

sightseeing possibilities, and that if one really wants to spot wildlife, jungle walks and safaris are a must; if luck is with you, you might just catch a glimpse of the ever elusive Royal Bengal Tiger. To try my luck, I headed for a jungle walk which led me through forests of tall sal trees and wide grasslands. The ranger, who was protecting us from wildlife with a bamboo stick, told us enthusiastically about all the different species of birds, animals and vegetation in the Chitwan National Park. His knowledge about vegetation and wildlife was exceptional.

During our half day excursion we saw barking deer, spotted deer, monkeys, crocodiles and beautiful birds like the paradise flycatcher and woodpeckers. As is often the case, the tiger remained hidden. I wasn't disappointed to miss out on the tigers; I was worried the ranger's bamboo stick would provide little protection. We ended our jungle walk with a visit to the elephant breeding centre. The centre, located 3km west of Sauraha, is the only elephant breeding centre in the country. It was set up, in 1985, to protect the endangered Asiatic elephants of the region; it also has a small museum full of information on elephants. If the museum doesn't hold your interest, you can watch adorable baby elephants playing with their mothers and older elephants being trained by their mahouts. It's a wonderful place to spend some time with and learn about the giant mammal.

The next day, I went to the Rapti River to bathe elephants. Before coming to Nepal, while researching all the things I could do in the country, one thing that caught my fancy was elephant bathing. I put it on my list of things to do in Nepal, and it was one of the main reasons I decided to visit Chitwan. Seeing the elephants take their morning bath was a beautiful sight, and I could not wait to get in the water. The mahout gave me a stone and instructed me on the ways to bathe the elephant and massage it while doing so. As soon as I got the instructions, I jumped in and gently scrubbed the elephant's hard skin with



the stone. The elephant seemed to be enjoying the experience just as much as I was. Once I was done giving it a bath, I sat on its back, and I was splashed with water from its trunk—talk about power shower. The fun bathing experience, which lasted for an hour or so, is definitely something I recommend everyone to do while in Chitwan.

The following morning, along with other guests of the resort, I headed to the Rapti River for another popular activity in Chitwan—river safari. We sat in a long, narrow, traditional wooden canoe that gently floated downriver. Throughout the 40 minute ride, we were surrounded by forests on both sides, and at times, tree branches hung over our heads. We spotted different species of birds, mostly kingfishers, storks and ruddy shelducks, a migratory bird that travels from Siberia to the plains of Nepal every year. We also spotted different species of deer who usually come to the riverbanks to drink water. The most magnificent sight of

all was of the crocodiles lazing by the banks of the river, sunbathing and stretching. The river's tranquility and the air filled with chirping birds made the experience meditative.

To pack in as much activity as possible, the next thing on my to-do list was the elephant safari. Riding on elephant back, we entered the Chitwan National Park, and the two-hour wobbly elephant safari revealed five rhinos, birds, deer and monkeys.

At the end of my Chitwan trip, I was glad that I had decided to include it in my travel itinerary, as it left me with memories to cherish for a long time to come.

— BY DAPHNE VAN DER POL



The author is the cofounder of Girlswanderlust, a travel blog

