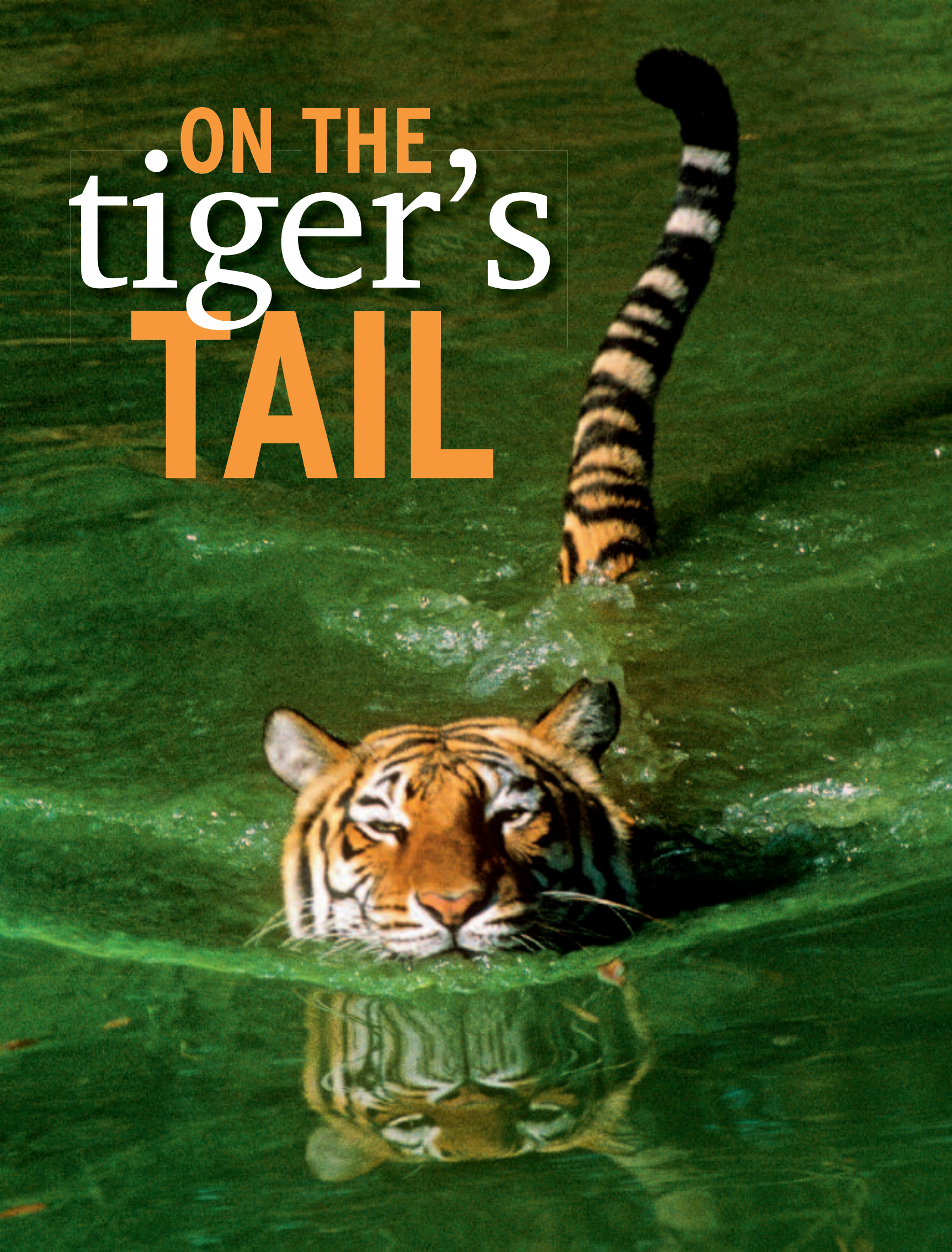




ON THE tiger's TAIL

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TRIP REPORT **BARDIA, NEPAL**

W

e stood right at the top of Tiger Tower, peering over to Terrible Island. The slightly wobbly wooden construction, some 15 metres high, was swaying a little in the wind but, focusing intently on the other side of the river, I was too preoccupied to care.

