

A view of the Grill House Restaurant and Bar

No one leaves the opportunity to witness wilderness in all its glory at Jim Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand. A visit to the gorgeous The Riverview Retreat, Corbett led us to appreciate a mesmerizing property along with an area that the legendary *shikaari* turned conservationist took efforts to preserve. Read to know why you should visit this retreat and the amazing national park.



A view of the room

| By **SAPNA SARFARE** |

Mumbai is known for two distinct weather – pouring rains and humid sweaty hell hole, though the city in rains has charm of its own. And being more close to nature is something of a fantasy to most Mumbaikars, despite the Sanjay Gandhi National Park being right next door. There is

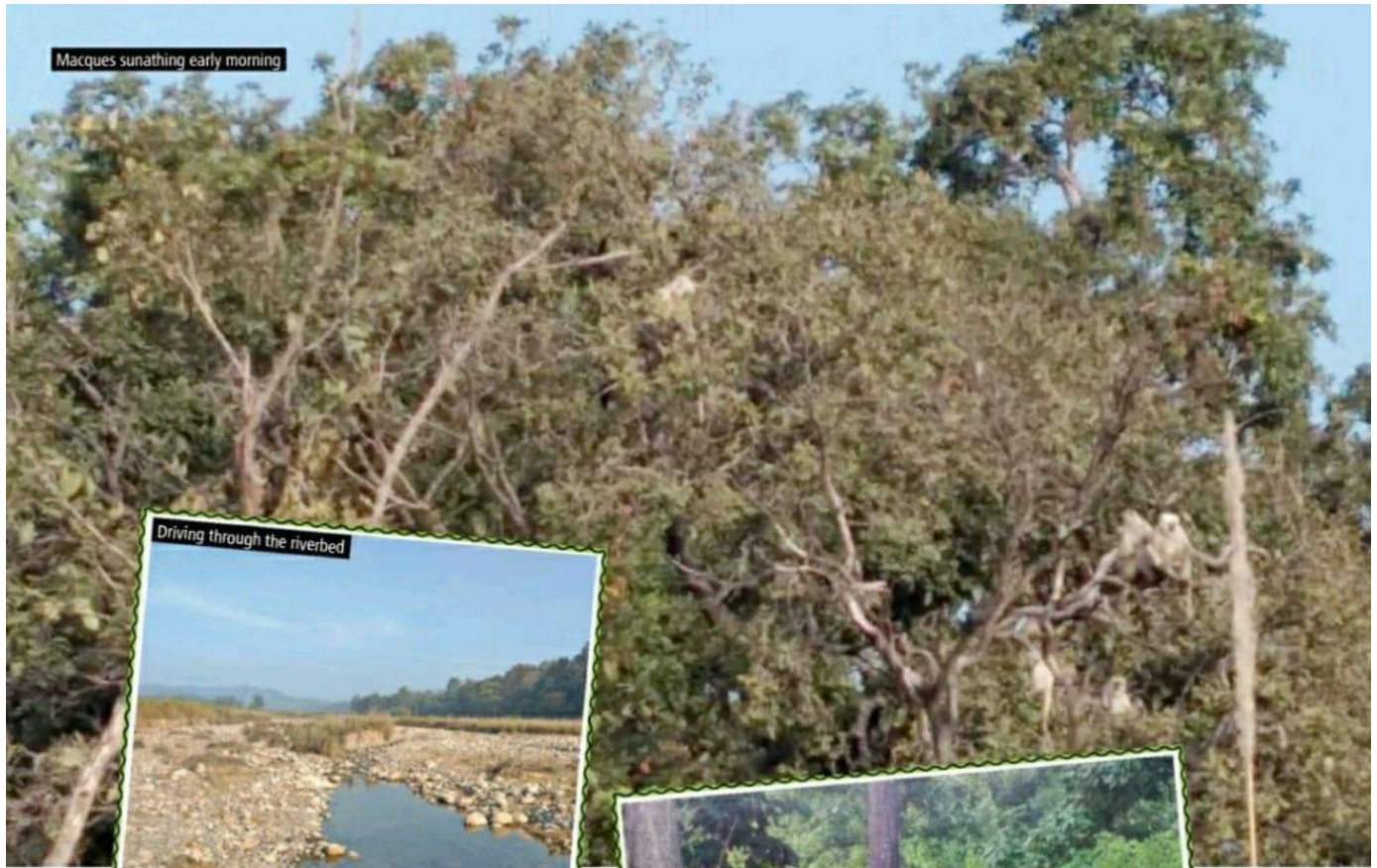
more to India than the cities. The India that resides in the forests is of a different kind. So getting an opportunity to find a place that is amidst green is like a dream come true.

