

Dear Friends,

We are now after our last dinner in India - a dinner that was probably the best in our entire trip, in a typical Indian restaurant, filled with mid and upper class locals only. Tomorrow night we take off to Mumbai and then to TA, thus bringing this unique trip to an end. I didn't write to you since we left Delhi 4 weeks ago, due to bad or nonexistent Internet service in the north where we were. So now I'll try to compensate for that, briefly, as it is quite difficult to summarize such intense weeks.

We left Delhi by flight to Leh, the capital of Ladakh in the Himalaya, north India. Stepping out of the plane there was like stepping out of India. We left behind the intense and hard-core scenes of India and landed in the cool Himalayan desert - clear sky, dry air, nice temperatures, Tibetan faces, large spaces - another world. We stayed in Ladakh about 2.5 weeks. It's a beautiful place that looks like a combination of Tibet, Bolivia, Switzerland and Sinai. The people are mostly Tibetan buddhist (while others are mostly Muslim), people look Tibetan or even Bolivian (it features the very same faces and costumes that can be seen in the South American country that shares the same impossible altitudes), the sight of the few green meadows and snow-capped mountains is very Swiss, but the general landscape (that includes even sand dunes) is strikingly similar to Sinai's. Add to that the fact that most tourists are Israelis and you get a place that feels like many other places on earth, just not India!

The highlights of that visit were a 3-day trip to the northern Nubra valley, during which we passed through the highest motorable road in the world (5500 meters above), a 3-day trek (the Spitik-Stok trail, if you insist) that included a cruel climb to a pass of height 4900 meters but also amazing landscapes and views that can hardly be described in words, and a trip to the big lakes of the region. Other highlights were the close encounters with the Tibetan culture, religion and food as well as with the masses of Israelis that visit Leh, take Shizhu and Reiki classes, eat momos (the Tibetan most popular dish) and travel around. Due to massive floods in the region in the day when we arrived there, the only road out of Ladakh back to civilization was partially destroyed, and dozens of Israelis and other tourists were stuck in the town. You should have walked in the streets of Leh on Friday night that week! Like walking in a military camp on a weekend and meeting all those that had to stay in the base. The guys we met there were very nice and we had two great Kabalot Shabat in that charming town.

And then the road was fixed and hundreds of tourists took the first bus out before another flood occurs. We took the bus to Manali (the drug capital of the north): 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.

From Manali, where we didn't stay more than one night, we continued (on the roof of a local bus) to the Paravati valley. That valley, where we trekked for several days, is another amazing valley that offers views out of this world. And I have pictures to prove that.

Today was Krishna's birthday. Delhi, that has almost no beautiful views to offer, showed her best for us in this last and holy day. The sun colored the sky with red and pink during sunset, and that served as a great background for the thousands of kites that were flown by thousands of Indians in celebration of that day. What a view.

See you next week in Israel.

Yours,

Tamir