

# Nature's Havens

**Ilika Ranjan explores the unknown in search of a different experience**

**S**ome people travel for leisure, and some to take a break from the humdrum of everyday life. There are still others who do so in search of a *difference - to explore the unknown and get absorbed in its environs*. Where nature plays host and engulfs you in its remarkable milieu; yet so real, happy, and enchanting. This is where life can be found in its most pristine form, unadulterated, and

smiling. Each such place is an inimitable experience, and also hides lovingly in the arms of the Indian subcontinent.

Among these places is Gopnath Village in Gujarat, which is situated on a cliff, with the sea splashing on all sides; Sam Village in Jaisalmer is an endless caravan in the sand dunes; and Bandhavgarh reserve in Madhya Pradesh, is the land of the roaring tiger.

## Gopnath Bungalow



This is a king's palace situated on a cliff, surrounded by sea on three sides and the countryside on the other. Veiled by cotton fields, it is located

in the coastal area of Bhavnagar, in Gujarat. The Gopnath Bungalow was once the summer residence of Maharaja Krishna Kumar Singhji, the ruler

of Bhavnagar.

**A chance visit** - We chanced upon this place while returning from Diu to Ahmedabad by road during our visit to Gujarat in the first week of January. A passerby had informed us that there is a nice bungalow in Gopnath. Our Gujarat journey had been mainly in a vagabond style, stopping on the way where we wished to and staying overnight at suitable places. In keeping with our style and mood, we followed the directions given to us by the village folk. The road leading up to the bungalow is a narrow *kachcha* road through cotton fields. The journey seemed endless, as every time we stopped to ask a passerby, the standard reply was that it was just another 30 kilometers away. We finally arrived escorted by a guide on a bicycle, who we followed in our Innova. At the bungalow we were greeted by two tall and plump gentlemen, with their faces totally covered under the monkey caps that they were wearing, shaking in the chill.

**A bungalow on the sea** - Wild bushes covered the view of the magnificent bungalow, with each room opening up to a view of the sea right



in front, rumbling with the resonance of splashing waves and roaring sea breeze. Each room was decorated in 'Maharaja Style', with ancient paintings on the walls, brick beds cushioned with mattresses, and very spacious balconies, including a marble tea table. Whispering in the air were ghost sto-

ries that rhymed with the wheezing sound of the breeze, the splashing sea, and the ancient figurines on the wall.

**Tea at the bungalow** - The presence of the tea table reminded us of our thirst for a *hot cup of ginger tea*, in the freezing cold. On inquiry, we were directed to a *dhaba* adjoining

the bungalow. Having grumbled our way to the *dhaba*, we had to eat our words after we had eaten there. The place serves out-of-this world, tea, and the most authentic Gujarati food I have ever had - from *poha* and *Upma* to meals with *bajra roti* complimented with pure white *makkhan*, and served with melted *gur* (*jagri*). The food was served by the host, and we ended up feasting twice more than our stomachs can normally take, having given in to the scrumptious meal before us. After we finished eating, we walked down the yellow-white fields to the adjoining temple of Lord Gopnath Mahadev.

**Spell-bound by nature** - The next morning we were up at the crack of dawn and were completely spell-bound by the spectacular sight of the sun's rays walking staunchly into our rooms; the open doors rendering a breathtaking view of the sea from where we sat with the wild tidal waves splattering on the undefined coast. We had been warned not to swim because of the abrasive coast. It was an experience to remember for a life time! ■

## Sam Village in Jaisalmer

My distinct memory of Sam Village is of dancing on the dunes with the natives. My existence completely melted into the melody of the *ektara*, my feet swaying dreamily. The Sam Village is in the Thar Desert, about 40 km away from the city of Jaisalmer.

**The journey from Delhi** - There are two possible ways of reaching here from Delhi. The first is surely more pleasurable and demanding; just 12-14 hours in a car, cruising along the immaculate, broad and curving roads of Rajasthan, crossing Jaipur, and Jodhpur on the way. The other, more unassuming option is a train journey that takes about 16 hours, as the train stops at almost all the known

stations between Delhi and Jaisalmer. I chose the humbler option, the train journey, starting in the evening, since my gang of five girls had opted out of the journey at the 11th hour. We were just two girls who decided to go on the daring journey in the foggy month of December. We opted to take the train as it was safer than two girls driving alone on the roads. It was our good luck that our fellow passenger in the train was a BSF officer who generously elaborated to us all that we could do in Jaisalmer and at Sam. When the train reached Jaisalmer station at around 12.30 pm, the next day, we were happy to be greeted by two gentlemen who had been sent from the camp at Sam,



where we were going to stay.