The Leisure Hotels Group happens to be quite a huge name in Uttarakhand when it comes to hospitality. And it was their property in the renowned Jim Corbett

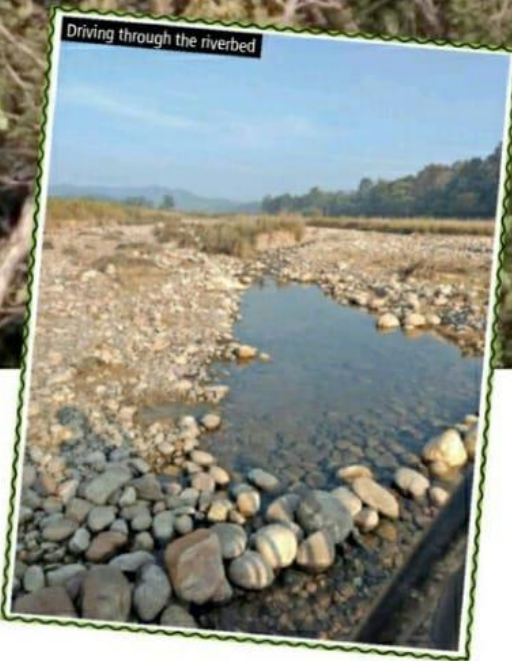
National Park called The Riverview Retreat that we got a chance to explore. But the options of having a relaxing great time was not limited to the property but extended to a safari of the acclaimed national park and the surrounding areas. One opportunity is enough to change our mind not just for the property but the treasures this place holds.



Macques sunbathing early morning



Driving through the riverbed



The elusive tiger spotted



### THE TRAVEL DRAMA

An early morning flight from Mumbai to New Delhi was enough to put me and my fellow travelling journalist to be in a mix sleepy still excited mood. Reaching the chilly Delhi was quite easy and we were quickly taxied away to our destination.

Smoggy and polluted Delhi and its nearby areas was kind of reflective of the grave issues our capital is facing. As we slowly started edging away from the capital and moving through Uttar Pradesh

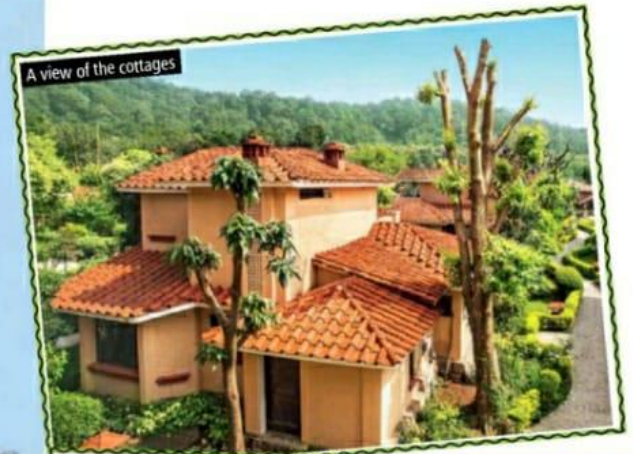
(UP) towards Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand, you will see the gradual green change that will keep you mesmerized.

A word of advice: while we took a slight longer route to the resort (travelling via Delhi-Gajraula-Moradabad-Kashipur-Rampur), you can reach it from other places too. Pantnagar is the nearest airport, while Lucknow, Dehradun and Nainital are few other places from where reaching this place is quite easy. Lucknow and Dehradun have

airports. Ramnagar is the nearest place with rail connection. Also the roads via our route were in the middle of some major highway construction plan near Delhi. So traffic jams might be an issue. Once completed, things will be better, we are informed.

On our way, we stopped at a famous eatery Moga Punjabi Tadka which is a landmark food joint in Gajraula. You must give it a try as you get some authentic Punjabi fare here at good rates. We resumed





our journey to reach our destination The Riverview Retreat at around 5 PM. The very sight acted as balm to our tired eyes.

