

A home away from home

Darkness was setting in as we reached the outskirts of the Corbett National Park. Within a few minutes of entering the boundary, we had our first sighting. On the edge of the road, a majestic sambar with its large horns had seen us before we saw it. It was stationary, eyeing us with curiosity.

Our driver very sensibly brought the car to a halt. We were soon rewarded yet again! Slowly, from behind the sambar, a female and two fawns emerged from the thickets. Our excitement was growing. Mayank(10), the eldest of the three kids, who had spotted the sambar first, was feeling extremely proud. After a couple of minutes, the sambar lost interest in us and slowly made his way into the forest. The female and the fawns disappeared behind him. "WOW!" was the unanimous reaction in the car.

Soon, it became pitch dark and since one is not allowed to switch on the lights of the vehicle in the park so as not to disturb the animals, everyone was getting anxious. "Mummy, when will we reach the hotel?" asked little Aranya(4), who was tired after a long day's journey. Even Mayank's brother, Mihir(7), looked a little scared. After all, it is not that every day one is in the middle of a forest after dark with no traffic lights and sounds that we are so accustomed to! "We are not going to a hotel," said Aranya's mother Neema. "We're going to a home stay in a village called Bakhrakot."

"But why a home?" asked Mayank. "Aren't there any hotels in Corbett?" Rahul, the boys' father, explained that there are many hotels in the area but this time they were going to do something different. Just as the children were about to protest, we saw a couple waving to us. As we halted, the woman came ahead and welcomed us warmly and introduced herself as Mrs. Rawat, our hostess. In the next minutes, the children and the baggage were out of the car, and we set off for her house. It was dark all around, we couldn't see much of the surroundings despite our torches.

Finally we reached Mrs. Rawat's house which had a huge courtyard in front enclosed by a low wall on all sides. All of us settled on the two *charpoys* in the courtyard and soon after the introductions were made, Mrs. Rawat busied herself with preparing dinner. Meanwhile, we all freshened up and soon, the smell of freshly cooked food wafted through the air.

Dinner was simple but delicious, comprising rotis, dal, vegetable and cucumber raita. The Rawats were wonderful hosts. We ate out in the courtyard in the light of kerosene lamps. "Mummy, look at the stars. There are so many here and they all look so bright and clear," said Mihir. As I was about to reply, Mayank said knowledgeably, "Of course! The sky is so clear because there is no pollution here." Soon we were led indoors and shown around the house.

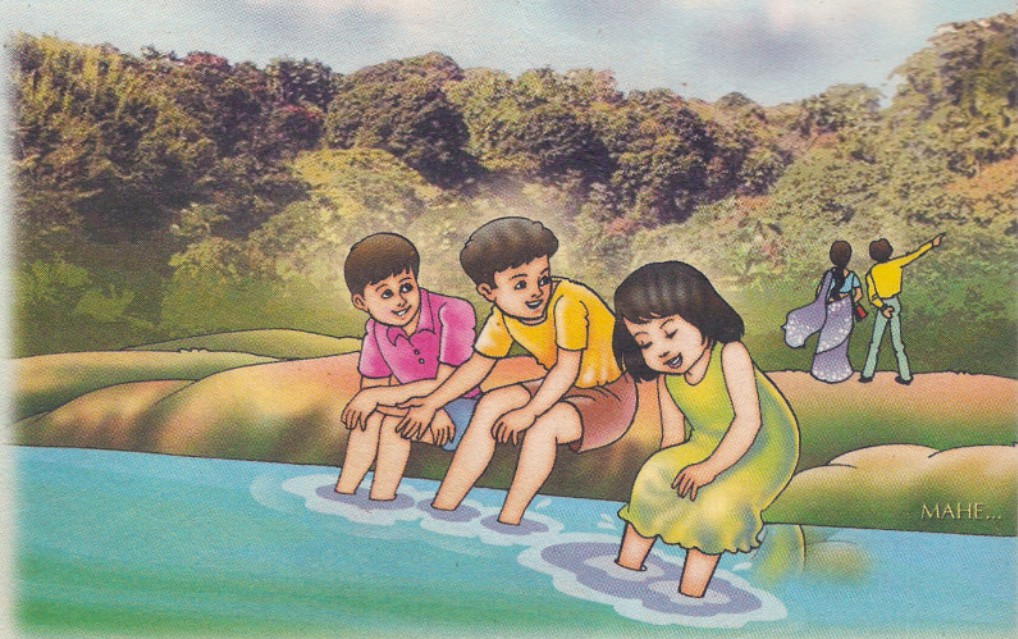
The house consisted of two rooms which were let out for guests like us, the kitchen which doubled up as our hosts' room and a storage space which one could use as a dining area if one wanted to eat indoors. The toilets were behind the house and were sparkling clean with a 24-hour water supply. Although the facilities were basic, the cleanliness of the place and the warmth of the hosts made us very comfortable. We soon fell asleep listening to the sound of wild boars foraging for food somewhere in the distance.



The next morning we rose at sunrise and stepped out of the house. The beauty of the scenery around us left us speechless. We were actually near the top of a hill which had a gradual slope. There was a valley sloping down gently in front of us where the Rawats had a farm. On one side was a dense forest. We spent the day taking long walks to the surrounding areas, but always heading back to our home-stay for every meal. On our forest walks we saw birds like woodpeckers, buntings and barbets, termite hills, reptiles, and many insects which we had never seen before. We heard the call of a barking deer. The children looked very happy to be here. They seemed to have forgotten their computer games, swimming pools and TV cartoons.

In the evening we headed towards the river which flowed some distance away. During the walk, we suddenly heard a loud whoosh sound overhead and when we looked up, a magnificent pair of the Great Hornbill flew past us. We asked the kids if they were enjoying their home-stay or would they rather move into a hotel. "No, no! We love it here," exclaimed all of them. "I'm so glad you thought of Aunty Rawat's house," added Mayank.

"The idea of staying with Aunty Rawat was to help local people in this area to earn some money," said Neema. "In many places in the country local people are being encouraged and helped to start home-stay facilities. After all, this is their land, which has been conserved by them



and their ancestors over the years. Hotels are usually built by people who are from outside the area. That's why we chose to stay with Mrs. Rawat when we heard of the home-stay programme here," she added.

"It's also important for city people like us to experience life in places like these," said Rahul. "Life is so much simpler here, and it makes us realize how much we consume in our cities," he added.

"Yes, yes, papa," chipped in Mayank, "I'll never complain when there's electricity breakdown during Cartoon Network time!" he said with a glint in his eye.

We soon reached the river and the children's eyes gleamed happily as they entered the water and sat on the edge paddling their feet. After they had played enough and it also began to get dark, the three children asked us, "When will we reach home?" I was thrilled. In a day it had truly become "home" for us!

- By Sharmila Deo



The original name of Los Angeles was El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora la Reina de los Angeles del rio Porciuncula, which translates to 'The Village of Our Lady the Queen of the Angels of the Porciuncula River'.

Until 1965, driving was on the left side of the road in Sweden. The conversion to right-hand was done on a week day at 5 p.m. All traffic stopped as people switched sides. The time and day were chosen to prevent accidents caused by drivers taking their vehicles in the morning, too sleepy to remember that it was the day of the changeover.