**Camp at Sam Village** - We embarked in an open jeep from Jaisalmer station to Sam Village. The rickety vehicle carried us noisily along on the deserted road, crossing some very up-market hotels, built like huge forts, on the way. We reached Sam in three hours, and managed to take a lot of photographs, in our attempt to grab every moment. The village was lined with brilliantly festooned tents with an elevated stage in the centre of the camp. After our evening tea, a majes-



tic camel called Mustafa, sauntered gallantly into our camp to carry us two girls to the dunes. Mustafa, who had knelt down to allow us to climb on to him, had to bear our squeals and giggles when he straightened up to begin his journey. We heroically sauntered along on giant Mustafa's back for almost an hour till we reached the top of an enormous dune. Poor Mustafa also had to tolerate our gibberish, juvenile banter for more than an hour. Our arrival was well timed to see the sun setting - an enormous, orange ball, gradually sinking behind the puny dune.

**A musical evening:** The lingering dusk was a perfect setting for the folk singers and bards to enthrall us with their music and dancing. The ladies

had decided to wake up at 4 am to salute the sun, when it rises in the morning amid the breeze and the dunes.

**Blinded by the sun** - The next day we were woken up by the alarm, at 4 am. The biting cold slapped my cheeks as soon as I got out from under my quilt, so I dived, right back into bed. The next few minutes I lay awake hearing my friend noisily washing her face in the washroom. I then heard Mustafa's owner asking whether we were ready. In 15 minutes we were out climbing back on to Mustafa's back for our ride into the dunes to catch the first sight of the sun as it rose. The cold wind blew in from one ear and out from the other. Our legs had frozen hanging next to the camel's body and our teeth rattled. We sat there cuddled

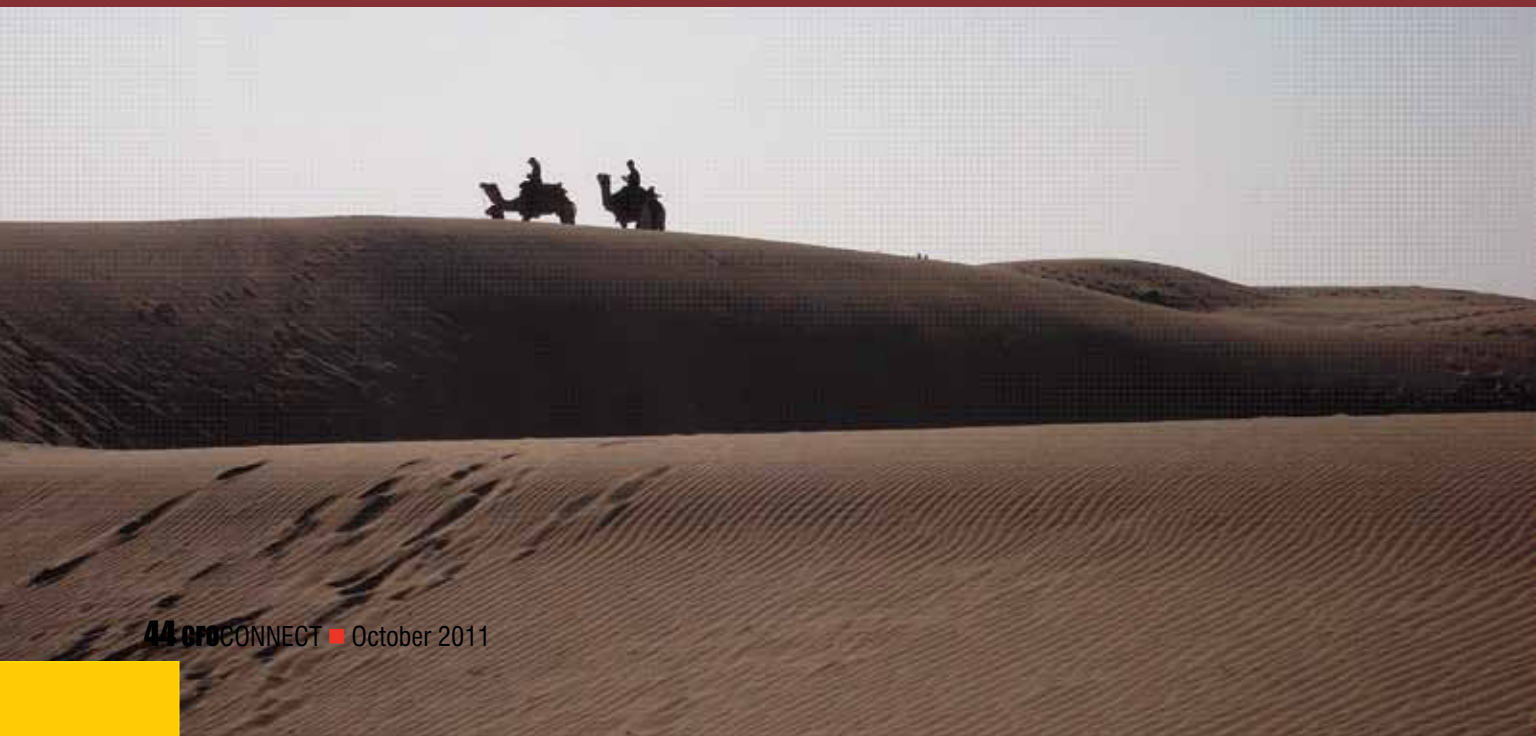
circling around and letting their coloured *lehangas* (long skirts), spread in the gusty wind and gyrate back onto their legs. After Mustafa took us back to our tent we rested awhile, and then set out to attend the cultural events in the evening. That night we went to sleep early as we

up on a dune, waiting in the deep darkness for the first ray of sunlight. It was about an hour later at around 5 am, that dawn broke and by 5.30 am, the huge, round orange orb came out from hiding and splashed light everywhere. With a click of our camera we captured this sight for eternity.

