

We arrived back in Delhi at 8am this morning after a 15 hour bus ride back from our 8 day field trip in the Himalayas - it was incredible! Over the course of the week we travelled from Shimla to Rekonig Peo to Tabo and finally to Minali visiting villages and examples of eco-management along the way which were truly astounding.

Shimla is a beautiful city and after 2 weeks in Delhi was not what we had come to expect from India! It is clean, cool and calm with almost no vehicles to be seen anywhere - a few horses give rides up and down the mall, the main street in Shimla, and otherwise packs of relatively well fed and happy looking dogs roam around the streets. Monkeys are everywhere and when dealing with them we followed the example of the locals and gave them a wide berth. A word of warning - monkeys don't like being stared at but equally will back down when shouted at! Unfortunately Shimla also meant the first of the tummy bugs for me and I spent a day confined to sick bay with three others - we spent the day sleeping and watching ancient Jackie Chan movies dubbed in Hindi.

Rekonig Peo predominantly acted as a base for us to visit surrounding areas and in particular to gain the permits we needed to visit restricted areas and areas close to the border with Tibet (which we were on or wandering along a few times). This included a small community of around 80 families who were fighting against the government to bring a halt to a hydro-power project in the region. Because of the poor planning and cost saving ambitions of the company involved, the project threatened a species of tree that grows a rare nut only found in that region and which is also the main source of income for the community. They were incredibly hospitable and spent time with us, answering our questions, inviting us into their homes and even allowing us to sample the rare nut on which they rely so heavily. The good news for them is that their case is gaining traction and it looks like they will win the battle to have their lands protected and preserved.

Tabo was also incredible and offered us the opportunity to visit an area nearby which had been rehabilitated from what is otherwise referred to as the cold desert. With very little rain throughout the year, harvesting of any glacial melt or rainwater that does fall is essential. With 10 years of hard work and careful planning, a small team of around 4 people have created an oasis on a completely barren mountain - they grow apple trees, sweet peas, beans and are also creating the correct environment to grow truffles for additional income - for the first time this year the plantation will break even and it will be in profits from next year onwards. The level of effort which goes into creating this is astounding - long channels have been built to bring glacial melt waters to the crops and tall grasses have been planted on the outskirts in a bid to fill the bellies of ravenous rabbits before they get too close to the valuable sweet peas and young willow trees which are only just beginning to grow. Those who work there spend 6 months of the year living in small spaces which they have constructed by building simple walls to the edges of large boulders. When winter arrives and it's too cold to stay any longer they retreat to a lower altitude and hope that tall coniferous trees planted around the edge of the crops provide enough of a wind barrier to prevent too much damage. Needless to say, we all have a great deal of respect for the man who gave up his life in government to realise this project.

Minali was a simple day off for us before the long journey home and for me the highlight was definitely the very sweet dog who attached herself to us and followed us all around the town for a few hours, visiting the various monasteries and temples before heading to the bus station.



One of the most important things to mention when it comes to travelling in the Himalayas is that you should always factor in extra time to deal with unexpected obstructions:

1. Problem: A herd of pashmina goats blocking the road ahead



Solution: Everyone jump out of the jeeps and make an attempt at herding the goats off the road and out of the way

Time required: 15 minutes

2. Problem: Road works are underway and traffic is stopped whilst workers tarmac another 20 meters worth of road, drizzling the hot tar onto the surface by hand

Solution: Honk on your horn loudly and shout in Hindi until the said workers move off the road and allow you to drive over their freshly laid tarmac

Time required: 1 hour

3. Problem: A mudslide has occurred and for love nor money, no vehicle can make it up a slope which is 1.5 feet deep in thick and slippery mud



Solution: Sit in the jeep and play chess until a suitably large JCB arrives to scrape the mud from the surface of the road

Time required: 2 hours

4. Problem: The jeep in front of you has broken down. Much discussion and a number of car jacks reveal that the problem is a broken suspension fork.



Solution: Discuss further for some time, remove all suspension and test the vehicle. Decide it is unfit for use. Load 7 additional passengers plus luggage into the unsuspecting jeep behind to total 14. Remember that some passengers will now need to exit the car at regular intervals if it is to be able to climb any incline.

Time required: 45 minutes

5. Problem: Blasting of new tunnels in the region has been carried out less than expertly - 3 large boulders of approximately 3m in diameter each are blocking the road.



Solution: A few seasoned experts, drills, dynamite and a large plough to clear the debris (remember to cover your ears and keep your mouth open when the man lighting the dynamite turns to run desperately in your direction)

Time required: 5 hours

Despite all this, the most important thing to remember is always to **enjoy the view!**



