

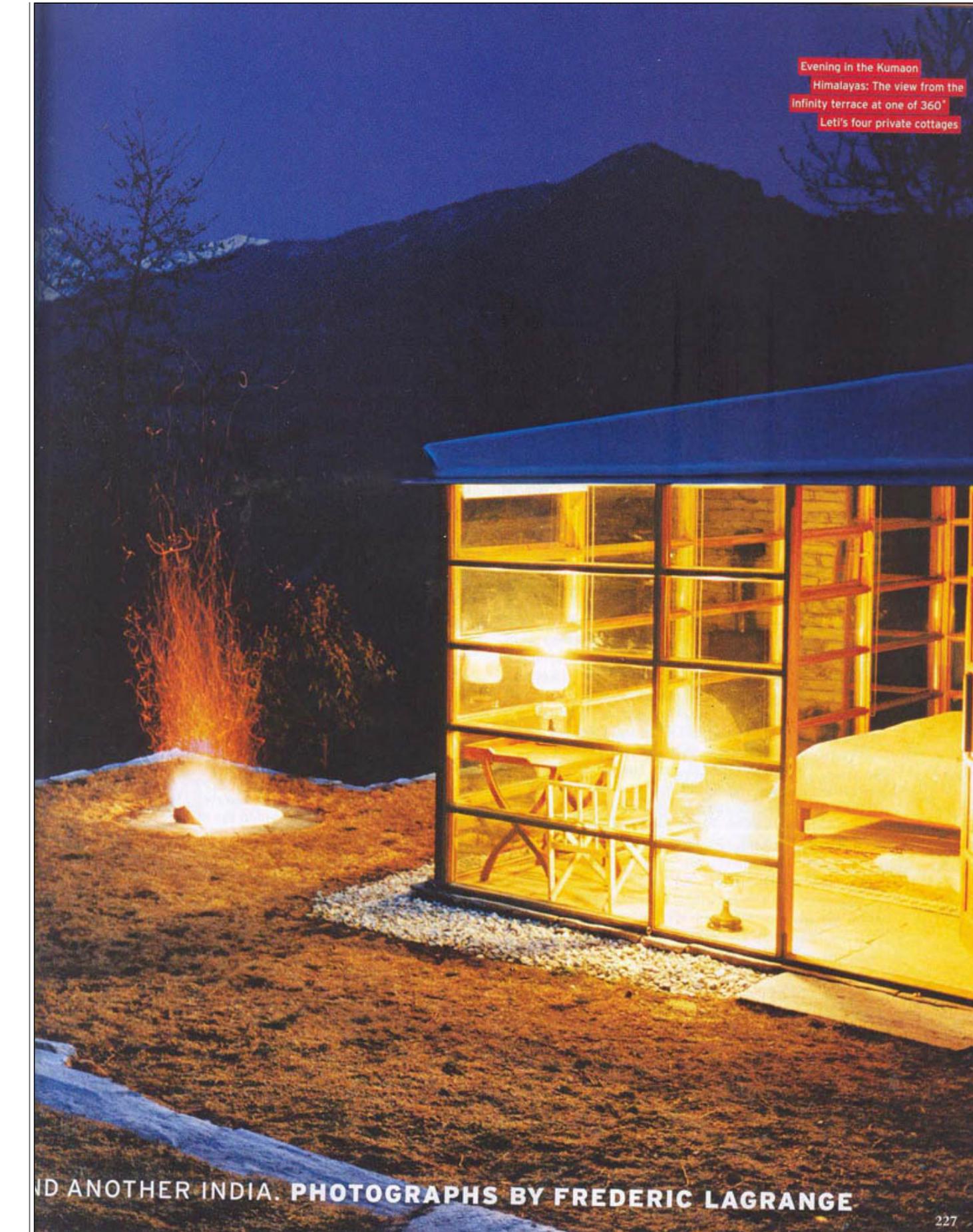
HIGHLIGHT

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LUXE

AT A HIGH-ALTITUDE RETREAT, **SOPHY ROBERTS** FINDS SOLACE, BE



Evening in the Kumaon  
Himalayas: The view from the  
Infinity terrace at one of 360°  
Leti's four private cottages

