

CAMPING LADAKH

# A GLAMP WITH A VIEW

Cappuccino, spectacular views and the Thiksey monastery  
keep **CHARUKESI RAMADURAI** company in TUTC's  
luxurious Chamba Camp in Ladakh.  
Photographs by **SANKAR SRIDHAR**



*The tents of Chamba Camp with the  
Thiksey monastery in the background*

## LADAKH

There are those who, when they go camping, want to leave it all behind. And then there are those who want to take it all with them. And want to have it all when they get there.

I belong to the latter group. Love and fresh air may be enough for some; I look for fast wi-fi and cappuccino on call.

Enter glamping.

Chamba Camp at Thiksey in Ladakh is the new kid on the glamping block. This flagship property of The Ultimate Travelling Camp (TUTC) has thrown open its gates to guests for the first time this season. Yet, there is not a single misstep in the two days I spend here.

When I arrive at Chamba Camp, a small welcome team is waiting outside the reception marquee. Warm smiles, introductions, cold towels and sweet herbal tea are passed around. And then someone casually asks if I would like the camp doctor to check my oxygen levels. They are very serious about the acclimatisation process here, advising guests to take it easy on their first day at this altitude.

Niki—who will be my Jeeves during my stay—walks me to my tent. It comes with a four-poster bed, antique tea chest and comfortable camp-style sofa chairs. And there is a remarkable feel of solidity about the tent; think Baroque chandelier above the bed and gleaming copper sink in the bathroom.

But it is the view that is the showstopper. As soon as I settle down on my chair on the narrow deck outside the tent, I know that I will have no problem with the whole ‘go easy’ advice. Even if I have already spent a couple of days in Ladakh, and am breathing deep and steady by now. My tent faces the Stok range, with a direct view of the snowcapped Stok Kangri, which keeps playing hide and seek with the clouds.

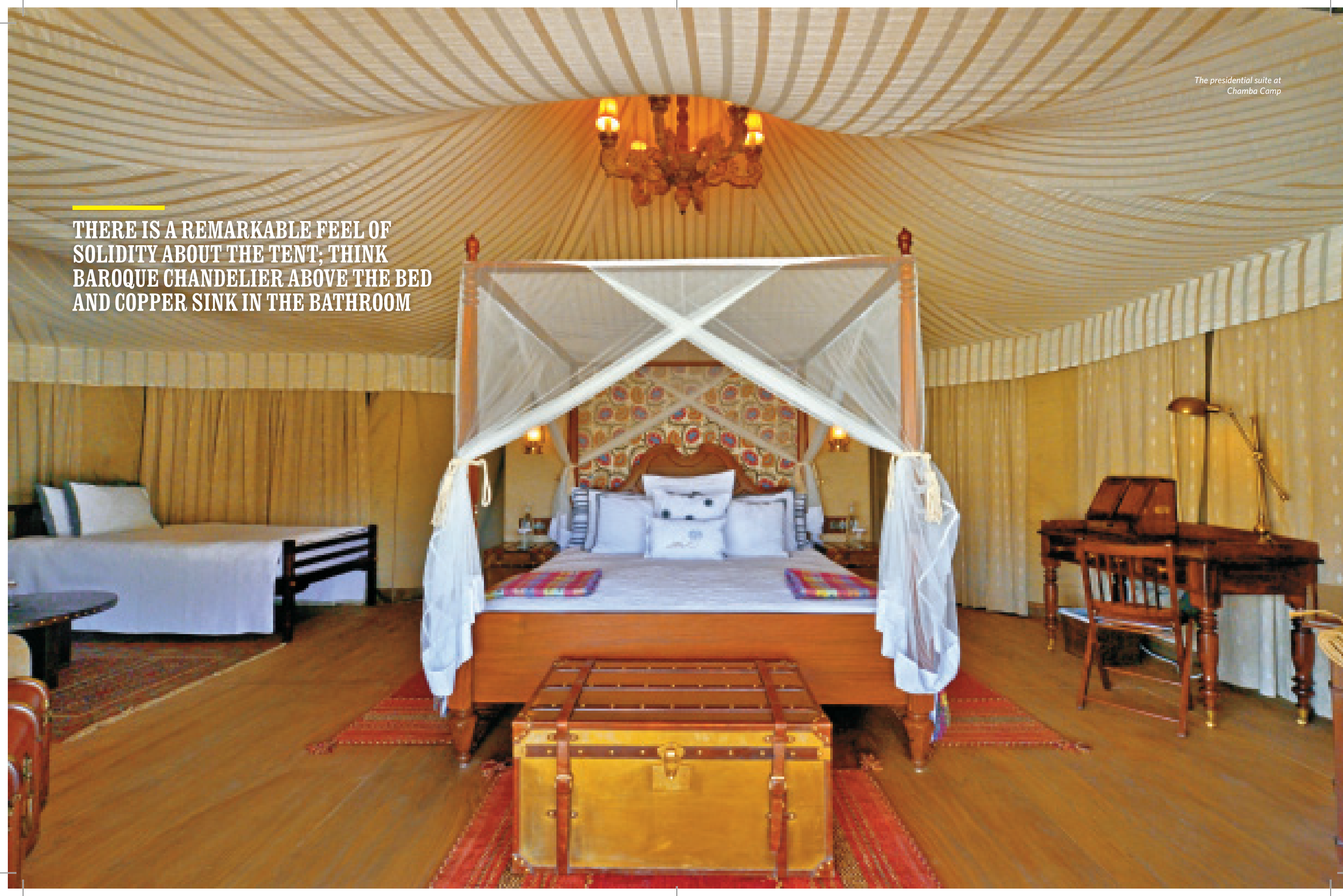
If the allure of a hotel or resort partly lies in the location, then Chamba Camp comes up trumps. The campsite sits in the shadow of the picturesque Thiksey monastery, a mishmash of squat ascetic structures cascading down the hill.



