

ADVENTURE LADAKH

THE LEOPARD IN WINTER

TRACKING THE MOST ELUSIVE OF THE BIG CATS IN THE
FRIGID WILDS OF LADAKH. TEXT BY **AMIT DIXIT**.
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **PUNEET K. PALIWAL**

*A rare glimpse of the snow
leopard inside the Hemis
National Park
NIKON D850/VR
70-200MM F/2.8G LENS
(F/7.1, 1/4,000s, ISO: 400)*

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In a way, the snow leopard was simply an excuse. Of course, I wanted to see one in the wild, but, in retrospect, the trip was more about me: about challenging myself, pushing my limits, and finding out if I had it in me to head into a Ladakh winter and live to tell the tale.

You're reading this, so I guess I did. It began comfortably enough, with the party meeting at the well-appointed Grand Dragon in Ladakh, where the joys of central heating had reduced me to shorts and tees. The group included an extroverted old Ladakh hand and an introverted retired IT professional whose idea of fun was diving in mountain lakes in winter (but who could not handle any spices in her food). Both hailed from Switzerland. There was Puneet, our photographer, who has the agility—and chutzpah—of a tree-dwelling ape. There

was Aly Rashid, Bhopal royal, passionate naturalist and leader of the expedition. There was a crew of seasoned trackers and guides. And there was me, the weakest link in the chain.

Snow leopards are best seen in winter, when they follow their prey down to slightly lower altitudes. The plan was simple. Although the leopards are just about everywhere in Ladakh, two villages have emerged as front runners in the viewing stakes: Ulley, north of the Indus in West Ladakh, which was developed by the Snow Leopard Conservancy for community-based leopard tourism, and Rumbak, deep inside the Hemis National Park and accessible only on foot from the roadhead. Both were reasonable drives from Leh. Not wanting to leave anything to chance, we would visit both.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Modi was set to swoop into Leh for some pre-election

campaigning the next morning, so we headed out early to avoid any traffic snarls. Destination: Ulley.

Ladakh is lovely in any season, but in the depths of winter it is something else. The landscape is stunning, and there's a stillness in the air which belongs only to winter. Every time we stepped out of our cosy SUV to spot a herd of blue sheep or observe a lammergeier, however, the wind chilled us to the bone. This did not deter us from getting out at the partially frozen confluence of the Indus and Zaskar rivers, and taking in the view. Nor did it bother us when we stopped longer by the side of the frozen Zaskar and went walking on it—a small sample of the legendary Chadar trek, and enough to get you hooked.

There always comes a moment in every trip when things click into place. For me this was that moment. The silence was

Ladakh is lovely in any season, but in the depths of winter it is something else. The landscape is simply stunning



A structure used only in summer near Rumbak; NIKON D850/24-70MM F/2.8G LENS (F/18, 1/250s, ISO: 320); and (facing page) glimpses from a walk (including a leopard pugmark)





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Aly Rashid of Jehan
Numa Wilderness
points at something
NIKON D850/24-
70MM F/2.8G
LENS (F/22, 1/250s,
ISO: 250)



Blue sheep on a crag
NIKON D850, VR
500MM F/4E LENS
(F/8, 1/800s, ISO: 320)



The party takes a break
NIKON D850/24-70MM F/2.8G LENS
(F/11, 1/125s, ISO: 250)



