

FOR INTIMATE ENCOUNTERS WITH THE FOREST AND ITS WILDLIFE, AND TO RETRACE THE FOOTSTEPS OF BRITISH EXPLORER CAPTAIN JAMES FORSYTH, TREK THROUGH MADHYA PRADESH'S FORSYTH TRAIL, FIRST DISCOVERED BY HIM IN THE 1860s.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS
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IN FORSYTH'S FOOTSTEPS

“Hold it if you want to,” the naturalist repeated. I inspect the crumbled leaf ball up close, and withdraw my hand right after stretching it out; it’s swarming with weaver ants. What momentarily looked like a strange ball is actually their nest, and I shriek and laugh at the same time. We leave it carefully on the ground where we had found it fallen off the tree, and continue, piercing the endless stretches of tall sal trees.

OUTDOORS



More than a hundred years ago, British explorer Captain James Forsyth set off on this same trail in his earliest explorations of Central India, and in my mind I match him step for step, in awe of his intrepid discoveries that continue to draw the world to the heart of India, to trace his footsteps on a path fittingly named after him.

After an hour's drive from Satpura, we leave the vehicle and the tarmac road at the non-descript Sitadhungri to enter the jungles of Pachmarhi in Madhya Pradesh. Tarvan, a young forest guide of the zone, joins us. Together with our naturalist Chinmay, a young lad from Nagpur whose youth belies his deep knowledge of the forest and its wild, Abhay, a nature enthusiast, and Jessica Braun, a shy but dogged German lady in pursuit of Kipling's Mowgli, I set off into the

inviting woodland. Despite the strong sun beating down, the broad leaves of the sal trees cut the heat into half, and I was relieved that they had been declared natural heritage soon after the British times when vast sal tracts were chopped for making railway berths. A lot of this conservation is attributed to Forsyth, who came to India as a forest conservator with the East India Company. He acquired a wide reputation as a hunter, but was also the first to point out the abundance of medicinal plants in the region and the importance of preserving it. He penned down his findings of the region in 1870, which were published posthumously under the title of *The Highlands of Central India: Notes on their Forests and Wild Tribes, Natural History, and Sports*. It remains till date the most informative book on the region, but since I haven't read it, naturalist Chinmay is my next best bet for unearthing secrets of this trail, and he doesn't disappoint me.

Clockwise from above:
Tigers are some of the inhabitants in the national park; A guide tracks pugmarks; An ant's nest.

OUTDOORS

TRAVEL TIPS

BEST TIME TO VISIT

December to March is the best time to walk this trail.

TRAVEL COMPANIES

Pugdundee Safaris has some of the best naturalists in Central India and the Forsyth Trail is one their most efficiently organised trails, complete with terrific logistic staff support. For more information log on to www.pugdundeefaris.com

Village Ways works in partnership with the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department, and combines a stay in Pachmarhi, forest walks in Satpura and wildlife jeep safaris in Pench with village interaction. Guests can stay in comfortable camps at Chopna Village and at a beautiful forest checkpoint by the river. Their standard itinerary is an 11-night holiday but tailor-made trips are also available. For more information log on to www.villageways.com