Later, after returning to the camp we slept till it was time for us to check out and go on a tour of Jaisalmer.

**The Golden Fort** - Jaisalmer, the city of Raja Rawal Jaisal, a Bhatti Rajput ruler, built in approximately, 1156 AD, stands with the same exuberance as the other destinations in Rajasthan such as Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Udaipur. The main attraction of the city is the Jaisalmer fort also known as the Golden fort. Magnificently ornate and flaunting the colour of the lion, it stands still sheltering the houses of the natives in the city. The Jaisalmer city thrives within the arms of the fort and its economy depends on the inflow of tourists and local handicraft, and weaving.

In the interior of the fort are the rooms of the ancient rajas and ranis, who conspicuously resided within the flamboyantly carved walls, embellished with mirror work. We did buy a few *bandhani duppattas* and mirror work cushion covers, and bedsheets, and the elegant, colourful thick bangles, before proceeding to board the train back to Delhi. ■



# Bandhavgarh: The land of the roaring tiger

**The journey** - Our decision to head to Bandhavgarh, situated in the Vindhyan mountain ranges of central India in Madhya Pradesh, was an impromptu one. It was the sweltering month of June which everybody said was the right time to sight the Royal Bengal tiger. The route we took was Delhi to Agra, and then to Gwalior, Jhansi, Orchha, Khajurao, and further on to Bandhavgarh. The non-stop journey is almost 800 km by car from New Delhi, but we decided to break journey at Orchha, where we stayed overnight. We had an unintentional rendezvous with yet another unblemished haven, where the *Betwa River* flows gracefully, and energetically, splashing on to the huge boulders in the surrounding areas. We stayed overnight in a reasonably priced heritage property called Orchha resort. This area is surrounded by temples of Lord Rama and the Fort. The next morning we woke up late, and after paying homage to the deity, we headed straight to Bandhavgarh, which is about 300 km from Orchha. We did cross the Khajurao temples but due to paucity of time, we did not stop to see the temples.

**A night in the jungle** - The route is fairly isolated and dry in the hot weather. Hot puffs of air managed to sneak into our air-conditioned car every time we rolled down the windows to ask passersby for directions. We drove through dusk and an unforgettable night that followed. We failed to notice the sudden change in the topography, and drove right into a jungle. After passing by several monkeys and hearing eerie sounds we spotted a lone human being whom we asked for directions to Bandhavgarh. By



that time we had covered at least five kilometers of the jungle. The gentleman informed us that we were in the Bandhavgarh National Park, and he was the resort in-charge. He then gave us directions to navigate ourselves out of there but we were distracted by our green and dark surroundings and the eerie sounds and it took us a while to explore our way to the resort.

**At the resort** - The resort is an immaculately planned property with big cottages sprinkled at a distance of almost a quarter of a kilometer from each other. At the entrance of each cottage was a lantern that had been lit, which dimly illuminated the area around it. The all-wood cottages had a balcony that opened up to the wild-life beyond. After a delicious dinner, we headed back to our cottage for a good sleep before facing the tiger in the morning.

**The jungle safari** - An open jeep was waiting to take us on the jungle safari. We had pre-booked the safari for both the *tala* (deep jungle) and *magadhi* areas and so were spared the waiting time at the government forest office, where there were many people waiting for their chance. The

morning safari was to the *Magadhi* area, where the female tiger with her two cubs could be spotted. The driver and the guide were evidently familiar with all the nooks and corners of this reserve and knew exactly where to go. We crept behind other vehicles and secretly waved at the deer and birds that we passed by. Soon we came upon a slender, jet black snake, hastily wriggling through the bushes but we kept silent as we had been instructed to. It is said that when the tiger is around, the deer, the monkey, and other animals emit warning sounds to the fellow residents of the jungle, and this is what our driver and guide were looking out to hear. There was dust blowing everywhere and our hair had become like straw, but we did not mind resembling Einstein, in our quest to spot the tiger. After four hours we had located quite a few animals but the tiger remained elusive. We returned to our resort by 10 am, with the hope that the evening safari would be much more promising, and we were greedy to meet Bengal's pride. We spent the rest of the day waiting in excitement for what the evening would reveal.

**Meeting the Bengal tiger** - Around 4 pm, we began our evening safari, with caps and goggles and a scarf to wrap around our faces, to avoid the blistering dust. We were well rewarded as after 45 minutes of searching we came upon a small pond and in front of it stood a brown and black striped beast lapping up the water. We stood stock still not daring to even breathe, waiting to capture the image of the tiger with our cameras. After this, the remaining part of our safari was a cheery drive in the wild! ■



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