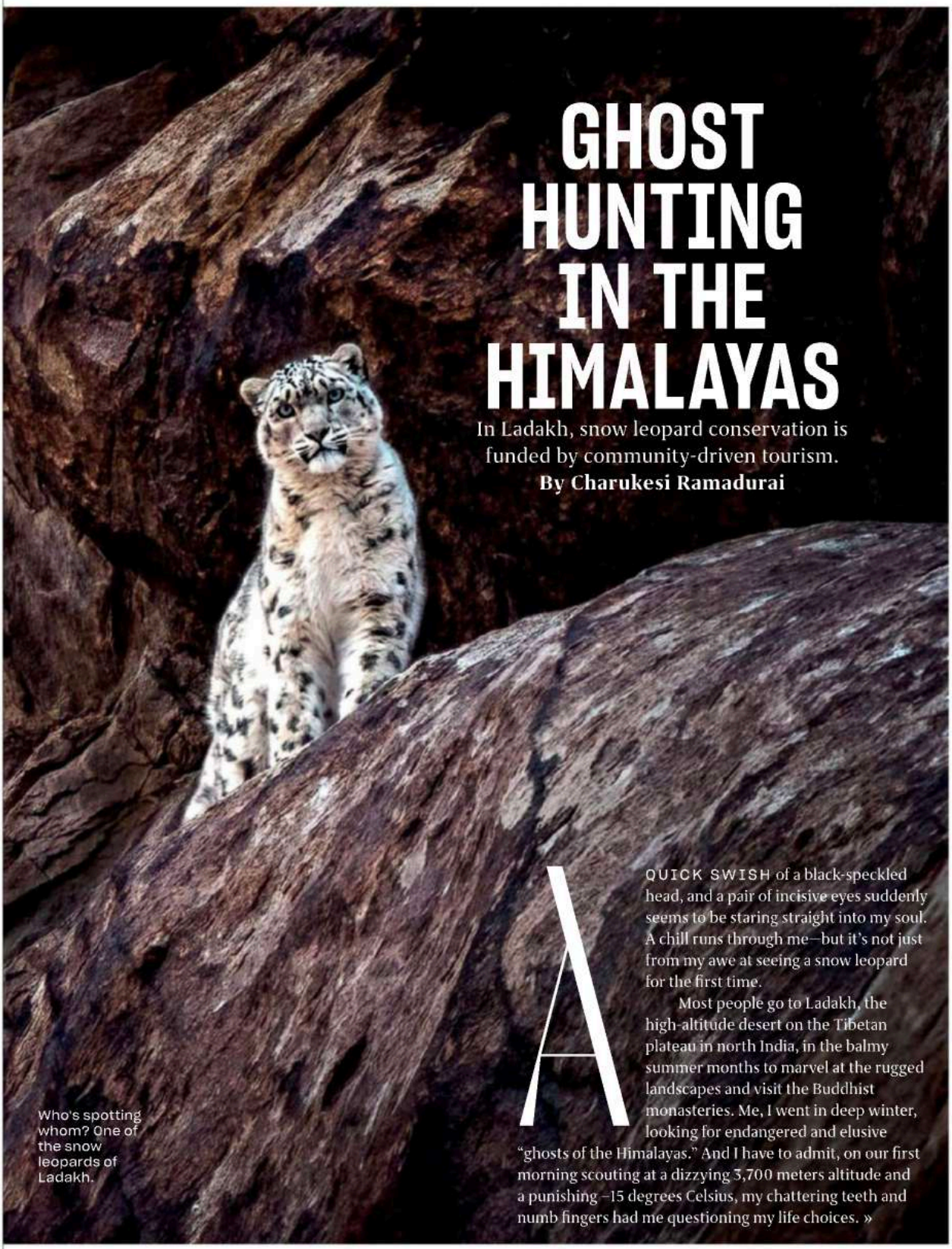


GHOST HUNTING IN THE HIMALAYAS

In Ladakh, snow leopard conservation is funded by community-driven tourism.

By Charukesi Ramadurai

Who's spotting whom? One of the snow leopards of Ladakh.

COURTESY OF NOMADIC EXPEDITIONS

A QUICK SWISH of a black-speckled head, and a pair of incisive eyes suddenly seems to be staring straight into my soul. A chill runs through me—but it's not just from my awe at seeing a snow leopard for the first time.

