



Reef & Rainforest



Group Tour Itinerary

IN SEARCH OF THE SNOW LEOPARDS OF LADAKH

Led by Erwin D Rose

12 - 25 February 2019

Maximum: 10 Guests, plus leader



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IN SEARCH OF THE SNOW LEOPARDS OF LADAKH

The snow leopard, locally known as shan or the grey ghost of the Himalayas, is one of the world's rarest, least seen and most exciting big cats. Primarily an opportunistic hunter, snow leopards can leap up to 50 feet high and are able to kill and carry up to three times their body weight. They are typically found in the high mountain ranges of Central and South Asia and are an endangered species listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. They are particularly difficult to see in the wild because of the remote and rugged terrain they live in and their excellently camouflaged coat.

In recent years, the Ladakh region of the Indian Himalayas has emerged as one of the best areas in the world to see this most elusive of big cats, with past trips typically involving camping in the high mountains valleys and searching one locality for the snow leopards. What makes this tour different is that we spread our search over two different snow leopard habitats: The Hemis National Park and the Ulley Valley thus increasing the chance of an encounter. In addition, rather than camping, we use a series of local homestays providing heated rooms, home-cooked food and the opportunity to meet some of Ladakh's fascinating and friendly people which in turn encourages protection of the cats and their habitat.





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By staying with the local families in Ulley and Hemis you can enjoy also learning about their co-operative approach to living within this harsh environment. Food and daily jobs are shared among the community for the benefit of all. You will be able to see first-hand, how your hosts make the most all of their limited resources and have cultivated small farming terraces and planted trees within such a hostile environment. Staying in the homestays directly benefits the local communities and encourages them to conserve their snow leopard populations, prey and habitat for future generations. During your time in Leh, there will also be fascinating cultural experiences too as you visit the bustling and colourful markets and beautiful ancient Buddhist monasteries overlooking the great Indus River Valley. This is the time of year that snow leopards prey on local livestock, so your stay will also help reimburse families for their losses, reduce reprisals against the snow leopards and provide much needed income during the winter months.



The timing of this group trip is crucial because in the bitter cold months of January, February and March, blue sheep, the primary prey of the snow leopard, descend down to the lower valleys where the leopards follow them. The lower valleys have human inhabitants too so their livestock also provides prey for snow leopards at this time. Ladakh is also home to other exciting and hardy species including the sandy coloured Tibetan wolf, fluffy Tibetan red fox, Eurasian lynx, argali (great Tibetan sheep), bharal (blue sheep), shapu (Ladakhi urial) and Asiatic ibex. There are also some spectacular birds including the peculiar ibisbill, lammergeier (bearded vulture), Himalayan griffon vulture, golden eagle and Himalayan and Tibetan snowcocks.

The snow leopard is one of the toughest creatures to track because of its elusive behaviour, the weather conditions, rugged terrain and vast area. While traversing this terrain we look for various signs: scrapes, faeces, urine and scent sprays in prominent locations along their usual routes. Every morning the tracking begins with spotters set up across various ridges armed with high-powered scopes and binoculars, keeping in radio communication with the rest of the team.

The 2017 group had a very successful trip with 5 different snow leopards seen and the 2018 group also saw a snow leopard for around two hours at distance. With such a rare and elusive animal and a reliance on local conditions (fresh snow really helps with tracking), luck always plays a huge role with any sightings, but we feel this group provides one of the best chances of glimpsing a snow leopard in the wild.



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Please note that whilst every effort has been made to make this trip as comfortable as we can, you will still be trekking at high altitude (over 3,800 - 4000 metres/13,000 feet) and in the middle of winter. Night time temperatures can occasionally drop below -25C and day time temperatures often remain below freezing. You should come dressed for some very cold weather and expect occasionally to walk through snow or ice.

Treks can last up to six hours a day over steep and uneven terrain, but private porters can be booked for an additional fee to carry bags and equipment. Ponies will transport your luggage to the Rumbak homestay and they can also be booked locally for the walks if required.

