

Wild at Heart

ANNIE M. MATHEWS CHECKS INTO RENI PANI, THE NEWEST LUXURY JUNGLE LODGE.
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SAPTARSHI BISWAS



Clockwise from this picture: a female sambar in Satpura National Park; a waterbody in the park's core area; and tourists on an elephant safari

For a long minute in the afternoon all sound ceased—no human voice, no drip of water, no flapping of pigeons, no grating of chair, no roar of engine, no tolling of temple bell, no ring of a cellphone—a resounding silence as birds probably soared silently through a clear blue sky, or snakes slithered very silently through the woods. My very thoughts went still. When it ceased being quite as silent after that minute, it was still a reminder of the city din that I carried in my head most of the year around, the constant urban drone and buzz, where as a matter of self-preservation habit, one ceases to listen.

We reached Reni Pani Jungle Lodge on the penultimate day of the park and lodge closing so we were the only guests. Even if there had

been other guests, since there are only 12 cottages, I expect all guests are greeted with the same lavish smiles, cold towels and refreshing drinks. Because of various time constraint reasons, which meant that we would only have one and a half days on the property, we had taken an early flight from Delhi to Bhopal and then a three-hour car journey, so a moment to be languorous was quite welcome. And languor is so infinitely possible in this lodge. It is one very seriously good reason to go there.

But there are many more. I would say that the primary reason for any visitor would be the Satpura National Park and Tiger Reserve a few kilometres away. And considering that this is Reni Pani's primary reason for setting up there, there's your best reason for going to the Reni Pani lodge.

The Satpura Tiger Reserve is actually a huge spread that, together with the adjoining Bori and Pachmarhi sanctuaries, covers an area of





1,500 square metres. Large enough for a good stretch of a leg and for big cats and scores of other wildlife to live, prosper and do their thing in sufficient peace and tranquillity. Since the park is also relatively free of hordes of tourist vehicles, the chances of encounters and sightings are that much larger and it is rather magnificent to move around in an open jeep under a heavy canopy of trees, binoculars at the ready, alert (or waiting to be alerted by the more vigilant experts) to a possible sighting, without ever feeling crowded.

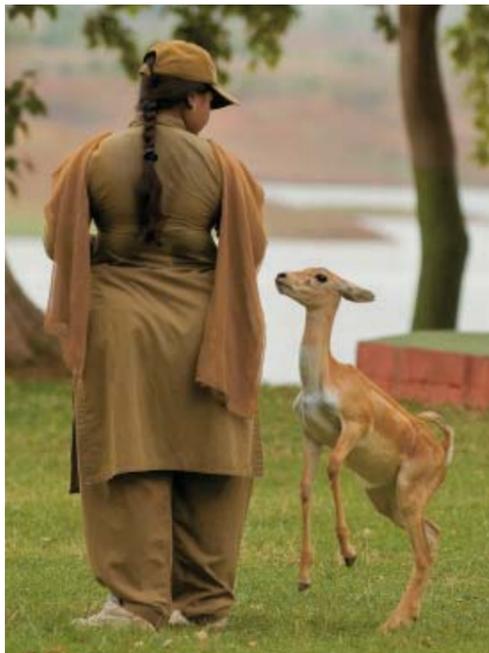
No, I did not see a tiger. I did not see a leopard either. Or a jungle dog. Or sloth bear. But I was with people who had, time and time again, and had stories enough to tell to kindle great hopes. We did stop to examine the evil-smelling gouged-out remains of a wild boar, which no doubt a series of animals had had a go at after the initial kill. We did pursue an elusive tiger, which could not have been very far from us considering the alarm calls. We did find fresh steaming scat of jungle dogs, which meant they had crossed that very path a short while before us. Maybe we did not see them but, instead, they saw us?

What we did see a great deal of were sambar, cheetal, neelgai and gaur. The much-misunderstood and therefore maligned gaur, the naturalist whispered, as we stood still gazing at them and they stood even more stock-still, returning our gaze of wonderment with large eyes filled with extreme caution.

While many tend to think that gaurs are likely to attack or charge with little or no provocation, they are in fact given to being skittish and turning tail and fleeing with amazing agility for such large beasts.

Brothers Faiz and Aly Rashid, owners of the lodge, Algar, the resident naturalist, and the photographer Rishi are enthusiastic birders. I am enthusiastic too in terms of admiration but my enthusiasm is matched by my extreme ignorance and low powers of ornithology retention, so I cannot share with you the names of the many wonders I saw. My guides are also schooled in extreme patience. They painstakingly direct my attention to obscure branches and when my eye has finally locked in on the right one, I am, more often than not, fortunate enough to see a brilliant flash of blue or saffron take off in flight, or sometimes quick enough to train my binoculars in on them for closer admiration. I am clearly no contributor to discussions on whether or not a particular bird sighted and identified by its specific attributes in the much-thumbed bird guide is actually indigenous to the region, or is in fact off-course, but I am happy enough to have seen this exceptional creature take flight!

