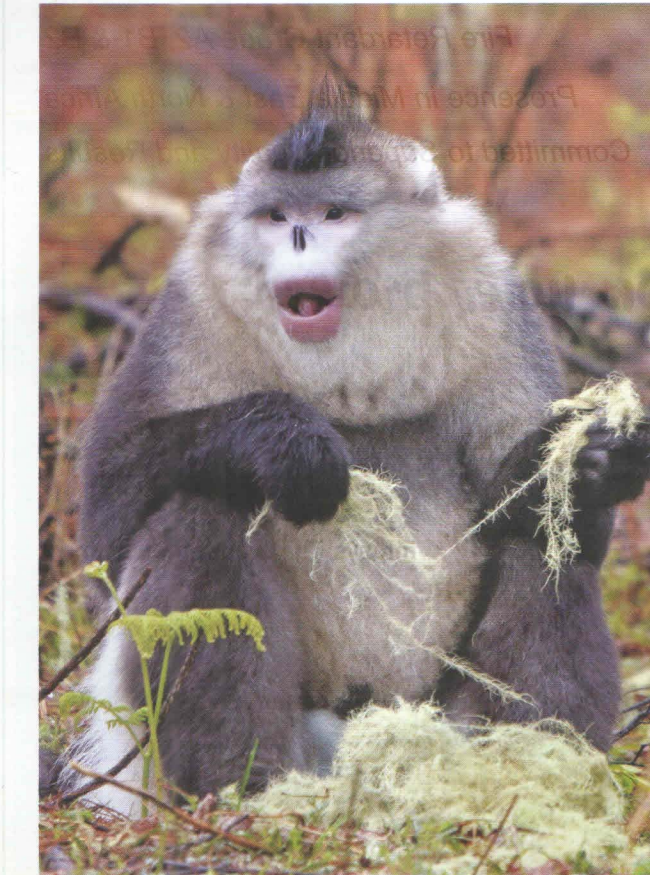


**WILD ENCOUNTERS**  
Experience wildlife in all its splendour!



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MARCH 2019



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**OFFBEAT**

TEXT ASHWIN RAJAGOPALAN

**INTO THE GREY GHOST'S DEN**

Most travellers will advise you to save a trip to Ladakh for the summer. However, if you can brave the cold and conquer those heights, there's no better time to visit the place than in winter, when stark landscapes turn surreal and the 'grey ghost' appears in all its magnificent glory.



This spread: The winter landscape of Ladakh is stunning and picturesque.

Jet Airways operates direct flights to Leh from New Delhi, five times a week.

I took 48 hours, but I finally received the call that I was waiting for. As I drove down the winding paths speckled with snow, I hoped I would keep my date with the grey ghost. Most people who seek it often return disappointed. I was hoping I wouldn't join that long list. From the adventure store in Bengaluru to my fellow passengers on the flight who put their smartphone cameras into overdrive almost 15 minutes into Leh, everyone assumed I was heading to Ladakh for the Chadar trek. And why not? After all,



Above: The warm hospitality of the Ladakh offsets the region's winter chill.  
Below: Indulge in a delicious serving of hot thukpa with momos.



winter tourism in Ladakh has become synonymous with the roughly 100 km-long trek which trails along Ladakh's Zaskar region. However, little did they know that I had no intentions of traversing the beaten path.

Only a small percentage of travellers who come to Ladakh – that has become one of India's 'bucket list' destinations – choose to visit this magical corner of Jammu and Kashmir in winter. Temperatures can often dip below -20°C and the high altitude with thin oxygen levels can be hard even on those who never cheat on their gym workouts and recommended diets. However, there is a magical facet of Ladakh that comes alive in this offbeat season. My week-long journey began within the confines of the Grand Dragon, a luxurious hotel just a few minutes away from the Leh airport.