AND ANOTHER INDIA. PHOTOGRAPHS BY FREDERIC LAGRANGE

After I heard the novelist Ian MacEwan was making the journey to 360° Leti, I started thinking about visiting the eccentric Himalayan lodge myself. "A distinguished and unforgettable blend of beauty and adventure," he wrote me in an e-mail after his trip this past February. "To find simple luxury and world-class food and service in a place of such pristine

beauty seemed improbable, a fantastic joke," added his wife, Annalena MacAfee.

:Located high on a vertiginous plateau in India's little visited Kumaon Himalayas, on the border with Nepal, 360° Leti is almost extravagantly remote. Although the region, which belongs to the northern state of Uttarakhand, has a rich tradition in exploratory mountaineering, there has never been any significant tourism north of Almora, the British Hill station about 130 miles south of the lodge.

Needless to say, getting to 360° Leti presents acute logistical hurdles. From Delhi it requires an eight-hour trip on a sleeper train to the small railway terminus at Kathgodam, then an eight-hour drive to Leti village, and finally, from the end of the last road, an hour's walk to the lodge. Alternatively, you can charter a five-eater plane to Pithoragarh, a town in the Kumaon Himalayas and a four-hour drive from the camp. But it's the last part of the journey that proves hardest: sharing weaving roads and precipices with hurtling Indian buses and following a path that's been obscured in places by dramatic rock falls.

For those who endure the humps, bumps, and stomach lurching switchbacks of the final climb, Leti promises noble reward. Unlike a luxury resort that's merely consumed, this is a place to be savored an intelligent model of eco architecture designed by one of Mumbai's most in demand names, Bijoy Jain. "The views alone merit a visit to the site regardless of any architectural intervention," says Jain. He's not wrong. I'd challenge anyone to fine a room with more profound view.

When we arrive at 360° Leti, it's almost night. My blood's rushing perhaps from the 8,000 foot altitude, perhaps from the strenuous hike but I'm truly thrilled to discover a lodge so alluringly comfortable this far from the many Oberois and Amanresorts that populate the Indian plains. Leti is on the northern flank of a spiky fin that resembles a sleeping dinosaur, the rocks dripping in old black moss and tears of iron. From my vantage point, I can see the highest peaks beginning to separate the clouds from recent storm,. I spot a glacier on the skyline how far I'm unsure because her distance are skewed. There is a smell of wet lichen and above me, an early-spring showing of new snow. There is nothing else around, only hamlets and cliff-hugging trails, oak, and rhododendron forests.

Even though I've made seven trips to the Indian Himalayas, arriving here at 360° Leti is like seeing these mountains for the first time. In this grand landscape the valleys are much more densely packed than in the Himalayas I know, the mountains more spec. When I wake to the view, I'm faced with walls of rock where perspective is lost, where the sounds of voices from the valley floor bounce up toward the higher ground as if coming from the next room. Narrow rivers snake below like veins on my hand, and in the distance, a ridge of 20,000-plus foot peaks speaks of other impenetrable hollows and the summits of Nepal. Ledges have been turned into terraced wheat fields, glinting gold in the sun, traversed by tracks just wide enough for a string of overloaded mules. Eagles float below me, rarely above.

Leti's owner, Jamshyd Sethna, acknowledges that his project is challenging. A Parsi psychoanalyst from Mumbai, he is familiar with complex Indian travel arrangements,; Sethna also owns Banyan Tours, which is among the country's leading tour agencies. But nothing as trite as Limited access was going to stop him from building this fantastic aerie. "Four year ago I was walking through the glaciers in thigh-deep snow and I saw snow leopard tracks. Blue antelope were beyond, and the peak of Nanda Devi. The place totally gripped me," he says. "I felt energized-a felling of exhilaration and peace and peace and it was then that I felt I had to do it. In the mountains everything drops away. It's like three months of therapy in three days."

