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PASSAGE TO INDIA

CULTURE

A series of luxury encampments not only offers visitors the chance to experience India in a very special and intimate way, but also contributes to the local community. **Teresa Levonian Cole** is beguiled by a first-class experience

At a Shiva temple, perched on a rocky hill, a solitary elderly priest stood watching. Naked but for his loincloth, a long, snowy beard covering his sun-darkened chest, he watched the leopard. The leopard, seated on a promontory just 15 metres away, watched the old man. This was not a stand-off, but more of a daily ritual.

We all know about the famous tigers of India, but leopards? “There is arguably the highest density of leopards anywhere in the world here,” says Adam Bannister, big cat expert and guide at the newly opened Jawai Leopard Camp, a luxury encampment lost in the wilderness some four hours’ drive northwest of Udaipur, across the Aravalli Hills. “From the 1920s, with the advent of powerful rifles and motor vehicles, until all hunting for sport was banned in 1973, shooting parties used to come here. These days, few people know about the leopards. Part of our mission is to increase awareness of these animals, and highlight the way in which humans and leopards live in harmony in this area.”



Top: Jawai Leopard Camp. Above: Daybreak at the camp; sunset is the ideal time for wildlife observation; one of the local leopards

This is no small claim, as big cats and man are generally depicted as being in opposition in India. Only recently, there were press reports of a leopard wreaking havoc in a hospital in Mirat, and of a tigress in Muradabad with a price on her head, having claimed 14 human victims. In the granite hills of Jawai, however, it would not be fanciful to say that shepherds and farmers enjoy a quasi-spiritual relationship with their spotted neighbours. “The locals are incredibly proud of their leopards,” says Bannister, “and there has not been a report of a fatal attack by a leopard here for 154 years.”

The hill we are currently watching, in fact, is in a local village, the former farmland given over by the local *thakur* (lord or headman) for use as a conservation area for the leopards. Jawai compensates him and brings small groups of guests

to this rock, where up to 20 different leopards have been recognised by the old priest. In the course of the afternoon, we see four of them. That same morning, another leopard was seen gambolling with her two cubs. “It is an extremely unusual situation,” says Bannister, “because leopards are solitary animals. Yet on this particular rock, we have seen multiple generations of various families living together in harmony in an area of one square kilometre and exhibiting none of the usual territorial behaviour.”



The Chhatra Sagar camp in Rajasthan



Leopards live in peace with the locals at the Jawai camp

Jawai is the newest offering of the Suján group (www.sujanluxury.com), which includes the tiger camp of Sher Bagh in Ranthambhore. It is one of four camps I am visiting in Rajasthan, which focus on combining luxury with social responsibility, offering guests an insight into the local way of life. The Jawai camp consists of eight gorgeous tents erected on black slate plinths, in a landscape comprising some 100sq km of rugged hills eroded into surreal shapes, caves, kopjes and scrub. Furnished in contemporary style with steel and black leather, the large black-and-white photographs of leopards that adorn the canvas walls seem to come alive at night, as the antiphonal roaring of cats in the grounds sounds disconcertingly close. But there is nothing to fear: local Rabari herdsmen are hired to guard the camp, a silent and benevolent presence in their scarlet turbans and white robes, who guide you with lanterns along pathways for those pre-dawn safaris.

In the three months since the camp opened, Bannister has had 123 sightings of 17 different leopards in the small area he has explored to date. Jawai is planning to initiate a leopard research programme together with the government of Rajasthan’s Department of Environment and Forest Department to undertake a scientific study of this group. The government will recompense shepherds for any loss of livestock to leopards, to the tune of £8-£120 per animal, thereby reducing potential tension between man and beast.

