

India Satpura Tiger Safari

19th - 26th March

Report by Paul McDougall

Tour participants Paul McDougall (photographic Guide) with 3 Touch the Wild clients

Summary

Satpura Tiger Reserve is a vast tranquil protected area within the Satpura Mountain range of Central India. This pristine Jungle has still retained nature's magical charm and wilderness areas like this are hard to find these days. Centuries of weathering has shaped this elevated highland into a rugged landscape adorned with sandstone peaks with stunning views, gorges and ravines, rivulets; waterfalls and streams that have nurtured these dense jungles.

Satpura Tiger Reserve is a prime example of the central Indian highlands eco-system and with an area of 2133.307 square km, it is one of the major geographical plateaus in India and part of the Deccan bio-geographic zone of India. The reserve lies in the Narmadapuram district of Madhya Pradesh. It's a unique area of high natural and diverse land resource values and is gifted with rich bio-diversity, having many rare and endemic plants and animals. Another unique combination which can be seen only here in Satpura is that on Pachmarhi plateau - part Sal forests exist on Gondwana sandstone whereas on lower plain areas of the reserve teak forests grow on basaltic traps. It is also interesting to note that some species, which are not common elsewhere in Madhya Pradesh are found in this area.

Satpura, is considered as the inspiration of the magical forest of the Jungle Book. The word Satpura is derived from Sanskrit which basically means "Seven Folds" or "Seven hills", it forms a watershed between the Narmada and Tapti Rivers from Central India which is triangular in shape. Comprising of Bori Sanctuary, Satpura is one of the oldest forest reserves with a well-established tradition of scientific management of forests.

In addition to Biological, Satpura also has a huge Archaeological significance considering more than 50 rock shelters with painting that are 1500 to 10,000 years old are found within its boundaries. Satpura Tiger Reserve stands out by its magnificent natural beauty and the famous Pachmari town, the only designated hill station of Madhya Pradesh which is famous for its picturesque locations, also falls within the reserve. Its unique geographical formations, dense forests, waterfalls, distinguished flora and fauna, rock shelters depicting ancient cultural heritage, pilgrim sites, colonial buildings and tribal culture make it one of the most unique wildlife destinations in India.

There are 52 species of mammals, 300 species of birds and 31 species of reptiles all found in the reserve.

The mammal highlights include Tiger, Leopard, Gaur, Sambar, Spotted Deer, Barking deer, Chausingha, Chinkara, Nilgai, Wild boar, Sloth bear, and Wild Dog (Dhole). The small carnivores include Jungle cat, Palm civet and small Indian civet. There are two important arboreal mammals: the Indian Giant squirrel and the large brown flying squirrel.

In the past I have always done my Tiger Safaris in Bandhavgarh or Ranthambhore. They have always been hugely successful with tiger sightings, but part of my wildlife tours is a focus on the experience that guests get and unfortunately over the last few years the experience has not

been great with lots of vehicles around the tigers and inconsiderate guides and drivers that just drive in front of you when you are photographing a tiger. The guests on this trip when they contacted me asked whether there was a way of seeing tigers without the high numbers of vehicles. I discussed it with my Indian friend who I work with on these trips and he suggested Satpura. As you will see through reading this report Satpura delivered on everything, fantastic tiger sightings including the best tiger experience I have ever had and low vehicle numbers. It was an amazing tour packed full of photo opportunities.

We stayed at Denwa Backwaters Escape, which is an eco-luxury, wildlife resort in Satpura National Park. This idyllic getaway is nestled in the densely forested land of Madhai, along the backwaters of the meandering Denwa River. Built on 10 acres of lush forest cover; the eco-luxury wildlife resort offers stunning views of the Denwa River, the rolling Pachmarhi hills and rolling grasslands of Satpura.

Our forested estate is gifted with an undulating landscape, a versatile set of flora and fauna that includes in-house wildlife residents, water bodies and a robust set of cottages and tree houses with unhindered, expansive views. The Denwa Backwater Escape is a quaint jungle eco-luxury resort that is single-use plastic free. Built in contemporary safari style design, the lodge uses local and sustainable material like stone, baked tiles, even recycled old furniture, including wooden railway sleepers.

