

*Here, Wellness
Follows You...*

MINDFUL, REJUVENATING EXPERIENCES IN MADHYA PRADESH



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Sushri Usha Thakur

*Minister, Culture, Tourism,
Religious Trusts & Endowments*

In this book, we've shared a holistic view of wellness in tourism, one that is not limited to massages and meditation. We believe that reconnecting with the soil, working with our hands, listening to soulful music, practising meditative art forms, eating organic, farm-fresh food, seeking out open spaces, sleeping under starlit skies, hiking, cycling, participating in rural adventures, dipping your toes in hot springs, exploring the ancient healing practices, apart from yoga, meditation and indulging in spa treatments can heal us deeply from within.

From growing and savouring delicious, slow food at farmstays to reenergizing Ayurveda sessions in Kanha, from discovering the small joys of slow travel in and around Mandu, Jhabua and Fort Amla to forest bathing in some of the most glorious, most biodiverse corners of the state, there's a variety of healing, rejuvenating options in this book for both the physical as well as mental well-being of a responsible traveller!

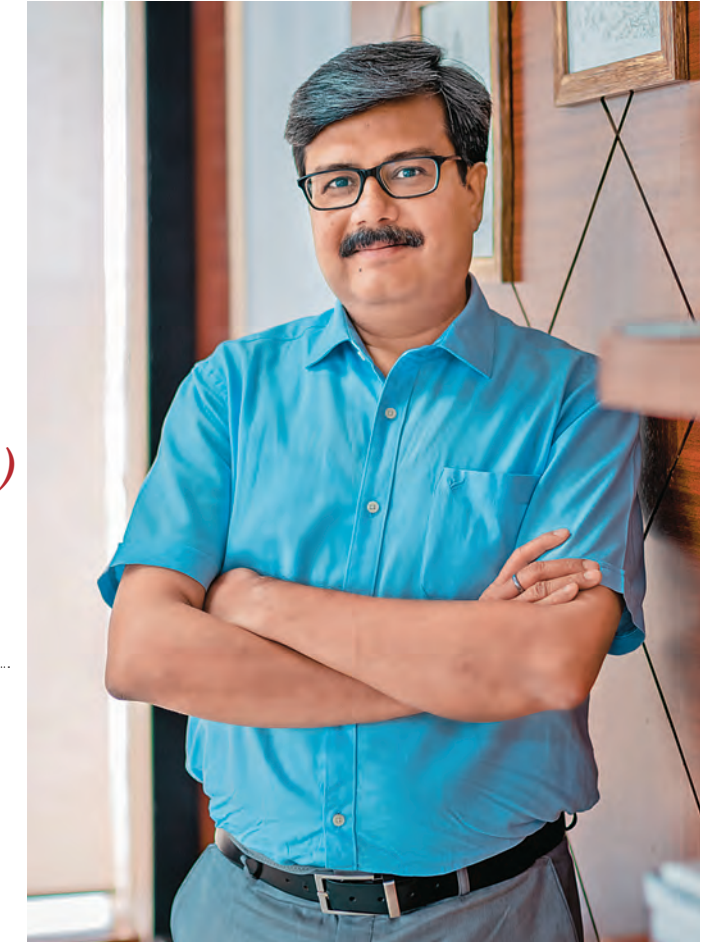
With a diversity of destinations, cultures, indigenous communities and natural assets that few others can rival, Madhya Pradesh continues to be an open secret for Indian and international travellers, who seek immersive, meaningful experiences. Yet, few know about the enormous potential of the state as a wellness destination. A place that offers several opportunities to rejuvenate the body, mind and soul of the post-pandemic traveller.

Shri Sheo Shekhar Shukla (IAS)

*Principal Secretary,
Department of Tourism &
MD, MP Tourism Board*

Whether it's the everyday stress of urban living or the invisible impacts of pandemics and climate change, travellers today need more than just another holiday to heal and rejuvenate their body and soul. They need a great escape, a wonderful window to reconnect with nature and with themselves, to experience the small joys of life that they may have long forgotten. Through this book, we hope we can help the post-pandemic traveller start this important journey of rediscovery, and rebooting.

Going beyond the traditional definition of 'wellness', this book explores so many other ways of finding inner peace and happiness. In



other words, it coaxes the jaded, world-weary traveller to seek out travel in its purest, unadulterated form in Madhya Pradesh. A state that bridges the gap between ancient practices and modern experiences seamlessly. A state where you discover something that makes you feel good, feel alive, at every turn.

We hope you enjoy reading about these wonderful experiences as much as we enjoyed sharing them with you, and embark on your own journey of healing in Madhya Pradesh very soon!



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*Evening descends
on Mandu*



Contents

INTRODUCTION	
The Heartland of India	08
AGRI-TOURISM AND FARMSTAYS	
■ A Wild Refuge	12
■ Slow Living at Fort Amla	16
■ The Enchanted Forest	22
FOREST BATHING	
■ Call of the Wild	28
■ Walk in the Wild	34
GLAMPING AND SOFT ADVENTURES	
■ Mandu on Wheels	42
■ Tent on the Tree	48
■ Under the Mandu Sky	54
■ Zen and the Art of Zipping	58
HEALING FOODS	
■ Eat, Brew, Love	64
■ Eating the Gond Way!	70
MUSIC AND ART EXPERIENCES	
■ Sacred Sounds at Ujjain's Ram Ghat	78
■ Sunset Show in Narmadapuram	84
RURAL TOURISM	
■ Farm Fresh Dining at Mandu	90
■ Forest Essentials	96
■ Practising Halma in Jhabua	100
■ Sacred Jungles of Jhabua	106
TRADITIONAL MEDICINE AND HOT SPRINGS	
■ The Healing Herbs	112
YOGA AND SPAS	
■ Be Well... and Wild!	118
■ The Quiet Perches	124

*A rocky waterfall
close to Satdhara*



A view of the royal cenotaphs of Orchha over the Betwa river

The Heartland of India

It is not just because of its location that Madhya Pradesh is often referred to as the beating heart of India. Its heritage, culture, legends and myths are intrinsic and central to India's identity, as are its numerous arts and crafts. Little surprise then that the state is ripe with unbound potential for immersive travel that will leave tourists marvelling at the numerous treasures, big or small, hidden here. Be

it a cycling tour in ancient, picturesque Mandu, a wellness stay in a property on the edge of the Kanha National Park, taking in the tranquillity of Pachmarhi and the Satpura Tiger Reserve during a walk or satiating your taste buds by sampling Gond cuisine, Madhya Pradesh offers a variety of attractions for people of diverse inclinations. More importantly, these experiences can all be enjoyed at one's own pace.

Symbolically speaking, the heart also carries with it notions of health and wellness. And, true to its name, Madhya Pradesh has evolved into a hub of wellness tourism as well in the 21st century. The healing experiences to be had in the state are a blend of the spiritual and the scientific, as well as the ancient and the modern. Year after year, visitors travel to Mandla, Mandsaur, Omkareshwar, Amarkantak, Chitrakoot, Sanchi, Ujjain and Narmadapuram, to experience divinity and spirituality, unlike anywhere else.

Through a variety of immersive experiences like a cycling tour in ancient,

picturesque Mandu, a wellness stay in a property on the edge of the Kanha National Park, learning about the intricacies of Maheshwar's rich textiles, taking in the tranquillity of Pachmarhi and the Satpura Tiger Reserve during a walk or satiating your taste buds by sampling Gond cuisine, Madhya Pradesh exemplifies that it has something to offer for people of diverse inclinations.

This guide aims to be a ready reckoner for travellers who are setting out to explore the state with a focus on physical and mental well-being. The adventures encapsulated here promise to do just that.



Agri-Tourism and Farmstays

A fresh-from-the-farm dining experience. A relaxed, rustic stay in a fort. And a visit to an organic farm. We've handpicked a few charming experiences, rooted in the soil of Madhya Pradesh

*Banana plantains at
Vanya wait to shoot up*



The expansive verandah at Salban looks out onto the 11-acre compound dotted with fruit trees, allowing guests to watch birds from the comfort of their chairs

A Wild Refuge

Savour the joys of slow living and slow foods in the shadows of Kanha National Park

Some places have a rhythm of their own... Quiet, elemental, idyllic places, where the breeze and the birdsong, the angle of the sunlight and the rainbow colours on the plate, are each part of an incredible orchestra that changes its tune every season. Places, where jaded travellers can truly unwind...

As you leave the paved road and turn towards the Baiga village of Bandha Tola, the gate of Salban, The Kanha Homestay, comes into view. By the time you reach the courtyard, Sheema and Jhampan Mookherjee, a former publisher and conservationist couple who opened the doors to their home a few years ago, are ready to welcome you into their tranquil world. The openness and the spaciousness of the homestay, and its earthy façade, instantly draw you in.

As Salban shares its border with the core area of the Kanha Tiger Reserve, it offers the best of both worlds... You're never too far from the wild intensity of a dense Central Indian forest or a hot cup of tea and the sweet hug of a homely environment. Adding to the charm is a sprawling Mahua tree right in front of the



A majestic, native Mahua tree beautifully frames the rustic, red-tile-roofed bungalow at Salban

main cottage. The cottage, built in the local style with slanted, tiled roofs and a roomy verandah, looks like a traditional Baiga house from a distance; the only difference is in scale.

When the weather is favourable, Salban also serves freshly made homecooked meals under its majestic Mahua tree – a simple, yet incredibly relaxing experience. With rare, hyperlocal, nutrient-rich ingredients sourced from their own farm or local farmers, and gifted homecooks who can elevate the humblest ingredients like Kodo millet into a gourmet

meal, it's one of the most memorable farm-to-table experiences in the region.

The main cottage at Salban has two rooms for guests, while there are two more rooms adjacent to each other in a separate cottage on the other side of the Mahua tree. They are connected by a small pool and a pond.

Nature is both the chief host and chief guest at Salban. So, your early dinner with delicious Kodo millet fried 'rice', roast chicken and a refreshing salad prepared with fresh produce from the farm, may be accompanied by clear skies

and the song of cicadas, or a spell of heavy rain and rolling mists. Either way, you're never too far from a surprise at Salban. Even when you turn in for the night, a

goodnight message — tongue firmly in cheek — could remind you to expect the unexpected in the wild... "Do call us if you see a tiger at night!"

THE INFORMATION

How to get there: Salban is close to the Mukki Gate at Kanha, so the closest airports are Raipur or Nagpur, and the closest railway station is Gondia junction. The hosts arrange for taxis for pick up and drop.

Best time to visit: Certified under the homestay scheme of Madhya Pradesh Tourism, the best time to visit is October to March.

Address: Village Baherakhar, PO Nikkum (Malajkhand), District Balagha

Cost: ₹7,000-10,000, inclusive of all meals

Contact: +91-6268843290, 6267384787

Email: salbankanha@gmail.com

The countryside in Madhya Pradesh has a gentler rhythm, and offers many beautiful agri-tourism and farmstay experiences. Here are a few more to consider:

Sattva Farmstay by MPTB

A warm cottage on a two-acre organic farm, Sattva Farmstay is located just outside Bhopal. It offers a unique open-air theatre experience too.

How to get there: Sattva is en route to Kerwa Dam from Bhopal, which has the closest airport and railway station. Address: Sattva Farmstay, H. No. 59, Kerwa Dam Road, Khudagaj, Central Semen Centre, Bhopal.

Contact: + 91-9479660944; Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/sattvafarmstay>

Rawla Kaneriya

Hosted by the Jamnia Royal Family, Rawla Kaneriya offers activities, such as farm tours, picnics, and lunches under tree canopies, as well as opportunities for hikes, nature walks, workshops and more.

How to get there: The closest airport or railway station to Rawla Kaneriya is Indore, approximately 40km away. Address: Bagdi-Manpur Road, Dhar. **Contact:** +91-9425740106

Website: <https://agriculturetourism.wixsite.com/rawlakaneriya>

Rekha Homestay by MPTB

One of the three villages in India nominated for the UNWTO's Best Tourism Village Award, Ladpura Khas (where Rekha Homestay is located), offers a chance to experience the quintessential country life and enjoy farm-to-fork meals.

How to get there: Gwalior airport and Orchha railway station are closest to the homestay.

Address: H.No. 265 Khasra (near Upper Middle School), Maharajpura Gram Panchayat, Orchha.

Contact: +91-6392071364

Jeevantika Farm, Ujjain

An ecologically diverse farm of one-and-a-half acres, which is focused on improving soil health and using indigenous seeds to grow 100% chemical-free food, Jeevantika Farm allows visitors to experience the joy of reconnecting with the land, and encourages them to embark on their own journey of sustainability and well-being.

How to get there:

From Ratlam (50 kms) – by local train, bus or taxi

From Ujjain (50 kms) – by a bus or taxi.

From Indore (90 kms) – by local train, bus or taxi.

Address: Jeevantika, Amla, Road, Barnagar, Madhya Pradesh.

Contact: Email: arpit2mv@gmail.com |

Facebook Page: <https://m.facebook.com/jeevantika.forest>

Shambhala

It's an organic farm with four rooms on the outskirts of Bhopal.

How to get there: Bhopal is connected by train and air. It's a short drive to Shambhala from there.

Address: Bhouri Jod, Near Champion School, Bhopal-Indore Highway, Bhouri Village, Bairagarh, Bhopal.

Contact: +91-7554073333

Email: info@shambhalastay.com

Slow Living at Fort Amla

*Exercise your green thumb at
Barnagar farms*

Walking into one of Barnagar's many fields is like walking into a beautiful postcard image of agrarian living. Blessed with Malwa's fertile black soil and Narmada's sacred waters (along with *Tapti* river), the fields here are bountiful. Driving past harvests of soya, wheat, maize and corn, we make our way to one such farm, with our guide Ishwar from Fort Amla. It is around noon and we are greeted by a shepherd and his flock, making their way towards a watering hole nearby. A short distance away, a herd of cattle lay bathing under the warmth of the gentle winter sun.

As we walk further, we come across a woman picking fresh harvest of chickpea leaves. The 'saag' made of these leaves is a winter speciality, we're told, and welcomed to lend a hand. If you're a city slicker wanting to exercise your green thumb, then this is an ideal day out. We make our way from one end of the field to the other, sampling the ripe fruits that Ishwar



*The exquisite Fort Amla sits
overlooking the Barnagar farms*



Above & Facing page: A couple at work in the fields of Barnagar; The courtyard at Fort Amla

has been plucking for us – lemons, oranges and guavas. Grown with natural methods, using no chemicals, these are safe to bite into right after plucking.

