

Hi everyone,

The earthquake was officially upgraded from 6.6 to 6.8 in the Richter scale. That means that it was even scarier than we thought.

I got to know more people in LA - most of them Israelis, some Brazilians, so my after work life is richer and more entertaining now. We established some traditions (which are too young to be called "traditions", but they will become, hopefully, "traditions" some day). For instance - a video night on Friday: going together to a video store and renting a movie and then entering the store near by and buying cakes, drinks and "pitsu-chim" to eat in front of the TV screen, together with the great Brazilian coffee that Marcus, the host and the VCR owner, makes. Or, another tradition, international kitchens: There are so many types of restaurants in LA - Chinese, Mexican, Italian, Persian, Hawaiian, Caribbean, Indian and many more. We already had great Cuban and Thai experiences and the next will be probably a Persian restaurant. I'll let you know how is their shish-kabab.

I started taking lessons for improving my swimming. Our instructor is a 20 year old kid who's younger than all of his students (who are either graduate students or professors). That's amazing what he makes us do. I thought I'll never hear again military training stuff such as: "Go!!!" or "Only 27 seconds left" or "You can do it!!!". Straining as it may be, it did wonders to my swimming and although my old body is in pain - my soul is happy.

"Death Valley National Monument, America's most renowned desert is host to some of the most amazing scenery in the country. Giant sand dunes, eerie ghost towns and magnificent plant life fill this valley of sheer beauty. The mere existence of this awe inspiring land can boggle the mind". I didn't write that; neither did Shakespeare. It was David Wyman, the leader in a UCLA organized camping trip to the Death Valley that I took this weekend. I went to this trip alone since most of my friends here are - how shall I put it gently? - losers and couch-potatos. So, I came to the pre-trip meeting that was held 2 days before the trip in UCLA sport's center - and found out that I know no one, except for a current student of mine (who took today a test in my course). The participants who have cars gave a ride to those who didn't, so I ended up with 2 "trempistim" - Brian, my student, and Matt, a 19-year-old freshman. I was worried about the 6-hour drive with someone who uses to call me "Professor Tassa" and another 19 year old American kid with whom I probably have nothing in common. But - it was great. Brian plays the cello, spent 4 years in Chicago - the music capitol of the USA - and was in the Galapagos islands, so we had a lot to talk about. Matt, on the other hand, turned out to be not entirely stupid and he was once in a trip in Europe (wow!!) - so, we had things to talk about as well, for the whole drive.

We met the group in the camping site, set up our tent and Matt and I went to a saloon, where the hostess asked us for an ID!!! What a compliment for me! The next morning we woke up at 6AM and started the trip by going to the sand dunes near the camp. After an overwhelming breakfast (eggs, sausages, beans, chips, bagels, cream cheese, lox, corn-flakes, juices, Danish cakes, cookies, tortillas, coffee, tea, coco, fruits) we hit the road. The impressive sites for that day where "Badwaters" - a huge plane covered with salt (the lowest point in the western hemisphere, the analogue of the dead sea) and "Zabriskie Point" - a place that looks extraterrestrial. We came to this place at sunset and viewed a remarkably fast change of colors of the ground. At night we saw slides of David, the trip leader who's a professional photographer. These slides convinced me to add New Mexico to my list of "must visit".

The next morning we woke up early again to spend a magical hour on other giant sand dunes (I didn't know that sand dunes can be so beautiful and exciting), afterwards - the ghost town of Rhyolite (in

Nevada) where I shot about 30 pictures that I intend to send for publication to "The National Geographic", and "The Devil's Golf Course" (a place which is as impressive as its name). So - the outrageous description that David wrote about the Death Valley is quite agreeable. As for the company in that trip - there were mostly students. I enjoyed their company very much, we had a lot of laughs and entertaining talks and we even exchanged phone numbers (although it's obvious that besides meeting for seeing pictures we won't meet again). I admit that it felt really good to have the following conversation several times during the trip:

She or He: So - what's your major? (major is the main subject of studying)

I: Math.

She or He: Are you a grad student?

I: No, I teach.

She or He: Oh, so you are a TA (Teaching Assistant)?

I (smiling and being disgustingly "mabsut"): Well, actually I'm an assistant professor.

She or He (almost fainting): What? You? Really? But you're so young! How old are you, 25? 26?

I (almost melting into the ground from all those compliments): Well, I'm quite old. You see, I'll be 30 (Oy Vey!!!) this summer.

So - doing a PhD really helps somehow in life.

See you,

Tamir