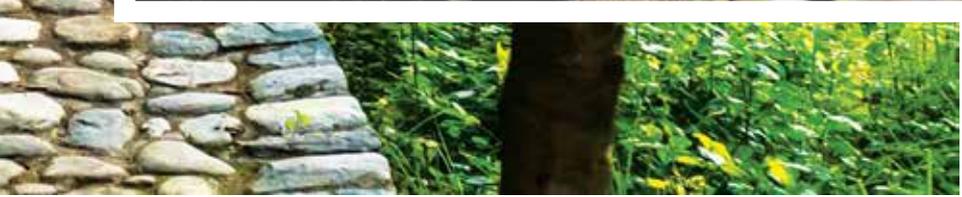


VANGHAT LODGE:

**A Glimpse
of Another Life**

**Pushpa Nair explores
the land of trumpet, roar and song**



Another holiday! Where to go this time, we wonder? Corbett National Park is my first response, and straightaway, I am bombarded by unsolicited advice, from those who had been there and seen tigers, and those who had not. It is interesting that for most of us, a visit to the jungle means tiger spotting. The majesty of elephants, the elusive leopard, soulful deer, quicksilver otters, magnificent birds, hypnotic snakes, and the glorious spread of flora and fauna, are all mere footnotes. Why this obsession with the tiger, I ponder, as we board the Ranikhet Express? Even India's other big cat, the lion, does not evoke

the same kind of awe.

Early next morning, we are in Ramnagar. The complete silence is striking, even as the sun has yet to begin her journey for the day. A quick stop for coffee, and we are on our way. Despite the darkness, it is apparent that we have arrived in tiger country – and any doubts dissipate as we hit the stretch of the Ranikhet road that passes through Dhikuli village. Tiger motifs roar back at us from the signboards of safari operators, road signs, and what not. Further ahead, the park's outskirts are apparent from the increase in elevation, and from the tall conifers surrounding us. The crispness in the air, the sounds of the jungle,

the shy appearance of barking deer en-route – they all create their own magic. Resorts on the outskirts of the national park appear whichever way you look, each promising a more magnificent view than the other. We continue on our way to our final destination, Vanghat Lodge, even as the sun slowly lights up the sky, and the sounds of everyday life filter through.

On a secluded bank of the Ramganga River lies one of most remote wildlife resorts in Northern India. Vanghat Lodge is a wilderness paradise unlike anything else to be found around Jim Corbett National Park. Getting to the resort is an adventure in itself – and having at least an average fitness level is a must. After parking your vehicle at Marchula, near Solluna resort, you have to trek along a somewhat rough, 2 km route, through a settlement, over a small hillock, and



then along the riverside. (The resort sends porters to carry your luggage.) Next, you must cross the river on a bamboo raft, and then trek again for about 500 metres to the lodge.

'Vanghat' translates from Hindi to 'forest on the river' – an apt name, indeed. It is hard to determine where the woodlands end and the lodge begins. Situated in a wildlife hotspot, it is an oasis of zen. Leaving a minimal environmental footprint is central to the ethos here, and Vanghat stands by its claim of being a lodge run by naturalists for naturalists. Staying so deep in the forest is to experience living in untouched, thriving nature. The eight-acre estate is guarded at its river entrance by two giant silk-cotton trees, part of a sacred grove revered as living deities. Amidst thickets of fruiting trees, dense undergrowth, and elephant grass lie several clearings, which accommodate four thatched cottages and three cottages, all made from local, eco-friendly in the stone masonry style so typical of the lodges of yore. The rooms are simple, rustic and warm, with windows on all sides, en suite bathrooms, and bucket baths. Hot water bottles are provided to keep you warm when the temperature





dips – and it certainly does! Each cottage is decorated in the colours of nature, and charmingly ‘numbered’ by the number of lanterns placed outside. A porch in front allows you to enjoy nature in her glorious majesty: the call of birds and langurs, or just the sounds of silence. For the overworked, overstressed corporate, the big plus is that mobile connectivity is spotty. Ideal for team-building sessions, this is a place where you can focus on the other person, without getting diverted by technology. A large, central machan serves as a dining room, where you are served simple, Indian home-cooked food and delicious lemonade. Everything is fresh, tasty and healthy.

Food digested, it is exploration time. Vanghat is situated in a range of hills that serve as a transition zone between the plains to the south and the mountains to the northeast. Uttarakhand’s Western Himalayan region is one of richest and most diverse bird habitats in all of Asia. Of the 1,248 species of birds found across India, over 621 have been spotted here, largely because the altitude varies all the way from 400m to over 7,800m. Birding is a specialty of Vanghat, and in this melting pot of habitats, you can hope to see almost all of the species present, both resident and migratory. Sumantha Ghosh and his team are experts in the local

lore, and in spotting and identifying birds. The walking safaris along the river are a definite must, and we see Pallas’, lesser and grey-headed fish eagles; numerous kingfishers; brown dippers; wallcreepers; and several species of fork-tail (the spotted and little fork-tail being the most common); plumbeous and white-capped water redstart; and several wagtail species.

Apart from the myriad birds, other residents include barking and sambar deer, troops of gangly langurs (which often pass through), and the Himalayan goral, a shy goat-antelope species that is frequently seen on the rock faces of the valley opposite the lodge. The distinct alarm calls of these animals, echoing from the forest from dusk till dawn, alert us to a predator’s presence. We see elephant dung, but sadly no elephants. (Just before our arrival, a herd of elephants with several babies was sighted, but had moved on.) Leopards are ever present, as other felines, including jungle cats, fishing cats and leopard cats. Predators including the Indian python, cobras, mongoose, and martens have also been spotted – and porcupines, slot

bears and Himalayan black bears are occasional visitors, too.

Activities in the resort include trekking along the Ramganga, or up the hills to the north and south, where, if you are lucky, you have a chance of encountering tigers and elephants coming down the hill for a drink. Although sighted only on occasion, cat species are in abundance around Vanghat, with fresh pug marks seen almost daily.

Holidays must end – and the inescapable fact of life must present itself again. We drive back into Ramnagar, back to the noise of everyday life, which has been interrupted only briefly at Vanghat Lodge by that tantalizing glimpse of another way of life. Although we spotted no tigers, what I saw was a veritable treasure trove of diverse flora and fauna. Only when you start appreciating the different sights and sounds of the jungle, can you really understand the joys of being in the very lap of Mother Nature. ■



Pushpa Nair is a communications expert and an avid traveller