



CLOCKWISE: SANJAY SHRISHRIMALALAMY; SUMEET KESWANI (2); SANJAY SHRISHRIMALALAMY

WHERE THE WILD IS WELCOME

INSTEAD OF ESCAPING THE HEAT OF THE PLAINS AND HEADING TO THE HILLS, **SUMEET KESWANI** TRUDGES THROUGH THE JUNGLES OF CENTRAL INDIA TO DISCOVER TWO SUSTAINABLE LODGES MELTING INTO THE WOODS THAT SURROUND THEM.

THE THREE-HOUR DRIVE from the Nagpur airport isn't the most scenic road trip I've taken, and when I arrive at Waghoba Eco Lodge, I'm still not in lush green woodland as I had imagined. This is shadeless scrubland, crisscrossed by beaten paths and fringed by trees in the distance. But this raw setting is very much by design.

Waghoba Eco Lodge is the newest property of Pugdundee Safaris. The eco-tourism company now runs seven lodges across six national parks in Central India. "It was a conscious decision not to re-wild the land around the property too much, to maintain the natural bushland ecosystem," says Swanand Deshpande, head naturalist at Waghoba Eco Lodge. The litmus test of responsible tourism is to do the right thing, not the more saleable one.

This is not to say that no changes have been made. An artificial reservoir at the lodge provides birds respite from the heat—the mercury touches 50° Celsius in peak summer—a reliable food and water source, and a safe nesting site. Nearby, a smaller, shallower pool looks conspicuously redundant—until you notice a low, flat structure overlooking the two waterbodies. The Bird Hide allows guests to photograph birds at eye level, without

Clockwise: A jeep safari in Tadoba National Park; a spotted deer in the jungle; a Brahminy starling (left) and two rosy starlings seen on a nature walk around Waghoba Eco Lodge; Tadoba National Park has a healthy population of tigers.

disturbing them. The plan seems to be working. The reservoir is visited by sparrows, Indian silverbills, pond herons, white-breasted kingfishers, spotted doves, and red-wattled lapwings. In the afternoons, flights of wire-tailed and streak-throated swallows circle the airspace above the lake, taking turns to swoop down for their freshwater grub.

Pugdundee Safaris has also won accolades for its commitment to green architecture. Waghoba Eco Lodge's rustic, earthen look is not just an aesthetic choice, it's down to the material used: handmade Adobe earth bricks. "When these bricks crumble, they mix with the soil and do not hamper its fertility," Deshpande tells me. The vaulted ceilings are made of handmade earthen cups called *guna*; they interlock and form arches over us. A mosaic of repurposed tiles on top reflects harsh sunlight and keeps the interiors cool. There are 14 cottages of the same size and design, embedded with WiFi but no TV. Their brick walls are adorned with informative sketches of the local flora and fauna, illuminated by sustainable lighting fixtures. The bathroom and toilet, peppered with organic linen and toiletries, are besieged by harmless critters at night—a small cost of living amid unfettered nature.

The ethos of sustainability flavours the food as well. "We have a zero-tolerance policy towards preservatives and chemicals," says Chef Ark, who helms the kitchen and organic garden. And so, he makes most of the stuff in-house, from grinding the spices to whipping up a new ice-cream flavour every day. The meals are regional, and the produce homegrown or locally sourced—"from within a radius of 100 miles (160 km)" as a Pugdundee Safaris policy. Through my three-day stay, I sample a Nagpuri thali, a Maharashtrian thali, a South Indian breakfast, and a North Indian meal.

The lodge gets its name from the locals' moniker for the apex predator of these woods. The tiger, or *wagh*, is worshipped as a deity by the Gond tribe, hence the reverential address: *waghoba*. In fact, there are many temples in the area with stone figurines of tigers inside.