### ON ARRIVAL

What you see is a well-planned and laid-out resort which actually stays true to its name – The Riverview Retreat, Corbett. The view from one side of the property gives an unparalleled view of the serene Kosi River. You see a rather dense forest cover on the other side of the river with slightly low hills covered with foliage. We were informed that if lucky, we can see animals like deer come to drink water from the river.

Gradually on a two-day trip, we were given a slow introduction to the property. Being impressed would be a minor acceptance of the fact that the property owner's Leisure Hotels have done a good job of maintaining the natural surrounding along with adding a good touch of modernity.

The hotel group has a good reputation in Uttarakhand and also has other properties all over India.

We walked the neatly paved paths to see the rooms divided as per your requirement. They are part of cottages which are again divided as per requirements and pricing. The quaint cottages are something that attract your attention and are just the thing you need for a relaxed posh holiday. The place has 90 bedrooms which are divided into private villas of two, three and four bedrooms while some can even get independent and duplex rooms. You have private garden and entrances for each villas. Spacious is the word which came to my mind as I saw the rooms. We were provided with two bedroom villas that had luxury written in every corner. I am not kidding when I say the best of materials and facilities have been provided for those who want nature combined with luxury.

And yes, the peace that this whole property provides is incomparable. I doubt that it does not get quieter than this place. One of the amusements (the inner child in me is very much alive) I was trying to find here was having the night's quietness broken by the roaring of the tiger or finding a wild animal outside the room trying to get a peek into our temporary abodes. Alas, it remained a fantasy.

Did I mention the fact that this trip was in winter? Winters in Uttarakhand wilderness is something to experience. Unless you are used to this weather or are a polar bear, mortals like me will have to bring adequate winter wear that includes thermals. The temperatures really drops and handling the nip in the air would be tough for those whose idea of chilliness is blast coming from the fridge.

Food is of course an important element of any travel. Again this retreat gets my





full attention and points. They have two options for anyone who wants to eat with the nature or predominantly indoors. The Grill House Restaurant and Bar near the very inviting swimming pool is the retreat's popular eating destination and has a round open machchan-like structure.

At Gurney House from where you can see the Kosi River in all its glory, is where you will be given your breakfast, lunch and dinner. It offers Indian, Mughlai and continental food here and I admit the food here was to die for. Each day we saw quite a spread during each time of the day which tempted us. They offered a small spread of local Kumaoni food that appealed to my simple taste-buds. This local cuisine offers simple meals but packed with great tastes. If you want sumptuous food that satisfies your soul,

Kumaoni food is your kind of cuisine. In fact, move out and try out the authentic cuisine as much as you can. We got to try out the items like 'Bhatt ki Churkani' and 'Gehet' with ghee-laden rotis.

Being close to nature and not exactly close to any major cities, it means that coming to retreat has a way to make you more in tune with your surroundings. The retreat has all possible facilities of the new-age world but you are still amidst nature with its silence letting you get close to your thoughts. The retreat provides ways to keep you entertained. They have great facilities to provide every kind of safaris and trips at the national park, apart from specialized trips (if you inquire) in and around Corbett and

events and programmes at the retreat. You have special things organised for everyone, right from kids to adults. The place is quite popular for corporate events. Coming back to special events planned as per popularity and needs, a small documentary on Jim Corbett gave us a fascinating peek into the life of this legendary shikari. No wonder, the people in Uttarakhand love him so much. Later two locals came with guitar in tow and sang some great Hindi film songs. They were indeed a great mood changer.

Day one went in travelling to the retreat, checking out the place and seeping in as much information about the place from Shiv Mehan, COO, Leisure Hotels Group and Ajay Kareer, General Manager (GM),





Jim Corbett's Museum in Kaladhungi

Riverview Retreat, Corbett. Both played the perfect host. We felt at peace with being amidst nature and despite the chill and certain tiredness, sleep came to us as easily as a fish takes to water. We were told that the retreat offers peaceful sleep without worries. We did take it with a pinch of salt but later realised we were told the truth.

We were also more excited for the next day to rise as we had a safari planned to the Jim Corbett National Park the next day. The early bird catches the worm and early risers are able to check out the wild animals including tigers if we reach a little before sunrise. Peaceful stay and a chance to connect with your fellow earth dwellers... well, who needs a city life?

