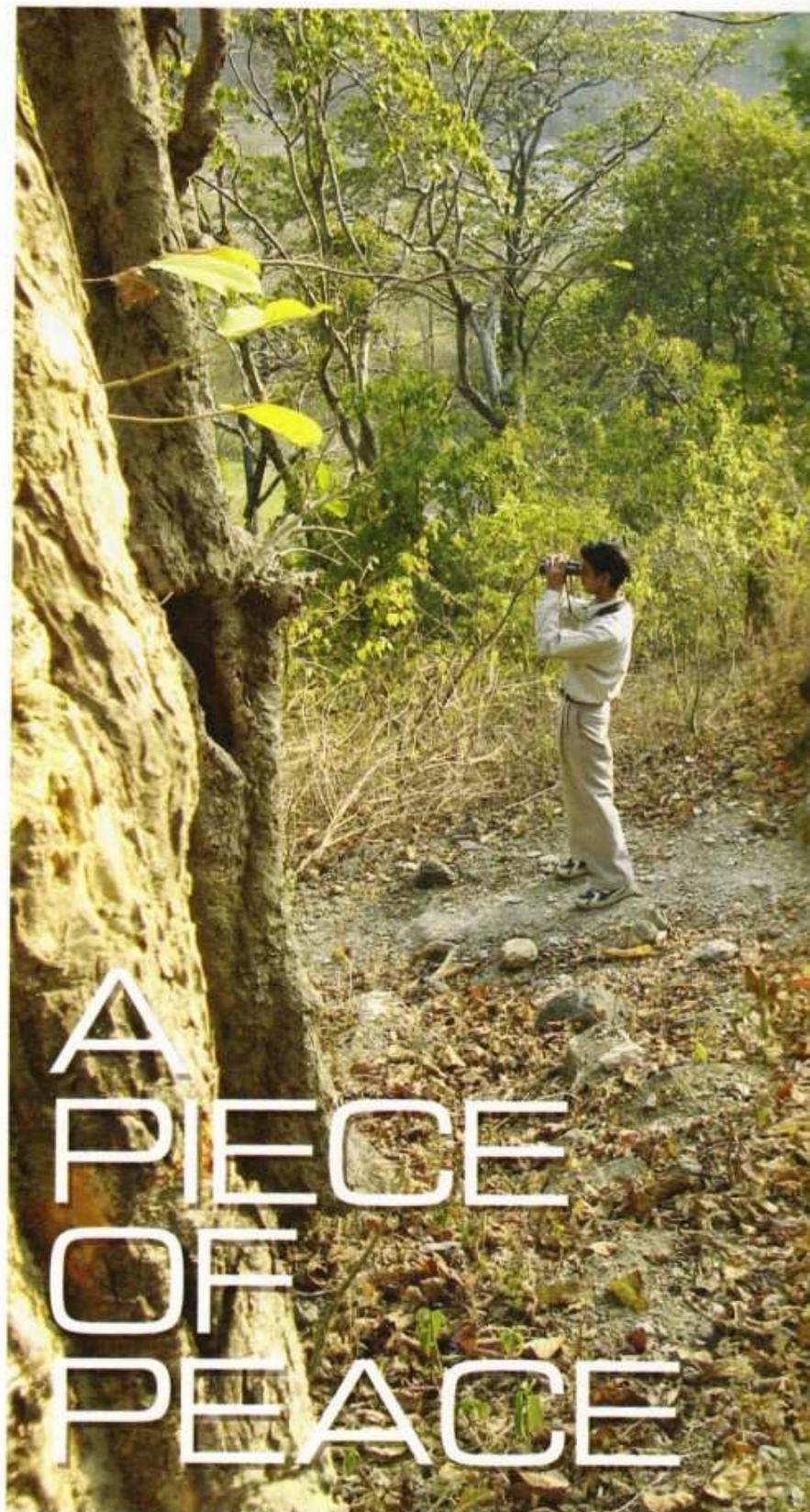


Placed in the ecologically diverse region of the Rajaji Game Sanctuary in Bhukandi, Wild Brook Retreat is the ultimate nature lover's hideaway. But, must all good things come to an end?





ANIRBAN ROY

I was pleasantly surprised to discover that Delhi offers, within a 200 kilometre circumference, a getaway that has precious little to do with habitation. Poised in the mountains above Haridwar and Rishikesh, both industrial area with ecological damage that's heartbreaking, are the villages of Bhukāndi and Vidhashini. These are among a handful of hamlets that fall within the Rajaji Game Sanctuary.

The sanctuary, declared so in 1983, consists of three ranges — Rajaji, Chela and Motichur. Measuring roughly 820 square kilometres in size, the area is dissected by the young Ganges. Been declared an IBA, or important bird area, Rajaji is also declared an elephant reserve and though officially not a tiger reserve, it also enjoys a level one 'tiger conservation unit' status.

Bhukāndi was a place I was fortunate to stumble upon. A local tea vendor, at the Chela canal, successfully marketed the hamlet as a place off the beaten path. I bit the bait, purchased his impromptu bargain of a jeep ride up,

and was on my way.