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“Wherever we have camps, we contribute according to the local needs of the area and the people”



Getting ready for a safari

The contribution of the Suján group also extends to work with the local villagers, many of whom we meet, herding their flocks or flagging us down to offer us armfuls of chickpeas, freshly harvested from their fields. “You can’t talk about animal conservation without first taking care of the people,” says Yusuf Ansari, author, historian, wildlife campaigner, former politician and encyclopaedic host at Jawai. “So wherever we have camps, we contribute according to the needs of the area. Here, for example, our research uncovered harmful levels of fluoride in the water table, so we installed a water treatment plant, and we are working on cleaning up the local villages. Cattle are vital to the Rabaris, so we are also introducing a vet camp twice a week to inoculate the animals.”

Similar community programmes exist at The Seri, Suján’s magnificent creation of 21 hand-stitched tents of canvas, pinkish-ochre Jaisalmer stone and natural leather in the Thar Desert. This environment of sand dunes, camels and the still-inhabited nearby fort of Jaisalmer, founded in 1156, offers guests a different experience. Between snacking on delicious thalis and vegetables from The Seri’s organic garden, being pampered with incomparable massages using holy basil and saffron oils, and sipping sundowners in the desert, cultural excursions include a visit to the ghost town of Kuldhara. This is one of 84 Palwal Brahmin villages said to have been abandoned overnight in 1825 and cursed by its community, outraged at the proposed imposition of taxes by the prime minister, Salim Singh, if he wasn’t allowed to marry the chieftain’s daughter. All that remains of the village, believed to have been inhabited since the 13th century, are the ruins of some 500 houses and temples, built with fossil stones mined from the riverbank.



The Chhatra Sagar camp overlooks a bird-rich reservoir

The highlight, however, was my visit to the Mangamar village of Khamra, famed for its musicians. “They are unusual, in that, although Muslim, they perform ragas and sing songs about Hindu deities and for Hindu festivals,” explains Jitin Sahni, the camp’s solicitous host, who worked together with owners Jaisal and Anjali Singh to create both Jawai and The Seri. “This is because the musicians were brought here 300 years ago from Dhaneli, close to the Pakistan border, by pajarans (patrons), who were all rajars.”

With the advent of independence in 1947, patronage by the rajars gradually disappeared, reducing the music to obscurity.

Today, The Seri promotes Mangamar culture, continuing the work of Jaisal Singh’s parents and ethnomusicologist Komal Kothari, who “rediscovered” these musicians and reintroduced Mangamar music to the mainstream; the group has since performed around the world, from London’s Royal Festival Hall to the Hollywood Bowl.

The village—of whose 1,500 residents some 100 are musicians—bore signs of its prosperity. Houses of sandstone were being erected, replacing earlier mud dwellings. In a modest room that served as performing space, Kheta Khan and his musicians awaited us with their traditional instruments. And so, at 10am, I was treated to an impromptu concert of plaintive music and song, of a rhythmic complexity ecstatic in its intensity. Khan’s two young sons, who have been training to be musicians since the age of four, sat alongside him, listening intently. “Ours is an oral tradition going back 13 centuries,” Khan tells me, during a break. “The castanets of Spain derive from the *khaandral*, and the gypsies of Europe arrived via Romania from Rajasthan.”



The Seri offers a unique desert setting for dining or afternoon tea



Afternoon tea in the desert and inviting shade at The Seri

Should the relative inaccessibility of Jaisalmer (there is no commercial airport) act as a deterrent, the more modest Wilderness Camp (www.wildernesscamp.com/wilderness.htm)—seven tents raised on crenellated mud platforms, appended to the lovely Mihir Gahr hotel, and an hour from Jodhpur—offers an easier approach to the semi-desert. The unique attraction of this camp—and a boon for riding enthusiasts—are the beautiful Marwari horses, with paisley-shaped ears like little devil’s horns, bred by Wilderness’ owner Siddharth Singh. The camp offers “cultural safaris” of its own, with visits to Bishnoi communities, an offshoot of Hinduism created in 1484, distinguished by their refusal to cut green trees or kill any animals. But another, more unusual, experience also lies in store: a visit to a local village for a welcome ceremony with a difference. It is not every day, after all, that one finds oneself slurping liquid opium from the palm of one’s host.

