



The leopards of Jawai Bandh frequent the trails humans walk, appearing frequently in temples and villages. But the last recorded attack on a human was 160 years ago. PHOTO: SUJAN LUXURY

# Animal adventures in Rajasthan

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

Jill Alphonso

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

But close by are ultra-luxe glamping (or glamorous camping) destinations that will have you experiencing leopard safaris, rides through the desert on rare Marwari horses and enjoying "sundowner" picnics 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.

Craggy granite cliffs – leopard territory and which are said to be about 850 million years old – loom high overhead.

Ranger and guide Surajpal Singh and I are chatting as he drives. A call comes through over the radio controller. I cannot make out what is said, as it is in the local Rajasthani dialect, but Mr Singh's relatively relaxed demeanour changes immediately. He grabs the walkie-talkie, clips out a terse "copy that" and hits the accelerator.

I hang onto the handrail in front of me as the jeep bounces across rocks. "Mind your sides," Mr Singh calls out, an indication to keep my arms in and to duck under thorny branches as he slings the jeep into sharp turns.

The goal: to get to a spot where we can see a leopard named Nagini. The bonus would be to spot her litter of cubs, born in September. Minutes later, we enter a clearing where we see a lip of rock, perhaps 125m tall and 20m off the ground, high up in the granite cliffs.

Mr Singh cuts the engine, hands me a pair of binoculars and tells me where to look. "Wait," he says. "Wait and keep your eyes there."

It takes about 10 minutes, but suddenly, there she is – just her head coming into sight as she lies down on the granite rock at the mouth of a den. Nagini, eyes half-closed, basks in the morning light after a night of hunting.

Behind her, visible only for moments at a time, are the cubs frolicking around their mother.

One leaps up to bite her neck playfully and others caper around the trees behind her.

It is my last sighting of the leopards on a seven-day, late-October trip to Rajasthan, India's largest state by area. It houses the large and inhospitable Thar Desert.

In the four safari drives I have taken out of Jawai Leopard Camp ([sujanluxury.com/jawai](http://sujanluxury.com/jawai)), a luxe glamping destination, I have seen leopards three times.

On this last morning, I cannot help but grin widely as I peer through the binoculars.

It is a gift, as Mr Singh says, to see the magnificent cats in the wild. Two days prior to this morning sighting, we had spotted Senai, the father of Nagini's cubs.

Mr Singh tells me that these leopards of Jawai – there are about 10 active ones roaming the area – tread the same paths as humans. Yet, the last recorded leopard attack on a human was 160 years ago.

"They've learnt to live among us," says Mr Singh, a native of this area who grew up seeing these elusive creatures.

When asked if he remembers his first sighting, he shakes his head. "You grow up here with your grandfather telling you stories of leopards and you see them constantly," he says, adding that, to the villagers, leopards are sacred.

In Hindu mythology, the goddess Durga, a powerful eight-armed slayer of demons who fights against ignorance and oppression, is always described as riding a lion or tiger. Thus, all big cats are revered.

A trip to Jawai is filled not just with sightings of the cats. There are also Indian wolves, jackals and small jungle cats.

One morning, we see a troupe of langur monkeys seated on a cliff face, their chests exposed to the rising sun. They look like cinemagoers, entranced by a big screen. One monkey is lying in the pose of a bikini model, anticipating the warmth of the sun's rays.

Nearby villages are filled with traditional Rabari herdsmen who move their cattle, goats and sheep around the desert to common grazing lands each day.

It is easy to spot them by their magnificent scarlet turbans, bright against the desert landscape. The women are always clothed in swathes of colour and often walk by with jars of water – and sometimes, large bushels of animal fodder or firewood – balanced on their heads. This is Rajasthan, I think.

**LUXURY CAMPS IN THE DESERT** 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 kingdom held sway.

When presented with the opportunity to visit Rajasthan, I ask Ms Kate Herz – my London-based travel designer who is the head of Asia for Jacada Travel, a luxury travel company that tailors bespoke trips for individuals and small groups – to surprise me.

