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# LOOKING FOR LIONS IN GIR FOREST NATIONAL PARK



GIR Forest National Park is India's largest wildlife sanctuary and was set up to protect the country's last remaining population of Asiatic lions. **Murli Menon** gets up close to the park's diverse wildlife and also spends time with the African-origin, Swahili-speaking human settlers that call the remote forested region home.

**I**n December 2022, I undertook a journey to the only home of the Asiatic lion in India, the Gir National Park. The protected forested park is located where it stretches across 2,400 square km. The terrain is hilly and covered with thick, dry deciduous forests, which are home to several species of birds and animals.

Perhaps the most surprising fact about Gir is that it contains a human settlement – the village of Shirwan – which is populated by African tribes who were brought to India by the Nawab of Junagadh four hundred years ago.

These tribes are known as Siddi Badshah by the locals. They can trace their ancestry to Kenya and to



this day speak a version of Swahili. Getting to Sirdan is a 12km trek from Sasan Gir, the base camp for visitors entering the park.

We follow a dirt road that winds its way between thick forests. It is a risky journey. Panthers, leopards, and cheetahs abound in the forests and could attack wayfarers. Monkeys, snakes, and wild boars are also commonly seen and represent mild danger. Another animal that could cross your path is the Asiatic lion, the animal that the park was set up to protect and whose fragile population numbers around 400.

### Slaves

The Siddi have lived in Sirdan since around 1600 when they were brought to India as slaves by the Nawab of Junagadh to convert the thick forests at that time into tillable land. Around 3,000 Siddi continue to live in the forest, adhering to a simple way of life that has changed little since the days of their ancestors. They still follow ancient traditions and maintain ethnic purity with almost 100 percent of the Siddi marrying among themselves.

The Siddi respect the law of the forest and do not indulge in hunting though they live adjacent to several hundred spotted deer. Instead, the hunter-gatherers live off the land, picking the plentiful supplies of wild fruits and berries. Fresh water is also readily available as the Hiran River flows through Gir. In addition to this, there are several watering holes across the forest.

### Houses

The Government of Gujarat has offered the Siddi modern houses outside the park, but so far none of the 100 families in Shirwan have accepted. Life in the forest for them includes plenty of dance and music with ancient tribal songs performed in Swahili accompanied by ancestral drums. The Siddi

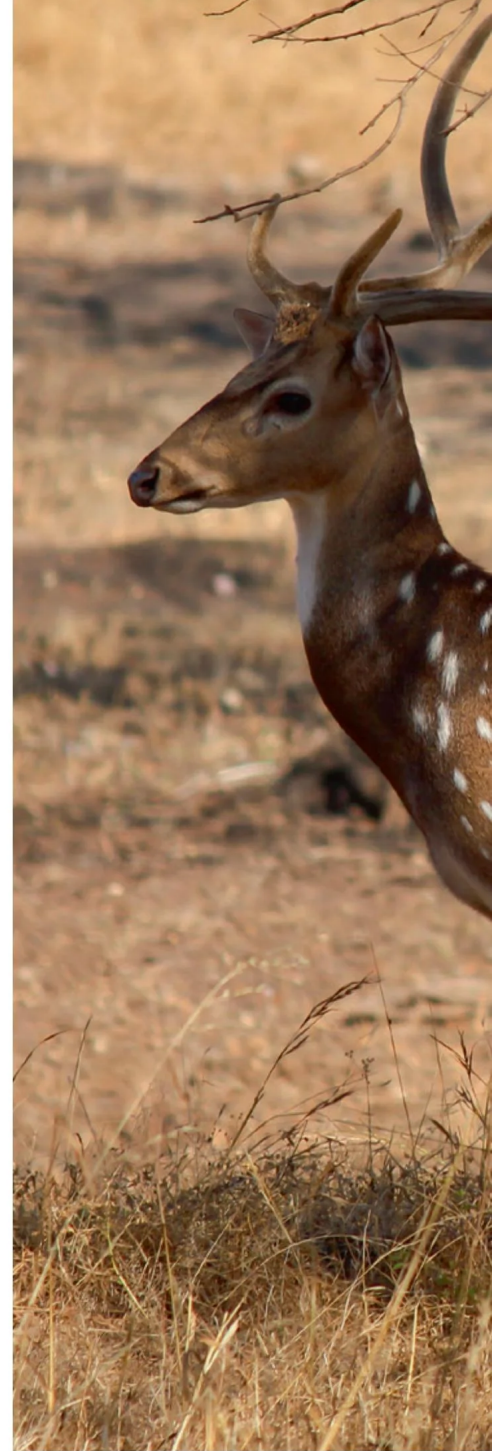
The Siddi respect the law of the forest and do not indulge in hunting though they live adjacent to several hundred spotted deer



Siddi women and children at Shirwan village inside the Park

tribal trance dance is known as 'dhamal' (or the boisterous dance) in Gujarati. The Siddi have also preserved their ancestral costumes, and every family has preserved one set of their ancestral tribal costumes which they wear during ceremonial occasions, marriages, or other festivities.

I got to witness a Siddi tribal dance with the village's men, women, and children moving together in synchronicity. It's a true community gathering. One of the important aspects of Siddi culture is their existence in the present moment. They think only about the here and now. They do not dwell on the past or contemplate the future. They are always aware of the present. If they get a meal they are happy, but they continue



to remain cheerful, even if forced to go hungry. During monsoon season, most of the Siddi tribal houses are swept away by the rains, yet villagers simply rebuild their huts without complaint and continue their lives. Free from mental stress or worries. The village was filled with smiling children, laughter, music, boisterous chatter, and dancing.

There is a lot to be learned from the Siddi. We could all benefit from





getting into the habit of shutting out the past, forgetting about the future, and continuing to exist in the present. In the words of this ancient Swahili Siddi proverb:  
 “The past no longer is,  
 The future has not yet come;  
 Looking deeply at life,  
 As it is;  
 In the very here and now,  
 The Siddi lives in stability and freedom”

### Flying to GIR from Mumbai

There are regular flights from Mumbai International Airport to Rajkot Airport. The journey time is approximately one hour. From Rajkot to Gir National Park is a three-hour drive.

### Where to stay?

Sinh Sadan, the official guest house of the forest department needs to be booked in advance for visitors and costs 10 US\$/- per night. The accommodation is comfortable, with hot water and the food is basic.

### Where to eat?

There are plenty of small restaurants serving North Indian and Gujarati cuisine in Sasan. Vegans can get fresh fruits including mangoes, papayas, pineapples, and berries at the Siddi settlements.

### MURLI MENON

Murli Menon, is a travel writer, stress management consultant and author based at Ahmedabad, India. He is the author of “ZeNLP-Learning through stories” published by The Written Word Publications, “ZeNLP-the power to succeed” published by Sage publications and “ZeNLP-the power to relax” by New Dawn Press. He can be reached at [zenlp@rediffmail.com](mailto:zenlp@rediffmail.com)