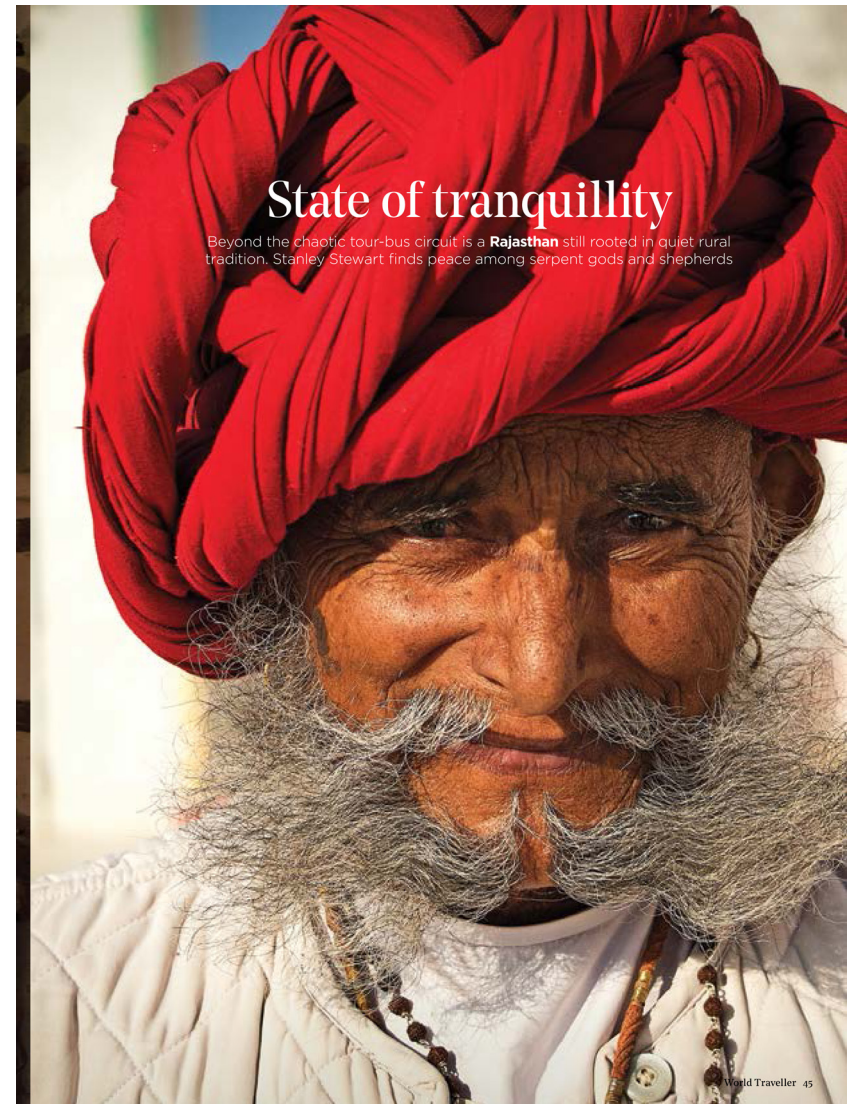


WORLD TRAVELLER

November 2017

“SUJÁN Jawai is a camp dedicated to leopards, to tracking them and protecting them.”



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Rajasthan DESTINATIONS

They call it godhulivela in Hindi. The hour of the cow dust: day's end, when long shadows rake across the fields and shepherds herd their cattle and sheep homeward.

Silhouetted against the sun, the shepherds are iconic figures with their long crooks, white robes and outlandish red turbans. I was following them home to their village, in the cooling afternoon, along a lane in Rajasthan, breathing in the aromas of the country: cattle, wood-smoke, sage. This is the rural India I have come to find, a place where days are measured by the coming and going of the cows.

At the village, I knew Pukia would be waiting for me beneath the wide neem tree – to hand me the battered trumpet to wake the gods, to fret about his sons, and to tell me his stories about the great days when they took thousands of sheep and goats on the annual migration to the Ganges. I was only three days into a week's journey across rural Rajasthan and already I had found myself a new best friend with a seat in the village square.

As India's most glamorous state, Rajasthan manages to corral most of the country's romantic clichés into a single region: extravagant palaces, intricately carved temples, charismatic tribesmen, hilltop forts, saris in startling colours, bazaars of silver and spices, and maharajahs with cut-glass accents and vintage Rolls-Royces. In Rajasthan, things tend to excess: turbans are the breadth of dustbin lids, moustaches the length of broad swords and landscapes as wide as a continent. Antelopes bound across long horizons, peacocks spread huge fans of feathers, while somewhere leopards pad through dappled shadows.