### THE CORBETT CHRONICLES

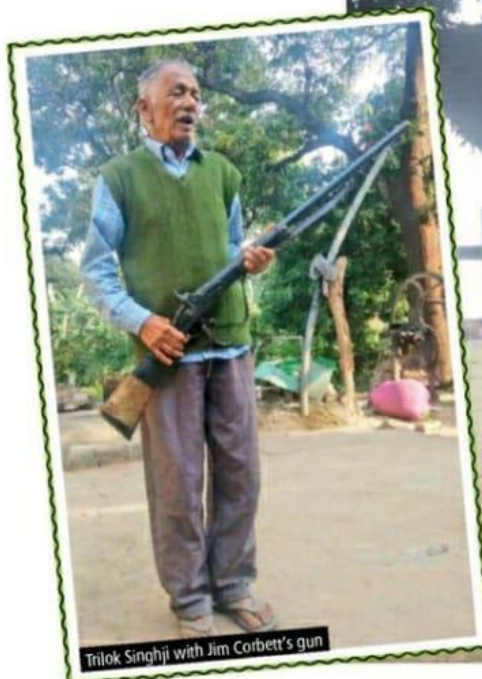
So at 5.45 am in the morning, my fellow travelers along with me gathered at the retreat's porch and sleepily got into the special safari jeep to travel in the dark at the park entrance. For those unaware of the national park, it is divided into various zones which have slightly different and some similar terrains. The whole park is not open for tourists and only few zones which are marked for tourists can be travelled to only with authorized guides. The zones are open to the public during certain seasons and not all are jeep safari zones. Limited people and jeeps are allowed inside for a certain time only.

We were in the Bijrani Zone which is a popular zone for seeing a variety of

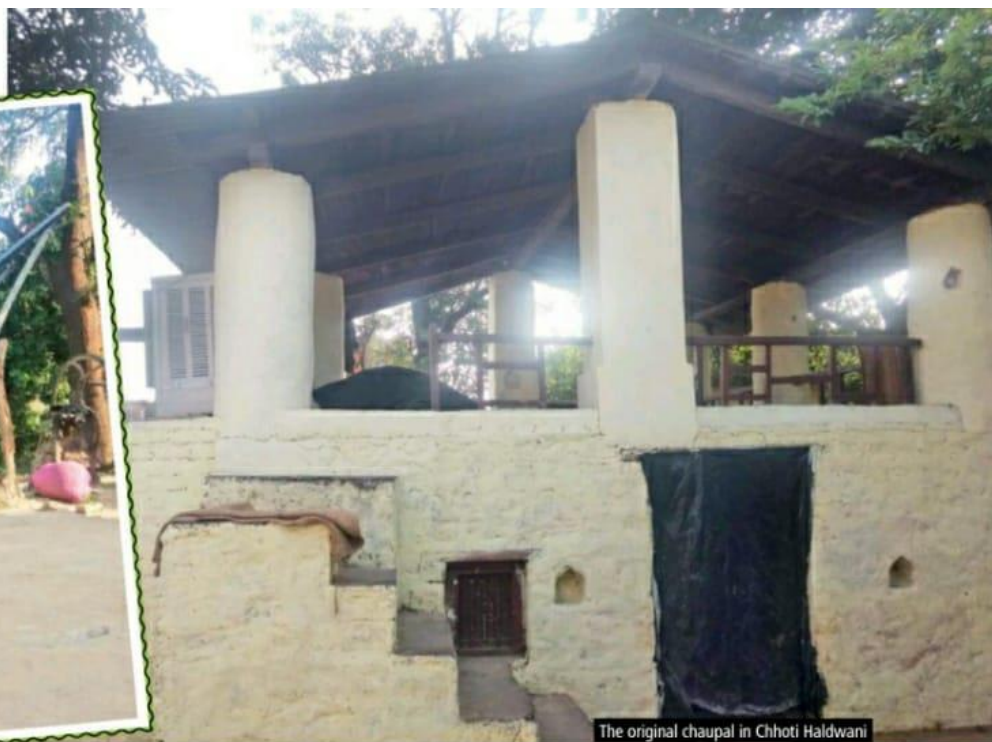
wildlife including the elusive tiger. Also, a word of advice would be using your intelligence to not step out of the jeep unless being told to. This is still a forest area with wild animals around. They cannot be held responsible for your stupidity. Making loud noises and screaming and unnecessary hand movements are also not acceptable. Also carry your government authorized identity card with you (you will be told to by the hotel). If you forget, then you lose the chance of entering. Yes, they are quite strict about these things. Safari bookings are done in advance. Speak to your hotel regarding this before you travel to the said reserve.