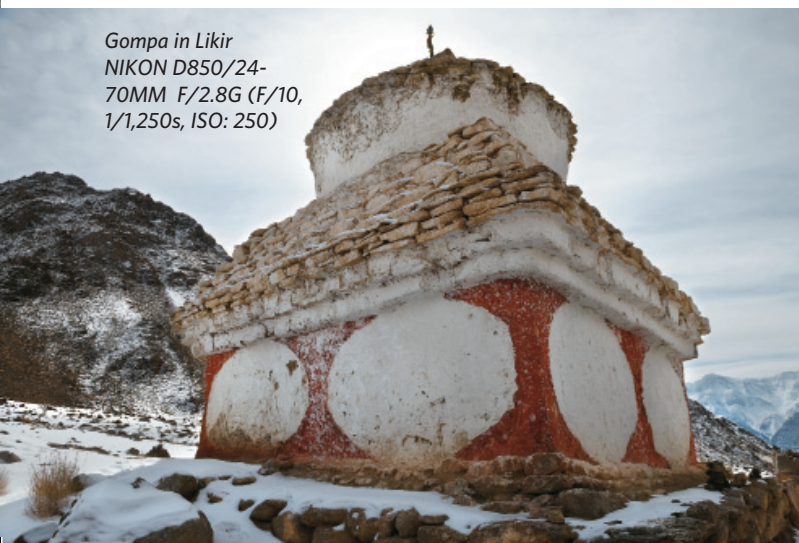
Curious wildlife
NIKON Z6/VR 500MM F/4E LENS
(F/9.5, 1/400s, ISO: AUTO)



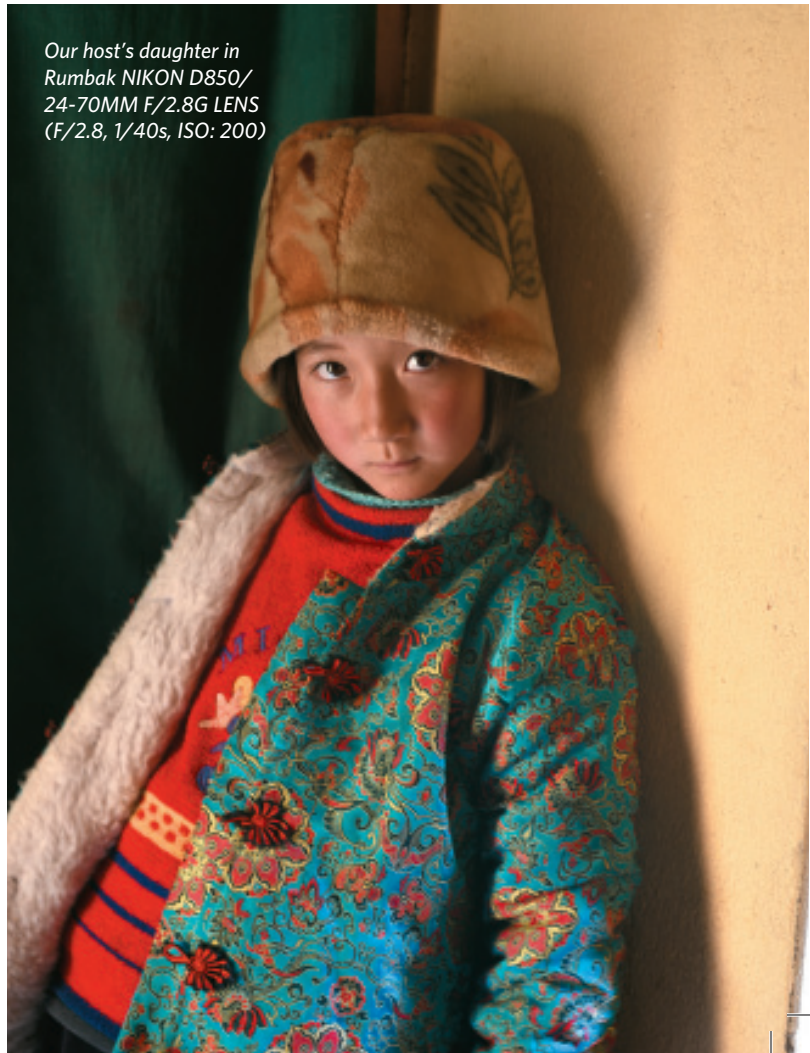
Looking for leopards
NIKON D850/24-70MM F/2.8G
LENS (F/14, 1/400s, ISO: 250)



Chukar partridges in Hemis Shukpachan
NIKON Z6/VR 500MM F/4E LENS
(F/9.5, 1/1,000s, ISO: AUTO)



Gompa in Likir
NIKON D850/24-
70MM F/2.8G (F/10,
1/1,250s, ISO: 250)



Our host's daughter in
Rumbak
NIKON D850/
24-70MM F/2.8G LENS
(F/2.8, 1/40s, ISO: 200)

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deafening. The sky a crisp blue, with discreet smudges of cloud. The air clean. The company excellent.

