Article on Corbett National Park, India

All photos taken by and © Bruce G. Marcot

Corbett National Park is still one of the most pristine wildernesses in India. JESSI KAUR takes a ride into the foothills of the Himalayas.

A Magical Jungle
n the twilight hour of a cold November morning, bundled up in three layers of clothing with a shawl around my face, I find myself in the foothills of the Himalayas, sitting next to the driver of a rickety old jeep to avoid the bite of the sharp morning air. My friends are enjoying the ride in the back of an open-air Maruti ‘Gypsy’. It is not quite 5:00 a.m. and we are on our way to Bijnor, where the gates open at six in the morning to enter the majestic Corbett National Park, but you have to wait in line for nearly an hour to complete the formalities to procure a pass.

Nestled in the picturesque Patliputra Valley of the Kumaon Range in Uttar Pradesh, Corbett National Park attracts tens of thousands of tourists from all over the world each year. For the longest time, I have wanted to visit India’s first national park that abounds in diverse flora and fauna and is teeming with wildlife. I get the opportunity when my friend, Mala Bawa, an architectural and interior designer of the Corbett Hideaway, has to make her bi-monthly visit to the Leisure Hotels resort while I am visiting her. She invites me to join her and I seize the prospect with delight and tag along.

We take the night train from New Delhi to Ram Nagar station, the gateway to Corbett country, and reach our destination while the sky is still pitch dark. To my utter surprise, as we pass through the town, it is buzzing with life as though it is the middle of the evening rather than the end of night. The hustle and bustle has started as businesses are gearing up to cater to the tourists. We leave the bazaar behind and head towards Garjiv village. There, amidst a large mango grove, Leisure Hotels has built a gem of a resort. The Corbett Hideaway.

Our resort cottage is comfortable and inviting with throw rugs and thick, plush comforters. Pictures of Jim Corbett are hung in strategic places to evoke legendary memories of the local heron. Corbett was a legendary hunter-turned-conservationist and best known for killing a number of man-eating tigers and leopards in the region in the first half of the 20th century. His legends inspired the park’s conservation efforts and lent the namesake to the region.

After a quick hot shower and a cup of coffee, I am ready to explore the verdant surroundings. A pebbled...
pathway leads me to Gurney House, named after the place that Corbett lived in for many years. The deck faces the foothills of the lower Shivalik range; below, the Kosi River flowing picturesquely creates a dramatic postcard for memory. No live music sounds sweeter than the soothing movement of the river. We sumptuously devour a smorgasbord of fresh fruits, continental, South Indian and made-to-order breakfast. I would have been content to sit there and soak up the serenity but there was more to experience.

My friend and I found out that the morning jeep safari excursion (one of many) had already left and the ones in the afternoon were already booked. Now, we had ample time to spend on the natural trails. The path along the Kosi is utterly rewarding. Luckily, I wore my walking shoes because this river stretches out for almost a mile, running just behind the Corbett Hideaway. Also, watch out as parts of the riverbed are dry and the polished pebbles can get quite slippery if you want to walk in the river or find a boulder to perch on for a few tranquil moments. The river abounds in mahseer, a fresh water fish that is very popular with anglers because of its large size. Fishing permits are available between October and May.

A few miles up river, on a huge rock that sits in the middle of the Kosi River, is the famous Garjinya Temple. A rope bridge takes us across the river to the steep

\textit{Continued on Page 98}
Edward James Corbett was born in 1873 of English ancestry in Kumaon, in the picturesque foothills of the Himalayas. His father, the postmaster in Naini Tal, died when Jim was four. It fell to Corbett's mother to raise and educate 12 children on a widow's meager pension. Corbett remembered his boyhood as a sort of forest idyll. Lying in his bed at night, he would listen to the sounds of the jungle. He learned to imitate the cries and calls of the animals so precisely that once, when he impersonated a leopard, a British hunter and a leopard crept toward him simultaneously.

Corbett began hunting to help feed his family. He had to make every shell count. Corbett's shooting skill and encyclopedic knowledge of the surrounding jungle soon became well known. As early as 1906, requests come to him, begging that he track down a tiger or leopard that had preyed on humans.

Corbett believed that animals that had struck under special conditions, such as protecting cubs or disturbed at a kill, should be given the benefit of doubt. He was only interested in habitual man-killers and consented to come only after two conditions had been met: that all offers of a reward were withdrawn, and that all other hunters had to leave the area. He wrote, "I am sure all sportsmen share my aversion to being classed as a reward-hunter and are as anxious as I to avoid being shot."

Between 1906 and 1941, Corbett hunted down at least a dozen man-eaters. It is estimated that the combined total of men, women and children those 12 animals are thought to have killed before he stopped.

