

LEH, Ladakh

Culture

Instead of following the usual tourist route, watch a game of ice hockey



MOUNTAIN

In the shadow of the Himalayas and flag-festooned monasteries that teeter on mountain ridges, a tense game of ice hockey unfolds; in Leh, 11,500 feet above sea level in the Union Territory of Ladakh, ice hockey is more than just a game—it's a cultural gathering.

From the first snowfall in December to springtime in March, foreign and local players skim the frozen Karzoo Zing, a pond that becomes a natural ice rink.

The sight of Ladakhis skillfully zipping over ice while brandishing hockey sticks at a bone-chilling -18°C is not a new one. The Ladakh Winter Sports Club (LWSC) has been hosting tournaments since 1995. Moreover, the Canadian High Commission in New Delhi supported the LWSC's efforts with the Indo-Canadian Friendship Ice Hockey Cup in 2001 and had its own team—New Delhi Sacred Bulls—participate in the tourney. Participation in the event has become a part of the High Commission's annual calendar, and this will be the 18th year for its

team now known as Delhi Bulls. India too has its own National Ice Hockey teams for both men and women, and with the country's only artificial ice rink that meets international standards remaining closed in Dehradun, Karzoo Zing has also long been the practice grounds for these athletes. It is heartwarming to visit the practice grounds of the all-Ladakhi National Women's Ice Hockey Team, who, using borrowed equipment, created history when they won two matches at the IIHF Challenge Cup of Asia held in Bangkok, Thailand in 2017. Typically, scheduled games last 45 minutes with a 15-minute cinnamon tea break before the next two competing teams take the ice. Spectators sit on tiered stands (entry is free) while some of the more enthusiastic supporters perch on tree branches for a better view!

Ice hockey played against the stunning backdrop of the Himalayas and in the rarefied air and lunar landscape of Ladakh is unlike any other tournament in the world.

—Gustasp and Jeroo Irani

HOW TO GO

While Delhi has direct daily flights to Leh, all flights from Mumbai involve a layover in the capital.

