India 2: From Ladakh to Zanskar

“India – a bouquet. Ladakh – a flower in it.”
(a quote from a road sign along the way from Leh to Manali)

About the trek:

Our trek took place in a region that is called “Little Tibet”. The trek, from Karsha (in the region called Zanskar, in the state of Jammu and Kashmir) to Wanla (back in Ladakh), crosses the Zanskar range of mountains that is located just west of the Tibetan plateau and north of the Himalayan range. The area is remote and the unspoiled landscape that we crossed was truly magnificent. It is also a very hard trek that involves seven passes in altitudes between 4000 and 5000 meters.

The Chemistry:

I find myself compelled to start with something that should have been more of an epilogue: the chemistry among the group members and the chemistry with the guide. The partners in such a trip can either make it a lousy experience, something that deserves forgetting, or a memorable experience to cherish for years. Our case was the latter one. The group was simply awesome! People who were strangers to each other became friends. My group-mates were great, friendly, benevolent, supportive of each other, funny and interesting. If someone felt bad, he or she got the support of all the rest of the gang. Moreover, those who felt bad (what is quite inevitable with those altitudes, food, strenuous walking and terribly harsh bus rides) did, quite naturally as it seemed to me, all efforts to pose as less burden as possible on the others. I found it quite admirable. (Luckily, I was healthy as an ox, and even had an appetite of one, throughout the entire trek, until it ended, when something went wrong in my stomach; a diet of warm coke and pepto-bismol solved my issues in few hours though.)

And then there was Gary - our guide. The brochure that we got before the trek told us of an experienced backpacker and climber that trekked the Annapurna, Langtang and Everest regions in Nepal, Mount Kailash in Tibet, and Zanskar and Ladakh areas in India. I imagined an Arnold Schwarzenegger type of a guide, that would wake us up every morning at 5AM with cheerful “Guten morgens” accompanied by “Raus, raus!” shouts if we wouldn’t get out of the tents in two minutes, and that would walk along the trek fast ahead of us and would encourage us to “schnell-up” with annoying march songs. Not even the least of it. Gary turned out to be a sweet soft-spoken man that was never in a hurry nor in stress. Whenever we encountered an unexpected problem, Gary would switch swiftly and smoothly from Plan A to B, then to C and, if necessary, to D, or, if possible, back to A. He always walked with the slowest party du-jour and, in general, gained the sympathy and friendship of all of us. Gary Loth is the name. Indeed, we had a “loth” of luck by having him.
What a service:

This part is mainly for my mom who always is interested to know what I ate and where I slept (yes, as you can guess, I have a Jewish mother). Well, we had six people in our local staff: KG – the chief operating officer of the trek; Pram – our cook; Tashi and Rinzin – two young helpers; and two pony-men (I’m sorry, but I forgot their names). Each morning, at 6AM, Rinzin or Tashi woke us up in our tents with a smile and a cup of tea, chai or coffee. They returned 15-30 minutes later with a bowl of warm water for washing up. At 7AM we had a very rich breakfast (cereals, porridge, bread, cheese, eggs, jam, peanut butter etc.). We usually started walking at 8-8:30, and the staff stayed behind in order to fold the tents, pack, and load everything on the ponies. The staff and the ponies always walked much faster than we did (“we” means everybody in the group except for Aris, our Greek friend, that could easily race the ponies up the mountains) and they passed us sometime during the day. In mid-day we had a light lunch and, when arriving at the campsite in the afternoon, we usually found it ready for us. At 5PM or so we enjoyed an afternoon tea and cookies in the dining tent (enhanced by cakes, halva, candy and liquor that we brought) and then, at around 7PM, it was time for our warm dinner and social gathering. The dinners were fantastic and even surprising (e.g., on Avi’s birthday, Pram made a warm chocolate cake with coconut frosting!). The conversation was always flowing and alive, but whenever there was a quiet moment, Gary took advantage of the opportunity to talk about the next day by whispering gently “So…, tomorrow…”, as if he was afraid that describing the daunting passes that awaited us the next day might be a too harsh throw back to the hard reality. At that stage, one of us would always ask the question “Do we need to bring river crossing shoes for tomorrow?” and Gary almost always said “no” (I couldn’t understand it, but some people seemed to be disappointed by that answer…).

I didn’t know how I would cope with almost two weeks of no bed and no shower and disconnection from the entire world. Well, it turned out to be much easier than I thought! It seemed that all of us slept, usually, very well, and as for the hygiene – it wasn’t that bad. We were in a dry desert, so even after 4-5 days with no shower I felt less dirty than after one humid hour in Tel Aviv in August (but, lets face it, much much dustier!!! Never in my life I was covered with and inhaled so much dust 😊). We had a chance to take freezing baths in several streams along the way, and wash there our cloths, just like Mother Nature intended. A full-body full-nudity bath in a freezing river under the desert sun is a very refreshing experience that I must recommend to you all. Try it in a river near you!

