India 3: From Zanskar to Ladakh

Day 1: An easy start

On Tuesday, August 9th, we woke up in Padum, the tiny capitol of Zanskar, after three days of a hard bus ride through appetizing landscapes. We began our last day of driving towards our trek starting point, Karsha. During that ride, like in the previous days, I was hanging out of the door of the bus, amazed by the views and eager to start walking.

We arrived in Karsha Gompa (Gompa is a Tibetan monastery) at around noon and had a very interesting visit there, which I will describe in the next blog. After leaving the monastery we started walking along the wide Zanskar River in a giant valley, enveloped by brown, slightly snow-dusted mountains. It was an easy day of walking that ended in the hamlet of Pishu where the local kids jumped on us with endless enthusiasm and running noses, demanding attention and entertainment. Mor, the giant buffoon, became the immediate attraction. The kids chased him around and after nailing him down, they were hanging from him like cheerful monkeys from a laughing tree. We slept in a nice field near the river. From across the river we could see the castle of the once-Zanskar king perched on a cliff.

A view from the gompa; Playful kids

Day 2: Still easy

We continued walking along the Zanskar River, what means that we still didn’t start the “sowing” motif of the trek (namely, walking up and down). Since that day offered no special effects or attractions, I will keep it short: We slept in a place called Hanumil, near a creek, where we could bath, wash our clothes and enjoy soft drinks that were sold by the locals who kept them chilled in the water of the creek.

The Zanskar River; The Zanskar Mountains

Day 3: Not anymore

After an hour or so of walking along the Zanskar River, we started going up and away from the river that we would never see again. We began our climb towards Parfi-La (“La” means ‘a pass’) – 3930m. It is a hard climb, which at some point becomes quite steep. However, walking slowly with Noa and having an interesting conversation with her made the climb much easier. We then descended towards the Oma Cha River, which marks the border between Zanskar and Ladakh. The descent is steep, curvy, and hard and offers amazing views. It is followed by another climb of over 500m to a nameless pass of altitude 3600m. The views from there over a gorge are simply breathtaking. Another spectacular walk along a traverse and above a canyon brought us to a meadow in Snertse where we spent the night.
Day 4: Will you marry me?

Friday morning. Mor informed me that “today is the day”. The day started with an extremely long walk towards our first serious pass – Hanuma La, 4750m. Along the climb, which followed a stream, we saw an ice cave and entered it (cool and refreshing!). I continued to walk ahead of most of the group since I had a mission. Whenever I stopped to breath, Mor, who was walking few hundred meters behind me, signaled me impatiently to keep on walking. The bastard. When I reached the pass, that I could see from afar, since passes in this region of the world are always marked by hundreds of prayer flags, Todd and I began organizing a little corner there with some stuff that I carried (one of the things I carried was a cake that Mor’s mother sent with me from Israel). Then came Shai who was carrying the katta (white Tibetan scarves with bits of Buddhist wisdom written on them). And then came Bartek who was carrying in his hands (for kilometers!) a bottle with water and fresh flowers that Anu picked somewhere along the way.

When everyone was finally up on the pass, Mor took his unsuspecting Tonya to that corner and asked her the question. She said yes. We then had our lunch and a little “after-proposal” party in front of a view that defies verbal description.

After a hard climb, the most appropriate thing to have is a very hard descent. That descent was along a path that looked like Lombard Street in San Francisco. The amazing views that we saw from the top were slowly changing together with our viewpoint – like that one incredible table-shaped mountain that slowly transformed into a fantastic “Castle”, as articulated so well by Bartek.

Day 5: It doesn’t get much more remote than this

It was Saturday, so we walked only half a day. We began by climbing over a shoulder. The minute we finished the supposedly easy climb, we discovered a view that once again I cannot describe. So I will concentrate on that single aspect of the view that I can put into words: the colors. Imagine all the spectrum of warm colors of earth, plus cooler grayish-bluish rocks, in order to get a sense of how spirit-lifting was that landscape.

At around noon we reached our campsite in a place called Lingshot. That is the most remote place I have ever been to. My first letter from New Zealand was entitled “It doesn't get much further than this”. Well, Lingshot is not further, but it certainly is more remote. It took us about 6
days to get there from Leh, and about 5 days to return to Leh. I don’t think that I have ever been so far away from home, time-wise.

In Lingshot we had another Buddhist encounter that I will describe in the next blog. Here I will only say that the view from the roof of the Lingshot Gompa to the southeast, onto the landscape that we left behind us (all the way back to Hanuma La) was surpassed only by the view to the west: The sun sent her last beams from behind a cliff and coronated that cliff with a crown of light that resembled the crown of The Statue of Liberty.

