



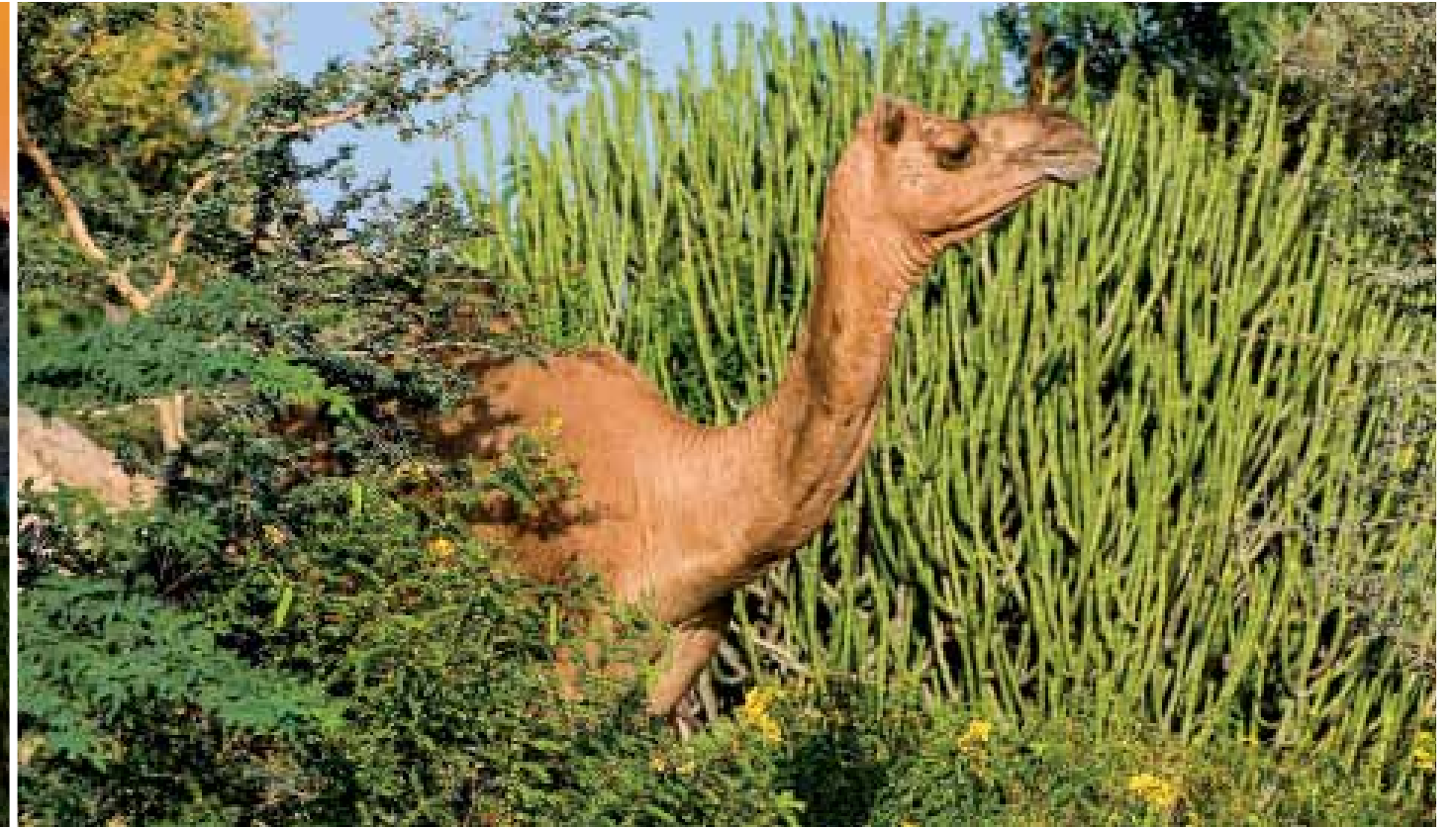
Wild At Heart

This is a corner of Earth where time has merely tip-toed past; burnishing the landscape rather than ravaging it. This is Jawai Bandh in Rajasthan and big cats come out to play here.

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A panoramic view of the Jawai Bandh region with the



Aravali Hills in the background; (Above) A grazing camel makes for a common sight during the safari; (Below) A monitor lizard caught on camera close to the Jawai Leopard Camp

This story is set in a parcel of wilderness—stark, harsh and also strangely rural and soft in parts—between Udaipur and Jodhpur. Rural Jawai is rugged country and comprises some 20 villages in the backyard of nowhere near Jawai Bandh, one of Rajasthan's largest reservoirs. This is leopard country, snuggling in the Aravalis where the terrain is rugged and rocky, dotted with caves and scrub, ideal topography for the handsome but elusive cat. And some 40 leopards call Jawai home. They are secure in their domain, unfazed by human presence, because the handsome felines know at a sublime level that they are objects of worship and adoration. Indeed, local villagers consider them sacred protectors of their cave and hilltop temples. Plus there are no other predators, no stress, no competition for food; indeed an idyllic existence for the big cat who shares the land with hyenas, jackals, antelopes, langurs, wild boar and 200 species of birds.

