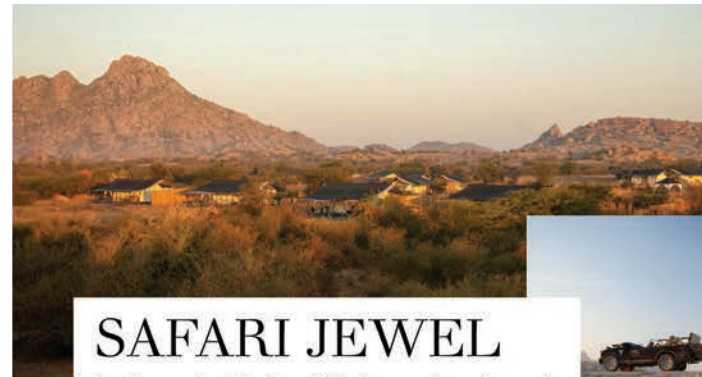


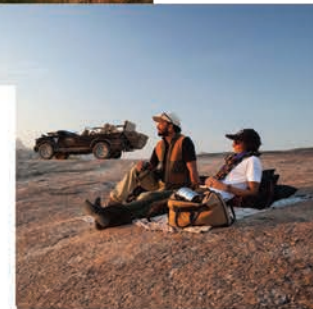
“ It was a combination of all the things we’re passionate about at SUJÁN; wildlife and wildernesses, culture and history”



SAFARI JEWEL

In the ancient Indian hills, leopards and people exist happily SIDE-BY-SIDE. And thanks to one CONSERVATIONIST you can witness this SYMBIOSIS in a setting of opulence.

WORDS RACHEL CORBETT



It may be the most unique human-wildlife relationship in the world,” says Jaisal Singh, speaking of his latest eco-tourism venture. Jawai is a luxury safari camp located in the Pali district of Western Rajasthan in India, the ancient hills home to countless leopards, antelope, hyenas, sloth bears and colourful birdlife. But what truly sets this region apart is the relationship between those animals and the local community.

“It’s astonishing to see them co-existing in complete harmony,” says Jaisal. Leopards often spell disaster for poor rural communities, killing valuable livestock and, occasionally, humans. But on the private land of Jawai, despite the safari’s close proximity, there hasn’t been a leopard attack in more than 150 years. In 2013 Jaisal, a keen conservationist and founder of tourism company SUJÁN, visited the area after hearing the local

leopard population was thriving. Having already opened a number of wildlife camps throughout India and Africa with his wife Anjali, he knew he’d stumbled across something special at Jawai.

“It was a combination of all the things we’re passionate about at SUJÁN; wildlife and wildernesses, culture and history.”

Within six months, they purchased eight hectares of land, obtained government clearances and built a low-impact luxury camp with 10 opulent tents and all the feel of a five-star hotel. An ambitious timeline for any business, but especially one setting up in rural India.

“It was a risk, going into an area with little tourism,” admits Jaisal.

The population of Jawai is largely Hindu and like most regional areas, the caste system remains and feudal lords (or thakurs) lead local communities.

“Without the support of the locals in areas like Jawai, businesses cannot succeed in India,” he says. The local leaders in rural areas are the landowners,

the tribes and often the politicians. With their support, businesses have a sense of protection. But without it, life can be very difficult. To get local backing, members of Jaisal’s team based themselves near Jawai for months before construction

It was a combination of all the things we’re PASSIONATE about at SUJÁN; wildlife and WILDERNESSES, culture and HISTORY.

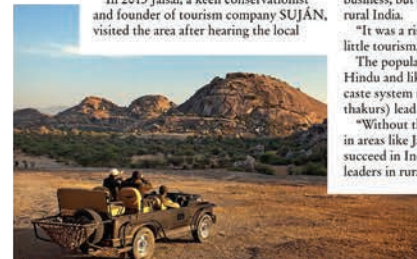
began, pooling local resources and working to build these relationships.

“It’s always been important for us to start our planning by meeting with the local people. This interaction is engrained in

our system,” says Jaisal.

It’s also a relationship that needs to be cultivated long after the doors have opened. SUJÁN’s Director of Experiences, Yusuf Ansari visits the region regularly and his first stop is always to meet with village leaders.

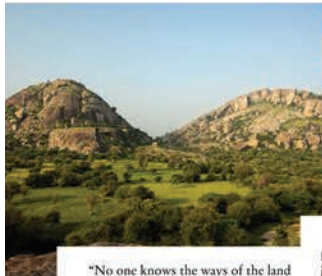
“He’ll listen to any concerns and ensure we continue to operate for the benefit of everyone,” explains Jaisal. >



IMAGES COURTESY OF SUJAN LUXURY

NOMAD

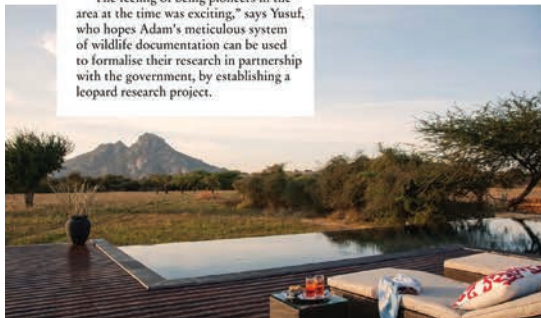
September, 2015



"No one knows the ways of the land better than those who've grown up there for generations. Their knowledge about animals, crops, religion, leopards, festivals and nature is hugely valuable when we're developing our experiences. We would be fools to try and operate without them."

