maldhari is "owner of animal stock". In different regions, they belong to different castes. Maldharis living in Gir Forest National Park are mainly Charan and their villages are known as "ness".

As history goes, the Nawab of Junagadh ordered a lot of slaves from Africa during his merry days. Today, these folks are as much an Indian citizen as the rest of India and enjoy the privileges that the Indian citizenship offers. Having been in India for generations, these folks speak Hindi and Gujarati fluently, but still retain their native dialects and scripts.