After going through the said procedures, trying not to freeze in the cold weather and





Trilok Singhji with Jim Corbett's gun



The original chaupal in Chhoti Haldwani

renting binoculars for Rs 100, we entered the reserve with excitement. I realised that me and my fellow travelers wrapped up in layers looked like a certain muffler man of Indian politics. You picture us now. Like many others, we entered with the need to see the tiger in the wild roaming about in his territory without any fear. Again a word of advice from a nature lover – even if you are not able to see the tiger, do not get disappointed. The park is a beautiful place with gorgeously soothing foliage and varied animals that call this place their home. You see various types of deer, birds, wild boars, monkeys, elephants and so on. If you want to see paradise, then this place does qualify. Also if you are able to see a tiger, chances are he or she is returning for rest after a night out in his or her territory looking for prey. Tigers are nocturnal cats who hunt in the dark. If you distract it or make noise, the tiger will disappear in no time and you will be left disappointed.

Our guide Narendrajji turned out to be an ace guide whose instincts and guiding skills were perfect. Within seconds of deciding on a route, we spotted a tiger

walking amidst the grass and trees. We stood in our jeep mesmerized at the magnificent beast that stood before us yet was hidden. In fact, we were the first ones and amongst the few to spot a tiger that day. Narendrajji tried guessing the tiger's gender and age and was keeping us updated on his movements. But the tiger was probably not in a mood to be the centre of attraction and again seconds later sprinted out of sight into oblivion. We did hear him roar a bit a little later along with the cries of sambar deer and barking deer. These two deer breeds are known to sense the presence of a tiger nearby and give a warning cry to others of it being around. Now we could see the reserve in peace.

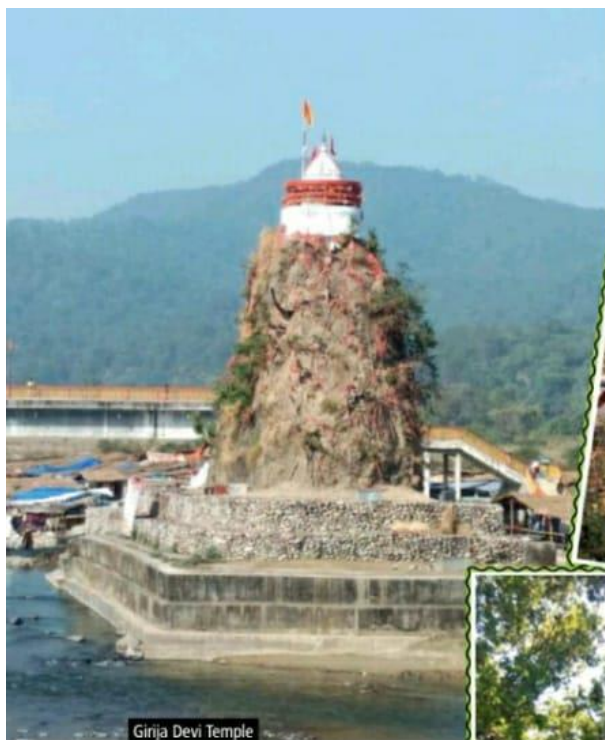
Time and again, I wish to advice any prospective traveller coming in this part of the country to enjoy the peace it has to offer. Noisy behaviour coupled with loud movements of a typical city dweller should be left behind. Nature's beauty lies in the quiet and solitude it offers with the lush greenery.

Our driver with Narendrajji was making a point to take us in every nook and corner of

