



Inside a yurt lined with tapestries, passed on from generation to generation. Sylvia (middle) sips on kumis, a welcome drink of horse milk which has undergone a fermentation process.

JOURNEY WITH A CAUSE

Sylvia Caravotas, from Benoni, is a young woman with strong beliefs that women should break free from society's dogma and start exploring and interacting with the world. . . which is exactly what she did when she went on a snow leopard expedition to Kyrgyzstan, last year.

She feels strongly about conservation and was looking to participate in a protection project.

"While browsing National Geographic's website I came across Biosphere Expeditions - an award-winning, non-profit wildlife volunteer organisation running conservation expeditions for volunteers across the globe. Their conservation projects place ordinary people with no research experience alongside scientists who are at the forefront of conservation work. I liked that their volunteers are

actively involved with the research," she explains.

Sylvia was intrigued by their snow leopard expedition. "After reading up on it, I asked for a sign that this was the right expedition for me and shortly thereafter I watched *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, starring Ben Stiller, where the snow leopard makes an appearance. This majestic ghost cat captured my attention and my soul."

On June 6, 2014, she left for the Tien Shan Mountains of Kyrgyzstan to survey snow leopards and their prey. In Kyrgyzstan, snow leopard numbers

declined from an estimated 600-700 in the late 1980s to 150-200 by 2000. For two weeks Sylvia was part of a team of 12 volunteers who worked from a tented base camp set up at 2 500m. They covered ground in expedition vehicles and on foot, searching for tracks, kills, scats and animals, as well as setting up camera traps and interviews with locals.

Poaching and overgrazing are serious issues and the data they collected is vital for the formulation of snow leopard protection plans. Although they did not see any snow leopards



Sylvia (back) with Kyrgyz herders and their horses, which are an integral part of their lives.

last year, this year's team has come across snow leopard tracks. "The relationship between the predator and prey species is very fragile. Luckily our surveys showed that the area's habitat is sufficient to sustain a healthy prey base for the snow leopard," says Sylvia.

"I loved exploring Kyrgyzstan, often referred to as the 'little Switzerland of Central Asia.'" She especially enjoyed the time she spent interacting with local Kyrgyz people and involving them in snow leopard conservation. "They don't speak English, but they were very friendly and happy to welcome us into their homes." She believes that locals are key in putting an end to poaching and protecting their natural national treasures. A moment that really stands out for Sylvia, was when she went out exploring with a group of five. The altitude was affecting her and she asked the group to move on while she rested for a while. "The silence I experienced there was incredible. Sitting on a rock all alone in an isolated mountain valley, there was no fear, only awe-inspiring peace and serenity.

"Many within my community could not understand how I could travel to an unfamiliar country to save snow leopards. Our planet is deteriorating and poaching is at the highest it's ever been and animals across the globe

need our help. Brave endeavours bring about change, and changing perception will change the snow leopard's fate. Through awareness campaigns, raising funds for camera traps, data collection and interaction with locals on the expedition, I hope to have brought attention to the snow leopard's plight," says Sylvia. She feels strongly that society, community, family, religion and dogma keep many women from exploring and interacting with their world. "As women, we have many fears to deal with, including our safety. When you tear down those barriers, you open yourself up to soul-nourishing experiences," she says.

She urges people to reconnect with the earth in a way that resonates with them. Join a wildlife or conservation initiative, start your own, or grow a vegetable garden in your yard or at community centre. "Women run their households and can contribute to the health of our planet by recycling and using biodegradable products at home, which are healthier for your family and the environment. We are educators and can teach our family about conservation. Starting at home creates a ripple effect, which feeds into your community and the world at large. By sustaining our planet, we sustain ourselves and our souls," says Sylvia.



Kyrgyz women treated the group to black tea and flat bread in their yurt.



A snow leopard. Note the long fur-lined tail and the big paws covered with fur. They are perfectly adapted to the cold and dry habitat in which they live.



A Kyrgyzstan yurt. Yurts are temporary homes set up by herders in the spring and summer months, when their livestock graze in the mountains.