She sold me on the wilds of Rajasthan, famed for its vast Thar 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 luxury 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.

"Africa is the obvious choice for safaris," 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-



Mihir Garh is home to pure-bred Marwari horses, which experienced riders can ride into the desert. PHOTO: HOUSE OF ROHET

free safari experience in India is growing.

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

**HORSE-LOVER'S PARADISE** A day before I head to Jawai, I am taken to Mihir Garh ([houseofrohet.com/mihir\\_garh](http://houseofrohet.com/mihir_garh)), another desert treasure of only nine suites.

Mihir Garh, which was listed as one of Lonely Planet's top 10 most extraordinary hotels in 2014, is the horse-lover's secret paradise.

Equestrians from Europe and the United States know to come here because Mihir Garh is famed for its stables, which house only Marwari horses – a breed indigenous to India marked by the animals' inward-turning ears.

I am taken on a ride on one of Mihir Gahr's prized animals. An hour is all I have here, but pop star Madonna famously spent days riding with Munshi Dan, one of Mihir Garh's top equestrian guides, in 2009.

Munshi Dan is accustomed to leading visitors on long trips on horseback through the desert. These can last from a day to 10 days. One spends hours riding, stopping at mobile campsites for picnic

lunches and tea-time refreshments, he tells me.

"Make time for that next time," he says. But, he warns, this experience is not for beginners.

**A GOLDEN FORT** Like Mihir Garh, The Serai ([sujanluxury.com/the-serai](http://sujanluxury.com/the-serai)) is another oasis set in the Rajasthani sands. It is a glamping property run by Sujan Luxury – the brand behind Jawai Leopard Camp.

The Serai has 21 tented suites, each at least as large as a small apartment in Singapore, at about 1,000 sq ft.

There are no leopards or horses here, but one can expect total tranquillity amid the desert scrub.

One walks along paths lined with khejri trees – a species found only in Rajasthan – cactus and kair berry trees as birds chirp from the bushes. In the mornings, expect to hear the sounds of the common babbler, which my guide Pritam Singh Rathore tells me is "the sound of Rajasthan".

The Serai proves to be a great base from which to explore Jaisalmer, only 30 minutes from the property by car. Known as Rajasthan's Golden City, the architecture of Jaisalmer is marked by its walls, made from yellow sandstone. Many people flock to this city to explore the Jaisalmer Fort, a Unesco World Heritage site. Built in AD1156, the monument is still home to people who run hotels, restaurants and shops within the fort's walls.

An afternoon trip to the heart of Jaisalmer, followed by an evening camel ride in nearby private sand dunes, can take an entire day. But, after that, instead of traipsing into some run-of-the-mill hotel, I head back to The Serai, my private desert fantasy.

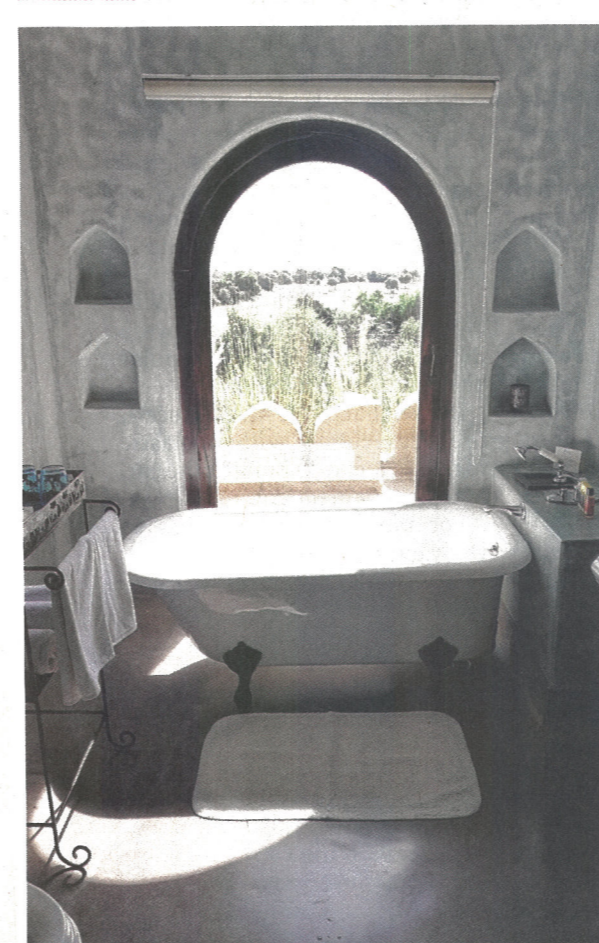
I step through the tent flap, feeling my feet hit the cool, polished sandstone floors. I sink onto the huge bed covered in blankets and throws made by local villagers.