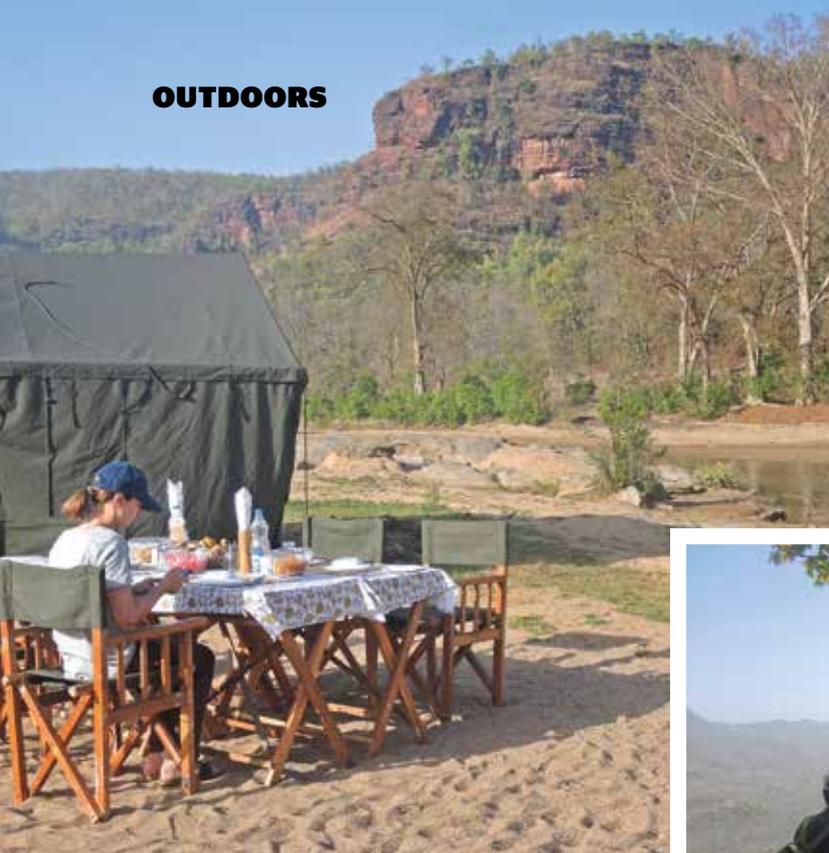


Known as the unofficial ‘snake king’, Chinmay has great stories of his close brushes with the wild; including one of a near-death encounter that resulted from a cobra bite. As he recounted anecdotes, we walked the 15-kilometre stretch for the day, crunching sun-hardened petals of Palash, bright orange against the brown earth, and dried sal leaves through which Brahminy skinks slithered noiselessly. I stop every now and then to catch my breath and take in the sweeping views of the vast plateau formed by the Pachmarhi Hills. Finding a foothold is a task at times when the smooth texture of rocks prevents it, and I wonder if it’s Forsyth I’m seeking on this walk, or something more. But the omnipresent silence around and incredulous beauty of these gigantic rocks, marked with exquisite lines and patterns, and shaped and polished by thousands of years of wind and water erosion, remove all doubts of why I’m doing this.

After over four hours of walking on the rocky terrain, we stop at Kanjighat by a rivulet in a shady patch for lunch. Lethargic after lunch and reluctant to end the lazy afternoon, I slowly put on my hiking shoes again and continue through the forests. I am told that the Gond tribals who once inhabited the forests, and have now been rehabilitated to the outskirts in order to keep the forests untouched, marking again the eternal man-animal conflicts that have plagued protected zones forever. Evening draws closer, and we reach our camp at



OUTDOORS



Dehlia across the River Denwa which runs along this trail for a major part of the walk. After a long day of marching through the highlands, it's more than a luxury to have a hot shower in the middle of nowhere and follow it up with a bonfire and dinner under the stars. I retire to my spacious tent and fall asleep the minute I hit the pillow, tired and dreamy, hearing the intense ruckus of skittering frogs but forgiving them for Chinmay had told me they are "Attenborough's favourite frogs".

The following day after a sumptuous breakfast the walk starts with a steep climb up to a ridge on which we walk; the views of the Denwa, our miniscule campsite far below and the forest-covered gorge are breathtaking and worth the arduous walk.

Along the ridge, we walk over ten kilometres through acacia, crocodile bark trees, and the occasional *amla* and *tendu*, or Indian ebony trees, the remains of a monkey paw and jaw from a leopard kill, and a rock agama (type of lizard) blended perfectly with the surrounding moss, among other signs of the wild. We sail past these and descend again into the valley, to walk along the riverbed where we find fresh pugmarks of a female tiger. Chinmay bends over them to teach us how to tell apart male and female big cats with their paw prints, as Jessica fits her palm over it to accentuate the difference, visibly moved by the knowledge of the validity of Sher Khan's existence. We then hear a leopard call, and wait near a water body and big rocks. After a long wait, we know we've missed the leopard and begin walking to the camp. Throughout, I've been deliberating, curious to know what it was

that must have drawn Captain James Forsyth to India's deepest jungles like wildfire. But as I see heads bent over the trail of pugmarks, I have my answer. Forsyth was drawn as much to what he didn't see, as he was to the contours of the landscape, the fauna, and all that was visible.

He was drawn to the clues the wild leaves behind, just as I now feel myself being drawn into this forest magic. ■

QUICK FACTS

GETTING THERE

Jet Airways operates daily flights to Bhopal from Mumbai, Delhi and Chhattisgarh. From here the Satpura National Park that is home to the Forsyth Trail lies about 140 km away.

ACCOMMODATION

Denwa Backwater Escape at Satpura National Park offers the best creature comforts and is a great base for this and also to explore the area. Another option is the spacious and well-equipped Forsyth Lodge. A budget option is the forest rest house at the edge of the park.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to www.mptourism.com

Clockwise from top left:

A sumptuous meal by the tents and rivulet; A giant Malabar squirrel enjoys a treat; Vast open views as seen from the trail.