The first 24 hours are critical as you begin to acclimatise to the weather. It's particularly tough for a restless traveller like me to stay put for long but I learnt quickly that Ladakh is a different kettle of fish. Food is one way to acquaint yourself with a destination and my first meal at The Grand Dragon was a Ladakhi feast that showcased some of the quintessential signatures of the region. *Timo* (pronounced 'time') with mutton *shapta* – thin slices of mutton in a mildly-spiced gravy – was one of the highlights. The Tibetan style *thukpa* and the mutton momos too provide comfort on a cold winter day.

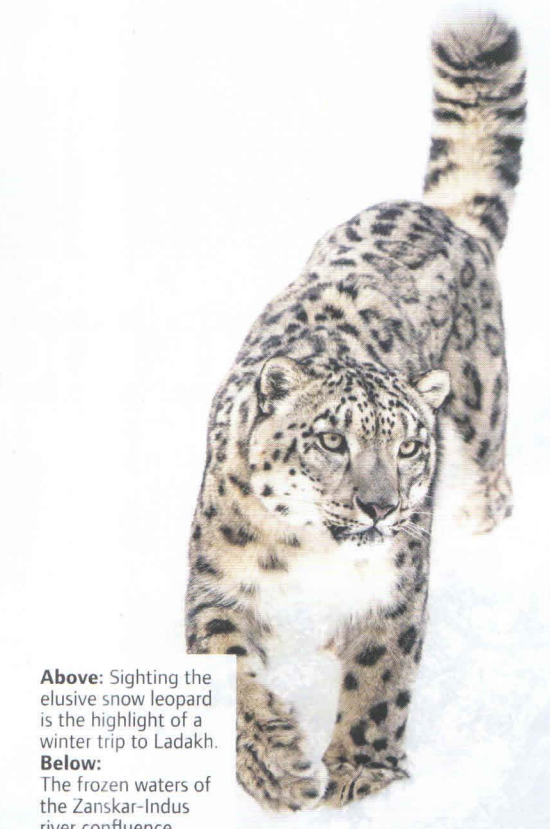
After soaking in the lap of luxury for over a day, it was time to head further up to the mountains, to Sham Valley, in pursuit of the grey ghost. A two-hour uphill drive from Leh brought us to Ulley, a tiny village at an altitude of nearly 4000m. This nondescript village with no connectivity (aside from a single satellite phone) is now trending among wildlife enthusiasts around the world. Tchéwang Norbu is one of Ulley's best-known residents. As a young boy, he would walk his father's yak through the mountains for grazing. These walks gradually made him curious about the wildlife that

**OFFBEAT**

surrounds the village. Today, Norbu is considered one of the world's best-known spotters of the grey ghost aka the snow leopard. Yes, not a vaporous legend from the past, but one of the world's most elusive animals had brought me all the way to Ulley. The village is home to Snow Leopard Lodge, a barebones wildlife lodge where more than 90 per cent of the guests visit from overseas to spot the elusive beast that lurks in the snow.

However, grey ghost is not the only magical part of the fauna that resides here. Soon, we were alerted to the presence of another mystical part of the wild. We were about to witness the king and his kill soon. Together, in fact, it was Norbu and his team who alerted us about a Ladakhi urial (an endemic and rare wild sheep that resides in the Indus and Shayok valleys in Ladakh) – the 'kill' – some 90 minutes away from Ulley. I reached the spot – a gorge off the Srinagar-Leh highway. Eventually, the snow leopard did show up. It was a surreal sight with the king of the Ladakhi wild just 800m away. The snow leopard stayed on for over 90 minutes. It was a rare sighting – one of the best of the 2019 winter season, and I was just lucky to be there at that very moment.