While this local knowledge is essential Jaisal also looked abroad for help, bringing in experienced guide and big cat expert Adam Bannister. Jaisal and Anjali first met Adam on a trip to Londolozi Game Reserve in South Africa and employed his help to develop the Jawai game experience, with Adam working closely with locals to study leopard movements and develop new trails for game drives.

"The feeling of being pioneers in the area at the time was exciting," says Yusuf, who hopes Adam's meticulous system of wildlife documentation can be used to formalise their research in partnership with the government, by establishing a leopard research project.



And while conservation is at the forefront of everything they do, Jawai is also passionate about giving back to the local community, with 70 per cent of staff from villages nearby. A portion of guests' fees are channelled into a fund that goes directly back into the local community ("We consult with the villagers and ask them what they need most, whether it's water wells or sheds for cattle. Then over the summer we

put this into action") and nearly all their supplies are sourced from local farmers and producers. One of the groups that benefit most from the camp are the local shepherds,

the Rabari. Dressed in traditional white garments and vibrant red turbans, these semi-settled nomads have shared the landscape with wildlife for centuries.



But as television and the Internet find their way into even the remotest communities, the younger generation are leaving ancient traditions behind in search of a better life in the cities.

Jawai provides an alternate source of income for these men, and guests are often invited into their homes or to walk with them as they lead the village goats to graze, giving an insight into a way of life.

And while the outside interest in their community has often caused confusion, it has also made the locals look at their culture in a different way.

"There's a growing sense of pride in their local customs and way of life," says Yusuf.

This mix of wildlife and community represents the first successful attempt to create a 'parks beyond parks' experience in India, where wildlife can be observed outside the confines of a national park or reserve.

"Jawai is truly a pioneering effort. It's not about tourism per se; it's about conservation, best practices and sharing something unique with the world in a responsible manner," says Jaisal.

And while he hopes there'll be more projects like Jawai on the horizon, Jaisal has advice for entrepreneurs who want to follow the path of eco-tourism.

"Conservation must always come first. Commerce second." ■

No one knows the WAYS of the LAND better than those who've grown up there for GENERATIONS.

OFF THE GRID

THE GREAT WALL OF INDIA, KUMBHALGARH

Far more elusive than its Chinese cousin, the second-longest continuous wall on the planet surrounds the ancient fort of Kumbhalgarh – one of India's best-kept secrets, nestled in the Aravalli Hills in the Rajasthan District of Rajasthan state in western India. Reaching more than 36km, the wall is quite the majestic beast – meticulously masoned with thousands of stone bricks and decorative embellishments. Heaven for the hardy traveller, it snakes for miles along a truly 'off-the-beaten' path.

HEMIS MONASTERY, HEMIS

While it's not the fanciest-looking monastery around, Hemis is the largest and richest Buddhist monastery in the Ladakh region, and home to a famous collection of ancient statues and artefacts. For those keen to get fully immersed, it's possible to stay at the monastery and participate in the Hemis Spiritual Retreat run by the monks during tourist season, and some villagers also offer homestay accommodations.

EVERY YEAR... AN AVERAGE OF 970 TECH PRODUCTS LAUNCH IN INDIA.

FOR INSPIRATION

DHAMMA SINDHU CENTRE VIPASSANA RETREAT, BADA

This 10-day meditation retreat is on the stricter side – with all attendees required to adhere to a code of discipline – observing a 'noble silence' of body, speech and mind (not one for social butterflies – even note-passing is prohibited). One of India's most ancient meditation techniques, Vipassana is thought to offer a remedy for illness through self-awareness (and a whole lot of shhhh...). sindhu.dhamma.org

ART OF LIVING ASHRAM, BANGALORE

A popular spot for peace-seekers and yogis alike, The Art of Living International Center spans a 26-hectare (65-acre) campus atop the Panchagiri Hills. Complete with organic farms, mountainside trails, gardens and a lake, the centre welcomes those from all cultures and religious backgrounds, inviting them to participate in voluntary service such as cooking, cleaning and general upkeep of the ashram. artofliving.org/bangalore-ashram

OUT OF INDIA

SPICE, splendour and glorious chaos. Welcome to India, with its unbridled NATURAL BEAUTY, ultimate luxury and a BUZZING start-up LANDSCAPE drenched in culture.

WORDS MELANIE DIMMITT, MEL CARSWELL

FOR ADVENTURE



UNCOVER INDIA TOUR - DELHI TO GOA

City slickers may prefer this fast-paced adventure, taking in bustling streets and ticking off must-see sights like the Taj Mahal and Agra Fort. This G Adventures 'Yolo' tour takes punters through the chaos of Delhi to the refuge of Goa sands, with pit stops such as a sunrise at Savitri temple and dinner in the desert cooked by camelleers along the way. gadventures.com

FOR RELAXATION

THE BEACH AT MANDVI PALACE, MANDVI

A favourite backdrop for many a Bollywood blockbuster, this princely private beach estate boasts one of the finer tent resorts, completely secluded from the outside world. You wouldn't be blamed for laying low in this peaceful patch – taking full advantage of your luxurious air-conditioned tent and on-call masseuse – but for those feeling a little more adventurous, there's the warm tropical water of the Arabian Sea to dip your toes in, and camel and horse dune rides on request. mandviceach.com

PACK ME

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