But for all its glamour and big-name attractions, Rajasthan is also a region where you can still find village India, away from the crowds and traffic, from the chaos and noise and stress that can be such a feature of Indian travels. In just a week in Rajasthan, with a car and a driver and local guides, I got to see India at ground level, a rural, tranquil place too often overlooked by travellers hurrying between those extravagant palaces. In Rajasthan, you can still find a seat in the village square and savour the sweet hour of the cow dust.

My first stop was Chhatra Sagar, a tented camp atop a 19th-century dam. Built by a local nobleman, Thakur Chhatra

Singh of Nimaj, the dam holds monsoon waters for farmers. In the days of the Raj, the lovely countryside of Chhatra Sagar became a favoured destination for seasonal camps, for grand picnics and for legendary shooting parties. The Thakur's great grandchildren have revived the tradition with their luxury camp.

The neighbouring village was so deep in rural quietude that traffic was limited to stray cows, the odd bullock and cart, and a couple of women carrying water pots on their heads. In houses and courtyards, a handful of artisans were at work. The potter was throwing water pots in his courtyard for Diwali, the season of new pots. The cobbler was making a pair of dashing shoes for Begum Khan, the schoolteacher's wife. The silversmith was making an intricate pair of earrings for an upcoming wedding.

“Things tend to excess here: turbans are the breadth of dustbin lids, while moustaches are the length of broad swords”

Pukia, my new BFF, was a presiding presence, a village elder in the shade of the neem tree, and on each of my three visits to the village, inevitably I would find him fishing a hand-rolled cheroot out of his turban. In Rajasthan, a man's turban is like a woman's handbag, containing everything from money to clean underwear.

Pukia and I bonded over the fact that we both belonged to the priestly caste. He was the bhopaji, the keeper of the village temple, a position that apparently went back seven generations in his family. I was the son of a vicar. In my family it was, admittedly, more of a single-generation thing – it had died out with me – but Pukia, after some initial doubts, kindly overlooked my inability to maintain caste tradition.

As we sat together after the hour of the cow dust, Pukia told me of the great migrations he had led. Pasturage can be thin in Rajasthan, so they herded their flocks more than 1,000km east to the valley of the Ganges to ensure the sheep and goats had enough grazing in the dry seasons. It was an epic journey with up to 10,000 head of cattle, and took two months each way.

“But some bad places are there,” Pukia said, wagging his head. “People were all

the time trying to steal goats. We were lighting fires and staying awake in the night with our slingshots. There were many battles with miscreants.” This was India's equivalent of the cattle wars of Dawson City – goat rustlers and the great slingshot battles of the northern plains.

Pukia was much preoccupied with the foolhardiness of his son who had recently returned from Bangalore with a battered second-hand Fiat. There was united disapproval from the family who were of the firm belief that any spare cash should be invested in gold not thrown away on automobiles. “A car?” Pukia said, wide-eyed. “What is he thinking? What is the bus for? It is coming every week.” In the evenings, after the arrival of the sheep and goats, we had masala chai – tea with spices, made with goat's milk. Then, lifting embers from

the cooking fire, and carrying them on a metal tray, he beckoned me to follow.

“Come,” Pukia said. He still had hopes I might fulfil my caste duties. “The Gods are waiting.” At the temple we left our shoes outside in the empty lane and took the embers in to light the butter lamps in front of the images of Shiva. Then Pukia handed me an old trumpet while he took the conch shell. Together we blew to alert the gods that we had come. Pukia's conch had a deep resonant note. In spite of my priestly heritage, my trumpeting was less successful – it sounded more like a goose with a severe bronchial issue.

But it was volume that counted here, not tunefulness. After a few moments of blowing, Pukia leaned forward and flipped an electric switch on the walls. The pride of the village, a bizarre Heath Robinson contraption, jerked into action. With wheels and pulleys, the machine created a cacophony of drums, cymbals and bells. Pukia wagged his head. “Modern technology,” he said. “What are they thinking of next?” A three-hour drive took me further into Rajasthan, to the outskirts of Deogarh, where I stayed at Dev Shree, a colonial-style country house with deep verandas,



Clockwise from this image: The Royal Tented Camp at Suján, where a rural, untouched Rajasthan awaits; leopards can still be spotted in India; a young Pukia works as potter in his village.





cushion-strewn divans and croquet lawns. Owned by the gregarious Shatrunjai Singh, a scion of the local noble family, it had the kind of rural ease you might find in a village in Dorset – had you been visiting Dorset in the 19th century. On an evening stroll in town I stopped for a shave at a splendid establishment the width of a cupboard, with old-fashioned shaving mugs, razor straps, pictures of Bollywood actresses, and the kind of barber chairs not seen since Clark Gable last had his moustache trimmed. Inder's shop operated under an irresistible tag line: "God Make the Man... I Make the Gentleman."