A view from the roof of Lingshot Gompa back to Hanuma La

**Day 6: Murgun, Kiupa and more**

Another amazing day of walking that involved two passes – Murgun La (4100m) and Kiupa La (4500m) that, what else, were separated by a steep descent to another river that carved its way through another spectacular valley. The magical moment of the day: Reaching the top of Kiupa La in less than half the time that Gary had guesstimated, sitting there with Mor under the prayer flags, and listening with him through a dual set of headphones to Barry Sakharoff (OD HOZER HANIGUN) and then to Glenn Gould (Bach piano concerto no. 1) while 5 horses and 2 horsemen are standing around us and gazing baffled at us. The magic had increased tremendously when they finally left and let us admire the view and the fresh horse-free air just as Glenn Gould began his climb towards the final pass of the first movement where the famous D-minor theme reappears with vigor and determination. (Now, was that last sentence pompous or what? 😁)

We went to sleep at the campsite of the highest pass along the way. We slept in altitude of 4450m – the highest place I have ever slept in, and were about to climb the highest point I have ever climbed to by foot.

A typical view; Stupa; Climbing Kiupa La; When horses listen to Bach

**Day 7: Reaching the top**

It was much easier than I had anticipated. When I reached the top of Sengge La (The Lion Pass) Tonya welcomed me with a hug and told me that she had good news and bad news. “The good news”, she said, “is that you made it.” “The bad news”, she added, “is that we still need to climb in order to hit 5000m”. It turned out that our two GPSs indicated that Sengge La is lower than expected – it is only, roughly, 4970m above sea level. So we all went up the western shoulder of the pass until the more pessimistic GPS of the two that we had read 5009m with an error margin of 7m; we were now certain of being over 5000m. And the view from there over the pass (and the lazy Shai that stayed down) was so wonderful. It is a very wide pass – think of a saddle that is designed to sit not only one person, but, say, 10 people in tandem on the back of a very long horse. And it was
ornamented with a long stretch of snow to create a chocolate-and-vanilla look. We really felt there like on the top of the world.

The rest of the day we walked along a huge valley where a giant rock, of height 6000m, in the shape of the Monument from Monument Valley (painted black-and-white rather than brown) dominated the skyline during most of our walk. We finally got to wet our feet while crossing a river, after which we proceeded to climb atop yet another pass (Bumiktse La, 4200m). Then, we continued walking for what seemed like eternity. Yes, not everything was always cool and groovy: That day ended only 11 hours after it began – a bit too late for me, I must confess. However, two bowls of Maggi noodle-soup, one slightly-chilled Pepsi cola, one sip of tasteless Ladakhi beer, and three jokes later, I resurrected for a short while, until I collapsed again to a deep and most-needed night sleep.

Sengge La; Trekkers at 5000m, looking down on Sengge La; A view from Sengge La ahead towards Bumiktse La; A view back from Bumiktse La to Sengge La and onto The Monument; Tired Noa and I

Day 8: The last La

We began with the last pass of the trek – Sirsir La (4800m). There was an anticlimax feeling in the air. Noa and I made our way towards the top with the speed and enthusiasm of two septuagenarians. At some point I left her behind and dashed along the extremely steep path in a speed of two-steps-a-minute. I thought that that climb was the hardest, but not everyone concurred. From there, it was all downhill and I was fast-forwarding together with Aris until we reached the campsite already at 3PM. Just in time for a cold bath in the river and an afternoon top-quality nap! The way was beautiful and, believe it or not, still offered new views to feast the eye. The geological highlight of the day – a mountain that looked like the Mount Rushmore equivalent for E.T. (I don’t know if there’s a connection, but I did phone home that evening 😊(using satellite phone; we were still days away from cellular coverage.)

Majestic landscape; Lo and behold

Day 9: The finale

Last day of walking. No passes – just a pleasant walk downhill through a landscape that was breathtaking only in the good sense: It was a very narrow canyon, along a gushing river, with countless mountains that looked as though they fight for the eye’s attention. It resembled a walk in a narrow Manhattan boulevard with high-rises on each side and many skyscrapers that fill-up all of the view way ahead in the distance. In the afternoon, after leaving this amazing valley-canyon-gorge, we made our way along a flat dirt road that offered no interesting views, towards the village of Wanla from which we left, by bus, to Leh the next day. Every now and then I looked back on the amazing “Manhattan” that we left behind. It reminded me of all those sci-fi movies in which the heroes
escape just in time from, say, Mars, and then, from the safety of their spaceship, they look back on the amazing place that they left behind and see it explode or something. Our amazing place did not explode, but I think that it did rain over there… Anyway, there was definitely a sense of “THE END” in the air.

These are not our ponies ; These neither ; A view back to the valley that we left behind