



AN IMMERSIVE, NATURE- FORWARD GUIDE TO KANHA

The sal forests of Kanha Tiger Reserve, believed to have sparked Rudyard Kipling's imagination, remain a sanctuary for tigers, wild dogs, and the hard-ground swamp deer, which the park famously saved from extinction.


BINDU GOPAL RAO

DAY
1



Dawn comes up slowly over Kanha. Mist hangs on the maidans, the open meadows that interrupt the sal forest, and the first light turns the wet grass gold while a langur barks somewhere in the canopy. This is the forest readers have pictured since 1894, the green world of Mowgli and Baloo of the famous ***The Jungle Book***, even if Rudyard Kipling never actually set foot in it. What he built from imagination and second-hand accounts, Kanha still delivers in the flesh.

Located in Madhya Pradesh, Kanha Tiger Reserve is a forest whose beauty itself is completely alluring, and its denizens add to the charm. Spread over a total area of 2,074.31sq.km., the park is home to one of India’s most successful conservation stories of the *barasingha* or the swamp deer. The species had whittled down to a mere 66 in 1967, but consistent and scientific conservation has ensured the numbers are over 1050 to date. This guide to 36 hours (or 3 days) in Kanha covers nature, wildlife, culture, and the jungle itself.

Early morning: 05.30am: Safari at Kanha Tiger Reserve.

Start your day early and be one of the first to enter the jungle. All safaris must be booked in advance (your resort can do this for you; mine was done by Tathastu Kanha), and you will need to carry your Aadhaar card for verification (which is also used to make the booking). The jeep safari is a great way to explore the jungle that is stunning with its evergreen sal trees that dominate the landscape.

Interestingly, there are grasslands and rolling meadows, which make the habitat varied and exciting. Sightings of the tiger (usually best at the Mukki gate), leopards, gaur, swamp deer, barking deer, and spotted deer are quite common. The jungle also has amazing bird life, and you can also see the Indian pitta and white-rumped vultures here. A breakfast stop is usually during the middle of the safari, where I suggest you stop by the Kanha Museum that gives you a deep insight into the biodiversity of the jungle through interesting exhibits, dioramas, and animal skeletons.



11.00am: Sign up for a pottery session at Tathastu Kanha

This involves learning from a traditional potter on the wheel, where you get your hands muddy as you learn to sculpt from an expert. The session is completely therapeutic, and the best part is you can also take your creation as a souvenir from the trip.



05.30pm: Sunset picnic drive

Driving through quaint villages that showcase a slice of rural life in Samnapur Banda Tola, to reach Amalnala Dam. This is a serene place with a beautiful lake that is hugged by the periphery of the forests and mountains beyond. Quiet and calm, the only sounds you hear are of the birds returning home. The sunset that happens just behind the lakebed swathes the landscape in all hues of orange. The hotel team lays out a carpet and small bites—sandwiches, samosas, and tea—that make for a lovely picnic by the water.



08.00pm: Candlelit dinner beneath the canopy of the banyan tree

Back at Tathastu Kanha, get ready for a special dinner where the team sets up a table under a leafy banyan tree with lights hanging all around. The dreamy setting is paired with a course-wise meal where the chef dishes out an eclectic set of starters, main courses, and desserts—largely cooked using wood fire.

10.00pm: Stargazing

The clear skies and limited light pollution mean that this is perfect for star gazing. Ghanshyam, the experienced in-house naturalist, does a nice session as he points out constellations and regales you with stories; that is a great way to end a packed day at Kanha. Head back to rest for Day 2.



01.30pm: Lunch at Van Bhoj Restaurant

A meal at Van Bhoj is unique as it is prepared on a wood fire, which means there is a noticeable difference in the taste and texture. This is a meal that is unhurried and takes time but is worth the wait. Sample local delicacies and vegetables grown at the in-house organic garden, which ensure the meal is fresh, light, and refreshing. The bakery chef dishes out several winners and makes some excellent tarts. A long meal like this certainly calls for an afternoon siesta; you won’t regret it.



DAY
2

Early morning: 06.00am:
a guided morning
birdwatching trail

Walking around the resort is a great way to observe the flora and fauna closely, especially with a naturalist. The morning hours are the best to see birds, and the place is abuzz with species like minivets, drongos, barbets, and langurs. You can see the locals waking up and going up and about at the start of their day as well. Do not miss the colourful butterflies here.

09.00am: Breakfast at
Outpost 12

Head to a new-age luxury bio-lodge, Outpost 12 by Sinali Experiences, for a hearty breakfast at the river-facing poolside patio. Sample South Indian specialties (yes, they're well-made) with a twist of health. Swap the regular dosa, for instance, for a millet dosa. Special mention must be made of the fresh-baked assorted cakes, croissants, and breads that are soft, delectable, and a must-have, washed down with freshly squeezed fruit juices.



10.30am: Birdwatching at
the hide

If you are a bird lover or even just simply enjoy nature, there are two bird hides at Outpost 12 where you can observe several species of birds as well as photograph them. One of the hides overlooks a manmade water body and attracts several bee-eaters and kingfishers. I also saw a cinnamon biter here, a lifer for me. The other hide has a small water body that attracts several small birds, from scaly-breasted munias, Oriental white-eyes, and red-whiskered bulbuls as well as larger birds like the treepie and emerald dove. You can take great images as well without disturbing the birds.



