

# TRACKING THE GREY GHOST

IN THE REMOTE ULLEY VALLEY WEST OF LEH, THE SNOW LEOPARD FLITS LIKE AN APPARITION

BY GUSTASP AND JEROO IRANI



The first glimpse of the snow leopard feels like a fantastical beast camouflaging itself expertly amid the stark Himalayan landscape.

Ladakh's Ulley valley is a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Leh, crusted with snow, and a breathtaking panorama of ridges and cliffs.



FAHIM KHAN/ISTOCK

## STEALTH AND GRACE MARKED HIS EVERY STEP; HIS LONG FURRY TAIL SWISHED LIKE A BRIDAL TRAIN, HELPING HIM MAINTAIN BALANCE AT THE TOP OF A RIDGE.

The snow leopard paused, preened and then presented a proud profile, yawning, baring his fangs. A bloody kill lay nearby; we learnt he had devoured it over a week. For a few moments, we forgot it was -15 °C, that the bitter cold cut to the bone; that freshly fallen snow lay at our feet and the wind whooshed and whipped around us. All we could see was the big furry cat loping slowly on the ridge towards its kill, and the ice-encrusted mountains that shrapnelled the sky. A half-frozen Indus flowed below, the colour of jade in parts, adding to the magic of the solitary cat's movements. We couldn't believe the snow leopard was real, and not an apparition.

Slowly, light leached out from the sapphire skies, but the mountains continued to glow like extraterrestrial ships that had soft landed in the middle of nowhere. Darkness descended like a curtain drawn on a performance, leaving its audience speechless, and obliterated the cat from view.

We walked back in a daze to our SUVs, which purred over ice-slicked roads, and onward to the Snow Leopard Lodge in the village of Ulley, a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Leh. Despite its relative closeness to Leh, the village of six mud-brick homes draped with prayer flags, seemed to exist a planet away from the city. The lodge offers rudimentary comforts like gas heaters and kerosene *bukharis* (traditional heater), and in that icy wilderness, it was everything we needed.

Up in the mountains, at 13,000 feet, the rarefied air winded us; we moved in slow motion and wheezed when we bent to tie our shoelaces, snuggling into layers of woollen clothing at dawn. Beyond our bedroom windows lay the Himalayas slumbering under layers of fresh snow. We'd hear the crackle of the *bukhari* being lit. Hot water in buckets followed by steaming cups of tea made it easier to emerge from the mountain of quilts and fleece-lined blankets we burrowed under each night, hugging hot water bottles.

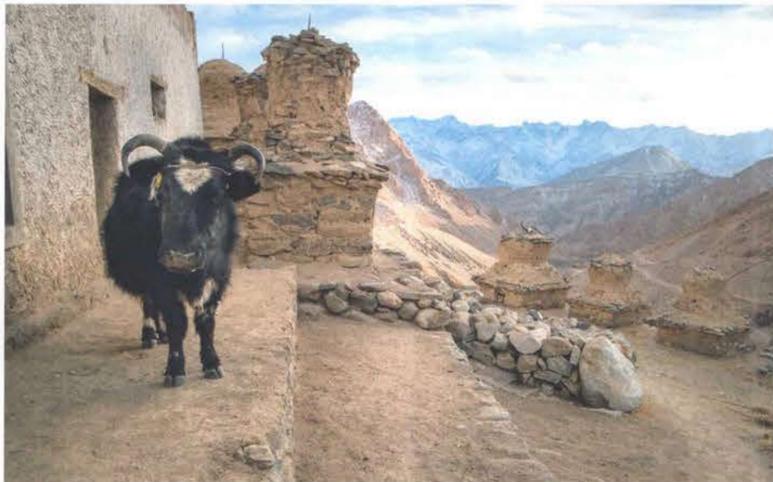
As we walked from our annexe to the main block for breakfast or dinner, we skirted shaggy dzos (a cross between a cow and a yak) and furry, ponderous yaks that are the lifeline of the locals. Dun-coloured chukker partridges strutted around in the yard. Occasionally, we would meet a local with her apple-cheeked baby strapped to her back, lugging empty plastic canisters to a nearby river to fill water. Older children would peep out from behind their mamas' skirts, often gambolling in the snow like marmots.

At the lodge, there was camaraderie aplenty, as guests swapped life histories and experiences. "When we first came here we were, in a sense, blind. They taught us how to see," said Catherine Eva, an American tourist, nodding towards Tshewang Norbu, who owns the Snow Leopard Lodge. He is also an expert tracker and a local legend of sorts. A few days ago, Eva and her group had seen a snow leopard close to the village, thanks to Norbu and his team, who



The graceful Himalayan ibex calls the steep crags of Ulley home.

