

# Tigers at dawn

Lucy Monro



Photo: © Jane Whittington.

**AS THE ELEPHANT WOBBLER** in ungainly four time through the jungle we sit in silence, eyes straining through the mist for any sign of movement. Periodically the mahout stops his charge to listen. There are tigers out there and our mission is to find them.

Riding elephants through the jungle at dawn in search of tigers is just about as good as it gets. On the list of 'things to do before you die, or get too old to do them' elephant safaris and sighting a tiger in the wild should rank highly. The Royal Chitwan National Park in Nepal offers one of the finest wildlife experiences in Asia and the exquisite, and tragically rare, chance to see a tiger in the wild.

Historically the Chitwan Valley in southern Nepal was a popular hunting destination for British aristocrats hungry for big game trophies. In a fun-packed 11 days in 1911 King George V and his son the Prince of Wales slaughtered 39 tigers and 18 rhinos. Surprisingly, despite the best efforts of the British gentry to kill everything that moved on four legs, it was habitat destruction caused by a land hungry local population that presented the greatest threat to the area's wildlife. By the mid 1970s the rhino



Photo: © Lucy Monro.



Photo: © Lucy Monro.

population in Chitwan had been depleted to less than 100 and only 20 tigers remained.

The creation of the National Park in 1973 halted what seemed a desperate slide towards extinction for many species and, although still endangered, the tiger and rhino population in the area is now increasing steadily.

- ◀ The Royal Bengal Tiger is endangered.
- ▲▲ Elephant safari is one of the best ways to get close to wildlife.
- ▲ Tracks reveal the presence of a tiger within the past six-hour period.
- ▶ A baby elephant born at Tiger Tops snuggles up to his mother.



Photo: © Lucy Monro.



Photo: © Lucy Monroe.

There are about 3000 Royal Bengal Tigers (*Panthera tigris tigris*) remaining in the Indian Sub-continent. The Royal Chitwan National Park is home to about 100, of which about 40 are of breeding age. A larger population of about 70 tigers of breeding age extends eastward from the park within Nepal and south into India.

The Great One-Horned Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) is the largest of the species of Asian rhinoceri. Habitat destruction and heavy poaching for the animals' horn, believed by the Chinese to be of great medicinal value, have led to a continued decline in numbers in recent decades. Less than 1500 are left in the Indian Sub-continent and that number represents the world population. Some 500 rhinos, about a third of the world population, live in the Royal Chitwan National Park.

Half a century ago wild elephants were common in Chitwan, but the chances of seeing a wild elephant in the valley today are slim. The total population of Asian Elephants (*Elephas maximus*) in Nepal is thought to be only between 30 to 50, roaming in tiny groups along the country's southern border.

Elephants, tigers and rhinos are just some of the myriad of species that have found sanctuary in southern Nepal, but they are the animals at the very heart of the area's eco-tourism industry. Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge lies in the Royal Chitwan National Park. Established in the early 1960s the lodge is Nepal's pioneer and premier wildlife safari lodge and has been the driving force behind establishing sustainable, environmentally friendly tourism since its inception. Recognised internationally as a leader in anti-poaching, wildlife crime and conservation activities, Tiger Tops set the standards for sustainable tourism long before eco-tourism



Photo: © Lucy Monroe.

became a buzzword and has been used as the model for numerous other projects since.

Home to a large herd of domesticated Asian elephants cared for by experts whose knowledge is sought after by elephant keepers and zoos around the world, Tiger Tops is the birthplace of modern day elephant polo in Nepal and the World Elephant Polo Championships held in the first week of December every year, but the tournament is just one of the many attractions that bring visitors to the Chitwan jungle.

Renowned as one of the finest jungle safari providers in the world, Tiger Tops has become a magnet for those who wish to experience the wonder of the jungle from the comfort of relative luxury. What better place to stay in the jungle than in a treehouse? The lodge's 20 rooms are housed in treehouses built from sustainable natural materials. Each room has solar powered reading lamps, ceiling fans and modern bathrooms equipped with solar-heated showers. The lodge's photovoltaic solar power plant is the largest in Nepal. Tiger Tops embraces guests with jungle-clad luxury in an environment that has the charm of a Swiss ski chalet holiday combined with the thrill of wildlife safari.

Comfort doesn't keep Tiger Tops guests in their beds for long! The best time to spot a tiger in the wild is at dawn and the mysticism of early morning jungle mist is not to be missed. Rangers knock on doors while condensation still drips from leaves the size of soup plates onto the treetop room roofs. It sounds as though it's pouring with rain as we are called for early morning safari. But it's not. Clad in sodden mist the jungle is awash with



Photo: © Courtesy Tiger Tops Jungle Lodges.