The observation tower offers one of the best vantage points for seeing tigers in Bardia National Park in remote western Nepal, with broad vistas spanning far across flat grasslands and the Geruwa River below. Terrible Island, to the north, is allegedly home to several tigers but its grasses are so tall and its vegetation so dense that our guide Santa said it was too frightening to visit. We knew tigers were around – a ranger had seen fresh prints that morning, heading in the island's direction. And as we arrived at the tower, we'd smelt the strong, bitter aroma of urine. "That's a tiger marking his territory," said Santa.

I peered and peered until my eyes hurt, waiting silently. Then, shattering the silence, a deer gave a single, urgent bark, its alarm call. "Bahg!" Santa whispered. "Tiger!" We followed him, hurrying along the path towards Terrible Island. This time, sadly, the tiger had eluded us. By the time we got to the clearing where they often cross the river, all was quiet. The tiger had clearly gone elsewhere for its supper.

The chances of seeing tigers here have improved over recent years. First listed as a protected hunting forest in 1969, Bardia became a national park in 1988, but suffered terribly during Nepal's Maoist Insurgency from 1996 to 2006. A huge increase in poaching saw tiger numbers plummet from around 80 before the

Left: tigers like this Bengal tiger are strong swimmers and can even catch prey while in the water. Above: elephants cross the Karnali river

The Bengal tigers of Bardia National Park are not the only attraction in this remote, western region of Nepal. As **Sue Watt** discovers, there are plenty of other rarities here too, from rhinos to sloth bears





With riverine and hardwood sal forests and open grasslands, Bardia is a beautiful, peaceful wilderness

insurgency to just 18 in 2009. When the Maoists won the historic elections in 2008, peace brought a renewed commitment to tiger conservation. As more patrols and army personnel became engaged in protecting Bardia once more, tiger numbers doubled: a count in 2011 identified 37 individuals here and researchers are optimistic that number is now higher.

With riverine and hardwood sal forests (narrow, straight trees similar to teak) and open grasslands called *phanta*, Bardia is a beautiful, peaceful wilderness covering 968 square kilometres. Home to over 50 different species of mammal, it also attracts around 400 bird species. We stayed for two days at the Forest Hideaway Hotel in Thakurdwara village outside the park, where 13 simple thatched cottages are scattered around pretty gardens, and where the guides are friendly and care passionately about their wildlife.

Walking safaris offer the best opportunities to see tigers here and as we strolled through grassland on our first day, we passed several groups of spotted deer

grazing in the sun, while langur monkeys swung through trees, shaking branches to scare us off. Often seen together, they collaborate when tigers prowl, the monkeys providing high lookout positions and good vision and the deer contributing their excellent sense of smell. As we walked we saw signs that tigers had walked here before us – paw prints in the sand, some poo with clumps of hair in it, and dried blood from a kill near tall elephant grasses – all of which left me feeling vulnerable and exposed.

“This is the best place to see them,” Santa told us as we approached the grassy clearing opposite Terrible Island. “They cross the river from the island to hunt in the early morning, so we’ll just sit and wait quietly for a while.” Like a langur monkey, he climbed nimbly to the top of a tree for the best look-out position.

Nature carried on as normal while we waited. Eight young otters swam silently past as we watched their mum fighting an eel on a sandbank. Two marsh mugger crocodiles lazed on the opposite shore; a white-throated

Clockwise from here: black buck antelope; a view of Bardia on a game drive; a river otter catches an eel for dinner



kingfisher with vivid blue wings darted across the still, greenish water; deer grazed and monkeys bathed nearby. We stayed for around three hours; waiting around for tigers is something you get used to in Bardia, and it brings with it a sense of peace and calmness tinged with anticipation. Sometimes, the waiting pays off. Santa told us how he’d once waited for four hours further upstream. Just as he and his guests were leaving, a tiger emerged from the grasses opposite accompanied by four little cubs, playing and lapping at the water for 20 minutes.

Nepal is the Cinderella of the tiger world. Small, modest and undeniably beautiful, its national parks receive far fewer visitors than India’s. Yet it shares a belt of land called the Terai Arc Landscape with its bigger, brasher sister nation. The region spreads over 49,000 square kilometres, encompassing 11 protected areas in northern India and southern Nepal, including India’s famous Jim Corbett National Park and Nepal’s Chitwan and Bardia National Parks. Home to some 500 Royal

RESIDENT RARITIES

Five more animals you’ll cross your fingers to see when in Bardia National Park

ASIAN ELEPHANT

Elephas maximus

Although domesticated elephants are common in Bardia, and used to ferry rangers, tourists and researchers about, endangered wild elephants are less frequently seen. Smaller than their African cousins, with a brownish hide and pink tips on the ears, it’s believed that there are around 80 here (which made our sighting of a herd of 35 particularly unusual).