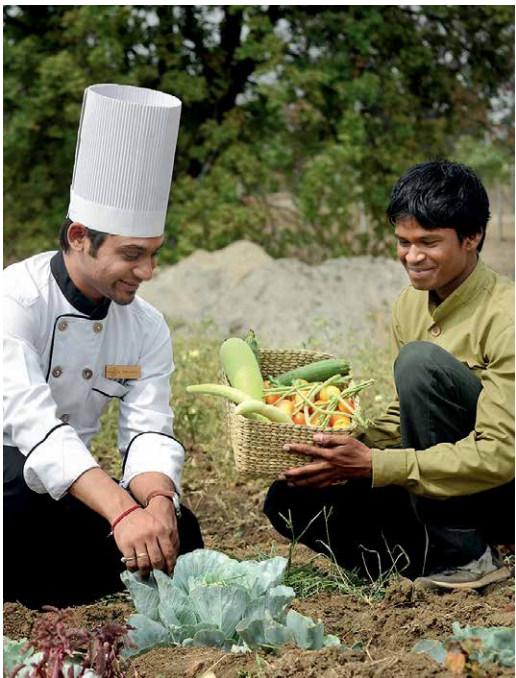
In the morning, Deshpande takes me on a stroll around the lodge. The trees on the horizon turn out to be the beginning of the core area of Tadoba National Park, so we skirt the edges of the woods. Deshpande is an encyclopaedia of information on the ecosystem and its relationship with the locals. He points out mahua trees, the flowers of which are used to produce liquor; he doesn't have to point out the palash flowers, which offer bright pops of orange in a green-brown landscape and which are used to make juice—while their leaves offer themselves up as *dona* (serving platters); he takes special interest in an Arjuna tree, the bark of which is used to brew a medicinal potion. But his enthusiasm takes a different form, that of two scratch marks on the ancient bark—the smaller one is of a sloth bear, and the bigger, more ominous one of a tiger. The gash is so deep it seems to have bled the tree and left scars—records for future archaeologists to unearth.



Clockwise: Waghoba Eco Lodge is built with Adobe earth bricks; the property's 14 cottages look out to scrubland teeming with birds; The Bird Hide at the lodge; the regional thalis are made from homegrown and locally sourced produce; a mosaic of repurposed tiles on top of a vaulted ceiling reflects harsh sunlight and keeps the interiors of the cottages cool.



CLOCKWISE: SUMEET KESWANI (2); COURTESY OF WAGHOBIA ECO LODGE (3)



Clockwise: A male jackal comes home to his mate and pups with food as a deer looks on inside Pench National Park; Pench Tree Lodge grows organic vegetables and fruits in its own garden and orchard; a dining setup near the organic garden; one of the property's six treehouses that allow for complete nature immersion.

CLOCKWISE: SUMEET KESWANI; COURTESY OF PENCH TREE LODGE (3)

There is no dearth of avian visitors either. Blue-tailed bee-eaters have arrived earlier than their summer schedule; we also spot ashy prinia, bush lark, common hawk-cuckoo, and rosy starlings. Deshpande singles out an ordinary looking chestnut-shouldered petronia and narrates the story of how the discovery of this bird spurred on Dr Salim Ali to research and classify Indian birds. His passion is contagious, so I ask Deshpande about his first ever tiger sighting. “I was in grade 8 when I first saw Maya in Tadoba,” he recalls with a sparkle in his eyes.

Maya, or T-12, is still alive, but well past her prime at 12 years of age. She is also the only tigress with her own Twitter account (@MayaTadoba). A single chital’s persistent alarm call in her territory offers hope that we may see her on our jeep safari. But she does not oblige. Two more alarm calls in other territories yield no big-cat sighting. We do, however, see multiple herds of deer frolicking in the grass, males locking horns for the privilege of mating and mothers nursing their fawns; a pair of Indian rollers flitting around our jeep; sambar herds watching us with concern; a white-eyed buzzard perched on a high branch; a mottled owl hiding in a tree trunk; and a mongoose scurrying in search of breakfast. Finally, when we’re about to give up, we come across a huddle of safari jeeps squinting in a particular direction. Across a hump of land, sleeping amid tall grass, is *Chhoti* Tara, a 2.5-year-old tigress. Deshpande tells us that she is bold and unbothered by human presence. We wait for her to emerge from the bushes for a better view. But the sky is cloudy, and she doesn’t feel the need for a drink, choosing instead to nap under a jamun tree.

