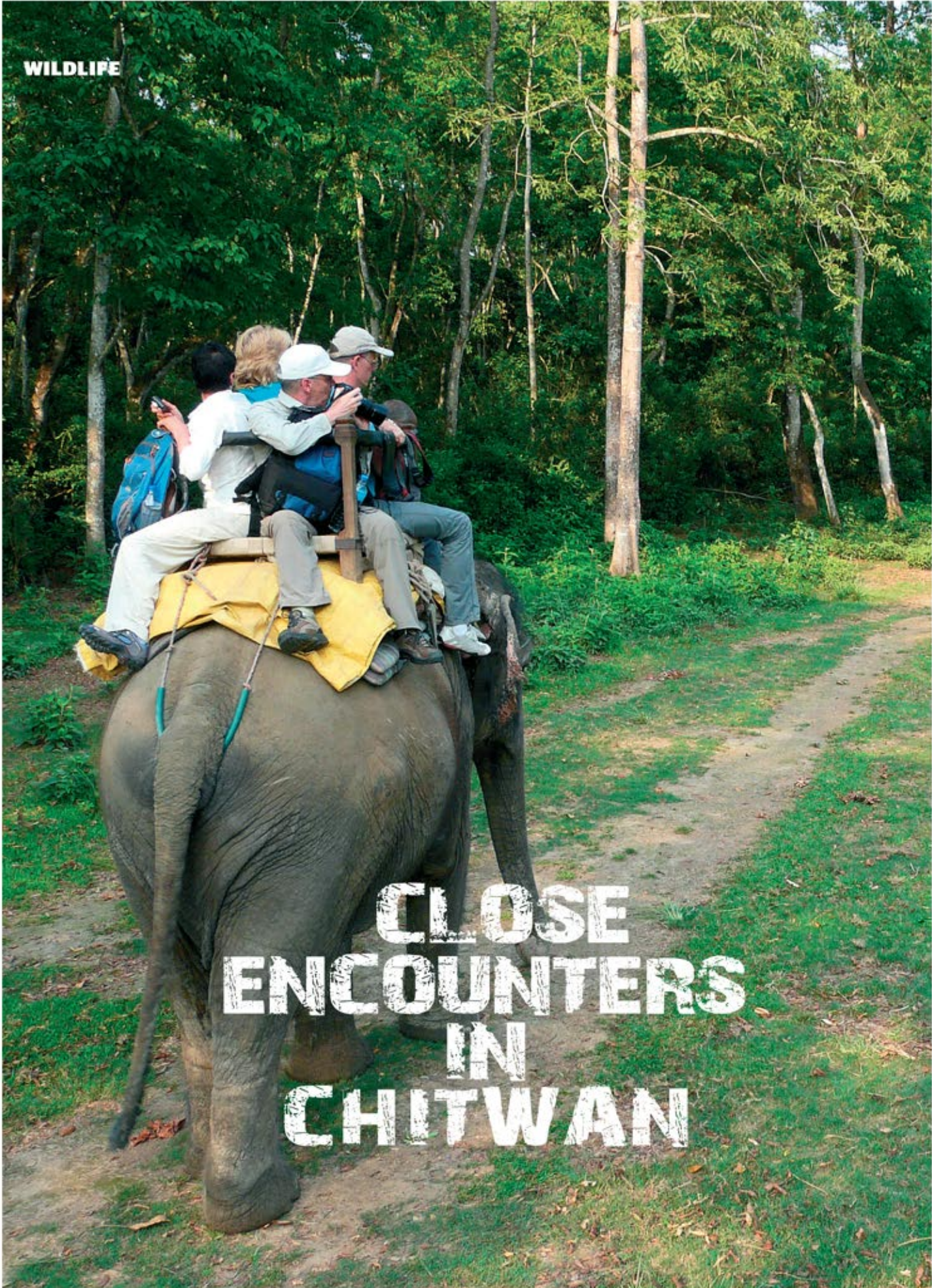


WILDLIFE

A group of five people are riding an elephant through a lush green forest. The elephant is walking on a dirt path. The riders are wearing various outdoor gear, including hats and jackets. The forest is dense with tall trees and green foliage. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

