

Tania's Safari Adventure

At Gir Forest National Park



By Kanika G

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It was late Friday afternoon. Tania and her family had just arrived at a hotel outside the Gir forest sanctuary and national park. They were spending the weekend there. Mama had arranged for a Jeep safari of the forest on Saturday afternoon. Tania was really looking forward to that.

Tania loved animals. She would get to see a lion, a real live lion. And not just in a cage at the zoo, *but in the wild!* Just imagine that. The lion may be just a few feet from her. That would be splendid, thought Tania.

The hotel was on the banks of the Hiran river. In the evening mama, papa, Tania and Sonia all went for a walk on the river bank. The river was fairly shallow so they all stepped in to it. The water was refreshingly cool and bits of moss floated around. Tania splashed around in the river

with mama and papa walked up and down with baby Sonia on his shoulders.



On the way back to the hotel, Tania heard a sound much like Kazoo's meowing. She was startled and asked, "Mama, do you see a cat anywhere?"

Mama laughed and said "No honey, look it is a peacock! They make a sound very similar to a cat."



Indeed a few feet away was a gorgeous peacock, strutting around. Tania wished it would open up it's tail feathers and dance.

The next morning, during breakfast at the outdoor restaurant, Tania spotted half a dozen squirrels scampering up and down the trees. She also noticed a bird sitting absolutely still near some bushes.



To her surprise the bird did not move, even when a man walked right past it. She asked "Mama, why does that bird not move at all?"

Mama too had noticed the unusual behaviour of the bird. She said "The bird may be

injured. Poor thing."

After breakfast, papa and Tania went to take a closer look at the bird. Tania asked "Papa what bird is this?"

Papa said "I cant be sure, but it looks like a hawk."

The bird stayed still even though Tania and papa were peering at it up close. Tania supposed the bird really was injured, but, sadly, there was nothing she could do.

After lunch the Jeep arrived to take Tania and her family on the safari.



Soon they were inside the forest. They were in an open Jeep and Sonia was sitting on mama's lap. The ride was so bumpy, Tania was afraid Sonia would fall out of the Jeep. Fortunately mama had the baby carrier and she strapped Sonia in safely.

The forest was dry, unlike the evergreen forests Tania had seen before at hill stations. The guide explained that colouring of the dry forest was ideal for lions to camouflage themselves.



The guide went on to explain, "The Gir forest sanctuary is the sole home of the Asiatic lion. There are only 411 of them including the babies. And the forest is huge. So it is really hard to spot a lion. We will do our best. But don't be too disappointed if you don't see one. There are plenty of other interesting animals to see too."

Before Tania had a chance to brood over the slim possibility of seeing lions, the guide pointed out a tree with a ghostly white trunk. He said it was a gum tree

like the one in the song "Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree".



Tania knew the song well and sang it out loud. The guide said every one would have to be as quiet as possible, so they did not disturb the animals. Tania nodded, and switched to talking in whispers.

Soon Tania spotted some lovely birds by a watering hole. The guide said "The big ones are storks and the little white ones are egrets."



Sometime later Tania saw a deer. She was really excited. This was the first big animal they saw on the safari. It was a beautiful spotted deer, but it was quite far away. Soon they saw more spotted deer.

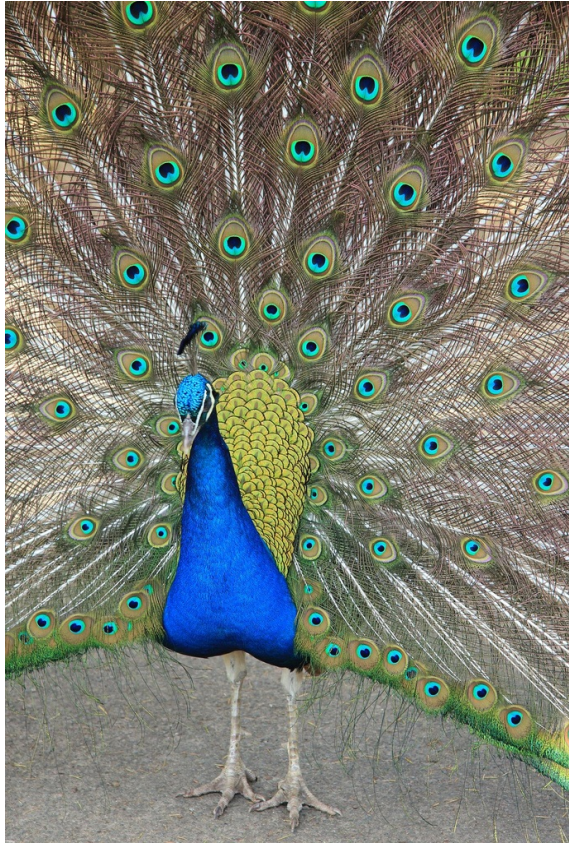
The guide told them that there were some 46000 spotted deer in the sanctuary. One spotted deer came quite close to the Jeep and papa got a good picture of it.



A little further down the road there was an explosive sound that startled everyone. The birds nearby flew away in fright. Tania held on tight to papa and Sonia woke up from her nap. The driver had driven over a sharp piece of rock and now they had a flat tire. Oh oh!

They all had to get out of the Jeep while the driver replaced the flat with the spare tire. For the first time, Tania was a little scared. What if a lion came by while they were fixing the tire? The guide tried to comfort her saying, "The Maldhari tribal community lives here and their children roam the forest. A lion has never hurt any of them as far as I know."

Tania still looked apprehensive, but mama distracted her by pointing to a group of 3 peahens and a peacock. Tania was watching them. Suddenly the peacock spread it's tail feathers and began to dance. Tania couldn't believe her luck. She forgot all about the lions and watched the dance. Papa managed to get a nice picture.



Soon the flat tire was fixed and the safari resumed. Tania's good luck continued. After about half an hour the guide spotted a lion and a lioness. The driver stopped the Jeep so everyone could take a good look.



A deer came by and the lioness started moving towards it.



Then she hid in the dry bushes getting ready to pounce. Tania was amazed to see that the movements of the lioness were very similar to those of Kazoo's, when she got ready to attack one of her toys. The dry bushes camouflaged the lioness so well that she was barely visible. The lioness waited patiently for the right moment to pounce.

Unfortunately, Tania did not get to see what happened next because the driver said it was getting late and they had a lot of ground to cover, so they would have to move on. Tania had mixed feelings about this. The hunt was so exciting, she wanted to stay and watch it. But she would feel really bad for the deer, if he got caught. So, on the whole, she thought it was good they left.



Tania got to see many more types of birds, a sambar deer and a few blue bulls. The hide of blue bulls actually had a bluish hue.



The guide said "The blue bull is the largest Asian antelope and is called *nilgai* in Hindi."

At this point, it was almost 6:30 pm. The light was starting to fade. The safari was over. Tania had a splendid time. She couldn't wait to tell everyone in school that she was barely 20 feet away from a lion. Now that was something to brag about.

That evening Tania thanked mama for taking her on '*The most awesome holiday ever*'. She meant '*The most awesome holiday to date*' of course. Mama is a great holiday planner. I can't wait to hear about their next holiday, can you?

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