



Dera Wilderness Camp, Jaipur

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF A FASCINATING COT: 30 years ago, when I used to love more and judge less, I had friends from diverse background – some super-duper rich whose mothers flew on weekends to then Calcutta, now Kolkata for a haircut (there was only Chandika's hair cutting saloon for men then in my neighbourhood). But we all played together. Our only distraction was All India Radio. While I crossed the Brahmaputra River and went to Lakhimpur during summer break, they went to Los Angeles. "Bilaat" was the word we used for all land foreign they went beyond the seven seas and thirteen rivers and for all things which our super-duper rich friends got from their overseas trips it was "Bilaati". Once such bilaati thing I absolutely adored was a cot which could be neatly folded. It had a rectangular top with moulded edges, many pairs of extending X-shaped legs covered in double canvas with leather trims. Fashioned with solid brass brackets, hinges and a perfect glaze finish I was fascinated by it. Carried like a suitcase by the servants it came out along with a picnic basket every time we went to play cricket in his huge bungalow.

30 years later I saw the cot again at the Dera Amer Wilderness Camp. Not one but four. I was told by Udajit Singh, the owner, that it is called the Cawnpore Wheeler's Cot and its design draws inspiration from the British Raj. Cawnpore is definitely Kanpur and whether the cot is named after Sir Hugh Wheeler, the British General at Cawnpore (Kanpur) killed in the Sati Chowra Ghat massacre during the Sepoy mutiny of 1857, I am yet to find out.

LOCATION, ENVIRON AND THE BACK ROAD TO AMBER FORT: Dera Wilderness Camp is located in the outskirts of Jaipur. The area is called Kukas and the Camp is inside a 300 acre private farm surrounded by the hills of the Nahargarh National Park and a few hamlets. The habitat is rocky and semi-arid (save for the months of August and September just after monsoon when it is a carpet of green) with thorn-scrub forests. The birdlife here is pretty impressive. The ubiquitous jungle babbler who gossips noisily in pairs of seven are most surely to visit you daily. There was a White-bellied Drongo (Udajit told me the name later) one morning perched on the rope of my tent totally nonchalant about my presence an arm's length away with my cup of tea. This is perfect Leopard country too. I didn't see one though but I am sure they saw me. Amber Fort is not too far from the camp and can be accessed through a very interesting back road on 4WDs (will be provided by the Dera Wilderness Camp and is included in the rate) where you pass the Delhi Gate (which people used during the days of the yore to travel from Jaipur to Delhi and vice versa), a medieval step well, a rescue centre for tigers and lions, the local village school and agricultural fields. Highly recommended that your clients staying in Dera Wilderness Camp head to Amber Fort taking this route which will add to the experience. Takes about 30-40 minutes to reach the Amber Fort. Lovleen Sagar (HOB Distant Frontiers), Neeraj Bhatt (HOB D, Sita), Gaurav Sood (Sita France) and Anuja Jain (Sita Germany) have also experienced this interesting back road to Amber Fort first-hand.

THE CONCEPT: Dera Wilderness Camp is a private, exclusive camp. There are 4 non-air-conditioned tents with attached bathrooms. However the camp will be given to only one party, whether two or eight people. So if we have a couple from Sita staying here, there will be no-one except them. Or a family of 4 travelling with Sita can take up 2 tents and there will be no one else but them. Or it can be a small group of 8 pax taking up all the 4 tents and having the entire place for themselves. Whatever may be the case, Sita's clients won't share space with strangers at the Dera Wilderness Camp.

MY TENT: The 4 tents of Dera Amer Wilderness Camp, which you first arrive on Elephant back and then walk a little distance, are not at all fancy look wise like the ones at Jawai Leopard Camp or the Serai Jaisalmer for example. They look simple. But you need to understand that a comparison despite the more or less similar price bracket is unfair because the product and the vibe is different. While Jawai Leopard Camp or the Serai Jaisalmer are tented hotels which are structured in its narrative, Dera Wilderness Camp is not at all structured, it is not a hotel and is set up just for your clients reminiscent of those days when the British Sahibs & Mem Sahibs went hunting or travelling with their elephants, horses, furniture, entourage of servants, cooks, food, wine, crockery and

cutlery et al. Despite the simple looking tents, Udaijit has done things with a lot of style and elegance. All furniture at Dera Wilderness Camp, including the Cawnpore Wheeler's Cots, are safari chic made by a Delhi based furniture designer who supplies to wildlife camps in Africa. It is cosy inside the tent with a super comfortable wooden bed, its immaculate mattress & duvet, crisp linen and elegant furniture which are portable, efficient, and solid, yet smart – be it the chairs, the luggage rack, the writing table or the side tables with lamps. The spacious attached bathroom with running hot and cold water has a brilliant rain shower which along with the flush toilet is set into a dark wooden plinth. The hand wash basin has a beautiful wooden framework with a mirror and all amenities are from Forest Essentials, a high-end Indian skincare brand. There are two gas heaters – one in the bathroom– to keep you warm. Hot water bottles are also provided. Electricity is provided 24 hours to your tent and the comfortable camp chairs outside are perfect to relax with your morning cuppa. Loved the idea of the charging console which takes care of four electronic gadgets at one go.

