

On the Tiger Trail in Tadoba

Green in every sense of the word, an eco-centric safari lodge in the hinterland of India's Maharashtra state offers a mindful escape centered on wildlife excursions, flavorsome regional cuisine, and easy hospitality.

— by Shikha Shah



Hopping off the train at the Chandrapur railway station in eastern Maharashtra, my husband and I are greeted by a life-size tiger sculpture solemnly staring into our eyes. A tiger cutout is perched atop the stone plaque a few steps ahead. As we exit the platforms, we can't help but admire a vibrant tile mosaic mural depicting the striped cat alongside scenes from pastoral India. The burst of feline-inspired artwork around every corner seems to be announcing our arrival in tiger country.

We are headed to the outskirts of the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve for a long-envisioned safari getaway. Encompassing more than 600 square kilometers on the Deccan Plateau of central India, this is Maharashtra's largest and oldest national park and a key habitat for the Bengal tiger, an animal we have tried (and failed) to spot at other wilderness areas across the country. We're hoping to have more success at Tadoba.

Another draw is Waghoba Eco Lodge, which

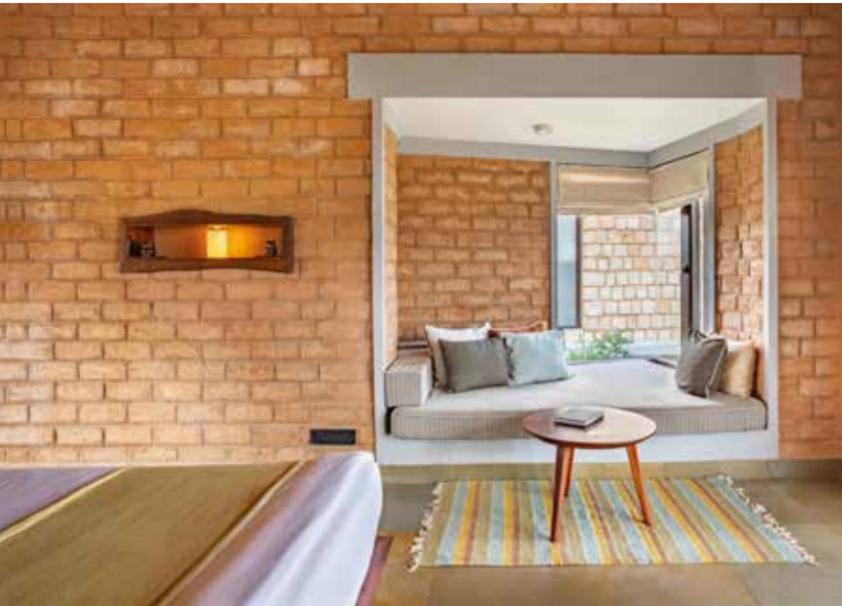
opened in 2021 as the seventh property from Delhi-based Pugdundee Safaris, a leading name in sustainable ecotourism. Set on five hectares of conserved grassland in the reserve's buffer zone, it feels a world away from the bustle of Chandrapur, though the drive from there takes just over an hour. Soon enough, we're sipping icy lemon-mint coolers under the vaulted roof of Waghoba's reception lounge, which frames unfettered views of the countryside and the forested hills beyond.

Sustainability informs every aspect of the operation. The lodge's communal spaces and 14 rustic guest cottages were built using handmade adobe bricks and locally sourced sandstone. It all blends effortlessly into the landscape. A solar plant supplies most of the electricity, complemented by rainwater harvesting and gray-water recycling. And the majority of employees have been recruited from nearby villages, with a focus on gender balance.

Beyond its green cred, Waghoba is

EASY, TIGER

Above, from left: One of Tadoba's big cats; on the lookout for birdlife at Waghoba Eco Lodge; a thali platter at the lodge's restaurant.



DAWN PATROL
Clockwise from above: Encountering a tiger on a morning safari; inside one of Waghoba Eco Lodge's clean-lined guest cottages; resident naturalist Gaurav Dhotre.

also unpretentiously stylish. The first thing we notice inside our cottage is the arched ceiling made from thousands of *guna*, or earthenware cylinders. Terra cotta-hued brick walls are enlivened by monochromatic sketches of local flora and fauna, while reclaimed teakwood furniture and linen window blinds impart a feel of minimalist elegance. Our skylighted bathroom is stocked with refillable toiletries from Just Herbs, a line of all-natural Ayurvedic skin and hair care products. A trapezoidal nook done up as a daybed — perfect for napping in between



excursions — and a limestone-tiled deck complete the picture.

The food is another high point. In the lodge's airy restaurant, we eat our way through different *thali* platters that showcase local seasonal ingredients. Presented on a gleaming, handmade bronze platter, the Maharashtrian *thali* is particularly sumptuous, laden with bowls of *aloo gobi bhaji* (potato and cauliflower cooked with a blend of spices), yellow dal, chicken curry, *moong dal koshimbir* (a lentil salad with cucumber, carrots, and grated coconut), and *paneer masala*. For a sweet finish, the kitchen makes its own *modak* (Maharashtrian dumplings with a coconut-jaggery filling) and *santra barfi*, a fudge-like confection with a tangy orange flavor. They also produce some wicked ice cream.

