

India:

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Stir away from the almost irresistible, flamboyant energy of India's metro cities and wander off to the far-flung corners of this land of diversity, where the true beauty and rural tranquillity of India lie hidden

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THE SUNSET ON DAL LAKE/THINKSTOCK



THIS PAGE: JAWAI Leopard Camp's luxurious tented suite. OPPOSITE PAGE: One of the smart guest rooms at the Ahilya Fort; wildlife sightings are guaranteed at the JAWAI Leopard Camp

history of the fort. Best enjoyed, of course, with some of the delicious home-cooked food on offer.

There are also plenty of activities to enjoy, many just a short distance away. An hour away by car lies Mandu, a deserted ancient Islamic city, abandoned since the 15th century, which is ripe for exploration and perhaps an Indian-style picnic.

While many visitors to India make a beeline for the holy city of Varanasi, Ahilya Fort is enviably close to Omkareshwar. This is a similarly holy place with ghats (steps leading down to the river) that is sometimes referred to as a 'mini Varanasi.' The island is actually shaped like the Hindu Om symbol, often associated with meditation and yoga, which has to be a good thing. A truly unique hideaway. www.ahilyafort.com

JAWAI LEOPARD CAMP, RAJASTHAN

Just opened last December, the super smart JAWAI Leopard Camp is already causing quite a stir. Ecologically minded, the camp focuses on looking after the environment and local communities as much as its guests.

Located close to Udaipur, the camp provides a stylish, sophisticated, comfortable 'wildlife and wilderness' base from which to recover from the chaos of India. JAWAI

Leopard Camp has just eight luxurious tented suites – making it wonderfully serene and personal – and is the only property to lie within this unexplored region of outstanding natural beauty.

Artfully designed by its owners, Anjali and Jaisal Singh (who run the excellent Sher Bagh camp and the ultra-luxurious The Serai), each of the tented suites is spacious, covering an area of 1,300 sq m. Private viewing decks come as standard too and afford spectacular views of the granite formations surrounding the camp.

The surrounding landscape hosts a diverse eco-system, at the top of which sits the leopard.

Wildlife sightings are guaranteed; in fact, within the first month of opening, besides crocodiles, hyenas, jackal, and a host of migratory birds, the camp also reported 32 separate sightings of leopards. There is at least a 75 per cent chance of seeing one.

Guests are provided with modern, semi-professional cameras and 'His and Her' binoculars – thoughtful touches which add to the experience.

Post-safari there is a SUJÁN Spa, which offers wellness therapies and treatments using indigenous herbs and oils of the region.



India's mega cities are witnessing huge advances in hotel developments and resort expansions. Glittering five-star hotels jostle for place next to tiny boutique options, but it is away from these centres of trade and business that true peace and serenity can be found.

Deep in the jungle-rich hills, or beyond the outskirts of towns, refuges for mind and soul abound. Here we choose the very best places to get off the beaten track in India.

AHILYA FORT, MADHYA PRADESH

A completely unique, family-owned residence deep in little-visited Madhya Pradesh, Ahilya Fort is run by Prince Richard Holkar. A descendant of Queen Ahilya Holkar, Richard took over the fort in 1971, carefully restored it and opened it as a hotel in the year 2000.

Today, there are 13 smart guest rooms, all individually designed, including a very special 'Maharaja Tent', which comes with its own little garden and its own heated plunge pool.

Ahilya Fort is centrally located in Maheshwar, a 4,000-year-old town right on the river Narmada, one of India's holiest waterways. It is especially holy as it is believed to have been created from a drop of sweat from Lord Shiva's forehead.

At the fort it is all about observing everyday life along the river, which the property looks over. Fascinating scenes of washing and chanting can be taken in by guests, in shaded comfort.

If Richard Holkar is in residence and is hosting his guests, you will find yourself with a truly unique opportunity to learn about his family heritage, the local area and the





THIS PAGE: The beautiful Vana, Malsi Estate; Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa boasts an amazing natural landscape. OPPOSITE PAGE: Vivanta by Taj – Madikeri is a tranquil resort in the rainforested mountains of Karnataka

and cooking classes.