SANJAY KUMAR/ISTOCK



Shaggy dzos (hybrids of cow and yak) are occasionally seen near the Snow Leopard Lodge in Ulley.

know every crevasse and fold in the land, and are up on the ridge above the lodge at daybreak, scanning the snowy paths for leopard scat, pug marks and other tell-tale signs that the big cat had been on the prowl the night before.

One morning, we sat on a row of trestle chairs outside, scanning the horizon for wildlife, overwhelmed by the immensity of ridge upon ridge, unravelling like some white-knuckled seismic hump under blue skies. We saw proud ibex in valleys swaggering across the wilderness like an army on a long march. A golden eagle rode the thermals above, while urial sashayed across the white canvas, unmindful of the fact that a leopard might lurk somewhere in a crevasse.

On another day, we drove further afield and had lunch set up on tables anchored in snow, watching the desert landscape unroll like a colossal *tangka* painting around us. Rivers of ice slashed the slopes, and we realised that the handsome snow leopard needs terrain just like this to showcase its unique beauty.

Until recently the feline was reviled by locals for making off with their livestock in the dead of the night, said Tsewang Namgail, director of Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust, a Leh-based non-profit. The NGO worked with the locals of Ulley and Rumbak, a village

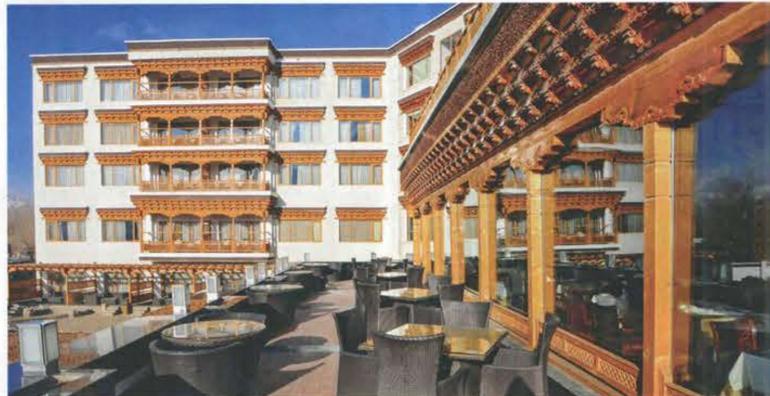
in Hemis National Park in eastern Ladakh (it's said to have the highest density of snow leopards in any protected area in the world), highlighting the need to protect the animal. Without it, the herbivore and ungulate population would explode and impact the ecosystem negatively, he explained. "People came around, and are now stakeholders in the effort," said Namgail. The snow leopard is now revered for bringing in visitors, which has bolstered the region's economy. Tourism has brought in jobs; the agency has set up ecotourism projects like homestays, given villagers the means to corral their livestock safely, and initiated a livestock insurance scheme which is run by the community itself.

Living briefly in those harsh conditions taught us at a visceral level that we were ultimately at nature's mercy. We saw first-hand how it is possible to lead a sustainable life, taking from our surroundings only what one needs and no more; that water is precious at that altitude.

After three nights, we drove back to Leh, to a more manageable 11,500 feet, and took in the Stok Kangri mountain range. Everything took on dream-like proportions, just like that grey ghost on that distant ridge. Had we really seen him? Or was he a mirage thrown up by the high-altitude desert? ■

VOJESHI PLANIAR/SHUTTERSTOCK

The village of Ulley (top) has six homes strung with prayer flags, a feeling of remoteness, and a slow-moving life. Some lunches (bottom) are better than others, with front-row seats to the Himalayas: The Snow Leopard Lodge provides winter packages with the luxurious Grand Dragon Ladakh hotel (middle) in Leh.



### ESSENTIALS

There are daily flights to Leh from Delhi, and one-stop flights from Mumbai. Devote 24-48 hours to acclimatise to the altitude in Leh before moving up to Ulley. The scenic roads to Leh from Srinagar and Manali are closed in winter. The best time to spot the snow leopard is between January and April, when it descends into the valley in search of prey.

The writers were guests of The Grand Dragon Ladakh hotel (01982 257786; 11-day package includes stay at the Snow Leopard Lodge in Ulley; ex-Leh ₹250,000 per person approx.).

GUSTASP AND JEROO IRANI