Jungle jive in the monsoon

No, this isn’t a safari in one of India’s far-off corners. Barely two hours away from Mumbai, you can sign up for a heady, off-road trip that packs in a forest trail, followed by hours of scenic calm by a waterbody, dotted with temple ruins, and if you want more, you could scale a mountain too!

Accompanied by expert guides, we ventured into this 4x4 vehicle wading through a pool of water formed by a nearby waterfall in Rajmachi forest area. Pics: Resham Kh

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Camp in the wild

ADVENTURE TOURISM

A pillar of a temple that we found by the Shirotalake (in the foreground)

Driving through the narrow paths in Rajmachi forest area

A waterfall near the campsite; (left) Nicholas Onwarwal, one of our expert guides entertaining us with a guitar session.

Whomeversaid forest camps meant only roughing it out in the woods? With Della’s new Jungle Camp, Krutika Behrawala gets on an open jeep, rides through the Rajmachi forest and explores a secluded campsite near Shirotalake.

There’s a pleasure in the pathless woods, There’s a rapture on the lonely shore, There is society where none intrudes, By the deep sea, and music in its roar; Peace not ruin the less, but nature more

TOUGH to imagine but Lord Byron’s inspiration could well have been the dense Rajmachi forest and the scenic Shirotalake while he penned these famous lines from Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage. Located just two hours from the maddening crowds, we seased every moment of the vast, secluded landscape near Lonawala as we set out for our adventurous off-road gypsy drive as part of Della Adventure’s new offering, Della Jungle Camp. In their hope to make city folk feel close to nature and while at it, teach conservation along with adventure, the four-year-old adventure park has been offering half-day and full-day Jungle Camp packages for trekking enthusiasts, nature lovers or those who wish to spend quality time with friends and family. The full-day camp covers a long trek to the famous Rajmachi Fort, the half-day (that we did) includes an off-road drive into the Rajmachi forest leading to Shirotalake.

Quite a carnama

Starting from Mumbai, we reached Della post a two-hour drive through the old Khandala Road (a part of the Mumbai-Pune Expressway remains shut from 10 am to 5 pm during this season due to possibility of landslides). The swish five-star property presenting views of the Salphadris and the valley brought us much-needed monsoon cheer. Leaving those luxurious confines behind, we headed to the adventure park from where we headed to the jungle camp.

Waiting for us was a monstrous-looking 4x4 vehicle, a car modified into an open jeep that could accommodate 10 people—four inside and six at the back in the open jeep section. We were told that the 45-minute drive could be enjoyed the most standing at the back of the jeep, at the cost of getting drenched. Since we were armed with raincoats, we chose to stand. While we expected some sort of body harness considering it was going to be an off-road ride, we only had a rod for support. Three expert guides accompanied us on this drive.

Duck and dive

Slowly, we started our way into the mountainous forest, taking a narrow, dishevelled and winding path surrounded by trees on both sides. Home to wild boars, deer, leopards, snakes like the Green Pit Viper and also fireflies, we could only spot the kingfisher and langurs en route. The experts were aware of the forest and their knowledge helped us figure out the fauna along the way, including a bush bearing blackberries.

Before we knew it, our vehicle gained speed and from thereon, it was a rollercoaster! Even as we turned to enjoy the view of the Rajmachi peak, we had to duck to avoid branches that brushed past our vehicle. We went up and down the slope and splashed into water pools formed by nearby waterfalls as we tried to balance ourselves. How we missed those body harnesses. This thrilling ride was the highlight of our trip.

Temple run

All of a sudden, the narrow road opened into a vast expanse of grass-carpeted land bordered by hills and a lake, half-filled with water due to lack of rainfall this season. We reached the campsite by the Shirotalake. Apart from the gushing sound of a rivulet and the occasional birdcall of Red-Wattled Lapwing (that sounds like it’s asking you “Did You Do It?”), pin-drop silence greeted us at this stunning campsite and we felt our stress ebbing away. If only we could pitch tents and cook our own barbeque here. “This will be part of our overnight jungle camp post monsoons where we will teach patrons how to do these activities,” said one of our guides, Nicholas Onwarwal.

On exploring the campsite—dodging muddy areas and crab holes—we found a few temple ruins here too! These were stone pillars carved with figures of goddesses in different dance poses. While our guides were unaware of their exact date or the dynasty they belonged to, they informed us that long time ago, a temple had been submerged under a flood and these ruins were part of that structure.

As we muddled over the mystery, Onwarwal pulled out his guitar and played classic English and Hindi tracks. The music sounded much better in this picturesque setting. After tucking into sumptuous snacks that included a burger, an apple and a juice, wemade our way back to the park.

This camp may be too comfortable for adrenaline junkies who love to rough it out in the woods. However, for even thumbs like us who often feel claustrophobic in the concrete jungle, the jungle camp rejuvenated us and gave us a dose of adventure at our own pace. Just the way we like it.

A topsy-turvy ride

At Della Adventure Park, we came across a test drive being done for Human Gyro, featuring 360 degrees and revolving too, this exciting ride will be launched next week.

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A trip to Bishnupur for Ichapani Mela where snake charmers perform acts with King Cobras. To know more about festivals in August, log on to our monthly planner on www.mid-day.com