Waghoba's covered outdoor swimming pool provides respite from the scorching heat of the day. We don't find time for more than a dip, but a candlelit poolside dinner will remain a fond memory.

Most mornings, we wake at the crack of dawn to explore the countryside and sleepy villages over long walks and cycling trips in the company of friendly in-house naturalist Gaurav Dhotre. Along the way, he identifies native trees — *mahua*, *jamun*, *semal*, *palash* — and birds like the bronze-winged jacana and the orange-headed thrush. For ardent twitchers, the bird hide adjacent to the lodge's pond offers a chance to study and photograph some of the local avian life at eye level: red-wattled lapwings, white-throated kingfishers, and pond herons are regular visitors.

But what we're really here to see are tigers. When the big day arrives, we join Dhotre in an open-top jeep for the 20-minute drive through cotton and mustard fields to Tadoba's Khutwanda gate, where our IDs are inspected and we are politely told that using cell phones inside the forest is prohibited.

Within a few minutes of entering the still-misty woodlands of teak and wild bamboo, we see a herd

of spotted deer grazing in the underbrush, a sambar stag rubbing its antlers on a tree trunk, and peacocks strutting about the forest floor, their train of tail feathers dragging behind them. Above us, families of langur monkeys swing from one branch to another. Keen-eyed Dhotre points to a forest owlet camouflaged in the foliage. Soon after, we spy an enormous black wood spider serenely sitting on its web. With the pale morning light of the Indian winter seeping through the canopy, the forest is bewitching, straight out of a painting.

What we don't see, we hear: a cacophony of chirps and yaps and squeaks and screeches. While Bengal tigers are its biggest lure, Tadoba is home to dozens of mammal and reptile species — including Asiatic wild dogs, sloth bears, marsh crocodiles, and civets — as well as around 200 types of birds. But the sound we're hoping for is the high-pitched alarm call of a deer or monkey that signals the presence of a tiger. According to the lodge, 115 of the big cats currently roam these forests, one of the highest concentrations in the country. Among them is the legendary tigress Choti Tara, who reigns over the territory around Jamani Lake.

We're hoping to encounter her, or any tiger for

that matter, but despite Dhotre's best efforts to find fresh tracks on the dirt road, there is none to be seen. At 10 a.m., disheartened, we resign ourselves to the vagaries of nature, and park the jeep in a broad meadow for a picnic of chicken sandwiches, danishes, boiled eggs, and coffee. "Never lose hope while you're inside the forest," Dhotre says to help cheer us up.

Back at the lodge's library, we console ourselves with a viewing of *The Tigers of Chandrapur*, a locally shot wildlife documentary. We may not have been lucky with spotting a big cat but we do feel grateful for the liberating time spent in the wild, breathing in the crisp forest air, getting acquainted with its residents, and listening to hair-raising tales of tiger sightings. We realize that a safari adventure, just like life in general, is governed by unpredictability and chance encounters, and perhaps therein lies its charm. ☺

Rates at Waghoba Eco Lodge (waghobaecolodge.com) start from US\$215 a night, meals included. Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve opens to visitors seasonally from October 15 through June, though the lodge operates year-round.

LIVING HISTORY

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HISTORY ENTHUSIASTS will love the location of Paradox Singapore Merchant Court, an urban resort linked to the vibrant Clarke Quay precinct via a pedestrian bridge. Clarke Quay is the place to begin a Singapore River cruise on a wooden bumboat; start off at 7:30 p.m. to catch the sunset and Marina Bay's light and water show. Nearby, the hilltop Fort Canning Park contains nine historical gardens alongside monuments such as British fortifications and Keramat Iskandar Shah, a shrine dedicated to the last King of Singapura.

Chinatown is less than 15 minutes' walk from the hotel, or just one stop away on the MRT's North East Line. Near the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple, Yong Gallery combines traditional Chinese calligraphy with wood carving; it also stocks scroll paintings and traditional seals. Another notable spot is Pek Sin Choon Tea Merchants, which has been mixing and roasting tea leaves into artisanal blends since 1925. You can even learn about the area's unsavory past through the Triad Trails walking tour each Saturday, led by ex-triad members who share their experiences navigating the criminal underworld.

Two MRT stops from the hotel in the other direction, Little India is known for colorful street art and storefronts overflowing with traditional wares. Here, the ultramodern Indian Heritage Centre chronicles the Indian diaspora experience in Southeast Asia through its precious collection of artifacts and family heirlooms. Just around the corner on Dunlop Street, old-school grocer's Thandapani Co was established in the 1960s: stock up on spices and take home their house-mixed briyani masala for a uniquely aromatic souvenir.

For more information, visit paradoxhotels.com/singapore

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