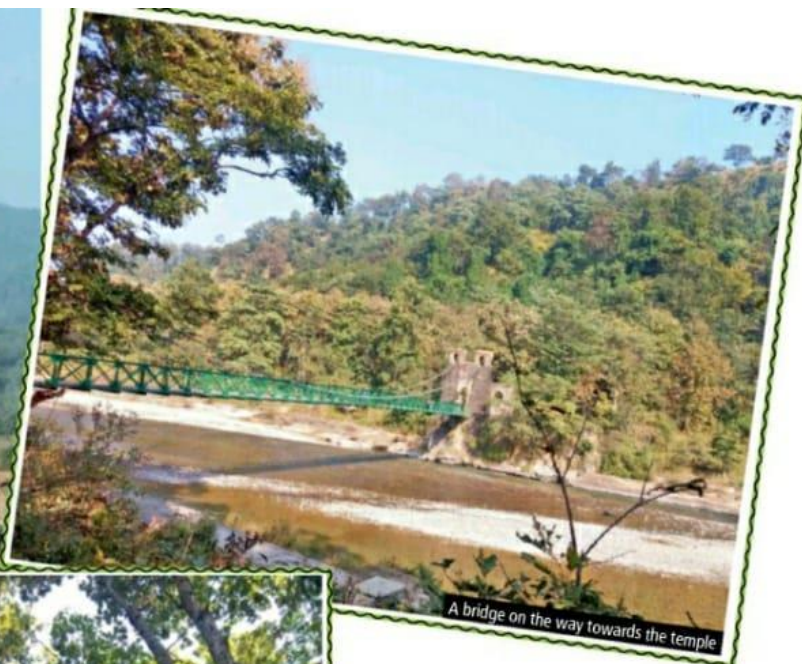
the reserve showing us the animals that call this place their home. We took the rough road that went through some dense forest areas, dried up river beds or with lower water levels and grasslands. The varied terrain played hide and seek with the sun that had slowly risen to dispel the cold and spread light. Sunlight kissing our cheeks combined with blue sky and fresh air made me realise that city bred people need to come to such places for a real breath of oxygen. We saw the crested hawk eagle perched on top of a desolate tree while just nearby a group of macaques were perched on a tree sunbathing. It was quite an amusing and sweet sight to see. Spotted deer were seen quite frequently while we missed seeing wild boars and elephants that too frequent this part of the park. I found it sad that a few of the tourists were dozing off in the jeep. A sight offered here cannot be found anywhere and not spotting a tiger does not mean you don't look at the other sights. Waking up early can be an issue but it is worth the experience.

Chatting with Narendrajji about the animals, the park, changing scenario of

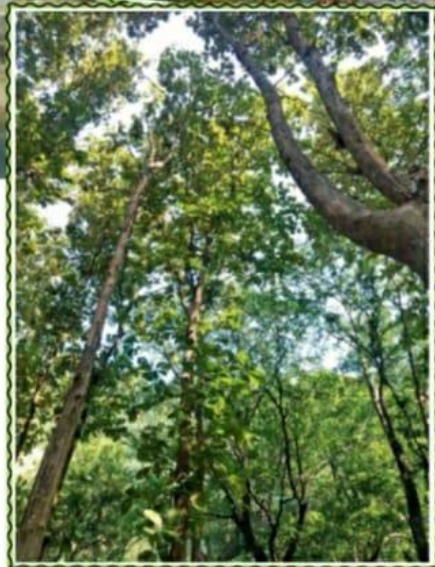




Girija Devi Temple



A bridge on the way towards the temple



the region along with the whole Uttarakhand, the localities and so on was an eye-opener. People in this area are not allowed to reside inside the park and the few staying there will be relocated in near future. There are spots in the park where you can stay for the night after reservation. Hotels are known to offer various kinds of safaris to enjoy the terrain. Just inquire a bit further to enjoy the place.

Those staying in the surrounding areas are frequent victims of tiger, leopard or other wild animal attacks and are sometimes killed too. Spotting a tiger, leopard or wild elephant nearby is as normal as seeing cattle. We are told that the tiger population here is rising and is the highest amongst all the national parks. Leopards are quite the intelligent and adaptive and are more of a threat than a tiger. They are known to enter homes and attack and unlike man-eating tigers, a man-eater leopard never loses its fear of the human beings.

We returned to our hotel all happy at the treasures that fell into laps and being able

to be one with nature. We were fortunate to have a wonderful and cheerful guide like Narendrajji to show us around.

### MAKING A DARSHAN

Once back, a sumptuous breakfast (more of a brunch) waited for us. The Riverview Retreat just knows what the guests want. And again our stomachs were satisfied and we went to take a bath. Our next part of a different darshan was planned. We went to the nearby Girijadevi Temple which is quite popular amongst the people in and around Uttarakhand. This popular temple

is a Shakti shrine located in the middle of the Kosi River on top of a rock which got eroded during a flood. What you see now is a kind of tall structure in the middle of the river on which the temple stands erect.

