SANCTUARY ASIA
2021

"India's most successful conservation tourism entrepreneur."

COURTESY: JAISAL SINGH

The *Sanctuary* Interview

Meet Jaisal Singh

Conservationist. Responsible Tourism Entrepreneur. Polo Player

He virtually grew up in Ranthambhore some years before Sanctuary *was born... in the same forest, under the same banyan tree, under the ramparts of the massive Ranthambhore Fort. Young Jaisal and* Sanctuary *were both mentored by the late Fateh Singh Rathore, credited with almost single-handedly turning this wilderness into one of the world's best known tiger habitats. Now one of India's most successful conservation tourism entrepreneurs, Jaisal Singh founded and heads the globally acclaimed SUJÁN – a model of positive-impact wildlife tourism. He also champions the use of electric vehicles, and the phase out of the internal combustion engine.*

Jaisal, I have seen you turn from a boy into a man of the world. Who were your key influences? Several people. Fateh Singh Rathore, or Fateh *Kaka* as I fondly called him, influenced my early life. He helped me cultivate an understanding of the wild, particularly Ranthambhore. Much of my primordial memory and knowledge of these forests came from him – and we were especially close when I was growing up. Today, my wife Anjali and I share a special, subliminal bond that brings out the best in each of us. In particular, our shared passion for wildlife and nature is reflected in all we create and do together.

Polo, Modern School Barakhamba and you… what brought you together? The link with Modern School is an obviously filial one, from both my paternal and maternal sides. I have always had a love for Polo, and all things equestrian, while my family has been associated with the Modern School from its earliest days, when they established an almost hereditary bond with the institution, something that has continued with my own appointment to its Management Committee.

How are the big three behemoths – politics, government and economics, your subjects at Collingham College in London, impacting the wildernesses you love? Wildlife and wildernesses are directly impacted by how the politics of both policy and government play out. I believe the single greatest threat to wildlife and biodiversity is mindless land use – habitats are snatched away from wildlife and subjected to devastation in the name of "development", for "economic" progress. Of course, economic development is a critical necessity, but I believe a better balance between the interests of wildernesses and those of the economy is possible. Our economy cannot survive if our habitats aren't thriving. More than anything, the benefits of conservation and protecting wildernesses must serve the economic interests of local communities who live in and around these habitats, whether through employment or other measures.

Is Ranthambhore the tiger landscape you, or your Fateh *Kaka*, might have wanted it to be? The answer to that has to be yes and no. I believe Fateh *Kaka* would have been as disappointed as I have been with the excessive meddling and dishevelment of the natural landscape in the name of infrastructural development as I currently am. Pristine areas have been irrevocably affected by construction and many lie in various states of degradation. Yet, Ranthambhore has this almost magical way of bouncing back and regenerating itself. I think he would have been overjoyed, as I am with the knowledge that tigers are now populating several districts of Rajasthan.

Let's move to tourism. What drew you to Africa and would you hold Ranthambhore out as a model for wildlife and nature tourism in India? The African continent is like a calling that appeals to something very prehistoric and primordial within us. It is a raw attraction to the landscape, the scale of the wilderness and the profusion of species, the vibrance of its communities, all this and more that has drawn me to Africa from the time I first went there, decades ago. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Anjali and I have always spent a portion of our year there together.

Ranthambhore is unique, in that few places – and nowhere in Africa – are interwoven with as much history and diversity. With a few minor policy alterations, Ranthambhore can flourish into an even more outstanding wildlife destination. Rajasthan has benefitted from having successive governments that have generally been "pro-conservation" and built policies for the betterment of tourism and wildlife. We need to build on some of those policies, work with the best minds in conservation tourism, both in India and Africa. I have no doubt that Ranthambhore can offer wildlife experiences on par with the best in the world.

How badly has the pandemic affected the SUJÁN Group? Our case is no exception to the general devastation that hit the tourism industry the world over. However, I believe our response has been quite different from that of others in our sector. SUJÁN is perhaps unique as a hospitality enterprise in India that did not lay off a single employee on account of cutbacks. Furthermore, we employed good, old-fashioned and simple Keynesian economic principles of benefitting the greatest number of people through our massive renovation and refurbishment programme by procuring locally, employing locally and distributing jobs – from technicians to suppliers – locally, at a time when rural Rajasthan was reeling under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our conservation efforts, including our monitoring, rewilding, anti-poaching and research programmes, did not cease to operate for a single day, even while our properties remained closed for well over a year.