Speaking of all things natural, cow dung is a big part of rural culture. At one corner of the field is a woman collecting fresh dung and slapping them onto a wall to make dung cakes. Cow dung is used in place of firewood, as manure and even for coating the floors owing to their insulating and antibacterial properties. On the other side of the field, a couple is prep-

ping for lunch. Even from a distance, we can smell the aroma of freshly-ground spices wafting towards us. On the menu is *chane ki sabzi* cooked in a clay pot. In keeping with the hospitality of Barnagar's residents, we're invited to join the meal. We had to politely decline of course, but it is common for one to be invited by the folks over a meal or a cup of tea, after a short conversation.

The unhurried yet disciplined way of life on the farm is a welcome change from the chaos of city lives. And one is welcome to indulge



A shepherd with his flock close to the farms; A guide plucks ripe guavas for us to try along the walk

in this lifestyle – even if for a few days – by participating in most farm activities.

Regal and rustic

At Fort Amla in Barnagar, however, one gets to complement the village experience with a heritage one. Originally set up as an Army outpost to stand guard against Mughal invaders, it is now a homestay run by Raghavendra Singh, and welcomes guests from all over the world.

The spiked, arched doorway of Fort Amla is deceptive. Standing tall and unassuming at the end of a rustic lane, it gives you little indication of the glorious 320-year-old fort behind it. It opens up to a walkway with grass beds on either side, leading you to the inner

entrance of the building. On display here are antique pieces – storage chests and mirrors that date back a couple of centuries at least. Walk further and you’ll find yourself in an open courtyard that hosts the guest bedrooms and a lone temple tree in the centre.

We’re greeted by Shivika, the ‘Bhavrani’ of the family, in what she describes as the ‘zenana ghar’ (ladies’ hall). The men of the house traditionally host guests in the ‘mardana ghar’ or the men’s hall. Shivika, a gracious host, shares many such nuggets and keeps us enthralled throughout a sumptuous lunch and a tour of the fort. If you’re fascinated by heritage architecture, then the alleyways and open terraces are enticing. Not to mention the views of open fields for as far as the eyes can see.

Why agri-tourism?

Although situated in close proximity to some of Madhya Pradesh’s busier hubs such as Ujjain, Ratlam and Indore, Barnagar is a quiet town. After having toured through the popular spots, this is where people come to just breathe and be, says Shivika. It is what prompted them to encourage the idea of ‘agri-tourism’. “Agriculture has been the tradition and identity of the village folk for centuries. The idea is to

expose this richness to the outside world, while giving the locals an opportunity to make an additional living,” Shivika tells us.

Of course, a day or two will only help sample the most appetising bits of farm life, but it gives you an opportunity to understand an alternate way of living. And empathise with the process that brings food to our tables. It is a refreshing new way of experiencing a blend of the regal and rustic.

THE INFORMATION

How to get there: The best way to get to Barnagar is by road from either Ujjain (45 kms) or Indore (80 kms).

Best time to visit: Between October and June.

Address: Heritage Village Amla, Tehsil Barnagar, Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh

Cost: ₹8,000 for a double-occupancy room

Contact: +91-9977833323

Website: www.fortamla.com

The number of agritourism destinations has been growing steadily in Madhya Pradesh. Here are a few more places that you might like:

Bundeli Countryside, near Orchha

A lovely, warm community, Friends of Orchha, offers a wonderful window to rural Bundeli life. Set up by a local NGO to break barriers of caste and gender, the homestays give travellers a chance to truly live like a local, even as they discover the royal charms of this ancient city on the Betwa river.

Address: Lakshmi Mandir Road, Ganj Mohalla, Orchha

Cost: ₹1,000 for a double-occupancy room

Contact: +91-9981749660

Website: www.orchha.org

Daytrip to Khamba village

Khamba, on the edge of Pench National Park, is a Gond village,

where you can experience what life is like for communities traditionally dependent on the forests of Central India. Spend a day amidst birdsong, watch children at play, and see the sun go down at dusk, even as you discover more about wild and foraged foods, and herbal medicine. If you ask your hotel, they may even be able to arrange a meal cooked by a local family with fresh produce from their own fields.

How to get there: Nagpur is the nearest airport and railway station to Pench. Khamba village shares a boundary with the Pench National Park..

Rekha Homestay by MPTB

One of the three villages selected for United Nations World Tourism Organization’s Rural Tourism Program, Ladpura Khas (where Rekha Homestay is located) offers a glimpse into the quintessential country life complete with farm-to-fork meals and more. Situated on the banks of the Betwa and Gurari rivers, this riparian community celebrates several festivals through the year, including their own version of Lathmar holi!

How to get there: Gwalior airport and Orcha railway station are closest if you’re making your way to Rekha Homestay.

Address: H.No. 265 KHASRA (near Upper Middle School), Maharajpura Gram Panchayat, Orcha, Madhya Pradesh

Contact: +91-6392071364

The Enchanted Forest

Vanya Organics, near Indore, is synonymous with sustainability and wellness

Having visited a few organic farms over the years, we were prepared for rows of neatly planted saplings, pruned trees, and mounds of compost in various stages of maturity at Vanya Organics. But it displayed none of it. Instead, true to its name, it resembled a forest. A food forest where trees, vines, roots and shoots grow at will. And in abundance. Mango, papaya, babool, pink pepper, kaffir lime, dates, ginger, aloe vera – the whole platter. We entered the gates of Vanya, near Indore, at around 12 noon. Yet the overhead sun, instead of scorching us, filtered through tall canopies of moringa and *tendu*, giving us just the cover for a leisurely walk in the forest.

Sun, soil and symbiosis

A 40-acre oasis on the banks of Narmada, Vanya's bounty is as carefully designed as it is organic. Thanks to 'natural farming' deployed by former IRS Officer Patanjali Jha. Unlike industrial farming that razes forests and depletes soil's nutrients, natural farming harnesses natural resources on

the land. The 'layered' nature of the forest, for instance, ensures that the sun's rays first bathe the moringa trees, trickle down to shine on the citrus, descend further to caress the vetiver (*khas grass*) and ultimately nourish the turmeric or sweet potato that grow underground. Similarly, the guduchi, a popular herb in Ayurvedic practices, intertwines itself around neem trees, ensuring that the two engage in a symbiotic relationship.

Of trees and bees

The land here is never turned or tilled and there is no use of chemical fertiliser, pesticide or herbicide. 'Cide', as Jha points out, means to kill. Vanya contrarily is designed as a space that allows life to 'thrive'. So the forest grows plants and trees that flower and fruit throughout different times of the year to ensure a steady supply of nourishment for the bees. "The productivity of a farm visited by bees grows by 30 per cent," Jha explained. Vanya doesn't compost either. The natural mulch from the trees' shedding and ani-



The layered forest at Vanya has moringa canopies at the top and vetiver (khas grass) on the floor to ensure that the sun's rays are effectively harnessed



Clockwise from top left: Giloy vines intertwine a neem tree, adding to the charm of a 'layered' forest; A fruit-laden papaya tree stands tall; Fist-sized attari lemons hang low on the tree; The land at Vanya Organics is never tilled or turned

mal waste makes for excellent nutrition for the trees, he added. An economist by qualification, Jha's passion for natural farming is inspired by the Japanese no-till farming visionary Masanobu Fukuoka and Gujarati natural farming pioneer Bhaskar.

Healing people and the planet

A passionate farmer, Jha believes that any food when grown in a pristine environment

is medicinal. A refreshing brew made entirely with ingredients foraged from this forest that we had had earlier is an example of the same. So is the lunch that we were lovingly served – also prepared entirely from the forest's harvests. Apart from being an oasis for all life forms that depend on it, Jha believes that the forests can also reverse climate change.

“The Earth's cycle of plant and animal life is naturally regenerative and

sustainable. We must mimic it and learn from it, not replace it with unsustainable practices. If we can create these little pieces of natural paradise everywhere in the world, it can be a strong force to fight the climate crisis,” he said.

In fact, ever since Jha took over the land around 12 years ago, the temperature here hasn't shot beyond 36 degrees – a whopping 10 degrees lower than when his parents lived here more than a decade ago. Besides, natural

farming with its quadruple layers is capable of producing 200 times more than a regular farm, thereby reducing the need to create more 'agriculture land'.

From growing clean food to reversing climate change and harvesting large quantities of food in sustainable ways, there is much to learn at Vanya – as an urban farmer, a foodie, a biologist or just someone curious about how the world can be a more compassionate and healthier place.

THE INFORMATION

How to get there: Indore is the nearest airport, 105km away, and the nearest railway station is also at Indore, 95km away. There are also regular bus services from Indore to Dhar/Khalghat.
Best time to visit: The farm welcomes guests throughout the year for a tour, but it is ideal to visit after October.
Accommodation: Vanya has two rooms, offered at no charge for both food and stay. Alternatively, the MPT hotel at Khalghat is 5km away.
Address: Vanya Organic Natural Farm, State Highway 31, Khal Bujurg, Madhya Pradesh.
Contact: +91-1234567890; **Email:** email@vanyaorganic.com

Madhya Pradesh offers many opportunities to learn about, cherish and even grow your own food. Here are a few more places you could visit:

Aaramgah, The Homestay

From farm fresh custard apples and cherries on the table to pottery workshops and silk handicraft-making, at Aaramgah there's a lot to see and experience at leisure. Barely a few kilometres away from the banks of the rivers Tawa and Narmada, and planted on a two-acre farm, the homestay attracts birds, bees, butterflies, and discerning travellers who love slow holidays. The hosts live on the property.

How to get there: The nearest railway station is Itarsi Junction

(20km), and the nearest airport is Bhopal (90km).
Address: Tasalli Raipur Road, Malakhedi, Narmadapuram
Contact: 9425040851

Reconnecting with our Roots, near Bhopal

Just about 50km from the capital city, Maati Se is a farmstay that celebrates local produce.
How to get there: The closest airport is Bhopal, and the railway stations at Bhopal and Sehore are both easily accessible.
Address: Maati Se Farm, Kotakarar Village, Anwali Kheda Panchayat, Sehore District.
Accommodation: Maati Se Farm
Website: maatise.in

Seasonal Wonders in Pachmarhi

Part of the AM Hotel Kollection, The Summer House, Pachmarhi, perched at 1,100 msl, enjoys sweeping views of the Satpuras. Their in-house restaurant, The Five, features a curated seasonal menu that changes throughout the year.
How to get there: The closest airport is Bhopal, and Pipariya is the closest railway station.
Address: The Summer House, Civil Lines, Pachmarhi, Madhya Pradesh.
Website: www.amhotelkollection.com/THESUMMERHOUSE



Forest Bathing

The term forest bathing (or shinrin-yoku) may have Japanese roots, but by no means is the experience strictly limited to Japan alone. Madhya Pradesh has several excellent forest trails which are well-suited for forest bathing – the ones in Satpura National Park being a case in point

Call of the Wild

*Sprinting past trees, hills, streams
and sand, Forsyth Trail Run in
Satpura is 'wildly' refreshing*

No one word, or two or three, can describe the landscape at the Satpura National Park. Although blessed abundantly with towering canopies, magical floors, flowing streams and all the features that make for an enticing forest, it is impossible to pin down its scenery to a single type. The fact that it magically transforms into a new landscape every few miles is what makes the Forsyth Trail Run in Satpura a uniquely soul-stirring experience. That, and the fact that it is the only activity of its kind to be hosted in a tiger reserve! A 36-km-long trail, it starts on a motorable road in Singanama village and ends uphill, at the Bison Lodge in Pachmarhi. Along the way, it makes you scale slopes in a rainforest, tread past sandy beach-like shores, sprint across fields, and dip your toes in cool brooks from time to time. Participants also get a glimpse



*Participants dip their toes in a brook
for respite from the heat*



Clockwise from left page: The streams along the trail; A tiger pug-mark; Forest guide Ghanshyam Kahar has been leading the trail for more than 40 years; A small stream flows by



of the traditional Gond and Baiga lifestyles as they go past the villages of Khokhra and Thadipathar on the banks of the Gopad and Mahan rivers. The nature worshippers have a regular haat or market and run eco-friendly homestays that have been supported by Biome and MP Tourism.

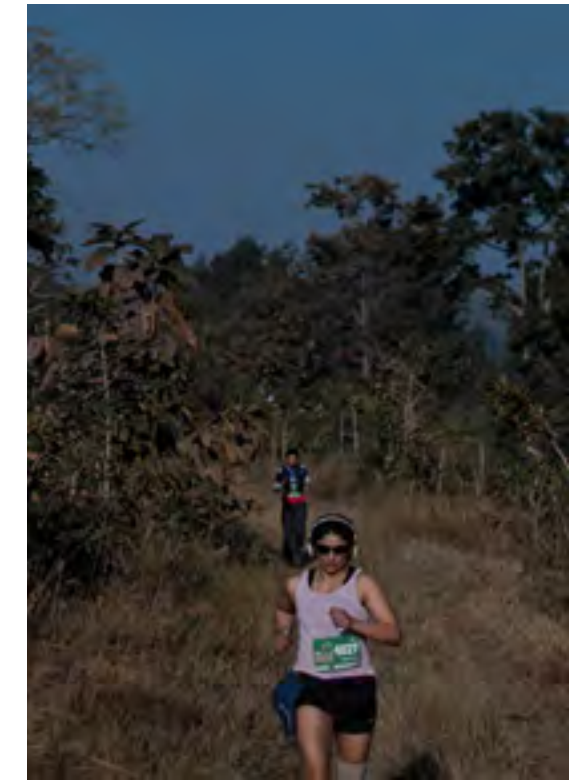
Run in peace

The Forsyth Trail Run starts off as a group activity high on adrenaline, but along the way and over the next eight hours, evolves into a reflective journey as one continues at one's own pace – fascinated by the transforming trail. If you're lucky, you may even catch a glimpse of a deer or a sambar sprinting alongside. Away from the chaos outside its fences, the forest offers a meditative track to run with your thoughts. Interrupted occasionally by the rustle of leaves, the prattling of brooks and the occasional call of a bird or beast.

Choose your trail

The first to flag off what is going to be an annual event, this is an intense trail recommended for only seasoned runners. Going forward, however, the organisers, Moustache Escapes and Madhya Pradesh Tourism, will offer three different trails –10, 20 and 36-km long. This includes parts of the core forest cover as well as buffer zones.

Physically and mentally challenging yet infinitely rewarding, the Forsyth Trail Run is a rare opportunity to witness the glory of the wild on foot.



Facing page & above: Participants pose for a group photo at the end of the Forsyth Trail Run; A diverse trail, Forsyth reveals a new facet of the forest every few miles

THE INFORMATION

How to get there: Itarsi railway station is 70 kms from Satpura, Pachmarhi. The closest airport is Bhopal, 146 kms away.

Best time to visit: The Trail Run is held in the winter months.

