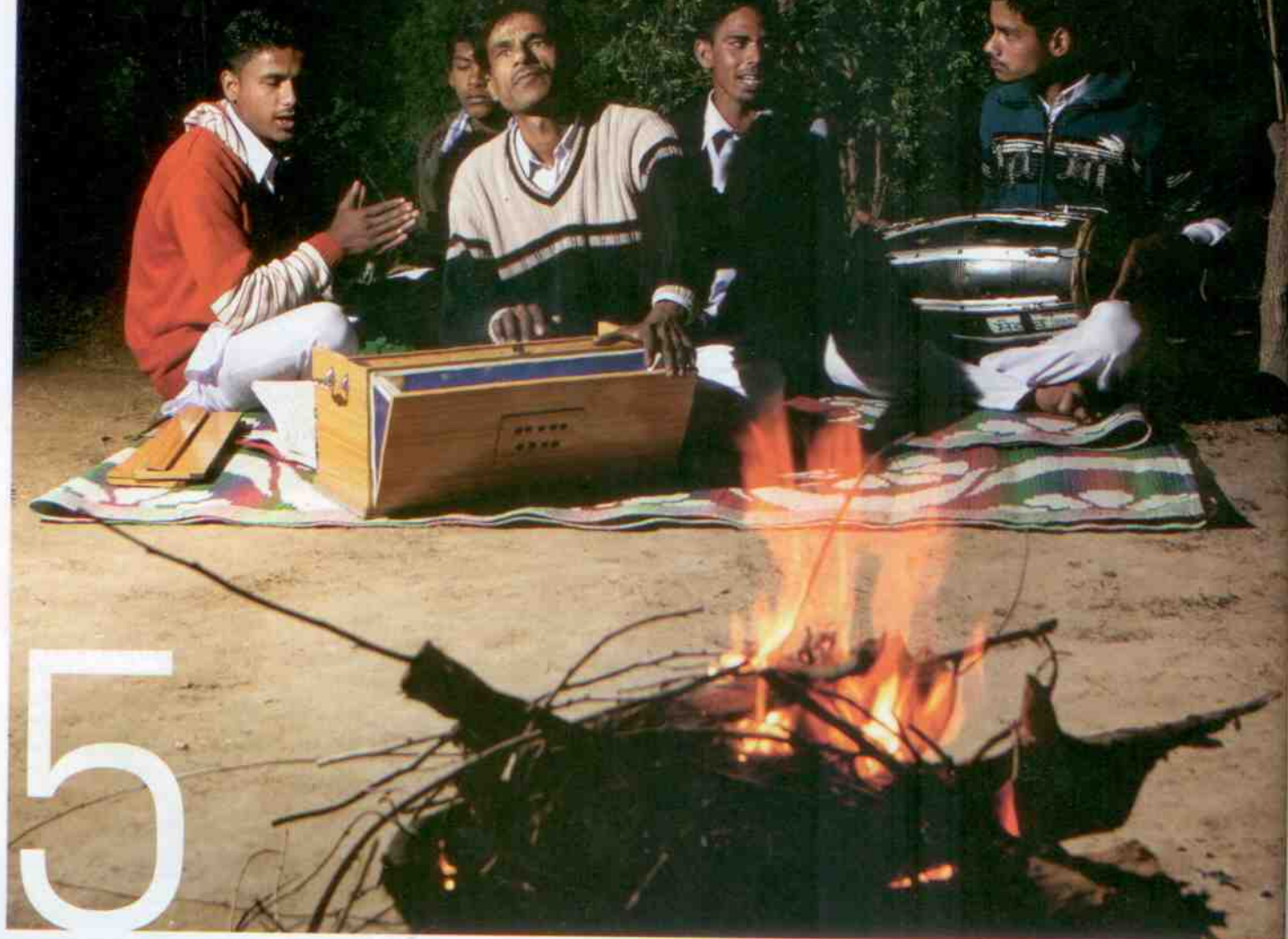


5 EASY TRIPS

Sufi singers from the nearby village put up quite a performance at Prakriti, interspersing the *qawwalis* with folk tales

RUSTIC
RETREAT



Prakriti - Kaushal's Ecological Farm, Rupnagar, Punjab

THE SIMPLE LIFE

There are no signboards leading you to Prakriti - Kaushal's Ecological Farm. Heck, there's no signage pointing you towards Rupnagar, either. When the driver turns right into a nondescript bylane off the Phagwara-Mohali Expressway, you abruptly find yourself in a tiny village, and just as suddenly, you're in the middle of the forest. Just when you begin to wonder if said driver knows where he's going, you're deposited at Prakriti's front gate.

