

THE HERALD SUN

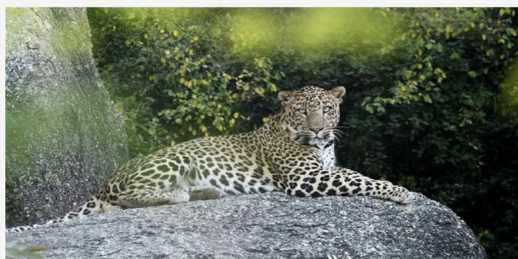
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“There’s no word for this experience. It’s not just a safari. It’s all about the local people and their culture.”

The Daily Telegraph

Jawai safari camp in Rajasthan, India

ROB MCFARLAND ESCAPE FEBRUARY 28, 2015 12:00AM



A leopard checks out tourists from the safety of a rocky hill. Picture: Anjali Singh

“THIS ruins everything we know about leopards,” says our guide excitedly. From our jeep we watch, spellbound, as five of the planet’s most anti-social animals return home after a night of hunting and disappear into the fissures of a granite outcrop.

Leopards are supposed to be solitary animals. Mothers normally abandon their cubs after 18 months and males will often kill young so they can mate. Yet here, on an isolated rocky outcrop in the Pali district of Rajasthan, India, a unique situation has evolved where the region’s leopards have become tolerant of each other.

Incredibly, the leopards aren’t the outcrop’s only residents. Halfway up is a small temple and five minutes after the leopards pass out of sight, an elderly priest emerges. Dressed in an orange turban and flowing white robes, he embarks on what is quite possibly the world’s most dangerous commute.



Entrance to Jawai flanked by Rabaris. Picture: Rob McFarland

Carrying a wooden stick under his arm, he slowly descends a flight of stone steps that leads to the cave the leopards just slunk into. We watch with increasing concern as he disappears behind a large boulder and into the cave. The seconds tick by and there’s a collective sigh of relief when he emerges, unscathed, and nonchalantly continues his descent. Clearly, the leopards have learnt to tolerate more than just each other.

The drive back to camp takes us not through the sort of untouched wilderness you normally associate with game viewing, but instead through villages and farmland. Women in brightly-coloured saris wave while tending crops of mustard seed and we frequently have to give way to red-turbaned Rabaris, the region’s traditional herdsmen, and their flocks of sheep and goats.

Technically, we’re on safari, but it doesn’t feel like it. We’re not in a conservancy or a national park; the land is privately owned, yet this is one of the best places in India to see leopards.

It’s only when we get back to Jawai, our luxury tented camp, that things start to feel more safari-like. We’re greeted with cold towels and refreshing glasses of ginger and lemon tea before being escorted to a granite-tiled dining tent for breakfast. Next door is an elegantly furnished lounge with fawn sofas and vintage luggage trunks that leads to a stylish outdoor pool.



Morning tea while overlooking rocky outcrop. Picture: Rob McFarland

Accommodation is in 10 steel-framed tented suites with views over grassy bushland towards a horizon studded with granite outcrops. Each tent is appointed with a mosquito-net draped bed, modern stainless steel furniture and striking black-and-white leopard prints. There’s a spacious ensuite bathroom and a covered terrace complete with leather-topped writing desk should inspiration strike. The camp opened in December 2013 so everything still looks and feels shiny and new plus you get modern conveniences such as reverse cycle air-conditioning and Wi-Fi.

There are two game drives each day — one departing at the rather un-holiday hour of 5:45am and another at 4:30pm, with the rest of the time free for reading, napping, taking spas and eating.

As with most safaris, the food is relentless. Breakfast is a western-style feast of toast, cereals and a choice of eggs. Lunches feature dishes such as pan fried lake surmai (a local fish) with lemon butter sauce followed by flourless chocolate cake with homemade vanilla ice-cream. In the unlikely event you’re hungry again by 4pm, there’s an afternoon tea of freshly made cakes and biscuits. There are more drinks and snacks while on safari and a traditional Indian dinner — such as chicken curry with gobi masala and black dal — when you return. Unless you have monk-like restraint, you will leave heavier than when you arrive.



Tented accommodation at Jawai. Picture: Rob McFarland

Weather permitting, dinners are taken outside and on our second night staff lead us to a lantern-lit clearing with a makeshift bar and tables curled around a roaring fire. Over drinks I chat with head guide Adam who was lured here from Londolozi, one of South Africa’s most prestigious private game reserves. He explains that the appeal of Jawai was not only the opportunity to start something from scratch, but also to observe the uniquely harmonious relationship between the local community and the leopards.

He tells a story of a local farmer who recently lost a young buffalo to a leopard. In other parts of India, the leopard would have been shot or poisoned but the man sought no compensation or retribution. Shortly before our visit a man was killed by a leopard in the Himalayan foothills north of Delhi.

Over the course of four game drives we see a total of nine leopards, a remarkable tally for such an elusive animal. Of course, sightings aren’t guaranteed and they’ll sometimes go several days without seeing any at all.

While leopards are the big drawcard, there’s other wildlife in the area too, including blue antelope, striped hyenas and a remarkable array of birdlife. Our guide once spotted 86 different species in one day.

Surprisingly, my most memorable animal encounter at Jawai is not with leopards. One afternoon we meet a Rabari who is shepherding a flock of around 150 goats between two villages. We join him and walk for an hour, swept along by a bleating wave of twitching ears and tails. It’s a comical spectacle and he looks on with bewildered amusement as I laugh and take photos. The encounter reminds me of something Adam said the night before: “There’s no word for this experience. It’s not just a safari. It’s all about the local people and their culture.”