While you can reach the place via a road leading to the temple premises after which you need to walk, our guide Mohanji preferred a slightly longer walk via a bridge, narrow path leading up to a unusual darshan of the temple. You need to then walk down to the river bed which will lead right up to the temple. The walk itself is quite mesmerizing and you get the sights and sounds of the river which is slightly small during winters. At some points, the river looks clear and green and you can actually see the numerous fishes that call the Kosi River their home. A word of warning – fishing is banned in Uttarakhand. This is done to preserve the delicate river fauna of the state. In case you are allowed, it is for catch and release. Mahseer, a well-known fish in this part, is endangered and so fishing is limited. We suggest you have proper knowledge of the fishing rules before you try your hand.

Mohanji turned out to be another encyclopedia of information on the surroundings. He kept regaling us with tales



of *sbikaar*, leopard and tiger sightings, the people, the local thinking, food and more. We kept on asking him things and he was more than happy to talk. Ask around and the knowledge you get from the locals will only make you richer in every way. The flora and fauna that dotted to pathway towards the temple and beyond needs to be felt. The mountain ranges beyond the temple are famous for treks. In fact, in recent times, leopard attacks have been frequent. So while you are here, foolhardy daredevilry should be kept in control. There is still jungle *raj* in these areas.

A cup of chai and lots of chat later, we returned to our soothing retreat where we had a light lunch. We returned to our rooms where we relaxed before setting out with the enthusiastic GM Kareerji to eat the winter specialty of the region. Made only during winters, *Kachri* is quite a popular staple made out of singhara flour, onions, loads of butter and other simple stuff. We were taken to Bablooji who is well-known in and around Ramnagar for this. In fact he sells it so fast that you will be disappointed soon. You need to be here and eat here to know what this delight is all about. While returning, we collected the famous sweet from Uttarakhand, *Baal Mitthai* from Rawat Sweets. It is another must from this region, though you can find it a bit sweet, heavy and chewy. But those with sweet tooth can have a little bit once in a while.

On our return, we were treated to a good dinner and drinks (courtesy a well-stocked bar) which also included local Kumaoni specialties. Before our dinner, we had a session with a local animal expert who gave a brief on the wildlife that could be found in the jungle. Do ask for this session before you head to the safari as it might be of help in understanding the jungle better. The session was both informative and interesting.



Savitri Gajraulla



Organic farming in Mankandpur

### LAST DAY IN PARADISE

Being in paradise on such a small notice is so unfair. Before we could say 'Love you The Riverview Retreat', it was time to leave for Delhi. Thankfully our flight was a late night one and so we were provided with some tour of other resort properties around The Riverview Retreat. We were taken to show two other properties leased out to other groups. The Taj Corbett Resort and Spa, Uttarakhand can be called a typical high-end Taj property – well-maintained and complete with premium facilities. We enjoyed a sumptuous breakfast in the outdoor seating which like The Riverview Retreat, was besides the Kosi River. We also made a tour of the Club Mahindra Corbett Resort, a sparser but still well-maintained place seemingly popular amongst families

### CORBETT NAMA

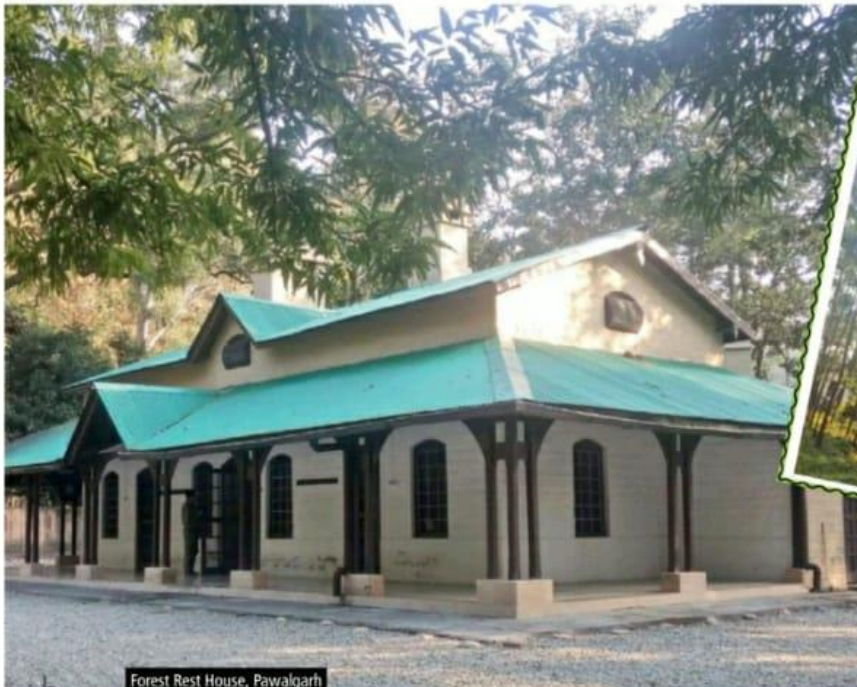
Our visit is not complete if we do not visit Jim Corbett's home in Kaladhungi. It is now a museum dedicated to a legend who probably made us fall in love with nature, tigers, shikars and jungle lore. The drive down to the place is as scenic as you can imagine. You weave in and around the hilly terrain dotted with trees.