Cost: ₹4,000 for two nights, including stay and breakfast

Contact: +91-8929100705

Website: <https://moustachescapes.com> (the exact dates for the run can be tracked here)



Walk in the Wild

*Satpura – the only National Park to offer
a walking tour in the core forest cover*

*The afternoon sun cuts through
the dense canopy in the core
area of Satpura Tiger Reserve*

The run-up to the walk at Satpura is perhaps as thrilling as the walk itself. We take our seats on a little boat that will take us across a stretch of the Denwa river and into the forest. Barely a minute into the ride, we spot a crocodile resting peacefully on a little island in the middle of a lake. As we inch closer, looking through a pair of binoculars lent by one of the forest guides, it

Langurs merrily swinging on tree tops (below); A gaur basking in the sun, seen from a boat while approaching the core area of the Tiger Reserve (bottom)



makes a loud swoosh with its tail as if announcing its retreat into the water. On the right, is a herd of the sambar blissfully grazing the greens along the water.

I was initially sceptical of the time that we picked for the walk - 3 p.m., when the sun is scorching right overhead. But the scepticism was laid to rest in less than a minute of entering the jungle. So dense is the canopy of the trees, that it filters the sun's rays, allowing only about a half of it to trickle through the leaves. In fact, the light, cutting through the canopy like swords of bright yellow, make for a sight to behold.

Floored by the forest

We're instructed to walk in a single file and make as little noise as possible. A minimum of four people had to go together, and since it was only two of us, we were accompanied by two forest guides – Kanhaiya and Rameshwar - who knew the jungle like the back of their hand. Curious, we asked them if they'd ever had a close shave with a wild cat. After all, we are in the 'core area' of the forest. Interestingly, Satpura is the only National Park in the country that allows visitors to walk in the core area as opposed to other parks that allow it in the buffer zones. Kanhaiya tells us that the ecosystem at Satpura is so biodiverse and self-sufficient that the carnivores are almost never a threat to humans.

The core forest cover at Satpura National Park is 1,500 sq kms whereas the buffer area is spread across 700 sq kms. Walking in a single file as instructed, we make our way past trees



A crocodile perched on a small island

such as Sal, Teak, Tendu, Mahua, Cork Tree and Bamboo. "Have you ever seen a crocodile on a tree?" Kanhaiya asks. Of course we hadn't. He then points to a tree, the bark of which resembles the scaly back of a crocodile. So uncanny is the resemblance, that the tree is called the 'crocodile tree' – and one can spot hordes of these around.

Sounds so soothing

There is a walking trail or 'pugdundee' etched out on the forest floor thanks to the walks, but we choose to walk slightly outside of it, to get an amplified rustle of the dried leaves being crushed underfoot. If it is a sound that calms

you, then there is ample sound therapy that the forest offers.

Speaking of the forest floor, we notice pug marks of a wild cat that may have passed by not so long ago, fresh droppings of a bear and many symmetrical webs of the funnel spider. And if you look up from the stories of the floor, the trees have their tales too. Some trees bear claw marks, left behind by bears sharpening their claws. Or in some cases, by tigers marking their territory as a show of strength in keeping with the jungle laws.

As we walk further, the silence is pleasantly interrupted by the sounds of birds. After a fair bit of hide and seek with the



Guides Rameshwar Gujar and Kanhaiyalal Wadia identify bird species

binoculars, we are finally able to catch a glimpse of the Oriole and Kingfisher adding a dash of colour to the green and yellow tapestry of the jungle.

While we didn't catch a proper glimpse of any animal on the walk we heard the sound of an Indian gaur that fled seconds before we could lay our eyes on it and a few langurs that merrily swung on tree tops.

Spotting or no spotting, there is something so reinvigorating about being in the presence of nature's virgin beauty. And while little compares to the rush of spotting an animal in its natural habitat, it is these finer sights and sounds that make walking in a jungle, a compelling, immersive and almost meditative experience.

THE INFORMATION

Tourism is now an integral part of the identity of the Satpuras. So much so that it is recognised as the key 'product' under the 'One District One Product' scheme in the district of Narmadapuram, which is home to the Satpuras.

How to get there: Itarsi is a popular railway station 70 kms away from Satpura. Closest airports would be Bhopal and Jabalpur.

Best time to visit: Between October and March. The park is closed for visitors during the monsoons – from July to September.

Cost: The Satpura Walking Safari lasts around two hours and costs between ₹1,500 and ₹2,000 depending on the number of people.

Contact: +91-9205515652 (Gypsy Adventures)
Suggested accommodation: MP Tourism's Satpura Retreat is a quaint property where tourists can enjoy a peaceful stay; **Address:** Mahadev Rd, Pachmarhi, Madhya Pradesh

Contact: +91-7578252097

Website: <https://mpstdc.com>

WELLNESS IN THE WOODS
 Nature is the world's best (and most affordable) therapist. And with the largest forest cover in the country, Madhya Pradesh is home to many healing jungles of its own...

WHY
 The forest heals us in invisible ways... And the Japanese even have a name for it! Shinrin-Yoku or forest bathing is a beautiful way to let the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and textures of nature lift our spirits, and restore our tired minds and muscles.

HOW

- Keep your phone & camera away
- Walk slowly and aimlessly
- See the forest floor, the angled rays of the sunlight
- Listen to the birds, insects, and the wind
- Touch the bark of a tree, a fern or a pebble
- Sit or lie down in a quiet spot
- Smell the flowers, the moss, the breeze
- Feel your body relax

WHERE

- Discover the sacred groves of Jhabua & Alirajpur
- Walk with the Pardhis in Panna
- Walk past the ruins of temples & forts in Bandhavgarh
- Go for a walking safari in Satpura National Park
- Explore the buffer zones of Pench National Park
- Take a Canopy Walk at Mukki & Sarhi in Kanha

Swiftly moving on the zipline

Glamping and Soft Adventures

Looking to challenge yourself? From zip lining over Lake Kerwa to glamping in Mandu, explore some of the most refreshing and safe soft adventure experiences on your next trip to Madhya Pradesh





*Cycling past a green field
en route to Jami Masjid*

Mandu on Wheels

*There is no better way to romance
Mandu than on a bicycle*

It was an epic love story... A timeless romance celebrated through the ages, between Sultan Baz Bahadur and Rani Roopmati. One that Mandu continues to honour even today through its architecture and folklore. Come monsoon, the Jahaz Mahal still looks like a majestic ship sailing through deep waters – as imagined by Sultan Ghiyas-ud-din-Khilji. Even the grand baobab trees take us back to the days when they made it to Mandu as gifts borne by African traders. Frozen in time, Mandu is uncorrupted by the pace of life outside its walls. The best way therefore to explore this historical gem is at its own pace. Unhurried, on a bicycle.

After a night under the stars at a glamp, we set out early the next morning for a bicycle tour with our guide Parvez Qureshi. He tells us that Mandu's unique position – perched on the Vindhya overlooking the Malwa plateau – made it an ideal citadel. The first imprint of its legacy greets you right at the gates or 'darwazas' that are now faint remainders of what may have been imposing doorways back in the day. Once inside the gates, you will see rows of baobab trees with bulbous trunks lining the roads. These are now integral to Mandu's identity, and are popularly known as *Khurasani imli*. Also lining the roads are humble clay cottages – homes of the Bhil community. A ride through the town therefore straddles two worlds – one of a regal



Jahaz Mahal takes its name from its resemblance to the structure of a ship



Above & right: Walls of the Baz Bahadur Palace stand tall, defying the test of time; Arched doorways at the Baz Bahadur Palace

past and the other a more modest present.

Love notes

Speaking of the regal heritage, the Baz Bahadur Palace is a must-see for its ingenious architecture, but also for the tribute that it pays to the romance of Baz Bahadur and Rani Roopmati. Brought together by their love for music, the two are said to have enjoyed many melodic evenings in one of the halls, the acoustic strength of which shines through even today. Parvez sings us an old Bollywood couplet and his voice,



Majestic arches on the insides of Baz Bahadur Palace

as one would expect, reverberates through the halls. Right outside the palace, pilgrims gather at the Rewa Kund, a spot visited by Rani Roopmati twice a day to offer prayers to the Holy Narmada.

Royal vestiges

A few minutes away on bicycle, we make our way to the Jahaz Mahal, a beautiful palace standing tall amidst a dry pond. But it is in its full glory in the monsoon, when the ponds fill up and the palace looks like a ship in the waters. Likewise, Hoshang Shah's Tomb, Jami Masjid, Hathi Mahal, Rani Roopmati's Pavilion, Hindola Mahal and many more vestiges of the past connect Mandu's history to its present. Cruising leisurely on a bicycle, away from the rush and noise of the city, is the best way of letting Mandu grow on you.

Rural Charms near Mandu

To experience another side of Mandu, and its rural charms, visitors can also explore the villages of Bhilakheda, Sulibardi, Songadh Gate, Malipura and Undakho. MP Tourism is supporting local communities to host travellers in these idyllic villages.

THE INFORMATION

How to get there: Indore railway station and airport, at 98 kms and 124 kms respectively, are closest to Mandu.

Best time to visit: Monsoon months from July to September are the best time. The Mandu Festival is held usually in December-January and is also a good time to visit Mandu.

Contact: +91-8819077812 (for cycling tours)

Website: <https://www.mandufestival.com> lists dates, accommodation options and other activities to look forward to during the Mandu Festival.

Suggested accommodation:

Contact: 07292-263235, +91-9977113354



Tent on the Tree

Camping allows one to enjoy the many shades of the forest – from dusk to dawn

The hammock tent firmly strapped to sal and teak trees under the glorious morning sun at Satpura National Park

It's way past sundown and we're seated next to a bonfire in the jungle. Next to us, a couple of guides are busy putting up a tree tent, our home for the night. All through the past few days, the 'golden hour' had been our cue to retreat into our rooms or make our way out of a forest. And yet, here we were tonight making our way into one after sunset. And we had no plans of

leaving well after sunrise the next morning. The thought was so exciting, it made me forget how sore my body was after a 16 kms trek along the Forsyth Trail earlier that day.

Satpura is the only National Park in the country that allows visitors to not only walk, but also camp in the core forest area that spans across 1,500 sq kms. An additional 700 sq kms make up the buffer



The guide lights up firewood before preparing a hot breakfast

zone. So night time in the jungle, as you can imagine, is pitch dark – with only the bonfire, the moon or your own torch to light up the way. It also means that the skies twinkle with star light, which is otherwise blurred behind the flash of city lights.

Gather around, everyone

The thing about bonfires is that it sets the stage for storytelling. As does a starry night. And if you're a local who grew up in the forests like our guides Syed Anwar Ali and Mahendra Kalam, you most certainly have stories about encounters with a wild cat. Syed, an animated story-teller, had a treasure trove of these tales – for instance, how as a child, he put up a brave front in front of a tiger, only to go back home and faint before he could brag about it. It had been a long day, so we gorged on a very comforting Indian meal heated on the firewood with a side of continued conversations.

Magical nights

We were hoping to catch a glimpse of some nocturnal forest activity, but there was no peep from any quarter. The feeling is oddly disappointing and relieving at the same time. When it was time to hit bed, Mahendra told us to not fret if we heard an eerie cry because it would in all probability be the Mottled Wood Owl. With that advice apart from torches, blankets and a sleeping bag in tow, we made our way to the tent.

But the adventures weren't over yet!



An early-morning birding trail

Getting into bed was quite an activity too. Unlike most tents that are pitched into the ground, this one hung in the air, suspended in between three strong trees. It's how it earns the name 'hammock tent'. You climb up a ladder and enter from an opening at the bottom of the tent. Given that there is little head room inside, it isn't meant for sitting or resting, but strictly retiring for the night. Despite the light material of the tent, it was reasonably warm and toasty once we settled in. And if you're someone who enjoys mild swaying like you experience in the sleeper



The bonfire keeps us warm as we share stories under a starry sky



Above left & right: The hammock tent rests firmly beside traces of bonfire from the night before; The opening at the bottom of the hammock tent to let you in

coach of a train, then you'd appreciate how the tent lulls you into sleep.

The morning after

Quite predictably and pleasantly, we woke up to the calls of birds. It's only once we stepped out of the tent that we could truly appreciate the gorgeousness of the location for our night haul. Bathed in the morning rays of the sun, the forest had woken up even prettier. We followed the calls of the birds with Mahendra, who has a natural gift to spot these winged beauties and identify them with the softest call. We spotted the Red Vested Fly Catcher swooping over a lake and the Indian Pond Heron peacefully seated beside. Also making an appearance were Parakeets, the Fan Tailed Flycatcher and

the Canary Flycatcher. Having worked up an appetite with the walk and some delightful spotting, we had the breakfast prepared on the rekindled firewood from the previous night and enjoyed it with what seemed like a whole other view of the forest.

THE INFORMATION

How to get there: Itarsi is a popular railway station situated 70 kms from Satpura. Closest airports would be Bhopal and Jabalpur.
Best time to visit: Between October and March. The park is closed for visitors from July to September.
Cost: A stay in a hammock tent for a night costs ₹14,000 for a couple. The experience also includes a guided evening walk, dinner, breakfast and a birding tour in the morning.
Contact: +91-9205515652 (Gypsy Adventures)

