The Pride of Gujarat

A game-changing safari lodge in India's wild west offers lion-spotting and luxury in equal measure.

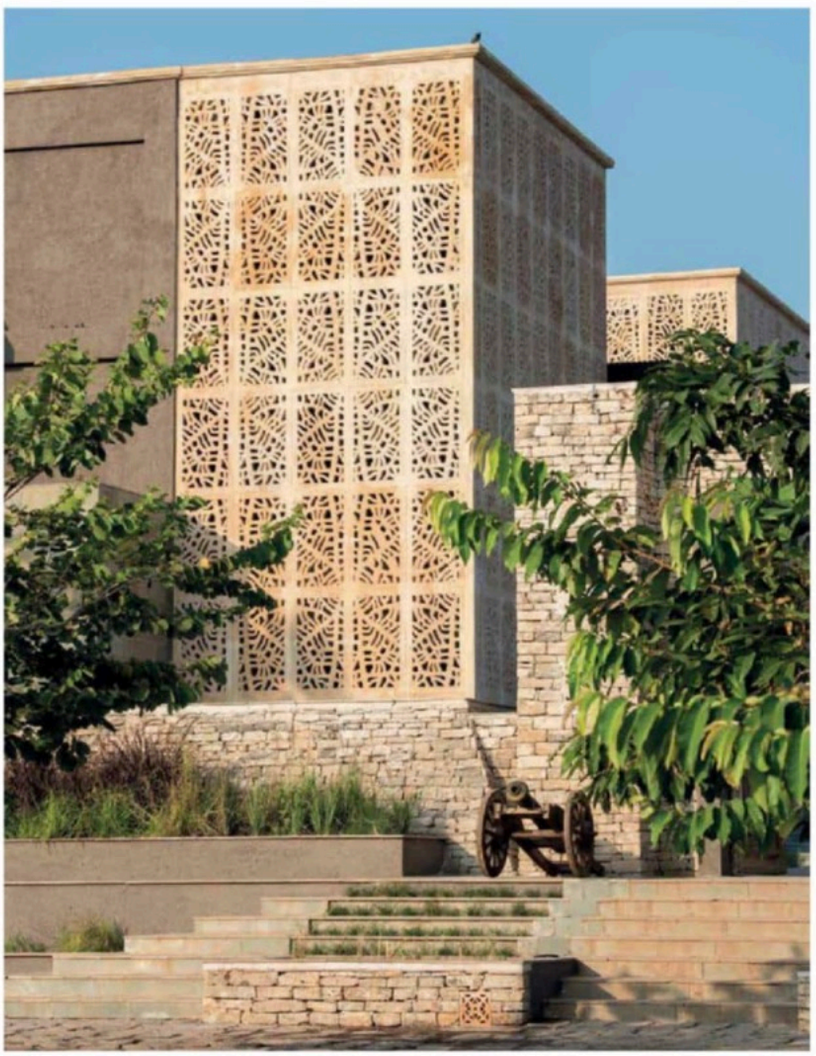
—— by Shoba Narayan

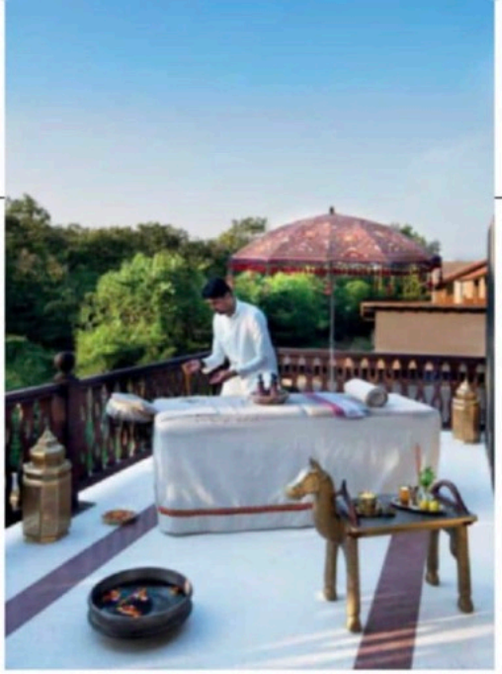
MANE EVENT
Above: Gir National Park is the last refuge of the Asiatic lion. *Bottom:* Practicing asanas (yogic poses) in the yoga pavilion at Aramness.