There are only 10 rooms made up of 8 cottages and 2 tree house rooms. This meant that it never felt busy and was a wonderful base to explore and enjoy Satpura.

Our 7 nights here were extremely successful with several tiger sightings and numerous photographic opportunities. We also saw and photographed several other different species in some of the most spectacular locations that I have ever seen.



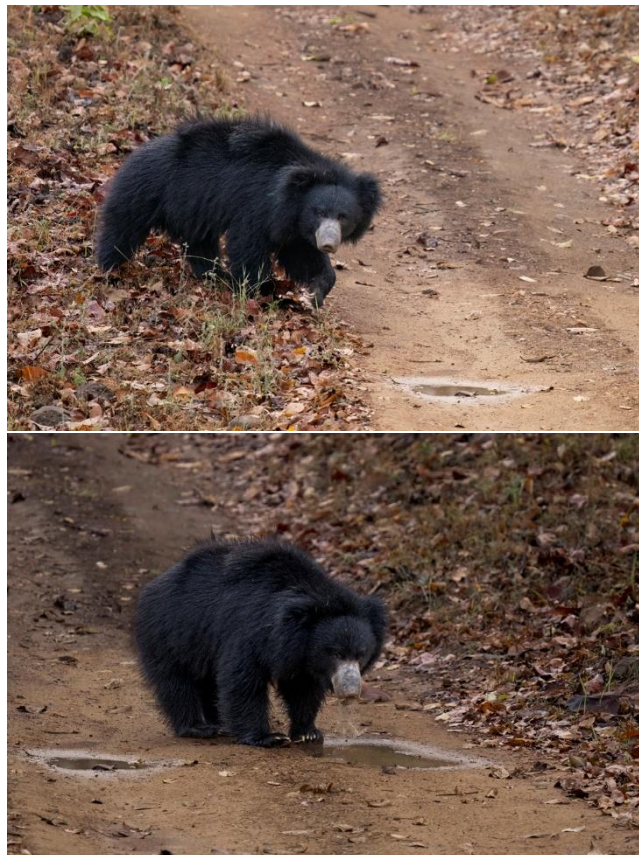
Day 1 Thursday 19th March

Thursday was a travel day as my guests had previously been on my Fishing Cat Tour we all travelled together. It was an early start leaving at 3am for our 7am flight from Kolkata to Delhi and then our flight from Delhi to Bhopal and then it was a 3 hour journey by car to Satpura. No activity was planned for this day, and we arrived at our lodge Denwa Backwaters Escape at around 4pm. There was no activity planned for this day and everyone was relieved to have time to unpack and relax before an early start the next day. I caught up on admin emails and some work. My guests relaxed and one enjoyed the pool. It was extremely hot here 35 degrees and the pool and the air conditioning were welcome breaks from the high temperatures.

We had a delicious traditional dinner and slept early ready for the next day.

Day 2 Friday 20th March

Today we were doing a morning and afternoon safari with a break in between. It had rained heavily the night before and I was hopeful that this would mean that things would be more active. It would also minimise the dust from the road and hopefully cool everything down. We met at 5:30am for tea and coffee and then left for the reserve. Satpura is unique in the fact that you get a boat across to the main reserve entry gate. So after getting dropped off at the boats we made our way across the river and walked the short distance to our vehicles at the main gate. We climbed in to the vehicles with 2 of the guests going with Shantanu and 1 coming with me for one-to-one photography tuition and support. Unlike a lot of photo safaris I only ever have 2 photographers in a vehicle and that set up has always worked well even if it does make the cost higher. We set off into the reserve. We had only been driving for a few minutes marvelling at the landscape and the beautiful colours of the forest when the other vehicle which was in front of us stopped. There was a sloth bear. WOW Sloth bear on the first drive on the first day. Usually in my experience bears have a habit of disappearing in to the forest quite quickly. But not this bear it walked towards us and kept coming before stopping in the middle of the road to drink from a puddle. It then looked up and gazed straight at us with water dripping from its chin. It then made its way back in to the forest taking advantage of the wet softer ground to more easily dig and forage for food. Everyone was understandably excited and everyone got some great images of the bear. A brilliant start to Satpura. We continued on our safari and came to an area in the forest where we stopped and listened as the langur monkeys were making alarm calls. This is one of the signs that the guides listen for as it usually means a leopard or tiger is around. After a while the langur stopped calling and continued to eat the leaves from the tree.