Under the Mandu Sky

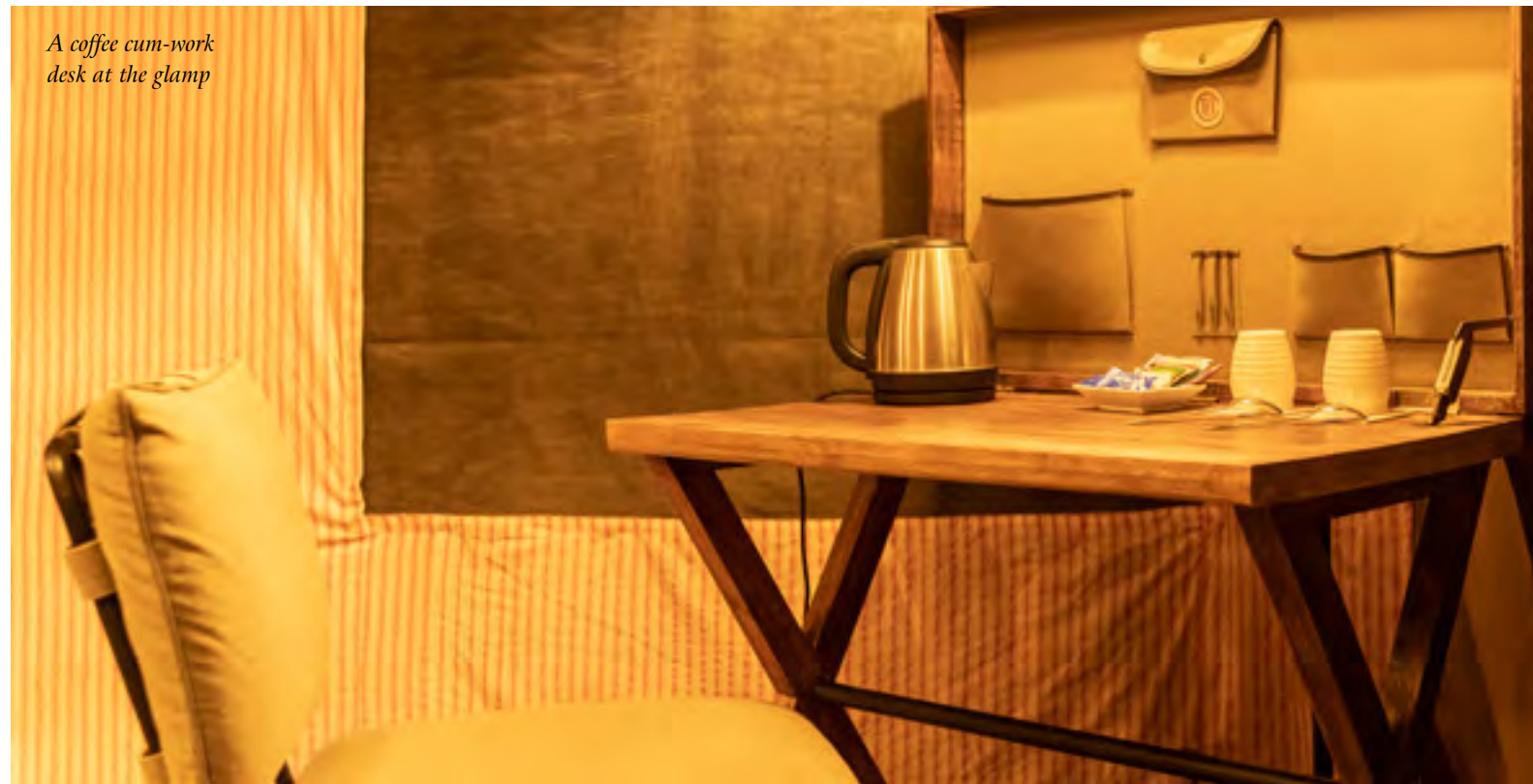
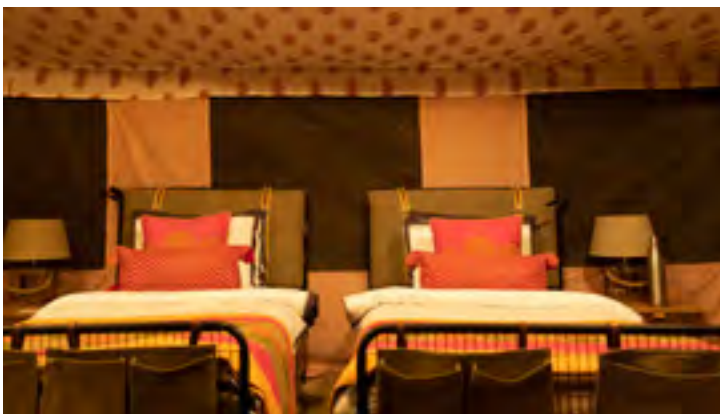
Surrounded by monuments of love and conquest, Mandu's glamps create the perfect ambience for contemplation and conversation

A cluster of glamps in Mandu



If you're on a road trip through Madhya Pradesh, you won't run out of spectacular views of either a forest or vast agricultural fields. The approach to Mandu therefore stood out, given that it resembled nothing of what we had seen thus far. First, the town sits atop a hill in the Vindhya, Malwa – a region known for its many conquests. Next, true to its character of a fortress town, Mandu welcomes you with countless gates or 'darwazas'. Therefore, it is fitting that you retire to a glamorous camp or 'glamp' after exploring

Below & Bottom: The spacious dining area at the glamp; Gorgeous drapes make for the roof of the glamp



A coffee cum-work desk at the glamp

imposing structures such as Baz Bahadur Palace, Roopmati Pavilion and Jahaz Mahal.

Starry, starry night

Luxurious with carpeted floors and exquisite drapes for roofs, Mandu's glamps are reminiscent of what may have been a royal layover back in the day. Toasty even on a February evening, the glamps come with a common dining hall, which, with its silken drapes and pristine whites, is fit for a royal repast. The interiors are charming enough to hold you hostage, but the view outside is just as magical. Stars shine bright in the Mandu sky. Each of the 18 tents has a porch that invites you

to sit out and savour the celestial treat, and find inner peace and calm in the silence of the night.

Mandu Festival

The glamps are put up for the Mandu Festival, the state's annual marquee cultural festival usually held in December-January. It is a five-day fiesta featuring live music, art exhibitions, adventure sport activities, poetry evenings, light-and-sound show – all against the exquisite backdrop of Mandu's architectural gems.

The tent village stays put for a few days after the festival. In case you visit it post the festivities, you can still explore the town with the help of the team at the glamp. It offers a walking and a cycling tour; there's also a special Instagram tour for the social-media savvy.

THE INFORMATION

How to get there: The closest airport is in Indore, 124 km away. The closest railway station is Ratlam, 99 kms away.

Best time to visit: The glamps are put up during the Mandu festival held typically in December-January. However, they continue to be there until the end of February.

Cost: A couple-occupancy glamp costs ₹18,000 a night, inclusive of meals

Website: <https://www.mandufestival.com> lists dates and other activities to look forward to during the Mandu festival. One may also refer to this site for booking a glamp during the festival.

Besides Mandu, Madhya Pradesh offers many camping and glamping experiences in its gorgeous wild environs:

Shergarh Tented Camp

Located on a sprawling 20-acre property, Shergarh Camp sits at the edge of the Kanha Tiger Reserve and is closest to Mukki Gate.

How to get there: It is best to access it from Jabalpur airport or railway station, situated approx. 160 kms away.

Cost: Double occupancy starts at ₹32,000.

Contact: +91-9098187346

Website: www.shergarh.com

Taj Banjaar Tola

This exquisite property is located just outside Kanha and on the banks of the Banjaar river.

How to get there: It is best to access it from Jabalpur airport or railway station, situated approximately 160 kms away.

Cost: Double occupancy starts at ₹30,000.

Website: www.tajhotels.com/en-in/taj/banjaar-tola-kanha-national-park

Jamtara Wilderness Camp

Centred around an ancient banyan tree, Jamtara in Pench is perfect for some forest bathing or simply reliving Kipling's works that were inspired from the jungles here.

How to get there: Nagpur airport/railway station is closest to Jamtara, nearly 72 kms away.

Cost: Double occupancy starts at ₹28,000.

Contact: +91-11-2685 3760, 2651 6770

Website: www.jamtarawilderness.com

Zen and the Art of Ziplining

Feel the magic of 'here and now' while ziplining over the calming waters of Kerwa Lake

From atop a hill, at the mounting base of Kerwa zipline, the views are breathtaking. A vast, calm lake, open fields and a lush green cover of tree tops. Standing on one end, the 510 metre long zipline looks like an endless cable running over the lake, and into oblivion. The sight may be a little daunting at first, but it takes only a few seconds to shake off the nerves and embrace an overwhelming sense of awe that washes over instantly. Zipping at a rapid pace, high above the tranquil lake and cutting through the chill of a crisp winter morning, the experience is as thrilling as it is meditative. The latter more so, because it heightens all your senses. For those 45-50 seconds in the air, your mind is wholly consumed by the magic of the 'here and now'. From the speed to the views and the fact that you're hanging by a cable - everything about the experience gives you a rush.



The calm blue water of the lake seen from above while ziplining



*Facing page & above: Guide Umesh Jangde's last-minute instructions before we take off;
The zipline base along Kerwa Dam*

Besides, Kerwa, we're told, is the longest twin zip line in South Asia at 510 metres. Which basically means that there are two zip lines running parallel to each other – making it possible for two people to set off at the same time, on separate lines. An ideal activity to try out with a friend or partner.

THE INFORMATION

How to get there: Kerwa is a 40-minute drive from Raja Bhoj Airport, Bhopal, and a 30-minute one from Habibganj Railway Station, Bhopal.

Best time to visit: August to March

Timings: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Cost: ₹500 per person

Contact: +91-8719861986 (Skyfall Adventure)

Suggested accommodation: MP Tourism's four-room resort in Kerwa is ideally located to access the zip line; **Address:** MPT Kerwa Resort, near Kerwa Dam, Mendora, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh

Contact: +91-9424796635; **Website:** <https://mpstdc.com>

First timer or not, you're given a quick crash course in zipping along a short trial line. Lasting less than 10 mins, it is enough to tell you the basic techniques required for a smooth run.

However, zipping or not, given its proximity to the city and its idyllic character, Kerwa Dam makes for a perfect place to get away on weekends – even if only for a walk or some quiet time. A peaceful and scenic spot, it is difficult to imagine that Kerwa Dam is situated on the outskirts of the capital city of Madhya Pradesh. It is a short drive from the city centre and a far cry from the hustle and bustle of Bhopal. If you're an adventure junkie, then ziplining over Kerwa Lake is a must-do activity for you. If not, walking along the dam to soak up the morning sun or watch the setting sun is just as therapeutic.



*Spices sourced from in and
around Kanha*

Healing Foods

The wisdom of Madhya Pradesh's tribes and indigenous people enriches the cuisine of the state. The Gond way of eating, as seen in the Kanha Earth Lodge for instance, is an eco-conscious one – one that reflects a deep respect for nature. Other plant-based fare, such as garadu and mahua, also add a certain vibrance and colour to the state's cuisines

Eat, Brew, Love

Home-brewed mahua and masala-tossed garadu are the state's unique offerings

Of the many varieties of plant-based foods that the Indian *mandi* offers, the yam is my least favourite. To me, it lacks the look, aroma or flavour of its cousins. Which is why I was surprised to see the *garadu* (a type of yam) at multiple roadside carts as an evening snack or as a chaat item in parts of Madhya Pradesh. While it can be found in other parts of central and northern India, Madhya Pradesh – more specifically, Indore – loves *garadu*, which is available only during the winter months.

We sampled it on our trip to the state in February. Fried to a crisp and coated in the most lip-smacking *jeeralu* masala, the steaming hot chunks of *garadu* were indeed delicious and the perfect accompaniment to our chai. Additionally, the root is extremely nutritious and also helps build immunity, especially during the winter months when one is most susceptible to cold. The special *jeeralu masala* made of lemon, ginger powder, *sendha namak* (rock salt), *jeera* (cumin) and *hing* (asafoetida) aids digestion.

The fact that *garadu* does not have an overpowering taste of its own helps it absorb the flavours in the wok and makes it the perfect hot snack on a winter evening



Mahua, a local brew, is now finding its place on international bar menus



Malwa's Corn-ucopia

Another specialty that few outside the region of Malwa know about is bhatte ka kees, made with grated corn cooked in milk, ghee and aromatic spices. A gift of the monsoons, it's spiced with a special mix called jeeravan.

Malwa has a lot more on its plate, of course. The dal bafla and the papad ki sabzi, for instance, remind us of the fact that the cuisine of the Malwa region is a delicious blend of flavours and styles adopted and adapted from Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra.



*Above & right: A cart owner scoops up chunks of garadu for eager buyers; Garadu is mostly available during winter
Facing page: Garadu chaat, tossed in a lip-smacking masala, is a popular evening snack*



Brewed with love

The mahua tree has a special place in Madhya Pradesh's heart. Whether you go on a forest trail or for a walk in a field, the local guides will promptly point to the mahua tree. They will speak of its medicinal value, its fruits, its edible flowers, its seeds that were once used to make oil, but mostly, they will speak fondly of its potent brew. Mahua or the *Madhuca longifolia* is the only flower fermented to make alcohol and blooms in March and April. So if you visit Madhya Pradesh during these months,

the trees will bear a dramatically different look and fragrance. They will have at their feet a carpet of pale yellow flowers. It is a busy time for the rural folks who collect the flowers, dry them and save them for distillation. Both man and animal vie for it.. Langurs, deer and sloth bears gather around to feast on the mahua flowers.

Heritage liquor

Given its place in India's adivasi culture, mahua is somewhat of a heritage liquor, a fact the authorities are taking note of.

EDIBLE FLOWERS
(THAT ARE GOOD FOR YOU)

THE KITCHENS OF MADHYA PRADESH ARE RICH WITH HEALTHY INGREDIENTS PLUCKED RIGHT OFF A TREE!

MAHUA
The intoxicant of the jungle, this cream-coloured flower carpets the forest floor in summer. Many tribes of Madhya Pradesh make a potent brew with it. They also eat the flowers as a snack. Or, in recent years, add them to cakes and biscuits!

SENJANA
Flowers (and leaves) of the Moringa tree boost immunity. In Bundelkhand, the flowers are added to dal, or cooked with vegetables.

PALASH
The flame of the forest is a prized ingredient in the royal kitchen of Sailana in Malwa. Its petals are boiled and stir-fried with onions, garlic, jeera and dry mango powder.

KACHNAR
Buds of Kachnar from the Camel's Foot Tree are common in the tribal kitchens of Umaria.

SEMAL
Buds of Semal or Silk Cotton flowers too are used to make delicious curries.

We tried it at a little cottage in Mandu overlooking sloping fields on a cool winter evening - perhaps the best weather to try the fiery brew. It is almost colourless with a whitish tinge and bears a light floral fragrance. A swig goes down leaving behind a mild burn and a sweet after-taste.

Although distinct in its taste, one is

reminded of sake, the popular Japanese liquor. Brewed and consumed only among the locals once upon a time, mahua is slowly making its way into cocktail glasses and high-end bars. Some purists argue that drinking it in cupped leaves in the forest honours its legacy. True as that may be, it is time this home brew tantalises the international palate.

THE INFORMATION

How to get there: The airport closest to Mandu is in Indore, 124 kms away. The closest railway station is Ratlam at a distance of 99 kms.

Best time to visit: Any time of the year is a good time. However, there is much more to explore during the Mandu Festival organised in December or January.

Cost: The farm-to-table experience costs anywhere between ₹2,000-₹3,000. One is welcome to partake in the preparation and indulge in daily activities with the family as part of the experience.

Contact: +91-7000802851 (Dhiraj Chaudhary), +91-882741595 (Marie Wintrebert Chaudhary)

A big part of Madhya Pradesh's charm lies in its quaint countryside, uncorrupted by urban lure. You can experience this in more ways than one.

Tamia - Patalkot Darshan

An initiative by Motel Tamia and Tribescape, this tour gives a close look at tribal life and its culinary culture. One of the best parts is that farm fresh food can be enjoyed at a hilltop, gazing at the rising and setting sun.

How to get there: The closest airport to Motel Tamia is Nagpur. One can also take a train to Chhindwara, and drive another 80kms to get to Patalkot

Address: Bijori, Nagpur - Pachmarhi Highway, Tamia, Chhindwara, Madhya Pradesh

Cost: ₹12,000-₹14,000 for 2 nights

Contact: 07149-272300, +91-6266940601

Website: <https://moteltamia.com>

Walk with the Pardhis

Get to know the culture of the Pardhi community, MP's traditional hunters. Evolving with the times, the Pardhis now use their traditional knowledge of the wild to acquaint tourists with their home, Panna.