COURTESY OF ARAMNESS

It happened in one heart-stopping moment. Heeding the alarm calls of langurs, our small jeep convoy slowed to a stop in Gir National Park, hoping for a glimpse of the apex predator we'd all come to see. Then, suddenly, he appeared: a golden male Asiatic lion, emerging from the undergrowth with the unhurried confidence of a maharaja. Framed in the evening light, he crossed the sandy track and roared — 16 times. I counted. "Like all big cats, they have retractable claws and the ability to roar," said Kamakshi Trivedi, the naturalist at the lodge where I was staying, while he explained how Asiatic lions evolved separately from their larger African cousins over tens of thousands of years. "But they have shorter manes that expose their beautiful large ears, as well as a dewlap that hangs all the way down their middle."

Gir was generous that day. Moments later, we





SCREEN TIME
Above: Sandstone *jaali* screens hand-carved with leaf patterns feature across Aramness. *Top:* Setting up a private massage treatment on a villa balcony.

came upon a young lioness lying on the side of the track. Her mate lay yawning under the banyan tree ahead. We watched, spellbound, for many magical minutes before moving on through a patchwork of scrubland and deciduous woods.

For Indians, the jungle is the original storybook — the stage where our epics unfolded. Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* sent their heroes to the forest, a space at once sacred and transformative. This is perhaps why, to this day, the forest for us is a mythic call, in spite of the cameras we tote.

In South India, where I live, we have tigers, leopards, and elephants. But to see lions in the wild, you must travel to the western state of Gujarat. This is the final refuge of the Asiatic lion, which once ranged from eastern Turkey through Persia, Pakistan, and central India. Today, Gir National Park and its surrounding habitats on Gujarat's Kathiawar peninsula are home to the last of them: 891, according to the most recent census.

And that's how I found myself in Gir one weekend just before Diwali, chasing not just lions, but also the stillness that city life had drained out of me. My base was the area's newest and most luxurious safari lodge, **Aramness** (*aramness.com; from US$900 a night*). Designed by Johannesburg-based Fox Browne Creative and Nicholas Plewman Architects — the names behind some of the world's most soulful wilderness retreats, including South Africa's andBeyond Ngala Tented Camp and Bisate Lodge in Rwanda — the five-hectare property sits at the edge of the park, its 18 two-level villas (each with a small swimming pool and shaded courtyard) laid out in the style of a Gujarati village beyond a *haveli*-inspired reception building.

Design elements are rooted in the land. White stucco walls glitter with *lippan* mirror-work from the neighboring district of Kutch accented by earthy tones of saffron and oxblood. Antique carved doors from abandoned houses adorn the main lobby; discarded wood block-printing tiles are embedded in bar counters. Old railway trolleys have become luggage carriers. Some features are marvels of engineering. The sandstone *jaali* screens seen throughout the property are hand-carved in patterns that recall the veins of dried teak leaves that carpet the surrounding forest. Impressive, too, are the villas' Makrana marble washbasins, bookended with lion's head finials. Just getting them here from Rajasthan must have required some serious willpower, or madness, given the state of Indian roads.

I also enjoyed browsing Aramness's library with its wunderkammer of curios: fraying Gujarati ledgers and rare first-edition storybooks; rustic wooden cowbells once used by the region's seminomadic Maldhari herders; even kitschy Air India maharaja figurines. This is Gujarat reimagined, which makes the lodge's name feel almost quixotic. "Aramness," I thought, sounded oddly Anglicized — until I learned what it really meant (more on that later).

As the brainchild of passionate wildlife conservationist and photographer Jimmy Patel, the lodge has a solid wildlife program, with jungle walks and twice-daily small-group game drives that respect animals' behavior and natural rhythms. Wellness

COURTESY OF ARAMNESS

is another cornerstone of its appeal, offering something to do between safaris and a reason to visit even during the months of the summer monsoon, when Gir National Park is closed.