The nearly 1,000-year-old Likir monastery en route was hosting a festival and we dropped by for a quick dekko. But after that, it was strictly business, the snow leopard on top of our minds.

Somewhere along the drive I nodded off. When I awoke, we were above the snowline, in a surreal white wonderland. This was Ulley, a tiny village at the mouth of the Ulley Chhu valley, perched at about 4,000m above sea level. There are only a handful of homes here. We were being hosted at the highest home in the village, where a lodge had been purpose built for snow leopard enthusiasts. Some of us chose to walk the last kilometre through the snow to the lodge (I'm sure you can guess I wasn't one of them). Here we were welcomed by central heating,

which was putting up a valiant fight against the punishing cold outside.

No leopard had been spotted near Ulley in over a week, we were told, but our spirits were undimmed. Everywhere there were delectable views. Chased by a playful young yak, we climbed a nearby knoll and made angels in the snow. Not a good idea if you don't have waterproof clothing, we realised.

The living room—which in a traditional Ladakhi home would have been a functioning kitchen—was cosy and here we congregated in the evening for a little talk by Aly on the wildlife of Ladakh. The lack of mobile connectivity helped us focus. There was a satellite phone in the village somewhere if acute homesickness syndrome struck but we never felt the need to reach for it. Dinner was ample, the night sky sumptuous with stars.

But it was the first night in a new place

and we slept fitfully. Someone dreamt of having their hand eaten by a snow leopard. If only we were so lucky...

Next morning, our spotters headed out early with their scopes. They had no luck, however, so we decided to drive out to Hemis Shukpachan, a village with paths lined with wisp-like poplars. A large and prosperous settlement in the shadow of towering mountains, this was once an important stop on an old trade route. Here we spotted chukar partridges galore, and urial on the high slopes. Moving further down the village, we observed a magnificent herd of ibex. This was a build-up to the big sighting, someone suggested optimistically.

Alas, it was not to be, at least not at Ulley, and we headed back to Leh, but not before stopping to explore a remote and exquisite valley that lay just below the village. It was the first of several spec-

Rumbak was misty, windswept and punishingly cold. At -20°C, the cold seeps into your skin. And bones. And sinews

View from the Rumbak arena
NIKON D850/24-70MM F/2.8G
LENS (F/9, 1/4,000s, ISO: 200)

Facing page: a friendly bovine in
Hemis Shukpachan
NIKON Z6/VR 500MM F/4E
LENS (F/9.5, 1/125s, ISO: AUTO)



PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMIT DIXIT



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*The 'arena' at Rumbak NIKON
D850/24-70MM F/2.8G LENS
(F/9, 1/6,400s, ISO: 200*

Another glimpse of the snow leopard
NIKON D850/VR 500
F/4E LENS (F/6.7,
1/320s, ISO: 400)

It eventually settled down for a lengthy nap on a sunny crag. We had such a long sighting we almost got bored

tacular day treks we would undertake in Ladakh in our cat quest. We followed a frozen water channel upriver. At one point, the valley opened up dramatically. The sky was the blue of a tile from Samarkand. We stopped for tea and to catch our breath. High up on a hill was a secluded monastic retreat, where monks came to meditate. While the crew scanned the slopes for snow leopards, which I was now beginning to believe were mythological creatures, I played Sudoku on my phone. Very therapeutic.

In Leh, there was somewhat more effective central heating and hot showers, so it was an indisputably cleaner group that set out for Rumbak the next day. At the entrance to the national park, we stopped to gaze at the swiftly flowing Indus below and do some more spotting. “It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack,” said Aly cheerily. Shortly after, we had to leave our vehicle and continue

the rest of the journey on foot. While the others scampered up, I trailed behind. And then, just like that, came news that a wizened old leopard had been spotted high up on some crags in Husing, a valley to our left popular with campers. There was a spring in my step after that.