How to get there: The closest airport and railway station to Panna is Khajuraho. The closest railway junction is Satna.

Address: Jungle Camp Madla, Panna, Madhya Pradesh

Accommodation: MPT Jungle Camp

Cost: ₹2,500 onwards (for accommodation)

Contact: +91-7880108592

Website: To explore a walk with the Pardhis, get in touch with <https://thelastwilderness.org>.

Learn pottery in Pachdhar at Pench Jungle Camp

A small village of about 110 families, Pachdhar is home to the potters' community. One can walk through the lanes of Pachdhar while taking in the sweet scent of clay and also get one's hand muddy on the pottery wheel.

How to get there: Nagpur has the nearest airport and railway station to Pench.

Address: Pench Jungle Camp, Kurai, Seoni, Avarghani, Madhya Pradesh

Cost: ₹6,000 onwards (for accommodation)

Contact: +91-9999742000

Website: www.penchjunglecamp.com



Eating the Gond Way!

Made from freshly-foraged ingredients, the Gond thali at Kanha Earth Lodge is food for the soul

The outdoor clay kitchen counter setup at Kanha Earth Lodge



From facing page: While making Kikad Roti, the dough is pressed between two camel foot leaves and cooked ; Kikad Roti is slow-cooked on traditional dung-cake charcoal; Colocasia leaves with smeared spiced chickpea flour being rolled into a Bhramakass Ki Badi; Spicy Paan Bada gravy being brought to a boil

It is early evening, and one can see smoke rising from a little mound of charcoal in the courtyard. Of course, it's too early for the 'angaar', even on a really cold day, so we take a closer look to find out that the mound is in fact dung cake charcoal. It is being prepared to roast *kicad roti*, a star component of the *Gond thali* to be served later that night.

If you're an amateur chef or even a seasoned one who has always wanted a peek into the workings of a professional kitchen, then the Gond thali experience at Kanha Earth Lodge is doubly exciting. Because this is an open kitchen and a curious onlooker is more than welcome. The Gond chef, Rohit Shendram, is happy to indulge any questions and

unlike some chefs who fiercely guard their recipes, patiently takes you through the process of preparing each dish.

The first thing, however, that draws your attention during the experience is the exquisite earthen counter – with clay pots and traditional pans. It bears decorative etchings and one can see the firewood burning through its front facade. It's only 4 p.m., but preparations are well underway.

Rolled and steamed

In a world drifting towards the convenience of two-minute noodles and one-pot recipes, the joy of devouring a slow-cooked meal, prepared in traditional pots with freshly-foraged ingredients, defines a fine-dine experience. And it's

not just a culinary delight. It offers a window into the lives of its people. As author Deborah Cater puts it, "You have to taste a culture to understand it". If the Gond thali is anything to go by, its simple yet robust flavours speak for the earthy and ingenious people of the Gond community.

Given its special place in the Gond thali, the *kicad roti* is what we're looking forward to sampling. A unique Indian bread, *kicad* is a ball of wheat dough with salt and ghee/butter pressed in between Camel Foot leaves and left to slow cook in the charcoal. Once done, the texture resembles that of a cookie that you can

crack with your fingers. Served hot with a side of jaggery, you can also dip it in the curries on the plate. It makes for a very interesting texture and spin on the more popular form of roti.

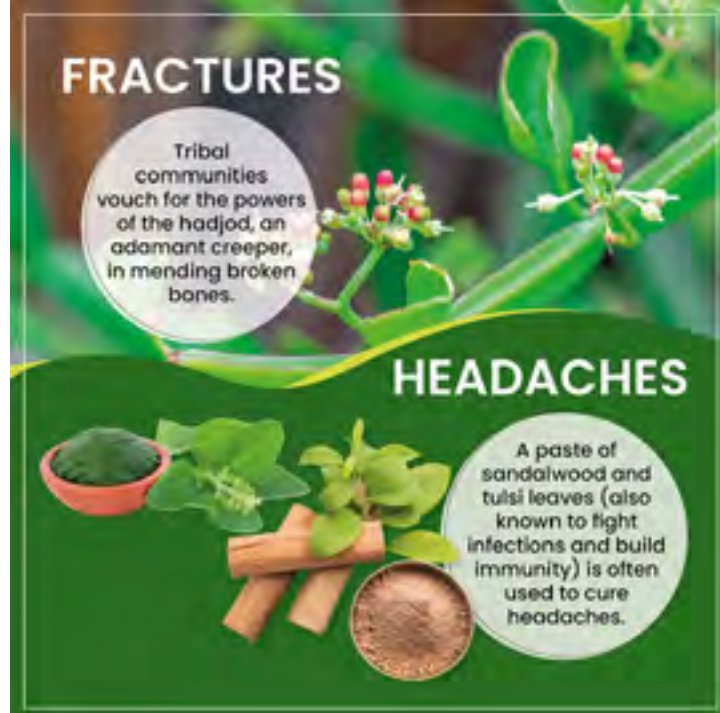
Eco-conscious thali

The rest of the fare is served on a copper plate, lined with a traditional 'thali' stitched with palash leaves. The original Indian disposable plate. Of course it is the only 'disposable' in the property, because Kanha Earth Lodge is an eco-conscious venture that composts all of its wet waste. The compost goes directly to their organic garden.



SACRED GREENS

Long before paracetamols and antibiotics crowded our shelves, indigenous people healed the human body with plants growing in the wild. In MP, the Gond, Baiga, Bhariya, Bhil, Korku and Pardhi tribes still use seeds, bark, leaves, roots and flowers to stay healthy.

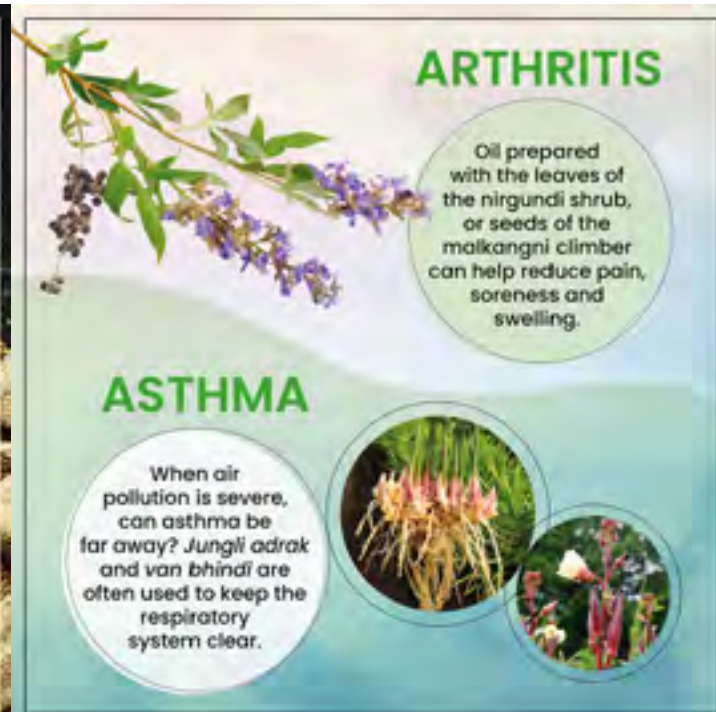


FRACTURES

Tribal communities vouch for the powers of the hadjod, an adamant creeper, in mending broken bones.

HEADACHES

A paste of sandalwood and tulsi leaves (also known to fight infections and build immunity) is often used to cure headaches.



ARTHRITIS

Oil prepared with the leaves of the nirgundi shrub, or seeds of the malkangni climber can help reduce pain, soreness and swelling.

ASTHMA

When air pollution is severe, can asthma be far away? Jungli adrak and van bhindi are often used to keep the respiratory system clear.



MALARIA

Traditional healers use a decoction made with harsingar or kalmegh to fight this mosquito-borne infection.

SNAKE BITE

Seeds of the kemach safed plant and even the root of the giloy shrub apparently serve as good antidotes to venom.

Note: Please consult a doctor before using any of these suggestions.

But back to the food. Next up, we bite into the Bhramakass ki badi or chakri. Spiced chickpea flour is spread out on Colocasia leaves, rolled and steamed. It is a variation of the Maharashtrian

Aluwadi, Gujrati Patra or Kannadiga Patrode among others. But what sets this apart is that it is deep fried until it gets crunchy like a fritter!

Another popular Gond dish on the menu is the Paan Bada – a preparation of urad dal balls fried and let into a spiced gravy. Hot and comforting, it can be had with rice or as a dip with the kicad roti. On the side, is the fiery Bhedra Chutney made of roasted tomatoes mixed with freshly ground spices and crushed on a traditional sil batta (grinding stone). What a sil batta does to squeeze out the juices of ingredients, a mixer can never do. And therefore, although a charmingly simple recipe, the Bhedra Chutney packs a punch.

The thali also had a local spin on the baigan ka bharta, a paneer dish and a chicken gravy. All of this, served by a very hospitable staff that urges you to take extra helpings of everything.

Flavorsome and fresh, each dish on the thali – especially on the cold winter night – was like a warm hug on a plate. That it is served in the beautiful outdoors under a tree at Kanha Earth Lodge, only adds to the charming and rustic Gond experience.



The Gond thali at Kanha Earth Lodge - Kicad Roti with jaggery, Bhramakass Ki Badi, Paan Bada, Bhedra chutney, Papad, Baigan Ka Bharta, Paneer Sabzi and rice

THE INFORMATION

How to get there: Kanha is a four-hour drive from Jabalpur Airport or Jabalpur Railway Station. It is five hours away from Raipur Airport.
Best time of the year: The place hosts guests all year round, but October onwards is particularly ideal.
Address: Kanha Earth Lodge, Kanha Tiger Reserve, P.O. Sarekha, Narna, Madhya Pradesh
Cost: Tariff for double occupancy starts at ₹16,000. If you're not staying at the lodge, you will need to make a prior dinner/lunch reservation for ₹3,500 per person.
Website: <https://www.kanhaearthlodge.com>

Madhya Pradesh's platter is a generous dose of organic foods sourced from the forest and farms. Enjoy more traditional fares in the following places:

MPT Kings Lodge, Bandhavgarh

The Baiga thali is truly reflective of its culture – rooted, warm and healing. Enjoy an authentic Baiga Thali at Kings Lodge.
How to get there: Umariia is the closest railway station. Jabalpur is the closest airport to Kings Lodge.
Address: Kings Lodge, Ranchara village, Umariia, Madhya Pradesh
Cost: ₹16,000 onwards
Contact: +91-11-4013 6332; **Website:** <https://www.kingslodge.in/>

*Devotees raise their hands in
tribute to the Narmada*

Music and Art Experiences

Ghats on the banks of the Kshipra and the Narmada in places such as Ujjain and Narmadapuram reverberate with the chants of people and priests performing aarti in the evening. The ambience and atmosphere is said to be spiritually cleansing, and the rhythmic chants resonate and stay with you long after the performances are over



Ram Ghat stands on the banks of Kshipra, one of the holiest rivers in Hinduism

Sacred Sounds at Ujjain's Ram Ghat

The evening aarti brings peace amidst happy chaos

Legend has it that Lord Ram performed 'pind daan' for his parents at Ujjain's Ram Ghat. That is how the place earned its name. It's hard to imagine what it looks like during the Simhashta Mela with lakhs of devotees thronging the ghat, but on a February evening, bathed in the orange glow of the setting sun, Ram Ghat is a picture of serenity. The anticipation of the *aarti* is palpable, though. People begin to take their place close to the aarti, making offerings to the river and waiting for the priests to take centre stage.

As the sun begins to retreat making way for darker skies, the character of the ghat transitions from calm to energetic.

Resounding and rhythmic

The energy builds up and remains constant through the ringing of the bells, clanging of the cymbals and beating of the *damru*. Priests stand tall at the edge of the ghat, their faces lit up by flames of the massive aarti as they chant mantras in a chorus.

The Kshipra, one of the holiest rivers in Hinduism, calmly accepts and reflects this adoration. Soon, the devotees join the ritual, singing in unison and settling into a common rhythm that makes you subconsciously participate in the ensemble performance.

The high-energy ritual lasts an hour or so. We witness it from steps of the ghat as well as from the waters, as we take a pedal boat across the river – getting separate perspectives of this immersive experience.

Charmingly clamorous, the sounds of Ram Ghat stay with you long after the bells stop ringing.

Temple town

Host to one of the 12 jyotirlingas, Ujjain is celebrated for its Mahakaleshwar temple. There are 84 Shiva temples here, some of them at Ram Ghat. The *bhasm* (ash) *aarti* performed at the Mahakaleshwar temple at 4 a.m., is also popular among devotees from across India.



Above & right: The aarti draws believers from across the country; Devotees collect blessings from the holy fire after the aarti

Facing page: Tourists and devotees start gathering at the ghat for the sunset aarti





A boat ride on the Kshipra offers a clear view of the aarti

THE INFORMATION

How to get there: The closest airport to Ujjain is Indore, 65 kms away. If one wants to get here by train, the Ujjain Junction Railway Station is well connected too, and just 3 kms from Ram Ghat.

Best time to visit: Ram Ghat aartis are performed all year. The best time, however, is during the cooler months from October to March.

Timing: The aarti is always performed at sunset, so the timing varies between 6 p.m. and 7 p.m. according to the season.

Address: Ram Ghat Marg, Kartik Chowk, Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh

Sunset Show in Narmadapuram

Narmada aarti is a symphony of sight and sound

Visitors wait for the aarti to begin



Unlike the more popular Ram Ghat in Ujjain that overlooks the Kshipra river and hosts the Kumbh Mela, Sethani Ghat in Narmadapuram (earlier known as Hoshangabad) is subdued in character. Lined with little shops and quaint old single-storey houses, the labyrinth that leads to the ghat gives no hint of the splendid view at the end of it. Painted in bright colours, the steps at the ghat overlook a calm river as devotees take dips and offer prayers at the little shrines on the banks.

Quiet flows the river

Sethani can be seen in its full ornate glory on Narmada Jayanti in early February when hundreds of people throng the banks, and offerings of haldi, kumkum and flowers adorn the river. But a regular day has its own charm too. Every evening as the sun sets on the river, the ghat comes alive with enthused chants, aarti and the sounds of bells, cymbals and dholaks. Priests wielding majestic thalis with foot-long flames offer prayers in unison, making this an artistic performance apart from a devotional one. The Narmada, flowing calmly beneath, reflects the reverence as devotees and visitors play a part of their own – either singing, chanting or clapping to a common rhythm.