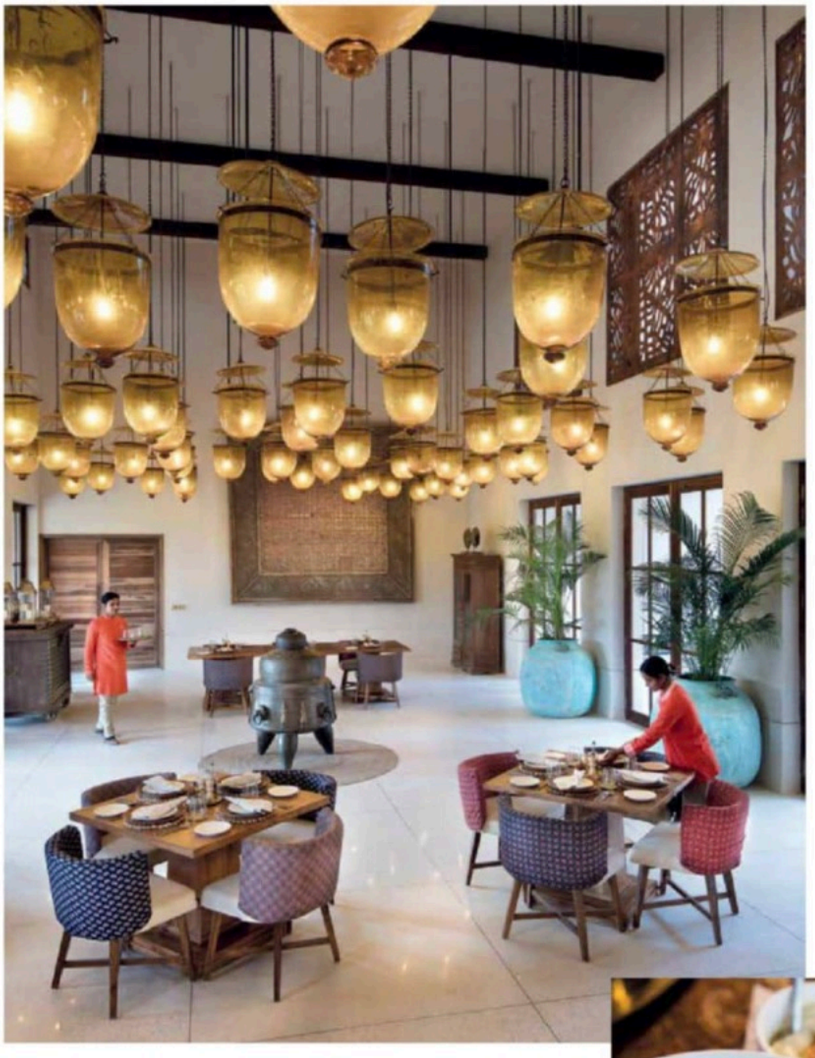
On my first morning, I consulted with Dr. Rafeek Jabbar, an Ayurvedic physician whose office is a bamboo pavilion threaded with birdsong. He felt my pulse, examined my tongue, and declared me a restless *Vata* type, prone to insomnia and wandering thoughts. Both true. As a remedy, he prescribed sound healing, meditation lessons, and a tea made with magnesium-rich bananas to soothe my nerves. The latter, spiked with Indian spices, was delicious, and sent me blissfully to sleep each night.

The next morning, yoga teacher Kunal Gawade guided my sound-bath session using Tibetan singing bowls, crystal bells, and softly resonant drums. Even for someone like me — who, as my husband likes to say, has tried every "woo-woo" practice on earth — it turned out to be one of the most profoundly healing experiences of my life. I booked a second session for the next day. Aramness's InBody scanner later revealed I needed to lose eight kilos, hard to do when faced with a tasty Gujarati *thali* at dinner. Thankfully, the fluffy *bajra roti* flatbreads made by local chef Halumaben were low-carb and gluten-free, so I dug in.

Around 60 percent of the staff come from nearby villages. On my last evening, I visited one of them, Sangodra, where I was invited into the home of a Maldhari family. For generations, these pastoralists have inhabited the forests of Gir, coexisting with its diverse wildlife, which includes leopards, *nilgai* antelopes, and wild boar. Each household owns anywhere from 20 to 100 buffaloes and cows that they herd through the jungle. If a lion attacks and kills one of their animals, they bear no rancor. Instead, they call it a "forest tax."

In the 1970s, after passing the Wild Life Protection Act, the Indian government began relocating Maldhari families to settlements on the perimeter of the forest. But as Ramuben, the elegant matriarch of this household, told me, it wasn't the same. "We miss our *ness* [hamlet] in the forest," she said. Then the penny dropped. *Aram* means "relaxation" in Gujarati; *ness* is a forest home. Aramness — the name makes perfect sense.

In a world obsessed with speed, Aramness invites slowness. It's a nudge that comes from the design, the staff, and the food itself. When the forest becomes part of the spa experience — or vice versa — the real therapy isn't the lavender massage oils or the herbal tea infusions. It's the act of remembering what stillness feels like: watching wild boars root out tubers from the earth as you swim in your villa's pool; listening to cicadas and cuckoos as dusk falls; seeing fireflies dance as you return from the evening safari; meeting the smiling eyes of the lodge staff who stand outside to welcome you with cold towels. And realizing that somewhere out there, the maharaja of the jungle prowls.



CREATURE COMFORTS
Clockwise from top: Preparing tables in Aramness's restaurant; organic fruits and vegetables grown on-site find their way into salads and other dishes; villas at the lodge are called *kothis*, after the Gujarati term for bungalow.