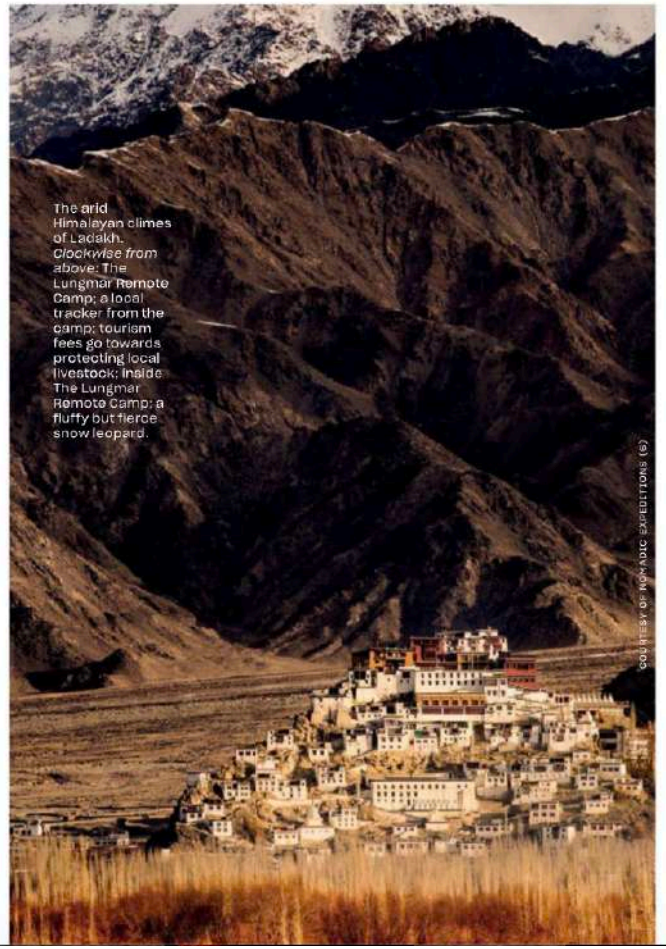
Most people go to Ladakh, the high-altitude desert on the Tibetan plateau in north India, in the balmy summer months to marvel at the rugged landscapes and visit the Buddhist monasteries. Me, I went in deep winter, looking for endangered and elusive "ghosts of the Himalayas." And I have to admit, on our first morning scouting at a dizzying 3,700 meters altitude and a punishing –15 degrees Celsius, my chattering teeth and numb fingers had me questioning my life choices. »

I was traveling with **Voygr Expeditions** *(voygr.com)*, a responsible wildlife tourism company that works with local communities to involve them in conservation. Our headquarters for the trip was **The Lungmar Remote Camp** *(snowleopardcamp.com)*, an upscale boutique wildlife lodge with just six rooms and six tents. The lodge is located inside Hemis National Park, one of the few places in the world where snow leopards are to be found.

To call it remote is underselling it. To get there, I had taken an early morning flight from Delhi to the town of Leh, where I spent two days just acclimatizing to the high altitude. And then it was a two-hour drive to Lungmar, named for the native red soil of the surrounding landscape.

While Voygr's signature snow leopard expeditions span 12 days *(from US$8,790 per person)*, I had only a week to spare—but I wasn't too worried, knowing they have a 100 percent success rate in snow leopard sightings.

And indeed, that freezing day on the mountain was no exception. Before long, I got a glimpse of the big cat in question strutting elegantly through the rock and snow, almost merging into the landscape. Then the sun came out, the wind died down and the snow gleamed bright and fresh. I was overwhelmed with gratitude for the experience, and knew that all the effort was worth it.



The arid Himalayan climes of Ladakh. *Clockwise from above:* The Lungmar Remote Camp; a local tracker from the camp; tourism fees go towards protecting local livestock; inside The Lungmar Remote Camp; a fluffy but fierce snow leopard.

COURTESY OF NOMADIC EXPEDITIONS (6)

BUT SNOW LEOPARD sightings on frigid mountainsides are just part of the Voyagr experience. Staying at The Lungmar Remote Camp itself is a cultural immersion, with its use of vernacular Ladakhi architecture (think warm wood and stone) and staff of men and women from Ladakh. Most of the workers here are from the Hemis region, from cooks to cleaners to guides—locals who have grown up seeing snow leopards around them and are now passionately committed to their welfare.

Some of them work as trackers: the people who go out early in the morning and, using long-distance scopes and their own generational knowledge of this animal, look for signs of snow leopard movement. When they have a sighting they send word back to the camp, and guests scurry out to the location for glimpse. Occasionally during my stay, the big cat had other plans and disappeared by the time we reached the spot.

On outings where we weren't snow leopard stalking, Voygr showed us more of our spectacular locale. Once, we picnicked in a clearing near an almost-frozen lake. And then there were visits to monasteries to witness Buddhist prayer rituals. Voygr's programming, true to their goal of involving nearby communities, also included trips to local homes to take a closer look at the Ladakhi way of life.

According to CEO Behzad Larry, one of their primary sustainability tasks is to manage the human-wildlife conflict that arises when snow leopards come down the mountains in search of easy livestock prey. "The economic and emotional stress of seeing their precious animals attacked is so deep-rooted that they tend to kill these predators on sight," he told me. More than 400 snow leopards are killed annually across their historic habitat range due to human interference, an alarming number given their already vulnerable status.

To reduce these conflicts, Voygr established the **High Asia Habitat Fund** *(highasiafund.org)*, whose conservation fees are paid through tour costs and a percentage of annual profits—directly and in partnership with non-profits and conservationists, across Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Mongolia, China, and India. The money funds the building of protective corrals around the livestock pens in local homes.

In other Central Asian countries, the fund also supports regular training and upskilling programs for wildlife rangers. Combined with a reduction in livestock attacks, this has converted wary haters into conservation champions.

The mood at camp the night of our chilly first sighting was jubilant, with stories about the snow leopard sighting flying thick and fast over the dinner table—it was all we could talk about. Over the course of the week, I saw two more, but that first surprising glimpse of this elusive big cat is the one I will cherish forever.