Come one, come all

Reverence for the holy Narmada can be seen across a large part of Madhya Pradesh. Along the river's route starting from Amarkantak – where it originates – pilgrims can be seen walking (often barefoot) in what is called the Narmada Parikrama. It is an arduous journey of circumambulating the river that lasts for months. It is in respect for the river that the Sethani Ghat was built with generous contributions from Jankibai Sethani in the 19th century – to make the river accessible to all.

For soothing sounds of the aarti and the display of devotion, the Narmada aarti at Sethani Ghat is a must-do in Narmadapuram.



Facing page from left: Devotees offer pooja against the setting sun on the banks of the Narmada; Devotees pass the aarti thali around after an hour-long ritual draws to a close; Priests line up to perform the Narmada aarti

THE INFORMATION

Madhya Pradesh has many other spiritual centres like Narmadapuram:

Omkareshwar

Home to one of the 12 jyotirlingas of Shiva, Omkareshwar is located on Mandhata, an island on the Narmada River. Many believe this sacred town is shaped like the holy syllable of Om. Millions of devotees flock to the temples here throughout the year, and witness the aarti on the Narmada. But a visit on Mahashivratri is considered particularly auspicious.

How to get there: It has its own railway station. But the closest airport is Indore (88km).

Amarkantak

Amarkantak is where the Narmada rises from the womb of the earth. It's also where the Satpuras and the Vindhyas meet. Blessed naturally and spiritually as a destination, it's more than just another pitstop for pilgrims. And the most important date in the calendar year? Well, it's Narmada Jayanti, celebrated around Makarsankranti, in January.

How to get there: The closest railway station is at Pendra Road (20km) and the closest airport is Jabalpur (220km).

Chitrakoot

Devotees who throng the temples of Chitrakoot believe it has a powerful spiritual and umbilical connection to the epic, Ramayana. Ram, Sita and Laxman apparently spent their years in exile in the forests of Chitrakoot or 'the hill of many wonders', which is why, Ramnavami is celebrated here with great fervour every year.

How to get there: The closest railway station is in Chitrakoot itself (75km) away and the closest airport is at Allahabad (106 km).

Rural Tourism

Far away from the din and noise of the urban centres, Madhya Pradesh's rural areas are a world unto their own. The offerings are unique, refreshing and in tune with natural surroundings. From a first-hand view of handicraft practices and farm-fresh dining to taking part in a sustainable way of community living, these experiences show the way forward to harmony, coexistence and peace.

Marie and Dhiraj share anecdotes about an immersive farm-to-table experience

Farm Fresh Dining at Mandu

Enjoy an authentic tribal meal at a traditional clay home

By Sushmita Murthy

Cryptoscophobia - Urban dictionary defines it as 'the desire to secretly look through windows of homes that one passes by'. I'd like to believe it is a feeling that most of us can relate to – a harmless curiosity stoked especially on travels. For although the sun-kissed fields and forests of Madhya Pradesh were a sight, I wondered what the insides of the cosy mud houses among them looked like. Thanks to the lovely couple Dhiraj and Marie who hosted us for a farm-to-table meal in Mandu, we were able to not only visit one, but also enjoy an authentic meal prepared in one of these very warm homes.



A lady lovingly roasts makke ki roti over a brick-and-firewood stove



FOOD FOR THE SOUL

We are what we eat... Our health and happiness depends on it. In Madhya Pradesh, the tribes still rely on local, seasonal produce and age-old culinary traditions. Here are a few dishes inspired by five tribal kitchens...




KORKU

PAAN ROTI

Roti wrapped and cooked in Sal leaves.





KOL

BALHAR KI GUGHAREE

Black-eyed beans tossed with hand-ground spices.




BAIGA

MUNGA TAMATAR BADI

Dish made of ash gourd, and cooked with tomato and drumstick.




GOND

KUTKI KHEER

A milk pudding made with the local variety of Kutki millet.



BHARIA

THETHRA RABDI

Poori made with Mahua flowers, topped with sweetened and thickened milk.




A traditional Bhil fare laid out in earthen pots, overlooking sloping fields in Mandu

A home with a view

Rows and rows of mud and clay cottages line the roads in Mandu. Most of these homes belong to the Bhil community. We were invited to one such home of Santosh Gawar, a member of the indigenous Bhil community, who graciously agreed to host us for a meal.

Walking towards the house, we noticed that the part that faces the road is a plain facade. There is a narrow lane that leads to the back and to a whole different vista that stays hidden behind the humble front. Bathed in the rays of the setting sun are vast stretches of green sloping fields dotted with the yellow and orange of marigold beds. A pond lay

We pick the juiciest tomatoes for a side of fresh salad



still, reflecting the splendour of the tangerine skies. A beautiful sit-out arrangement with charpais has been made for an alfresco meal. Just as we were soaking the views, Dhiraj tells us that it is common for leopards to use the pond as a watering hole. While the sight is sure to cause more than a flutter elsewhere, the people of Mandu and certainly this family are nonchalant about it. The wild cat does not usually come up to the road, unless it catches the sight of cattle or a goat. Humans are almost never bothered, they tell us.

Farm fresh

Relieved with that little nugget, we take a short walk down the slope. *Channe* that we're having later that night is plucked from right here. We had helped Marie pluck ripe tomatoes to serve as a side of fresh salad earlier that evening, but the 'channa' is only plucked when the sun is right overhead, she tells us. Unlike grass which is plucked when the sun is going down. A true Indophile from France, Marie knows the place and much of the practices like a local.

All the ingredients on the table are locally-sourced and grown without the use of chemicals.

Family that stays together

Back after a little jaunt, we can smell the aroma of the food wafting through the windows. So we went in to take a closer look. A traditional Bhil home is made from mud and clay. The material ensures that the homes stay warm in winters and cold during the

summers. A typical house, like the one we visited, has a built-in room for the domestic/farm pets inside the house. "It is common for everyone in the house to sleep under one roof," Dhiraj tells us. Both Dhiraj and Marie were formerly involved actively in the tourism industry and have since wanted to create an immersive and authentic experience that veers far away from 'commercial tourism'. They also wanted the process to incentivise the local communities who are inherently hospitable.

Let's eat!

After a swig of locally-brewed Mahua, we're ready for the spread lovingly prepared by the family. A batch of *Makke ki roti* is being freshly roasted on a brick stove over firewood. Served in earthen pots, the table is laid out with *channe ki sabji* (gram leaves), *sajna sabji* (moringa leaves), yellow dal, fish curry and a chicken dish. And of course, a powerful side of *lehsun-mirchi ka achaar* that is freshly ground on a sil batta. After days of eating out, this is just the home-cooked soul food that we were craving – simple, fresh, healthy and flavourful. And to give it a sweet closure, a melt-in-the-mouth *gajar ka halwa*. Sitting outside, wrapped up in our shawls on a chilly winter night, the food is like a warm caress.

The farm-to-table meal in Mandu is truly an immersive experience. Wholesome and authentic, it not only lets you savour the food, but also the way of life – if only for a day. The impression, of course, will last a lifetime.

THE INFORMATION

How to get there: The airport closest to Mandu is in Indore, 124 km away. The closest railway station is Ratlam, 99 km away.

Best time to visit: Anytime of the year is a good time. However, there is much more to experience during the Mandu Festival in December or January. **Cost:** The farm-to-table experience costs anywhere between ₹2,000-₹3,000. You are welcome to participate in the food preparation and indulge in daily activities with the family as part of the experience.

Contact: +91-7000802851 (Dhiraj Chaudhary), +91-882741595 (Marie Wintrebert Chaudhary)

Madhya Pradesh's charm lies in its quaint countryside. You can experience this in more ways than one.

Tamia-Pataalkot Darshan

Planted somewhere between the banks of the River Betwa and the hills and ridges of the Vindhya Range, Tiso's Treehouse is perched atop a beautiful mango tree. Painted in the colours of the earth, it stands tall amidst the sprawling, green farm that surrounds it; a farm where traditional, organic farming is practiced and the knowledge is shared. From learning about local produce and medicinal herbs to fishing in the river nearby, there's plenty to do here.

How to get there: The nearest railway station is Rani Kamalapati (25km), and the nearest airport is Bhopal (40km).

Address: Near the village of Imaliya in the district of Bhopal.

Contact: 9910675598

Tiso's Treehouse

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Contact: 9910675598

Reconnecting with our Roots

Just about 50km from the capital city, Maati Se is a farmstay that celebrates local produce.

How to get there: The closest airport is Bhopal, and the railway stations at Bhopal and Sehore are both easily accessible.

Address: Maati Se Farm, Kotakarar Village, Anwali Kheda Panchayat,

Sehore District. **Accommodation:** Maati Se Farm

Website: maatise.in



*A traditional clay cottage
hosts the Pashoo Pakshee
workshop at Kanha*

Forest Essentials

*PashooPakshee's handcrafted souvenirs are an ode to
Kanha and the communities that call it home*



Above left & right: Artisans of Pashoo Pakshee weave magic into the souvenirs on display at Corbett Foundation, Kanha; The display room is a vibrant space with happy animal prints and motifs on various articles

If you're at Kanha National Park, there is a good chance that your resort or hotel has a souvenir store with vibrant door hangings, bag charms, bookmarks, trinkets – all bearing colourful animal and bird prints. These are lovingly handcrafted by the women at PashooPakshee, an organisation that works with local, marginalised communities living in wildlife conflict areas.

As the name suggests, all PashooPakshee creations draw inspiration from inhabitants of the wild: tigers, deer, monkeys, butterflies, owls and a host of other birds and animals. These souvenirs and accessories emphasise the

deep connection between human beings and nature, and the sense of well-being that comes from staying close to one's roots.

Wild at heart

On a weekend at Kanha, we visited the workshop that brings to life the many products that we had noticed on display throughout our trip. It is a quaint little mud cottage at The Corbett Foundation. The interior, bursting with vibrant colour pops, is in sharp contrast to the sober exterior of the cottage. Inside, Indrakala, Sanju and Sandhya, three enterprising women from the

local communities, are busy stringing together wall hangings. It is a skill they have picked up from the trainers at PashooPakshee. Reflective of their own individual ecosystem, these products facilitate sustainable livelihoods for forest communities.

Being natural

The products are crafted with natural materials such as cloth, clay, wood and paper, and bear an earthy imprint, true to the nature of its creators. They make for thoughtful and conscious gifts and souvenirs, while also supporting local craftsmanship. Be it a fridge magnet or a figurine in the garden, the



Kanha and its wealth of flora and fauna inspires Pashoo Pakshee creations

world of Pashoo Pakshee makes for beautiful memories of a fine jungle trip.

THE INFORMATION

How to get there: The closest airport to this part of Kanha is Jabalpur (131km), about four hours away. The closest railway station is Gondia Junction, 125km away.

Best time to visit: The centre is open all year, but October to March is when Kanha is at its best.

Address: Corbett Foundation, Infinity Resort, Baherakhar village near Baihar, P.O. Nikkum, Balaghat, Kanha National Park, Madhya Pradesh

Timing: 11am to 4pm; closed on Tuesdays

Contact: +91-9650193664 (Infinity Resort)

There are many other similar ways of experiencing Madhya Pradesh's idyllic, artistic charms. Here are a few experiences to consider:

Madla Craft Centre

In 2021, Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board joined hands with PashooPakshee, an online store, to set up a sustainable, craft-based centre to provide local employment and to give travellers a chance to pick up wonderful souvenirs and meet the artisans who make them. You can also try your hand at making your own tote bags and stickers at the Craft Your Souvenir workshop (45

minutes, group size 2 to 16) along with the artisans, who belong to the forest communities of Panna.

How to get there: The closest airport is at Khajuraho (22km), and the railway station for Madla Gate of Panna National Park is also at Khajuraho.

Address: Responsible Souvenir Centre, NH39, Panna Khajuraho Road, Panna; **Timing:** 11am to 4pm; closed on Mondays

Contact: +91-9343425688

Art Ichol

Close to the legendary musical town of Maihar, Art Ichol in Ichol village is set in four acres of green. It is an abode of art, open to artists from across the world. They come here for residencies and workshops. But you don't have to be an artist to be able to visit Art Ichol. It welcomes everyone.

How to get there: Khajuraho (120km) and Jabalpur (160km) are the closest airports. Maihar, just 8 km away, is the closest railway station.

Address: Art Ichol, Khajuraho-Bandhavgarh Highway, Ichol Village, near Maihar, Madhya Pradesh

Cost: ₹7,000 onwards

Contact: +91 8349449999; **Website:** www.artichol.in

Practising Halma in Jhabua

*A beautiful example of self-sustained
community living*

*“The Earth is thirsty, why are you still sleeping?
Bring your tools and let’s get to work.
We’ve got a dam to build, we’ve got trees to plant.”*

Loosely translated from the Bhil dialect, these are lines sung in earnest by Puniyabhai Bhuria. A farmer of the Bhil tribe, Puniyabhai stands against a pond that he helped build in 2018 as he sings these lines for us, explaining how the ‘talab’ came to be.

Built in the centre of wheat, corn and sugarcane fields, the pond reflects the bounty that surrounds it. But this wasn’t quite the scene a few years ago, Puniyabhai tells us. The land was parched and summers especially were a challenging time on the



*Various medicinal plants
that surround the pond*



fields. The pond, however, has embellished the landscape and made sure that the fields are always well watered. A change, facilitated by the Bhils' age-old practice of Halma and with the support of Shivganga, an NGO working for the development of tribal communities in Jhabua and Alirajpur districts.

Living in harmony

Halma is a way of self-sustained community living. "Suppose the roof of my house is ripped, I call upon the 'suchak' or 'kotwal' (a messenger) to announce that I need help

fixing my roof and that I am going to host a 'halma' at noon tomorrow. The suchak spreads the word and the next day, all those who can make time for it, step forward with their tools and expertise. It is a service in exchange for a modest meal."

Puniyabhai has deeply imbibed this spirit. "Sometimes when people approach me for help as the Tadvi (village head), I tell them quite frankly that I have humble earnings, I will not be able to offer monetary help. But I will make sure that I am of service by offering my time and labour."

