

# DESTINATION REVIEW OF KANHA NATIONAL PARK

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**Introduction:** One state that has always kept me captivated by the plethora of experiences that it can offer is Madhya Pradesh. Being geographically located in the centre of India, it is truly a Heartland of India. For me it's an epitome of Indian culture and heritage with its history dating back to pre-historic times. From the rock-shelters of Bhimbetka of Paleolithic and Mesolithic period, to Buddhist site of Sanchi of around 3 century BCE, the Khajuraho temple known for its enticing sculptures, several palaces and forts from medieval period to modern day cities of Indore and Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh has kept its enriching heritage alive in all its glory. This state is also home to around 25 wildlife sanctuaries, out of which Bandhavgarh, Pench, Panna and Kanha are the most renowned and visited by wildlife lovers around the globe (Madhya Pradesh).

Kanha – Kisli national Park is situated in the district of Mandla and Balaghat which is around 410 km of Bhopal, 160 km of Jabalpur and 270 km of Nagpur. Kanha National Park was created on 1 June 1955 and in 1973 was made the Kanha Tiger Reserve. The park consists of 940 km square core area and 1005 km square buffer zone. The national park is also made up of two sanctuaries, Hallon and Banjar, of 250 and 300 km<sup>2</sup> respectively. (<https://balaghat.nic.in/>) Although this park is known for Tigers, it has a unique mascot called “Bhoorsingh- the Barasingha” (the swamp deer). (<https://www.kanhakislinationalpark.com/>)

Kanha National Park has 3 gates called Khatia, Mukki and Sarhi and 4 safari zones called Kanha, Mukki, Kisli and Sarhi. The park gates open at around 5.30-6 am and the entry protocols starts as early as 5 am. We were already in the queue at around 5 am and the pitch darkness of the jungle and the cold weather literally gives you chills at these early hours. The no of safaris is restricted to around 15-20 at each gate. Due to Covid pandemic, every single safari was been thoroughly sanitized, and people were checked for their temperatures and mask were made compulsory and everything was noted in their registry along with the name and ticket number. It was really appreciable to see the discipline that is been followed for giving entry permits for each safari as well as individual (Kanha national park).

Last December, I visited the Madhya Pradesh for the 6th time and this time it was to Kanha National Park. I had already travelled to the other parks before and wasn't expecting more than the regular wildlife experience. But this place left me enchanted. The tribal village, the jungles, the people, the food, the art is something so intriguing that you wish to explore it more and more.

I have travelled to different wildlife sanctuaries across India and globally, but Kanha has a different vibe altogether. As we entered the park along with the first rays of sun, the forest started mesmerizing me. The first scene that welcomed me was the layer of fog floating upon the lake and grassland, a ray or two peeping out of the thick walls of trees and the quiescent landscape that totally left me spell bounded. With the rising sun, the movements started as the birds chirping and the animals coming out of their hideout to drink water and find food.

Kanha National Park is the host of the major animals (mammals) including the Barasingha or swamp deer (*Rucervus Duvaucelii*), Indian wild dog and the most famous Indian Tiger. Kanha is also home to several reptiles such as python, Indian cobra, Indian krait, fan throated lizard and Indian garden lizard. Moreover, giant danio, common rhabdora, mud perches, brown snakehead and green snakehead are the fish species that live in the national park.

Barasingha is known as the "Jewel of Kanha", as it is the place where this highly endangered species got saved and is now thriving well and has significantly seen a growth in their population. From just 66 of them in 1971 to around 800 of them in recent times, these beautiful creatures have seen revival through several decades of conservation work. Several initiatives such as eradicating weed, maintaining tall grasses and captive breeding have been carried out to see the successful habitation of them.

Kanha also homes another endangered animal called blackbuck. Blackbuck is an antelope species whose population had been declining since 1975. Furthermore, 2004 was the last time blackbuck was seen in Kanha. Because of this unfortunate event, Kanha decided to some animals into extensive areas of short grass with low density of shrubs and woody species since it would serve as a good rehabilitation sites for the blackbuck. 7000 blackbucks were translocated to Kanha and instead of releasing them into the wild, they were kept in an enclosure so they could be observed for any health problems. Thanks to this initiative, the blackbuck population is now thriving.

December been the breeding season for these animals, we could see their natural mating

behavior. Male Barasinghas were seen decorating their 12 antlers with weeds and leaves and creating special sounds to attract and impress females. In next 3 days and 6 safaris, I spotted 5 tigers, fox couples, Indian Gaur couple, wild boars, Blackbucks, black bear, owlets, eagles, lapwings, sandpipers, peacocks, Indian rollers and several monkeys. If you open your heart and ears, you will know that the forest speaks to you in its own magically language.