THE STAFF, THE FOOD, THE EVENING AND THE MORNING:

At the Dera Wilderness Camp, your host is Bharat, a pleasant young Rajput who is Udaijit's cousin. Bharat is the go-to man during your stay here. He will help you plan your activities and also be your guide – be it the Dhani visit, the forest walk, the bird watching trip, or when you spend time with the resident elephants (who aren't kept chained) by going on rides, feeding or painting them (bathing elephants in the pond is possible only during the month of October, November and March) or driving you to Amber Fort through the back road in the 4WD. You will also have a designated butler supported by 4 other staff members. Bharat and 2 staff members stay at the campsite during the night. I found Bharat and the other staff members polite, courteous and unobtrusive. Really enjoyed the company of Chetram, my butler who was my guide when I went visiting the nearby hamlet of 5 brothers who are into farming. The way he narrated and presented their simple life was outstanding. Chetram was always calm and had this perpetual happy smile on his face which I found uplifting.

Those of us who have done the Elephant ride and a meal (lunch/dinner) which Udaijit started 12 years ago are familiar with the food at Dera Amer. The same food is served at the Wilderness Camp. For those who haven't, it is simple, home style delicious food with ingredients from their organic garden laid out in a buffet. The food is mostly a mix of Indian and Rajasthani (some family recipes such as the Dera Mutton) with spices toned down to suit the palate of their largely overseas clientele. Udaijit's was telling me that his friends who are chefs abroad have taught his staff to cook a few continental dishes and that they do a decent job. Just so you know the food is not cooked at the campsite, but in the kitchen not too far away and whisked in discreetly through the "service lane" (what service lane, it is all forest. I didn't realise it was a service lane until Udaijit pointed it out to explain how the logistics work).

True to the bush tradition, there is no dining tent at the Dera Wilderness Camp. All meals are served under the open sky. As evening sets in, the lanterns, the diyas (earthen oil lamps) and the bonfire are lit. Drinks are served by your butler whilst your personal chef takes care of the barbecue live and fresh in front of you. The faint strains of the most sweet music of a stringed instrument from somewhere close by keeps you company. A folk dance performance can be organised for an extra supplement.

In the morning, a resident Elephant arrives with whom you can spend quality time while breakfast is being prepared. The Mahout will be around. Feed the gentle giant bananas and sugar cane, touch it, talk with it, enjoy each other's company. Let Bharat know what you want for breakfast - bread, butter, cheese, sausage, ham, bacon, milk, cereals, fresh juice, tea/coffee and eggs to order OR parathas with yogurt etc.

ACTIVITIES: (Which I experienced firsthand)

Dhani Visit: I took a camel cart ride to the nearby Dhani of 5 brothers with my butler Chetram. Clients are accompanied by both Chetram who narrates and Bharat who translates. I asked Bharat to take a break. Dhani in Rajasthan are clusters of huts inhabited by people who are relatives or at least of the same socio-economic background. All Dhani are closer to agricultural fields where the idea is better management of the crops and its protection from animals – particularly the Nilgai or the Blue Bull, the largest Asian antelope who is a common crop pest in Rajasthan. Very interestingly, despite a provision to kill Nilgais by seeking permission from authorities no farmer would exercise this option. This is because 'Gai', meaning a cow, is part of the antelope's name and cows are considered holy in India. They would rather blast music all night to keep them away. That's what Chetram told me while pointing out to the music system on the edge of the field. That explains the dugga - dugga sound I heard when I was having a drink with Udaijit in the lounge after dinner. I thought there was a party somewhere.

It was carrot harvesting season and Chetram took me to the family working on the field. A cot arrived and so did tea. I was told about everything that goes into it – when the carrots are planted, when they ripen, how the carrots are cleaned, from where they hire equipment to do that, how much that costs, how are the carrots sorted and then stored, how it reaches the market, will they be able to cover costs this time around, make profits, what next in the crop cycle et al. Chetram also explained the ecosystem that existed around the Dhani – a generator to provide 24 hr electricity, a borewell for 24 hrs water, a huge tank to store water for irrigation which also doubles up as a swimming pool in summer and the shrine of their protector deity. We ended our tour of the Dhani with a cup of tea made out of goat's milk. I remembered my Grandma, her goats and her chai. As we returned to the camp Chetram asked me with a smile – did you notice everything is within walking distance for these folks? – their work space, where their goats and buffaloes graze, where their children play and their school. How much time does it take for you to reach office from home? I smiled and kept nodding.