Much to 'pond'er over

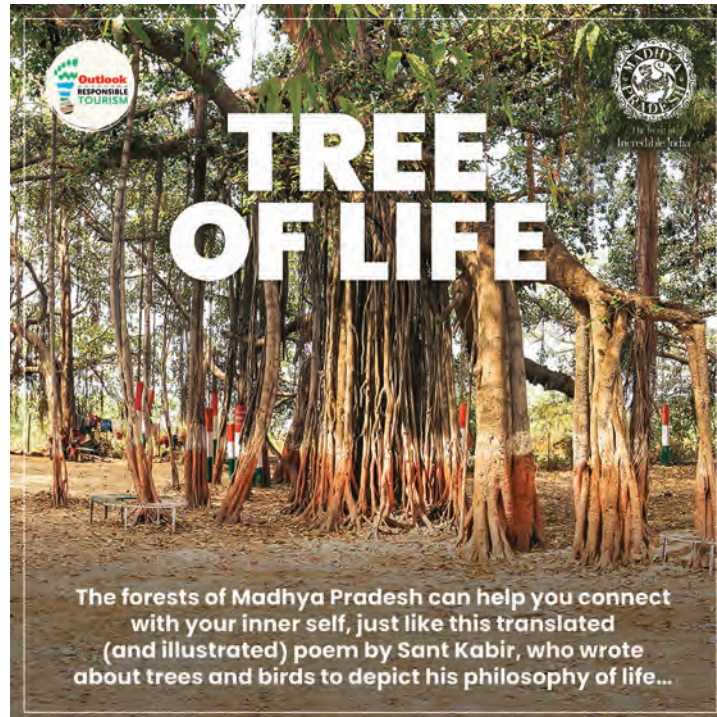
In 2018, when the village decided to build a dam and a pond, as the Tadvi, Puniyabhai announced a Halma. "200 people came forward and participated in the efforts every day. The team from Shivganga helped with transporting black soil from the neighbouring village of Meghnagar and in less than a month, the pond was ready," he says. Everybody brought their tools, but more importantly, their spirit to the cause. Puniyabhai arranged for their meals each day. Together

The 'talab' was built by the Bhil community, with help from NGO Shivganga

they worked and sang (lines mentioned above) and brought the pond to life. Built entirely of stone and mud, it has no traces of concrete whatsoever and has served the farmers well for over four years now.

Come one, come all

Shivganga has been organising large scale Halmas in Jhabua since 2009. The events are open to all and attract students and professionals from outside of Madhya Pradesh too. Nitin Dhakad, an active member of Shivganga and an alumnus of



The forests of Madhya Pradesh can help you connect with your inner self, just like this translated (and illustrated) poem by Sant Kabir, who wrote about trees and birds to depict his philosophy of life...

None tell me of this bird that sings within me.

It is neither coloured nor colourless:
it has neither form nor

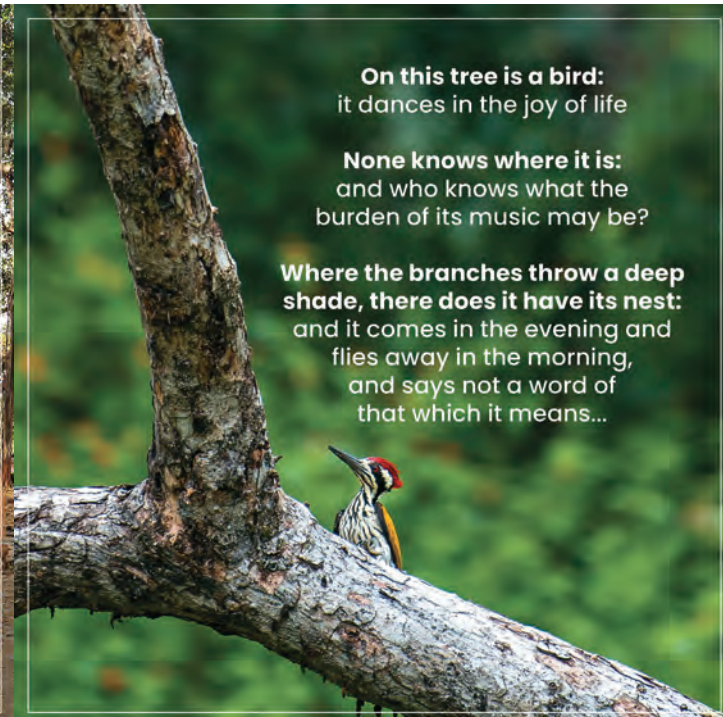
It sits in the shadow of love.

It dwells within the Unattainable,
the Infinite, and the Eternal;

And no one marks when it comes and goes.

Kabir says:

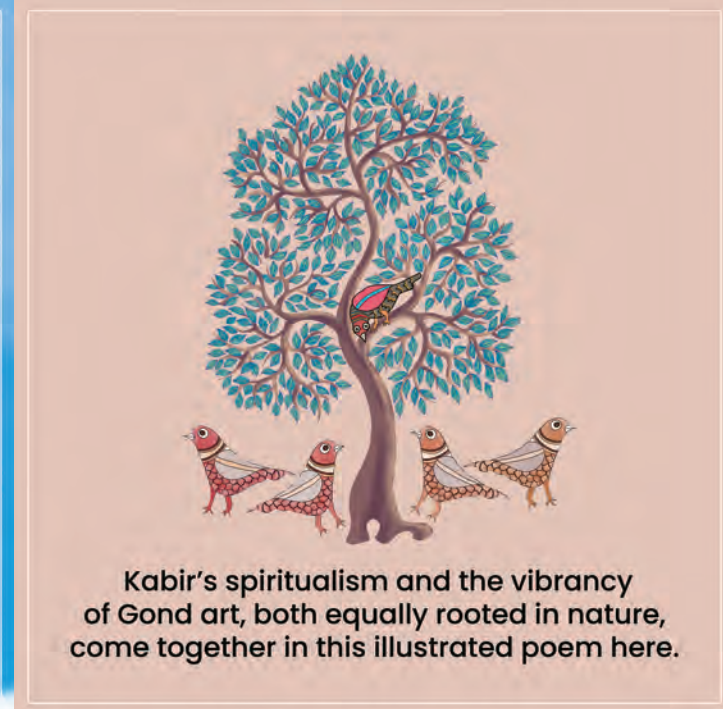
“O brother Sadhu! deep is the mystery.
Let wise men seek to know
where rests that bird.



On this tree is a bird:
it dances in the joy of life

None knows where it is:
and who knows what the
burden of its music may be?

**Where the branches throw a deep
shade, there does it have its nest:**
and it comes in the evening and
flies away in the morning,
and says not a word of
that which it means...



**Kabir's spiritualism and the vibrancy
of Gond art, both equally rooted in nature,
come together in this illustrated poem here.**

IIT Roorkee, started his journey with the NGO on one such volunteer trip. Originally from Kota, Rajasthan, so charmed was he by the simplicity of life here that he abandoned his plans of moving to the big cities and decided to serve communities in the hinterlands instead. And he isn't the only one. A bunch of his colleagues are

from similar backgrounds. At a time when the world is catching up with and cashing in on 'sustainability' one can take a cue from the Bhil way of life, he tells us. "From composting their waste and revering nature to living in harmony, there is much to learn here. But one needs to come with the right mindset – to learn and not educate."

THE INFORMATION

How to get there: Indore, at a distance of 150 km, is the closest airport to Jhabua. The nearest railway station is at Nahargarh, 19 km away.

Best time to visit: Anytime of the year is fine, but October onwards, after the rains have just washed over, is particularly good.

Accommodation: The MPT Tourist Motel, NH-59, Deojharipanda, Madhya Pradesh

Contact: 07392-244668; Website: <https://mpstdc.com>

Website: You too can volunteer for a Halma in Jhabua. Read up on the various volunteer activities with Shivganga here: <https://shivganga.jhabua.org>.

In rural Madhya Pradesh, living off the land is as much about hard work as it is about celebrations. You can savour this way of life during festivals or through a multitude of other experiences:

Experience rural life at Madla

A river, forest and hills. Madla has all three within a kilometre. And that is what makes this village, just 19km from Khajuraho, so special. It is also home to artists who have decorated the walls of their houses with paintings. You can cycle through Madla, take a village tour, enjoy local food and stock up on souvenirs, such as spices, papad and pickles.

How to get there: Madla is just 19km from Khajuraho; so this can be a day trip

Accommodation: Madla has a few homestay options, but you can always make Khajuraho your base for this outing.

Cost: Rooms at Lalit Temple View Khajuraho are available for ₹6,000 onwards

Contact: +91 9993092604; Website: <http://www.thelalit.com/the-lalit-khajuraho/>

Learn pottery in Pachdhar, Pench Jungle Camp

A small village of about 110 families, Pachdhar is synonymous with pottery. Walk the lanes of the village while taking in the earthy scent of clay and try your hands at the pottery wheel.

How to get there: Nagpur is the nearest airport and railway station.

Address: Pench Jungle Camp, Kurai, Seoni, Avarghani, Madhya Pradesh

Cost: ₹6,000 onwards (for accommodation)

Contact: +91-9999742000

Website: www.penchjunglecamp.com

Organic pleasures of Bagdara Farms, near Bandhavgarh

Between the safaris (morning and evening) at Bandhavgarh, pack in a visit to the nearby Bagdara Farms where 27 different kinds of turmeric are grown. Pick up organic haldi from here, before you drive to Dhamokar Gate for a quick stop at Gond and Baiga villages in Bandhavgarh's buffer zone.

How to get there: Jabalpur (190km) and Khajuraho (250km) are the closest airports to Bandhavgarh. Umaria (37km) and Katni (100km) are the closest railway stations.

Address: Village Bagdara, Tehsil Barhi, Post Office Khitauli, District Katni, Madhya Pradesh

Accommodation: Bandhavgarh has many options, in different budget categories.

Contact: +91 9560254646

Email: farmoperations@bagdarafarms.com



A traditional Bhil healer with a root used as a remedy for ailments

Sacred Jungles of Jhabua

From faith to healing, Matavan is a matter of belief for forest communities

As a little girl, Puniyabhai Bhuria's daughter was once very sick. He believes that she recovered from the illness due to the blessings of 'Matavan' or the forest deity. Puniyabhai hails from the Bhil tribe in Jhabua district's Rakhadia village and like most people here, he reveres the forest. It is what has sustained his family for aeons

and will continue to do so for a long time to come, he tells us. The reverence in his voice is telling of just how much the community looks up to these sacred groves. No ritual is complete without paying respects to the jungle.

Although the curing of illnesses by the blessings of Matavan may be a matter of belief, most communities



A trishul, symbolic of Lord Shiva, at the sacred grove

in Jhabua and Alirajpur districts look up to the forest as the primary source of remedy for minor health concerns. After sipping a cup of tea under a tree in Puniyabhai's yard, we follow him into the forest, which is a short walk away. All along, he points out to us the many medicinal qualities of the forest that make it sacred for the Bhil community. The Mahua leaves, for instance, help with cramps. Twigs of the 'Ratandodiya' help with dental care, the henna plant helps in healing cracked feet, bark of the 'Ladhodi' tree is used to heal burns, the 'Baramaasi' helps with swelling, the 'Garmala' heals body pain, and so on. From treating cuts and bruises to aiding

fertility, there is a remedy at hand for most ailments in the forest, Puniyabhai tells us.

Power to heal

Along the walk, we notice that some trees have under them a little canopy made with branches and sticks. Kept below are clay urns and clay dolls in the shape of horses. Easily camouflaged by auburn leaves all around, they look like they're guarding a shrine. Puniyabhai starts clearing the dried leaves and putting aside the twigs as though tidying up a space in his home. "These are offerings made to the forest. We don't pluck the leaves or chop the branches of these




COME HOME TO THE VILLAGE

Rural homestays in Madhya Pradesh are an oasis of calm. Even the most jaded travellers rediscover the simple joys of slow living here...

FARM FRESH

Settle down to an early lunch of millets and fresh vegetables on a sal leaf plate before a siesta under a tree.

Walk or cycle to the field. Feel the soil in your hands... Till the land with local farmers. Plant, or pluck the produce.

GOOD MORNING, MP!
Wake up to birdsong not your phone's alarm. Do some yoga, meditation, or birdwatching under a tree. Fill your lungs with unpolluted air, and have a hearty, homemade breakfast.

SLOW CHARMS
Take in the mid-morning sights and sounds: children at play, women drawing water from wells, the potter at work, young girls on the swing.

NIGHT COMES EARLY
Let the silence of the night lull you into deep sleep in the comfort of your mud cottage.

SOUND OF MUSIC
Bring in the evening by joining in the dance and music of the local tribes. Gather around a fire and enjoy the local brew or snacks made of mahua flowers.

trees for any domestic purpose,” he tells us. The clay horses are symbolic of Lord Shiva, he informs. A revered deity in the state, you will find little Shiva temples, the ‘trishul’ or ‘Shivlings’ every few minutes.

Shivganga, an NGO operating in Jhabua, has been instrumental in reviving parts of the forest lost to ‘development work’ by planting close to 43,000 trees in the district. Together with the local communities, they not only plant these trees, but also pledge to protect them until the trees mature. Rajendra Dindod, a volunteer with Shivganga, tells us that

the philosophy is an extension of their way of life and that certain plants and trees are akin to family. “I am from the Dindod community, so the ‘Hetri’ tree is particularly sacred to us. If I see someone harming it or chopping it, it is my moral obligation to intervene and request him or her to not do so. Similarly, someone from the Bilwal community would extend that protection to the ‘Bil Patra’ or a person from the Singad community would do so for the ‘Kekdia’ plant. We consider these plants and trees as an extension of our families and it is our duty to protect them.”

THE INFORMATION

How to get there: The nearest airports from Jhabua are Indore, at a distance of 150 km, and Vadodara, at a distance of 188 km. The nearest railway station is at Nahargarh, 19 km away.

Best time to visit: Anytime of the year is fine, but October onwards, after the rains have just washed over, is particularly good.

Website: You can get additional information about Matavan and Shivganga's efforts at <https://shivganga.jhabua.org>

Suggested accommodation: The MPT Tourist Motel, NH-59, Deojaripanda, Madhya Pradesh
Contact: 07392-244668
Website: <https://mpstdc.com>

Madhya Pradesh is a treasure trove of rural experiences that soothe frayed city nerves. Here are a few other options for you:

Walk with the Pardhis

Get a glimpse of the life of the Pardhis, MP's traditional hunters. Evolving with the times, the Pardhis now use their traditional

knowledge of the wild to acquaint tourists with their home, Panna.

How to get there: The closest airport and railway station to Panna is Khajuraho. The closest railway junction is Satna.

Address: Jungle Camp Madla, Panna, Madhya Pradesh

Accommodation: MPT Jungle Camp

Cost: ₹2,500 onwards (for accommodation)

Contact: +91 7880108592

Website: To book a walk with the Pardhis, visit <https://thelastwilderness.org>

Daytrip to Khamba village

Khamba, near Pench National Park, is a Gond village where you can spend a day amidst birdsong, watch children at play, and see the sun go down.

How to get there: Nagpur is the nearest airport and railway station to Pench. Khamba village shares a boundary with the national park.

Accommodation: There are many options in Pench, across price brackets.

