

White winter hymnal

Enter the stunning winter wonderland of Ladakh, a kingdom of snow, no tourists and freezing cold

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The snow lies thick on the ground in Hemis. The snowfields stretch down the valley, past groves of skeletal willows, down towards the Indus. The sky is overcast and a bitterly cold wind blows down from the craggy ridges of the Zaskar range behind me. Beyond the river, to the north, the high mountains of the Ladakh range catch a bit of sun and the sloping valley of distant Chemrey lights up.

"Isn't it quiet?" says Nawang, a monk at the Hemis monastery, almost to himself. It is, I say—and freezing. January in Ladakh is cold, the kind that hits you like a body blow. And when the wind blows from the summits of the two ranges that sandwich the Indus valley, no matter how many layers you're wearing, it still chills you to the bone.

Nawang, who is in his mid-30s, is wrapped up in his red monk's robes, as well as a thick sweater and a woolen hat of the same colour. We stand on a walkway below a huge golden statue of the Buddha Sakyamuni, on a hillock overlooking the Hemis monastery. Apart from a few large, furry dogs gambolling in the snow below, and many *chukars* (a kind of partridge endemic to Ladakh), Hemis wears a desolate look. The village houses are shuttered and the monastery, though open, is largely deserted. This is a far cry from when I was last there, in 2016, for the annual Hemis Festival. Then, summer greenery was everywhere, as was a sea of humanity, which had come from all over Ladakh, as well as the world, to watch the masked dances the festival is famous for.

Truth be told, I preferred this quietness.

Ladakh in winter is a world apart. In Leh, all the tourist shops are shut, just local markets are open. You hardly see any tourists as you walk around town, and sometimes it feels like you have stepped back to a past before Ladakh was opened to tourism in the 1970s. The faces are of Tibetan or Central Asian origin, and though hardly anyone wears traditional clothes any more, there's a degree of authenticity to the Ladakh experience that's wholly missing during the peak summer months.

That's not to say that there are no tourists to be seen at all. I was in Leh as a guest of The Grand Dragon Ladakh, a lavish hotel of some opulence. During my week-long stay there, there were groups of trekkers from around the country for the famous Chadar trek on the frozen Zaskar river. There were also mixed national and international teams of players for an ice-hockey tournament held every January, organized by the Canadian embassy in Delhi. And then there were some visitors who had come for the snow. But this was still probably only 5% of the tourists who come every summer. Indeed, almost all the other hotels and guest houses that dot the old city are shut through winter, which officially lasts as late as May-June. Danish Din, co-director, The Grand Dragon Ladakh, says



(clockwise, from left) A 'chukar'; the Hemis monastery in winter; The Grand Dragon Ladakh in Leh; and wildlife trackers at the Snow Leopard Lodge.

the number of winter tourists has been rising steadily. "But it's better that people coming here are prepared for the cold and the altitude," he says.

The hotel provides a great base to explore wintry Ladakh. Its rooms and suites are the perfect mix of luxury and elegance, and it's a joy to be snug as a bug in your heated room, and watch the dawn break over a white Indus valley. Acclimatizing to Leh's 3,500m is a delicate business even in summer, and that much more difficult in sub-zero weather. To this end, the hotel insists on a blood oxygen count by a doctor on the first day, followed by a course of Diamox (a medication that helps acclimatize to altitude) or some time with bottled oxygen, depending on the results. I must say I have never acclimatized in such style, or eaten as much. Although you get pretty much all kinds of cuisine at the hotel, do try the traditional Ladakhi spread and the choicest Kashmiri *wazwan* dishes. The hotel can also do a Ladakhi tasting menu on request.

But the resting period is just for the first 24 hours. If you lay off alcohol, drink enough fluids, and get some adequate rest, by the next day you should be fine to head out and explore. And there's much to see and do up and down the Indus valley during winter. The roads in the valley are all open, so mobility isn't a problem. But cross high motorable passes like Khardung La or Chang La to head to Nubra or Pangong Tso only on the basis of weather reports. It's always a risky business, as there is a serious danger of avalanches.