This unique trip uses a combination of comfortable hotels and local homestays. The latter are heated and provide traditional bedding and warm blankets and hot water bottles are also provided at night. Sleeping bags are still recommended though for extra comfort. Toilets are dry pit Indian-style in Rumbak and there are no showers (bowls of hot water are provided for washing). Food is a wholesome mix of rice, meat, vegetables and lentils.

Your Expert Guide and Leader – Erwin D’Rose

Erwin’s dedication, passion and commitment to all things wild combine to make him one of the best big cat guides in India. He spent five years in India’s Kanha National Park studying and understanding tiger behaviour before moving to Satpura where he has spent the last two years guiding guests in search of leopards, tigers, sloth bears, wild dog and other Indian carnivores. Erwin’s passion for wildlife started early in life while growing up in Jabalpur, the entry point to many famous national parks including Kanha and Bandhavgarh. His childhood interest quickly developed into a passion for wildlife and photography and, in addition to guiding,



he has worked on many tiger documentaries and other filming projects. Erwin guided our 2017 group on which he was lucky enough to see 7 different snow leopards.



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ITINERARY IN DETAIL

Tue 12 Feb Depart LONDON HEATHROW on AIR INDIA flight AI162 at 0845 to DELHI arriving 2225. **(Other airline options are available)** Met and transfer to the hotel. O/n LEMON TREE, BB. Conveniently located close to the airport, this modern hotel features a pleasant swimming pool, restaurant and gym.



Wed 13 Feb Private transfer to DELHI AIRPORT early in the morning with a box breakfast. Depart at 0555 am on AIR INDIA flight AI 445 to LEH arriving 0720. Met on arrival and transfer to the hotel.

At an altitude of 3,500m (11,500ft) Leh is the capital of the Himalayan kingdom of Ladakh and the starting point for much of the trekking done in the Indian Himalayas. You will have the rest of the day free to relax and adjust to the altitude and climate. It is very important to rest as much as possible today to slowly adjust to the altitude. A short and easy visit to a local market in town will be offered in the evening for those interested.



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O/n GRAND DRAGON HOTEL, FB. Located just a 10 minute walk from the centre of Leh and main market square, this is one the most comfortable and modern hotels in Leh. The hotel has an incredible view towards the impressive Stok mountain range from most floors including the smart and friendly



restaurant, which offers a range of local Ladakhi and Tibetan cuisine as well as Chinese and Western dishes. There is also a coffee shop for light snacks and room service is available 24 hours a day. All rooms feature comfortable beds with air-conditioning, a flat screen LED TV, mini-safe, tea and coffee facilities, direct dial telephone, seating and private bathrooms with hot water always available. Rooms have different view either overlooking the Stok Mountains, Khardung La Pass, Leh Palace or Shanti Stupa. With its grand and traditional architecture and modern décor and facilities the hotel is one of the best choices in Leh and other facilities include central heating, Wi-Fi access (although rarely works during the winter), 24-hour heated water supply, generator backup and laundry service.



Thu 14 Feb

Another day for acclimatisation and sightseeing making some gentle walks in the local area. This morning visit the colourful Thiksey Monastery, Stock Place, Hemis Monastery and perhaps the village of Shang Shumdo. During your visits to these monasteries you will learn about the Buddhist culture and perhaps have an opportunity to meet and talk with some of the monks, often of Tibetan descent.



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There will also be a visit to the Indus River where the shingle banks provide a feeding ground for the peculiar ibisbill, which feeds in these fast flowing Himalayan Rivers. You will also make a short (60 minute) walk through the pastureland that



borders the river in search of other birdlife including white-winged redstarts, brown accentor, black throated thrush, solitary snipe, green sandpiper and red fronted serin. Occasionally otters and mountain weasels are seen hunting in this area. (All meals are included today) O/n GRAND DRAGON HOTEL, FB.

