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LIFESTYLE

Animal adventures in Rajasthan



The leopards of Jawai Bandh frequent the tribal farmers' walls, appearing frequently in temples and villages. But the last recorded attack on a human was 100 years ago. PHOTO: SUJAN LUXURY

Take a walk on the wild side with glamping, leopard safaris and horseback riding through the desert in this Indian state

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Jill Alphonso

Rajasthan in north-western India may be known for its bustling cities of Jodhpur and Jaipur.

But close by are ultra-luxe glamping (or glanzorous camping) destinations that will have you experiencing leopard safaris, riding through the desert on camels, horseback and enjoying “raddoosher” ponies on sand dunes.

It is 7:15am and the morning light has lit the surrounding desert in tones of gold and our jeep is winding its way through the scrub land.

This is Rajasthan, I think.

LUXURY CAMPS IN THE DESERT



The Royal Tented Suite at Jawai Leopard Camp is the ultimate in luxury and has a private pool. PHOTO: SUJAN LUXURY

Rajasthan is highly diverse culturally and it is said that the dialect - and even the style of dress, such as how men wrap their turbans - changes every 40km or so.

A trip to this northern part of India usually entails heading to Jaipur, the state capital, or to Jodhpur, once the cultural seat of Rajasthan, where the ancient Rajputana kingdoms held sway.

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In my head are images of leopards roaming through darkened temples, of birds drinking nectar and horses with their breath smelling of sweet grass and berries. I close my eyes and all I can see is the desert landscape and the sun rushing over the golden sands.



She sold me on the wilds of Rajasthan, famed for its vast desert that has unique flora and fauna, and which can feel as remote as the moon.

Dotted among the landscape are luxury glamping resorts such as Jawai Leopard Camp.

In India, royal camps and tents feature in its long, storied history and this has fit in well with the rise of the glamping trend around the world.

In India, wilderness camps have been around for decades, but newer properties, such as Jawai Leopard Camp, opened in 2013, are the by-word in sophistication and are the must-see for glamping fans.

Where similar camps may have countless tents and facilities such as shared bathrooms, Jawai features only nine canvas tents and one luxury “royal” suite, which comes with its own pool. You will find hourly bedding, stylish furniture, a private verandah with views of the grasslands of Jawai Bandh and a butler on call for each tent.

Ms Herz warns that here, one does not expect to see wildlife the way one does in Kenya, where hippopotamuses, lions, giraffes and, yes, even leopards, come at you in breathtaking droves.

The leopards of Jawai Bandh are true to their reportedly elusive nature and one must be prepared to not see at all. There was reportedly a 12-day stretch where the big cats did not show themselves.



SUNDAY TIMES GRAPHICS

“Africa is the obvious choice for safari,” says Ms Herz. “Which means that, often, your safari is crowded with other travellers.”

“In India, especially with luxury places such as Jawai Leopard Camp, few other vehicles are in the area around you to crowd for a view of the animals.”

The demand for a remote, crowd-free safari experience in India is growing.

Jacada Travel, she tells me, is working on expanding its big-cat experiences to include nearby Gujarat, where travellers will be able to spot the rare, endangered Asiatic lion.

GETTING THERE

To get to Rajasthan, most people fly to Delhi, then to Jodhpur.

Many airlines, including Singapore Airlines, fly to Delhi. From there, take an internal flight on carriers such as India's Jet Airways and Air India to Jodhpur.

Alternatively, fly on Scoot straight to Jaipur. Most glamping properties must then be accessed by car.

Some camps, such as Jawai Leopard Camp, close for the monsoon season each year. Check with each property on its open season (break dates change each year) before booking.

The weather in Rajasthan is that of a desert, where temperatures soar during the day and drop dramatically at night. The best times to go are in the spring, autumn and winter seasons.

Prices for the glamping destinations here are set at about \$700 a night (including breakfast). Suján Luxury's Jawai Leopard Camp costs \$1,200 a night. The price includes breakfast and two safari drives a day.