

# JUNGLELORE

Set in the midst of a forest in Madhya Pradesh, the Kanha Earth Lodge is an ecological escape with all the comforts of a modern holiday.

TEXT: **BRINDA SURI** | PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY **KANHA EARTH LODGE**



The foyer's entrance, furnished with organic furniture, exudes an idyllic appeal.

When constructing a property, how many of us feel a sense of gratitude for the land that will graciously be hosting us, giving space for our desires? How many of us think about what we can return to the land, rather than what the land can do for us? Pugdundee Safaris seems to have asked these questions and addressed them with Kanha Earth Lodge, the latest entrant in their line-up of wildlife



resorts around Madhya Pradesh. The property is a tribute to natural surroundings and its true residents (read wildlife). An outcome of intense passion and unflinching commitment, it's a remarkable illustration of a time-honoured maxim: the will here being to go green with gusto. Albeit, without discounting on the luxuries a modern vacation demands.

Miles away from the cluster of wildlife resorts, this getaway is cocooned in the buffer zone of the Kanha Tiger Reserve, a few kilometres from the Khatia entrance gate. Appearing custom-made

1 The name board at the entrance provides guests with a glimpse of the mood that encompasses the rest of the property.

2 Elements of vernacular Gond architecture are clearly visible in the design of the cottage, underscored by use of mud-plaster, stone, terracotta tiles...

3 A harmonious, open design allows the cottage to blend into the landscape.

4 No trees were felled during construction. In fact, the guest accommodation was constructed around the onsite vegetation.

5 The main building is aglow with the gentle illumination of the evening's light.

6 The library duplicates as a pre-supper interaction area, where one may read, converse or conduct wildlife programmes.



for the nature enthusiast, the sprawling property blends into the landscape. This is subtly illustrated by the placement of the lodge's deluxe, open-fronted cottages around the existing (Mahua) trees of the region; ie no tree was felled during construction. This translates into twin benefits: first, an undisturbed ecology, and second natural protection from solar radiation thanks to dense leafy shade. It is this ethos of consistently walking the conserve-and-recycle path that lets Kanha Earth Lodge stand in a league of its own.

Conceptualized by Pugdundee Safaris, the resort has been given brilliant form by architect Deepak Srivastava and his associates at Archinova Design Group, Bhopal. The green soldiers agreed to primarily 'use traditional building technology and material wherever possible and combine these with modern counterparts for greater sustainability and endeavour to work together with the local community'. Other features included opting for alternative/sustainable means of water acquisition and reducing consumption; providing for careful handling and disposal of solid waste; and meeting energy needs through passive design/renewable sources.



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**CONCEPT:** To provide a lodge using vernacular construction techniques and locally-available materials, while offering luxuries of a modern holiday.

Set in a 16-acre jungle, the lodge's basic concept has been inspired from the vernacular Gond tribal architecture of the area, including the use of mud-plaster, stone, terracotta tiles as well as rough-hewn timber beams and columns. A harmonious, open design, coupled with the use of locally-available materials, allows the cottages to blend into the landscape. Paths through untamed grass lead to these individual guest accommodations, adding more than a sense of thrill to the entire living-in-the-jungle experience, which comes to the fore when animal calls pierce the air. Putting it all into perspective is Shyamendra Singh, heir of the Nagod royal family and the founder-director of Pugdundee Safaris. "The property has created a niche for itself in a crowded location like Kanha. What stands out is the ease with which it merges with the forest and tribal villages around," he says, wistfully adding, "To me it looks as if it were always here."

There's a hierarchy of spaces in the property's design. The parking has been offset from the main entrance to prevent vehicular movement from disturbing guests. The central area consists



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**MATERIALS: WALLS** Polygonal stone (main building) and brick with mud finish plaster. **FLOORING** Flagstone (main building) and terracotta tile (cottages). **CEILING** Terracotta tiles on wooden rafters with a waste wood false ceiling. **FURNITURE** Organic furniture with recycled unsawn wood and recycled sleeper wood. **FURNISHINGS** Bamboo chicks (window covering) and vegetable-dyed cotton.

- 7** Open-fronted cottages allow guests to enjoy luscious views of the natural surroundings.
- 8** The blend of traditional building technology and materials with modern conveniences lets the lodges exude a warm and inviting glow.
- 9** The dip pool is placed within a cluster of trees for privacy. No excavation was done; rather the pool was raised, affording views of the lush forest with which the infinity edge merges.
- 10** The dining section is a double-height space that has multi-level pitched roofs, large glazed openings and chunky wooden furniture.

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**11** Overhead lights fitted into wooden planks that are suspended from the ceiling with ropes, make for interesting fixtures.

**12** Innovation and attention to detail can be noticed in the wooden blades of the fans.

**13** Teak biscuits embedded into cottage doors ensure no wood was wasted during construction.

**14** Chairs get their swivel bars from bullock cart wheels.

**15** This book shelf is actually a vertically positioned cattle feeder.

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of a ramp leading to a foyer that's flanked by an interactively-designed library (a casual space sans contours) and a double-height, glazed dining section with a sit-out that overlooks a wetland/forest environs. In the vicinity, set between Mahua trees, is a small pool, its infinity edge merging with the forested canopy. The property comprises 12 chic cottages. In sync with the overriding theme, their interiors have a rustic yet exclusive feel. The emphasis is on the use of tribal artefacts and pastoral elements. A characteristic feature in some cottages is the en-suite bathroom, ingeniously designed as an open bathing space.

"The challenge was to convert the scrub land into an eco-lodge, which in itself would be an experience to stay in," explains Manav Khanduja, a director of Pugdunde Safaris. Contributing to the ambience is the structural material that has been used in its original form. The ceilings are artistically held by *ballis* (beams) and ventilator frames have also been crafted with them. There's ingenious use of plough-staves at the entrance and railway sleepers can be spotted as lintels and



**16** The bathrooms have a bucolic appeal that's accentuated with plenty of natural lighting streaming in.

**17** Some cottages have an open (no-door) bathroom with floors dressed in large pebbles and timber, conveying an out-in-the-open character.

shelves at various locations. Sections of hollow tamarind logs (salvaged from trees that were cut down to widen roads) with glass inlays function as tables; handmade bamboo blinds replace curtains; and teak biscuits, pasted on 12 mm plywood, adorn the main doors. The *pièce de résistance* is bar stools created with sections of bullock-cart wheels.

Basalt, the chief construction material, has found applications in structural masonry, screen walls, garden walls, etc. The rough-finished, greyish-beige stone has been admirably hand-quarried from within a five-kilometre radius. This, in turn, facilitated the employment of locals in the construction process. According to Srivastava, "Stone piers act as structural members as well as background material for art displays. The contrast between the rough textured stone and smooth, hand-plastered wall creates an element of interest and further enhances the tactile nature of stone. The finishes change with the character of space."

At Kanha Earth Lodge all building material has fit into specific physical and cultural contexts through careful attention to form, landscaping and colour. The project was awarded the All-India Stone Architectural Award 2010 (interior design category) by the Centre for Development of Stone for its 'sensitive use of stone in vernacular methodology'. A commendable construction, this one! **BI**



**FACT FILE: NAME OF PROJECT** Kanha Earth Lodge, Balaghat, Madhya Pradesh. **SITE AREA** 16 acres. **CONSTRUCTED AREA** 17,000 sq ft. **DESIGN FIRM** Archinova Design Group. **PRINCIPAL ARCHITECT** Deepak Srivastava. **DESIGN TEAM** Padmaja Srivastava, Yogesh Badgaiyan and Kaushal Bhadourya. **PROJECT DURATION** Two years.