

READERS' TRAVEL AWARDS 2021 WINNERS INSIDE

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INDIAN EDITION

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AMAZING PEOPLE
ON WHY THEIR
HOME COUNTRY
SHOULD BE
YOUR NEXT
DESTINATION

Bengaluru-based
poet and writer
Joshua Muiwa
at the Malleswaram
flower market

The World
made local

plus REIMAGINING IBIZA ★ GOA, BUT DIFFERENT ★ SKIING IN FRANCE ★ NEW IN THE MALDIVES

FIRST LOOK



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WAGHOBA ECO LODGE MAHARASHTRA

Pugdundee Safaris' lodge is perfect for earth-friendly R&R in the wild. By **Saumya Ancheri**

It is 8.40pm on a Saturday night. Fireflies spark gold in the canopy, as we chomp on sandwiches in Maharashtra's Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve. Yes, a big cat could appear any moment now but, given the unseasonal showers, no one's placing any bets. I had been really looking forward to spotting those stripes in the wild and yet, it was turning out to be just the right kind of weekend.

Waghoba Eco Lodge is spread over seven acres, about 2.5 hours by road from Nagpur airport. Set in the buffer zone, the hotel is within a half-hour's drive of the tiger reserve's core gates at Khutwanda and Moharli. The seventh lodge from the sustainability-minded Pugdundee Safaris, the hotel is their first outside of Madhya Pradesh and a perfect addition for a safari lodge circuit.

Rustic and pared-back in design, the lodge offers a relaxed, unpretentious, earth-friendly stay. Each of the 14 one-bedroom cottages comes with a sit-out, a writing desk, a coffee press and cookies, a large bathroom with a skylight and a very comfy bed.

The guna vault ceilings made of earthen cylinders minimise the use of concrete, steel and electricity, bolstered by sandstone cladding, adobe brick walls, and arched roofs made of upcycled broken mosaic. Everything from the locally sourced materials to the alignment of the structures has been geared by architecture firm Biome Solutions to cut Tadoba's searing heat.

Sustainability is in the details, too: furniture of reclaimed wood, filtered drinking water, Just Herbs bath products in refillable bottles,

dental and shaving kits on request, and a no single-use plastic policy. Many of the makers are nonprofits. Most employees are locals, with a focus on gender balance.

The restaurant—helmed by chef Michael Swamy—serves delicious regional and Continental fare made with house mixes and local produce: thalipeeth and eggs for breakfast; lunch thalis focusing on the cuisine of Hyderabad, Maharashtra and its Vidarbha region, and a five-course dinner. Kids get a menu with pasta and the like. Each meal ends on a sweet note, and the breads, sweets and ice creams are all made in-house.

The outdoors take centre-stage at Waghoba. There are no TVs or WiFi (though there's aircon and hot water). Hit the lounge for board games, nature books and DVDs or cool off in the shaded pool. A bird hide for photographers and a butterfly garden are shaping up. But the top attraction is the safari: at dawn, afternoon, night and, from November, even by boat.

I may not have seen a big cat in the monsoon forest but thanks to the trained eye of lodge naturalist Swanand Deshpande, I spotted mottled wood owl, barking deer, sloth bear. My sense of the tiger was peripheral—the property's shrine to Waghoba (as the deified tiger is known here), pugmarks—but there was joy in knowing that the forest is thriving and for one long weekend, I was part of it. 🐾

WAGHOBA ECO LODGE

Wadala Tukum, Maharashtra 442906. (waghobaecolodge.com; doubles from ₹18,500 including three meals per night)