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Clockwise from top: a leopard; an Indian langur; crested serpent eagle; and a baby blackbuck who seems chummy with this employee of the Satpura sanctuary



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THE RASHIDS KEENLY WANT GUESTS WHO COME OUT FOR WHAT THEY HAVE ON OFFER—ACCESS TO THE WILD, A DISCONNECT FROM THE URBAN CHURN, SERVED UP WITH TOTAL PAMPERING.

SATPURA



Access to the park is across a water body with a single boat ferry that does the shuttle between park and mainland from sunrise to sunset and the park itself is open to the public from October 15 to June 30. We did the run twice, for an evening round the first day and again the next morning at the crack of dawn, on the ready for both slumbering or awakening beasts in the enchanting green forest.

Once done with these rounds, we have all the soothing comforts of the lodge itself awaiting us—the Reni Pani lodge is named after a berry that is nowhere in evidence in June but bursts forth in profusion in the winter months.

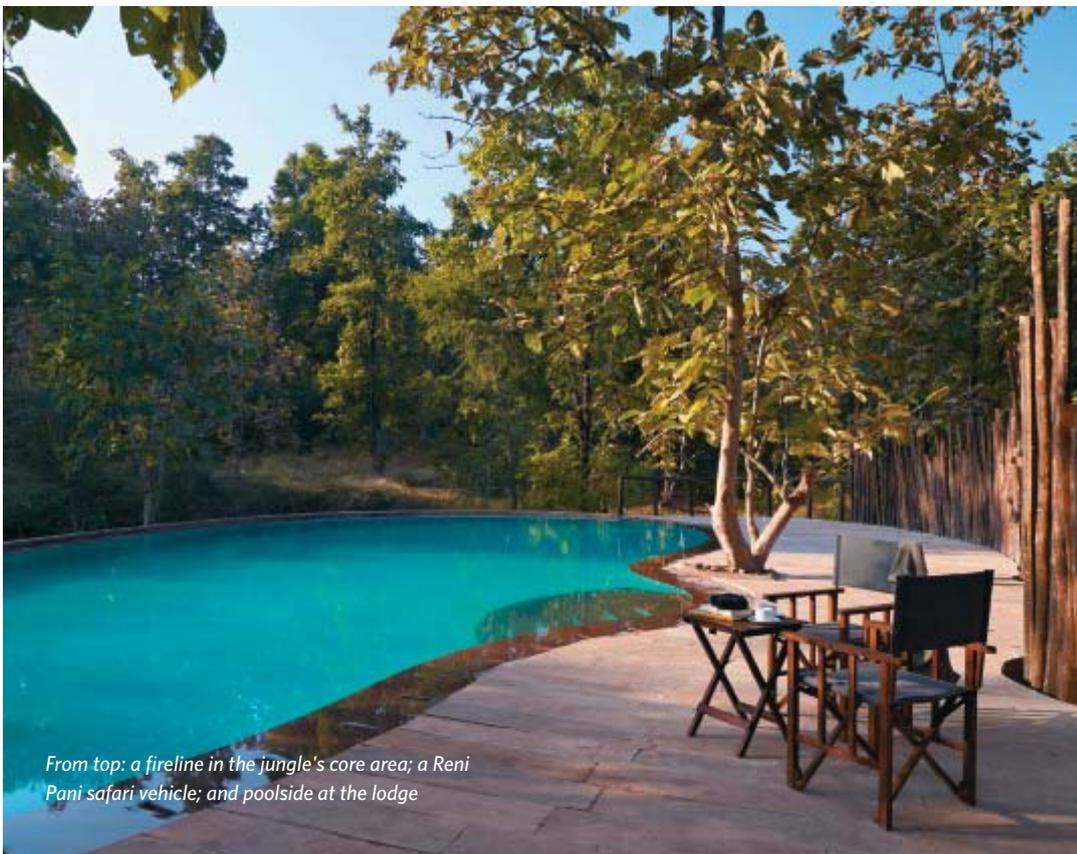
At the heart of the lodge is the Gol Ghar. This large central space is winged like a cross with a library lounge in the rear wing, a bar and breakfast area in another across from the large dining table in the third and a living room area in the front.

While the furniture is by and large solid and classic wooden stuff, old and new, the spaces are warmly and colourfully filled with carved wooden miniatures of vintage automobiles or crocodiles, made by craftsmen in a neighbouring village, Gond figurines and papier-mâché bowls. Despite its newness, one immediately

has the impression of old world domestic comfort that is echoed in the wholesome and fresh meals that have been turned over by an expert hand, schooled apparently in the family recipes.