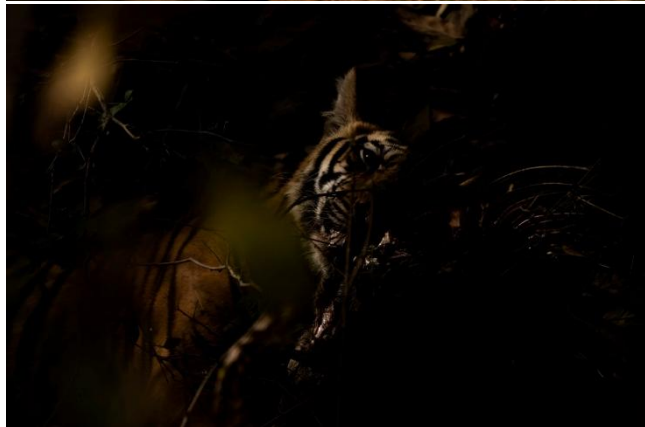




We continued on our drive and approached an area where there were a few vehicles. The maximum allowed in Satpura is 12 and most were in this area. We were told by our guide that there was a tigress known as Firebreak with her 4 cubs laying in the bushes. We saw the mother and then sat and watched as one by one the cubs moved in the bushes. Clear images were hard as the undergrowth was particularly thick but we all got some images and these images really help with telling the story of where the tiger lives. The light was superb penetrating through the overhead branches creating patches of sunlight. The tigers also had a sambar kill and we caught glimpses of them feeding on the carcass and moving it around. I helped both vehicles with settings, especially the focus and exposure settings and everyone got some images. We stayed there for as long as we could for the rest of the morning and soon the tigers disappeared in to the undergrowth we then went for a late breakfast at one of the rest areas and then when it was time to leave we made our way out of the reserve. I think this is the only time in 15 years of photographing tigers that I have seen a sloth bear and a tiger on the same drive and it is also the first time I had ever seen 5 tigers together. What an incredible start to our time in Satpura.







We returned to our lodge. The group went and had lunch which I skipped as I had a lot of work to catch up on. The afternoon was relaxing and then at 2:30pm we met to return to the reserve. We decided to go straight to where the tigers were. They were not there so the other vehicle set off to search for them whilst we waited to see whether we could see any movement in the bushes. Then we noticed the tigress walking through the forest. She stopped by the side of the road, paused for a while looking straight at us, then she called her cubs. The cubs started to appear from the other side of the roads. The mother crossed the road and the cubs ran to greet her, another incredible sighting and we were the only vehicle. The mother sat and groomed the cubs and they all then dispersed in to the forest. We could still see them at a distance but they were only occasionally visible. The other vehicle came back and we both took up different positions to see if they would come back out. After a while they came towards the carcass. We couldn't get anything great photographically from our position but that was ok, the other vehicle had better views and got some images of one of the cubs laying in the open. It was soon time to

leave and we left the reserve all very happy with our first day and the wonderful experiences that we shared with the tigers and the bear.







We had a lovely meal that evening and although everyone was tired you could still feel the excitement in the air. We slept early ready for what tomorrow would bring.

Day 3 Saturday 21st March

Today was our first full day drive. I always try to include several full day permits in my tours as it gives us the freedom to avoid any zone restrictions and go any where in the reserve. It also means we don't have to exit the reserve and so if we do see a tiger we can stay with it rather than leaving. They are expensive but in my opinion they are worth every penny. We started the morning photographing the Spotted Deer in the lovely pre-dawn blue light. We then started our tiger search but had no luck finding Firebreak and her cubs. We continued deeper into the reserve where we could only go with the full day permits. We came across a herd of Gaur in amazing light, these animals are like large buffalo but have beautiful markings and colours in the right light. We had the added bonus of seeing a very young calf that was only a few days old. We carried on driving and stopped for breakfast at one of the forest guard rest areas. Over breakfast we photographed the Asian Green Bee-eaters which provided lots of entertainment.

