

## WILDLIFE

# Awed by rare sight of a group of leopards

STEPHANIE PLENTL JAWAI, INDIA

‘Expect the unexpected,’ I’m told as we approach a sacred mound in the rural Jawai region of Rajasthan, in western India. It’s 6 a.m. and the hill’s chunks of rock glow peach-coloured under the rising sun. A Hindu mantra blares from a nearby temple, part of a daily ritual of respect for this mysterious land. There’s an undeniable aura about the place, but I’ve been drawn by something more tangible: leopards.

Here on this hill, at least 11 leopards – a notoriously lone species – are living together in unusual harmony. I’m with Adam Bannister, a big-cat expert from South Africa, who is part of a pioneering team at Jawai Leopard Camp, located about halfway between Jodhpur and Udaipur. The team is dedicated to conserving this rare phenomenon across several hills in the Jawai region. Not only does Bannister believe that this hill offers the densest population of leopards in the world, but it is also located beside a thriving village. People and leopards are not traditional neighbours.

A leopard appears on the hill crest, lazy after a night hunting among the fields of sesame and wheat. Bannister recognizes him as Chacha Kaan, a young male well-known to the team at Jawai. Like all leopards in this area, he’s unperturbed by our presence, or that of the priest who lives in the tiny temple on the hill slope.

As the workday begins for nearby farmers, Chacha Kaan retreats to his sanctuary: private land belonging to an owner sympathetic to the cats that have claimed it. Moments later, with our binoculars and cameras trained on his sleek silhouette, Chacha Kaan elegantly leaps from view. It’s a brief but thrilling encounter.

Leopards are at risk across Asia, whether from hunters after their coats or those trying to control attacks on livestock. But in Jawai, the community itself set up a council to protect the leopards. Rabari herdsmen – distinguished by their magnificent scarlet turbans – shepherd their cattle to



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fields by day and shelter them at night, although if any animal left behind is hunted by an opportunistic leopard, the government may compensate the owner.

Villagers have a fierce respect for the leopards that roam the area; the cats are seen as guardians of its sacred hills (the last recorded attack on a human here was 154 years ago). Women in colourful saris walk along the dusty lanes balancing bundles of greenery on their heads, curious boys peer down at us as they play on the granite mounds – all absolutely at ease with their proximity to the big cats.

After our sunrise drive, we’re greeted at the gates of Jawai Leopard Camp with refreshing cordials made with crushed rose petals. The eight-hectare eco-camp, which opened December, 2013, is part of the Sujan collection of luxury tented properties in India and Kenya. Boasting not only 24 leopards recorded within a 15-minute drive, the camp’s idyllic setting is soul-stirring. By

mid-September, the monsoon season transforms the normally dry scrub into a lush landscape awash with wildflowers. The land is peppered with enormous granite boulders and teems with peacocks, grey langur monkeys and mongoose.

That evening, it’s a short ride to Dev Giri hill, where a leopard kill occurred the previous night. Perched on the slope is a white temple, where Bannister once came upon a leopard napping on the steps. Soon we catch sight of the region’s dominant male leopard, Nag Vasi. He pads out from under a rock – blue eyes blazing – as I try to capture him with one of the Nikon P600 cameras that Jawai lends its guests. The 80-kilogram cat slips into a cave, into which he had dragged a 120-kg cow to feed upon.

Still awed by the sight, we return to camp and find it transformed into a galaxy of tiny lights – its pathways and trees studded with more than 200 gas lamps.

Beyond the very likely chance of glimpsing a leopard, the Jawai region holds several other aces. You can hike or cycle along Jawai Bandh Lake, spotting crocodiles, flamingos and migratory birds, or explore the ancient Ranakpur Temple or formidable Kumbhalgarh Fort, both about an hour’s drive from the leopard camp.

But perhaps its most ravishing sight is what Bannister calls the Silent Valley, a stretch of rocky undulations that is an offshoot of the Aravalli Range. We stopped there during an evening drive, transfixed by a sinking persimmon sun. The blushing scenery had an otherworldly quality that rooted us to the spot – a magnetism to the land that we, in that moment, shared with the villagers and leopards.

*The writer was a guest of Original Travel and Jawai Leopard Camp, neither of which reviewed or approved this article.*

Special to The Globe and Mail.