The family is not new to hospitality. They have for long been running the Jehan Numa Palace Hotel, a large and stately property that caters mainly to business travellers in Bhopal. But when the sons, Faiz and Aly, decided to branch out, their personal inclinations headed them in a wilder direction—even if it was a quiet kind of wild. They roped in architect Dean DeCruz and set about building on this large expanse of property in Badhai, close to the park. There are 12 cottages in all: two hill cottages with windows and decks that look out on the undulating Satpura range, six cottages facing the natural nala that runs through the property and four forest-view cottages. They are spread out enough to ensure privacy and close enough to permit neighbourly activity. While plans are afoot to level certain open areas and build stables for horses that they intend to get there, they have no intentions of crowding up their large open land with more cottages at the present time.

Their attempt at being environmentally friendly goes beyond lip service. Having skirted around every existing tree on the property while building, they also consciously decided against installing noisy and polluting generators though electrical supply is fickle at best. However, their concern that this might engender



From top: a fireline in the jungle's core area; a Reni Pani safari vehicle; and poolside at the lodge

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SATPURA



some discomfort seems unfounded to me. We are there at the end of June, where the weather alternates between stormy skies and searing heat. Within the high-ceilinged large and spacious rooms with large beds, gaily coloured bedspreads and cushioned sitting areas, the air-conditioning is performing and effective while there is current and the room retains a very comfortable temperature with the fan when the inverter kicks in. As spacious as the room itself is the anteroom for baggage and then the large bathroom with an attached outdoor shower, open to the skies.

Our time there was far too short (less than two days), but we tried to squeeze in as much as we could. While we managed the morning and evening road trips into the park, there was not time enough to do the visit on foot: this is one of the few parks that allow it. To make up for that, Algar, the excellent resident naturalist, takes me on a walk by the disused canal in the vicinity, and I am treated to the sight of the single, lonely crocodile that mysteriously washed up against the rocky banks one day and stayed on. Butterflies, birds galore, an all-male pack of monkeys, loping on the ridge over the other bank, preening peacocks, scorpions by the side of the road, intriguingly marked beetles, a teeming world bristling in the bushes, the undergrowth, the underground...

Our last evening, we tramp to a clearing on the

property where the Rashids hold their legendary barbecue nights. A bar counter for aperitifs, delectable plates of barbecued meats and vegetables is manned by the ever-cheerful and attentive staff, most of whom are locals now trained in the trade. As always, there is too much food, as always, I overeat, loath to refuse one more tasty morsel. They do not have a menu card and meals are part of the package at the lodge. Visitors are expected to take their meals together at one sitting and considering how filling they are, it's unlikely that you would need to call in for anything between meals; but their kitchen can always rustle up something if necessary, they say.

In their first season, Reni Pani had a mixed bag of visitors. Some came to check out the new branch of the urban Jehan Numa palace hotel in Bhopal and instead found themselves in a lodge, albeit comfortable and tasteful, without televisions in the room or cellphone connectivity in parts of the property (I deliberately avoided the areas that

did). With little inclination to visit the park or merely indolently lounge by the pool or on the decks, these visitors are unlikely to return. And that is unlikely to disappoint the Rashids. They keenly want guests who come out for what they have on offer—access to the wild, a disconnect from the urban churn, served up with total pampering.



Palak paneer is one of the homey dishes at mealtime; and (left) a bush dinner and barbecue, a Reni Pani speciality

THE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

The Reni Pani Jungle Lodge is set on the edge of the **Satpura Tiger Reserve** in Madhya Pradesh. The closest airport is in **Bhopal**, 135km away, while the nearest railways stations are at **Pipariya** (35km), **Hoshangabad** (45km) and **Itarsi** (60km).

Non-stop flights are offered from Delhi by Air India (1hr15min) from approx. Rs 5,600, and from Mumbai by Jet Konnect (2hrs) from approx. Rs 7,500. The New Delhi-Jabalpur Shridham Express and the Mahanagari Express run daily to Pipariya from Delhi (Rs 1,226 on 2A) and Mumbai (Rs 1,123), respectively. The hotel can arrange railway and airport transfers.

THE LODGE

Reni Pani offers **12 independent cottages** in three different categories: the nallah, forest and hill units, all of which feature excellently positioned viewing decks, large bay windows and luxurious bath-

rooms. The resort also offers a dining area, bar, library and a pool. **TARIFF** (for double occupancy) Rs 15,000 for the Reni Pani Plan, which includes accommodation, meals and evening snacks, and Rs 20,000 for the Jungle Plan, which includes accommodation, meals, evening snacks, laundry, two game drives per day and other activities offered by the lodge. Extra charge for children aged between five and 12: Rs 3,000 (Reni Pani Plan), Rs 4,250 (Jungle Plan). **CONTACT** 0755-2661100, renipanijunglelodge.com

WHAT TO SEE & DO

The resort organises a number of outdoor excursions, including **elephant safaris** in the park, **boat safaris**, **bird-watching** and **nature walks**, escorted safari jeep drives and walks or drives through neighbouring villages. By the time you visit, horse-riding, pottery workshops and massage treatments will also be on offer.