AMMENITIES AND FACILITIES:

- Foreign exchange **Yes**
- Accepts Credit Card (Masters and Visa) **Yes**
- WiFi – **In the Camp – No/In the Lounge area which is a 5 minute walk - Yes**
- Mobile Connectivity in the property **Yes**
- Air-conditioning **No**
- Fan inside tent **No**. But possible to arrange stand fans
- Spa – **No**. (But a masseur is available on 3 hrs advance notice)
- Complimentary water bottles in the room **Yes**
- Tea Coffee Maker in room **No** – Just ask your Butler
- Hair Dryer, Towels and Toiletries in bathroom **Yes**
- Electronic Safe in room **Yes**
- In house phone in room and Room Service **No**
- Mini Bar in rooms **No**
- TV in the rooms - **No**
- 24 hr power back up **Yes**
- Extra Bed can be placed in the rooms **Yes**
- Alcohol **Yes**
- Pool – **No**
- Doctor on call – **Yes**
- In house activities: **Yes**

1. All Elephant Activities during your stay in the camp – included in the rate
2. Camel Cart Ride to the Dhani – included in the rate
3. Jeep Safari to Amber Fort – included in the rate
4. Forest Walk with picnic lunch - included in the rate
5. Bird watching trip – included in the rate
6. Yoga session – Extra supplement
7. Horse Riding - Extra supplement
8. Hot Air Balloon Ride - Extra supplement

- Tipping – Dera Wilderness Camp does not encourage individual tipping. Ask for an envelope from your host while checking out and should you want to leave behind a tip for the staff.

WHAT IS INCLUDED IN THE RATES:

Room, all meals, water, tea, coffee, soft drinks, alcoholic beverages (Indian) and the following activities:

1. All Elephant Activities during your stay in the camp
2. Camel Cart Ride to the Dhani
3. Jeep Safari to Amber Fort
4. Forest Walk with picnic lunch
5. Bird watching trip

BEST TIME TO GO: The camp is open from 01 October to 15 April. I would recommend Mid October – Mid-March since the tents don't have AC.

OVERALL RATING: On a scale of 1-10

1. Exterior Appearance of the Tent: 5
2. Interior Appearance and Cleanliness: 9
3. Overall Staff Attitude/Professionalism: 9
4. Room Décor and Bed: 9
5. Bathroom and Bathroom Fixtures/Amenities: 9
6. Room Cleanliness: 9
7. Daily Room Servicing: 9
8. Quality of Bathroom Supplies : 9
9. Food: 9
10. Quality of in-house experiences (Village visit) : 9

POSSIBLE ROUTING: (for first timers to India)

- Delhi-Agra- Dera Wilderness Camp- Devshree – via Ranakpur – Devigarh/Udaipur-Delhi

DERA WILDERNESS CAMP ITINERARY:

Option 1: 2 nights in Dera Wilderness Camp

Day 1 - Arrive Dera Amer Wilderness Camp from Agra post lunch. Head out to your tent on Elephant Back. Visit the Village, go on a forest walk, a bird watching trip or spend time with the resident Elephants. Overnight Dera Amer Wilderness Camp.

Day 2 – Spend quality time with your Elephant while breakfast is being prepared. Breakfast . Head out to Amber Fort from the back roads in the 4WD of Dera Amer Wilderness Camp. Sita Guide will meet clients and take them for the Amber Fort Tour. Continue on Sita's vehicle and with Sita guide to visit the City Palace and Jantar Mantar and return to the camp on the Sita vehicle. Evening folk dance. Overnight Dera Amer Wilderness Camp.

Day 3 – Breakfast. Continue to Devshree.

Option 2: 1 night in Dera Wilderness Camp+2 nights in a Jaipur city Hotel

Day 1 - Arrive Dera Amer Wilderness Camp from Agra post lunch. Head out to your tent on Elephant Back. Visit the Village, go on a forest walk, a bird watching trip or spend time with the resident Elephants. Evening folk dance. Overnight Dera Amer Wilderness Camp

Day 2 – Spend quality time with your Elephant while breakfast is being prepared. Breakfast. Check-out. Head out to Amber Fort from the back roads in the 4WD of Dera Amer Wilderness Camp. Sita Guide will meet clients and take them for the Amber Fort Tour. Continue on Sita's vehicle from Amber Fort to check-in to your Jaipur City Hotel. Afternoon at leisure or Evening Walking Tour in the Old City (Sita's no 1 Experience pan India). Overnight Jaipur City Hotel

Day 3 – Morning City Palace and Jantar Mantar. Afternoon at leisure or Cooking Lesson at Dera Mandawa followed by Dinner (Sita's no 5 Experience pan India). Overnight Jaipur City Hotel

Day 4 – Breakfast. Continue to Devshree.

LAST WORD:

The Dera Wilderness Camp will work very well for clients travelling with children, small groups (8 pax/4 tents) and even couples who seek a personalised experience in a private getaway which is so near yet so far away from everything in Jaipur.

WEBSITE:

<http://deraamer.com/living-elephants-%E2%80%93-tented-camp-dera-amer>

VIDEO OF THE DERA WILDERNESS CAMP:

<https://vimeo.com/sitain/review/156543597/cf713d8c04> (166 seconds)

Cheers

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