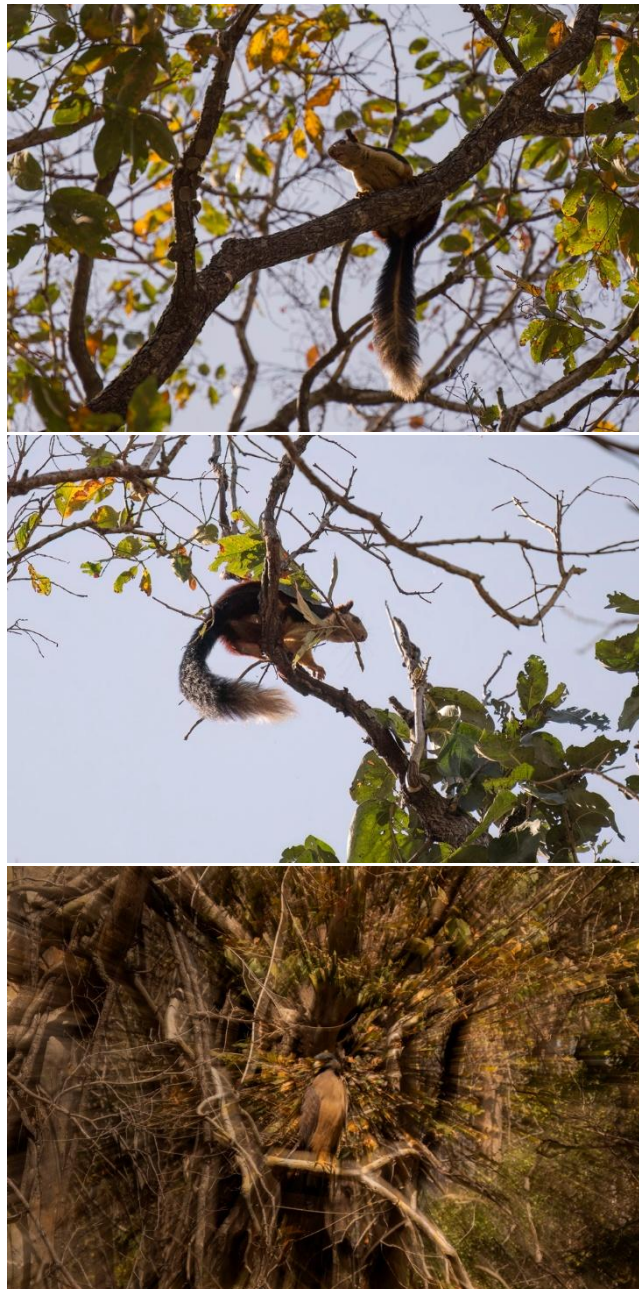






We then continued our drive and whilst driving under some large trees our guide shouted squirrel. Now usually this would generate minimum excitement in me but in Satpura there are Giant Squirrels that are the most beautiful colours. This was a species that I had never seen before and was desperate to see. The light was not the best for photography but the squirrel was nest building so we watched it for ages coming down the tree and using its sharp teeth to cut a suitable branch before carrying it back up the tree to its nest. It was an amazing sighting. We then saw a Crested Serpent Eagle which was a nice find. They are quite common in Satpura but it was still a nice sighting for everyone. We eventually arrived at our rest stop where we were due to have lunch. In this location you can stay in the reserve but the facilities are quite basic. However we were given 2 rooms to use for toilets and were even told we could relax in the rooms or sleep if we wanted to. We all sat outside whilst lunch was being prepared and watched the macaque monkeys, another species to add to our portfolio. The light was good and this group had babies and were very active so it made for some nice images. After lunch we went for a walk to look for some more squirrels and then were allowed to go and see one of the working

