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India: OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Stir away from the almost irresistible, flamboyant energy of India's metro cities and wander off to the far-flung corners of this land of diversity, where the true beauty and rural tranquillity of India lie hidden. Writer: Caroline Eden

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THIS PAGE: JAWAI Leopard Camp's luxurious tented suite. OPPOSITE PAGE: One of the smart guest rooms at the Ahilya Fort; wildlife sightings are guaranteed at the JAWAI Leopard Camp

history of the fort. Best enjoyed, of course, with some of the delicious home-cooked food on offer.

There are also plenty of activities to enjoy, many just a short distance away. An hour away by car lies Mandu, a deserted ancient Islamic city, abandoned since the 15th century, which is ripe for exploration and perhaps an Indian-style picnic.

While many visitors to India make a beeline for the holy city of Varanasi, Ahilya Fort is enviably close to Omkareshwar. This is a similarly holy place with ghats (steps leading down to the river) that is sometimes referred to as a 'mini Varanasi.' The island is actually shaped like the Hindu Om symbol, often associated with meditation and yoga, which has to be a good thing. A truly unique hideaway. www.ahilyafort.com

JAWAI LEOPARD CAMP, RAJASTHAN

Just opened last December, the super smart JAWAI Leopard Camp is already causing quite a stir. Ecologically minded, the camp focuses on looking after the environment and local communities as much as its guests.

Located close to Udaipur, the camp provides a stylish, sophisticated, comfortable 'wildlife and wilderness' base from which to recover from the chaos of India. JAWAI

Leopard Camp has just eight luxurious tented suites—making it wonderfully serene and personal—and is the only property to lie within this unexplored region of outstanding natural beauty.

Artfully designed by its owners, Anjali and Jaisal Singh (who run the excellent Sher Bagh camp and the ultra-luxurious The Serai), each of the tented suites is spacious, covering an area of 1,300 sq m. Private viewing decks come as standard too and afford spectacular views of the granite formations surrounding the camp.

The surrounding landscape hosts a diverse eco-system, at the top of which sits the leopard.

Wildlife sightings are guaranteed; in fact, within the first month of opening, besides crocodiles, hyenas, jackal, and a host of migratory birds, the camp also reported 32 separate sightings of leopards. There is at least a 75 per cent chance of seeing one.

Guests are provided with modern, semi-professional cameras and 'His and Her' binoculars—thoughtful touches which add to the experience.

Post-safari there is a SUJÁN Spa, which offers wellness therapies and treatments using indigenous herbs and oils of the region.



India's mega cities are witnessing huge advances in hotel developments and resort expansions. Glittering five-star hotels jostle for place next to tiny boutique options, but it is away from these centres of trade and business that true peace and serenity can be found.

Deep in the jungle-rich hills, or beyond the outskirts of towns, refuges for mind and soul abound. Here we choose the very best places to get off the beaten track in India.

AHILYA FORT, MADHYA PRADESH

A completely unique, family-owned residence deep in little-visited Madhya Pradesh, Ahilya Fort is run by Prince Richard Holkar. A descendant of Queen Ahilya Holkar, Richard took over the fort in 1971, carefully restored it and opened it as a hotel in the year 2000.

Today, there are 13 smart guest rooms, all individually designed, including a very special 'Maharaja Tent', which comes with its own little garden and its own heated plunge pool.

Ahilya Fort is centrally located in Maheshwar, a 4,000-year-old town right on the river Narmada, one of India's holiest waterways. It is especially holy as it is believed to have been created from a drop of sweat from Lord Shiva's forehead.

At the fort it is all about observing everyday life along the river, which the property looks over. Fascinating scenes of washing and chanting can be taken in by guests, in shaded comfort.

If Richard Holkar is in residence and is hosting his guests, you will find yourself with a truly unique opportunity to learn about his family heritage, the local area and the

