

HVS Monday Musings: Wildlife Tourism in India - The Roar Can Be Louder!

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Indian wildlife Tourism is a promising and growing segment that can compete on the global stage with peers in Africa, Australia, and the US, by providing unique experiences to tourists and marketing it more effectively. Read on to know more.

India is known as a land sustaining immense diversity, not just in terms of its population, but also when it comes to other living beings. The country is home to 567 wildlife sanctuaries and 106 national parks, but we have yet to effectively market this niche tourism segment, especially to international tourists. For instance, due to the government's conservation efforts, Project Tiger achieved its goal of more than doubling the tiger population in the country, four years in advance – a milestone that should have been leveraged to attract more tourists to the country.

This niche tourism market is more evolved and developed in Africa, which has been able to effectively market “The Big 5” (Lions, Leopards, Black Rhinoceros, African Bush Elephants, and African Buffalo) compared to Indian Safaris. One of the main challenges that Indian wildlife tourism faces are inferior animal sightings due to various reasons like habitat degradation or lack of training of guides and drivers. In all other places, the visitors get what they asked for along with other enhanced facilities, but in India, even a tiger sighting in Jim Corbett National Park is not guaranteed. The transport options that are available in Africa are perhaps more wildlife friendly and they also allow tourists to stay inside the parks, whereas, in India, only Jim Corbett allows basic accommodation within the park.





Source: Freepik

Even outside of the parks, African hotels provide a more diverse range of options to choose from, like tents to 5-Star luxury rooms. They also keep coming up with innovative ways to enhance the guest's experience like The Giraffe Manor, which gives tourists the opportunity to feed and walk with rare Rothschild's giraffes. Meanwhile, The Phuket Elephant Sanctuary lets visitors play with the elephants, get rides, feed them, have some cooking classes for local dishes, etc. Small memoir shops are also popular in these areas. The Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage in Sri Lanka also holds small elephant shows, enabling the visitors to witness the beautiful communication between the animal caretakers and the animals. All of this adds to the tourism experience, which is perhaps a best practice that India can learn from. When you go to Africa on a Safari, you are going there for an experience, not merely to see animals. Nearly 1.8 million tourists arrived at the Kruger National Park in South Africa every year before the pandemic, compared to just over 280,000 in Jim Corbett National Park in India! In fact, Jim Corbett, which was established as the country's premier wildlife park, is now better known as a wedding destination rather than a game park due to neglect and lack of focus!

Realizing the potential of this niche segment, the government has created wildlife tourism circuits and some hotel chains such as Oberoi Hotels, IHCL, and ITC Hotels have started providing unique experiences including the option of luxury tents at some of their properties near wildlife sanctuaries and national parks. Moreover, in India, we don't simply have national parks either, we have national parks with historic forts and ancient structures overlooking them. For instance, the Ranthambore National Park has a beautiful fort - a UNESCO World Heritage Site - overlooking it from a vantage point, which can provide tourists with the best of heritage as well as wildlife tourism experiences at the same place. Another way India can make the wildlife experience better is by opening up recreational camps in between the safari tracks. In these places, the visitors can relax, learn more about the area, and perhaps go for short walks as well, combining eco-tourism with wildlife tourism.

Indian wildlife tourism has great potential, but thorough research should be done before any development happens in these protected areas. We should create a discipline that allows animals in their natural habitats to remain undisturbed by tourists by developing an ecosystem of limited and well-controlled safaris. We must expand our options for promoting wildlife safaris across the country while ensuring that the natural habitat is not disrupted by large crowds. Additionally, given the current condition of Joshimath and the possibility of Nainital and Uttarkashi also facing the same fate, we have to ensure the sustainability of any development that takes place before we economize this nature's gift to us.