Fri 15 Feb

Today, we will have our first attempt at finding snow leopard as we drive (4-5 hours) to the small Himalayan area of Ulley. En route, we will stop at the frozen river of Chadar which is used by the locals to travel to the Zanskari villages. This is a beautiful location



with impressive mountain ridges above, where the endemic Ladakh urial and golden eagles are frequently seen. If the conditions are right, the group can take a walk along the frozen river itself.

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The journey to Ulley is very scenic with impressive mountain peaks and ridges and possible wildlife such as urial, wolf and birds of prey could be seen. On arrival at Ulley around lunchtime, we will begin the search for snow leopard as well as Ladakh urial, Siberian ibex, red fox and Tibetan wolf. The Ulley village consists of a small collection of very remote houses where you will be staying. It sits at the end of three valleys all frequented by snow leopards and packs of Tibetan wolf. The scenery throughout this area is stunning with towering often snow-capped peaks visible in almost every direction. (All meals are included today)



O/n ULLEY SNOW LEOPARD LODGE HOMESTAY, FB. Accommodation is in a traditional mud and stone building with flat roof and communal living quarters. Each guest will be allocated one of the 5 simple private rooms within. The rooms are



carpeted and feature mattresses with thick Ladakhi blankets, pillows and a gas heater. There is a simple shared toilet. Please note that a sleeping bag is also still recommended to provide extra comfort against the cold. Meals will be taken in the communal dining living room of the house and will feature local home cooked food such as rice and lentils, vegetables, chicken, eggs, dumplings, and soup. Hot tea, coffee and water is always available and hot water bowls for washing or brushing teeth can be provided on request.

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Sat 16 Feb

A full day in the Ulley Valley to search for snow leopards. Based on the current survey results there are thought to be between 8 and 10 different snow leopards in this area. Trackers will be out throughout the day searching the mountain ridges and following tracks in search of the cats and other wildlife. There is a road that runs through the valley and searching will be a combination of scanning from the road and walking short distances to view from vantage points.

The Ulley valley is a great location to see the magnificent Asiatic ibex, which can often be seen feeding on impossibly narrow ledges and ridgelines. These impressive wild goats with distinctive backwards curving horns on the males can weigh up to 200 pounds.

Another local speciality here is the Tibetan wolf which is quite often seen in the early mornings and late afternoons patrolling the valleys. Around the homestay birds such as robin accentor, chukar partridge, great tit and flocks of vocal alpine and red billed chough can be seen. Higher in the mountains, lammergeiers and golden eagles can be seen along with the Tibetan and Himalayan snowcocks. (All meals are included today) O/n SNOW LEOPARD LODGE HOMESTAY, FB.



Sun 17 Feb

Another morning spent looking for snow leopards and other wildlife. Drive back to Leh in the afternoon. (All meals are included today) O/n GRAND DRAGON HOTEL, FB.

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Mon 18 Feb

Today, our snow leopard search will begin in earnest as we drive to the village of ZINGCHEN and trek (5-6 hours, elevation 12,400ft, graded easy) through the HEMIS NATIONAL PARK and the RUMBAK VALLEY looking for snow leopards as we go. The walk is mostly flat and along a wide track to begin with but becomes a gradual incline with some downhill sections nearer the village of Rumbak. Ponies will transport all the luggage that you do not need with you on the walk and will also be available to carry guests if necessary. Oxygen will also be carried by the tour leaders.



Keep your senses sharp and look out amidst the cliffs and at the base of rocks where they mark their turf. You may stop for lunch or a tea break at spot of loose scree along the valley bottom where Royale's pikas (a small rodent like member of the rabbit



family) can often be spotted charging in between the boulders in an almost constant search for food.

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Herds of blue sheep (bharal) are also a common sight along the walk, and they are also often spotted at close range providing some great photographic opportunities.



The Hemis National Park is a high altitude reserve in the eastern Ladakh region, part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir in India. It is the only national park in the northern Himalayas, and at 4,400 sq km is the largest notified protected area in India. The region is considered to have the



world's highest density of snow leopards, with up to 200 breeding individuals. The Rumbak valley and its interconnecting Tarbung and Husing Valleys are home to several snow leopard territories and during the winter months, the snow at higher elevations brings the blue sheep and snow leopards lower into the valleys.