Shatrunjai was a train enthusiast and an energetic host, and the next morning we boarded the Kambhigat to Phulad train on a country line so quiet that there were only a half-dozen passengers in our carriage of wooden seats. An old metre gauge line, it climbed a long ridge of the Aravalli Hills at the breathtaking speed of zokph. Views opened over distant valleys. Across a country of thorn scrub and rock, goats browsed, women collected firewood and the occasional thoughtful cow watched us pass. As we went through the pitch-dark tunnels, the passengers leapt from their seats to howl through the open windows, a tradition of the line in which adults try to persuade children that wolves live in the tunnels. At Goram Ghat, we were expecting crowds of monkeys accustomed to enjoying biscuits thrown from the train. But on this fine morning, no monkeys appeared.

"They are lying low. There must be a leopard in the vicinity," Shatrunjai explained.

Tigers may be India's iconic animal but in rural areas of Rajasthan, it is leopards that

capture the imagination. Further west along the Aravalli Hills, not far from the 15th-century fort of Kumbhalgarh, is Jawai, one of the great leopard habitats of India. SUJAN Jawai is a camp dedicated to leopards, to tracking them and protecting them.

This is a haunting landscape. The ploughed fields and the wide stretches of pastureland are broken by granite kopjes of smooth-faced boulders, great outcrops of piled rock in sensual shapes that Henry Moore might have carved. Full of nooks and caves, these hills are the ideal habitat for leopards.

Morning and evening for two days I set out on game drives in an open 4WD with Yusuf Ansari, head of wildlife for the property. Peacocks swayed beneath glamorous tails, partridges scuttled away through the brush, while gangs of babblers invaded the roadside bushes. The smell of the dew-laden wheat, like fresh hops, filled the morning. Somewhere, a distance off, a train hooted mournfully.

Yusuf was explaining that SUJAN Jawai was not just a leopard-sighting experience for visitors. They also study the animals here, keeping notes about the various individuals and their relationships, and trying to expand the leopard habitat. Working with locals, they lease or buy land and plant it with native species conducive to wildlife, hoping to connect the isolated granite outcrops with wilderness corridors. In a couple of seasons, they've already seen considerable results as leopards and their prey have quickly moved into these new areas.

When we paused for a morning coffee atop a high ridge, a radio call came from

one of the camp trackers. There'd been a sighting. Climbing back into the 4WD, we set out across open country to one of the granite hills to the north. Between a screen of euphorbia and a glen of jujube trees, we waited, binoculars poised.

On the ridgeline above us was a troop of langur monkeys giving their alarm call, a kind of coughing bark. Two scouting monkeys had descended the precipitous rocks. We followed their gaze to a smooth ledge. And there sat our leopard, the dominant male of the area, rock-coloured, magnificent, reclining like a sultan in the early sun. The monkeys gazed down at him with a mix of anxiety and awe.

That evening we went for drinks on the shores of Jawai Lake. The sun was setting beyond the Aravalli Hills, and birds flew out of a rose-coloured sky – cormorants and egrets, night herons and silverbills. A flock of Indian skimmers passed low over their own reflections on the surface of the water, while a painted stork lumbered away to the west. Beyond, we could hear the chatter of flamingoes.

"This kind of solitude is not the usual idea of India," Yusuf said.

We went home past trees loud with sparrow larks. A huge hill of smooth granite loomed above us.

"These hills are all home to local gods," Yusuf said. He pointed to the steps carved in rock faces. "This one is sacred to a serpent god." High up against the sky we could see the small shrine. And then next to it, we spotted the silhouette of a leopard.

"This is what saves them," Yusuf said. "Sometimes leopards will take livestock, but the locals never hunt them. And it is because they inhabit the same heights as the gods. To the locals, the leopards are divine guardians." In the lane, we came upon a herdsman taking his cattle home. Veils of dust rose from the hooves, softening the last hours of daylight. Tall and erect, sporting a huge red turban above a moustache wider than his cheeks, the man smiled and waved. It was the sweet hour of the cow dust in rural India, a place to remember when you find yourself in Delhi's howling traffic.

Inspired to travel? To book a trip, call +91 4 316 6666 or visit dnatatravel.com

Words: Stanley Stewart / The Sunday Times Travel Magazine / News & Features from the Indian subcontinent. Images courtesy of Poon Chaudhri, SUJAN Jawai, Vedant

DESTINATIONS Rajasthan

Tracking leopards with guides from SUJAN Jawai. **Opposite:** A shepherd with his goats in the Rajasthan countryside.

"Full of nooks and caves, the Aravalli Hills are the ideal habitat for leopards"