The lodge may have been named after the tiger, but Tadoba National Park’s most famous resident is Blacky, a melanistic leopard who has been named quite unimaginatively. He lives up to his reputation of being elusive, but the sighting of *Chhoti* Tara keeps my spirits high for the six-hour journey ahead—to Pench National Park.

Pench Tree Lodge cannot be more different from Waghoba Eco Lodge. Set on 40 acres of dense deciduous forest, it offers six treehouses—made of local sal wood and perched five and a half metres above the ground on mahua trees—and six stone-and-wood cottages on the ground. The mahua trees are dotted with bulbous leaf nests of weaver ants—millions of them. The bunker-style Kipling Hide at Pench Tree Lodge has a coffee station, fridge, charging stations, and bean bags for photography, and overlooks a reflection pool just like Waghoba, but it’s aimed at photographing animals like wild pig, jungle cat, jackal, antelope, palm civet, porcupine, mongoose, and small Indian civet. Leopards may sound like a long shot, but they proved everyone wrong last December.

With conscious re-wilding efforts maintaining the natural ecosystem, the resort acts as a natural extension of the forest and sees daily movement of small wild animals. In December 2021, three leopards parked themselves

Deep in the Woods

GETTING THERE

The Nagpur airport is well connected to most major Indian cities. Waghoba Eco Lodge is located 140 km (2.5 hrs) from the Nagpur airport. Pench Tree Lodge is around 130 km from Nagpur, and about six hours away by road from Waghoba Eco Lodge.

STAY

Waghoba Eco Lodge (doubles from ₹21,000; waghobaecolodge.com) offers 14 cottages, while **Pench Tree Lodge** gives you a choice between six tree houses (doubles from ₹23,000) and six cottages (doubles from ₹21,000; penchtreelodge.com).

within the property’s premises with a langur kill. Perhaps that’s why I’m escorted by a guard with a stick and a flashlight every time I walk out of my cottage after dark.

On a morning safari, even before we breach the gate of the national park, I spot an eerie feline silhouette in the middle of a farm. Head naturalist Gaurav Dhotre uses his binoculars to confirm that it is indeed a jungle cat. Inside, the Pench woods appear less dense than Tadoba and exhibit a healthy population of prey—spotted deer and sambar—which reduces human-tiger conflict, according to Dhotre. The terrain is also home to leopards, who aren’t afraid to flaunt their spots. But as the mercury rises, there is no sign of big cats. A jackal comes home to a den of hungry mouths and regurgitates its food to feed its pups. A couple of nesting Malabar pied hornbills engage in a loud domestic dispute over their nest—a trunk hollow where the male will seal the female in, informs Dhotre. A lone vulture waits for the Grim Reaper to strike.

Back at the lodge, I overcompensate for the lack of tiger sightings by shopping for striped souvenirs. The gift shop offers sustainable items made by tribal artisans—from scarves on tiger moth migration to bags themed on langurs and leopards, bamboo jewellery made by the Dangs of Gujarat, hand-painted coasters, and even DIY block-printing kits.

In the evening, a farm-to-table dinner nourishes our tired bodies. The tables are set up right next to an organic garden and orchard. A regional meal tantalises our senses, heightened by the dark of the night, and culminates in a dessert of *dobri mahua kheer* (mahua flowers in rice pudding). Such special dining experiences aside, meals are usually served in a poolside restaurant peppered with evocative art that captures the story of *The Jungle Book*. This is, after all, the land that inspired Kipling to write his classic. On the floor above, there is a cosy library filled with books inspired by nature. Coincidentally—or not—the book I’m carrying centres around an untouched natural ecosystem. But it stays firmly tucked in my backpack. For I *am* where the crawdads sing. ✦