To find the perfect location, Sethna says, he sent out scouts armed with cameras, adding, "I told them to look for some place as far away as possible within the shadow of the peaks of Nanda Kot or Nanda Devi."

Sethna ended up on a ledge above a tiny hamlet named Capri overlooking the Ramganga Valley. In 2005 he leased the narrow plateau from six farmers (members of their families are employed as staff). His initial operation consisted of two reinforced Rajasthani-style tents. In late 2006 he committed to a more ambitious project, working with the California-trained Jain, who also designed Sethna's beach house in Nandgaon, outside Mumbai. Jain's plan for Leti included four guest cottages as well as a main house with a lounge and dining area. But just when the buildings were nearly completed, in spring 2007, they were severely damaged by heavy monsoons. After massive renovations the property is now fully watertight and a tour de force in ecosensitive lodge design.

It is boldly modern and, aside from some traditional building techniques, decidedly un Indian: 352 panes of glass, ten tons of teak, and abundant layered slate speckled with silver mica. (some 35 to 50 porters each carried 40 stones a day up the mountain during the five months of construction.)



Scenes from 360° Leti: The lodge from a distance; the main sitting room of the lodge; picnicking by a waterfall; a bedside sheepskin rug and a solar-powered lantern; walking on a suspended bridge through the Kumaon Himalayas; room service.

## HIMALAYAN LUXE

The freestanding cottages, all with private infinity grass terraces and sunken outdoor bukhari firepits, are cut into the

plateau 150 to 300 feet apart from one another. Despite their sharp, contemporary edges, the structures maintain a non-intrusive presence in the landscape. This is largely because of sensitive placement that maximizes privacy while grounding the buildings in the land's contours.

The interiors are equally pared down the focus is on what lies outside with twin or double beds, slate floors, woodstoves, white sheepskin rugs, crisp sheets, brass sinks, and creamy, soft pashmina blankets. The wood-and-leather campaign furniture is an attractive hangover from Leti's tented days. Lighting is provided by solar lanterns, which you use to navigate the plateau as you wander up the 50-yard path to dinner. In the main house you can expect damask tablecloths, elegant white crockery, silver and a crackling open fire.

And you do eat well: afternoon tea of strawberry jam and fresh-baked scones, delectable akuri scrambled eggs for breakfast, chilled gazpacho for lunch, mouthwatering curry feasts at dinner, good Scottish whiskeys, and imported wines. The chef, a former Tibetan monk, puts together picnics for day walks to the snow line, a temple, a waterfall made up of excellent bread and sophisticated salads, many of the vegetables grown in the lodge's organic garden.

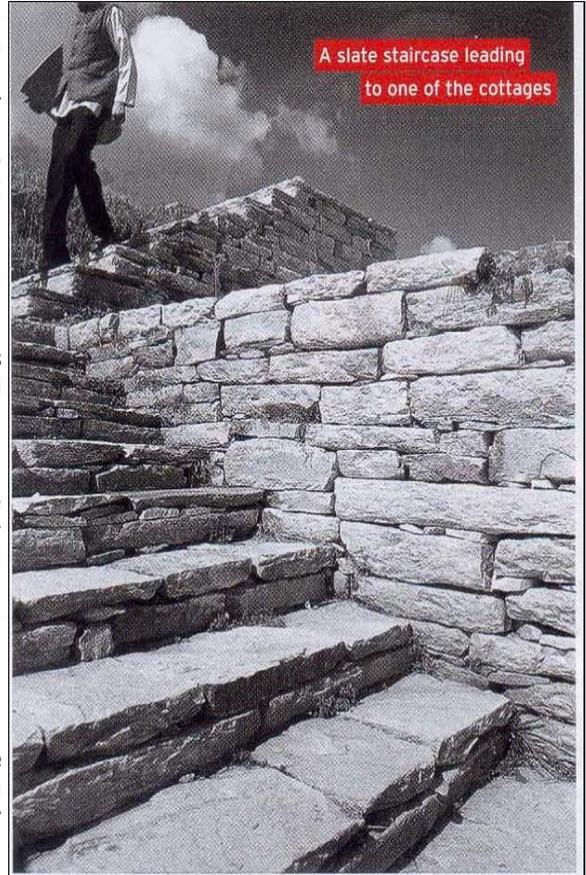
Leti's team of well-trained locals is memorable. The Indian guides are all university educated with deep knowledge of these mountains, their people, and their politics, while the lodge staff is amusing, willing, and attentive. They strive to get it right and most of the time do. If you order a cold beer for 4 PM the first day, they will bring you the same the next day without being prompted. If, for example, you like a certain spicy prawn chutney, it will appear in a little porcelain dish beside you at every meal thereafter.