Starting with Leh, I was treated to an exhilarating day of watching ice-hockey

WINTER DEALS FOR LADAKH

You can avail of The Grand Dragon Ladakh's (Thegranddragonladakh.com) six days/five nights winter package starting from ₹50,000 per person, inclusive of all meals, transport and taxes. This includes a visit to Thiksey for morning prayers, picnics by the Zaskar, visits to local monasteries, the Sham valley, and drives up to Khardung La and Pangong Tso (depending on the weather). The hotel also organizes Tibetan calligraphy classes, ice-hockey and skating masterclasses and a visit to Stok Palace. The hotel has 16 deluxe double rooms, 28 premier heritage rooms, six family suites and six luxury suites.

You can also book a stay at the Snow Leopard Lodge (Snowleopardlodge.com), starting at ₹20,000 per person per day. This includes transfers to and from Leh, wildlife tracking, all meals and stay. The lodge and its annexe have 11 rooms. The lodge is open from November-April.

matches of the annual Indo-Canadian Friendship Cup at the open-air rink in old Leh. The game has become immensely popular with Ladakhis. It's a treat to watch the teams battle it out in a blur of superfast movement as large crowds of onlookers cheer the teams over cups of steaming tea and old Hindi film songs blare out during breaks.

I decided to acclimatize further by climbing up to the Leh Palace and the even higher Namgyal Tsemo monastery for a bird's-eye view of the city. The lung-busting climb is worth it for the spectacular views of the Indus Valley and the Stok Range beyond. Over the next few days, I was treated to wintry Ladakh's charms, which seemed all the more intimate because I wasn't sharing them with thousands of other tourists. Take, for example, a morning prayer service at the spectacular Thikse monastery, 19km from Leh. The cavernous prayer hall of this 17th century monastery hummed with the rising and falling cadences of monks old and young reciting the scriptures, punctuated by blasts of the long trumpet-like *dungchen* and *gyalings* (which look like clarinets) and the clashing of *byikal* cymbals. The morning prayer is also when the monks break fast with bowls of *tsampa* (a barley-based porridge and a Tibetan staple) and rounds of hot butter tea.

Winter is a great time to visit Ladakh for snow leopard tourism. These elusive and rarely

seen big cats, called *shan* in Ladakhi, come down to lower altitudes following their prey species, the *bharal* (Himalayan blue sheep), the ibex and the urial.

Their mating season begins in February, and this is as good a time as any to try and catch a glimpse of this almost mythical beast. I headed to the Snow Leopard Lodge, a community home-stay in the remote village of Ulley at over 4,000m to spend a few days spotting wildlife. The lodge, with its cosy and well-appointed rooms, complete with electric heaters and fleeces and wool blankets, lies in the middle of a snowy wonderland. The lodge arranged for daily wildlife trips across three adjacent high valleys, and I was fortunate enough to spot a snow leopard, which had been assiduously tracked by the lodge's excellent team of Ladakhi spotters.

These day-long excursions came with camp-style lunches and tea breaks in snowy orchards, under willow trees, with magpies for company. There's much scope for other wildlife sightings as well, as Ulley and its

surroundings teem with ibex, urial, snow hares and red foxes, to name just a few.

The confluence of the Zaskar and Indus rivers is always a draw, and in winter, with both rivers frozen, it's even more spectacular. I drove down to the village of Chilling, on the frozen Zaskar, which is the starting point of the famed Chadar trek. It's almost surreal to come across frozen waterfalls, their flow turned into a block of ice, or the blue waters of the central channel of Zaskar, which doesn't freeze but carries plate-sized blocks of translucent ice dotted with frozen air bubbles. On the drive back from Ulley, I visited Ladakh's oldest monastery, Alchi. Built over the 12th-13th centuries, Alchi is famed for its wooden carvings, gigantic clay statues of the various Bodhisattvas, and gorgeous murals done in the Kashmiri style, depicting Buddhas, ornate mandalas and everyday scenes from early medieval Kashmir. You can also visit the nearby Buddhist caves at Saspol, with their 15th century murals, and the ruined fortifications at Basgo, once the capital of central Ladakh.

The writer was in Ladakh at the invitation of The Grand Dragon Ladakh.



