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[Back Magazine](#)

TIME OUT

## Corbett with a difference

'This is not a hotel, but a home away from home.' NEEMA PATHAK describes her holiday at Bhakrakot, near this premier tiger reserve.

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**One of the few national parks where low investment, low resource intensive tourism runs successfully.**

THIS was not the first time we were visiting Corbett National Park. Located along the Ramganga river, adjacent to the town of Ramnagar in Uttaranchal, the vibrant diversity of plants, mammals and birds in Corbett has always had a magnetic effect on me. One can watch herds of elephant, hog deer, chital, wild boar and an array of birds at Dhikala *chaur* (a grassland in the core area of the park) and if you are lucky, even that elusive striped predator, the tiger! The sight of a huge *gharial* resting along the lake or swimming in the water can affect many a brave heart. If one ignores the presence of an equally large number of tourists, the experience is nearly spiritual.

### Experience rural India

Dhikala *chaur* was once a village. I had often wondered what it would be like to live life as a villager for whom plants and animals are not merely a tourist attraction but an integral part of one's existence. In an endeavour to increase the livelihood options for villagers living in and around areas which were significantly rich in biodiversity eco-tourism is currently being promoted by the Government of Uttaranchal. The objective is to encourage tourism that is sensitive to plants and animals as well as local people and their cultures, where a tourist not only enjoys the serene environment but also interacts with the people and cultures that have evolved

within. Tourism that directly benefits the local people thus increasing their stake in the well being of their surroundings.

Rajiv Bhartari, Conservator of Forests, in charge of ecotourism in Uttaranchal, had suggested that we experience a homestay in Bhakrakot, a village adjacent to Corbett. A homestay essentially means living with a family in the way that they live and eat what they eat.

We reached Bhakrakot late in the night and Vimla Rawat, our hostess, was waiting to guide us to her home. The following two days were an amazing experience in an area surrounded by well-forested hills, some of which are a part of Corbett. Life begins early in the hills and early next morning we heard a series of barking deer calls from the forests just beyond the fields. We walked in its direction and startled the already frightened deer. Next we were stopped in our tracks by a blood-curdling scream. Moti, the half-Bhotia dog of our host, had attacked a wildboar.

We decided to continue walking further into the forest, though it was disappointing to see the extent to which it had suffered in a forest fire that had burnt every bit of regenerating vegetation and the delicate under-growth. A huge monitor lizard ran across our path, and we wondered how it had escaped the fire. Attracted by some sounds, Moti disappeared into the jungle. Conversation soon drifted to discuss why all the dogs in the village were black. We had been told that these forests abound with leopards. Since leopards enjoy eating dogs we surmised that black dogs could find it easier to take advantage of the darkness and escape a lurking leopard. Some time had elapsed since Moti left us and we were beginning to get concerned. with the children frantically calling out to him. There were collective sighs of relief when Moti finally emerged.

### Basic facilities

Ravenously hungry, we returned to a delicious breakfast of spring onion and potato vegetable, *pahari* cucumber *raita* and *rotis*. Vimla had collected most of the ingredients from her kitchen garden, though she kept saying, "what we eat is very simple food. We have very basic facilities for you but this is how we live." We tried to reassure our gentle hostess by telling her that we were more than pleased with the clean toilets and bathrooms, simple home made food, the kitchen garden that kept the children busy and a huge courtyard where one could sit, feel the breeze and watch birds. At dinner the conversation shifted to the burning forests. "This time our forests have burnt after seven years," explained Rajendra Rawat, Vimla's husband. The village has an understanding with the forest department for protecting the forests against fire. In return the village receives Rs. 2,000 per year. They explained that though no one in the village or surrounding villages starts a fire, this time the raging fires were too extensive to be managed. The situation had got worse because of delayed rain. Vimla also explained that there were many unburnt patches within the village which supported a fair amount of bird diversity. For keen bird watchers, our hosts said, "we normally request Kunwar Singh of 'Camp Fork Tail Creek' ([www.campforktrailcreek.com](http://www.campforktrailcreek.com)) to help our visitors. He is one of the best bird guides in Corbett." Vimla and Rajendra are also good at taking visitors on the various trails. One of the delights of staying with them is a visit around the village, meeting and talking to other villagers. "Our village has an interesting history and many villagers can relate fascinating stories," said Vimla.

The hot afternoon was just meant to nap on a *charpayi* under the mango tree in the courtyard. As some of us slept, others watched the courtship of a pair of paradise flycatchers and a pair of crested buntings. We dozed off to the mellifluous sounds of nature.