*The Tsemo Palace in Leh; and (facing page) Chamba Camp guests enjoy a picnic breakfast by the river Indus*



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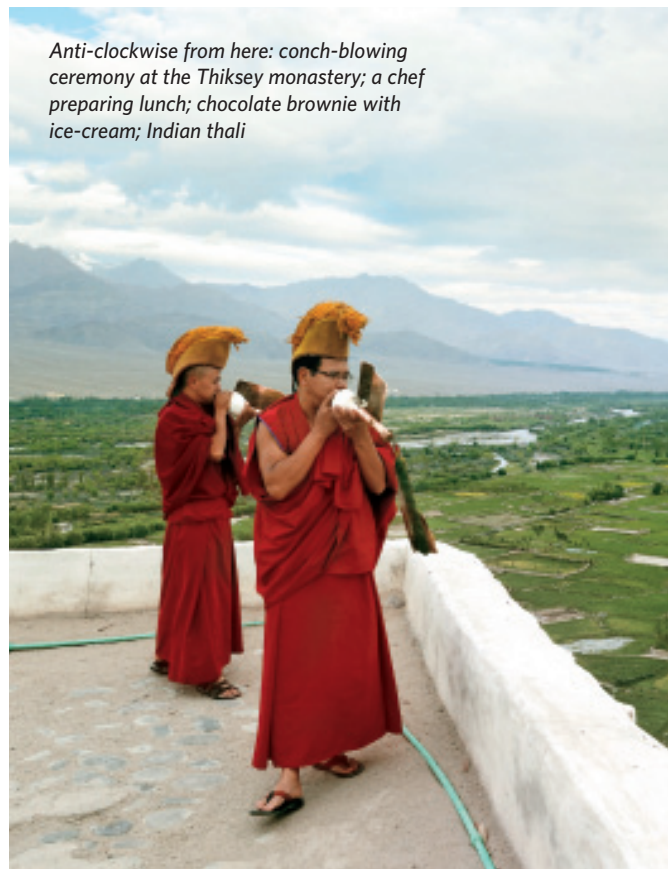
## LADAKH

The monastery is a constant presence around the campsite, visible from various spots. One set of tents—including the presidential suites meant for families—opens out to this dramatic view. And if that is not enough, there are the dozens of chortens lining the property, towards the direction of the monastery. Chortens are powerful structures in Tibetan Buddhism, often containing sacred relics and artefacts. The ones near the campsite are old and crumbling, but I think they radiate a sense of peace, especially in the muted moonlight.

