



STATE OF WONDER

Frequent leopard sightings aren't the only wildlife experience Jawai offers. At an eco-friendly boutique resort in the region, **DEEPAI SINGH** discovers the joys of birding, crocodile spotting, and more.

OUR TRIP TO JAWAI in Rajasthan is going better than we anticipated. Here we are, thinking we'd spot a leopard or two, but it's just day one and we have been treated to the sight of not just a male and a female leopard but two cubs as well! Whoever said we'd have to be pretty darn unlucky not to spot a few of these majestic creatures in a place which has come to be known as the leopard hills, was absolutely on the money. Soon, we find ourselves inclining towards other inhabitants of the wild.

On our second morning here, all thoughts of a leisurely breakfast go out the window as we find ourselves hurtling down dusty roads, holding on for dear life as our driver Chintu Singh zooms the open gypsy over steep rock structures that have been formed over thousands of years.

The thrill of chasing a sunrise can be as glorious as being on the trail of a leopard, a lesson we take back from the trip. Perched atop a hillock, with Singh looking

out for signs of leopards in the vicinity, we sit inside our gypsy taking in the scene as the sun peeks out and then rises amidst the clouds in a rhapsody of hues.

Our hearts and minds satiated, we fill our tummies with cheese-cucumber sandwiches and hot tea served to us on top of the jeep bonnet. It's an outdoor picnic unlike any other. Who knows which elusive cat is watching us from their perch among the craggy rocks in the distance.

We head towards Jawai Dam that is home to several migratory species of birds as well as hyenas

and leopards; I am particularly excited about the hundreds of crocodiles that have made the dam their home.

Leaving the open fields behind, our gypsy reaches rocky, barren terrains that do a good job of hiding the dam waters until the last moment when the reservoir reveals itself in its full glory. Reflected in its calm and tranquil waters are the barren hillocks and ledges on the other side. It's a stunning visual aided by the



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF BJJAPUR LODGE; SUDIPTA CHAKRABORTY/GETTY IMAGES; CHRIS CALDICOTT/DESIGN PICS/GETTY IMAGES

▲ *Clockwise from far left: Jawai is said to shelter one of the highest non-forest concentrations of leopards in the world; cranes flying over a field; a camp a picnic breakfast set up near the dam in Jawai.*



▲ Clockwise from top: A pied kingfisher in flight over the water of the Jawai Dam; darters are also a common sight here; crocodiles lazing around on the banks of Jawai Dam.

pin-drop silence, which is only broken when a flock of demoiselle crane flies noisily above us, changing course several times before it disappears from view. A striking pied kingfisher hovers above the water before swooping down for the kill.

The crocodiles though, for whom we made this journey, are harder to pick out. Maybe it's the sun in our eyes and the fact that they almost blend in with the terrain, but our eyes finally rest on an enormous croc sunning itself with its mouth wide open. As we watch, another one glides by.

By this time, our eyes have adjusted to the sun and the strikingly beautiful landscape. Scanning the shores



of the reservoir with binoculars, we spot a couple of crocodiles of all shapes and sizes basking lazily by its side. We sip on hot tea from our flasks, watching the majestic beasts, awed by the peaceful co-existence between man and animal.

While driving back to the lodge, Singh halts the vehicle quite a few times to point at birds and hand us the binoculars. On the ride back alone, we spot green bee-eaters, shrikes, ruddy shelducks, owlets, black drongos, water hens, babblers, darters, and common cranes among others. Who knew Jawai would be such a haven for bird watchers?

Back at Bijapur Lodge, a canopy of bamboo trees offers a respite from the hot sun as we make our way to our room. The six-room boutique property is a labour of love for the founders Devendra Singh Shekhawat and Vikramaditya Singh Rathore.

In just a matter of five years, the five-acre land on which it stands has been transformed from a farm with a mere three trees to a jungle with almost 10,000 plants of local species. Sitting in the shade of a canopy in the expansive courtyard facing the pool and trees, Shekhawat tells us that the plantation of indigenous trees began almost four years prior to the construction of the lodge. "There's a farm-to-table concept, ours is 'farm to jungle,'" he smiles.

Taking us on a short tour of the property, he points to some of the furniture, doors, and windows. Logs and planks from old havelis from the nearby state of Gujarat and used *kelus* (mud roof tiles) from houses in neighbouring



villages have found their way here. "The *kelus* provide insulation, keeping the rooms cool during summers and warm during the winter months, reducing electricity consumption and carbon footprint," he shares. Rainwater harvesting and solar panels for electricity generation are some of their other sustainable initiatives that contribute to the eco-friendly experience.

There's no pulling away from luxury either. From the massive courtyard to the pool that looks inviting enough for a midnight swim to the delicious fare, which includes *laal maas* prepared by local tribesmen at the property, everything here spells opulence.

The alarm clock rings at an ungodly hour the next day. Bundled up in layers and shivering at the prospect of a gypsy ride so early in the morning, we warm ourselves up with cups of hot tea. The destination is Madh Forest, a half hour ride away. A sloth bear had been sighted in the vicinity the day before and we

set out to spot it. A couple of street dogs sleeping on the side of the road wake up with a start as our gypsy speeds by.

Narrow roads lead to a dense forest of large shrubs and trees. It is still dark outside and just imagining the dangers of entering a jungle at this hour makes our hearts skip a beat. We duck our heads time and again to avoid getting scratched by large thorns of the jujuba shrubs, commonly known as *ber*. I manage to spot the Indian fox and a couple of *chinkaras*. The sloth bear is a no show and unbeknownst to others, I heave a sigh of relief.

As the weekend and my time at the lodge draw to a close, I recall all the wild beauties I spotted. It is definitely more than I had hoped for. And enough to sustain me until next time. +

▲ Open jeep safaris are a great way to explore Jawai. Below, from left: Natural canopy of bamboo trees at Bijapur Lodge; the sit-out area.

GETTING THERE

The nearest airport to Jawai is in Udaipur. Bijapur Lodge is a 2.5-hour drive away.

STAY

Bijapur Lodge offers six aesthetically appointed suites. Doubles from ₹27,000 including meals; bijapurlodge.com

CLOCKWISE: SHUTTERSTOCK; COURTESY OF BIJAPUR LODGE; PANDIT VIVEKGETTYIMAGES

COURTESY OF BIJAPUR LODGE (3)