A herd of urial in the Ulley valley. COURTESY SNOW LEOPARD LODGE

Summer in the big city

Returning to New York? Bite into the Big Apple's latest experiences

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In February, Fred Dixon, the CEO of New York City's tourism arm, NYC and Co., shared figures which showed that 53% of Indians travel for leisure, indulging in fine-dining and sightseeing. 2019 may be a good year, or, as NYC's new campaign puts it, a "monumental" year, to plan your visit, for there are several new openings to catch and properties to check into. *Lounge* spoke to Dixon about select experiences.

WATERBORNE

Skip NYC's subways and opt for the recently launched ferry services that operate across six routes. Dixon says NYC's extensive waterfront, which had slipped into a slump from the late 1980s, is being revived. It stretches across 500 plus miles,

with parks that can be accessed through six ferry routes: Astoria, East River, Lower East Side, Rockaway, Soundview and South Brooklyn. These offer majestic skyline views at affordable price points, the same as a one-way subway ticket (\$2.75, or around ₹190). www.ferry.nyc

LIBERTY SPEAKS

The new Statue of Liberty Museum, adjacent to the famous monument, will debut in May. The museum has three gallery spaces, including an immersive theatre that showcases the story of the statue and the ideals she represents. In fall, the museum will house the original torch that Lady Liberty once brandished. Originally made of copper sheets, it underwent several changes and was retired in 1984. www.libertyellisfoundation.org

HUDDLE BY THE HUDSON

NYC's newest neighbourhood is Hudson Yards, the largest private real estate development in the history of the US, which integrates commercial, residential, dining and retail. The upscale area has a cultural centre called The Shed, which will com-

mission and produce performing and visual arts after it debuts in April. The Vessel, a 15-storey centrepiece with 154 interconnecting flights of stairs, opened this month, although to mixed reviews. People are expected to climb the honeycomb-like landmark designed by British architect Thomas Heatherwick. Hudson Yards will be home to new dining venues, including celebrity chef David Chang's new Momofuku restaurant Kawi, which has already caught art critic Jerry Saltz's eye. www.hudsonyardsnewyork.com

WORLD PRIDE

June will mark the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising of 1969, when demonstrations by the LGBTQ+ community followed a police raid at an inn. A significant moment in the history of gay rights, Stonewall will be commemorated by NYC through World Pride 2019, the first time that the global event will come to the US. Dixon says: "The gay rights movement has had such an impact on arts and cultural forms. So this is a chance for cultural institutions to pause and pay tribute to it."

Through June, there are several events lined up alongside World Pride. Dixon



A projection of the interiors of the new Statue of Liberty Museum.

recommends a visit to the New York Public Library's exhibition of photographs of Stonewall, *Love And Resistance: Stonewall 50*, running till 14 July. The Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute's Spring 2019 exhibition is *Camp: Notes On Fashion*, which will run from 9 May-8 September. The exhibition will explore the origins of the camp aesthetic through 175 objects, including womenswear and menswear, sculptures, paintings and drawings,

right from the 17th century to the present. You may want to check out the place where it all started. Stonewall, declared a national monument in 2016 by former president Barack Obama. www.nycpride.com

NEW VIEWS

When booking your stay in NYC, consider these. The 1960s-vibe TWA Hotel is a major restoration project, repurposing

the Trans World Airlines Flight Center at JFK Airport. While the original historic building is a public space, reservations for the hotel's 512 rooms are open. Dixon recommends the hotel's vintage-style Sunken Lounge, opening this May, which will offer views of a 1958 Lockheed Constellation aeroplane parked outside.

In the heart of Manhattan, Times Square, hotelier Ian Schrager opened his EDITION Hotel earlier this month. Times Square EDITION hopes to put the sizzle back in the commercial neighbourhood with interiors that sport the colours of a Jeff Koons work and a floating stainless sphere inspired by Anish Kapoor. Be sure to dine at the Terrace Restaurant, which has a menu from Michelin-starred chef John Fraser. Additionally, the hotel is home to Paradise Club, a modern-day cabaret, which will have a regular ongoing performance based on William Blake's *The Marriage Of Heaven And Hell*.

What's a visit to NYC without a bar with a stellar view? Dear Irving on Hudson opened earlier this year, following the success of its original outpost in the Gramercy Park neighbourhood. The two-level bar has a James Bond and art deco theme created by Delphine Mauroit, and is nothing short of a homage to NYC, with speciality cocktails such as the Panorama Daiquiri and Half Moon.