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This offers much better access and chances to see them as they become concentrated into suitable areas. Also when there is fresh snowfall, not only do the leopards stand out better against the white background but their tracks also reveal their presence. With climate change though, the snowfall in this part of the Himalayas, has become less reliable in recent years. However the local trackers escorting the group and also resident in Rumbak village have become experts at spotting these superbly camouflaged cats known locally as the grey ghost.



As well as snow leopards, the park is also home to the Tibetan wolf, red fox, Eurasian lynx, stone marten, mountain weasel, woolly hare, argali (great Tibetan sheep), bharal (blue sheep), shapu (Ladakhi urial) and ibex. Birds include the impressive lammergeier (bearded vulture), Himalayan griffon vulture, golden eagle, brown and robin accentor, Tibetan partridge and Himalayan and Tibetan snowcocks. (All meals are included today)



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O/n RUMBAK HOMESTAY, FB. Accommodation is in traditional mud and stone houses with flat roofs and communal living quarters. Each guest will be allocated simple private rooms within different houses in the village to provide income to the entire village.



The rooms are carpeted and feature mattresses with thick Ladakhi blankets, pillows and a Bukhara style (wood burning chiminea) heater. Please note that a sleeping bag is also recommended to provide extra comfort against the cold.



Tue 19 Feb

Spend the day searching for snow leopards and other wildlife in the RUMBAK VALLEY. When sightings are made it will often be necessary to walk up to six hours a day over steep and uneven terrain, however sometimes sightings occur very close to the village.



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Snow leopards naturally predate on wild bharal (blue sheep) or ibex (mountain goats). However they have been known to kill domestic animals including goat and sheep, so searching for the cats will often concentrate on areas with high numbers of prey. When searching for the leopards there will be a fair amount of time spent scanning ridges and likely spots for the cats and other wildlife and at times there will be little to see in between sightings. However the scenery will be sensational and hot drinks and food will be brought to the group depending on the location of sightings. (All meals are included today) O/n RUMBAK HOMESTAY, FB.

Wed 20 Feb Another day searching for snow leopards and other wildlife. Depending on recent sightings we may today head to the **TARBUNG VALLEY**, another prime place to spot the elusive cat. Each day, when searching or viewing leopards away from the village, porters will bring hot drinks, snacks and anything else required at both mid-morning and mid-afternoon in addition to a hot lunch delivered in the field each day. (All meals are included today) O/n RUMBAK HOMESTAY, FB.



Thu 21 Feb Another day searching for snow leopards and other wildlife. Depending on recent sightings we may today head to the **HUSING VALLEY** or another area. The itinerary of each day will be governed by recent sightings. (All meals are included today) O/n RUMBAK HOMESTAY, FB.



Fri 22 Feb Today depending on recent sightings we may trek (up to 3 hours) to **URUTSE** (13500ft) and the **GANDALA PASS** which is also known for its high density of woolly hares, as many as 30 have been in one day here. As a result this area attracts many Eurasian lynx, foxes and wolves and the area is particularly known for its lynx sightings. Snow leopards are also often spotted in this area too. O/n URUTSE HOMESTAY, FB.



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- Sat 23 Feb Today we will trek back (approx. five hours) past snow leopard haunts and piles of carved Tibetan prayer stones to ZINGCHEN and drive back to LEH. The timing will depend on recent sightings and success. After a much deserved shower back at the hotel, it is time to relax, order a drink and enjoy the last of the gorgeous and peaceful Himalayan scenery. In the evening there will be a farewell dinner. (All meals are included today) O/n GRAND DRAGON HOTEL, FB.
- Sun 24 Feb Transfer to LEH airport and board AIR INDIA flight AI 446 at 1100, to DELHI arriving at 1225. Met on arrival and transfer to hotel with early check in included. Enjoy the rest of the day at leisure. OPTIONAL excursions such as a city tour of Delhi or birdwatching are available on request. O/n LEMON TREE, BB. (Breakfast only is included today)
- Mon 25 Feb After breakfast, pick up from the hotel and transfer to the airport to check in for your international flight. Take AIR INDIA flight AI 111 at 1400 to LONDON HEATHROW, arriving 1900. (Breakfast only is included today) BB.