- ◀ A rhino pauses for a photo opportunity before disappearing into the grass.
- ▲ Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge.
- ▼ Each elephant is cared for by a team of three mahouts who look after the same elephant for life.



Photo: © Lucy Momo.

## ESSENTIALS

### Clothing

Rangers wear khaki for the simple reason that it is the best camouflage colour and therefore the least disturbing to the environment and the animals that you are hoping to see. To increase your chances of spotting a tiger in the wild forget high fashion and don casual clothing in jungle colours!

Natural fibres are best for humid jungle conditions and trousers rather than shorts will protect you from undergrowth and the ubiquitous leeches. The jungle is a cold and damp place during the winter so fleeces or warm jackets are essential. Heavy walking boots are not necessary, but comfortable walking shoes are vital. Even in winter (November to February) daytime temperatures rise rapidly, light cotton shirts, sunglasses and a hat are recommended. Between March and early October lightweight clothing and rainwear is recommended.

### Don't forget!

Binoculars - if you are fortunate enough to spot a tiger it's not going to walk up to you and pose! Don't forget the binos!

First aid kit and personal medical supplies - Tiger Tops is extremely remote. As with all Third World or adventure travel a comprehensive first aid kit is essential.

Cameras, film, flash cards and chargers (there are no sockets in the rooms but the lodge office will recharge equipment for you).

### What not to take!

Leave the massive suitcase at home, or store it in Kathmandu. The journey to Tiger Tops involves light aircraft, a 4X4 journey and a river crossing on a small 'punt-style' boat.

It hardly needs to be said, but there is nowhere to plug a hairdryer in - so don't bother taking it!

### Vaccinations

You need to be protected against the normal Third World suspects:

Diphtheria, tetanus, hepatitis A and B, meningococcal meningitis, polio and typhoid. Malaria is present in the Terai but the risk in Royal Chitwan National Park is extremely low except in the hot months of June, July and August when it is considered simply 'low'.



dripping dew as we make our way to the elephant camp to meet the mounts that may take us to tigers. As we rumble across the lodge's lawn heading towards long grass in which we hope tigers await us the first hint of an orange dawn appears. As tangerine light pushes through a grey sky the mahout halts our elephant at the edge of a raging river. "Tiger, maybe six hours." He points at tracks leading from the river's edge into the grass ahead of us. Within the last six hours there was a tiger here. Thrilled we photograph the prints, massive paw marks bigger than a man's hand embedded into sandy mud. We lumber onwards. "Tiger, two babies!" The mahout stops his charge again to point out three sets of tiger tracks, two smaller sets of tracks run either side of a larger set and the cameras come out again. There really are tigers out here!

A deer leaps through the undergrowth. This is a good sign. Tigers hunt deer and a startled deer may well indicate a tiger's presence. We search, but we don't find. As the sun finally wins its battle with grey cloud we head back to the lodge to be met with the news that another group struck gold. With a roar a tiger hunting a deer had leapt across the trail in front of them. Mid-hunt it had paused briefly, seemingly to sneer, lip curled, at the group of stunned intruders in its domain, before disappearing in a single magnificent bound in pursuit of its quarry

Instinct that would normally have provoked envy failed to register as excitement dominated all reaction. Could we go out again? The ranger told us no. Tomorrow we could try again, but we would be able to see rhinos in the afternoon.

We did see rhinos. Not just one, but several awaited us in elephant-high grass. Our sought after tigers remained tantalisingly elusive, but somehow it didn't matter. We knew they were there and that was enough. To know that tigers roam free, prowling on the very ground you are walking brings a thrill of its own. One day they would reveal themselves, but for the time being it was enough just to know that they were there.

[www.tigermountain.com](http://www.tigermountain.com)



Photo: © Lucy Manno.

### GETTING THERE

Air Arabia flies four times a week on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, to Kathmandu from Sharjah.

Visas are available upon arrival at the airport in Kathmandu.

[www.airarabia.com](http://www.airarabia.com)

Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge lies in the Royal Chitwan National Park in the Terai in the south of Nepal. Yeti Airlines flies from Kathmandu to Meghauli, from where 4X4 transfers are available to the lodge.

In addition to Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge, Tiger Mountain runs Tiger Tops Tented Camp and Tiger Mountain Tharu Lodge in Chitwan.

[www.tigermountain.com](http://www.tigermountain.com)



Photo: © Courtesy Air Arabia.



Photo: © Courtesy Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge.



Photo: © Courtesy Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge.