



**W E L C O M E <sup>TO</sup>**

NO ONE KNOWS INDIA'S JUNGLE BETTER THAN THE PARDHI  
TRIBE WHO HAVE LIVED THERE FOR MORE THAN 500 YEARS.  
WE FOLLOW THEM INTO UNCHARTED TERRITORY



# THE JUNGLE

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deep in the valley, thick bamboo sticks shoot up around us from the earthy undergrowth. Their vivid green leaves form a natural parasol which shades us from the midday sun as we crouch down to inspect the ground for animal tracks.

Badda Pardhi points out a faint, almost invisible scuff in the dirt, and follows its direction over to a nearby tree. The gnarled trunk is covered with fresh scratch marks.

“A leopard was just here,” he whispers, running his palm over the rough indents. Sure enough, he finds a fragment of a claw, not much bigger than a fingernail, embedded in the bark. He moves on stealthily, a fresh look of determination on his face, and just as we begin a steep climb up a forested, rocky hill, an alien sound – something between a roar, a howl and a bark – ricochets around the surrounding gorge’s rocky walls. From the knowing smiles of my companions, it’s clearly the sound of a

Clockwise from above scanning for wildlife in Panna National Park; cooking in the jungle; ancient temples emerge from the undergrowth

big cat, of the golden and black-spotted variety. Without missing a beat, Badda puts his hands to his mouth and imitates the deafening roar, calling back through the trees, pitch perfect. The uncanny ability to mimic animal calls and communicate with all manner of creatures is just one of the Pardhi tribe’s secret weapons.

I’m trekking through the *Jumanji*-like jungle of Panna National Park, a protected area of India’s eastern Madhya Pradesh state. The 543sq km reserve draws visitors for one main reason: its incredible wildlife, and one community here knows how to track animals like no other. From sloth



bears, snakes and hyenas to leopards, tigers and monkeys, if anyone can help us navigate this landscape and make it out alive, it's these guys.

The indigenous Pardhi (meaning "hunting") tribe, Badda among them, has lived nomadically in this area for five centuries, its people sustaining themselves through foraging and hunting wild boar, birds and other animals, something they are no longer permitted to do in the protected national park. Indeed, in a remarkable about-turn, the tribe has redirected their unrivalled tracking abilities towards human visitors, offering them an immersive wilderness experience like no other.

Badda is one of 16 Pardhis to be involved with special expeditions, run from Pashan Garh lodge – a luxury-safari outpost of Taj Hotels, and the starting point for our day. The unique project was launched in tandem with wildlife conservation programme Last Wilderness Foundation and the Indian government's Panna Forest Department, in order to give visitors to the region a real taste of jungle life.

The morning of our walk, we're up and at it before sunrise. Over a steaming cup of chai tea, I sign a mildly worrying waiver – one that absolves the lodge from blame if I fall victim to the "real risk of bodily harm by dangerous animals". As I do so, the hotel's on-site naturalist, Dipu Kumar, races into the room to tell me that a tiger was just seen stalking through the lodge site. It's the second time in four days. We rush outside to see deep paw prints pressed into the sandy forest floor, just metres from where we were sitting. Hearts pounding, we agree that it's time to meet up with the Pardhis.

By the time we reach our meeting point, on a hot, dusty road dotted with small settlements, the sun is high enough to hit the tips of the treetops. We set off towards the cavernous Ranipur gorge, which we'll climb down before entering the jungle proper and scaling the towering peak on the other side before sundown. A walk is generally escorted by five or so Pardhis – today we've got Badda, Batal, Reshna and Lallarsi, all, somewhat confusingly, with the same surname, Pardhi.

We've only been walking for a few minutes before Badda begins enthusiastically pointing out signs of wildlife, big and small: hours-old hyena tracks, identifiable by their garlic clove-shaped claws; the teeny paw prints of field mice;





a caterpillar trail that resembles a miniscule tyre track. Batal points out medicinal plants that have been used by the Pardhis for centuries – the community is still reliant on ancient herbal remedies and, apparently, the odd witch doctor.

We chew on *ketha* leaves, a herbal mouth freshener that tastes like aniseed, and run our fingers through the leaves of a mahua tree, the pink flower petals of

Clockwise from above stargazing around the campfire; the Pardhis are expert animal trackers; grinding red bark to make a soothing tea



which can be dried and crushed into the favoured local hooch. Lallarsi strips the red bark off an arjun tree, to be ground into a tea that treats high blood pressure. Batal rubs lantana leaves – a natural antiseptic – between his palms, releasing a potent green juice that I’m told is powerful enough to remedy scorpion stings. “You can also put this in your ear to treat tooth problems,” he advises, “but only on Wednesdays.”

Good to know. Before moving on, it’s time to prepare lunch, by a jade-green river at the bottom of the gorge. Water buffalo laze around us, electric-blue kingfishers swoop overhead and a family of langur monkeys watches with interest as the Pardhis boil rice in fresh river water and crush gooseberries and coriander into a chutney on a large, flat rock.

As we wait for our food, I enjoy front row seats to an epic performance of the Pardhis’ famous animal calls. Lallarsi roars like a jackal and barks like a monkey, before carrying out a surprisingly passionate imitation of the mating calls between a peacock and a peahen. Batal whistles to a partridge perched on a nearby branch – which tweets back in reply – before expelling the guttural, threatening growl of a tiger. He reveals that the very ground we’re sitting on was the site of a tiger-poaching incident in 2000 – one that he was in fact party to.

There’s no escaping the fact that the Pardhis were once prolific and highly skilled hunters. They didn’t have many other options. The tribe had been exiled from mainstream Indian society throughout history, notably by British colonial officials, who labelled them a “criminal tribe” in 1871 due to their outlawed existence in the bush, despite regularly exploiting the Pardhis’ tracking skills to help them trophy-hunt big game. While the tribe was finally denotified of this label in 1952, decades of persecution had made their reputation, and mindset, hard to shift.

Batal was the first of his community to give up hunting, in 2008, when – convinced by the Forest Department – he became an advocate for a different way of life. It wouldn’t have been possible without the support of the Last Wilderness Foundation, which built schools for Pardhi children in the Panna region as well as permanent accommodation,









providing security and a glimpse of a future potentially worth leaving the jungle for. The foundation employed Batal and his wife Mahila Bai to teach the Pardhi youngsters how to brush their teeth, cut their nails and generally prepare themselves for a life and education in mainstream society. Astonishingly, the pair managed to convince their entire community to stop hunting for good, a feat which won them a lifetime wild-life award from *Sanctuary* magazine. The villagers came together at their local temple and vowed to no longer hunt, nor let their children hunt. In return, a small pole-making factory was opened by the Last Wilderness Foundation to give the tribe an alternative way of supporting and feeding themselves, with the community being asked to choose its location.

The Pardhis chose a beautifully remote, forested site, surrounded by trees and the wildlife with which they were so accustomed to sharing their days.

“We don’t want them to be ashamed of who they are or what they have done in the past,” says Bhavna Menon, who has been managing the Pardhi community outreach programme for nine years. She’s more interested in focusing on the tribe’s bright future.

It was with this in mind that another big step was taken, when the foundation began recruiting Pardhi members to become trained walking guides for Taj Safaris. Now, five families are entirely supported in these roles, and last year, the first Pardhi women were trained up for the job. Reshna, in her early twenties and kitted out in crisp khakis, is the youngest in our group and the first female in her community to become a trained naturalist.

“It’s a big deal that girls like Reshna can earn their own money,” Bhavna explains.

Clockwise from above the tranquil Taj Pashan Garh lodge; making roti on the rocks; monkeying around



“It means they don’t have to be reliant on men any more.”

Today, nomadic life is rare among the Pardhis, who have settled in various villages. But while the older generation worries that the tribe’s heritage will be forgotten, Bhavna explains that the Walk with the Pardhis programme is actually re-affirming the value of their tracking skills, which might otherwise have been lost.

After a lunch of lentil daal and slow-cooked potatoes, peas and tomatoes, served on stitched-together banyan leaves and enjoyed with bonfire-baked roti bread, we enter the densest part of the jungle. We pass through dark caves, which I’m told are known leopard dens, until the path between the trees becomes steeper, rockier and more difficult to traverse. Luckily, the Pardhis know it like the back of their hands. We scramble up rocks and slash through the coarse thicket, squeezing through a narrow crevice that opens up onto a jaw-dropping view of the gorge below.

Our Pardhi guides’ wives are waiting for us there with baskets full of aromatic dried spices and rice for our evening meal. They sing folk songs as we cook – melodic, haunting odes to the dramatic landscape around us, as the sun disappears and we light lanterns and settle in around the camp fire.

“Who needs a five-star hotel?” asks Hada, reclining back to gaze at the twinkling canopy emerging from the night sky. “We’ve got the best view right here.”

The Pardhis take the idea of living a simple life to the next level. It’s ingrained in their nomadic DNA to own only that which can be carried around from place to place. In their jungle-dwelling days, the tribe would walk long distances, carrying just one small bundle wrapped in cloth (known as *potli* in Hindi), which they would unwind and lay on the ground to sleep on beneath the stars.



At most, a plastic sheet draped over branches provided a temporary shelter from the jungle elements.

As extraordinary as all this sounds, I can’t pretend I’m not glad to arrive back at the safari lodge later on. Sprawled out in my bed in the pitch black I put my new, Pardhi-style tracking skills to the test and tune my ear to the sounds outside. I pick up the rustle of palm squirrels on the roof and the snouts of wild boars rooting in the undergrowth. So far, so peaceful. Then, I hear a distant, panic-stricken series of barks. It’s a family of monkeys, warning of approaching danger, followed by the honk of a sambar deer, prey to the biggest cat of all, and one that’s so far eluded us.

As the monkeys’ calls grow more frenzied, I hear a distant roar. It’s indistinguishable from the sounds made by Batal and Badda, but there’s no mistaking which creature it comes from. This is the real call of the jungle: more visceral and heart-racing than calling out “Jumanji!” at the end of a Hollywood blockbuster. And it sounds extremely close by. My heart’s pumping, the adrenaline racing. But like *Jumanji*’s cast of adventurers, I’m not sure I’m ready to return to real life just yet.

📺 **Watch *Jumanji: The Next Level***