

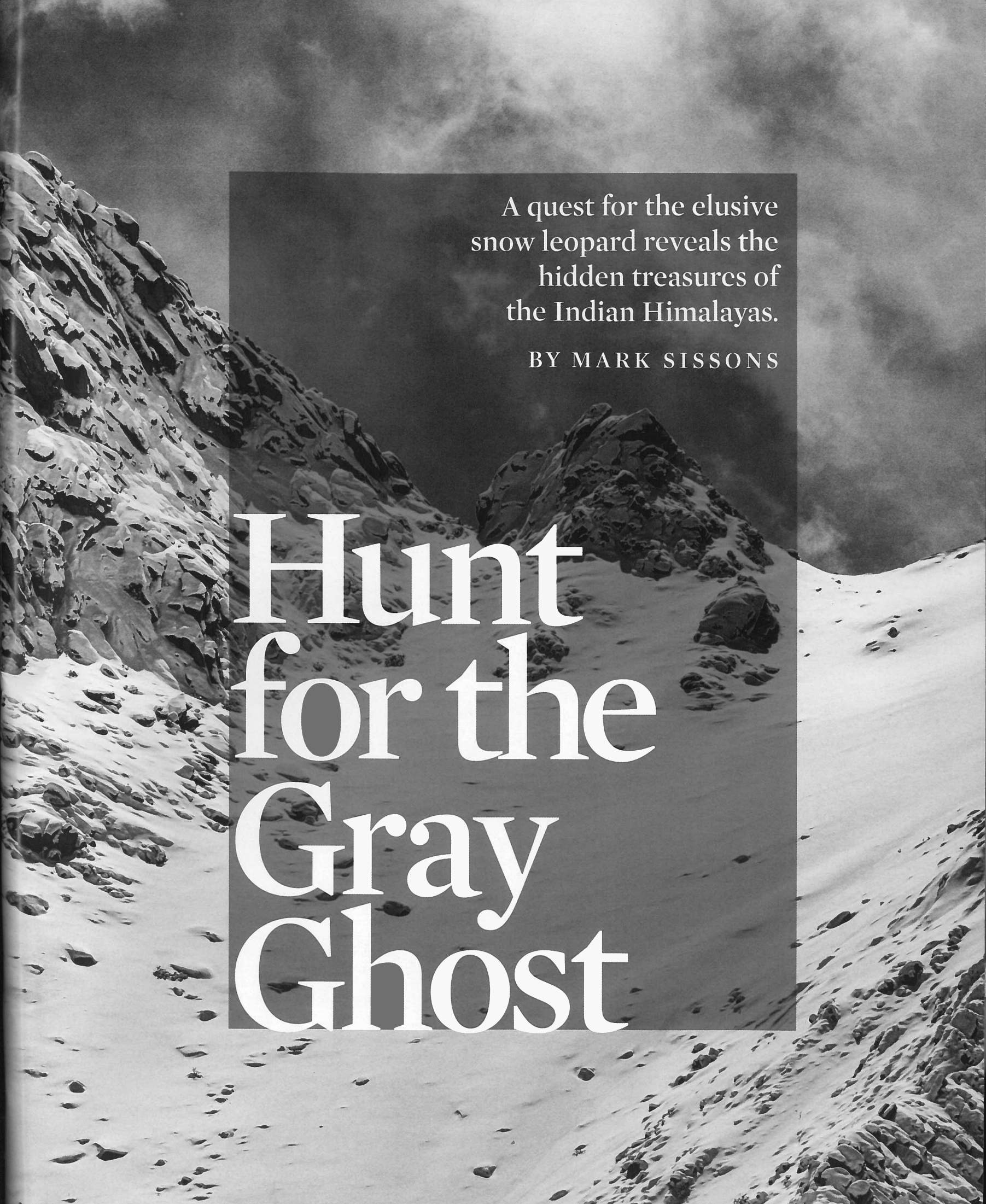
THE MANUAL OF MODERN LUXURY

Robb Report

Dream Machines




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A quest for the elusive
snow leopard reveals the
hidden treasures of
the Indian Himalayas.

BY MARK SISSONS

Hunt for the Gray Ghost



Squinting into a battered old telescope, I scan the craggy ridgeline for a flicker of feline movement. It is wintertime in Ladakh's remote Ulley Valley, a sparsely populated desert region high in the Indian Himalayas, and somewhere up there amid the frozen cliffs, the extraordinary snow leopard is lying in wait. I pan from left to right, right to left, searching for some sign of the endangered cat—perhaps a flash of pale-green eyes or a blur of spotted fur. Alas, I see nothing.

“That’s where the *shan* usually hide, straddling the top of those high ridges,” says Tsewang Norboo, using the Ladakhi term for snow leopard. An expert wildlife tracker, Tsewang is guiding me on an acclimating hike through the valley, ascending higher and higher, bit by bit, through the snow-dusted slopes some 14,000 feet above sea level. A Ladakh native, my companion easily scrambles from rock to rock at this elevation, leaving me behind to gulp desperately for oxygen. Still I persist, driven by the desire to see one of Earth’s scarcest and most beautiful creatures.

