

METRO

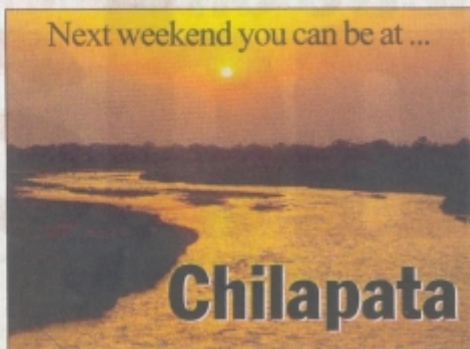
on Sunday

XXCE

Imagine sleeping inside a forest bungalow with wild animals moving around the compound in the dead of night. Strange sounds break the silence ever so often, adding to the eeriness. There's a sudden flurry of movement over the fence — is it a herd of wild pigs or a leopard?

This is Chilapata, a dense forest near Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary in Jalpaiguri district. It forms an elephant corridor between Jaldapara and Buxa Tiger Reserve.

Once infamous for dacoits, Chilapata has over the years become a popular destination for tourists, thanks to the efforts of the local administration, forest department and



Next weekend you can be at ...

Chilapata

police.

The West Bengal Forest Development Corporation runs an eco-tourism resort, Mend-

abari Jungle Camp, at Kodalbasti, 2km inside the jungle.

At night, it's best not to venture out of the bungalow on

foot as leopards often visit the stream by its side for a drink.

We decided on a jeep safari after lunch. Mud-paved tracks and thick vegetation that allows almost no sunlight to get in greeted us on the trail.

We stopped at Nalraja Garh — one of the largest secular monuments of the Gupta period in West Bengal.

Forgetting our fear of wild animals, we stood in awe before the remains of the 2,000-year-old fortress inside the dense jungle.

It is said that Nalraja Garh was excavated by Sudhin De in 1966-67. In his report, the researcher proposed that the monument was built during the Gupta period, judging by its architectural features. We

Going

Take Teesta Torsa Express from Sealdah or Kamrup Express from Howrah to reach New Alipurduar Junction, the nearest rail station. Chilapata is an hour's drive from Alipurduar.

Staying

Mendabari Jungle Camp, run by WBFDCA at Kodalbasti, provides basic accommodation. Contact: West Bengal Tourism, M-4 Building, Hill Cart Road, Siliguri Telephone: (0353) 2511979, 2517561

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tried to venture inside but a snake slithered past us, putting paid to our adventurous mission.

Another interesting site is the watchtower beside the Torsa. You can find several domesticated elephants near the watchtower called "kunki" by the local people.

Once on the top of the tower, we spotted a rhino lazing around amid a clump of tall grass near the river. We were eager to go down and explore but our guide warned us that such tall grasses were a favourite hiding place for leopards.

We spent some more time on the watchtower and were rewarded with a spectacular sunset over the Torsa.

(Metro on Sunday thanks reader AMITABHA GUPTA for this contribution.