

Where to stay

OUT IN THE WILD

MADHYA PRADESH Prasad Ramamurthy gets an exclusive first look at Reni Pani, a brand new lodge in Satpura that embodies jungle chic

FIRST LOOK

As the dust raised by the 4x4 cleared, my welcoming party came into focus: a petite, pleasant-faced woman who serves as an omnipresent manager; two lanky attendants, brown as berries, who never leave her side; and the CEO of Reni Pani himself, Faiz Rashid, a 29-year-old wildlife enthusiast who admits spending the better part of last year camped outside in the jungle, looking over every detail of the building of this new property. They were all smiling, waving and holding out glasses of cold water, as if I were arriving at their home, not a sleek ecolodge. It's a warm welcome gesture: I had driven for three hours from Madhya Pradesh's capital, Bhopal, into the jungles of Satpura, all the way to the edge of the tiger reserve here for an exclusive viewing of Reni Pani Jungle Lodge. It's an extension of the Bhopal landmark, the Jehan Numa Palace Hotel, which is owned by Rashid's family.

The park is, of course, the main draw—tigers and leopards roam here—but Reni Pani makes for a great

base to (cautiously) explore the area. As we entered the cavernous lobby/dining hall/lounge area, Faiz told me, "All our units are insulated, so you have nothing to worry about. But then, this is a jungle. Anything can happen." He

“Air-conditioned cottages, a pool and spa—Reni Pani is everything you don't expect in the middle of the jungle”



Top: A porch at Reni Pani with a seasonal stream flowing by. Above left: A tiger on the prowl. Above right: The king-sized bed occupies centre stage in a bedroom at Reni Pani

paused, ensured I was paying attention, then continued, "We request all our guests not to leave their rooms alone after sunset. Your butler will guide you to dinner, or in case you want to step out for some fresh air, because this is not our territory." No, this is tiger territory, and the carnivore is its main attraction. I'm assured, however, that mostly leopards and sloth bears have been spotted close to this property. "If there is any wildlife in your room," Faiz added, "don't panic. One of our staffers will come and take care of it."

Thoughts of felines lingered as I entered my single-room cottage. The décor was sub-Saharan chic with the familiar thrown in: sheets and cushion covers cleverly block-printed to remind one of tiger stripes (designed by Faiz's mother), Bastar bronzes cast into lamp animal heads and busts of tribal deities.

Reni Pani consists of 12 air-conditioned cottages (mine had a seasonal stream flowing by). The bedrooms and bathrooms are large, and each room comes with a separate dressing area—all built by local masons and carpenters, providing urban comforts that are in keeping with local architecture. There's also an infinity pool and a spa opening this October.

The lodge works to limit its carbon footprint, so air-conditioners work only when the state supplies electricity. Fortunately, load-shedding often



Tea by the pool at Reni Pani

coincides with park hours so you'll be out of your room when cuts occur.

Reni Pani is named after the neighbouring village, from where it sources half its workforce and a portion of its vegetables, meat and produce (all organic). Faiz and his brother Aly are encouraging local farmers to go organic. It's part of their goal to not just make the lodge sustainable, but also to share the benefits of tourism with the local community.

The result: the village's population has doubled since the lodge's construction began a year ago. Guests can go for village tours, have tea with

the locals, go on walking trips, or drive their way into tiger territory.

"The park is the main activity here. We love it, and we want people who come here to love it too," Faiz declared over lunch, underlining Reni Pani's ethos. Later, Alger Fernandes, the resident naturalist, suggested a visit to the tiger reserve. "The animals may come out to get a drink at sunset," he said. We didn't spot any stripes and spots, but that morning, Alger had witnessed a leopard hunting a monkey. "The leopard jumped at the langur," said Alger, "but our vehicle alerted the monkey, causing the leopard to miss."

Back at the lodge, dinner was a simple affair. Afterwards, a waiter appeared, sparkler in one hand, cake in the other. There was a birthday at the adjacent table and Alger had whipped up a cheesecake from yoghurt, Amul cheese and multigrain biscuits—a sweet touch in the middle of the jungle! And, at Rani Pani, that does not come as a surprise. 🐾

RENI PANI JUNGLE LODGE

BEST FOR: HOME-STYLE CHARM

The lodge has 12 luxury villas, a swimming pool and a soon-to-open spa. (0755 266-1100; www.renipanilodge.com) Doubles from ₹15,000

WHAT TO SEE Tigers, leopards, sloth bears, deer, migratory birds

GETTING THERE Nearest airport is in Bhopal (three hours away). **Indian** and **Jet Airways** fly direct from Mumbai and New Delhi.

WHEN TO GO October to January, when the weather is cool and there are more chances of sighting a tiger or a leopard.

ON THE TRAIL

On your next wildlife holiday, stay at one of the following hotels

Bandhavgarh National Park

WHERE TO STAY

Samode Safari Lodge

The lodge contains 12 luxury villas, a heated swimming pool and a spa. (0141 263-2370; www.samode.com) Doubles from ₹37,500

WHAT TO SEE

Tigers, wolves, reptiles

GETTING THERE

Nearest airports are in Khajuraho (six hours away) and Jabalpur (four hours away). **Jet Airways** and **Kingfisher** fly direct to Jabalpur, while **Indian** and **Jet Airways** fly direct to Khajuraho from New Delhi.

Panna National Park

WHERE TO STAY

Pashan Ghar

The hotel has 12 stone cottages and a watchtower overlooking a forest watering hole. (022 6601-1825; www.tajsafaris.com) Doubles from ₹32,000

WHAT TO SEE

Tigers, wolves, deer, sloth bears

GETTING THERE

Nearest airport is Khajuraho (one hour away). Fly **Indian** and **Jet Airways** to Khajuraho from New Delhi. Pick-ups and drops are arranged by the hotel.

Kanha National Park

WHERE TO STAY

Tuli Tiger Corridor

The hotel has eight air-conditioned luxury tents, a bar and a spa. (07649 277-221; www.tulihotels.com) Doubles from ₹10,000

WHAT TO SEE

Tigers, leopards, hyenas, jackals, monkeys, reptiles and birds

GETTING THERE

Nearest airport is in Jabalpur (three and a half hours away). **Jet Airways** and **Kingfisher** fly direct to Jabalpur from New Delhi. You can then hire a car or taxi from the airport. Fares begin from ₹3,500.

SUITE TALK

SWISSÔTEL KOLKATA

Swissôtel Kolkata Neotia Vista is the Swiss hospitality chain's first foray into India. The property has 147 luxury rooms and suites and is perched on the banks of the Hooghly River. Swissôtel's trademark Swiss Meeting Advantage programme is available to help guests plan events. (033 6626-6666; www.swissotel.com)

COURTYARD BY MARRIOTT, PUNE

A half-hour's drive from major auto-makers like Volkswagen, the Marriott Courtyard is a convenient hotel for



Swissôtel Kolkata's Café Swiss

business travellers to Pune. It has four conference rooms and outdoor venues that can accommodate up to 200 people. Make use of the in-house event planners to organise meetings. (020 4212-2222; www.courtyardmarriottpune.com)

THE LEELA PALACE, NEW DELHI

The Leela Palace New Delhi at Chanakyaपुरi opened just in time for the Commonwealth Games. It is located in the heart of the Diplomatic Enclave, with close access to the capital's business districts and embassies. Its 260 rooms are equipped with cutting-edge business facilities, while numerous meeting rooms and a 5,500sq ft Grand Ballroom make it ideal for business functions. There are three speciality restaurants, serving Indian, Italian and Japanese cuisine. (011 3933-1234; www.theleela.com)