Prices: £3,967.00 per person sharing double/twin rooms. Single Supplement: £596

Group One: 01 - 14 February 2019

Group Two: 12 - 25 February 2019

Group size: 10 maximum

Including: All international and domestic (economy class) flights, all transfers, all accommodation, all guide and tracker expenses, all meals as described: BB = breakfast only, HB = half board, FB = full board) hot drinks, water and juices in Ulley and Rumbak, all guided excursions as described, park and monastery entrance fees, wildlife permits and protection through ATOL.

Not including: Tips; meals unless indicated; drinks (except all local drinks in Ulley and Rumbak); items of a personal nature; activities marked as OPTIONAL, Indian visa and travel insurance.

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PLEASE NOTE: The airport in Leh is managed by the Indian Army and is only open for commercial flights in the morning. Therefore if there is bad weather and visibility (which is quite common in the winter), flights can often be cancelled. This can then lead to a missed connection for your international flight back from Delhi. Therefore it is a condition of booking that you have full travel insurance to cover this. Your insurance cover should include Missed Departure and/or Missed Flight Connection and emergency repatriation for both outbound and return flight sectors. We ask that you send us the name of your travel insurer, policy number and the 24hr medical assistance telephone number issued by your insurer before departure.

In order to minimize the disruption and extra costs if your flights to and from Leh are delayed or cancelled we recommend booking all of your flights under the same ticket with air India. This will provide protection by the airline if there are any delays or missed connections. Alternatively to reduce the risk of missing the international flight if the domestic flight is cancelled, we would recommend additional nights in Delhi at the end of the tour or an extension in other parts of India.

PLEASE NOTE: Searching for snow leopards in Hemis National Parks and surrounds requires you to be able to take frequent and sometimes strenuous walks through mountainous and possibly uneven or snowy terrain. Therefore you must have a level of fitness suitable for trekking in mountainous terrain at altitude, although most walks are graded easy-moderate and on level ground. The walks will be taken at your own pace with the support of porters, ponies and oxygen if necessary and are rarely too demanding. Most walks will be over rocky and sometimes snowy or frozen ground and crampons are recommended for those with poor balance.

You will also need to be aware of the effects of altitude, which can affect people in different ways regardless of age and fitness. Even with gentle acclimatising to the altitude in Leh (at 3,500 meters), you will likely still feel the effects of altitude on this trip and should be prepared, although most people have no serious problems. Levels of activity that may be relatively easy at lower altitudes can be much more difficult when between 3,000 and 4,000 metres and you are likely to feel far more tired after any exercise.

NB: Extensions are available to the tiger parks of central India and other areas of the country: please ask for details.

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IMPORTANT NOTES TO ACCOMPANY THE ITINERARY

NB: Snow leopards are one of the world's rarest and most elusive big cats. This trip will involve days of extensive search, spending many hours attempting to spot leopards through scopes on remote mountains slopes. Chances of at least one sighting are high but cannot be guaranteed.

NB: Night time temperatures can drop below -25 degrees and day time temperatures often remain below freezing. You should come dressed for some very cold weather and expect to occasionally walk through snow. Treks can last up to six hours a day over steep and uneven terrain.

NB: Much of this itinerary is spent trekking in remote areas and at very high altitude (over 4000 metres / 13000 feet). A high level of personal fitness is required and specialist travel insurance may be needed. Be mindful of the risks of altitude sickness and take time to acclimatise yourselves to the altitude and conditions.

NB: Checked baggage limit on domestic flights is 15kg per person, excess baggage charge approx £2.50 per kg payable at airport.

NB: The above tentative itinerary and its quoted price are based on specific flights, hotels and lodges. Should there be insufficient availability at the time of booking, alternative flights, hotels and lodges of a similar standard may have to be booked instead, in which case the itinerary and/or price may change.