elephants that the forest guards use for their patrols. The elephant as lovely and as none of my guests had ever seen an Asian elephant it was a nice experience for them. We were all keen to get going again, but after more tea and coffee we finally got going again. On the way back the other vehicle stopped and we quickly identified that they had seen something on closer observation it was a Dhole or Indian Wild Dog. With these you usually have to be quick as they run off, but this one stood in a patch of sunlight for us allowing everyone to get some amazing images. We spent quite a while with it before it made its way back in to the forest. I had never photographed these animals before so it was another first for me. On our long drive back we came across a Changeable Hawk Eagle sat in a tree eating a bird of some kind and also had a nice sighting of a male Nilgai Antelope. At the end of the drive just as we were exiting the gate we saw another Sloth Bear, but it was distant and the light was poor so we continued on our way.











We returned to our lodge and had another delicious meal and slept early.

Day 4 Sunday 22nd March

We had been so lucky on the previous 2 days. Surely that luck could not continue today. We decided to try and go further in to the reserve as there was another tigress with 3 cubs and another one with 5 cubs. So we started our journey. We found a herd of Gaur early on and got some lovely images of them in nice light. We then found another Giant Squirrel. The rest of the morning was largely uneventful with a few birds. Then late morning we came across a tiger laying in some long grass quite a distance from the road. This tiger is another female known as Karnika. We positioned ourselves near an area of water and hoped that she would come and drink. We waited for some time before deciding to go for a late breakfast/early lunch combined. We returned to the tiger and she was still sat there. After a while she got up and instead of walking towards us walked away through the long grass. We spent the rest of the afternoon listening for alarm calls and searching the area with no luck. We started our return to the main gate and again it was a quiet drive. Unfortunately this can sometimes be the case with tigers a lot of waiting and searching without the end result. But after the last 2 days nobody could really complain and everyone still managed to get a few images of the tigress.



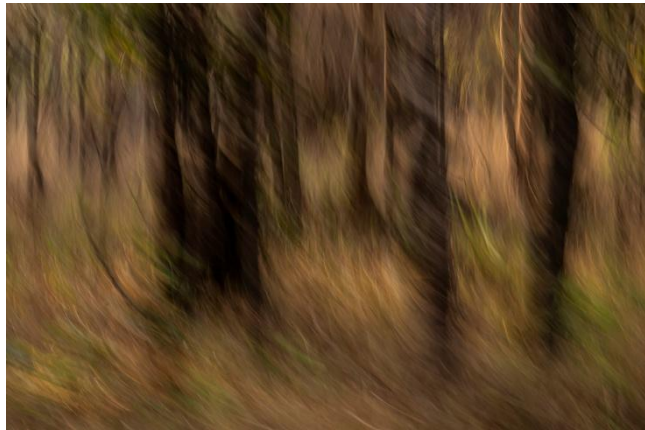
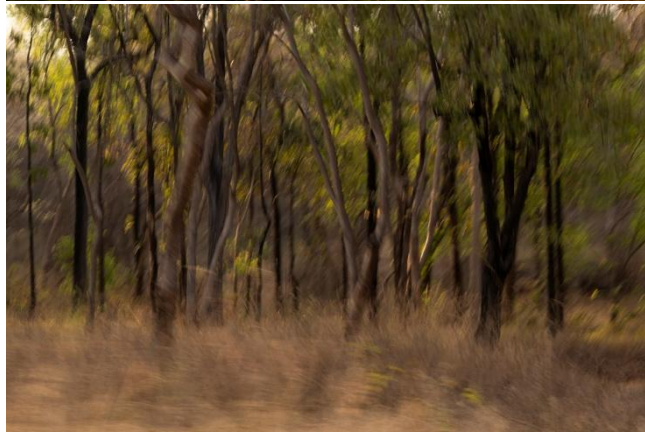
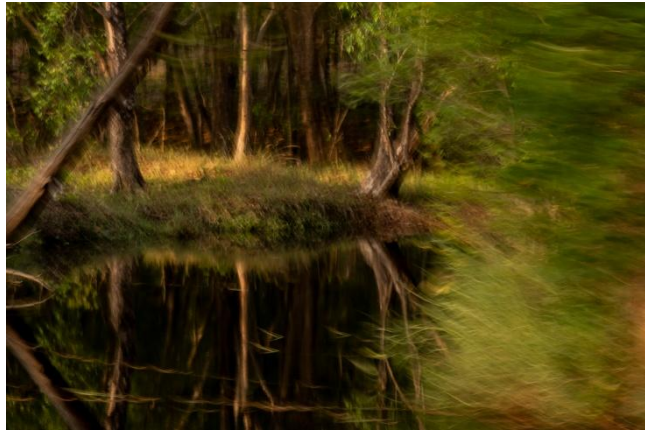