We stayed at the Jawai Leopard Camp, near Jawai Bandh, the only accommodation for tourists in this deeply rural and rugged area. Additionally, the camp gives a feel of glamping or glamorous camping like in the days of the Maharajas and the Brits who liked to pulverise tigers in the cross-hairs of their rifles even as they revelled in tented luxury.

A complex of eight plush tents (with en suite facilities) that seem to embrace the wilderness rather than keep it at bay, the Jawai Leopard Camp's 1930s decor is stark and in keeping with the surrounding terrain—in black and white shades and lots of tubular, brushed-steel furniture and designer accessories like locally crafted black and white rugs. In the cosy tents, large black and white photographs of wildlife bring the outdoors indoors while our private verandah brought us up close to the wrap-around views of the wilderness.

On our first afternoon, we embarked on a game drive, accompanied by Varun Kutty, one of the camp's naturalists, who has grown up in the area. We bumped along the rocky terrain interspersed occasionally with fields of mustard, wheat, sesame and maize that rippled in the sun and pools of mauve coxcomb flowers that softened the stony aridity and dry riverbeds.

Granite outcrops chiselled by nature into weird shapes loomed in the distance—nuclear mushroom clouds, snarling beasts and crocodiles and amorphous boulders pockmarked the land—as though they had been flung around in divine fury. In these bizarre formations, rust, orange, almost pink-



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hued, nature has chiselled out caves where the felines live—unafraid and unmolested by man, the ultimate predator. A geologist from the UK, staying at the camp, later remarked that the outlandishly shaped rocks and boulders, fissured and gouged by time, were over 850 million years old!

And in this quixotic, painterly landscape walk the sure-footed Rabari herdsmen with their cattle, protecting their heads from the harsh sun with tightly-wound red turbans that weigh a cool one kilogramme and clucking to their cattle as though they were children. If we had had more time, we could have strolled with them to get a glimpse of their semi-nomadic lifestyle, so far removed from the pressures of the modern age. A man and his veiled wife, white bangles covering both her arms, zipped past our 4x4 safari jeep on a motorbike, reminding us that the 21st century has not lagged far behind and perhaps will finally catch up with this untrammelled space. A monitor lizard slithered away into the prickly embrace of a thicket of large cacti while white egrets and black drongos drew arabesques over the mirror-still waters of the Jawai Dam which harbour crocodiles that are said to be similar to the Nile crocodile.

JAWAI'S SOCIAL LEOPARDS

"The man-leopard relationship in Jawai is unique," says Adam Bannister, a South African naturalist at the camp who has studied leopard behaviour around the world. The most intriguing thing that he noticed about the Jawai cats was their social behaviour. "Leopards around the world are solitary and fiercely territorial animals. Here, they seem to behave more like lions and live in prides. Nowhere else are you likely to see seven leopards sharing an outcrop like they do at Jawai."

Bannister feels that the leopards in Jawai have to be studied more closely to understand their rather unusual behaviour. However, given his limited exposure to these animals, he can only make some educated guesses.

While Jawai does have a scattering of deer, hare and other animals that are the natural prey of leopards, he believes this is not enough to sustain the population of 35 to 40 leopards that they have counted so far in these parts. There has to be an alternative source of food for these cats and that is provided by local residents who revere the leopard as the protector of their shrines and temples. Should a big cat kill a cow or a sheep, they see it as an offering to the gods. Occasionally, they even leave animals (cows that are past their milk-producing days, for instance) out for the leopards to prey on.

The leopards, in turn, seem to perceive man as a benevolent provider!

"We need to study and understand the fine balance in the man-leopard relationship at Jawai!" says Bannister. The leopards of Jawai have restored his faith in man.



NAVIGATOR

HOW TO REACH

Jawai Bandh is a three-hour drive from Udaipur or Jodhpur, which have good air and rail connections.

SAFARI

Jawai is leopard country minus the arduous regulations that hamper Indian wildlife parks. It is not a designated wildlife park and is probably the only place in India where you can go on a night safari.

STAY

The year-old Jawai Leopard Camp is the only accommodation available to tourists and is part of the Suján luxury camps and palaces which include The Serai Jaisalmer and Sher Bagh Ranthambore which are affiliated with the prestigious Relais & Chateaux.