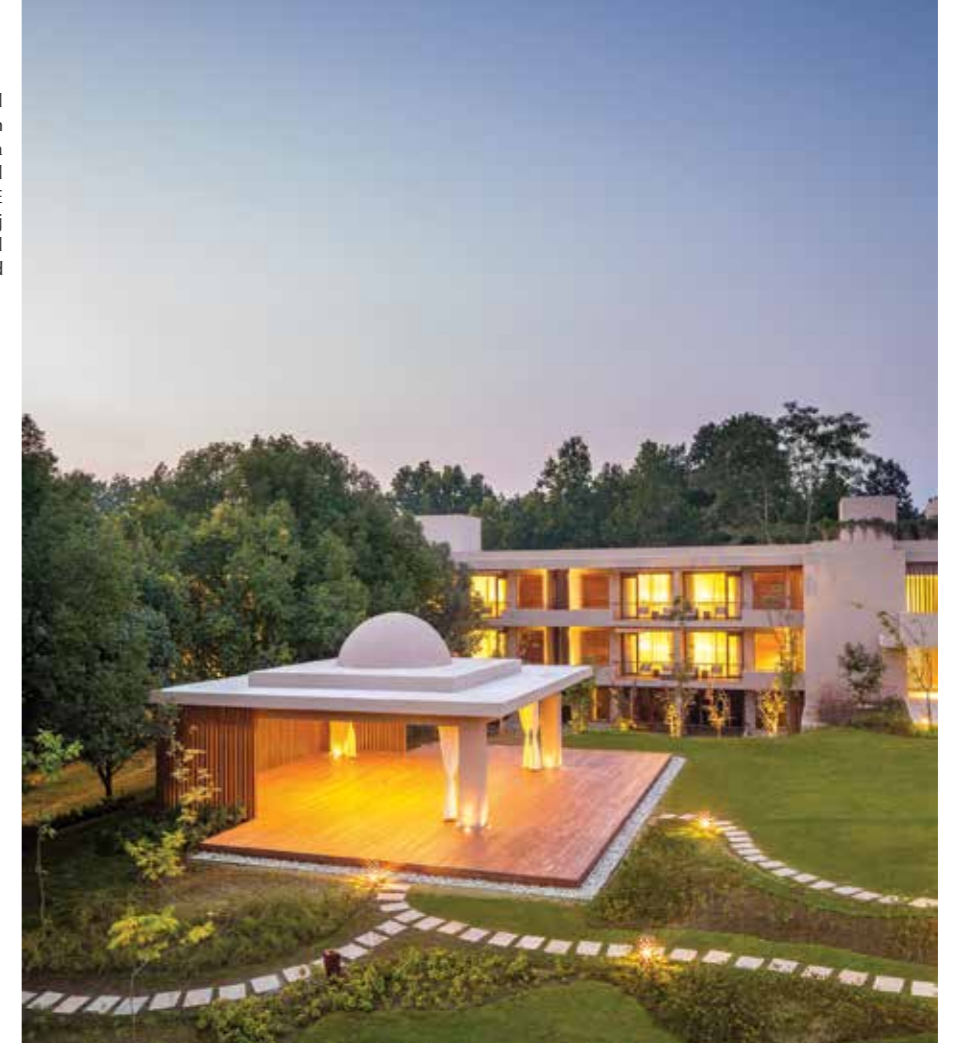
As with all the best places, there is a long-ish journey to get here, but it is scenic. Expect around six hours by car from Bangalore, but go via historic Mysore, which should not be missed for its temples and the Amba Vilas Palace. The last couple of hours of the journey will take you through coffee and cardamom plantations. These are breathtakingly beautiful and demand plenty of photo stops. www.vivantabytaj.com

**HILTON SHILLIM ESTATE
RETREAT & SPA, PUNE**

A three-hour or so drive out of Mumbai will take you to the Western Ghats and the private and serene Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa.

This five-star retreat – manned by disarmingly friendly staff – opened in 2013 and is unique to this part of India. The owner's vision was to create a world-class sanctuary and to preserve this small but increasingly vulnerable area of the Western Ghats. Happily, it succeeds on all fronts.

Spanning 3,500 acres of privately owned forest and jungle, the Sahyadri mountain range encircles the retreat. Birdsong (200 or so species have been spotted) and the sound of running water are immediately relaxing



and are noticeable on arrival.

The resort is huge, so the dedicated butler service is essential in getting around (you'll need a buggy) and helping you to plan your day.

There are 99 villas, all carefully landscaped into the virgin forest. Cool and chic, the villas have dry-stone walling, private decks or balconies, and some come

with special spa treatment areas and private pools.

Best of all is the spa. This is not any old spa, but a 'spa zone', where, spread over 70 acres, there are 17 treatment rooms, five consultation rooms, four relaxation terraces, a yoga pavilion and meditation cave, saunas, steam, outdoor hot tubs and hydrotherapy tubs.

The camp has already planted thousands of plants, developed water harvesting projects using solar energy and is busy organising joint patrols with the Forest Department to keep park boundaries protected. Luxury, adventure and a safari with a difference, this is the perfect getaway for wildlife enthusiasts.

www.sujanluxury.com

**VANA, MALSI ESTATE,
UTTARAKHAND**

Also new to India is Vana, Malsi Estate, which has 69 rooms, 17 suites and four immaculate villas all tucked away within 21 acres of mango and lychee orchards.

Located near Dehradun in the lower Himalayan foothills, the owner's aim is to make this estate the most iconic wellness retreat in the world.

The focus is strictly on Ayurveda, oriental and spa therapies and the ethos is that guests can take newly acquired spa knowledge home with them.

The retreat has more than 50 treatment and consultation rooms, making it one of the largest in Asia. There are four yoga studios

and pavilions, an indoor and outdoor pool, wet areas, watsu and a state-of-the-art gymnasium. There are also three restaurants, one of which has a focus on authentic Ayurvedic principles, with a sister restaurant serving those on the strict panchakarma diet.

