

Explained in 60 Seconds: Creating Sustainable Livelihoods Through Astrostays

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A lack of electricity, education and access to sustainable incomes are critical problems surrounding remote Himalayan communities. However, these regions have a powerful resource that had never been utilized to drive growth and positive change for these areas—their clear night skies.

With the aim of leveraging astronomy as a key developmental intervention, Global Himalayan Expedition (GHE), a social enterprise working in the Ladakh territory, partnered with International Astronomical Union Office of Astronomy for Development (IAU OAD), to create Astronomy for Himalayan Livelihood Creation (AHLC). This programme promotes astronomy to further develop the economy of the remote villages in Ladakh. The first project of AHLC is AstroStays.

The main objective behind AstroStays is to leverage astronomy to create sustainable livelihood opportunities for these remote communities. Astrostays

engages tourists in local culture, stories and heritage while travellers live in a homestay, which in turn generates benefits for the rural and remote region that has access to clear night skies. Communities are kept at the core of the programme—community members are equal stakeholders in the development of AstroStays. The inflow of money into the village economy alleviates everyone equally, and many women, in particular, are now more confident and handle family finances.

Since starting in June 2019, 30 women from 15 different villages have been trained on the basics of astronomy and how to operate a telescopes by scientists from the Indian Institute of Astrophysics (IIA). The first astrostay in Ladakh was set up in the village of Maan (4250 metres elevation), near the lake Pangong Tso. A team of five trained community members from Maan now use their new skills to conduct night sky viewing ses-

sions for the incoming tourists using a 10-inch telescope on a tracking mount. A second telescope has been installed in nearby Leh, in a partnership with PAGIR, an organisation working with specially-abled people of Ladakh. The five-member team has been similarly trained as the women to promote inclusive astrotourism.

There are now five astronomical homestays operational in Ladakh. In the last four months of operations, over 510 travellers have visited the astrostays, generating an additional income of around 1410 USD for the community and local entrepreneurs. Conducting night sky watching sessions and homestays for the incoming tourists has enabled communities to create new channels for generating revenue, while along the way fostering sustainable progress in the economy, gender equality, as well as scientific temperament in the region.



Figure 1. AstroStays Team in Ladakh. Credit: Global Himalayan Expedition (GHE)