Which is not to say Leti doesn't have its shortcomings. The brass rose head showers are solar heated so not 100 percent reliable (though buckets of hot water are always on reserve), and you can't dial "1" for room service, Instead you have to swing by the kitchen and ask.

There's no spa, but if you practice yoga (teachers must be booked in advance), I cannot think of a better place, the altitude bringing on a certain clarity of mind. The height, which is comparable to the upper runs of St. Moritz, seems to induce a physiological sense of wholeness, as if every cell in your body were on maximum alert.

I meet an older British couple making the journey back to Delhi. English gentry and slightly stiff in the legs, they remark that the walk to Leti is hard but well worth the effort. Though they are well traveled in India and perhaps a bit jaded, Leti has left them surprised, enamored, rejuvenated.

Sethna describes the freestanding cottages, all with private infinity grass terraces and sunken outdoor bukkari firepits, are cut into the plateau Leti as "something entirely illogical." And clearly it is too much of an aberration to be called a hotel. There are no manufactured diversions, like TVs, DVDs, or hot tubs. Instead I read, walk enjoy picnics at the foot of waterfalls, and visit villages. I meet the "tailor of Capri," a well-known community figure (he has a cell phone that village girls use to call absent husbands serving in the Kumaon regiment). He seems bemused that I'm even here.



## Trekking Trips

Leti pairs effectively with Jamshyd Sethna's other recent project, Based in a different part of the Kumaon Himalayas, a five hour drive south from the lodge. Called Shakti Village Experience, it is India's first high-end walking and Himalayan camp concept. The idea is simple enough: Shakti is a smarter version of the "teahouse trekking" that has operated in Nepal since the late sixties. It is about walking rather than technical climbing and covers about seven to ten miles a day on a specific Himalayan circuit.

Walkers access remote valley, stay in village houses (done up by Sethna into elegant two-or three-room guesthouses), and eat local food. For every two clients, Shakti provides a traveling staff of six, including porters, a guide, and a camp cool. Shakti also offers routes in Sikkim, a small state in northeastern India, and Ladakh, the moonscape like region running along the Indian-Tibetan border in the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

From \$1,135 per person for a three-night trek, with a minimum of two travelers; meals, guides, and lodging are included (91-11-4173-4788; shaktihimalaya.com).

stay three nights but could have remained a week. For this is the privilege of Leti: You're sharing the peculiar expression of a surprising dream, accessing that feels private, something that belongs to a determined, imaginative individual rather than a money making machine. There's nothing like it in India or elsewhere. Leti reverberates with ambition and a deeply felt connection with these hauntingly quiet mountains. It delivers a different pace, therapeutic space, and nights well slept at 8,000 feet to me, the essence of a true retreat.

*The ideal time to visit the Kumaon Himalayas is autumn, when the skies are clear and cold, or in March and April, when the rhododendrons come into bloom. December and January offer the best views (In spring the sky can be hazy with the buildup of heat from the plains). 360° Leti is closed from June through late September, when monsoon rains cause landslides that block the access road. A minimum three-night stay, at \$540 a person per night, is required. Rates include all porters, guides, accommodations, meals, and beverages (even alcoholic). Call 91-11-4173-4788 or go to shaktihimalaya.com.*