Wilderness Camp offers its own “cultural safaris” and visits

“There are government shops that sell dried poppy heads, milked of their latex, which can be boiled to produce a very mild intoxicant,” explains Siddharth’s wife, Rashmi. “But many local people succeed in buying liquid opium destined for medicinal use, on the black market. It is, of course, illegal, but it is so engrained in western Rajasthan custom, that a blind eye is turned.”

Opium used to be given to Rajput warriors, before going into battle. Today it has more social uses—at special events, and to welcome guests—and is traditionally to be taken only by men over the age of 45. And so, on this occasion, my guide and I joined an assembly of Brahmins (the tradition transcends caste), the presiding elder already dozy-eyed with dope. The liquid opium had been boiled with molasses and sesame oil, pressed into a tablet, crushed and diluted with water. Now I watched it being strained through two cloth funnels and into little wooden boots. Amid incantations, the first libation was offered to the god Shiva, before the liquid was passed around the assembled group, to be slurped noisily from the hand of the elder with loud but lame protestations.

Then it was my turn. I hesitated. The men all stared, curious. Oh well... I slurped, three times (twice is bad luck). And then a piece of jaggery sugar was placed in my mouth, as if I were accepting the host, to sweeten the acrid taste. I waited for something to happen. Nothing. Unless, that is, this universal panacea averted the dose of dysentery I had feared the proceedings might induce.



Marwari horses are a unique attraction at Wilderness Camp

But this was not just an afternoon of fun: families receive financial advantage from such village visits. And, as with other camps, Wilderness has indirect ways of helping the local community, which, here, include providing mobile ophthalmic units and paying for any treatment deemed necessary.

“There is very much a sense of social responsibility in Rajasthan,” says Raj Rathore, who, with his cousins Harsh and Nand, owns Chhatra Sagar camp (www.chhatrasagar.com), a bird-watcher’s paradise, with over 220 species fluttering, twittering and soaring overhead. In 1990, in order to harvest monsoon waters, his great-grandfather, the *thakur*, built the dam on whose banks the camp now stands: nine tents, with a further two atop a hill, with 360° views of the lake, the surrounding scrub and, beyond, the lush farmland made possible by the *thakur*’s gift to the area. “Even today,” says Rathore, “although the Maharajas lost not only much of their lands and wealth following independence but also their power, they are still loved and respected by the local people.”

There is a hint of this feudalism as we walk through the settlement of Chhatra Sagar and into the lives of the 1,200 souls. It is a hive of industry in which every craft is represented: a semi-retired shepherd (identifiable by his black-print turban) engaged in spinning camel wool; a potter throwing perfectly rounded water pots, subsequently painted by his wife; a carpenter measuring window frames; a silversmith hammering a wedding necklace; a cobbler cutting the traditional pointed leather shoes; even a wig-maker, who pedals by on his bicycle. Children in immaculate blue-and-white uniforms emerge from the village school supported by Chhatra Sagar, while, in the fertile fields, women in jewel-coloured saris form kaleidoscopic patterns as they glide, half-hidden, through the tall aniseed plants they are harvesting. It is a perfectly-balanced microcosm.

Back at camp, lunch events, as it did 100 years ago, for the *thakur*’s guests: delicious old family recipes from locally sourced foods. Around us, village women are engaged in resurfacing the mud-and-dung ground and decorating it with paint of lime and tamarind—a labour-intensive task that must be repeated every three weeks. The only sounds are those of their laughter, the chirping of parakeets and the flapping of 350 pairs of wings, belonging to the great white pelicans who are enjoying their own lunch of catfish on the lake below.

Further information For more on bespoke trips to India, contact Wild Frontiers, www.wildfrontiersindia.com.