

Never Changing its Spots

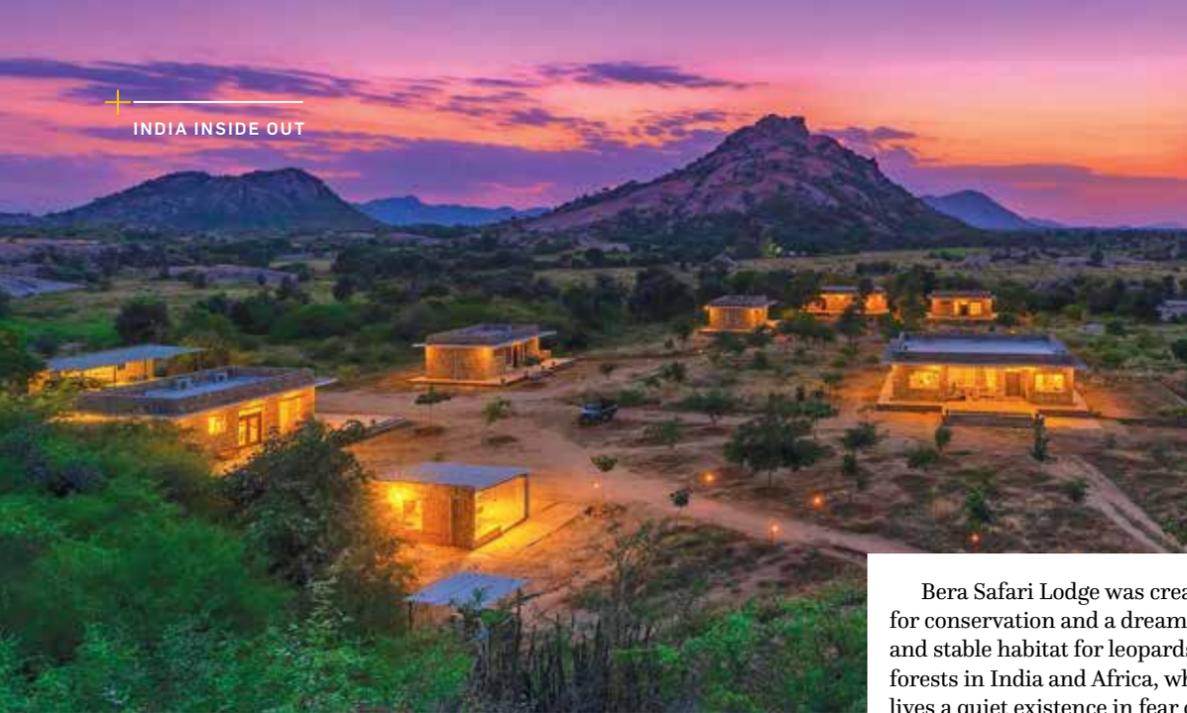
In the rocky hills of **Jawai, Rajasthan**, the Indian leopard is the apex predator but chooses to live in harmony with the locals. A safari lodge is spearheading efforts for conservation of the area's wildlife. *Charukesi Ramadurai* checks-in to spot a big cat, or four.

LATE ONE WINTER AFTERNOON, after a leisurely lunch, we leave our wildlife lodge for a safari, with prayers on our lips and leopards on our mind. We drive for over an hour through country roads, narrow and dusty. Langurs and peacocks pop up at unexpected corners, and local women walk demurely on the side of the road, carrying pots of water and bales of hay.

As we finally come to a halt on a mud track just off the main road, our driver-guide Manohar Singh points towards a spot high up on a hillock and says with a flourish, "There! There is your leopard!" But stare as I do, with the naked eye and then through a pair of binoculars, I cannot see any leopard. My husband, meanwhile, is jumping in excitement, echoing the words of Singh, who is getting more and more agitated, "It's right there, can't you see it?" And finally, I do.