Another day has arrived. As our jeep chugs its way to Bijrani, one of the five entrances to the park, I remember reading that the Corbett reserve has been called the land of "trumpet, roar and song." I find this to be an apt description. The jungle casts its philharmonic spell on me from the moment we enter it. Its pleasures, however, are not just auditory. The naturalist, one Mr. Sahai, who accompanies us on the trip, makes the scenic canvas of a thousand shades of green richer and more enjoyable for us. I move to the back of the jeep to hear him name every tree and shrub while keeping my ears tuned to the jungle sounds and signs.

The lush vegetation is made up of a variety of mixed deciduous trees, the steely sal that dominates the region, a smattering of fragrant pine, the sprawling banyan, the

Continued On Page 101
Continued from Page 91

Below, the dusty dirt road at Corbett National Park allows vehicles to pass but clearly discourages off-road driving and speeding. This road is used for sightseeing.

Corbett was 64 years old when World War II broke out. He volunteered to train Allied troops in the techniques of jungle survival, but the strain proved too much and he became very ill. Recuperating, he wrote “Man-eaters of Kumaon,” which became an international best-seller, was translated into 27 languages, and was almost universally praised by critics.

After 1947, Corbett and his sister Maggie, to whom he had been devoted all his life, retired to Kenya, where he continued to write and sound the alarm about declining numbers of tigers and other wildlife. Jim Corbett died of a heart attack in 1955 and is buried in Africa. The national park he fought to establish in India was renamed in his honor two years later, and is now nearly twice its original size. It is a favored place for visitors hoping to see a tiger. Corbett also provided the narrative for the film, “India: Kingdom of the Tiger.”

-National Wildlife Federation.
in sight. The langur monkeys are jumping playfully from one tree to another; several families of spotted deer have ambled out to greet the new day. Across the open marshland, we see a herd of elephants passing. All conversation idles as we are enveloped in the hush of the early morning in one of the most majestic places in the world—a pristine jungle.

Then, lo and behold, what is this? It is a set of fresh animal footprints trailing straight into a thicket. Are we going to be in luck and see the king of the land? We find a vantage point and wait in silence. There is rustling in the distance. The cameras come out and we wait with bated breath. No one moves, not even the 12-year-old who has constantly been stepping on my toes for the last hour. Several minutes pass. A likely encounter with a tiger takes on the excitement of a tryst with a beloved.

The rustle abates, everyone sighs, and the jeep comes back to life. We decide to go to a local machan, an open-air wooden lookout tower, to better our chances of catching a glimpse of the tiger. Two teenage girls, who are already up in the machan, are chatting away the quietude. No elusive striped cat is going to come anywhere near this babble. We leave disappointed about missing the chance to see these elegant jungle predators in their natural environment.

The journey back is replete with more sights and sounds. The jungle has indeed woken up and is awash with life. The sun is casting dappled shadows on the trails. Myriads of birds are chirping their prerogative over the land. The deer give us ample opportunity to capture them in digital image format. Even a mongoose crosses our path leisurely for a photo opportunity. Corbett National Park, the legacy of a hunter-turned-conservationist, has to be a must on every nature lover's itinerary.

**Essential Facts ‘n’ Tips**

**Corbett National Park**

*Established: 1936*

*Conservation Efforts:* In conjunction with The World Wildlife Fund, The Project Tiger was launched in 1972 as a conservation program for saving the Indian tiger population. Besides habitat deterioration from human presence, poaching of otter and its prey (fish) still remain the major threats in the Corbett region.

*Wildlife:* Tigers and its prey are the leading inhabitants of the park. However, due to outstanding conservation efforts, you might see a hog deer, which has been virtually saved from extinction.

Corbett is also the only home of the rare Indian pagolin, and you might even see the rare fish-eating, long-nosed gharial.

*Must See:* Crocodile Pool, Dhikala Machaan, Corbett Museum (Dhangadi gate), Corbett Falls, and Garjya Temple.

*Size:* 201 square miles.

*Location:* Corbett is approximately 300 kms from Delhi.

*Season:* The park is open annually from October to June, with Nov. 15-June 15 the best time to visit.

*Nearest Train Station:* Ram Nagar

*Nearest Airport:* PantNagar

*Reservations:* Jeep and elephant safaris should be made in advance.

*Transportation:* You can arrive by bus, train, plane and private car.

*Do:* Wear dull clothes in forest, respect all signs and local customs, wear protective clothes so the sunrays and bugs won't harm you.

*Don’t:* Litter, smoke in the forest, walk by yourself, collect anything from the forest, carry strong smelling food, feed the animals.