NB: Prices are based on specific airlines and specific seating classes. The price may change if those are not available at the time of booking. We strongly advise booking early to secure the prices quoted, particularly as the seating classes quoted for are usually the first to be filled.

NB: All itineraries are subject to change without notice to take into account possible airline flight schedule changes which can take place before departure date or during the tour, and other operational factors.

NB: Once the tour has been booked and a deposit paid, any further changes initiated by the client may be subject to additional charges.

NB: Inclusive tours and excursions as stated in the itinerary will have been pre-paid. Once full payment has been made and/or clients are actually at their destination, should clients be disinclined to partake of any inclusive tour or excursion, no refunds will be possible.

NB: With any trip involving wildlife it is impossible to guarantee a sighting, but each trip is designed around known habitats. Every effort will be made to ensure a sighting, but we cannot be held responsible if no sighting is made due to the wildlife itself, weather, or any elements beyond our control.

NB: Adequate insurance cover is mandatory. Please supply us with details of your cover.

NB: VISAS are required for all UK visitors to India.

NB: This tour involves some travel in remote areas. This adds to the adventure and increases the opportunity to enjoy a true wildlife experience. However, due to terrain, weather, road conditions, and other factors beyond our control, some elements of the tour may have to be altered. Times of some activities may need to be changed or even cancelled due to the conditions. If an activity is cancelled it will usually be replaced with an alternative activity that is more appropriate for the conditions. Advance notice will be given for any changes where possible, although at times changes may need to be made whilst the tour is in progress.

NB: Excursions marked as 'Optional' are not included in the price.

NB: The transfer drivers are not guides, and may not speak English very well or at all.

NB: Despite recent improvements, Ladakh still has some accommodation of a lower standard than that normally expected by western travelers, and a precarious infrastructure including unreliable domestic flights, poor telecommunications and bad roads. This tour visits areas well off the beaten track, and therefore far from medical and other services. Trails can sometimes be arduous and slippery, and homestay accommodation is usually very basic. Bookings will only be accepted on the understanding that the client accepts Reef and Rainforest Tours has done everything in its power to ensure there are no difficulties, but has no control over standards of some equipment, available accommodation and services, airline reservation policies, flight schedule changes or possible breakdowns in communication in remote parts of Ladakh.

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NB: Prices are based on standard rooms unless otherwise stated in the itinerary. Should you wish to upgrade please let us know.

NB: In some hotels, English will be spoken either badly or not at all.

NB: Before and after booking, clients must familiarise themselves with current UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) travel advisories so as to satisfy themselves as to the suitability of the destination(s) to be visited in this itinerary. All decisions relating to the tour will be based on UK FCO advisories, and not those of any other countries' governments. In the event of any emergency or other problem encountered in the destination, it is advisable if appropriate to contact the local UK Embassy, High Commission or Consulate for assistance. The FCO in London also has dedicated telephone call centres: Crisis Management Dept - 0207 008 5335 (during UK office hours), and Global Response Centre - 0207 008 1500 (out of UK office hours).

NB: It is a condition of booking that full travel insurance including Emergency Medical Repatriation is taken out by each person travelling. Your insurance cover must also include Missed Departure and/or Missed Flight Connection for both outbound and return flight sectors (such cover might be subject to a small additional premium – please confirm with your insurers). This is essential due to the unreliability of domestic flights in and out of Leh due to bad weather. It is also essential that your travel insurer is aware that you will be at altitudes of around 4000 meters above sea level on this trip. We ask that you send us a photo/fax/electronic copy of your policy document together with the 24hr medical assistance telephone number issued by your insurer.



Reef and Rainforest Tours Ltd.

A7 Dart Marine Park, Steamer Quay, Totnes, Devon, TQ9 5AL, UK

Tel: ++ 44 (0)1803 866965 Fax: ++ 44 (0)1803 865916

www.reefandrainforest.co.uk mail@reefandrainforest.co.uk

