

Nepal to Ladakh: via Dharamsala (6/5/2008-7/11/2008)

The toughest leg in my journey from Nepal to Ladakh in northwest India was not the bone shattering 24 hour Manali to Leh bus along one of the highest and remotest roads in the world, nor was it braving the heat, humidity, and down pours of the Indian monsoon while passing through the plains, rather it was merely just getting out of Kathmandu. I had intended about a week stay of rest and recuperation in Kathmandu after my month of trekking in the Everest region. My first delay was brought about by the failure of my footwear during my previous trek. Having freakishly large feet by Asian standards, large by Western ones, I am in a bit of a bind when it comes to shoes, since it is incredibly difficult to find my size anywhere in Asia. Not wanting to trek though Ladakh in flip flops, Nepali porter style, I had to remedy my shoe problem. Fortunately, Merrell's customer service department was very responsive and I had a new pair of hiking boots Fedex'd to me within a couple of weeks. Armed with my new footwear I was off to Ladakh, at least I thought I would be. As it turned out, rising oil prices, local self interest groups, and Nepal's hopelessly inept government would all conspire to keep me in this country for nearly two more weeks.

The mess began a couple days before I had planned on leaving, when the government which controls prices on gasoline and other petroleum products decided it was time to raise prices as they were already selling gas at a huge loss due to the high price of oil on the international market. In an effort to lose less money the government oil company was by buying less fuel than the demand required. Economics 101 will tell you this is not a good idea, and of course leads to shortages. The price rise was inevitable given the current world oil market but of course everyone still wants prices to remain the same. The day after the government raised prices the transporters raised prices as well, although they are also controlled by the government and legally they were not allowed to do this. This sharp rise in prices angered the students who promptly demanded a larger discount on transportation fares. Crowds of students took to the streets in protest blocking intersections and shutting down roads. When the government released the official transport rate increases they were less than what the transporters wanted which promptly caused the transporters to go on strike. The government suggested student discount did not please the students either so they continued there road blocks. To make matters even worse the gas station owners were also upset because despite the rise in petrol prices the government was still not buying enough petrol to meet the demand, in protest the gas station owners refused to sell gas, pad locking the gates to the distribution centers to prevent the distribution of gas. Meanwhile, there was an on going political crisis as well, despite being more than two months after the Maoist victory in Nepal's historic election, the bickering political parties had yet to form a coalition government. With angry mobs of students lighting bon fires in the streets and throwing bricks at police who tried extinguishing them, buses, taxis and minibuses refusing to work, and no gas for private vehicles, getting out of Kathmandu anyway other than flying was pretty much out of the question. Even those tourists who did fly out had to take two hour cycle rickshaw rides just to get to the airport. The locals around Kathmandu took the whole situation with a laugh, being use to such disruptions, jokingly playing off the Maoist's slogan saying this is the "New Nepal" with a smile, because of course it was still the same old Nepal.

Other than not allowing me to leave the strike did not really interrupt my daily routine in Kathmandu, which consisted of walking to restaurants and internet places as well as helping Kili, the man I had met at Everest base camp, with his website, in between excursions I made use of Nepal's lenient enforcement of film piracy laws by buying and watching several 50 cent DVDs, catching up on the latest movies. A great deal once you get used to watching films video taped off of screens complete with coughs and people getting up in front of the camera blocking the screen, of course sometimes you get lucky and the copy is made from a demo DVD. I like Kathmandu, so I really didn't mind too much that I was trapped there. There are certainly far worse cities in Asia to be stuck. But I was getting nervous, as the time on my visa was running out, and I really didn't want to pay for another month

extension merely because of a strike. Fortunately on the day my visa was set to expire, the strike was lifted and I hopped on the first bus I could to the border.

It had taken me so long to get out of Kathmandu I decided to alter my plan and rather than head up to Ladakh via the Spiti Valley in Himachal Pradesh I headed straight to Dharamsala where the Tibetan government in exile resides to witness the celebrations of the Dalai Lama's birthday a few days away on July 6th (a date which I always remember as it coincides with my sister's birthday as well). I hung out in McLeod Ganj (town near Dharamsala where the Tibetan government in exile is located) for about 5 days waiting for the big day. There is not a lot to do in McLeod Ganj especially when it is in the grip of the monsoon. Most tourists come to do meditation or Buddhist philosophy courses, not really practical in my time frame, I ended up spending quite a bit of time in my hotel room, which had satellite TV (a novel extravagance for me), watching movies and catching up on BBC news while it rained outside. When the big day did come it was pretty underwhelming. Apparently because of the violence in Tibet celebrations were toned down this year. There was a small program in the morning at the temple and there was more activity than usual, but on the rankings of Tibetan celebration I have seen it wasn't particularly high on the list.

