

The Great Game

A stylish new safari lodge on the edge of Chitwan National Park is raising the hospitality bar and bringing eco-tourism back to Nepal. BY **SHOBA NARAYAN**



“WHATEVER I AM TODAY, I owe totally to my homeland,” says Binod Chaudhary, with a humility I hadn’t expected from Nepal’s first and only billionaire. Dressed casually in a T-shirt and slacks, he stands out from the pack of glitzy Delhi socialites and Nepali royalty gathered to celebrate his 61st birthday. With a gracious smile, he begins describing our surroundings on the edge of the country’s oldest national park and how he’s using the new Meghauri Serai lodge to repay his debt.

Not only is his two-year-long passion project the only safari lodge of this caliber that the area has ever seen, but it also is uniquely devoted to sustainability and community development. Managed by Taj Safaris, the lodge borders Chitwan National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the country’s rare conservation success stories. Prior to obtaining protected status, the region was a favorite of big game hunters, who decimated

the local wildlife populations in the first half of the 20th century. When the park was established in 1973, just 100 one-horned rhinos roamed this riverine forest. It took an army—a full 1,100-man battalion of Nepal’s finest soldiers, to be specific—to solve the problem. Thanks to exceptional teamwork with rangers and shoot-on-sight orders for poachers, some 600 rhinos, as well as clouded leopards, Bengal tigers, striped hyenas, sambar deer and sloth bears, now roam this thriving ecosystem. In the wake of last year’s devastating earthquake, Nepalese locals such as Chaudhary hope to restore the country’s struggling tourism industry by promoting a more eco-friendly version of the game drives that once drew throngs to Chitwan.

OVER DRINKS AT THE wood-paneled bar, Chaudhary and his two sons explain the group’s involvement with Chitwan. It began with Tiger Tops, a lodge founded in 1964 with camps

inside the jungle run for 40 years by British naturalist Jim Edwards. In 2012, the Nepali forest department refused to extend the lease for all lodges inside the national park. “Tiger Tops created a new benchmark for hospitality in this region,” says Chaudhary. “When it closed down, obviously there was a vacuum in Chitwan.” By then the Chaudhary Group had partnered with Taj Safaris in all their Indian lodges. Nepal was a “natural entry,” and “probably the best in the portfolio,” says Chaudhary. “It has put Nepal’s wildlife back in the global map.”

Wildlife may be the primary draw here, but the warm, welcoming vibe and stylishly rustic grounds are equally appealing. After a flight from Kathmandu to Bharatpur, Rajasthan, and a rather bumpy drive, I’m greeted by khaki-clad staff, who wave with both hands and press cold towels and mint juice on me. Straight away, Pradip Mahato, a naturalist and a member of the

Tharu tribe native to this region, escorts me to my villa. He spots my birding binoculars and obligingly points out a cluster of scaly-breasted munia along the way.

My villa, one of 16, is huge, twice the size of my bedroom back home. The thatched roof and mud walls doff their architectural hat at the Tharu tribal homes. The insides, however, are thoroughly contemporary, with silk upholstery, dark wood furniture, remote-operated lights and Wi-Fi, accented by forgettable curios.

In the midst of all this plush modernity, a whimsical brush painting of a pastoral scene across an entire wall by local artist Durga Mahato stands out. More than a mere decoration, it represents part of the lodge’s effort to engage the surrounding community. Complementing it are pastel furnishings supplied by a local NGO, Lahar Srijana. The next day, I visit it and meet its founder, Pratima Thapa, a former foreign-service wife who wanted to promote the region’s indigenous crafts while offering fairly paid employment to

local women at the same time. Her NGO returns tribal women—and some men—to their native crafts. “All these women used to be in construction,” she says, pointing to the dozen or so workers weaving the braided grass mats that will end up on the floor of villas like mine. “Their handwork is exceptional. Thankfully, we can now employ them full-time.”

THE DAYS HAVE A RHYTHM. Oatmeal porridge at dawn, spiked with Baileys Irish Cream or Grand Marnier for an indulgent touch, followed by a four-hour game drive with a picnic breakfast in the forest. We escape the afternoon sun and rinse off in our private bathrooms, each of which features a claw-footed bathtub, an enclosed indoor rain shower and an outdoor *dhunge dhara*, a traditional Nepali stone-shower that spouts water with the force of a waterfall. The outdoor shower has an adjoining veranda with a coir bed to sun, sleep or simply tan. If all else fails, there is the plunge pool facing the Rapti River and the forest. >>



One-horned rhinos are a rare conservation success story. **OPPOSITE:** A great way to escape the heat: Meghauri Serai’s infinity pool.

COURTESY OF TAJ HOTELS



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: An elephant-back safari is the best way to spot wildlife in this region of Nepal; spacious rooms with modern comforts; exploring Chitwan National Park on foot; a Tharu-style *thali* dinner at Meghauri Serai.

Lodge manager Ritesh Bhatt hires most of his service staff from neighboring villages. “They may be inexperienced, but they aren’t jaded. Their smiles reach their eyes, which is invaluable in hospitality,” he says. He introduces me to one young waitress, who attends college from 5 a.m. to 10 a.m., works in the lodge all day, and goes home to homework. If her grueling schedule takes a toll on her, you’d never know.

Naturalists are also from the area and offer a wealth of knowledge about birds, bees, spiders and mammals. In search of the local fauna, I embark on an elephant safari and jungle walks with Mahato. His enthusiastic female

colleague, Arpita Dutta, who describes the jungle as her “office,” shows me plovers, pittas and other birds on a river walk. In two days, I have seen 100 species of birds and about as many rhinos, as well as wild dogs, boars and a sloth bear.

The next day, Dutta accompanies me to what turns out to be the highlight of the trip: an elephant bathing session with Anjali Kali, the lodge’s resident pachyderm-matriarch. “Wear a swimsuit—you will be soaked,” she warns. I find out what she means when the mahout guides the elephant into the river with me on top. The elephant kneels and I plunge into the water. To my delight, she lies in the shallows and I

clamber atop her back. She showers us with her snaky trunk and I burst out laughing. Finally, I rest my face on Anjali’s body, staring into her eyes. We both sigh in unison.

The night before I leave, we dine on Tharu dishes such as nettle soup and a dal made with 78 types of legumes. Young local girls and boys dressed in minimalist white costumes sing and dance around a fire. The drumbeat is hypnotic and the dancers graceful. They wave fans and beckon guests to fall in line and join. At the last minute, I rise. Why not? I think. So what if I make a fool of myself. It’s only one night. tajhotels.com; doubles from US\$400, all-inclusive. +