We returned to the lodge for another lovely meal and then slept early.

Day 5 Monday 23rd March

Today was another full day. We decided to do the same plan as the previous day. Firebreak had not been seen for a few days so we all decided to focus on trying to find the tigress with the 5 cubs so we drove straight there. It was quite a long drive. One of my guests was interested in ICM and Motion blur images so we focused on that during the morning and used a technique I call vehicle panning where you select a slow shutter speed and take images as you are driving, the irregular motion of the vehicle on some of the roads can create some quite interesting images and effects and that is what happened. These images are not for everyone but it is another different technique that I teach and I was happy to have someone so enthusiastic about learning. We met some vehicles at the far side of the reserve who had seen the tigress in the morning crossing the road, but nobody had seen the cubs or her since. We had breakfast at a forest guard rest area. Then after breakfast we spent another hour searching for the tigress and the cubs, she wasn't in any of her usual favourite places so we decided to head back and look for the other tigress with 3 cubs. We arrived back in this area and met another vehicle who told us that they had seen the tigress walk over to a spotted deer carcass by a lake and drag it in to the bushes for the cubs to eat. The deer had been killed by wild dog and there wasn't much left of it so we spent the whole of the afternoon sat by the lake hoping that's she would come out. We had a brief break for lunch but soon returned to wait. Whilst we were waiting there was plenty of birds to photograph and a mongoose. But sadly no tiger. We gave up and drove back. We didn't see anything of note on our way back until we got to near the entrance gate, and there was another Sloth Bear. The light was fading fast but we got a few images of the bear as it was foraging for food. After a while the bear made a bee-line for a tree with some flowers on it, and we watched in amazement as it stood on its back legs to pull the flowers off the branches, it did

this twice and although photographically it wasn't a good sighting, for behaviour and observation it was fantastic. A great end to a frustrating day.











We exited the reserve and returned to our lodge where we had dinner and then slept early.

Day 6 Tuesday 24th March

I had spoken to the guides the night before and we all agreed that the trip had been good with some amazing sightings but that we needed to try and get one more tiger sighting to make the trip even better. Everyone had worked so hard but we just didn't have the luck that the time and effort deserved. We also hadn't really seen the advantage of the full day permits, they had shown us areas of the reserve that we couldn't see without them but hadn't massively benefited us in the way of tigers. Little did we know that all that was going to change today.

We decided to use the advantage of the full day permits and enter the reserve earlier so we could be the first vehicles in and pick up any tracks on the road. We soon picked up tracks of a tiger and then tracks of 4 tigers, the 2 sets of tracks then joined at a point and you could see the marks of where they had all led in the road. Wow these were fresh tracks and so we held our breath as we watched in amazement as our guides and drivers worked out what the tracks were telling us. They all agreed that at the point the tracks disappeared that they thought the tiger family would be going to a specific location so we went to look for them, unfortunately we couldn't find them so we made our way back to where we lost the tracks, there was another vehicle there who had seen the tigers appear in a gap through some trees, not a clear view but they were there so we waited. Every so often you would see a head appear and then another one. We waited and hoped that they would come out and then Firebreak appeared and led her cubs out of the trees. What happened next was simply incredible. The family walked up the slight hill in the open and sat down metres from us and all groomed each other, the scene was incredible with the mountains in the background and the tigers interacting. They then continued on to an area of water and they all started to drink, the cubs then entered the water and swam. It was so amazing to see this. The whole family entered the water and crossed to the other side with one cub staying a bit behind the others.















