

THE INDIAN EXPRESS

India, January, 2017

The screenshot shows the top of a web browser displaying the article 'Born to be Wild' on The Indian Express website. The article is dated January 29, 2017, and has 1.9K shares. The main image shows two leopards perched on a white stone wall. Below the image is a caption: 'Burning bright. Comfortably perched on the roof of the Devgiri mandir, a breeding pair of leopards pose for the camera.'

Winter means different things to different people. Speaking for myself, growing up on a healthy dose of Jim Corbett's accounts of his experiences in the jungles of north India has meant a natural inclination for the great Indian wilderness. And winter is ideal for this. At the first opportunity (read: have wheels, will travel), these jungles became our natural stomping ground; subsequent forays took us further afield to the vast forest tracts of Madhya Pradesh, and then onto Rajasthan.

After countless sojourns at various forest rest houses, and spectacular sightings of big game — tigers, rhinos, elephants and the gaur (Indian bison), from both jeep and elephant back—the one creature that had so far eluded me was the leopard.

Flash-forward two decades later to the present (still leopardless), and it was with a great deal of scepticism that I found myself in Jawai in south-western Rajasthan, lured by the promise of leopards — many, many leopards!

Although leopards are known to lurk around villages pretty much across the length and breadth of the country, they are notoriously hard to spot in the wild. Jawai and its surroundings are unusual in this respect. Nestled amidst prehistoric rock formations and scrub forest, the region offers visitors the opportunity to come, up close and personal not only with this super-shy big cat, but with many other wildlife species as well. Optimising on this, over the last couple of years, a number of wildlife camps and guesthouses have opened. Pioneer amongst them is the eponymous Jawai Leopard Camp. The establishment is owned and operated by Jaisal Singh and his wife, proprietors of Suján. The duo have the perfect pedigree too —Singh, nephew of well-known tiger expert Valmik Thapar, runs a popular luxury camp (Sher Bagh) outside Ranthambhore National Park.

“This was just the beginning of what was to be an unforgettable experience.”

The image shows two men, likely Rabaris, wearing traditional red turbans and shawls. They are smiling and looking towards the camera. The man on the left has a white beard and is wearing a blue shawl, while the man on the right has a grey beard and is wearing a white shawl.

The pastoral Rabaris.

The rocky outcrops that loom over the terrain betray no trace of any wild inhabitants, let alone any inkling that they provide a veritable housing complex for leopards. Tiny temples dot the stony peaks and village life moves to the timeless rhythm of bucolic pursuits. Local Rabari tribesmen, instantly recognisable by their brilliant vermilion turbans and intricately woven black-and-white shawls, go about their daily routine of farming and herding cattle, oblivious to the possibility of any threat. Jawai is unique because it is arguably the only place on earth where leopards and humans peacefully coexist in such close proximity. More than 30 wild leopards call the hills around Jawai, Bera, Perwa and so on — an area of roughly 50 sq km that is neither a notified wildlife sanctuary or a national park — home.

Little children and wizened old men walk about blithely, unafraid of the chitro (the local word for leopard). The last reported human kill was 164 years ago. This is remarkable, given that the big cats' increasingly shrinking natural habitat has had disastrous consequences elsewhere in the country for both man and beast alike.

When Singh first set up Jawai Leopard Camp roughly two years ago, no one had a definitive number of how many cats roamed the caves that exist in the surrounding hills. Gradually, Singh, along with his team of trained naturalists, began the painstaking job of putting together an unofficial but scientific census through systematic photographic documentation of sightings, mapping leopards' beats, pug marks, reported animal kills, and so on. “We have documented over 28 leopards in just 50 sq km, which possibly makes this the highest density of leopards in the world,” says Singh. These cats have affectionately been given names too: Naina, Nigel, Naagvaasi. Each day at first and last light, Singh's posse of 4x4s fan out through the village bylanes and up rockfaces — sometimes at a dizzying 45-degree angle — to offer visitors a near-aerial view of the sleepy village landscape and, of course, the draw of big cats.

As luck would have it, my very first safari into leopard land was a success. Driving into a mellow sunset, near the picturesque Jawai Dam, after having sighted a pair of somnolent crocodiles, I was quite prepared to call it a day. Descending the rocky hills towards the camp, we caught a flash of movement followed by a glimpse of glittering emerald green — leopard eyes! Even as the jeep came to a halt, unperturbed by our not-so-distant presence (leopards have extremely good eyesight and can hear five times better than humans), an enormous male leopard—Naagvaasi, in this case—sashayed past us.

The image shows a white tent with a dark roof, situated in a grassy field. The tent is illuminated from within, and there are some chairs and tables outside. The background shows a line of trees and a clear sky.

Royal tent at the Jawai camp.

This was just the beginning of what was to be an unforgettable experience. Greedy for more, the crack of dawn saw us back in the jeep, bundled up in blankets and clutching hot water bottles (did I mention the camp is uber-luxurious?). Bumping along rutted paths, we headed out towards a different set of hills, crested with a temple blaring devotional songs at 7 am. Fat chance, I thought glumly to myself, but our patience was rewarded. Suddenly, one... two... three tawny spotted beauties — a mother with two cubs — revealed themselves, basking in the early morning sun. I'm not particularly religious, but, somehow, even the raucous temple music wasn't at variance with the presence of that beautiful mother with her children. In fact, the steps leading up to the temple, says Singh, often play host to more than just humans; in 2014, as many as seven leopards were photographed on the steps, the only recorded instance of such a large group together at one time.

Yusuf Ansari, director, wildlife experiences, Suján, tells me the local hills resonate with myth and belief — belief that leopards are the guardians of the local shrines. Every temple that dots the hills makes a nod to the chitro — loss of livestock is considered devi ka prasaad by the pastoral Rabaris, and is, thus, overlooked and forgiven. Most nights, a wild leopard will crisscross the village lanes and fields, seeking a stray dog or a vulnerable calf or goat kid. But local villagers are pragmatic and united in letting the chitro — so interwoven with the myth of devi or the Mother Goddess — get its due. Just before my visit, an adult leopard streaked past a sleeping baby in a village home compound in broad daylight, vying only for the goats.

Later that night, back at Jawai, warmed by both the bonfire as well as some fine single malt, and replete after a delicious three-course meal, I felt privileged to have been part of this unique ecosystem. Although the Rabaris have managed to straddle their pastoral traditions with relentless progress, the lifestyle of both human and feline is, in a sense, equally fragile. Fortunately, because the two have managed a harmonious coexistence for the present, unlike in other parts of the country, where leopards are trapped and poached as vermin, in the hills of Jawai at least, the animal lives to rule another day.

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