

AT HOME WITH THE RHINOS

Hooves, paws and feet should be on a similar plane for authentic encounters. While jeep safaris help cover ground, strolling under the thick canopy of trees leaves one with an inimitable connection with the wild.

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discovers the joys of ethical travel at the core of Chitwan National Park





DESPITE

it being February, it was a hot, stifling day. The fact that we were at the edge of a forest in a Himalayan country or the proximity to the tree-laden terrain and mountains didn't help either. The Terai (plains) regions of south-central Nepal get a copious dose of sun and summer. I stood outside a hut in Madi village on the fringes of Chitwan National Park, placing my hand on the wall to match it with a colourful imprint of another previously paint-doused hand. Mine was much bigger, clearly spilling over the original. Suddenly a giggle broke my concentration. It was the lady of the house, simply called Didi by our guide.

We ducked under a low beam to enter as she welcomed our group of three into her house with a *tika* — the quintessential rice and vermilion dot on the head. As we entered, the heat was quickly dispelled and replaced with cool shaded interiors. The Tharu tribal community that lives in this region builds their houses with thatch and mud, making insulation an integral feature to counter the extreme cold and heat. Didi and her family are a few of the chosen houses of the village that are happy to open their homes to travellers, keeping in mind that this cultural immersion will help people understand their life at close quarters.

Inside, we scanned the house looking at local agricultural tools, several varieties of storage baskets, traditional jewellery, a blackened pot to cook over the fire and finally settled in the shaded courtyard with a glass of *raksi* in hand. The local alcoholic beverage

tastes like a hybrid of Japanese sake and vodka, though it is made of millet or rice. Only, this one tasted 10 times more potent. A small quick swig was the only way to finish it. We spent some time chatting with her husband, a school teacher, and left for the next experience, bowing our heads to thank Didi and her family.

WE had arrived from India the previous afternoon, hopping through Nepal's capital Kathmandu to reach Chitwan. Our noses had been constantly squashed against the windows to see the fat-bellied Himalayan peaks, on the 20-minute flight to Bharatpur, the springboard to Chitwan. My mind was made up for a pure wildlife experience to savour the low-octave trip where I could take in the dense green jungle and its widely famed population of the one-horned rhinos. But the days ahead with Barahi Jungle Lodge, where we stayed, made me look at the region with a fresh eye.

Bathing the resident elephant, Sundar Kali, in the river and a boat ride across the river Rapti



VITAL STATS

GETTING THERE: Fly to the capital, Kathmandu, and then take a connecting flight to Bharatpur. It lies about 30 km from Chitwan National Park. Ask the lodge you're staying at to arrange for a pick-up at the airport. Buses are also available from different places in Nepal.

STAY at Barahi Jungle Lodge; www.barahijunglodge.com; packages start from ₹21,000 for double occupancy

ENTRY FEE: Nepalese/SAARC Countries/Foreigners ₹100/750/1500 per day; jeep fees are additional.

TIMINGS: Sunrise to sunset

Chitwan National Park is a UNESCO listed World Heritage Site that spans over 932 sq km, hemmed with riverine forests, honey-toned grasslands and marshlands where a sizeable population of wildlife feels at home. For the first day, my mind was anchored to only birding, spotting a rhino or trying to remember names of trees. But over the next few days the jungle experience was made even richer with something more than the opaque forests. It was the carefully created ethical travel experiences by the lodge that made the time spent here so much more worthwhile.

"Why leg it when you can wheel it?," would be my normal refrain. But not in a jungle. Here, hooves, paws and feet should be on a similar plane for authentic encounters. While jeep safaris help cover ground, strolling under the thick canopy of trees leaves one with an inimitable connection with the wild. So when Saket, our guide, told us that we would be exploring the jungle on foot, I was sold. For those who like life in the slow lane, even in the forest, a walking safari is ideal. Since very few national parks in the Indian subcontinent allow slow strolls inside the jungle, this raw wonderful experience was truly one-of-a-kind. It was a lesson in nature that covered native trees, plants, insects and birdlife. We were also told how the lodges aid the forest department in

Walking in the national park was a lesson in nature that covered native trees, plants, insects and birdlife





(Clockwise): Welcome with a traditional tika; Colourful hand impressions on mud walls and traditional jewellery



cleaning, setting up photo-traps for estimating animal population and movement and re-building the green cover on over-grazed lands.

BUT this was not before we encountered a close brush with a rhino and her calf. It had been an hour in the jungle, tracing a dirt path made by the hulky creatures, when we decided to stop for breakfast. Perched on a fallen tree trunk, we dug into the apples and sandwiches, with the cacophony of a langur family as the background score. Still reeling from the excitement of spotting a rhino lumbering through the River Rapti into the forest, we hoped that another glimpse of the oddly serene animal would help close the safari on a high. Engrossed in stories of snakes, spiders and other amazing wildlife spectacles, we didn't hear the rustle of grass behind us. We were seated in a clearing with a thick copse of trees on either side, and grasslands to the back, from where the sound had come. Just as we stood up to leave, we spotted a rhino and her baby between the grass, gaze locked with ours. Through the glade of golden grass, we saw the rhino anxiously gauging the intrusion. Satisfied that we hadn't come to disturb her habitat, she turned around and melded with the black undergrowth of the forest. The encounter forever re-defined the essence of a safari for me.

BACK at the lodge, we feverishly discussed the rhino meeting and spent a restless night, thinking of what lay in store the next day. It was a wheeled safari in the morning with remarkable images of lazy crocodiles

snoozing on the banks of the Rapti, barbets and woodpeckers chuntering on tree tops, liquid-eyed deer breaking into a run at the sound of the jeep and many jungle wonders making short but memorable cameos. The afternoon was reserved for feeding and bathing one of the resident elephants of the lodge — Sundar Kali. She ambled in front of us to the river and flopped into it, making a huge splash. Over the next hour, we scrubbed her rough back and rolled hay to make her hundreds of sandwiches. Since elephants are integral to safaris in the grasslands, the lodge encourages guests to interact with the animals and their *mahouts*. Observing them closely is key to making travellers aware of their lives.

As the sun's rays slanted, we settled around the bonfire for yet another glimpse of life at Chitwan. A row of local women walked in, followed by the men folk from the village. A dance troupe, decked in traditional finery, took to the stage with playful lyrics and a slow build-up to the crescendo. I couldn't have asked for a better curtain down to the trip.