Both the flowers and the leaves of the mahua tree are used by humans

Traditional Medicine and Hot Springs

In a land as rich in myths, folklores and legends as India, faith can often emerge to be a great healer. Madhya Pradesh is no different in this regard

The Healing Herbs

Madhya Pradesh's rich forests contain a wealth of medicinal herbs that heal and strengthen the human system

Nature is endlessly bountiful, and humanity simply cannot count the ways. From the water we drink to the food we eat... everything comes from Mother Earth. The planet provides us with everything one would need for a rich and fulfilling life. Including the means to restore health. For millennia, civilizations across the globe relied on nature-based healing. From Sumerians to the Greeks, from Chinese herbal traditions to the hallowed, ancient systems of India, the magic of herbs has always nurtured well-being.

The land of Bharat has produced wonderful



The flowers of the Mahua tree are used as a remedy for many ailments

systems such as Ayurveda and Siddha – and Madhya Pradesh is particularly blessed in its fertile generosity. Among Indian states, the state has the highest forest cover by area: 95,000 sq km which is about 31% of its total area. It has as many as 11 agro-climatic zones within its borders, explaining the astounding range of soil and climatic

A young Tendu tree, whose fruit is prized for its medicinal properties



conditions. Which also makes it home to a wide array of tropical medicinal herbs.

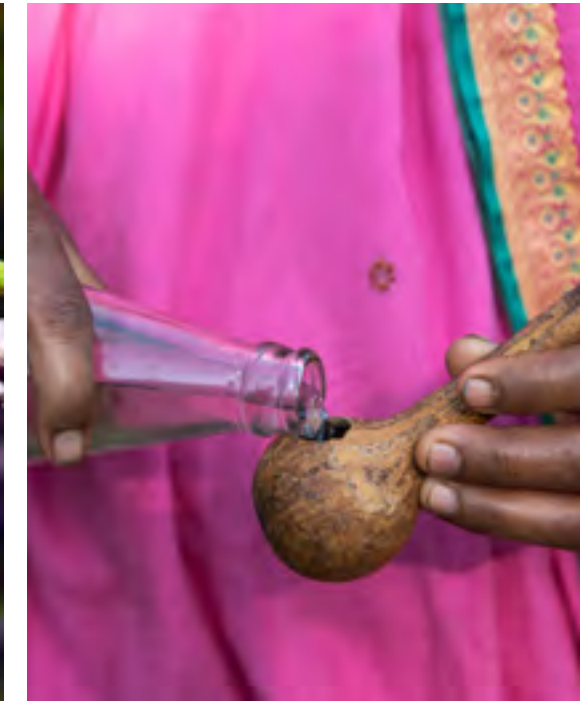
The Forest that Gives

Foraging is a way of life with forest dwellers. It is fascinating to see the gatherers in action as they set out to pick medicinal supplies. Leaves, shoots, seeds, fruit, bark, root... the medicine could lie in anything. But essential is the knowledge of what to take and what not to take. The fruit may be full of vitamins and antioxidants but the leaf could be toxic! Some shoots are at their best tender, some bark is to be collected old. Deep familiarity with the forests and its many gifts is learned over years, by observing elders and listening to their lore. A generational knowledge handed down through centuries.

The Mahua tree has pride of place among the tribal communities of Central India. Every part of this ‘Tree of Life’ is used in various ways. As food, alcoholic drink, medicine, animal fodder and even fuel.

Then there is Neem. Used socially and culturally in a myriad ways, this beautiful tree, with its bitter leaves, thrives on sunlight and is considered the solution to several ills. So also the tart fruit of amla or gooseberry. Cold? Amla. Digestive aid? Amla. Inflammation? Yes, amla.

The system of Ayurveda has a range of concoctions for various conditions, but at the forefront is a particular combination



Mahua flowers in bloom (left); an earthy, healing brew made from the flowers (right)

called Triphala. A mixture of three fruits – the afore-mentioned Amalaki as well as Bibhitaki and Haritaki – this is a Rasayanic or rejuvenative formula consisting of equal parts of the three myrobalans taken without seed. So fabled and wide-ranging are the benefits of Triphala that it is said: *No mother? Do not worry, as long as you have Triphala.*

Another product that is ubiquitous in the forests of Madhya Pradesh is the Tendu tree. The leaves are big business, as they are used to roll beedis but its fruit, the Persimmon, is a star in its own right. It is believed to be anti-inflammatory and an aid in the control of diabetes; its bark and

roots are used in herbal medicine too.

Each plant and shrub has a story in these parts. Luckily, they are being heard.

THE INFORMATION

The extraction of medicine from plant sources is an old art but is now being addressed with superior technology and quality control. The Minor Forest Produce Processing And Research Centre (MFP-PARC) in Bhopal undertakes to deliver a range of products benefitting local communities as well as markets.

In various places, rich floral diversity is also enshrined in sacred groves, which have been devotedly preserved by forest-dwelling communities. Alirajpur, in southwest Madhya Pradesh, is particularly famous for sheltering rare, endangered and threatened species of plants. About 144 plants belonging to 57 families and 134 genera have been identified here.

Yoga and Spas

That Madhya Pradesh is a hub of wellness now is evident from the sheer number of high-quality spas, yoga and other therapeutic facilities in the state. Here, we look at a few serene spaces, where you can indulge in slow living, while allowing your body to heal

The buffer area at Kanha Tiger Reserve has several spots suited for meditation

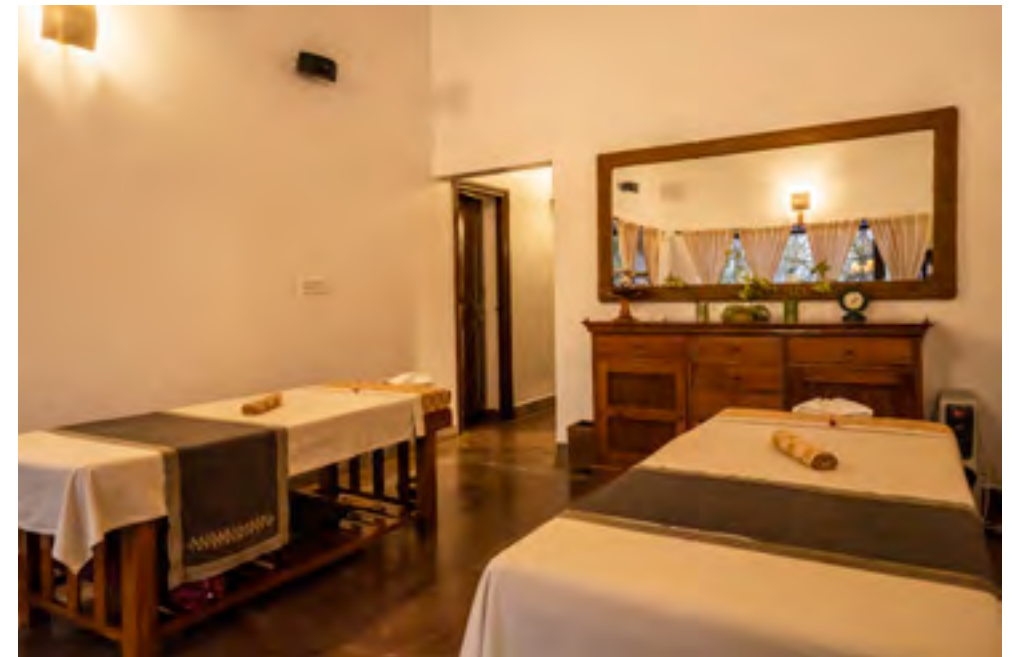
Be Well... and Wild!

Experience wellness and wilderness at the jungle glamps in Bagh Villas

It is 4 p.m. and I'm sipping a cup of coffee on the porch outside my tent. A pond lined with jungle grass mirrors the wilderness around it. A 5-foot anthill stands a few feet away. The untamed beauty of the view in the front is in sharp contrast to what stands behind – a luxurious tent inspired by traditional shikar design of royal tents, pitched during the Maharajas' hunting expeditions. It is this blend of raw and refined that defines the experience at Bagh Villas in Kanha.



Lia hosts an evening meditation session against the serene backdrop of the forests at Bagh Villas



Clockwise from left page: A swimming pool overlooking the wilderness; A cosy corner of the tent offering a peaceful outdoor view; The tranquil spa room offers a multitude of services to the visitors

For the body and mind

I take a walk around the property and am lured into a spacious reading room with stacks of jungle stories and its fair share of titles. With only 12 tents occupying the sprawling expanse, it is quiet enough to hear your own thoughts, with an occasional cooing or croaking to pleasantly interrupt the stillness. The place naturally is a site for meditation

and mindful exercises. Seated amidst the forest cover, with just enough light trickling through the canopy, the milieu is perfect during our evening yoga session. Lia, a trained yoga instructor and one half of the couple that runs the property, hosts these sessions. The place also hosts a tranquil spa room offering a range of treatments such as aromatherapy and warm stone massage.

*Below: The property hosts a spacious and peaceful reading room for curious minds
Facing page: The elegant interiors of a shikar tent on the property*



Blending in

The thing that really strikes a chord with us is how Bagh Villas strives to be the least invasive in its surroundings. The pond around which the entire property is centred helps harvest rainwater. There is no trace of single-use plastics anywhere – everything is served in reusable containers. The kitchen waste goes to make compost which is then used in the in-house vegetable and herb garden. We had a chance to savour some fresh home-grown veggies and herbs over an Italian spread for lunch and may we say... mamma mia! All of this, served with a side of warm and regaling conversations with Akhilesh Nair, whose labour of love Bagh Villas is.

As if making up for the quiet of the day, meal times here are a peppy affair with everybody on the property getting together over friendly chatter.

For the outdoor souls

Apart from indulging in wellness activities on the property, one can experience the grand outdoors with in-house naturalists on birding trips and safaris. One can also explore the neighbouring Baiga villages on a bi-cycle trail. The villages here with their quaint mud homes and vast stretches of farms dotted with lakes and ponds are straight out of a postcard. The golden hour, with its unobstructed tangerine skies, is the highlight of the day.

Luxurious yet earthy, there's plenty of wellness and wilderness to experience at this charming forest glamp.

THE INFORMATION

How to get there: The closest airport to this part of Kanha is Raipur, 4 hours away. The closest railway station is Gondia Junction, 125 kms away.

Best time to visit: October to June is an ideal time to enjoy safaris, nature walks and cycle tours.

Address: Near Mukki Gate of Kanha National Park, Behrakhar village, Balaghat, Madhya Pradesh

Cost: ₹18,000 onwards

Contact: +91-9111003371 or +91-9111003372

Email: contact@baghvillas.com

Website: <https://baghvillas.com>

Alternate yoga and spa options in Madhya Pradesh include:

MPT White Tiger Forest Lodge

Named after the fabled white tigers in the 1950s, this exquisite property is the perfect backdrop for a mediation camp.

How to get there: Jabalpur is the closest airport to Bandhavgarh and Umariya is the closest railway station.

Address: Bandhavgarh National Park, Umariya, Madhya Pradesh

Cost: Upon enquiry

Contact: +91-78801852

MPT Baghira Jungle Resort, Mocha (Kanha National Park)

Located on the banks of the Banjar river, Baghira is a tranquil getaway ideal for a mindful and meditative stay.

How to get there: Gondia and Jabalpur are the two closest railway stations to Baghira. One can also fly in, via Jabalpur airport, and take a road trip.

Address: Chiraidongri - Kanha Rd, Mocha, Madhya Pradesh

Cost: ₹4,500 onwards

Contact: +91-78801852

MPT Amarkantak Holiday Homes

Located in the birthplace of the holy Narmada river, the calm environs of Amarkantak Holiday Homes offer a spiritual, meditative getaway.

How to get there: By air, Bilaspur is the nearest airport. By train, the nearest railhead is Karonji Railway Station.

Address: Near Narmada Temple, behind Jain Temple, Amarkantak, Madhya Pradesh

Cost: ₹2,500 onwards

Contact: +91-9111401004



*Sonmuda, the source of the river
Son, a tributary of the Narmada*

The Quiet Perches

Five gorgeous places in Madhya Pradesh to take a deep breath, clear the mind and enjoy some quiet contemplation

So much to see, so much to do... travel can be a hectic whirlwind of just ticking off the checklist. However, there are a few sweet spots on earth where the traveller must simply stand and be suffused with a sense of presence. The awareness that only this moment matters.

Amarkantak

Amarkantak is where the mountain ranges of Vindhya, Satpura and the Maikal Hills meet. The region sees the origin of three rivers – the holy Narmada, Son and Johilla. Near the spring from which Son emerges is a viewpoint called Sonmuda. Surrounded by hills and dense forests, this promontory affords a spectacular view of the sunrise. As one looks down, the gurgling stream flings itself off the cliff to the valley below. On the hilltop, there is a temple with a small yard that is ideal for a few rounds of Surya Namaskar, and a gazebo that calls for serene chai and breakfast.



Above: Meditate on the tranquil ghats of Maheshwar, on the banks of the Narmada

Sanchi

About 46km from Bhopal is Sanchi, famous for its well-preserved Buddhist stupa. Commissioned by Ashoka in 3rd century BCE, and added to by a line of devout kings, this site now contains about 50 structures in all, including pillars, toranas, temples and monasteries. In fact, it is a record of Buddhist presence in India for about 1,300 years. The complex is serene. As one circumambulates the structure, it emanates a sense of history as well as worship. The best way to soak it in? Simply sit and meditate a while.

Maheshwar

Maheshwar, on the banks of the Narmada, is an immersive experience. Said to be the ancient city of Mahishmati, there is layer upon layer of history, myth, legend and fact associated with it. It was the capital of the great Maratha queen Ahilya Bai Holkar, and Ahilya Fort stands as a testament of that golden era. With its sweeping stairs, the lofty temples that line the riverside, the city is steeped in history and faith. The scenic ghats of Maheshwar are the perfect backdrop for a deep dive into meditation.





Clockwise from Top Left: Rock-cut Jain sculptures at Gopachal Parvat, Gwalior; ruins at the peaceful, sprawling premises of Sanchi; and a quiet corner at Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal

Gopachal Parvat, Gwalior

If the hilltop fort of Gwalior is a much-touted attraction, then what lies below, hugging the cliffsides, must be the unsung hero. The Gopachal Parvat contains about 100 towering statues depicting Jain Tirthankaras carved out of the hillside. The tallest of the magnificent Jain Colossi (7th-15th centuries) stands around 58ft. The spot wasn't always peaceful: Babur commanded their desecration in 1527. Although the statues have worn down with years, it is soothingly quiet today. On the traveller who chooses to sit here and dwell on the Self, no

doubt the Tirthankaras confer their blessings.

Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal

Located on the Upper Lake in Bhopal is not a natural wonder, but one wrought by the hand of man. Bharat Bhavan is a beautiful multi-art centre designed by the celebrated architect Charles Correa. This series of terraced gardens, buildings and pavilions is devoted to the arts and artists. The displays, installations and exhibits can provoke, soothe, entertain and inspire. However, Bharat Bhavan is also an engaging retreat for its own sake – imbibing the breadth of human creativity over a protracted cup of tea.