SLOTH BEAR

Melursus ursinus

Don’t be fooled by the name – these shaggy nocturnal bears can climb trees, swim and run faster than humans. Classed as vulnerable, they have a year-round food supply of ants and termites and so never need to hibernate. They can be particularly aggressive if you come across a mother with cubs and are also renowned for being vocal when eating and mating.

GANGETIC DOLPHIN

Platanista gangetica

These endangered freshwater dolphins are sometimes seen in the Karnali river, but their numbers are decreasing due to dolphin-unfriendly fishing practices, lower water levels and poaching. With wonky teeth and pointed noses, they are almost blind, using sonar to navigate and find food. Unusually for dolphins, they swim on their sides.

BENGAL FLORICAN

Houbaropsis bengalensis

Birders would be in raptures if they saw one of these; among the rarest bustards in the world. Critically endangered due to loss of habitat and poaching, around 1,000 still survive, with just 100 in Nepal. Males have striking black and white plumage, are about 70cm high and perform dazzling courtship displays, diving and strutting to impress the ladies.

GHARIAL

Gavialis gangeticus

These strange crocodiles are critically endangered: around 2,000 remain in the world. Males have a long, thin snout adorned with a bulb on its end, and can grow to three metres in length. Sometimes seen in the Karnali river, these crocs are thankfully not man-eaters. Their numbers are increasing thanks to a breeding centre near the park HQ.



Bengal tigers, the World Wildlife Fund for Nature believes this to be one of the densest tiger concentrations on earth. With the world population estimated to be only around 3,000 in India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, tiger conservation in the Terai is critical to their survival.

Both India and Nepal have committed to WWF's 'Save Tigers Now TX2' campaign, headed by Leonardo di Caprio, aiming to double their tiger populations by 2022, the next Year of the Tiger. Both governments are working with WWF to conduct the first ever simultaneous count across the Terai region, using camera traps to identify individual animals, ensuring that if tigers cross borders, they will only be counted once. That count coincided with our visit to Bardia.

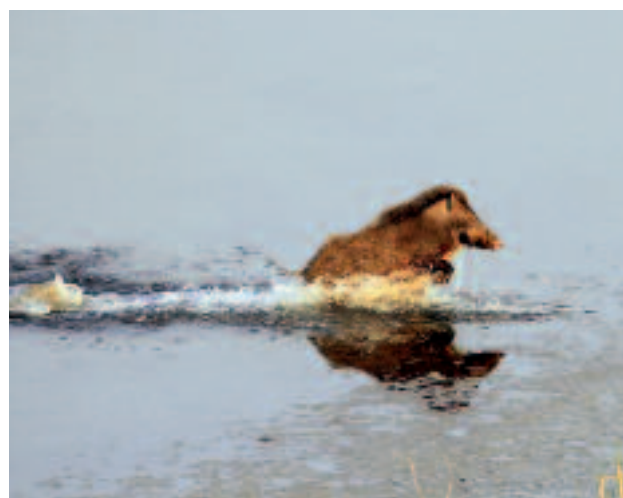
The morning after our three hour wait, we met two count researchers on elephant-back, who told us they'd just caught images of a tiger on camera traps two kilometres from our hotel. Not only that, they'd also seen a tiger an hour before, and said it had looked like it might attack them. Although very rare, it's not unknown for tigers to leap up at elephants but this one had disappeared into the grasses instead, and I felt relieved it had been them, not us, who'd seen it.

Elephant rides gave a different perspective to life in the Terai. We wondered whether our 64 year-old pachyderm transport might falter as she slid along the mud into the river, but she knew what she was doing. Lurching from side to side through the morning mist, with the smell of curry plants being crushed underfoot, crocodiles lying nearby simply ignored us and in the forest, deer stared but didn't scurry away.

