

Adventures in the Himalayas

By Peter Hooley

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I had been looking forward to my upcoming medical mission to Northern India all winter. I had read books on the medicine, religion, and history. I had planned every little detail. I simply could not wait to go!! When the warning came, a week before my scheduled departure, for all American and Canadian citizens to leave immediately and those planning to travel there not to go, there was no doubt about, I was still going! They would have to tie me up and throw me in jail to prevent me from going. And thus begins my adventures in India.....

The decision to go on a medical mission to India, was for the incredible chance to experience: a very rich history; breath-taking mountain ranges; a wealth of ancient religious groups and the Dalai Lama; new medical experiences; a sea of cultural diversity; and who knows - give something back? With such incredible diversity, India is more like a large continent than a single country. There would be no possible way to experience even a fraction of this diversity in a month let alone a year.

Upon meeting with the rest of the team in New Delhi, I discovered many others had canceled in fear, but those who came shared the same burning desire to be there; and none of us regretted the decision at all. I came on the mission as the only Canadian member of a mostly American contingent of health care workers and trainees. The group consisted of a very caring, fun-loving bunch, mainly fellow med students, a few doctors, a nurse, and even a psychologist from places like Omaha, Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, and West Virginia.

I could fill several books with the experiences that our medical mission to India was amply endowed with, but I will focus in on a day in the trip that I think stands out rather uniquely!

The day began very early, as most did, for some reason we did not require much sleep while in the Himalayas - perhaps it was the thin air, or the village coming alive at 5:00am, or just the excitement? This day we were in Tabo, home of one of the most important monasteries in the Tibetan Buddhist world established way back in 996 AD. Tabo is a peaceful, spiritual village which takes you back a few centuries in time. On this particular day, my only sick day, I had a some new microbe disrupting my whole GI - which fortunately only lasted for half a day. Needless to say, I got a full cocktail of our best medicine, recovered rather quickly, with no shortage of care from the other members of the trip.

Once that business was dealt with, I was off to the clinic by late morning. The clinic was really a group of three tents with teams of workers in each. In my tent were a top-notch, internal medicine resident, and three of us medical students, as well as our translators. We had a great day of clinic, treating an amazing variety from obscure rashes (Leishmania), rheumatic heart disease with bounding murmurs, fulminant TB, and everything in between.

That evening we paid a visit to the monastery. The novelty of seeing monks never grew old. The ancient paintings and other artifacts from antiquity always captivated my interest. Dinner was a finely prepared meal, this evening with a Tibetan twist. We ate under the candle light, sipping our soup, re-telling our tales of that day's clinic. After our meal it was decision time, would we proceed with the wild idea we had a few days before? Let me take you back a couple days.....

The day we had driven into Tabo, one of the first things that struck us, besides the calming sense of peacefulness, were the caves well above the town. Picture it, lying in a lush valley at 12000 ft altitude, surrounded on all sides by the towering mountainsides of the Himalayas, and a powerful river running through it. On the mountain lying to the north side of the village are these caves, perhaps 10 of them bored into the mountain. I would soon discover from Ravi, the leader of Himalayan Health Exchange, the fantastic organization that planned our trip, that these caves were very ancient, sacred places where the local Buddhist monks went to meditate, known locally as the Pho Gompa.

I felt some mysterious urge to go to these caves. Although I did have, throughout the trip, an innate need to conquer every hill, cliff, and mountain within our reach, this one particularly drew me in.

Sunrise, our first morning before clinic, I happened to be exploring the monastery and by chance came across a fellow traveler, Austin, who I was able to persuade rather easily to come along to the caves. After a little effort, mainly due to our adjustment to the altitude, we got up to the old trails to the caves and explored most of them and took some fine pictures. We also planned to submit to the compulsion to camp in one of the caves. We planned to get a few co-conspirators, which given the sense of adventure within the group, it was not hard to later on find recruits to buy into the idea.

These caves projected a great sense of history and spirituality. There were signs of existence, with remnants of many fires in the past, melted candles, little shreds of cloth, old incense; and in one cave a current inhabitant. We were mesmerized by the experience.

Two days later, back to the day in question, we still had not camped in a cave, and were moving on to another village the next day. Obviously, camping in a cave well up in the Himalayas is not something any of us had much experience with, thus there was a little apprehension. More truthfully, there was not really any apprehension, perhaps just fatigue from adjusting to the new altitude and long, busy days. We thought of poor excuses about the temperature, wild rabid dogs, and a perhaps even the chance of a meeting with a local treasure, the elusive, yet notoriously dangerous snow leopard?

After supper we met, and agreed the trek into the mountain must be done, despite our exhaustion from a long day of clinic and our slight apprehension. There was no turning back. Four strong, Kellie, Ched, Austin, and I were on our way climbing in the pitch black up the mountain - we arrived at last in our cave.

We settled quickly into an inviting cave with a somewhat flat area and a large overhang of shelter. It looked as cozy as any other place. Once we had the sleeping bags out, candles on all the ledges with light dancing across the ancient walls of the cave, a few sips of a local concoction to warm up, and the beginning of the story telling, we felt as close to enlightenment as the monks who proceeded us. We were really camping in a monk's cave in the Himalayas! Can you believe it?

After lots of fine storytelling (you can imagine the themes involved) we quietly went to sleep, all strewn about the cave, nestled deep in our sleeping bags. And a fine sleep it was! I had the best sleep of the trip up in that cave. Was it the fresh air, the coolest of surroundings, the fine company? I don't know. I woke up feeling like a new man to the sunrise and crisp mountain air. There were many great adventures throughout the trip that I will fondly remember, but this day was a rather unique memory of a great trip.