**CLOSE  
ENCOUNTERS  
IN  
CHITWAN**



**NEPAL'S CHITWAN NATIONAL PARK OFFERS LESS-FRENZIED SAFARIS THAT ARE PROTRACTED, AND LEISURELY TRIPS INTO ITS JUNGLE TEEMING WITH ANIMAL AND AVIAN WEALTH.**

**TEXT PRATHAP NAIR**

**“T**here’s someone on the floor,” says our naturalist guide Subash Gurung in a faint whisper that barely conceals his excitement. I follow his eyes and spot what, to me, looks like a grey mound partly obscured by tall elephant grass and milkweed bushes on the Terai plains of Nepal’s western Chitwan. That ‘someone’, Subash just referred to is a one-horned rhino, luxuriating in the foggy morning nippiness over a hearty breakfast of plump green elephant grass. Gradually, we spot two curious pointy ears rise up along with folds of skin hanging from ridges and a comically tiny tail, swishing sideways.

Elephant safaris are the best way to tour the landscape.

iPics / Shutterstock.com



**Above:** A one-horned rhino strolls through the park.

**Below:** Enjoy scenic views while rowing along Rapti River.

As we waddle ungainly towards the beast on the back of our safari elephant – lyrically named Madhumala – the rhino lifts its head and gauges us with its beady black eyes loaded with suspicion but loses interest quickly.

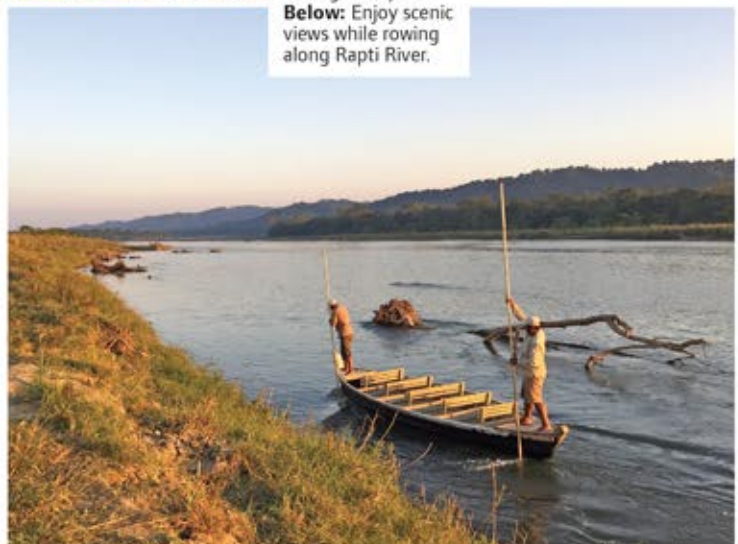
### RHINO RULES

One-horned rhinos thrive in the Terai plains of Chitwan National Park, located in south central Nepal, bordering the west Champaran district of Bihar where the forests form part of Valmiki national park on the Indian side. What was once a hunting ground for the Rana rulers of Nepal, the gradual decline of wildlife due to hunting and relentless poaching that pushed animals like the one-horned rhinos to near extinction prompted the rulers to establish the Royal Chitwan National Park in 1973. The rhino population has drastically increased in recent years, thanks to a diligent army force that patrol the jungles. Two natural boundaries, Rapti and Narayani rivers notwithstanding, there are now 53 different check posts inside the national park.

Hence it's a common sight to see a one-horned rhino on any safari – going about its morning breakfast – even in the buffer area of the National Park and sure enough, we soon spot another rhino. That morning, we also spotted numerous birds – streak-throated woodpeckers, velvet-fronted nuthatches, golden orioles, peacocks, fulvous-breasted woodpeckers, white-bellied drongos, oriental white-eyes and shikras quite actively looking for preys.

### THE WEST ENTRANCE

Though the eastern gate of Sauraha attracts a large number of visitors, in the west entrance of Meghauli, the forests are free from tourist frenzy. As a result, there's no three-month advance booking, no festive crowd in front of its gates or bulky camera-wielding wildlife tourists on safari jeeps. There is only a smattering of tourists



and the result is an experience that brings the visitor closer to the jungles and its wildlife without distractions.