A great place for kids to run free and learn about nature,

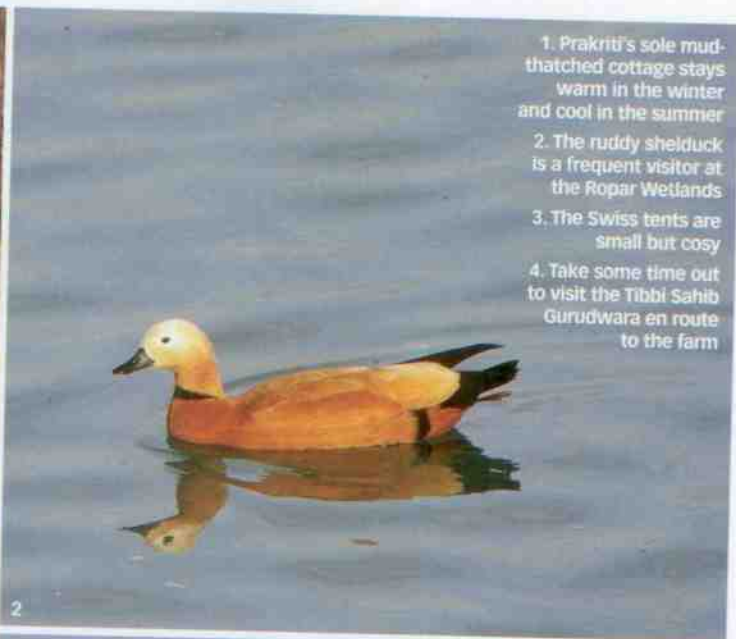
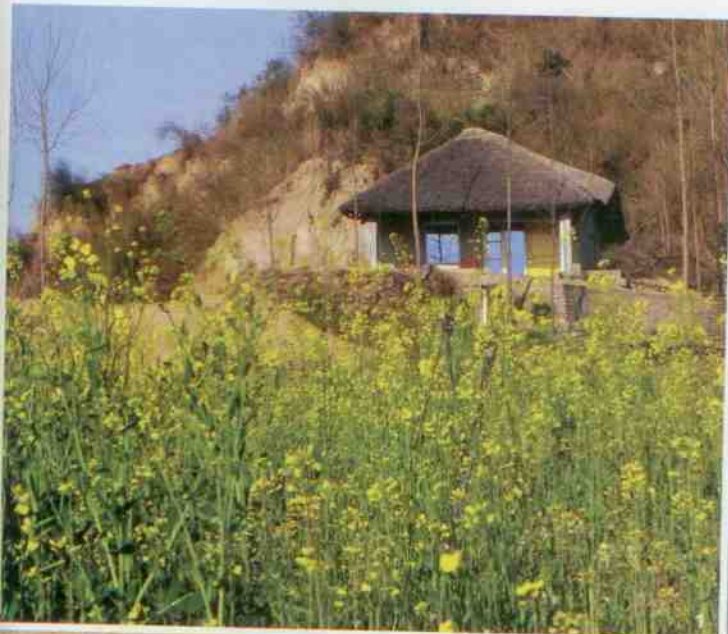
Prakriti offers an active or do-nothing break, depending on what you want. The lack of advertising is intentional, as Kaushal Netar, the affable owner, wants only people who respect and enjoy nature to visit the 10-acre working farm.

There's a lot to do on the farm - you can help with ploughing, planting and the general upkeep of the orchards (they grow guava and kinnows, a type of orange) and vegetable patches. Almost everything served at the farm is grown organically - potatoes, carrots, spinach, even wheat and

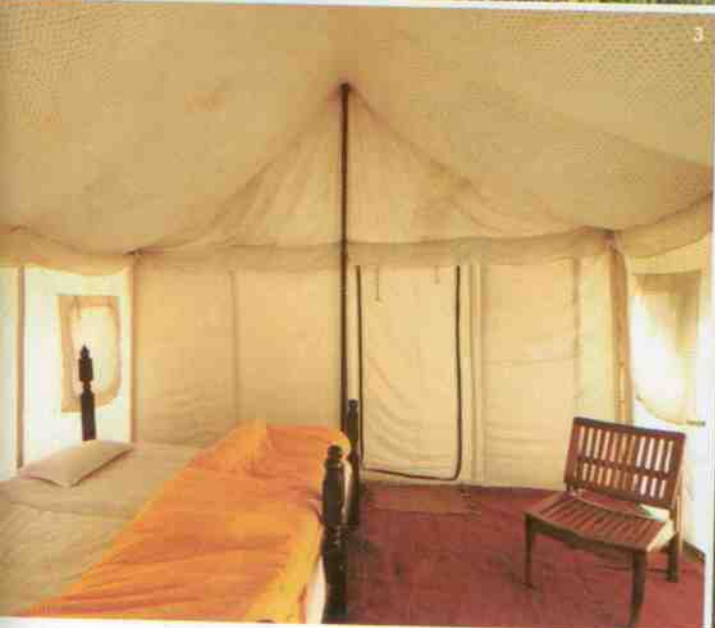
lentils - and then slow-cooked over an open fire to make the dishes you will relish.