I am filled with thoughts of the adventures I have had. 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.

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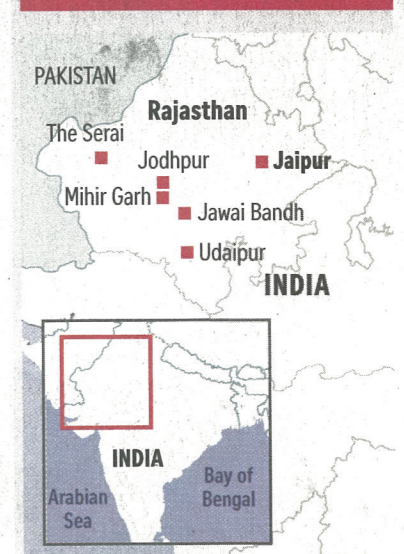
● Jill Alphonso is a freelance writer and yoga teacher. She was hosted by Jacada Travel.



(Above) The Royal Tented Suite at Jawai Leopard Camp is the ultimate in luxury and has a private pool.

(Far left) The accommodation at Mihir Garh include apartment-sized suites with claw foot tubs in bathrooms and views of the grasslands.

(Left) Jaisalmer Fort teems with colour and its walls are made from yellow sandstone. PHOTOS: JILL ALPHONSO



SUNDAY TIMES GRAPHICS

**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 (exact 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 start at about \$700 a night (including breakfast). Sujan Luxury's Jawai Leopard Camp costs \$1,200 a night. The price includes breakfast and two safari drives a day.

**TIPS**

- When travelling in India, dress modestly. Long and loose is the way to go, especially for women. Covered arms and legs and clothing that is not skin-tight is de rigueur. Women should take along a scarf to cover their heads if necessary. Be prepared to perspire during the day. However, carry at least one sweater and a pair of long pants in anticipation of cooler evenings.
- If you are visiting temples in Rajasthan, many of which are Hindu or Jain, note that no leather goods are allowed in, out of respect to the religions there.
- As traffic in India is notoriously unpredictable (camels can cross the road during my trip more than once), hire a good driver. Bajrang Gaur, an operator working with Jacada Travel, was the driver on my trip and knows the roads around Jodhpur particularly well. He also doubled as my security guard – an important aspect for any solo traveller.
- If you are travelling alone or are not familiar with India, engage a travel company or an experienced guide to help you navigate. If you hire a guide, make sure you tip. Budget about 2,000 Indian rupees (about \$340) a day to tip your guide or driver. Tip at hotels as well.
- If you are looking for a bespoke trip, look to companies such as Jacada Travel ([www.jacadatravel.com](http://www.jacadatravel.com)), which can build an itinerary of experiences that are not easily available. However, expect to pay top dollar for such services, which usually include a concierge on call after you book (think a SIM card ready for you upon arrival or dietary restrictions catered for).
- A seven-day trip to India can cost about \$10,000 for two, including flights, accommodation and land transfers.