

## Day of the undercat

Nomad and leopard alike add a burst of colour to a coffee-table book set in the stark, rocky terrain of Rajasthan



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EXPAND IMAGE

And while the sun shines on the tiger, this other cat - utterly beautiful and graceful - lurks in the shadows. Rarely spotted in its natural lair, the elusive leopard more often than not enters our mindscape when it's making news as a 'menace' on the prowl, presumably bloodthirsty. And stoned, beaten, burnt for the sheer audacity of being in spaces that were once forests, but are now the gated domains of Homo sapiens. And in one such city that I endured (I cannot honestly say lived in), I know the leopard did too; the wonder of its presence contained in the soft impressions on sand, and in the terror-stricken whine of my dog. I wiped off the pugmark, held the secret close to my heart, along with a prayer for its invisibility.

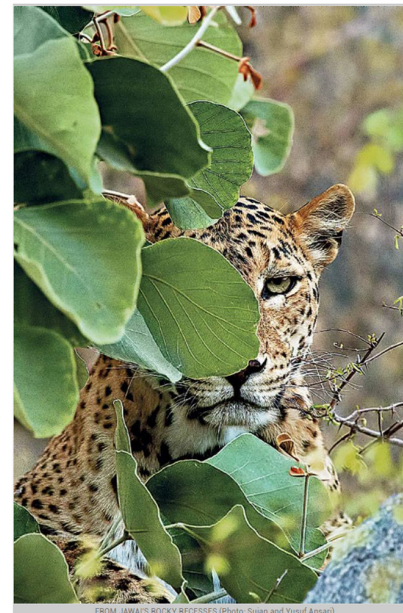


**JAWAI: Land of the Leopard**  
By Anjali & Jaisal Singh  
Sujan Art  
Price \$120  
Pages 284

For a visible leopard is likely a dead leopard; if 'lucky', it will be 'rescued', and carted off in barred cage-and denied its freedoms forever.

And so, when I look at the gorgeous coffee-table book that lands on my table, I take a deep breath, revelling in the fact that this Undercat has got its place in the sun; and is being celebrated in word and in art in JAWAI: The Land of the Leopard. The book is an experiential journey to Jawai, a tiny village in Rajasthan earlier off the map, now a huge draw for 'big cat' aficionados. It's authored in lush photographs, delicate sketches and crisp text.

JAWAI is a stunning visual gallery of leopards and their seemingly casual coexistence with the most vibrant of India's rural folk-the nomadic rabaris and villagers of Rajasthan. The landscape of the ancient 850 million-year-old outcrops of Godwar is raw, stark; the people and the wildlife provide the life and the colour. It's very Incredible India. The region is a mosaic of forests, fields, reservoirs and supports an array of biodiversity such as wolves, flamingoes, cranes, hedgehogs, foxes, rusty-spotted cats, scorpions etc.



FROM JAWAI'S ROCKY RECESSES (Photo: Sujan and Yusuf Ansari)

The author-photographers' resort in Jawai has redefined elegant luxury in wildlife tourism, and as you turn the pages, you might find shades of self-indulgence. But it is a luxury well-afforded, since the authors and their camp are now part of the story being scripted in Jawai. Therein lies the real value of the book. Jawai is a crucial link in a leopard stronghold comprising the Kumbalgarh National Park, the jungles of Mount Abu and the hills of Jalore. Jawai is unprotected, it is tolerance and veneration that has shielded the leopard since time immemorial. But as the winds of change blow through this hitherto remote region, a new order which brings in the economic advantages of wilderness may show a new way forward to nurture such coexistence, and conserve. Not just for Jawai, but other such hidden wild landscapes as well.

*The author is an award-winning journalist, wildlife conservationist and a former member of the National Board for Wildlife*