We then moved position and set off towards the bridge that crossed the water. This was the boundary for the other zone. This is where the full day permits proved their worth. We were able to follow the tigers whilst the other vehicles had to stay at the bridge. Our guides wanted to get ahead of the tigers before they came out of the long grass, the hope was that they would walk along the road. We were the only 2 vehicles and what followed for the next 2 hours was incredible with both guides and drivers working together to always position us with a clear view of the tigress and cubs walking along the road. We had them on the road for ages and every so often they would go off road and cut a corner and then rejoin the road, as they walked they walked through several different habitats and so the different images possible was amazing.

Eventually they all stopped in the middle of the road to have a rest. The cubs all greeted their mother and then the whole family led down. They stayed there for a while and it really was one of those special wildlife moments that are so rare. 5 tigers with no vehicles, just us, the tigers and the forest, it was silent apart from the noises the tigers made and it was absolutely incredible.

The tigers then continued their walk. We stayed with them for a bit longer as they really were not bothered at all that we were there. We eventually left them and went to have breakfast. It was such an amazing sighting and it was a privilege to share it with my wonderful guests. People could come to India for 10 years and not have a sighting like that and when you break the sighting down there was probably the equivalent of 7 fantastic tiger sightings all rolled in to one amazing moment.

















After breakfast we went to see if we could find any of the other tigers that had eluded us over the previous days. We based ourselves at the lake area again and there was another kill in the water, apparently killed again by wild dog. We would search the area and then return. We did this

continuously up until lunch. Then after lunch whilst searching we came across another Wild Dog. It was not as visible as the last one but was still a special sighting. We also found another Giant Squirrel in a much lower position with beautiful light which was a fantastic sighting. With no signs of tigers we decided to go back and see if we could find Firebrand and her cubs. We were driving along and rounded the corner and there was a tiger in the middle of the road, we quickly stopped and positioned ourselves, this was Macchli the mother of the 3 cubs. The cubs were nowhere to be seen, but she stayed in the road adjusting position every so often, but very comfortable with us a few metres away. It was a brilliant opportunity to get some portrait shots and the whole group focused on this, at one point she yawned giving us another brilliant photo opportunity. Amazingly there was also a giant squirrel in a tree above the tiger. It was being very careful not to make any mistakes whilst negotiating the branches and making its way over the top of the tiger. Another opportunity for some squirrel images, After a while we became aware of a herd of Gaur approaching behind us. Macchli became more alert and focused on them her whole demeanour changed, she was now in hunting mode. After what seemed like a few minutes she started stalking. Wow were we going to see a hunt as well? – she had spotted a Gaur calf and had it in her sights and took off after the Gaur, unfortunately for her and fortunately for the Gaur she missed and was unable to make the kill. It was brilliant to see her stalk and chase. Another superb tiger sighting. We left her to it and continued on our way, we soon came across another Sloth Bear. This one was walking along a log and was quite distant. We managed a few shots but nothing better than previous sightings. The rest of the journey was uneventful but after the day we had we probably needed a break.











We returned to the lodge and had dinner and slept early.

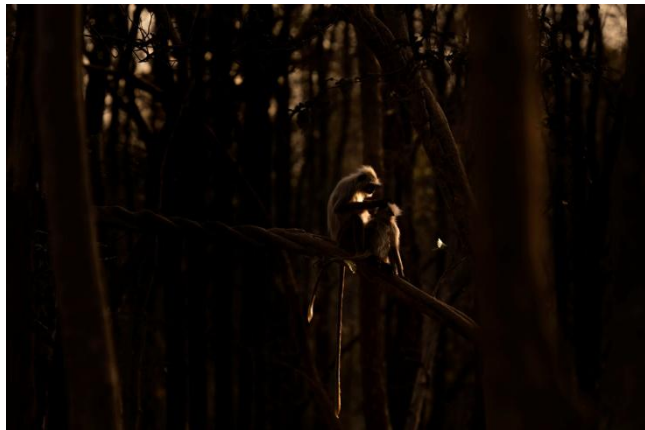
Day 7 Wednesday 25th March

Today we had a morning drive scheduled and then a night drive. Unfortunately a couple of weeks before we got to Satpura they had banned night drives, so this meant we couldn't do it and on Wednesday all reserves in Madhya Pradesh are closed in the afternoon so we arranged an afternoon drive in the buffer zone primarily to look for leopard.

