

# He came, he saw, he conquered!

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The chilly wind smote our faces in the open jeep as we drove towards the Gir National Park, but we did not mind it at all. We had nothing but lions on our minds. We hoped we could get an audience with the king of the jungle, on our safari at the Gir National Park near Junagadh in Gujarat.

The Gir National Park is the last home of the Asiatic Lion, *Panthera Leo Persica*, which numbered 523 as per the 2015 Lion Census. It figures in the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List of Threatened Species that lions are on the brink of extinction, thanks to habitat loss. It is believed that their population has dwindled by almost 95 per cent over the years.

But the National Park in Sasan Gir has been a success story of conservation. The lion population had decreased to a double digit figure in the early 1900s due to indiscriminate hunting. It was then that the Nawab of Junagadh banned hunting lions and pioneered the efforts of conservation of the Asiatic Lion.

## THE SAFARI

The air was rife with expectancy as we drove in our open jeep into the jungles of the Gir National Park. The light of the rising sun filtered through the trees and drew strange patterns on the ground. A herd of deer watched shyly from behind the undergrowth as we rounded a corner. A group of wild boar walked nonchalantly in the distance without even giving us a second glance. A family of langurs swung mockingly from the branches of an overhanging tree. It was business as usual in the jungle. But where was the king of the jungle?

We drove through the forest filled with teak wood trees listening to our guide Siddi Bapu, who explained the finer details of the lifestyle of the lions. Siddi Bapu is from the Siddi community who inhabit the area and whose roots can be traced to East Africa. "Our ancestors hailed from Nigeria, but we do not have any connection with Nigeria now," he said in fluent Gujarati. Except for his appearance, he is, for all intents and purposes, a local who is integrated into the social fabric of the region.

We passed a couple of Maldharis grazing their cattle on the fringes of the sanctuary. The Maldharis once used to live deep in the jungles and co-existed with the lions. Now they live in settlements outside the Gir National Park.

### **ENCOUNTER WITH THE KING**

While listening to what Siddi Bapu said, we also kept a wary eye for any movement in the jungle, hoping to at least get a glimpse of a lion.

And our guide stopped in mid-conversation as our jeep slowed down. The sounds of the jungle seemed to have been suddenly amplified. The excited cawing of crows rose to a crescendo. The jeep in front had come to a complete halt. And there in the distance by the side of the mud track sat a majestic lion. The clicks of camera shutters mingled with the excited gasps of the people around. Though the lion was clearly visible to the naked eye, it was still a little too far!

Even as we watched, another lion crossed the track and sat with the first lion, as if for a long tête-à-tête. At this juncture, the jeep in front of us started back in reverse gear and we followed suit, the two lions fading from our sight. As we started admonishing our guide and driver on this, we were advised to sit calm and wait patiently.

We figured that they knew their stuff, as within minutes, one of the lions stood up and started walking straight towards our jeeps. He passed us towards our right, walking nonchalantly as if we did not exist for him. He was so close that we could see the immaculately clean skin on his torso as he moved with feline grace. He disappeared behind some trees in the distance.

We let out a collective gasp of awe. We were happy, excited, and scared at the same time. Soon, walking towards us was the second lion. He demonstrated his individualistic behaviour by choosing not to follow in the footsteps of his brother and chose to walk by our left flank. He came straight at us and was within touching distance. For a moment, our eyes locked, and that moment seemed like an eternity. We froze, cameras and phones were immobile. "Do not make any body movements", was the hoarse whisper from our guide. We literally heard the lion's breathing, we could have counted the hair on his mane if we had the time and the nerve, he was that close! But he too, just like the other lion, did not show any interest in us apart from that one glance that will remain etched in our memories. He walked by as if the jungle belonged to him, and disappeared behind the trees following the tracks of the first lion, serenaded by the excited cawing of the crows.

No one spoke for a few minutes. The rustling of the wind and the excited chirping of the birds was the only noise in the jungle. And then everyone in the group broke into excited chatter. It was obvious that this encounter with the king would be a priceless memory, an incident that would be told and re-told again and again. "They are two brothers who are both 3.5 years old and they have established their own territory," said our guide, filling us in on the bio-data of the lions who had just given us an audience.

It was an incredible sighting, an experience of a lifetime, a close encounter with the Asiatic Lion, in the only place in the world where the species lives in its natural habitat. We drove out of the Gir National Park with our spirits scaling the pinnacles of euphoria, but we also felt a sense of sorrow thinking about the habitat loss of the lion populace across the world which has resulted in their drastic dwindling in the world.

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