

# Never never land retreat



At the Reni Pani Jungle Lodge, meal timings are fixed. But you can have your own barbecue at night.

By Kunal Doley

**W**HAT? YOU'RE travelling by train? So 'LS!' scoffed the high-fliers in my office. The remark was palpable, for a weekend vacation to a place nearly 900 kms away from the Capital, would simply mean wasting precious man hours and energy in a train. But I brushed aside my dear colleagues' kind considerations.

The logic was simple — I didn't want to be teleported from an urban jungle to a virtually unscaled forest ecosystem, deep in the heart of central India, on an hour-long flight. The idea was to soak in as much as possible from the short, destressing itinerary, right from the office swipe-out at 7 p.m. to catching the Bhopal Express at 9 p.m. to the final de-boarding the next morning at 7 a.m.

It was drizzling when I reached the Bhopal railway station. My first stop in the City of Nawabs was the Jehan Numa Palace Hotel, a heritage hotel on Shama Hills. On the hotel's invitation I decided to check out its newest property, Reni Pani — a luxury jungle lodge located about 135 km from Bhopal.

The three-hour long journey to the lodge passed quickly, and when I opened my eyes after a brief siesta, we had already made a detour off NH-12 on to a smaller road. The *pucca* road soon gave way to a narrow, gravel path and by the time we reached the entry gates, we were in the middle of a thick, dry-deciduous forest. The backdrop was characterised by gorgeous *nullahs* and a dramatic landscape.

The camp itself is inspired by classic wildlife camp architecture. "The materials used are completely indigenous to the area and provide patrons an insight into the local lifestyle," said Faiz Rashid, 27, CEO and one of the two brothers running the lodge. Ah, the younger brother, lost no time in giving me a quick brief on arrival: "Lunch and dinner timings are fixed here — 1.30 p.m. and 8.30 p.m. There are AC units installed in every cottage unit, the power will be on only when



The area around the jungle lodge is crowded with little *nullahs* that sex up the landscape.

there is regular electricity supply. For the lights and fans, there are inverters that give a 24x7 output."

I wondered whether I'd landed in a WWII-era boot camp. But I soon discovered that this would be two days of peace and solitude. No cellphone signals, no newspapers, no intercom. "We also aim to leave a lesser carbon footprint here. Even when a tree falls, we let it be. If it's fallen on the way, we change the route but still don't touch the tree," said Faiz.

There are 12 independent units in the lodge with three distinct structural designs — *nullah*-facing units, forest units and hill-top units. All

rooms have large private decks enabling guests to enjoy the camp's natural surroundings. The best part is the outdoor shower area!

Reni Pani may be a luxury lodge, but the facilities are simple. There is a fixed food menu comprising local dishes cooked with fresh seasonal vegetables procured from villages within a radius of 30 km around the area. The lodge has an incredible central meeting place, the Gol Ghar, which encompasses the lounge, the dining area and the library. The lodge also has a magnificent swimming pool located along the *nullah*; a touch of luxury in the midst of pure wilderness.



■ Reni Pani is located nearly 900 km away from the Capital.

■ You could take the Shatabdi or the Bhopal Express to Bhopal. The lodge is three hours away by road.

■ The facilities are basic. There's a fixed food menu prepared with local produce.

■ The lodge offers no mobile connectivity. Keep your cell at home.

■ The Satpura National Park is right next door. Happy game watching.

The first activity on the agenda was a bird-watching trip to the nearby reserve forest. The one-km walk led us to an amazing variety of avian species such as the Malabar Pied hornbills, the Crested Serpent eagles, Honey buzzards, Paradise Flycatchers and thrushes among others. We were lucky to spot a crocodile that had just made the canal its new home.

Sleeping early is a must, so as to make it to the adjoining Satpura National Park early in the morning. If you're of the nocturnal variety, don't worry — the eerie silence will put you to sleep immediately. In the morning, the resident jeep took us to the Madhar entry point of the park. After the boat transfer on river Denwa, we took the park's 4X4 game drive, a tour inside the park. You may not be lucky enough to spot a tiger or a leopard, but you'll certainly get to see wild boars, cheetals, black bucks and gaurs. The park is also home to some of the lesser known species of Indian mammals such as the flying squirrel, porcupine and hyena, informed Reni Pani's resident naturalist Elger, a native of Goa.

Another evening at the lodge, and it was time to leave. As we moved away from the lodge, our cellphones started buzzing again. It was time for us to take a reality check.