The leopard is not just a shy and elusive cat, as I've always known, but also capable of efficient camouflage. In my defence, the leopard—with its tawny brown coat and dark spots—had merged into the arid, craggy rocks like an organic feature of the landscape. And until it decided to flex its long body and raise its head, the big cat remained hidden in plain sight. For the next half hour, we watch enthralled, as the leopard stretches and yawns, stands up and shakes its head, and then goes supine again, in a primeval routine.

The real surprise, though, is that the hillock is right behind a house, and from our safari jeep, we can see people going about their work with complete nonchalance—an old lady stands in the courtyard and a couple of kids play loud games, their voice competing with the noise of the cattle tethered to their shed behind the house. And this is the magic of the rocky Rajasthan region, says Shatrunjay Singh Pratap—the owner of Bera Safari Lodge, where I am staying. The peaceful co-existence of "leopards and shepherds," as he calls it.



Left: Bera Safari Lodge is built to blend into its natural environment.
Bottom: The property features large and spacious rooms, all stone and wood.

Bera village, within the larger area of Jawai, falls roughly midway between Udaipur and Jodhpur. It is here, far away from the tourist crowds of these popular heritage destinations, that Shatrunjay and his wife Katyaini (“call me Katu”) run a wildlife lodge that, very much like the leopards in the surrounding hills, blends into the environment.

Driving past the main gate through the winding driveway, it is initially difficult to see any sign of a lodge. Then we fetch up at the modest main house, where Shatrunjay stays with his wife, twin children, and two dogs. Bhikaram, from the kitchen team, welcomes us with a warm smile and glasses of *nimbu paani*, before escorting us to our room. There are only five guest cottages here, spread over the 10-acre property. And just like the owner’s residence, all of them are squat and brown, earth and stone, disappearing into the harsh browns of the Liloda Hill just behind the property (and lucky guests have been able to spot leopards on this hill from the comfort of their rooms). Our cottage is slightly far from the hillock, but that does not stop me from peering out hopefully through the large windows at all times of the day.



Bera Safari Lodge was created out of a passion for conservation and a dream of ensuring a safe and stable habitat for leopards. Unlike in most forests in India and Africa, where the leopard lives a quiet existence in fear of the tiger or the lion, here in Jawai it is the apex predator. This means that leopards here feel free to roam around the hills and lakes whenever they want. And over time, they have also managed to establish a comfortable “live and let live” relationship with the locals, mainly from the Rabari shepherd community. It is not uncommon to see—as I did—leopards in close vicinity of people, occasionally even in the middle of human settlements. When I sound sceptical at the idea, Singh points out a small temple in the neighbouring village one morning after the safari and reveals, “This is one of their favourite haunts, and the *pujari* here is used to their company.”

It hasn’t always been smooth sailing for the region of Jawai though, with mining lobbies trying to establish operations in the hills nearly a decade ago. This would have meant the destruction of wildlife habitats and ecosystems, threatening the survival of the already endangered leopard. Shatrunjay, who had just returned after studying wine-making in UC Davis, California, and was working with Sula Wines in Nashik, felt strongly enough to intervene.

“We have a farm just 20 kilometres from Bera, and I have been visiting the area since my childhood days,” he says, while explaining his love for the place. It was on an evening drive with his family in search of leopards that he heard a loud blast from the hills, and upon inquiring, came to know that 11 mines had already been approved by the government and another 144 were in the pipeline.

What followed was a long and difficult struggle, legal and political, that lasted over three years; it included educating and mobilising the local community, creating awareness through the media, and pleading and arguing with the authorities. The government finally passed a notice of termination of all mining leases, and