Kaushal tries to do as much as he can to preserve what's left of the forest; efforts include water harvesting, composting, contour terracing and planting various types of grass to tackle the soil erosion problem, and tree plantation to make up for the lack of trees in this area. Interestingly, his family has no background in agriculture, and much of what Kaushal knows - and he knows a lot - he's picked up on the farm and by reading up on it.

If you wish to venture out, the **Rõpar Wetlands**, which host more than a hundred species of resident and migratory birds, are a 10-minute drive away (*open daily; entry free*). There isn't an official guide, but Kaushal usually asks Jaspreet Singh Chadha - school teacher, avid birder and local historian - to show you around the wetlands, pointing out coots, ruddy shelduck, cormorants, common moorhen and the white-chested kingfisher (00-91-9417607444; chadha.jaspreet13@gmail.com; ₹ 2,000/day). **Sadabarat Nature Trail**,



1. Prakriti's sole mud-thatched cottage stays warm in the winter and cool in the summer
2. The ruddy shelduck is a frequent visitor at the Ropar Wetlands
3. The Swiss tents are small but cosy
4. Take some time out to visit the Tibbi Sahib Gurudwara en route to the farm



GREAT FROM
New Delhi, Chandigarh

GREAT FOR
Delicious farm-fresh food, birding, and history lessons

GO NOW
While the days are pleasantly warm and the nights cool enough for a bonfire.

the entrance to the wetlands, a good place for the little ones to learn about local flora
Divisional Forest Office [Wildlife];

00-91-1881-220715; 9am – 5am; entry free). The trail, with well-signposted trees, can take about three hours to complete, so plan your day accordingly.

Biodiversity aside, Rupnagar also hides a lot of history beneath its soil, quite literally. The rundown but fascinating **Archaeological Survey of India's museum** features finds from Harappan to medieval times, including a recreation of a Harappan funeral ceremony with an almost-intact human skeleton (00-91-1881-221230; College Rd; 9am – 5am, Fri closed; ₹ 5 entry).

The excavation site, around the corner, is an interesting place to visit when the dig's on (until end April; entry free). You can look into the trenches and watch as the specimens are picked out, cleaned and laid into neat piles for the archaeologist to examine.

When you've had your fill of the town, head back to the farm for hot *chai* and *palak pakodas* and settle down with a book, or hike up a little hillock at the farm to take in a pretty sunset. There is no TV or wi-fi here, but there are soulful performances by *Sufi* singers from the nearby

village to be enjoyed, and plenty of great conversations to be started by the bonfire. Or, ask a farmhand to take you to the cave nearby (30 minutes walking). It isn't much to look at, but the temple there makes for a great perch from which to take in the forest, a view of the Shivalik range, and, of course, the sunset.

Come here for nature, for the history, for the warm hospitality, but most of all, come here for the quietude.

WORDS HARDIKA PANCHAL
PHOTOGRAPHS VISHAL SABHARWAL

TURN OVER FOR ALL YOU NEED TO GET THERE

FACT SHEET

GETTING THERE

Closest metro: New Delhi (approx 280km) is a five-to six-hour drive away. Start early to avoid traffic in Chandigarh.

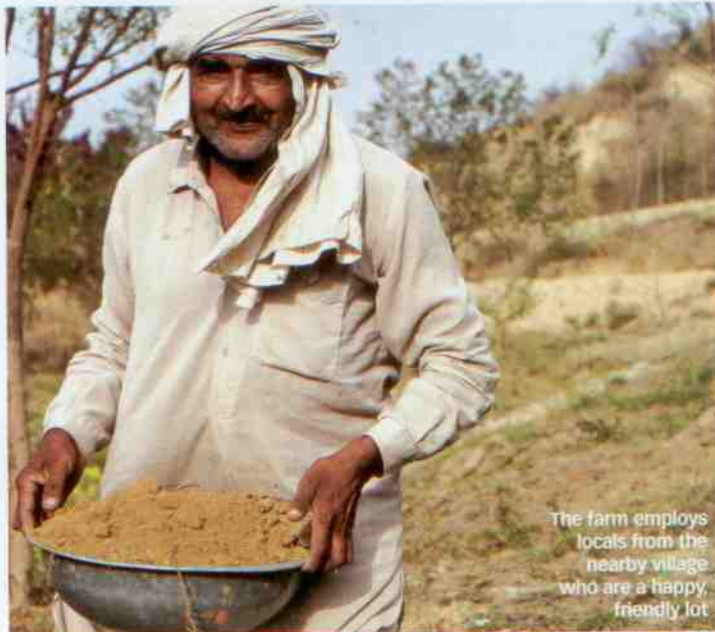
Closest airport: Chandigarh Airport (44km). Return flights from New Delhi start at ₹ 5,000. Prakriti – Kaushal's Ecological Farm is in Rupnagar, a one- to one-and-a-half-hour drive away depending on the traffic. As it's located deep in the Shivaliks, and regular taxis may not know how to find it, let Kaushal hire a car for you (₹ 2,500 for pick-up and drop-off in an Indica).

