India 5: And then there were seven

Back in Leh

There’s nothing more fun than coming back to civilization after a long escapade out there. Seeing again the hotel room (with beds, shower and toilet!), the friendly hotel owners, opening the bag that we left behind and fishing out clean clothes, taking a shower, a haircut, a shave, email, calling home, indulging ourselves with simple things like chilled apricot juice or pecan cookies, sitting in a café and doing some people-watching, eating in restaurants, shopping (a lot), and even taking an Ayurvedic massage…

There’s no comparison between doing the same stuff before a trek and after a trek. La joie de vivre!

The day and a half we had together in Leh was filled with a sequence of farewell meals in which we tried to find the best tandoori chicken in town. The next day, Avi, Anu and Bartek took off to Delhi on their way back home. So we said goodbye not only to Leh and Ladakh, but also to them. We were joined by Gary’s sister who came all the way from London to meet her little bro. She came right on time: It was the month of Sravana, and a full moon day. You know what that means, don’t you? Raksha Bandhan: This is a holiday where sisters fix amulets to their brothers’ wrists to protect them in the coming year. Mor and I were exposed to that beautiful tradition (think of it as the Indian version of Lance Armstrong’s Live-Strong) when we worked together few years ago. Prateek, an Indian friend who worked with us, got one day a package from India in which his sister sent him such an amulet to put on his wrist.

On Saturday morning, Aug 20th, Avi, Anu and Bartek woke up in the wee hours to catch their flight. We woke up later, had our last breakfast with Gary and then boarded the bus that we rented in order to start our long way down to Manali.

And then there were seven.

The Leh-Manali road

Here’s what I wrote about the road from Leh to Manali in a letter of mine from my previous visit to this region:

That is a two-day ride, one of the hardest ones I took, but perhaps the most beautiful one. Before too long, the landscape becomes breathtaking. The highly curved, narrow and dangerous road took us through deep and uniquely carved canyons, roaring rivers, unbelievably huge mountains, low hanging clouds, picturesque valleys and what not. But the great finale was the best. We went over the last pass (after 22 hours of being squeezed in the bus) and our amazed eyes beheld the Manali valley. This is a sight that I shall never forget. One and a half hours before the end, we saw the entire valley in which we were going to drive during the rest of the journey until the end
point of Manali. We were driving in an average speed of 25 Km/h so you can estimate the size of that valley. And what a valley! Huge rock formations, a wild river, cloud-covered peaks, trees hanging from the high edges of the upper rims, abundance of water falls (each one could be a major attraction in Israel), birds flying way below us, jungle-like plants and much much more. Other than glaciers, the designer of this valley put everything in it! Going down that valley reminded me the scene from Jurassic Park, where the helicopter descends slowly into the valley. However, I found the Manali valley much more dramatic and, instead of dinosaurs, we found in the bottom of the valley herds of Israelis that turned Manali into a completely Israeli town.

Ever since that wild drive, Mor and I dreamt of doing it again, but with a privately rented vehicle so that we could stop whenever we want to admire the view and take pictures. Sometimes, though, realizing dreams is not the way to go. This is the world’s second highest motorable road, reaching 5328m at Taglang La. As that treacherous road carves its 485 km-way through the Himalayas, you can imagine that it does offer spectacular views. However, Mor and I agreed that the experience that we remembered from five years ago was far more intense than the current one. I guess that we were already saturated from all that we had seen thus far.

During the entire ride we waited anxiously for the dramatic ending – the climb towards the last pass, Rohtang La, and then the descent into the valley that I described above. The climb was, in fact, unbelievable and much more impressive than what I remembered. The road gains something like 2000m in elevation, up to 3978m in the pass, only to lose them again immediately afterwards when it descends to Manali (2050m). When our bus was struggling to survive the steep ascent I kept looking both backwards, to the landscape that was slowly drifting away behind us, and forward, on the vehicles far ahead that were toiling their way up the mountain like little ants, just like in Rachel’s poem. My excitement level increased with the elevation, as we were approaching the pass, thinking about seeing that valley again. But a huge cloud that rested on the pass shuttered my dream. From the pass there was nothing to look down unto on the other side. Only after 20-30 minutes of descent down to below the cloud, we could see again that spirit-lifting valley. I stand behind every word that I wrote five years ago. Seeing that valley is a fantastic gift that one can give oneself.

I should add, by the way, that I was wrong to write back then that that valley had all sorts of natural forms except for glaciers. On the way down, when we were still engulfed by the cloud, I was amazed to see that we were passing near a small glacier (or a huge ice cube). Last time, when the sky was clear, our eyes tried to swallow the views of the valley, whence we failed to notice that little glacier just next to us.
Manali and Rishikesh

Manali is a town that has no special charm to offer except for its location between forests, orchards and green mountains, and serenity. Indeed, hundreds of Israelis get stuck there for many days, weeks and sometimes even more, enjoying the peaceful nothingness. We did that too. We stayed there for 3 lovely days in a fantastic cottage, situated in an English-like garden, and enjoyed a good rest, good food (including falafel and sabich at “Falafel Yuda”), good haircut-shave-and-head-massage, good Taki card games, and extremely bad local ice-cream.

From Manali, we went on to Rishikesh – the “Yoga Capital of the World”. It is situated on the banks of the holy Ganges, in a tropical-like setting. It has many ashrams for those who wish to study yoga, meditation and Hinduism in general. Those who are shallower and less spiritual (e.g., us) can walk along the holy river and enjoy the parade of sadhus (holy men) with their foggy look in their eyes. Rishikesh, by the way, became famous in the 60s when the Beatles came to meet their guru, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of the Transcendental Meditation.

And then there were 6,5,2,1,none

Tonya was the first one to leave us, from Manali to Rajasthan on her way back to the states. And then there were six.

Todd left next, from Rishikesh to Delhi, then to France and back to San Diego. And then there were five.

Noa, Shai and Mor left next for a trip in Sikh country. So on the morning of Saturday, August 27th, Aris and I were the only two that were left. We had a tête-à-tête breakfast on the roof of our hotel, overlooking the Ganges and its pedestrian suspension bridge. Then we took a taxi to Delhi. That evening we had dinner in “The Clay Oven” restaurant, where we all ate in the night just before leaving Delhi up north. Afterwards we wandered in the streets of the city that was celebrating the birthday of Krishna (just as it did in the last time I left Delhi in 2000) and then took a cab to the airport.

Aris left on a 1AM flight and then there was one.

I left two hours later and then there were none.

Shana Tova (Happy New Year) to you all.

Tamir