Getting there:

This trek is usually walked from north (Wanla in Ladakh) to south (Karsha or Padum in Zanskar, or even all the way down to the town of Manali in the state of Himachal Pradesh, but that version takes twice the time).
walked it from south (Karsha) to north (Wanla). The reason was the time of driving. The distance Leh-Wanla is coverable in about 6-7 hours. The distance Leh-Karsha, on the other hand, requires two very long days. We began with the longer ride in order to gain two more days of acclimatization to the heights. But then, HODU LE’ADONAY KI TOV, the good Lord turned that bus ride into a four-day bus ride so that we really got a chance to acclimatize to the high altitudes…

“Alert today, alive tomorrow”, “Better late than never”, “After whiskey, driving risky”, “A cat has nine lives, you have only one”, “If you sleep your family weep”, “If you are married, divorce speed”, “Better be Mister Late than a Late Mister”.

Yes, welcome to the Himank road system of Jammu and Kashmir. Himank are the road builders (or “mountain tamers” as they prefer to call themselves) of this difficult and remote area. Their road system boasts the two highest road-passes in the world (the highest one is about 5600m above sea level, on the way from Leh to the Nubra Valley – this one we passed 5 years ago; the second one is about 5350m, along the way from Leh to Manali – this one we passed few days ago). The terrain is so hard to tame and the conditions are so hard, that it is necessary to keep rebuilding those roads constantly. The roads are extremely curvy and narrow (this is not Switzerland, so forget about tunnels that cut through the mountains) and terribly bumpy (in many places the road degenerates to a mere dirt road, and a lousy one!). This explains the multitude of road signs that call for special alertness and cautiousness on those roads. This also explains why one cannot assume any mathematical relation between distance and time (except for the obvious relation that we mathematicians call “monotonicity”; namely, “more distance” implies “more time”) – 10 kms can take more than an hour. Consequently, no time plan that involves a ride along those roads is trustworthy; as indeed we found out.

We began the ride on Saturday, August 6th. We drove along the roaring Indus river, and everything looked OK, even though already at that point we understood that it would be a very hard drive (and I don’t refer just to the quality and dimensions of the bus). At noon, we heard that there was an accident ahead so we stopped for lunch, hoping that the road would clear in the meantime. Not. After finishing lunch we drove as much as we could until we arrived at the accident site. A truck driver that probably didn’t read the wise road signs (or maybe he did??) drove off the road and his truck was blocked by the rocks and trees on the mild cliff on the side. A military rescue truck came to pull it back. That rescue operation took many hours and caused an endless jam in both directions. True, we got a free show. However, slowly but surely we realized that there’s no way we can keep on moving that day. Luckily, we stopped very close to the large house (or mansion, I should say) of our driver’s parents. We were invited to spend the night there. Our hosts were generous and, as in our previous visit in Ladakh, the experience of staying at a Ladakhi house was most enjoyable.
The next morning we woke up at 3AM in order to start driving as early as possible. When the first rays of sun caressed the landscape around us we began to realize how astonishingly beautiful it is. We were surrounded by rock pillars, pinnacles and cathedrals that gave that place an out-worldly air. It had some resemblance to Bryce Canyon, but it was much wider, much more diverse, and the rocks had such a variety of colors that were only enhanced by the dawning sun. It turned out that the place is appropriately called The Valley of the Moon. And then, at around 6AM, we arrived at the famous Lamayuru monastery. The sight of that monastery took my breath away! No picture can capture that (but take a look at the first picture below), I’m afraid, so I’ll try my best in words: the monastery is situated atop a high cliff, surrounded by mighty mountains and overlooking the beautiful valley of the moon. The sky had a grayish-blue color and each of the many little sheep-clouds was lit as though it hid a candle in it (second picture). And the sun was beaming with the right angle from within the clouds right onto the side of the monastery. Just like in a classical painting that tries to convey a feeling of divine presence or providence. I stood there amazed, totally mesmerized by the picture, and fully aware to the fact that I am witnessing a short-lived spectacle. Indeed, after a minute or so, something changed in the lighting and the magic was gone.

Later on that day, we arrived at Kargil, a town that is very close to the Pakistani border and that used to be shelled from across the border. Here, and later on that day, the proximity to the Muslim Pakistan dominated the otherwise Tibetan nature of Ladakh. The spoken language is Urdu (that is written in Arabic letters), and the locals look like a mix of Palestinians and Afghans. From afar, we could see the peak of Mount Kun (over 7000m).

The next day, we left the main road that continues to Srinagar in Kashmir, and we started driving along a dirt road that turned out to be a trek of its own. Namely, think of a narrow path that goes through the most incredible landscape, and not of a simple dirt road. Our speed reduced to as little as 10 Km/h, the air was saturated with dust grains, and we were driving only few meters from a violent river, almost touching the feet of the mountains, tilting our heads to see the amazingly tall and sharpened cliffs around us, and passing something like 200m from the edge of a most respectable glacier! Later on we passed near a truly amazing glacier that looked like a giant frozen river (the picture below shows Shai and me with the glacier behind us). Near its edge there was a huge ice cave, covered with black dust and soil, in which we could see pillars of ice (like stalactites and stalagmites that were connected). Never in my life had I been in such a hard-yet-rewarding bus ride!

Only the next day, on Tuesday, we arrived at Karsha – the starting point of our trek in the modified plan (we were supposed to start walking in an earlier point, called Padum, but due to the unexpected delay, we had to adjust our trek route). So that was the end of our journey from Ladakh to Zanskar. We now began our way back from Zanskar to Ladakh, but this time on foot.
To be continued …