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A leopard-spotting safari in Rajasthan

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A Rabari herdsman

At the entrance to a Hindu temple atop a granite *kopje* rising from the Rajasthan plain, a leopard is stretched out in repose. This is not an illusion – not a hallucination brought on by the blazing sun overhead, nor the work of a devout stonemason. This is a real, 70-odd-kilo female – young, lissom and, when we hone in on her with our zoom lenses from the plain below, revealed to be startlingly blue-eyed.

Occasionally she stretches her neck back to groom her flank, then calmly returns her gaze to the horizon. On the temple wall behind her is a single line of hand-painted script. A prayer? I ask the driver of our Land Cruiser, is it a holy text? Not quite: please take off shoes before entering, he translates. Whatever – the magnificent cat’s presence underscores even this banality with a hint of divine mystery.

For just over two hours, since well before the sun rose, we have been tracking her as she emerged from the mustard fields after a night of hunting to make her way back up to her home on this sparsely forested hillock, one of dozens scattered across the landscape. As we focus and refocus our binoculars and cameras, starting the vehicle every so often to follow her progress, she winds up the side of the hill, under boulders and through low bush. Some langur monkeys natter and screech wildly, leaping and circling to keep her in sight. At one point, we all lose her for several minutes in the bush; two villagers passing by – tall, thin, elegant in their crimson turbans – stop next to us and study the hill. After about 15 seconds one of them casually points to just above a small ridge: there she is, a dappled shadow in the dappled shade of an outcrop.

These two villagers are far from the only locals we encounter on our dawn drive. Indeed, from the time light begins to fill the sky, the sounds and sights of rural Indian civilisation are all around us: the low but persistent tok-tok-tok of generator-powered wells; the buzz of a tractor; the tinny intonations of the Bhajan, the Hindu devotional to the deities living in the hills, broadcast from nearby villages; the faint singing and

musical of the plains and mountains.

Not your conventional wildlife viewing situation, then. But the team behind this experience hope the human context, as opposed to remote wilderness, will form part of its appeal. I am a guest of Jawai Leopard Camp, which opened in December and is part of the Suján Luxury collection, a family-owned Indian company focusing on intimate hospitality ventures with a conservation component. Jawai is between Udaipur and Jodhpur, on eight hectares of land owned by Jaisal and Anjali Singh, Suján’s founder-directors. When I query the Singhs as to the chances of a sighting during my stay, Jaisal comes back to me with a confident 80 per cent. In the event, I log two sightings in as many days; Jawai’s total for December was an impressive 32.



At Jawai, as at the first Suján camp, Sher Bagh, which opened in 2000 in Ranthambhore National Park in the east of the state, the focus is on big cats (at Sher Bagh, tiger; at Jawai, leopard) – but with a difference. Far from conspiring to evade, or mask, the abundant traces of civilisation all around, at Jawai the Singhs put the unusual collision of human and leopard at the centre of the show. “The coexistence here of these animals with human culture is unique; I’ve not seen anything like it,” says Jaisal. “They’re big, healthy, well fed, and clearly conditioned to the presence of people. It’s been going on for centuries. What we’re not trying to do is change the dynamic of this area, to make it an inviolate wilderness experience.” His research has yet to turn up an instance of a leopard attack on a human despite this remarkable proximity; the villagers and shepherds we encounter appear utterly unfazed by the presence of big cats in their midst.

Here, the leopard is the apex predator, as Jawai’s director of wilderness experiences, Yusuf Ansari, explains to me. Unlike in Africa, these leopards don’t live in trees; in the absence of lions (a notch up the food chain) there’s no need to retreat upwards to preserve a kill from competition.



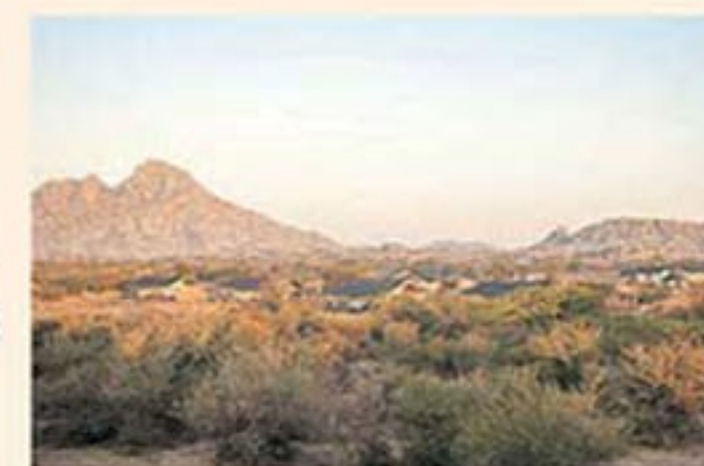
A leopard on a granite outcrop

As we meander along sandy dirt paths in our Land Cruiser, my guide, Adam Bannister, points out tracks and describes the various individual cats he’s familiarising himself with in the immediate area (there are about 30, by the Singhs’ estimate). Bannister spent four and a half years at Londolozi in South Africa’s Kruger National Park, spearheading lion and leopard studies before moving to Brazil to run a privately funded jaguar research project in the Pantanal.

At Jawai he works closely with the Singhs and Ansari, documenting the cats’ ranges and habits. Leopards are solitary movers, Bannister says. Here, each keeps more or less to its own hill, descending after dark to the fields to hunt langur monkey and goat, small antelope and porcupine, and returning at dawn.

It is, of course, an added fillip that Jawai and its situation are both gorgeous, surrounded by grasses and low, flowering-yellow bush, the Aravalli mountains a dun-coloured smear on the horizon to the east. Anjali Singh, who studied art and design at Central Saint Martins in London and who oversees the creation of all Suján properties, has used local materials, references and colour in her surprisingly – and, to my eyes, delightfully – contemporary design.

The eight spacious, creamy-white tents were hand-stitched in Jodhpur, the red throws and pillows are a nod to the signature turban of the local Rabari tribe. Leather and chrome chaises and armchairs dot the lounge and bar, open on all sides to the view; adjacent to them is a small but flawlessly formed infinity pool.



Jawai Leopard Camp

There are extensive organic kitchen gardens, which the chefs delight in showing off to guests, and a dedicated spa tent for treatments using oils and skincare formulated with local plants. We return the first evening to a sublime *jungli maas*, a typical mutton curry, served around a fire on the plain in front of the dining tent, accompanied by the music and singing of Manganiyar tribesmen. (“These guys have probably performed more at Carnegie Hall than they have in Rajasthan,” Jaisal tells me proudly.)

Singh saw his first leopard in the area in 1995; the idea for a camp began to take form in about 2009, along with the idea to establish a leopard research programme on site – a dedicated conservation scheme, backed in word and principle (if not yet in signed deed) by the Rajasthan Ministry of Forests. “We know so little about these animals, so the sense of custodianship is crucial to us,” he says.

The concept is for guests to be able to dip a toe into the programme or simply to stick to twice-daily drives, gourmet cuisine and botanical massages. “You could engage with one of our researchers over drinks or during a night drive. If you want to go deeper, you can,” says Singh.

One suspects many will. The landscape is arresting, and Jawai and its appointments profoundly comfortable, but it is the cats, beautiful and solitary up on their hills, that capture and hold the imagination.