11.30am: Relaxing spa session at
Ilika

Head to the in-house spa Ilika at Outpost 12 for a relaxing massage in their thoughtfully created wellness space. The Ilika aromatic massage is a good choice, as it is a calming treatment that is bound to remove the stress from your body and mind, allowing you to relax and rejuvenate. The session starts with a herbal steam bath and moves on to an invigorating massage that feels like just what the jungle ordered. A warm herbal tea and you are ready for the next safari.

02.00pm: Maikal Thali for Lunch

If you are like me and enjoy local food, the Maikal thali at Outpost 12 is a hyper-local meal that is inspired by the surrounding Tilari and other villages. The food is a nod to time-honoured recipes that have been shared by the community and have been thoughtfully reimagined. Each dish on the plate tells a story that is deeply connected to the forest and the land here. Sample dishes include Cheech Bhaaji and Laal Bhaji, both made with local greens, and Dal Paak, a local chicken curry and the use of millets in the rice and breads. End with Kutki kheer, and I can promise this is a meal like no other.



08.00pm: Dinner at Brander's 12 at Outpost 12

At the in-house bar, the dinner setup is all things cosy. Located a level below the main restaurant, this space is a nod to Kanha's most successful conservation story, the barasingha, or swamp deer. This is an unhurried meal that is served course by course. Try the marinated cucumber salad, Tomato Dhaniya Shorba, a selection of starters such as Coconut Seekh Kebab and Peanut Beetroot Kebab. The chef's kathal biryani is a definite highlight; you can be assured that you will not miss the meat version. The Malpua with Rabri is a nice way to end this meal on a sweet note.



05.30pm: Sunset Wilderness drive

Hop on to a specially designed vehicle by the team at Outpost 12 on a sunset drive that will take you on the banks of the Banjar River. Tuck into delectable snacks and watch the sunset, and then the fun part starts. Driving through the territorial forest, the naturalist team showed us some fantastic nightlife. From scorpions that glow under UV light to flying squirrels (I saw a pair) to jackals and owls, the night is when the forest is alive and buzzing. The team is fine-tuning what they call a 'sound safari experience', where you can listen to the sounds of the forest through headphones; that is a unique way to understand the forest.



09.30pm: Night walk

A unique experience at Outpost 12 is the night walk that brings you up close with several kinds of moths and spiders. While the monsoon is the best time to see more of these species, there is always something to see. A special moth project here has identified hundreds of moth species. You can also see small lizards, insects, and butterflies and understand their behaviour too.

Head back to rest for Day 3.



36 HOURS

DAY
3



11.00am: E-cycle safari

This is a fun way to explore the nearby sal forest. Keep your eyes peeled for birds and animals along the way and learn about the biodiversity of this amazing forest. The safari will take you to a treehouse where you can get a bird's-eye view of the surroundings.



01.30pm: Lunch at Taste of Jungle

Head to the in-house Taste of Jungle restaurant that overlooks a man-made water body and order an à la carte meal from the extensive menu. From delectable local fare to crowd pleasers, they serve it all. Do keep in mind that the portion size here is quite large. Honey chilli potatoes and hara bhara kebab deserve special mention. Try the local *thali* as well; that can be prepared with prior intimation.

03.00pm: Safari in the buffer zone

If you do a last-minute safari booking, chances are you may end up with one that takes you to the buffer zone. Don't fret though, as you can spot several mammals here, including big cats as well as the elusive four-horned antelope, chausingha.

06.00pm: Sunset Point

The Sunset Point at Khuksar is a paid entrance where your vehicle takes you up to a point after which a moderate climb is required to reach the top. The short trek is worth the effort as the views of the seemingly endless green cover are stunning. A vantage point at the edge is a favourite with Instagrammers, and a watchtower here gives you unobstructed views of the landscape below.

08.30am: Breakfast at Sterling Kanha

Start with a hearty buffet breakfast that serves a selection of South Indian staples. Think upma, idli, dosa, and medhu vada as well as North Indian parathas and puri subzi. Wash it down with fresh fruit juice, milkshakes and coffee or tea. The chilli cheese toast is an absolute delight here.

10.00am: Tribal Village visit

Sterling Kanha organises visits to the nearby Baiga tribe village. You can interact with the villagers and also visit their homes to understand the ancient craft of bead-making. The women create beautiful bead neckpieces that you can buy as well. While the designs are new now, they show you the kind of pieces that were made in the past. Do not be surprised to see old coins from the British times as part of the necklace.



WHERE
TO
STAY

Outpost 12 by Sinali Experiences

A boutique nine-cottage luxury bio-lodge, Outpost 12 by Sinali Experiences, has stunning rooms that overlook the Banjar River. Expansive at 700sq.ft. with 375sq.ft. of private deck space, the rooms are aesthetic, and the décor is a nod to the land and has local elements. With sustainability part of the DNA, this has been set up by a team of naturalists and is the best way to experience Kanha.

Tathastu Kanha

A premium wildlife lodge near the Mukki Gate, the retreat is spread over nine acres and has 20 rooms across Mongolian yurts, family rooms and cottages. In addition to an in-house spa, swimming pool, pottery, cricket, archery, stargazing, and nature walking activities, the resort also offers an excellent sundowner and assists with game drives as well.

Sterling Kanha

An 8.5-acre resort in the village of Mocha, Sterling Kanha has 25 spacious rooms that offer views of the Sal Forest. Set amidst lush landscapes, the property has access to the Banjar River and had jungle safaris, birdwatching, and trekking as part of its activity list. The Holiday Activity Centre has a host of indoor games, and apart from archery, you can also enjoy an ATV ride here.