And, sure enough, when I’d hauled my pounding heart to the scene, there it was, walking nimbly on a precarious incline high above the valley. The leopard eventually settled down for a lengthy nap on a sunny crag, with its bushy tail—which is an adaptation to its unique and challenging habitat—wrapped around it. We had such a long sighting we almost got bored. It’s the best gift I could have received on my birthday. The cake with the snow leopard pugmark iced on it that my hosts produced out of nowhere that night came a close second.

If Ulley had been bright and sunny, Rumbak was misty, windswept and

punishingly cold. At -20°C, the cold seeps into your skin. And bones. And sinews. This didn’t bother us overmuch. The cold made us retreat into our shells only briefly, and the robust *bukhari* in the homestay kitchen could always be relied upon to thaw our reserve. The days fell into a routine. Wake up, have hearty breakfast, head out for the day to explore any of the valleys surrounding the village, eat a warm packed lunch, return by evening to chat by the fire, have nice dinner, turn in. What more could one want?

Another snow leopard sighting, I guess. I learnt a thing or two about it too. Most of all, it’s a waiting game, requiring immense reserves of patience. It’s easier if there is a generous supply of *kahwa*. If your hosts are nice—like mine were—you’ll be plied, logistics permitting, with piping hot *pakor*as while you wait.

On one typical day, we woke up to news of a pair of lynxes chasing a snow leopard

The cosy living room at the homestay in Ulley
NIKON D850/24-70MM
F/2.8G LENS (F/8,
1/20s, ISO: 250)

in a valley nearby. Naturally, we had to go chasing after them, since lynx sightings are even rarer.

A herd of blue sheep kept pace with us on the other side of the frozen stream we were following. The call of a snow cock filled the air. A gentle snow began to fall. But no luck. Instead, we soaked in Rumbak’s ethereal beauty. Hemis is a unique habitat, not the sort of place that

springs to mind when you think ‘national park’. Cynics may question the merit of snow leopard viewings—especially given the test of endurance they often are—and wonder what the fuss is all about. But, like I said, the snow leopard is just an excuse to reconnect with nature. The experience is doubly special, given how beautiful yet fragile this habitat is.

It was only towards evening, close

to our homestay, that we sighted a lynx from the ‘arena’, a natural viewing platform where the entire world seems to congregate in its quest for the *shan*, as the snow leopard is called locally.

I left Rumbak carpeted in a couple of inches of snow, sated. Peter Matthiessen didn’t see a snow leopard and managed to write an entire book about it. I, having the gift of sight, am at a loss for words. 📍

THE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Many domestic airlines fly into Leh from major Indian cities. Because of technical issues arising out of the airport’s high altitude, the flights are mostly in the first half of the day. Fares in winter can be as low as ₹3,000 return.

THE TRIP

Among Ladakh’s winter activities, the popularity of **leopard spotting** is only surpassed by

the frozen river ‘**Chadar**’ trek. Many organisations as well as homestays in Ulley and Rumbak offer the snow leopard experience. The general rule is, the longer your trip, the better your chances of spotting the elusive cat. We can’t emphasise enough the importance of being kitted out properly for a trip like this. A **sub-zero jacket**, preferably with a down filling, is a must as are a pair of sturdy, **waterproof trekking shoes**.

Given the nature of the terrain and challenging weather conditions, it’s best to go with a reliable and reputed operator. We travelled with **Jehan Numa Wilderness**, which runs a wildlife lodge in the Satpuras (more are in the pipeline) and does pop-up expeditions to a variety of wildlife destinations through the year. Both premium and basic plans are on offer, the essential difference being in the accommodation. The

tariff also depends on the number of people who sign up. The more the participants (maximum strength: 10), the lower the cost per person. This can be as low as ₹161,500 + 5% GST for premium and ₹126,500 + 5% GST for basic. Costs are ex-Leh. Next departures: 1-12 Feb 2020 (premium plan); 13-24 Feb 2020 (basic plan). Contact +91-8602672443 or expeditions@jehannuma.com for more information or see jehannuma.com.