Thereafter, Ulley was my home for three whole days, during which I trekked through the snow in freezing temperatures, spotted other local fauna such as the Himalayan ibex, and also visited a couple of traditional village homes, including one with a 1000-year-old Buddhist shrine (according to a local legend). The calm of Ulley was in complete contrast to the frenetic action that followed in Leh, where the locals hit the rink and demonstrated their skills. At the Karzoo Ice Hockey Rink, Leh played host to the National Ice Hockey championship that also featured a few professionals from Canada. The altitude and the open venue (most ice hockey games are conducted in indoor



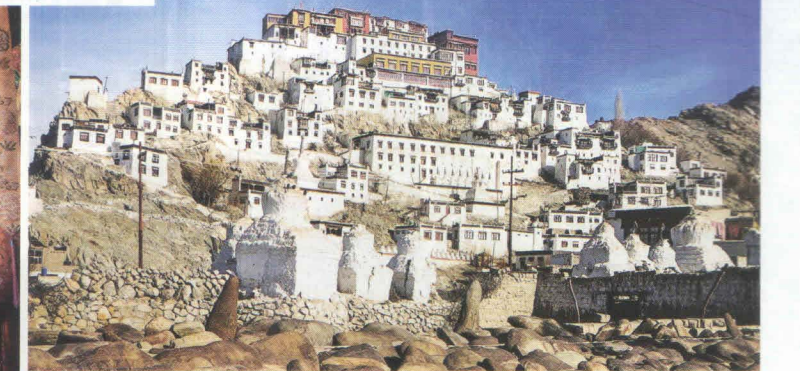
Above: Sighting the elusive snow leopard is the highlight of a winter trip to Ladakh.  
Below: The frozen waters of the Zaskar-Indus river confluence.

stadiums worldwide) posed a challenge even to these seasoned pros. The Karzoo rink isn't the only waterbody that freezes in the winter; much of the famous confluence (or sangam) of the historic Zaskar and Indus rivers is frozen too, adding extra drama to this stunning panorama. However, that's not the only place to switch to your camera's wide-angle mode. Many of the region's historic monasteries, which are near

**OFFBEAT**



Clockwise from left: An ornate statue of Lord Buddha at Thiksey Monastery. The stupas at Alchi Monastery. Located at the top of a hill, Thiksey monastery is called the 'Mini Potala' of India.



Leh, lend themselves to wide panoramas. I paused for a brief stop at three of these, starting off with an early morning drive to Thiksey Monastery, reaching just in time for their morning prayers. Here, monks across various age groups come together and create a magical energy as they chant in unison. Thiksey is also one of Leh's most imposing monasteries. Spread over 12 floors, it bears a striking resemblance to the Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet. In comparison, Alchi Monastery might appear modest but is one of the most historic ones in the region. According to local legends, this monastery complex was built by the famous translator Guru Rinchen Zangpo, somewhere between 958 and 1055 CE.

After the highs of Ulley, non-stop ice hockey action, and the serenity of the monasteries, I was back at The Grand Dragon where my pursuit of the snow leopard had begun. It was comforting to be in a temperature-controlled environment after being exposed to cold winds and harsh treks. Yet, if I had to trade all of it for another rare sighting of the snow leopard, I would gladly do that without batting an eyelid. There's a reason why this magnificent creature is called the elusive grey ghost.

It's not easy to spot (summer sightings are almost unheard of) and inhabits the toughest of terrains. The grey ghost is reason enough to brave Ladakh in the winter. ■

Jet Airways operates direct flights to Leh from New Delhi, five times a week.

**QUICK FACTS**

- BEST TIME TO VISIT**  
Snow leopard sightings usually take place between the months of December and March, sometimes up to April. Most monasteries are not teeming with tourists in the winter and snow-covered landscapes add magic to your photographs.
- GOOD TO KNOW**  
Ladakh can be tough even for the fittest of individuals. It's best to undergo a thorough medical screening in your home city before you arrive in Ladakh, especially in the winter. Most doctors will recommend a pre-visit medication that will help you with oxygen levels.
- UPCOMING EVENT**  
July 11-12: Immerse yourself in the rich culture of Ladakh at the Hemis Tsechu festival. Witness the splendid dance of lamas depicting the magical feats of Padmasambhava, a revered guru.
- FOR MORE INFORMATION**  
Log on to [leh.nic.in](http://leh.nic.in) and [www.jkt&c.co.in](http://www.jkt&c.co.in)