DO

Apart from wildlife experiences, Jawai offers village excursions, walks with a Rabari, cycling to the dam, excursions to the gorgeous Jain temples of Ranakpur and to the majestic fort of Kumbhalgarh. Ranakpur and Kumbhalgarh are an hour's drive from the camp.

www.sujanluxury.com



Rural Jawai is a land of rugged terrain and comprises some 20 villages. Apart from the Rabari herdsman, you see an assortment of wildlife and rock formations in strange shapes that adds to the drama of the safari



We stopped on a hilltop overlooking the dam and trestle chairs had been arranged in a semi-circle for a surprise sundowner in the wilderness. As other guests from the camp joined us, we spoke to Adam Bannister, the head naturalist at the camp, who has studied leopards in South Africa and helped develop a reserve in Brazil where jaguars are tracked and observed. “The leopards in Jawai are healthy, indeed they are larger (they weigh 80 kg in Jawai versus 60 kg elsewhere) because they are at the top of the food chain; there is neither poaching nor human pressure on the land. In fact, the big cat is protected by the locals; it’s a deep holistic approach... There is a lesson to be learnt in Jawai for it is a great model of how land is managed, without any man and animal conflict,” said Bannister. Indeed, in the last two centuries, not a single incident has been reported of a leopard killing a human here.

Even as he was speaking, a panoramic sweep of kopje-like granite rocks (in Africa, such outcrops are called kopjes) bristled with menace. Were we imagining it or was there a tawny rippling mass of muscle in the crevice; the gleam of cat eyes? The fifth largest feline in the world (after the tiger, lion, jaguar and mountain lion) was proving to be elusive. And then he emerged in the open, lazily surveyed the scene, his tawny eyes almost boring into us as though to

say: “Who are you? Why are you invading my terrain?” And then he loped away, back into the crevice from where he had emerged. The setting sun bled over the dun-coloured, dusty landscape, giving it a feverish glow. It had all come together within a few minutes...hard stony terrain, alive with the call of unseen birds and the stealthy tread of leopards on the prowl for easy prey! To celebrate our sighting, we sipped local wine.

Later, we drove back to the camp, aglow with paraffin lamps—a pastoral yet wild paradise that seemed to spring organically from the rocky soil, put together with an understanding of every nuance of the landscape and local culture. Outside the open-sided dining area, strewn with handcrafted artefacts and a black steel trunk piled high with an electrifying mountain of red Rabari turbans, we sat around a South African-style *boma* or campfire, sipped wine and chatted about our sightings with other guests. One from South Africa gushed: “I have never seen so many leopards in South Africa. Jawai possibly has the highest density of leopards in the world!”

Jawai is about small pleasures, too... spotting the red-rumped vulture by the Jawai Dam whose waters turn a shade of molten copper as the sun sets; the alarm calls of antelope signalling the unseen presence of the big cat—its



A tented lounge at the Jawai Leopard Camp. The camp offers uber luxury in the middle of nowhere

Elemental Jawai serves up many moments for those who seek...of leopards on sun-baked hills and deep silence textured by birdsong

signature imprinted in the dusty road; an Indian rock python slithering across the road; spotting a hyena scavenging on a kill; an avian orchestra starting up at sunset; grazing buffaloes with mynahs on their backs; a hare transfixed in the headlights of our jeep at dusk; local women carrying sacks of grass on their heads yet sauntering with unconscious grace; scrambling up a bare hillock to discover a forgotten abandoned temple next to a leopard's lair.

Our ultimate sighting happened one morning when a wan sun sprayed the landscape with its honey-gold rays, lighting up a hilltop temple with a divine aura while a gentle morning breeze rippled through the tawny grassland beyond. The shrill call of a peacock fractured the deep velvety silence of early dawn and doves cooed but our eyes were fixed on the folds of the hill in front of us with a temple snuggled on a ledge.

Suddenly, the air exploded with a series of low growls.

And then we saw the lightning-like flash of tawny flesh as two sub-adult leopards grappled with each other briefly and then disappeared into a crevice. The air was as taut as a bow-string, and thrummed with suspense. "Chacha Kaan must be here," our naturalist whispered, as though referring to a friendly uncle. Chacha Kaan, it turned out, is an eight-year-old male leopard, the alpha male. Lithe and powerful, his right ear is smaller than the left (hence the name).

"Chacha Kaan is a troublemaker, he tends to stir things up. He is not the father of the two cubs that we just saw and they were agitated because of his presence," he continued.

Like an unfolding narrative, a *dhoti*-clad priest with a flowing beard, eyes turned heavenward, chose to descend from his cave temple down a flight of steps hewn into the face of the hill. We watched in amazement as he strolled by nonchalantly, despite the fact that a leopard sat on a rocky ledge directly above him. Minutes later, a female leopard emerged from a bush and sauntered up the same steps. It was an electrifying cameo, showcasing the happy co-existence of man and beast.

Elemental Jawai serves up many moments like these for those who seek...of leopards on sun-baked hills, of deep silence textured by birdsong and a wilderness that seems to whisper to itself tales of magic and wildlife lore. 