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DECODING MODERN LOVE WITH SIDDHANT

experience

On a tiger trail

Waghoba Eco Lodge by Pugdundee Safaris is the perfect romantic getaway if you fancy spending quality time surrounded by nature this Valentine's Day weekend

Pics: Mayuresh Joshi

Tiger relaxing in a waterhole

THE OCCASIONAL ALERT calls of birds sensing the presence of a predator nearby, surrounded by the endless wilderness welcomed us as we made our way through Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) in Maharashtra a few weeks ago. As we reached the new luxurious Waghoba Eco-Lodge by Pugdundee Safaris, our abode for the next few days the serenity of the surrounding was a welcome change. Set in the heart of the unbridled wilderness of Tadoba, it is built painstakingly with minute attention to detail, keeping all sustainable construction and practises in mind. The inspiration behind the name Waghoba is 'Wagh' as the tiger is called in Maharashtra.

Chai stop

The drive from Nagpur airport to the tiger reserve was a pleasant one with a hint of winter chill on an otherwise sunny day. During our two-and-a-half-hour drive, we stopped to have tea at a *dhaba* located on the highway to recharge ourselves. It was already past noon by the time we reached the entry point of Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve. Once we entered the gate, the last leg of the 18.6 km road trip began with lush green on both sides. As we drove on a long serpentine road that runs through the forest, we felt the fresh air which we don't get in our daily city life. The lodge was about 15 minutes drive from the Khutwanda gate of Tadoba, and about 30 minutes from Moharli gate. We were welcomed by the courteous staff of the lodge along with a welcome drink and a hot towel to regain the lost energy if any, due to the long drive.



Non-veg Nagpur thali

Sustainability matters

Set across seven-acres of land in an untouched area in the buffer zone, Waghoba Eco-Lodge has 14 exclusive luxury cottages. It offers a swimming pool, organic vegetable and herb garden, library-cum-lounge, and a man-made hide for bird watching. Overhangs constructed with handmade Guna Adobe bricks and local stone have been designed to minimise day heat and keep the building cool. The dining, office, lounge etc. all are cooled using coolers, rather than AC. This helps reduce electricity for these sections by 75% and also balances the resort's carbon footprint.

As we get settled into one of the cottages for a snack break, we were surprised to find a private balcony to enjoy a hot cup of coffee. Almost like a mini home with all the modern facilities set in a jungle, suitable for a nature-loving couple this Valentine's Day weekend. In the evening all the guests at the lodge gathered at the library-cum-lounge area where we saw wildlife documentaries on Tadoba that helped us understand the flora and fauna better and enjoy the hospitality along with veg and non-veg snacks like paneer and chicken *tikka*, veg and non-veg momos served with a drink of choice. We wrapped up the long day with a hearty dinner and anticipation of a morning safari the next day.

Into the wild

We left for the safari sharp at 5.45 am in an open jeep wrapped in proper winter gear as it was very chilly. It took us nearly 15 minutes to reach the starting point at Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve. As it is a protected reserve, all safaris are accompanied by a forest department official. Though the drive was long, we were eager to



Breakfast on the bonnet



Library-cum-lounge area



Aerial view of the property

venture into one of the most sought-after tiger-sighting and watching destinations in India, replete with mammals, birds, insects and reptiles, along with grasses, shrubs and trees. The forest cover is predominantly teak and bamboo. Driving into the tiger reserve is like entering an entirely different world. Of course, like every tourist jeep passing by, we also wanted that one great tiger sighting. Soon we heard calls of Sambar deer alerting other animals of a predator's presence as explained by Naturalist Mayuresh Joshi who had accompanied us on the safari to explain to us all things wildlife. We stopped and sat in anticipation for the great sighting for a long time. But sadly, even though we didn't spot any predator during our journey, we realised Tadoba is a flourishing animal kingdom of other species, an avian world full of birds, plus reptile and insect life in abundance. This bio-diverse ecosystem was the ancient dynasty of Gonds. It is a known fact that Tadoba was named after a Gond King, Taru who fought a valiant battle with a tiger.

Brekkie on a bonnet

We took a breakfast break with our pre-packed boxes and enjoyed it over the jeep's bonnet while soaking in the jungle air along with monkey and langur friends who were eagerly waiting for their share of the spread. While we didn't spot a tiger or a leopard, we were otherwise lucky to see the pride of peacocks, spotted deer grazing happily, sambar deer walking and posing majestically for the shutterbugs and huge crocodiles soaking in the sun. After the four-hour safari, we headed back to Waghoba for a scrumptious lunch and rest. By night, the resort transforms into dreamland with lamps lit up along the driveway. The buffet dinner included Indian and continental dishes and an interesting choice of desserts. What impressed us were the deserts that were cooked using local produce like millet *barfi* and *thandai* ice cream, yet of international standard. After dinner, we retired soon to our rooms as our time at the lodge was almost over. The next morning, we enjoyed the cool breeze and warm sunlight as we sipped on coffee on our private balcony while watching an array of butterflies flutter by. After breakfast, we were ready for our drive back to the city. Our short yet adventurous expedition had come to an end, and we bid *adieu* to the hospitality of Waghoba with a promise to come back soon.

₹15,000 (exclusive of safari charges).
(The writer was at Waghoba Eco-Lodge on an invitation.)

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The sambar deer



White-eyed buzzard



Mottled wood owl



Bedroom of our cottage



Sloth bear taking a leisurely stroll



Private balcony of our cottage

How to reach

Via airport: Nagpur – 140 km (2.5 hours).
Via railway: Nagpur JN – 140 km | Chandrapura – 50 Km

Activities
Jeep safari, boat safari, night safari, nature walk, bird watching and cycling.