## IF YOU GO

Jawai, in the state of Rajasthan in western India, is about three hours by car from both Udaipur and Jodhpur airports. Jet Airways connects those airports to Delhi and Mumbai and onward to Canada. [jetairways.com](http://jetairways.com)

## GETTING AROUND

Original Travel creates bespoke itineraries that include hassle-free transfers; you’ll need their experienced drivers to negotiate the unconventional driving conditions (think cows, goats and cars coming the wrong way). 1-800-965-1937; [originaltravel.co.uk](http://originaltravel.co.uk)

## WHAT TO SEE

**Jawai Bandh Lake:** Spot birds, crocodiles and flamingos while hiking or cycling along the edge of this reservoir.  
**Kumbhalgarh Fort:** A UNESCO World Heritage site, this enormous 15th-century fortress lies at the end of the world’s second-longest wall (an impressive 36-km stretch).

## WHERE TO STAY

**Jawai Leopard Camp:** A tent for two costs about \$940 per night including twice-daily game drives, meals, soft drinks, house wine, beer and laundry. The camp is open September to May. [sujanluxury.com](http://sujanluxury.com)

**Raas Hotel:** In Jodhpur, this boutique design hotel offers spectacular views of the colossal Mehrangarh Fort – particularly vivid during cocktail hour from the rooftop bar. From \$375. [raasjodhpur.com](http://raasjodhpur.com)

**Taj Lake Palace:** For an overnight stay in Udaipur, nothing beats this elegant oasis floating on Lake Pichola, renowned as a location for the Bond film *Octopussy*. From \$650 per night. [tajhotels.com](http://tajhotels.com)

Stephanie Plentl

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Travellers arrive from Berlin at Gare de l'Est train station in Paris on Friday. Sleeper service between the two cities ended last week. MICHEL EULER/AP

## RAILWAYS

## It's the end of the line for sleeper trains linking Berlin and Paris

FRANK JORDANS BERLIN

Commuters jostle on and off their gleaming high-speed trains at Berlin's main railway station on a cold December morning, but one platform stays stubbornly empty. Finally, a grimy engine draws in, pulling carriages that look like they saw their best days in the 1980s.

It's the sleeper train from Paris, 20 minutes late. But none of the dozen passengers who tumble out with heavy bags and rucksacks seem to mind. It's the last stop on a long journey, much as it is soon to be for the train itself.

German railway company Deutsche Bahn has ended the sleeper service between Paris and Berlin, citing unsustainable losses. The service had been running since before the Second World War, and used to go all the way to Moscow.

Fierce competition from budget airlines has lured passengers away from night trains that were once a mainstay of cross-border travel in Europe, explains Deutsche Bahn spokeswoman Susanne Schulz.

“Demand has dropped by 30 per cent over the past decade because of the sinking cost of airline tickets,” Schulz said.

A mid-week journey from Berlin to Paris by night train (four bunks to a room) cost from €70 (\$101) and took 12 hours. A two-hour flight with one piece of checked luggage is available from €55.

Along with the link to the French capital, Deutsche Bahn is

ending sleeper services between Amsterdam, Prague, Basel and Copenhagen, and cutting the connection to Amsterdam from its overnight service to Warsaw.

Railway enthusiasts fear other routes could soon follow, spelling doom for Europe's night trains as a whole. Campaigners have launched petitions calling on governments and the European Union to save what they argue is an ecological and family-friendly way to travel.

The carbon footprint for the Paris-Berlin rail journey is less than half that of a flight, according to Deutsche Bahn's website.

While children pay close to full fare on airlines from the age of 2, they can ride the sleeper for free until they turn 15, and only need to reserve a seat or bed.

Deutsche Bahn says it lost €12-million last year on the night trains that it just cut.

Investing in modern rolling stock would cost millions, the company says.

That might be necessary if it wanted to tempt travellers back into its bunks, though.

As they arrive in Berlin, a group of young Mexican travellers struggle to leave the train because one of the doors is jammed shut.

A grumpy train guard eventually opens the door and the four get off, blinking in the harsh station light.

How was their journey? “I thought it would have WiFi,” says Alejandra Vega, one of the group. “But it was okay.”

Associated Press