

July 26th

We spend most of our time until now in Varanasi, the holy city near the Ganges where both bathing and body burning (and disposal) is taking place. Needless to say, we did not set foot in the water, and wore high top shoes at all times. The streets of Varanasi are a total mess - you cannot even begin to describe the traffic. The priorities on the roads are - cows, trucks and buses, cars, motorcycles, auto-rickshaw, rickshaw, bike and at the end, people and dogs. All of them blend together in a completely disordered way, where the number of horn blast every second equals the number of vehicles around you in that second (and this number can be anything from 59 to 32123, coming from all directions).

Aug 17th

We are now in Manali - Goa of the North as it is called, and justifyingly so - filled with dope-soaked Israelis. We took a bus drive down from Leh (Ladakh) - the road has the reputation of the "Death Road" of the east, although I am not sure anyone actually died there... it was pretty scary at times, especially when the driver thought he could handle it at 60 km/h going down hill. The ride took 2 days - about 11 hours each, and night camp with tents. It is only 480km, but the road is not the world's greatest. There is no more width to it than one bus (sometimes even less); but if needed, in some miraculous way, another bus or truck will pass by going the other way.

The views on the road were absolutely amazing. It was like all the mountains of the world were centered around this road. It starts with the beautiful and impressive desert mountains of Ladakh. The canyons running through them are Negev-like, but much greater. There are amazing forms of rocks and land on the way, much like the canyons of the west coast in the US. After the first day, the view slightly changes and becomes a little greener. The mountains tops, pointed and sharp, are still covered with snow, and the valleys are way, way below them - while the villages are amazingly located in the most beautiful spots. The ride makes you want to kill the bus driver. Not because he drives like a maniac; not because he blows the horn, like every good Indian, with no apparent reason what so ever (but still as fiercely as he can) - but because he does not stop at all those places you want to appreciate for a much longer time (and take a picture of!). At one point, we were going down into a cloud, crawling its way to us from a mountain path on the way.

<A sheep is trying to get into the Internet shop as I write this. It is MMMMe'ing near the door and everyone is distracted...>

The final part of the road was the most beautiful, coming down to Manali (the last 70km, which took 3 hours- mostly down hill). Green slopes, pine trees, Marijuana plants, huge cliffs, snow at the tops of the mountains - and everything is dripping with water. This was true for all the mountains along the way - the water (melting snow) is everywhere, dripping in streams, springs and waterfalls; but here in the Manali area it is much more. This is monsoon country, but the monsoon clouds never make it past the first range of mountains since they are so high.

We continue our way from here today to the Parvati valley (3 hour bus ride - a piece of cake...). By the way, we missed the famous "full moon party" in Manali by one day, but sources say it was not a great loss. We had our own full moon party - in a tent camp near a lake in Ladakh - we took a jeep ride there with a few other Israelis. We only had discman speakers, but the music of Underworld and the Pixies... it was very surrealistic.

Aug. 24th

Happy birthday, Krishna! It is a festive day in Delhi today; and it is our last night in Delhi. When we went up to dip in the pool on our guesthouse's roof, at sunset, we noticed the sky was covered with kites; and the Delhi rooftops with children flying them. It was some sight - and it added a dimension of beauty and magic to this poor and ugly metropolitan. When we left the guesthouse later, we noticed all the Hindu temples are lit with bright colors, and people gather around and inside them to celebrate the festival. On the rickshaw, going to one of the Internet cafes, I noticed such a place - and I thought I saw people dancing inside. Checking my email took 5 minutes (as I learned later, my email was not functioning during the trip, so all the messages sent to me were lost), so I decided to leave my friend Tamir there. I took the camera and walked to the temple where the dancing took place. Since it was a regular Indian neighborhood, there was no foreign person in sight for miles. It was around 10pm as I walked into the temple. Soon after doing that, hundreds of local, low class Indians attending the event shifted their attention from the on-going show to the 6'8" (204cm) European foreigner with the camera. Before I had the chance to further explore the scene, one of the dancers, which seemed all to be women, danced her way towards me and started dancing about a foot away from me, looking straight into my eyes. This was the moment I noticed that she (and the rest of them) were not women. They were not men, either - they were Hijras; a social cult, or maybe caste, which is the lowest of the low in India. They are actually treated like a third gender, and are allowed only to be beggars or entertainers. Back to the events - she/he is dancing in front of me, so I did the only thing I could logically do: I shook my head vigorously, and waved my hands like a lunatic in the air saying "no, no". It worked - she retreated back to center stage. Now I had the time to scan the place. The place was a big yard. There were about 200-300 people there, mostly men. Some were sitting on the floor, and some (including me) were standing around. In the middle, 5 Hijras were entertaining the attendees: speaking to the microphones (yes, there were microphones! and the place was brightly lit, too - a lot of electricity for Delhi); singing and dancing to the music. Once in a while, one of them went dancing into the crowd, faced one of the men and danced in front of him, sometimes even covering his head with her scarf. This act never failed to amuse the entire crowd, and especially the chosen man's friends. Eventually, the poor man would give the Hijra money (from what I saw, it was 10 rupees - about a quarter of a dollar), and then she left. At a certain point a man came to me and whispered - "you know, you can give them 10 rupees if you want!" Well, DUH!. I stayed there for 30 or 40 fascinating minutes, watching (India features great people-watching, and this was the best of them all!) and taking pictures - when I realized, by some gut feeling, that my time is up again. I took 10 rupees out of my wallet and put the wallet into my back pocket; put the camera back in the cover. Indeed, not a minute later, it came. One of the Hijras - naturally, the oldest and ugliest one - approached me for the second try. She walked all the way around the crowds, to the back where I was standing (but I knew she was coming my way all along). She started dancing, this time not even one foot away from me. But this time - I am SHANTI (cool, I guess, would be the translation), because my 10 rupees are ready. Needless to say, all eyes in attendance are watching us, and our interaction. So, for the sake of suspense, I let her dance for a few seconds. Then, I gracefully hand her the 10 rupees. She did not accept it! it was her turn to shake her head. I started sweating. I am now begging her, in the English language (which I am sure she commands at the same level she masters the Hebrew

language): "this is all I have! I have no more money! only 10 rupees, I don't have any more!". But she is dancing, and would not take it. The locals are smiling at this amusing scene. Now she points at my camera! I can only guess what she meant by that. Was it "if you don't have more money, I want the camera"? Or maybe "you have such a nice camera, you have to have more than 10 rupees"? Or maybe "you took pictures! You owe us more than your lousy 10 rupees!". Anyway, I still refuse to hand her more money, so now she simply jumps on me, putting both her arms around my waste and hugging me! The locals are now laughing out loud. When she gets off me, and still dancing and looking at me impatiently, I know I have to do something drastic. I pull the left pocket out of my pants; then I pull the right pocket out (you can do that in men's trousers, you know). I hold the tips of the now-reversed pockets in my hands, and I start dancing with her.

The locals are rolling on the floor, banging their fists against the wall or holding their stomachs. no doubt, this is going to be Krishna Festival story for the ages! As the laughter gets harder, she decides to retreat! She takes the 10 rupees and walks back to center stage. I am the hero of the year in the temple, and decide to make my grand exit right away. I turn and walk outside, while all the people part to clear my way. Success.

P.S. When I left the yard, I saw what we later called "the city mascot of Delhi": a rat, whose hind two legs are paralyzed, dragging itself forward with his other two...