The sun was kissing the Western slopes as we pulled up to Bhukāndi, a quaint hamlet that is marked by the confluence of two local streams: the Taal and Tadoon respectively. Having secured the ride up to the region, and with nightfall just minutes away, we found ourselves well and truly marooned. Shacking up with a local was an option, given the warmth of these folks. But the jeep tout had other ideas. Perhaps city slickers like us would prefer a resort?

The word 'resort' gives Manoj Kulshreshtra, the owner of the Wild brook Retreat, the hives. He doesn't entertain walk-in guests and he definitely doesn't want to be seen as a hotel. Kulshreshtra's property ditches the definition of the traditional hotel. There's no hard-selling sales office, no advertising and none of the trappings of a luxury resort. A commitment to the environment and a curiosity of the local plant, bird and animal species is a prerequisite to staying here. Kulshreshtra usually scans guest profiles through

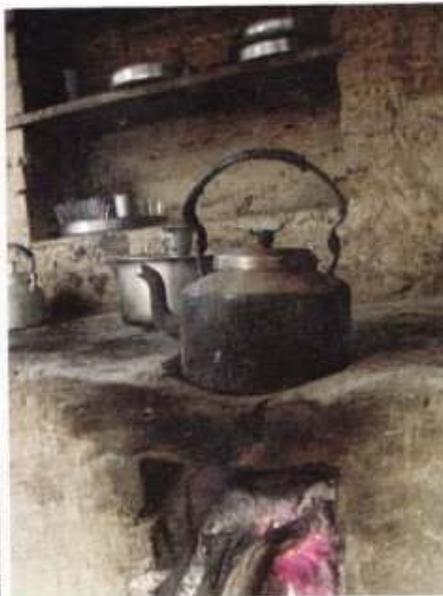
Wild-life

IN THE ROOM, everything from the solid wooden beds, secure stone walls to spotless floors and linen spoke of a frugal honesty. There's not an iota of pretension anywhere. Yet Wild Brook is the most tastefully done property I've been to. It's magic isn't contrived. The doors are designed not to let snakes, scorpions and other creepy crawlies in.

Everything, from the rooms to the furniture, is made from locally available, and eco-friendly materials. Special care is taken to dispose off dirty water so that streams in the area are not contaminated. The drinking water at the retreat is sourced from natural spurs, and the management swears it's cleaner than any city bottled water.

Lanterns and buckets of hamam-warmed water were delivered to our room. The fire place crackled to life and a hot bath later. It was a moonless night, and stepping out an all-encompassing darkness swallowed us whole. A gentle breeze made the elephant grass sway, and rustle. Many pairs of shining eyes glittered in the woods beyond. Finally, a baritone growl from the opposite range was the ultimate acoustic effect. The growling continued and echoed in the darkness. What else could anyone ask for?





'requests' placed through the internet. In addition to a room, what he's really looking to promote are learning tours, community service and a movement for the preservation of the ecology of the sanctuary. As a plant breeder, geneticist and activist with the Bombay Natural History Society, that's hardly surprising. We were exceptionally lucky to secure shelter at Wild Brook Retreat.

A set of six sturdy double-rooms, built on a high platforms, line the front of this property. Organic farms and meadows stretch out, on the slope, behind. The rocky riverbed runs parallel to Wild Brook, and another range of dense forest cloaked mountains lie on the other side. The range on the other side of Wild Brook is populated by hyenas, leopards, tigers, elephants, barking deer, porcupines, Sambhars, sloth bears, wild boars, blue bulls and gorals. These animals descend to tinkling streams by evening, or early morning, for a drink. It is probable chancing upon some nocturnal drama, simply by perching yourself atop the high verandas at night. Wandering around the property on foot at night is not encouraged.

The lack of electricity anywhere on the horizon is a unique selling point of this retreat. There's no road, no mobile signal, no TV, no phones and they don't even give you toilet paper

(unless you ask for it). In short, your existence is castrated of all the urban evils. Staying at the retreat, there are four things you can spend your time with: a chess board, a badminton racket, nature and, above everything else, yourself! You'd be surprised by how hard that is, for some.

Even though a small fire was made on our veranda, we didn't have the nerve to sit out. The night was frighteningly black and we were barely yards from the edge of the cliff. It's easy to give into your imagination on such nights, as we did. Our fears of a springing leopard, from the edge, were unfounded but severe enough to send us scuttling for cover!

By 5 am, next morning, all of us were up, fresh as due drops. After a breakfast of paranthas and mint tea. Dr. Chaturbhuji, the manager of Wild Brook and a PHD in environmental sciences, escorted us on a bird watching trail of the area. Almost 375 species of birds inhabit these jungles.

The last lap of our excursion took us down the slopes, to Bhukandi, where we learn a leopard just crossed our backs and disappeared into shrubbery! A frolick in the Taal stream, a swing from tree vines like Tarzan with temple bells descending from a cliff overhead, we find our jeep tout. Jumping into the *jonga*, we waved farewell to a piece of un-electrified heaven. ●