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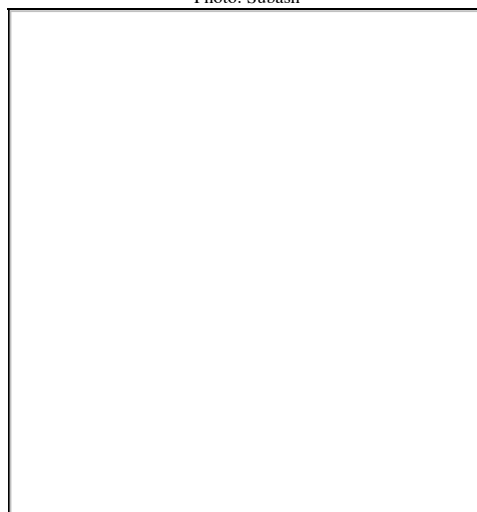


Oasis in a desert

ASHISH KOTHARI

Kumbalgarh Sanctuary offers an impressive range of wildlife, large tracts of forest land and a historic fort!

Photo: Subash



In all its splendour: The fort overlooks the sanctuary.

Kumbalgarh Sanctuary, in Rajsamand district, is spread over 610 sq. km. It is home to an impressive range of wildlife, including sloth bears, leopards, four-horned antelopes (chowsingha), several other mammals, over 200 species of birds, and reptiles like the crocodile.

As you enter the Sanctuary, the dry heat of southern Rajasthan miraculously turns moist and cool. This is not surprising, for several streams and rivers originate at Kumbalgarh. It was once the home of royal shikar, and visitors can still see a number of ancient hunting *ohdis* (watchtowers). Fortunately however hunting has been stopped for several decades now, with the Sanctuary having been declared in 1971.

Walk about

Unlike many other protected areas of India, wildlife enthusiasts can walk around certain parts of Kumbalgarh, of course with permission and accompanied by sanctuary staff. It is best to do this in small

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- [Datewise](#)

[News](#)

[News Update](#)

[Front Page](#)

[National](#)

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- [Tamil Nadu](#)

- [Andhra Pradesh](#)

- [Karnataka](#)

- [Kerala](#)

- [New Delhi](#)

- [Other States](#)

[International](#)

[Opinion](#)

[Business](#)

[Sport](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Index](#)

[Advts](#)

[Retail Plus](#)

[Classifieds](#)

[Jobs](#)

[Obituary](#)

groups and very very quietly, for then one will see and hear the birds and small mammals, and maybe even catch a glimpse of deer and wild pig. Or spend a few hours in a hide or watchtower overlooking a waterhole, and if you're mildly lucky, a leopard or sloth bear might walk up to quench its thirst.

If you are not only into wildlife, do talk to some of the villagers living in the buffer areas, you might get to know of their life within the forest, and even hear some exciting encounters with wildlife!

Finally, there is the Kumbalgarh Fort, which overlooks the sanctuary. Its original structure was built over 2000 years ago. The current wall are about 550 years old, and is the world's second longest (with a total length of 36 km)! The fort contains 360 temples, and is the birthplace of Maharana Pratap, one of Rajasthan's most famous rulers.

You would like to know

Kumbalgarh is about 90 km from Udaipur, easily reached by road. The Forest Department maintains a rest house inside the sanctuary, adjacent to a large lake with a crocodile breeding centre. This is a great place to spend a night (no, not in the crocodile pool!). The conscientious tourists can consider the Dera Kumbalgarh. This Swiss Tent complex, though somewhat expensive, is worth it as it is run by a village, is environmentally sensitive, and the profits go to some of the poorest local people (see www.derakumbhalgarh.com for more info).

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