Designed by the acclaimed Spanish design studio, Esteva i Esteva Arquitectura, all guest rooms, suites and villas (which come with certified organic bed and bath linen) have been created to give a sense of harmony. Thought has even gone into the staff uniforms, which have been designed by cool Indian brand Abraham & Thakore.

Vana takes its name from the surrounding forest and accordingly it takes its ecological vision seriously. Not only does it manage its energy and waste carefully, it is also one of the few properties to have its own bottling plant, which will help save up to 100,000 plastic bottles a year. A visionary retreat indeed. www.vanaretreats.com

**VIVANTA BY TAJ – MADIKERI,
COORG**

A relatively new addition to India's hotel scene, the 180-acre Vivanta by Taj –

Madikeri resort is situated high in the rainforested mountains of Karnataka, a relatively unvisited corner of India.

Guests here reconnect with nature via adventure trails and survival training, and there is even a 'Coorg conservatory' which highlights local culture.

Remaining true to the local scene, there are indigenous dance performances most evenings, which, while enjoyable, are also great for getting to know your fellow guests.

As the retreat lies 1,200 metres above sea level, there are wonderful panoramic views of the Western Ghats. A dream for photographers, especially early in the morning as the mist lifts.

Deceptively, there are 63 rooms and villas but they are spaced out and cleverly built into the landscape to ensure privacy and peace. Some of the more spacious villas come with their own terraces and fireplaces. The buildings have been built with recycled wood, local granite and river stones. Nothing looks out of place.

There are plenty of ways to get back to nature too. Mountain-biking and trekking are popular but there are also pottery, yoga



A meditation session is a must-try, but if this isn't your thing the on-site Masters offer 150 spa treatments, including pranayama, Ayurveda, chakra cleansing, shamanism, fire healing, music therapy, dance therapy, yoga and many other alternative therapies.

The other must-do activity is to spend time at the Shillim Institute. The retreat describes this as 'a centre for experiencing and embracing human potential' and it is wonderfully varied. You can join a cooking class, learn about dance, healing, nature or even botany.

Day visits to the nearby historic Maratha forts of Tungi, Tikona, Lohagad and Visapur and the ancient rocks of Karla and Bhaja are also possible. The optimum time here is a week so that you can take advantage of all the retreat has to offer. Just be warned, the service is so helpful and kind that it is hard to leave. www.hilton.com

SUKOON, KASHMIR

At last, a luxury houseboat adrift on Kashmir's majestic Dal Lake. Sukoon is a houseboat with a heart – and a history – and is one that is not short of luxury either.

Originally built in 1979, Sukoon has been brought completely into the modern era, without forgoing any of its charms. Its owners have converted the houseboat so that it now has just five spacious rooms and one suite, all comfortable and beautifully upholstered.

The original glass chandeliers have been kept and polished up, as has the cedarwood panelling with its intricate carving.

Sukoon is unique in that it is the only boat on Dal Lake that boasts a roof terrace, where guests can rise above the waters to relax under a *shamiana* (canopy), or indulge in some sunbathing (modestly dressed of course). Across the waters, in the distance, the mighty Himalaya beckons.

The front verandah is also a popular place to soak up the view and it is from here that you can watch as daily life on the lake unfolds. This is also the prime sundowner spot come 6pm.

Kashmir is currently stable and with this new luxury option, there has never been a better time to go. There will be sunshine, friendly hospitality and there will be ample opportunity for walking and exploration if you wish. A dream come



THIS PAGE: The Rajakkad Estate is a simple yet charming hotel truly off the beaten track. OPPOSITE PAGE: The luxurious Sukoon houseboat drifting peacefully on Dal Lake; Meditation Cave at Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa



true for those who make the effort to visit. www.sukoorkashmir.com

RAJAKKAD ESTATE, TAMIL NADU

Firmly off the beaten track, this lovely little wooden hotel is tucked away in the green, rolling Palani Hills of central Tamil Nadu in southern India.

There are just eight simple but charming rooms housed within an original 18th-century home and it is the perfect place to escape to for a week or so.

There is a library, a sitting room and a dining room and oodles of authentic touches. While Rajakkad is ultimately modern and comfortable it is also traditional and to stay here is to indulge in a little time travel.

As you approach the hotel, along an avenue of royal palms, gentle breezes waft past the louvered screens and doorways. This is old-school, upper-class Indian living and accordingly, it is cosy and homely.

The guest rooms are simple and airy with attached bathrooms and each has private access to the garden.

Nature abounds too. Here it is all about listening to birdsong, enjoying the views, traversing the lush jungles and taking in the fresh air.

There are shady terraces, ideal for reading and swinging hammocks for relaxing, and there is a farm to visit too.

The coffee plantation makes for an interesting visit, but most of all the estate itself has many winding paths that are perfect for a gentle stroll. Picnics can be provided as can assistance on bird watching. There are dozens of different migratory and indigenous birds to learn about. Also as the elevation is approximately 1,000 metres, the climate is almost never too hot or too cold.

Rajakkad is a secret waiting to get out, simply one of the best places in India to turn off your gadgets and reconnect with nature and yourself. www.rajakkadestate.com