Closest railhead:

Chandigarh (CDG, 45km). Rupnagar has a railway station, too, but it's a long ride from New Delhi. The 12011 **Kalka Shatabdi** is convenient (leaves New Delhi [NDLS] 7.40am, reaches CDG 11.05pm; ₹ 435 AC Chair Car). Return by the 12012 **Kalka Shatabdi** (leaves CDG 6.23pm, arrives NDLS 9.55pm; ₹ 505 AC Chair Car). Kaushal can arrange a pick-up from the station, too, (₹ 2,500 for pick-up and drop-off in an Indica).

GETTING AROUND

If you don't have your own car, Kaushal will drive you around in his car or hire one if required.



The farm employs locals from the nearby village who are a happy, friendly lot



WHERE TO STAY

Prakriti – Kaushal's Ecological Farm has three safari tents with shared bathrooms (₹ 2,000), three Swiss tents with attached bathrooms (₹ 3,000) and one mud-thatched cottage (₹ 4,000) all of which offer unobstructed views of the Shivaliks (00-91-9971393626; prakritifarms.com; PO Rail Majra Dist, Shahid Bharat Singh Nagar, near Ropar).

WHAT TO EAT

Meals at the farm are prepared in the traditional style using fresh, organic produce, served with much

enthusiasm and affection by Kaushal and his family. Expect more than your share of *makke di rotis* with generous drizzles of *desi ghee*, *aloo parathas* with butter, *sarson da saag*, *aloo methi*, *maa ki dal* and unlimited cups of tea and *lassi* (₹ 500 pp each day for all meals). Kaushal fires up the *tandoor* for larger groups. If you manage to tear yourself away from the farm's food, head to the main market for piping hot *samosas* with *chana*, served with chilled *dahi* at **Luxmi Sai Sweets** (Dashmesh Nagar, next to Kalyan Cinema, Rupnagar; 10am – 10pm; ₹ 7/ plate). Ask for **Niranjandas & Sons**; try

the excellent sweet *lassi*. This is also a good place to pick up *gaajar ka halwa* (called *gajrela* or *gaajar pak* here), and a local *besan barfi* with a thin layer of *khoya* – a local specialty (00-91-9872658476; 7am – 10pm; ₹ 20 lassi, ₹ 200/ kg gaajar ka halwa, ₹ 180/ kg besan barfi).

WHAT TO PACK

Warm clothes, walking shoes as the farm has hilly terrain, a cap, torch, binoculars for bird-watching (you can borrow Kaushal's if you don't own a pair), sunscreen, mosquito repellent, prescription medicine and a book.

SHOPPING

Get a bag of **kinnows** (a type of orange that's native to this region) from the roadside sellers along the highway near Rupnagar. Most stalls also have juicers – have a glass of freshly-squeezed juice (from ₹ 20/ kg, from ₹ 15 for a glass of juice).

CLEAN LOO GUIDE

Avoid the *dhabas* en route. Try **Aman Resorts** (10 minutes after *Kharar* on NH 205), which has semi-functional but clean loos – carry toilet paper and hand sanitiser.

SAFETY

The resident dog, *Billo*, and her troupe patrols the farm at night. Animals, especially wild boars (and a leopard that was once spotted here) are on the prowl by night, though, so don't wander off. Keep an eye on the kids, as there are many sandy slopes to navigate here.

MEDICAL AID

There are lots of hospitals at Rupnagar for medical emergencies. **Sangha Multi-Specialty Hospital** is a good bet (00-91-1881-227890; Zail Singh Rd).

CHILD-FRIENDLINESS

Kids can get a hands-on experience of life on a farm, and learn about conservation. Kaushal arranges educational tours for Delhi schools and has lots of interesting activities and information for children.

GOOD TO KNOW

- ◆ While this could be a wonderful family trip, getting around on the farm might be difficult for the elderly, as you have to walk up slightly steep, sandy slopes to get to your room/ tent.
- ◆ Prakriti isn't well-known, but Kaushal and his family, who hail from the same village, are familiar figures, so ask for the 'Colonel's farm' if you're lost.
- ◆ Try to time your visit for when Kaushal is at the farm, which is usually on weekends, as it'll enhance your experience.

MAP: BISHAL BOHRA/STOCKBOTS