

KARNATAKA

INTO THE WILD



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RANA SIDHU

A drive to Bandipur, the wild and untamed cousin to the stylish and cultural Bangalore, is among the best in the state. **BY KARANBIR SINGH BEDI**

WINTER HAS BID adieu and this time around the year is perfect for setting out on a long drive. The Bangalore-Bandipur drive snakes across the very heart of Karnataka and includes a flurry of small towns that provide all the comfort to those on the move. Though the traffic on this road for the first half is heavy, that doesn't stop Bangalorians benefiting from the software and mining boom taking their newfound optimism out for a spin on the wide, open road.

The idea behind driving to Bandipur is not so much to do the whole 'wildlife' thing, but to spend the weekend in a relaxed way. Managing

our tough as nails Toyota Fortuner on the not so perfect tarmac made me realise how well suited SUV's are to India and why the sales of luxury sedans have suffered while those of SUV's have only increased. With its torquey diesel engine and the tall gear ratio's the Fortuner is the perfect highway companion. The tall seating position gives the driver an excellent view of the road and the butch stance allows you to bully other smaller vehicles off the road.

The Fortuner's suspension ensured that our progress wasn't halted by anything that came along the way. It was an entirely agreeable day with all that you need for an amazing drive—sunshine, blue skies and limited traffic. And the smiling

faces turned out to be one of the highlights of my trip, which only confirms that a road trip is the best way to discover an area. We crossed one exceedingly picturesque village after another with everyone seeming to be in a cheerful mood, smiling at the obvious city-slicker driving his SUV. The route itself is a mix of dry and wet deciduous and montane rainforest, with habitat ranging from scrub and thorn forest to high-elevation.

As writer Jack Kerouac would put it, on the road you will feel a strange

1. Our ride in the forest, the fortuner
2. A giant Malabar squirrel makes a rare appearance
3. A typical forest road
4. The Indian Bison also called the 'Gaur'

Jungle Safaris

Karnataka Tourism and the Bandipur Safari Lodge together organise a three-day safari that includes stay, meals, wildlife safaris and guided nature walks for 25,000 per person. www.thekarnatakaturism.com



sense of satisfaction and privilege, it is a distinguished place. Bandipur is the wild and untamed cousin to the stylish and cultural Bangalore. The heat and distance eventually did take its toll on me but the forest in Bandipur immediately revives even the most tired of souls from the heat and buzz of the road.

The Bandipur national park is teeming with wildlife; carnivores include tiger, leopard, wild dog and the jackal. You're also likely to spot elephant, wild boar, spotted deer, bison and sambhar, plus a rich variety of birds, primates and reptiles. Cruising at a comfortable speed the trees on both sides formed a looming and ominous mass shielding the mysteries of the jungle from those on the road. The road through Bandipur was absolutely fabulous—superbly surfaced and winding, allowing for some driving fun.

Traffic generally inside the park is light with the occasional bus and jeep. One of the highlights of the drive was seeing spotted deer graze 10 meters away and on noticing us she raised her powerful shoulders and then, she was off.

And then right towards the end before driving into our lodge for the night, emerging from the fog of misted light a tigress ambled into

view. Rubbing her whiskers against a tree, she looked at us with bored indifference. Spotting a tiger in the wild is a magical experience and

luckily for us our sighting wasn't a flash of striped fur or a twitch of a tail, but even the merest of glimpses won't leave you disappointed.

At a Glance

GOOD TO KNOW: Along with the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary in Tamil Nadu, Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala and Nagarhole National Park in the Karnataka, the four National parks create India's biggest biosphere reserve also called the 'Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve'.

WILDLIFE SPOTTING: If you're lucky, a big cat sighting might come your way. For tiger lovers the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve is the best place to spot the tiger because of the prey base or prey availability for the cat.

STAY At the Bandipur Safari lodge, tel: (082) 2923 3001 or at Tusker Trails, tel: (080) 2361 8024

DISTANCE: Bandipur is 235 kms from Bangalore and to reach the park you have to cross Mysore (80kms short of Bandipur), Nanjangud and Gundelpet. By road the driving time is approximately 5 hours. The best time to visit is between October to May.