Intended to explore more far-flung corners of Bardia, game drives aren't expected to result in tiger sightings because of engine noise. But Santa had another tale to tell. Three weeks ago, one curious tiger had followed his jeep for three kilometres, disappearing into the forest whenever the jeep stopped and returning to pursue it when it moved again. That afternoon, throughout our game drive, I kept looking back just in case the stalking tiger had reappeared. We drove through serene, green forests dotted with hundreds of termite mounds, frolicking deer, mischievous monkeys and wary wild boar. Peacocks strutted away as we drove past and on the steep banks of the Geruwa river we watched a domesticated elephant bathing in its deep blue waters. "I wish we'd planned more days here," fellow guest Sarita told me. "I didn't realise it was so beautiful and peaceful."

Pythons seem to find it peaceful here too. Walking near the river, our guide motioned to us to tread softly, leading us to a wide sandy pit with holes in its walls, like a warren. There, coiled and oblivious, lay two enormous →

Lurching from side to side through the morning mist, crocodiles lying nearby simply ignored us



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Clockwise from top left: early morning ride; the roar of a Bengal can be heard 3km away; rhesus macaque; wild boar; marsh crocodiles on the banks of the River Lapwing; Thakurdwara village on the outskirts of Bardia



Clockwise from above: adult and juvenile greater one-horned rhinos; two entangled Asiatic rock pythons; mother and baby Nepal grey langurs

It was a rhino, standing perfectly still like a statue made of rock

Asiatic rock pythons. The biggest one was around 50 years-old, three to four metres long and had a body as wide as a man’s thigh. We stared, in horror and awe, until they woke and slithered into their den.

Tigers aren’t the only rare animal to be resident in Bardia. Walking into the forest, we saw a shadow among the trees. It was a rhino, standing perfectly still like a statue made of rock. “He looks like he’s dozing,” Santa whispered. A young male, around 12 years old, he remained motionless until we left. Once locally extinct, one-horned rhinos were reintroduced here from Chitwan National Park during the late 1980s. In 2000, the Park was home to 67 rhinos but by 2008, poaching during the insurgency had left only 22 alive. Today, there are believed to be around 30, but they remain as vulnerable as tigers and extremely elusive.

Back in the jeep, a call on the radio prompted the driver to dash back to Tiger Tower. Rushing to the top, we didn’t know what awaited us. Just across the river, we saw not a tiger but a rhino and her calf grazing peacefully, the baby only just visible among the tall golden grasses. It was a privileged sighting. The tigers may have eluded us but watching these precious animals as the sun set over Bardia was just as special. **WT**

TRIP ADVISER

COST RATING ★★☆☆☆
SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR: Sue travelled with Swiss Nepal Family Trekking & Expeditions (based in Kathmandu), which offers a 3-night, 4-day tour of Bardia for \$850 (about £550), staying at Forest Hideaway Hotel and including park fees, full board accommodation, game drives, elephant rides, walking safaris and a village visit. Return flights from Kathmandu to Nepalgunj and vehicle transfers to and from the lodge are also included in the price. Swiss Nepal Family Trekking & Expeditions (www.trekking-in-nepal.net).
GETTING THERE: Sue flew with British Airways (www.ba.com) via Delhi, which has daily flights connecting with Jet Airways to Kathmandu, from £768 return. There are several daily flights from Kathmandu to Nepalgunj, taking an hour,

while the transfer to Bardia National Park from the airport takes around two hours.
VISA REQUIREMENTS FROM THE UK: British citizens need a visa for Nepal. A 30-day visa is available on arrival (\$40 or around £25) or for £35 from the Nepal Embassy in London (020 7229 1594; www.nepembassy.org.uk).
TIPS & WARNINGS: Bardia has plenty of mosquitos around the monsoon time from July – September so take prophylaxis, deet and light, long-sleeved clothing if visiting then. A village visit to meet the local Tharu people and experience their culture is highly recommended, giving you the chance to see the human side to life in the jungle.
WHEN TO GO: Rains during the monsoon can make some of the roads impassable and so is best avoided. The best times to visit are between October and April.

TOUR OPERATORS

- **SWISS NEPAL FAMILY TREKKING & EXPEDITIONS,** Tel: +977 1 421 2911; www.trekking-in-nepal.net
- **IMAGINE INDIA,** Tel: 020 7622 5120; www.imagineindia.co.uk
- **COX & KINGS,** Tel: 0845 564 8307; www.coxandkings.co.uk

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