If this wilderness is not enough, then out there is an amazing village waiting for you. Around 155 villages are based in and around the buffer zone. These areas are inhabited by two major tribes of Gonds and Baigas. These tribes are also found in other parts of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and others. Most of these habitants are engaged in Agriculture, tendu leaves collection, along with traditional crafts of pottery, basket making, Gond paintings etc. Gond paintings are beautiful paintings depicting the wildlife with tiger, deers, trees, parrots, peacocks are their main characters. Gond peoples also create musical instruments. Whereas Baigas are known for their colorful beaded jewellery.

Both these tribes have extensive knowledge about the different types of tattoos and it is highly important in their culture. They prefer to eat kodo, kutki, paddy, jowar, wheat, corn and masoor. Pej is an important element in the food Men wear while women wear lugra and saree along with necklaces and ornaments made out of colorful beads and coins, silver and aluminum bracelets and armlets and bangles.

I had a chance to visit one such beautiful village as my resort was located in interiors of this village. The village was very clean and quite. The houses are made up of mud and painted with blue and white shades. The upper part is blue and bottom 2 ft is white and it signifies their devotion to lord Shiva. The house entrance is the important aspect of a home among these tribes. It signifies the reputation and wealth of the family. It has a huge door with the entire structure with roof on top. On the left and right side they have some spaces to keep their cattle and store the food grains. Bigger the door is wealthier the family. Inside from the flooring to the walls, ceilings, kitchen platform, storage cupboards, everything is made using wood and mud plasters and is well planned and designed.

I had an opportunity to visit one such home and meet a warm loving family. They were engaged in making Tendua leaves plates and Gond paintings for commercial use. The 4 days of stay was quite enriching not just for physical and mental rejuvenation but also for my awareness about

this community of Kanha. It was quite good to know that the place was self -sustainable and responsible in its own way towards the environment, people, and businesses.

Along with several initiatives of MP forest department, MP tourism department, Tribal department, many NGOs also play an important role in development and conservation of the tribes and animals. Together they have taken up initiatives to provide education, skill development training, employment opportunities to the younger generations. Tourism initiatives like Baiga Village tour and Baiga jewellery making workshops are highly appreciated by foreign tourists.

Several people have now been employed as wildlife safari drivers and guides. It is more remarkable that even women are now recruited on these jobs and do commendable work of spotting tigers, disseminating information about the forest, sharing legendary stories and providing a professional customer service.

Even the resorts have recruited women as Naturalists and Managers, who drive your around the park with equal enthusiasm. As we mention about resorts, there are about 10 standard resort, 8 deluxe, 6 luxury and 4 high end properties around various gates of Kanha.

I visited around 4 properties and it was good to know that they all promoted and practiced sustainable and eco-tourism. They were built using local and eco-friendly material, served local food, employed staff from local communities and extra care was taken to provide protection to wilderness. Activities on the resort were also based on concepts that would provide education and experience of the nature.

### **Suggestions:**

- As a destination, there can be further development by providing information centre to get more information on the available experiences in Kanha and villages, creating wayside amenities, introducing solar lights, toilets, better sanitization and waste management facilities, medical facilities, essential goods supply outlets, etc.
- Provision of restaurants and public spaces for the people who come for a day visit from neighboring cities.
- They can create an interpretation centre to learn more about the wildlife and tribes and more professionally planned and marketed tribal tours.

- But while we say it needs development, it is equally important for the stakeholders to keep in mind the sustainability of the local culture, environment and the people of the area.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the experience of been in Kanha was an extraordinary one. Being a tourism consultant, I can see that Kanha is a great example of a well-planned and management tourist destination and have a balance of commercial and cultural life. The sanctuary is well maintained and monitored to eliminate illegal practices of animal poaching and trade. It also takes adequate measures to protect and conserve the flora and fauna and practice responsible tourism among all the stakeholders of the tourism product (wildlife safaris). It is also good to know that the village population is well aware and educated and open for better opportunities of employment and skills. It is a place where one can visit not just for leisure and fun but also to learn the culture of the natives and observe the incredible ecosystem of the Kanha forest.

### **References:**

1. Kanha national park, [Online] last accessed on 26/04/2021 at: <https://www.kanha-national-park.com/>
2. Madhya Pradesh, [Online] last accessed on 26/04/2020 at: <https://mp.gov.in/>