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## Rajasthan leopard safari: Spot the boundaries



A pioneering safari camp in Rajasthan focuses on a thriving local leopard population. A key to the cats' vitality could be the absence of fences.

Which are more conspicuous – stripes or spots? This was the question I mullied over on the drive through southern Rajasthan towards Jawai. A previous visit to India had taken me into Jungle Book territory at a critical time for the nation's tiger population. A temporary ban would soon come into force, prohibiting tourism in tiger reserves, and even though I'd been able to access two of Madhya Pradesh's finest – Pench and Kanha – I'd been warned not to expect to see the increasingly threatened big cats.

Miraculously, an adult female obliged – perhaps in some way a cry for help not to lock the gates and leave her to the mercy of poachers. While I'd been extremely fortunate, the small population of leopards remained elusive, preferring to hunt during the cool of night. So, as I bumped over the scrubby, sun-baked tracks towards Jawai Leopard Camp, I decided to focus on the landscape, rather than the headline wildlife this time.

The camp reopened this autumn for its second season at the lip of the Aravali Hills. It is owned by Sujan, the same pioneering company that introduced the luxury safari camp concept to Ranthambore National Park with Sher Bagh in 2000 – Rajasthan's most popular park for tiger safaris. Sujan's owner, Jaisal Singh, grew up in a family of conservationists and saw a unique opportunity at Jawai. It is a region thought to have a population of between 40-50 leopards, one of the densest in India. Crucially though, this isn't a national park – its name flows from a local lake where flamingos decorate the water like lotus flowers.

I hopped into one of Jawai's customised 4x4s to complete the final approach with South African naturalist guides Adam and Nicky. The absence of gates or fences was notable. “The land isn't protected,” Adam would later explain. Singh spent considerable time surveying the landscape before choosing the 20-acre location for his latest luxury camp. He settled on a picturesque plot framed by two beehive-like hills and little else. For now, his remains the only such camp.

Unlike the jungles of Ranthambore and the parks of Madhya Pradesh, the setting here is

pretty pastoral. Crops are sown in renegade fashion during the mercilessly brief fertile period after the monsoon. I'd arrived to witness it in full flourish. The fields were seemingly organised into a neat patchwork of sesame and mustard saplings. Bundles of maize were being gathered up by timid farmers, as curious of us as we were of them. Nomadic Rabari herdsmen in alabaster-white tunics and dhotis (trousers), with blood-red turbans ushered sheep along the sandy tracks as their camels nibbled at neem trees, the only traffic I'd see during my stay. As we drove slowly past hedges of yellow-speckled euphorbia, our slipstream made the sound of gushing water through the succulents: an aural delusion of sorts, since the fierce sun was hard at work baking the land.

Life at camp was no less ravishing. The dozen air-conditioned tents are tucked into tall grasses, their white canvas concealing supremely luxurious living quarters – power showers, king-size beds, double sinks and Wi-Fi, all as sleekly monochrome as the black and white canvases that hint at Singh's skill for wildlife photography. A female leopard, captured tantalisingly close up, gazed at me from above the bed. It was going to be difficult to avoid pinning my hopes on seeing one.

Happily, there was Colin. The Scottish geologist had arrived in India with Nicky, his girlfriend, the previous day – she from Singita Game Reserve in South Africa, he from an expedition ship in Antarctica. And when it came to rocks, Colin was bordering on delirium. While Nicky tried to explain leopards' natural rhythms and social structure, he spritzed our evening safari drive with outcries of astonishment and awe, explaining how the landscape here was far older than the Aravali hills that surrounded us. Hundreds of millions of years old in fact, the granite forming by the slow cooling of magma that gives the rock its granular, sometimes sparkling appearance. “You come here to see leopards, but the hills have been here far longer – without them there would be no leopards,” he teased. We drove through the village of Sena, and past the “Oval” where a game of cricket was taking place to the rapturous applause of babblers, whose communal chirruping sounded like a flock of electric sheep; a crocodile made ripples in the lake as we approached the shore. At Devgiri rock, a priest was locking up his temple, created in a great fissure where the leopard above my bed had been photographed. “They're seen as guardians,” Nicky explained, as I pondered how man and beast seemingly co-exist in mutual respect here.

After the sun had dipped below the horizon – sending the babblers, bee-eaters, hoopoes, rollers and peacocks skywards – as it stole its warmth away, we got lucky. Stationed at the foot of Devgiri rock, we waited patiently, entertained by a troupe of dancing langurs while Nicky's torch scanned the surface until two flashes of reflective tapetum lucidum revealed our target. A female leopard was emerging for the night. These shy creatures retreat to the cool of the caves during the day; she had more reason to do so, revealed by two more flashes by her side. With the aid of some binoculars, I could just make out the silhouette of her cub.

After a sublime supper of Rajasthani lamb lal maas curry and Indian cabernet sauvignon lit by candles, lanterns and moonlight back at the camp, I felt I'd barely slept before my alarm went off for the dawn drive. The moon had disappeared from sight, revealing a neck-tilting display of diamond freckles saturating the indigo-ink sky. The sounds and smells were more intense in the dark, cattle and sheep replaced by skittish nilgai bulls, foxes and solitary owls. This time, it was Colin who spotted it, melting into his beloved rocks as the sun gradually revealed its form close to where we'd left its mother the previous evening. Innocently looking out across the landscape as farmers returned to work, the big eyes signalled one of the cubs, waiting for its mother to return.

Having now seen two generations of leopard, it was easy to relax into the arcadian rhythms of the countryside, breathing in the sweet scent of the crops, listening to the birds, feeling the cool air as it gradually warmed with the dawn, waving to the children who rushed out to greet our 4x4 each time we drove through the village. One of the huge benefits to the visitor of there being no fences or permits is that there's no queuing up at park gates and nature drives can be spontaneous. And since Jawai is, for now, the only camp to have set up here, there is only a maximum of six cars out at one time.

On our final evening, Varun, the camp's field operations manager, took me out on another drive. “This time we'll give the leopards a rest,” he explained as we threaded through the fields up to a towering rock above Sena. On the demanding hike up, we passed shepherds and their flocks on the lower flanks, the evening babble of children and bleating sheep gradually getting louder as we gained height. A flag marked out a shrine at the crest, where I turned around to take in the view. The village, home to around 1,500 residents spread out at the foot of the rock, the lake streaked rose gold and copper behind it. Rising between the two was Devgiri rock, home to our family of leopards, closer to the village than I was now.



A bottle of sparkling Indian wine and a picnic rug were produced as I sat down to take in the astonishing view, marvelling at the leopards' proximity not just to humans, but also their livestock. Varun explained that the leopards prey mostly on peacocks, only occasionally taking a sheep or goat – and even then, this is considered auspicious; because the cats often seek out temples they are regarded as holy

custodians. This is resonant, given that in other parts of India, big cat attacks often result in revenge killings. It's also where Jawai comes in – the camp now has the responsibility of helping to monitor and conserve their population, as well as operating sensitively in what was previously an un-touristed region.

On the way back to camp, we stopped at a small temple for the night-time puja. The priest beckoned us into his pitch-black shrine where I was invited to light incense and coconut husks, before he recited prayers, rang bells and banged drums to invoke the gods. Afterwards, he brewed a pot of chai, which we drank cross-legged by candle-light on the floor. It was an evocative end to the rarest of experiences, which could only have been enhanced had a leopard arrived to keep guard at the door.