After discussions with the group the night before the decision was to focus on the smaller less headline wildlife to help them add to their portfolio, so we set off in search of deer, monkeys and whatever else we could find. I used this as opportunity to cover different types of light and how to maximise each sighting and over the morning we took some wonderful images of backlit langur monkeys. Spotted deer, gaur and sambar and also lots of birds. It was nice to have a slower pace and focus on something a little different. We had a later breakfast and then returned to the lodge for lunch. We had several hours today to relax and pack for leaving tomorrow









We left for our buffer zone drive at 4pm. On the way we saw an owlet peaking out of its nest hole in a tree. We entered the buffer zone and the place has massive potential, we saw fresh Sloth Bear droppings, Tiger Prints and heard some alarm calls but in terms of sightings and images not that much. We made our way down to the river where we photographed some of the birds, it was a good opportunity to practice panning as the backgrounds here were superb. As we were leaving the buffer zone we heard that a tiger had been seen, we went to see if we could see it but shortly gave up as it was getting late and we needed to exit. We returned to the lodge and had one last meal together, we discussed highlights and memories of the trip and then went to sleep.



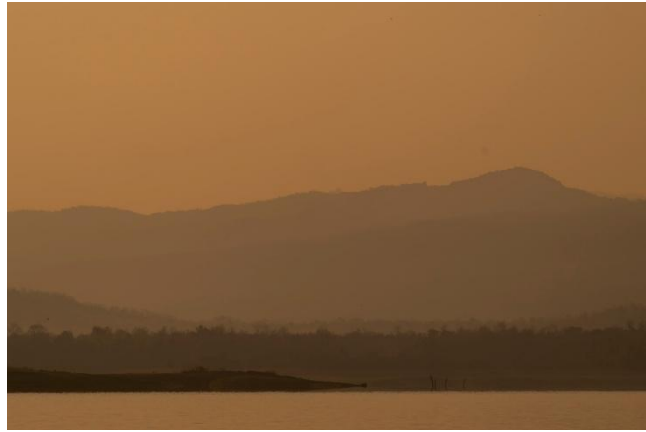


Day 8 Thursday 26th March

Scheduled for the last morning was a boat trip along the Denwa River. We left the lodge at 6:45am and made our way down to the boat. We boarded the boat and set off. If you are really lucky you can see tigers on these boat trips but we were just happy to enjoy the numerous birds. We were able to get some lovely images of the Asian Thick Knee, herons, Egret Kingfisher and Pratincole. It was also a great opportunity to take some landscape images of the Satpura Reserve which would definitely add to our portfolios. The highlight of the trip was when we came across a River Tern colony and we got some amazing images of them in flight and chasing each other. The boat trip only lasts for an hour so we returned to the lodge. We said our goodbyes as Shantanu and myself were leaving for an earlier flight to Delhi whilst my 3 guests were flying to Mumbai which was a consequence of them having to change their flights home. We thanked our amazing guides and drivers and then parted ways. We left at 9am and my guests left later and stopped off at the rock paintings on the way back to Bhopal.







Overall the trip was a huge success. Satpura perhaps does not offer the high volume of tiger sightings like some of the other better known Tiger Reserves, but it offers an incredible location for photography, an amazing mix of diverse species and as we found when you do get a tiger

encounter it tends to be a pretty special one. I will now run all of my tiger tours here as I would rather have less sightings with less vehicles than the higher number of sightings with crazy numbers of vehicles. All of my guests came away with some wonderful images, showing a range of techniques and capturing a large range of species, and of course they also have some of the best tiger images anyone could ever wish for.

Satpura really is a photographers dream and a location that I really look forward to returning to year after year.