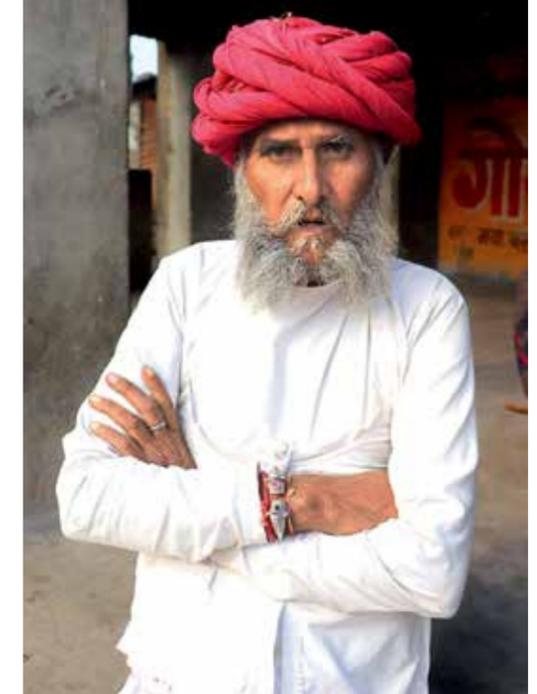
now over 50 leopards call this region their home. It was at the end of this fight that Shatrunjay and his wife moved here to build a wildlife lodge. Their four-year-old twins are enrolled in a Jaipur school, but live here most of the time, casually dropping trivia about the native flora and fauna.

Mealtimes are my favourite moments at the lodge, eating simple and hearty home-cooked food at the large communal dining table in the lounge. Shatrunjay and Katyaini join guests at all meals, and conversations are almost always about wildlife and ecology, with everyone sharing their favourite experiences and cherished memories. Occasionally, the kids saunter in with questions or complaints. Once we step out of the dining area, the dogs usually arrive with wagging tails and beseeching eyes that make it impossible not to pet them.

In the three days I spend at Bera Safari Lodge, we manage four leopard sightings, more than I had dared to hope for. Unlike safaris in conventional national parks, there are no fixed times or geographic boundaries. Shatrunjay works with a team of excellent scouts who spread out to track the movement of leopards and report back at the lodge. There are usually two drives in a day, and guests are taken to the area where leopards were last spotted. And that is how I end up seeing that camouflaged leopard one evening and one more on the other side of the same mound, and then a pair of them facing off on another hill the next morning.

The terrain is starkly beautiful, the rocks seeming to change colours and contours with the sunlight. The barren landscape is broken only by the occasional stretch of fields and hutments, or a flash of the long, colourful dupattas worn by local women. Our four-wheel drive surges up and down effortlessly on the rugged surface of the hillocks, as the sharp

A lack of urban lights in the surrounds means the Milky Way is clearly visible over the lodge.
Top: Rabari men in their white attire and red turbans are often seen shepherding herds of cattle to avoid traffic jams on roads.



eyes of our guide constantly scan the distance for the big cats. Every once in a while, we are caught in minor traffic jams involving large herds of cows or sheep, a solitary human in white dhoti and red turban walking behind them, balancing his long stick on his shoulders. This often involves a cloud of dust or a cacophony of moos, as the he tries to herd the animals on one side of the road.

One morning, after safari and breakfast, we pile into the jeep once more for a trip to Jawai Dam, built by Jodhpur’s then Maharaja Umaid Singh over 60 years ago. The dam has created a large reservoir that is haven for several species of endemic and migratory birds. In the few minutes we spend there, we manage to spot dozens of ducks and geese, cranes and raptors.

The night before we are to leave Bera, we sit in front of a bonfire, nursing drinks and exchanging notes. Shatrunjay suddenly gets his staff to switch off all the lanterns and lamps, and asks us to look up at the sky. For a city slicker like me, the idea of millions of stars on a clear sky has always seemed like a fairy tale; here in Jawai, it is an everyday sight. ✕

THE DETAILS

GETTING THERE

Fly into Udaipur or Jodhpur from any major Indian city; Bera Safari Lodge is an easy 3.5-hour drive from either city.

STAY

Accommodation at Bera Safari Lodge starts from ₹20,000, inclusive of all meals and two game drives. berasafarilodge.com

BEST SEASON

Although it is a year-round destination, the sweltering summer months between April to June provide the best leopard sightings.