The next day I took a bus to Manali, a town probably most famous for the hordes of young Israelis who flock here after their stint in the army to smoke copious amounts of cannabis, which grows naturally in the surrounding mountains. It is also the jumping off point for one of the most famous road journeys in India along the Manali-Leh road, which crosses four high mountain passes over the Himalayas and through some of the most remote areas of India. The highest pass, tops out at a breathless 5359m/17,582 ft, and is alleged to be the second highest motorable pass in the world. I decided to splurge for the much more comfortable tourist bus for this leg of the journey. The road passes through a variety of landscapes starting off in the green monsoon drenched valley of Manali and crossing on to the barren Tibetan plateau and finally in to the Indus river valley whose green bottom is surrounded by an arid desert landscape of dry mountains.

Ladakh resides on the far western edge of the Tibetan plateau and is much more culturally and geographically a part of Tibet than the rest of India. Its fortuitous position on the Indian side of the border spared the region the ravages of Chinese occupation and the Cultural Revolution which devastated many of the great monasteries of Tibet. It is thus a rare area where Tibetan Buddhism can be observed absent the disruptive influences of Chinese antireligious policies. Geographically the area is stunning as well, while Nepal's mountain geography is characterized by glacial valleys, Ladakh is a maze of colorful canyons and water eroded desert landscapes topped by glaciated peaks. I had taken less than 25 pictures in the previous month in Kathmandu and Dharamsala, I more than matched that total on my first day in Leh.



**Dog on the steps to Tsuglagkhang Temple,
McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala.**



**Monks intently watching a debate Namgyal
Gompa, Tsuglagkhang Complex, McLeod
Ganj, Dharamsala.**



**Monks holding prayer beads
Tsuglagkhang Complex,
McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala.**



Speeches at the Tsuglagkhang Temple on the Dali Lama's birthday, McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala.



Colorfully gowned Indian woman peers into the room of butter lamps at Tsuglagkhang Complex, McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala.



Banner demanding the release of the Panchen Lama imprisoned by the Chinese government, outside the Tsuglagkhang Complex, McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala.



Banners around the Tsuglagkhang Temple depicting “the knot of eternity,” on the Dali Lama’s birthday, McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala.



Monks amidst pro-Tibetan banners, outside the Tsuglagkhang Complex, McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala.



Pro-Tibetan banners, outside the Tsuglagkhang Complex, McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala.



Keylong along the Manali-Leh road.



Manali-Leh road.



Manali-Leh road.



Manali-Leh road.



Manali-Leh road.



**Taglang La (5359m/17,582 ft)
Manali-Leh road.**



**Taglang La (5359m/17,582 ft)
Manali-Leh road.**



**Taglang La (5359m/17,582 ft)
Manali-Leh road.**



**Taglang La (5359m/17,582 ft) Manali-Leh
road.**



Ladakh, Manali-Leh road.



Ladakh, Manali-Leh road.



View of Leh.



Palace, Leh.



Palace, Leh.



Prayer wheel and the Palace, Leh.



**Namgyal Tsemo Gompa,
Leh.**



**Towards Namgyal Tsemo
Gompa from the palace, Leh.**



Towards Namgyal Tsemo Gompa from the palace, Leh.



Palace, Leh.



**Monk looks out over Leh
from the palace.**



Palace, Leh.



**Namgyal Tsemo Gumpa,
Leh.**



Hills above Leh at sunset.



Hills above Leh at sunset.



Hills above Leh at sunset.



**Stok Kangri (6121 m/20,077 ft)
from Leh.**



**Namgyal Tsemo Gompa,
Leh.**



**Namgyal Tsemo Gompa,
Leh.**



**Namgyal Tsemo Gompa,
Leh.**



Man plays flute with view over Leh.



Hills above Leh.



**View of the Indus Valley
from Leh.**



Stupa and the moon, Leh.