The fact that Meghauli isn't attracting a lot of wildlife enthusiasts is not lost on many. Varun Kumar, the general manager at the Barahi Jungle Lodge where I was holed up, says he's surprised that the park doesn't attract a lot of wildlife enthusiasts despite the easy access and ease of animal and bird sightings. A large chunk of visitors here are people who arrive to relax after a grueling trek in the surrounding mountains. They lie on benches and watch the sun stroll across the sky. There's a new initiative in Meghauli to bring in more tourists, the Tharu Community Home Stay programme, that prompted the opening of affordable lodges and guest houses.

### SAFARIS AND SIGHTINGS

On an early winter morning, we set out on a seven-hour safari in a jeep along with two Londoners. We rode on mud tracks, interspersing between vast

## WILDLIFE



**Above:** A purple sunbird sits on a powderpuff tree.

**Below:** The sambar deer makes an appearance.

stretches of the elephant grass carpets and the sal, rhino apple, and silk cotton trees of the jungle. The landscape is dotted with vast pools of water brimming with waterfowls, aquatic plants, and crocodiles basking in the sunshine. Animals here are notoriously shy and slip behind the thick vegetation when they sense safari jeeps approaching. Subash warns us during the ride. As the mist lifts, we spot hog deer, spotted deer, wild boars, rhinos, sloth bears and birds, lots and lots of them!

### INSIDE THE JUNGLE

The next day, Subash takes me on a hike inside the jungle. Unlike other national parks in the subcontinent, Chitwan offers extended jungle treks into the core areas of the national park with greater possibilities for adventure. Since I'm unprepared for wild encounters, I pick on Subash's brain about his training in these matters. Subash, who now works for Barahi, grew up in the villages around the jungles of Chitwan. "We've spotted the rhino many times. In such instances, one should hide behind a huge tree or climb up to 6 ft on a tree," he warns. "The rhino's vision is poor but it has a heightened sense of smell and only charges only when agitated," he shared.

For the Tharu community, residing in the periphery of the forest, the tiger assumes less significance. They have rhinos to worry about and the odd one that accidentally strays into the villages is usually scared off with noisy drums.



Utopia\_88 / Shutterstock.com; Prithup Nair



**Left:** Wooden canoes lined up on the Rapti.  
**Below:** A white heron scouts for a prey.

After walking through the jungles, we arrive at a clearing – a slushy end of Rapti River’s tributary. A lesser adjutant takes off, a black-and-white, striped forktail pecks at the mud looking for insects. We successfully evade any predators and vice versa, I think to myself.

### RIPARIAN SCENES

After the hike we take a boat ride along Rapti, whose waters are teeming with birds hunting for fish and water insects. Flying against the orange sunshine and swooping down at their prey, they look like chunks of glitter falling from the sky. A giant mugger crocodile is stretched out, with its jaw wide open on a slushy mud bank. A little ahead, a rhino cools

itself off in the water that shimmers in the sunshine like a sash of blue silk. On another side, a bunch of locals are bent down fishing in knee-deep waters with a lengthy white garment that fluttered in the wind. Twilight gradually falls on us as we witness the unspoken harmony of shared sustenance.

When we reach the confluence of Rapti and Narayani rivers, framed by the Mahabharata and the Annapurna ranges, the evening sun is swiftly dipping, tingeing the foliage in its deep hues. It is all heartbreakingly beautiful and I’m a little overwhelmed. As if I can’t take it anymore, I turn away and start towards my room, but the river sand yields under my feet almost as if asking me to stay. ■



### QUICK FACTS

#### GETTING THERE

Jet Airways operates daily flights to Kathmandu from Mumbai and New Delhi. Chitwan is approximately 100 km from here.

#### ACCOMMODATION

Pick from lodges and resorts available at both Sauraha (east gate) and Meghauli (west entrance).

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit [www.welcomenepal.com](http://www.welcomenepal.com)