You have always said that tourism is a wildlife conservation tool. Where do communities, as entrepreneurs, fit into the scheme of things? Local communities must be the primary benficiaries in and around the wilderness areas they inhabit. They are the inherent custodians of the habitats around them and work with other organisations and individuals who are driven to conserve our wildernesses for future generations, as partners, customers and suppliers. As an example, in Jawai, just 12 rooms of our tented camp support livelihoods and employment across a dozen villages locally, and 84 per cent of our employees are locals, almost a 100 per cent of our suppliers and vendors are local and we work with local farmers to procure the majority of our ingredients, dairy, vegetables and other groceries. Not merely this, as owners and custodians of their lands, communities can benefit enormously from an alteration in land-usage, moving from agriculture to rewilding their land to increase the habitat area for wildlife, while boosting their economy.

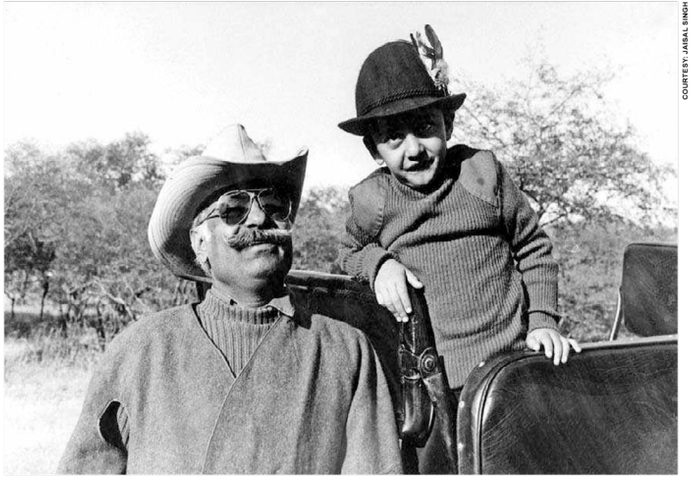
Exclusive or largescale wildlife tourism? Your prescriptions for India? Sustainable, positive impact tourism is the only way forward, in my view, and that is my mantra. I truly believe India has room for us all. What we do not have time for are unethical, unsustainable practices. Wildlife tourism needs to be better managed with established best practices on regulating tourism. There is definitely a need to recognise the difference between tourists who visit our wildernesses for sensationalism and the more patient, committed travellers who raise awareness. Those who contribute to conservation should have the option of being able to explore and enjoy our wildernesses without the unnecessary distractions that commercial tourism brings with it.

Are you optimistic, or pessimistic about the future of wildernesses in India? And does Anjali share your position? Despite the news we hear everyday of habitat destruction, poaching cases, depletion of forest cover, rising pollution and so on, I don't think any of us who care about wildernesses and the biodiversity they support have the privilege to be pessimistic about the future. Each of us, in our personal capacity, has the potential to contribute to conservation. I think more people are conscious about environmental issues than before, and that is a cause for optimism. Both Anjali and I manage to find reasons for optimism in our daily work and lives. We both refuse to allow pessimism to deter us from our commitment to conservation, despite all odds.

Apart from wildlife lessons learned by osmosis, what has been your single-most take away from Fateh Singh Rathore's incredible life? Never give up. You never lose until you give up.

FACING PAGE *Jaisal, his little son (middle) and father (left) while exploring one of the best known tiger habitats in the world – Ranthambhore.*

BELOW *Jaisal as a child with Fateh Singh Rathore, who he says greatly influenced his keen interest and knowledge of wild habitats.*



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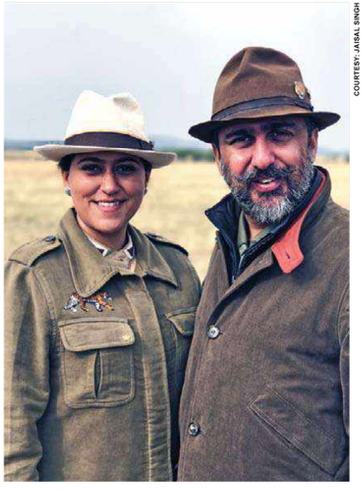

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ABOVE *Jaisal and his wife, Anjali. The duo are passionate explorers of wild habitats across the world, and are keen on passing on their love of the natural world to their children.*