That evening we walked along a stream which eventually meets the Kosi river. Unlike the area around the village, along the stream, the forests were thick and verdant. Suddenly, we heard the flapping of large wings and were transfixed by the sight of a pair of Great Pied Hornbills

overhead, finally disappearing into the green darkness. Hitchhiking in a jeep we reached Garjia temple on the shores of the Kosi, around 15 km from the village. The temple is located on a hillock in the middle of the river. Avoiding the crowd we made our way to the water hoping to see the famous large sized Mahseer. As it was fast getting dark, we thought we'd walk along the river, climb the hill and take a ride with any vehicle going back towards Bhakrakot. Little did we know that the last bus had already left an hour earlier and few vehicles would come our way as traffic on that road is closed after 8 p.m. Walking back 15 km in the dark, with three small children did not seem like a very enjoyable situation. We tried our luck and walked to the nearest police post. The police officer on duty was a kind hearted soul and stopped the last of the vehicles going towards the hills and to our luck, we were given a lift two kilometres short of the village. The walk along the stream was now very different. We walked with a little fear, a little excitement and a slight expectation of wild encounters which we weren't sure whether we wanted to encounter or not!

### 'Cautious about visitors'

As we sat down to chat with our hosts after a candlelit dinner (as the village is not electrified) we watched the efficiency with which Vimla worked. Straight backed, elegant, calm, quick and energetic, it was difficult to believe that she was already a grandmother. At 10 in the night she looked as clean, well groomed and energetic as she had looked at five in the morning. This was only our second night here and we already felt a part of the family and there was a pang of sorrow that we were leaving the next day. We asked our hosts why only two of the nearly 50 families in the village had opted to provide homestays. "Initially when Rajiv Bhartari explained the idea, many families had shown interest but slowly they dropped out. Often the discomfort is because we don't know the kind of visitors that will come." They explained that families with young women at home are particularly careful about getting into a venture of this kind. "We hear so many stories about what goes on in hotels and resorts ... . drinking ... . and unsavoury incidents. We are not sure all visitors would understand that this is not a hotel, and that this is a home away from home." According to Vimla and Rajendra, they have only had good experiences so far, and those who have come once have come again. "This is good for us and may even interest other villagers to start homestays," enthused Vimla.

### Rich birdlife

We were woken up early next morning by Kunwar Singh, our guide for birdwatching. A short walk on a completely new path was enough to tell us that this is heaven for bird watchers. "Corbett National Park is among the best locations in India to watch birds, but inside the park since visitors can't walk, they miss out on a number of small birds," explained Kunwar. By now we had already seen or heard the Great Pied Hornbill, the Himalayan Pied Hornbill, the Grey Hornbill, the Bluethroated Barbet, the Coppersmith barbet, the Himalayan Great Barbet, the Large Green Barbet, the Crested Bunting, the Emerald Dove, the Paradise Flycatcher and the Redbreasted Parakeet. According to Kunwar, the best time to come to Bhakrakot is between June and February, with each month revealing its own treasure of bird life.

It was now time to say goodbye, an emotional moment with promises of returning soon. Kunwar invited us to visit "Camp Fork Tail Creek", where he works as a manager/guide. It was a small camp site run by Ritesh and Meenakshi Suri in natural surroundings. With tents as accommodation and no electricity, it definitely looked very inviting. Kunwar explained that they too have a number of programmes for visitors, like trips to the park, bird watching, and so on. There is a symbiotic relationship between the camp and the families running homestays. "We help them whenever we can and also suggest homestays to our own guests," he explained. This

earns the camp goodwill in the village.

After Bhakrakot we made our way to another campsite run by a local youth Naveen Bisht, at Chunakhan about 20 km from Ramnagar. Naveen and a number of other youth are involved with what they call the "Jim Corbett Heritage Trail". Corbett Vatika Campsite is located adjacent to a perennial stream near the Kaladhungi Reserved Forests. Naveen and his young friends also try to market artefacts made by the village artisans. "Staying in simple cow dung plastered huts, one could spend hours playing in the stream in the day time and watching elephants go by in the forests at night", smiles Naveen. A stay at the camp site includes a visit to the Sitabani reserve forests, where Corbett spent his childhood and later hunted man-eating leopards. Though not a part of the national park, this area is a testimony to the richness of the *terai*.

### Jim Corbett's village

A short drive or a walk through the forest takes one to Choti Haldwani, where another group of local guides takes over for a tour around "Jim Corbett's village". Jim Corbett bought this land from a local landlord and settled a number of families who had helped him in his hunts. He made his house in such a way that he could keep an eye on the entire estate.

This trail begins with showing the visitor the house — which is now a museum, though now closed for renovation. The tour goes around the village, showing the houses constructed by Corbett for his people, the *choupal* where he regularly came to listen to the problems that people faced, the gun that he gave to the villagers to help them protect their crops and much more. At times the villagers recount their encounters and conversations with Corbett while he was alive.

I stole a few moments to take a quiet look at the road in front of the house, mentioned in Jim Corbett's book as the *kaccha* road going to Nainital, now bustling with traffic; the surrounding market where once leopards roamed. I felt it was his spirit that still inspired these young people, gave them pride in their heritage and the surrounding wildlife, which was now being encouraged and supported by the eco-tourism department of the Government of Uttaranchal. It was also encouraging to see low investment, low resource intensive tourism running successfully and providing revenues to the people of Uttaranchal. Despite the scarred forests, there seemed to be hope for the future of wildlife in the minds of the people here. This trip had indeed been a visit to Corbett with a difference!

### Useful addresses:

- The Director,  
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