However, Chamba Camp is not just about the location and the views; this is a property with a purpose. I am curious about how the influential Thiksey monastery has allowed a camp to be set up on its land. Our photographer Sridhar, a Ladakh veteran, wonders if the chortens have been moved—just a little distance—to keep the campsite clean and pretty. Salil Pradhan, who oversees the tours organised by the camp, is shocked at the very idea; after all, they are the interlopers here on the monastery's territory. Native alfalfa grass is allowed to sprout in profusion inside the campsite and locals are welcome to let their cattle graze on it.

While the monastery did lay down some conditions, Salil says that the TUTC promoters—a few from the armed forces—were always intent on giving back to the local community. The drivers, guides and the security staff here are all Ladakhi. The women tending to the flowers outside my tent are from the neighbouring village and always have a cheery “Juley” ready.

*Anti-clockwise from here: conch-blowing ceremony at the Thiksey monastery; a chef preparing lunch; chocolate brownie with ice-cream; Indian thali*



The monastery, in turn, has given the camp its blessings, with the Rinpoche taking a keen personal interest in the project. And although they don't advertise this fact, a few senior monks drop in occasionally to consecrate the central prayer flag and have tea with guests.

Salil and his team keep coming up with suggestions on where to go and what to do. Me, I am happy to just read my trashy thriller (turns out the butler didn't do it) and smile vacantly into the distance. They finally manage to drag me out for a village walk in the evening. And we head with our guide Dorje to his family home for a taste of Ladakhi hospitality marked by salty butter tea and juicy apricots.

It is only later that I learn that for guests like me—who like the active taken out of activity—the campsite itself provides enough distractions. There is a small archery zone, where I see chef Simarpal Virdi in active contest with the valets. Guests are welcome to join in or to head out to watch a vigorous polo



match in the vast open space below Stakna monastery. There is enough adventure on offer—rafting, mountain biking, trekking—to suit all levels of fitness and interest. No? Then, perhaps an hour with the spirits at a séance with the village oracle. Or a cultural tour of old Leh, taking in the ruins of the once magnificent palace.

There is something I don't want to miss. So we head out at daybreak, shivering slightly in the crisp mountain air, to Thiksey for the morning prayer. This is one of my favourite Ladakh experiences: the sonorous chants of the senior monks offset by the giggles of young monks (I call them ‘monklets’) bustling around with kettles filled with butter tea.

Breakfast is a picnic by the Indus, a picture postcard pretty location chosen by Chamba Camp for birding. We begin with the usual suspects like fresh fruit, cold cuts and baked goodies. Just when I expect this to be followed by eggs, they offer pav bhaji. Even at that early hour, buttery pav bhaji on the banks of a gurgling river is a sublime experience. And I say this as a connoisseur of Mumbai's roadside pav bhaji, plenty of heat and dust included.

Chamba Camp is a far cry from the spate of new guest houses and hotels that dot Leh, with their golden dragon wall motifs and multi-cuisine restaurants. This is understated, tasteful luxury at its best. Sure, the meals are multi-cuisine but it is because chef Simarpal chats with guests to know what they want to eat next. From asparagus risotto topped with intense blue cheese to pan-seared duck breast served with

pineapple pilaf, a surprise is whipped up each time. Just ask.

The wi-fi is a bit slow but then we are at an altitude of nearly 12,000 feet. And there is always cappuccino, served with jeera cookies and a smile (oh, the smiles everywhere).

The Ultimate Travelling Camp at Ladakh is open only for a few months during summer, after which the marquees are dismantled and sent to storage in Delhi. The action then shifts to Kohima in Nagaland, in time for the Hornbill Festival. Also in the pipeline are Kotwara near Lucknow, and Dudhwa along the Nepal border.

I like the thought that come winter, when Chamba Camp stays shut, the Thiksey monastery will still keep a benevolent eye over the empty campsite.

## THE INFORMATION

### GETTING THERE

There are several daily flights from Delhi to Leh (from ₹8,000 return); from the airport, Chamba Camp is a 30-minute drive.

### TARIFF

Packages from ₹1,47,213 for 3 nights/4 days per person on twin sharing basis in a luxury tent (includes transfers from and to Leh airport, all meals and specific guided excursions).

■ CHARUKESI RAMADURAI