This home turned museum which he shared with his sister is a simple early colonial style bungalow that is characteristic of any hill stations developed by the British. Surrounded by greenery, you see a lot of stuff belonging to the hunter turned conservationist still well-preserved in this place. You also will see information regarding the life of the man well-marked all over the bungalow. Visiting this place is a must if you have come to the safari. If interested, get some local mementoes from the shop in the vicinity that stocks everything from local products to books on Corbett and Uttarakhand.

A short distance away is Chhoti Haldwani, a village that Corbett had brought. He took care of the place along with locals who settled here. After independence, he left India but bequeathed the village to the villagers. The well-planned village showcases the foresight of the man and the original *chaupal* is still well-kept. We met Trilok Singhji whose father was Corbett's right-hand man. In fact, he still has the gun gifted to his father by Corbett. He readily posed for us and spoke fondly of the man.

After a quick meet and a fond goodbye, we went further to an interesting tourist haven. Pawalgarh is THE place to visit as it is the site





Forest Rest House, Pawalgarh



where the famous Bachelar of Pawalgarh was killed by Corbett. The Forest Rest House located here in the middle of Sitabani forest has the tree where the tiger was killed. This Bachelar of Pawalgarh was the biggest tiger ever shot by Corbett and had terrorized the region before being hunted by him in 1930. After the post-mortem, it was found that he was in fact not a man-eater that was earlier claimed and a remorseful Corbett left hunting and turned towards conserving the forest and its true dwellers. It was the turning point that made him the legend he became.

### GO ORGANIC

Our partner in crime in seeing the real Uttarakhand, GM Kareer had another surprise in store for us. After seeing a quaint water-run windmill that was actually a flour mill, we went to meet Savitri Garjaulla who manages an organic farm in Mankandpur village that is now a byword for organic farming. She happened to be the first one to start organic

farming in the region and is dedicated to it. In fact, this powerhouse woman now advises others from in and around Uttarakhand regarding organic farming. We visited her to understand what it is all about and ended the wonderful trip with some quaintly simple yet delicious Kumaoni food.

If you come (and I am sure you would come) to The Riverview Retreat, have them organise a trip to her place where for a nominal amount, you get to feel and eat organic life. Her information and work leaves you speechless and you feel what you offer in money is so less than what she really offers you.

After a good meal, the drive back to the retreat was equally thrilling. Zigzagging through rivers and forest areas, we came face to face with a herd of wild elephants that were doing their own thing and trying to cross the road. Temperamental creatures, one needs to be careful as they are capable of attacking at whim and running behind

you with great speed despite their size. Do not take these gentle giants lightly.

Once at the retreat, we realised that it was time to leave this paradise and return to Delhi as quickly as possible to catch an early morning flight. The two days of pleasant solitude coupled with some superb service and prime hospitality had charmed us. The Riverview Retreat, Corbett, owned and developed by Leisure Hotels stayed true to their group's motto – experience 'more'. What we really experienced here was more of nature, eco-friendly stay paired with luxury and true hospitality. Come here to feel the refreshing life offered here and also experience the park and Uttarakhand in its true sense.

With a heavy heart, we bade good bye to the retreat and disappeared into the dark night on the highway towards the city. Normalcy never felt so morose. Suddenly I understood what Jim Corbett meant when he wrote the following in his book '*The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*': There are events in one's life which, no matter how remote, never fade from memory. 🇮🇳