





Remi Pani Jungle Lodge

# India's wild heart

**Smack in the middle of the country is a storehouse of wildlife and natural treasures – the Satpura National Park being a singular example.**

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

“M  
adam, I strongly advise that you put your hand well inside the boat”, the boatman said in a very respectful and serious voice. My friend’s wife did so, her eyebrows furrowed in askance. The boatman simply moved his gaze from her face to the waters of the lake a few feet beyond the vessel. His eyes came to rest on what seemed like long piece of driftwood hanging immobile on the water’s surface. Then suddenly, it moved and glided away from the boat. It was a marsh crocodile.

We were on the Denwa River that marks the boundary of the Satpura National Park on a fantastic evening boat safari. Up until then, we had seen a multitude of birds, including the brilliantly blue Indian roller (blue jay) and the common kingfisher. Slender white egrets, big-winged black cormorants, grey herons and graceful painted storks had all been spotted and recognised. On the banks of the national park, we had seen deer, bison

Above: Spotting a leopard is a rare treat and even some seasoned game viewers have never seen one in the wild.

Facing page: Elephant strolls not only take you off jeep trails, they let you experience the jungle devoid of man-made sounds.



and bears. We hadn't seen the tiger that morning nor this evening, but I've learnt that you return disappointed from the national parks if you go with a single-minded desire to just spot the tiger.

### ON THE ROAD

Our plan for visiting the Satpura National Park was born out of the prospect of an exciting 840km-drive from Mumbai to Sohagpur, in Madhya Pradesh. Honestly, I had never heard of Sohagpur my entire life, until I started researching roads and studying maps to figure out the best route from Mumbai to the Reni Pani Jungle Lodge, where we planned to

Clockwise from below: The Indian gaur's bulk belies its speed; Get off the National Highways onto state roads to see the India that exists beyond concrete cities; Spotting crocodiles is almost never difficult. Those teeth rarely relinquish what they've clamped between them.



## Offbeat



stay. The Satpura National Park is a total of 1,500 sq km of dry deciduous forests with timeless teak trees and broad groves of bamboo, encompassed by gentle hills, generously peppered with tranquil water bodies, gorges and ravines.

Our drive started early from Mumbai, and we went past little villages with colourful markets, crumbling ruins of ancient temples and green fields stretching out till the horizon, finally reaching the lodge well into the evening. On the dirt road from the state highway to the lodge, a jackal streaked across the dipped beam of the car's headlights and hardly had we recovered from that, when a magnificent male leopard stepped out onto the road and froze in the white light before darting back into the darkness of the foliage.

### LAZY RIVER RIDE

The next morning we were out before the first light, proceeding towards the Denwa River from where we would pick up our national park guide and take the boat across the river to the park.

The sky went from a shy saturation of colour along the horizon to a rampant riot of orange, pink and red, as the sun climbed out from behind the low hills. At the park, we climbed into safari jeeps and set off onto rough tracks for a game drive. Our naturalist had honestly told us that seeing a tiger was rare and extremely lucky, but that didn't matter because the guide brilliantly bought the jungle alive with stories about the flora, the topography of the land and spotting of birds.

We spied a lone bison bull, a big brown bear climbing the trunk of a tree to get to a beehive and a pack of wild dogs. While we did see fresh pugmarks of a huge male tiger, the beast itself

remained elusive. It was mid-morning by the time we got back to the retreat where a lavish brunch had been spread out. My butler took me on a little walk around the property where we spotted a few more birds, startled a couple of deer and heard rustling amongst the leaves, which probably meant a snake was quickly moving away from our path.

That evening was spent on the boat, gliding down the lake, where another magnificent specimen was basking in the dying rays of the setting sun. Its mouth was open, displaying long and mean teeth like miniature daggers. The moment it saw us, it spun with a rapidity that defied its size and slunk into the water. All of us involuntarily huddled close to the centre of the boat, well away from the edges.

Clockwise from above: Skulls of herbivores are kept for display within the park; The small boat, christened Jal Pari, takes tourists on an evening river safari that's good for bird watching; Ruins of an ancient temple near Segaoon on State Highway 26, Madhya Pradesh.

**The next morning we were back in the park, but this time, on the back of a huge grey elephant that was shambling through the forest at an easy pace.**



## Offbeat



### UNTAMED SCENERY

The next morning we were back in the park, but this time, on the back of a huge grey elephant that was shambling through the forest at an easy pace. Our mahout told us that one can even do a safari on foot in the park, but of course, under the guidance of a trained park guide.

In the three days that we spent in the Satpuras, we pleasantly appreciated how well our jungle lodge was integrated with its surroundings. Even though it was well outside the boundaries of the park, it felt like being within the wild, such that when you're lazing in the pool you can catch a deer timidly staring at you, or hear a monkey cackle in the trees high above, sending out the warning of a leopard on the move.

For us, the trip was a fine blend of the romance of the open road, the sense of disconnect from urbanity and the sights and sounds of a small and relatively unknown national park in Central India's biosphere. ■

**Clockwise from below:** Sit out in the evening, discussing the day's sightings or in comfortable silence; Painted storks at a waterhole within the park; The national park has ample grazing land and water sources for cattle and wild animals alike.



Reni Pani Jungle Lodge

### QUICK FACTS

#### GETTING THERE

*By air:* The closest airport to the park is Bhopal. Jet Airways flies to Bhopal daily from several cities across the country. It is 210 km (three hour) drive to the Satpura National Park and your jungle lodge will arrange a pick up and drop.

*By rail:* The closest train station with good connectivity to the Park is Hoshangabad, which is 60 km away.

*By road:* If you want to drive from Mumbai, then it would be advisable to make Nashik your first stop. Drive to the Satpuras on the next day. From Delhi, it's about the same distance as from Mumbai. You could break the journey at Gwalior or Orchha, which is close to Jhansi.

#### ACCOMMODATION

The Reni Pani Jungle Lodge will certainly enhance your jungle experience. Visit [www.renipanijunglelodge.com](http://www.renipanijunglelodge.com) for information.

#### TRAVEL TIPS

Remember to pack forest-coloured clothes (dark greens and browns) for the safaris. A cap, sunglasses, a good pair of walking shoes, binoculars and a camera should serve you good. If you're prone to sensitive skin, don't forget to pack bug spray or insect repellents.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to [www.mptourism.com](http://www.mptourism.com)