To be sure, a *shan* sighting is exceptionally rare. So rare, in fact, that even Peter Matthiessen—the wilderness writer who penned *The Snow Leopard*, a gripping account of his 2-month quest for the big cat—never saw one. Such elusiveness makes for marvelous fables. The leopard’s “terrible beauty,” Matthiessen wrote in his 1978 book, “is the very stuff of human longing. Its uncompromising yellow eyes, wired into the depths of its unfathomable spirit, gaze out from the cover of innumerable editions. It is, I think, the animal I would most like to be eaten by.”

Tsewang doesn’t quite share Matthiessen’s sentiment. “When I was a child, I feared the *shan*,” he says. During the winter months—when the oft-hidden cats would descend from the valley’s highest peaks in search of prey—the snow leopards would snatch sheep, goats, and baby yaks from his father’s livestock corrals. The costly carnage left his father, and many ranchers like him, with an ax to grind. “Some farmers would shoot them with old matchlock rifles,” he says. Others would sell their pelts and bones on the black market.

Such retaliatory killings—along with habitat loss and targeted poaching—have placed this once undisputed monarch of Central Asia’s high peaks and steppes on the ever-growing list of endangered species. The World Wildlife Fund estimates that as few as 4,000 may exist in the wild



today. However, a 15-years-in-the-making initiative by the Indian chapter of the Snow Leopard Conservancy has slowly started to reverse this trend through the introduction of livestock-loss compensation programs and predator-proof fencing.

Beyond these measures, the nonprofit organization has launched its successful Himalayan Homestays program, providing training in hospitality and guiding to villagers like Tsewang, who in 2014 opened the Snow Leopard Lodge in a terraced field not far from his whitewashed

mud-brick home. The four-bedroom guesthouse is a testament to the transformative influence the conservancy has had on locals, who increasingly see the snow leopard (as well as the Tibetan wolf and Himalayan fox, two other predatory animals once considered pests) as a source of pride—and income.

This year, Tsewang partnered with the outfitter andBeyond, known for its luxurious African lodges and safaris, to bring travelers to Ladakh’s little-known Ulley Valley on snow-leopard-tracking

adventures. On the 13-day Snow Leopard Expedition, travelers journey from Delhi to the Ladakhi capital of Leh (where the Snow Leopard Conservancy is headquartered) and on to Ulley, where for 6 days they explore the three valleys surrounding the Snow Leopard Lodge in search of the legendary gray ghost and other indigenous species. Back at Tsewang's inn, they settle into intimate guest rooms adorned with kerosene lamps, colorful kilim rugs, and ornate Tibetan furniture, and dine on traditional Ladakhi dishes like *thukpa* (noodle soup with yak meat), *momos* (Tibetan dumplings), and *skyu* (vegetable stew)—all washed down with sweet yak-butter tea.

lucky: We've come at just the right time, when the snow is fresh and untouched, making paw prints—left behind as the cats stalk wild blue sheep, ibex, marmots, and hares—easier to spot. As our SUV bobs and sways from switchback to switchback, I examine the thin sheets of snow covering the ground for evidence of the elusive creature I have traveled so far to find. I soon discover, however, that luck can be as passing as the high Himalayan winds.

The next morning, buried beneath layers of wool blankets in my cozy bed, I awaken to find that the Snow Leopard Lodge is also buried—under more than 2 feet of fresh snow. Overnight, a

late-winter blizzard—the largest this region has seen in half a century—has turned the most ideal of tracking conditions into an unnavigable impasse.

I sip coffee in the lodge's kitchen, contemplating the dreadful turn of events, until a lull in the storm lures me outside. Filled with hope, I wade through thigh-deep snow, camera in hand, and spot a pair of ibex nimbly climbing toward a summit. Perhaps, I imagine, a hungry leopard crouches nearby, ready to pounce. No such luck. I lie in the snow staring at the amphitheater of austere peaks surrounding me, wondering which white mass might have a big cat curled up just behind it.



The 3-hour drive from Leh—a necessary pit stop for altitude acclimation—to the Ulley Valley is a dizzying array of twists and turns, wending along the sacred Indus and Zaskar Rivers, through ancient villages, and past 1,000-year-old *gompas* (monasteries). But it is the arrival into snow-leopard country, high up among the precipitous cliffs blanketed in winter white, that gets my adrenaline pumping most. Tsewang tells me I'm

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As the last rays of sunlight dapple the distant mountains, I return to the lodge to warm up next to a kerosene lamp. In an effort to

ease my disappointment, Tsewang shows me a video—filmed by a noninvasive motion-triggered remote infrared camera—of three snow leopards somewhere out there in the valley. They stare into the lens, their spotted white-gray coats glowing in the moonlight, before one suddenly leaps on an ibex carcass, savagely ripping off strips of flesh. It's a primal scene—one I had hoped to witness in person. Instead, I've traveled nearly 7,000 miles to see a snow leopard and, like Peter Matthiessen, will surely leave without achieving my goal.

But Matthiessen wasn't disappointed; quite the contrary. "Have you seen the snow leopard?" the author asks himself in the book. "No! Isn't that wonderful?"

A part of me can't help but agree. The blinding snow peaks, silver ice, requiem birds, and old carved stones that Matthiessen wrote about are no less wonderful on their own. In a way, the *shan's* absence makes the landscape more bewitching, more magical, and more beautiful, hinting at what might be just around the corner. **R**
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