

Its 11.15 pm, mid September 2018 and you're warmly cocooned in your sleeping bag inside the tent. It's about 4500 metres and - 10 outside but the wind chill makes it about - 20. You're drifting off to sleep. Suddenly your eyes snap open. That by now familiar grabbing cramp is returning to your guts and this means only one thing: You got to get out to that crusty little hole in the ground that passes for a toilet before you make a mess in the tent you really don't want to think about having to clean up. Again. As you reluctantly unzip the sleeping bag, the cramping gets worse and a potentially dire situation suddenly becomes, well... potentially very dire. The reluctance becomes panic as you wrestle out of the sleeping bag and crawl over your now fully awake and obdurate partner towards the front of the tent and salvation. The tent zip, which seemed a tad sticky for the past couple of days now decides this is the best time to become completely stuck, about a third of the way up. Frantic fingers fight with the zip before you give up and out of sheer necessity you just wriggle under the recalcitrant thing. Your sleeping bag liner, wrapped around your left foot follows you outside and you carelessly rip it off while grabbing sandshoes. Well actually one of yours and one of her's. And they are both the right feet. By now snot streams out of your nose as the cold air bites. Its bloody freezing particularly as you wear nothing but undies and that nice lightweight merino top your partner bought you to take away. You take off towards where you think the crusty little hole in the ground is, one sandshoe flicking off into the darkness as you go. But you don't care. All your attention is focussed on one thing: To get those undies down and get that crap out of you as soon as possible - it's actually about to do that of its own accord. You trip over a rock in the darkness. Bugger the hole. That'll do. You yank down the undies and squat. The relief is immense. You void your miserable bowels of something the consistency of a thin soup. You don't even notice or mind the snot under your nose freezing, that arctic blast going straight up your date or that you didn't bring toilet paper with you. You've just avoided a complete shitastrophe. After you've finished, you clean up as best you can and with chattering teeth, head back towards the tent, stumbling over the discarded sandshoe as you go. It's hers. You'll retrieve it in the morning. The tent looms out of the darkness, identifiable by the sleeping bag liner flapping forlornly around a tent peg, the only thing preventing it from disappearing out onto the freezing windswept plain. For some weird reason the tent zip now works just fine. You crawl back inside the tent, and return to the sleeping bag out of the wind and cold. Twenty minutes later, you have thawed out and are starting to drift off to sleep. Suddenly your eyes snap open..... Welcome to India.

Welcome to Ladakh.

Welcome to what will be your finest tramping experience, ever.

Having been part of the 'Inaugurals' and after consultation with others I thought it'd be a good idea to give you guys - 'The second wave' - a few pearls of experience and wisdom just to make your lives a little easier.

If you are anything like many of us, you won't have any idea what you are in for. You will have Googled, asked around, looked at maps and pictures and have some sort of mental picture as to what you think you going to experience. No. It's going to be completely different.

I'm going to work on the assumption that most of you have never been anywhere near India or high altitude before, so apologies if there is some egg sucking education below.

Altitude:

Be under no illusion, at times it's going to be hard. The tracks, the hills and vertigous passes you will be tramping are not the problem; it's the altitude.

You will be landing in Leh which at 3,500 metres is one of the highest commercial airports on the planet. It's also only a couple of hundred metres lower than Mount Cook. Not too bad you might think, but believe me, the first flight of stairs you climb after getting off the plane will leave you breathless. Your sinuses will start to run and it'll feel like you got a permanent slightly runny nose. It might even bleed a bit. You have gone from 200 metres to 3500 metres in less than two hours. It's going to take some time for your body to get used to that.

You will also be embarking on some of the highest trekking routes in the world, regularly going over 4000 metres, often a lot higher up to and over 5000 metres. And sleeping up there too. You'll probably get to be higher than the

highest mountain in Western Europe and will climb higher than Everest base camp. Its highly likely you will be going over passes in excess of 5000 metres. Some of the more intrepid of you may even manage a climb over 5500 metres.

At those altitudes the air is thinner and breathing, particularly when working hard (and trudging up those passes, you will be working very hard) is just a mission. You will be sucking deep and the feeling is that you are not getting enough oxygen, and the thing is, you aren't. The air pressure at 4500 metres is roughly about 40% less than at sea level. So there are fewer molecules of air including oxygen, to use.

You will get used to it (to a point) and you will adjust and acclimatise but it will take time. You will find your own walking and breathing rhythm and don't feel you have to keep up with everyone else. You don't. Go at your own pace.

Some of you may start to suffer from altitude sickness even in Leh. You are not going to know if that's you until you get there. But don't worry. You will get sorted. Drink heaps of water and black tea. Especially the first couple of days. Then don't stop. Keep drinking water. You'll also have prescribed prevention pills (Diamox) and they work. As do other pills (Dexy's) if you get really bad. You will acclimatise before the treks and will be undertaking various activities designed to facilitate that.

(Joe will talk to you in time about altitude sickness, the prevention and the management thereof)

It all sounds bad and potentially it could be, but it won't come to that. We all survived and so will you.

Once again; drink water. Lots and lots of water. And tea. And soup. Its dry up there and the moisture just gets sucked out of you like you wouldn't believe. So don't stop drinking otherwise dehydration will set in, any headaches will get worse and after a month you might look like a raisin

Fitness:

Get fit. Simple as that. Be as fit as you possibly can be.

This trip is not just a walk in the park, a meander though some hills, a couple of happy week long wanders. This trip is not for the weak, infirm of mind or body, or the inexperienced casual walker.

This trip is a couple of multiday high altitude treks.

You need to be on top of your game. You need to be fit.

Do as much hill work as you can. Not just once every week or two, but a couple of times every week. Find a hill, a big hill and walk and down it as often as possible. Put a daypack on your back, put 3 - 4 kg in it and go for it. Day, evening, night. Whatever. Just do it.

Without trying to blow our own trumpets, Donna and I did a lot of hill work (we are lucky to live in an area with a lot of hills) for several months before the last trip and we were able to cope quicker and a lot better with the altitude and the higher passes than some others, particularly on the first trek.

Now some of you may not have the luxury of hills in the neighbourhood, so just run and/or bike and get fit. Use the stairs at work if you have to, not the lift and get out and get the heart pumping as often as you can. Lose weight if you need to. You don't want to drag excess weight around up there.

Go for a few shakedown multiday tramps. You need an excuse to get out into the hills? Now you have it.

And don't start training a month or two out – waste of time; start at the beginning of the year and get into it.

If you ignore everything else in this email, don't ignore this: **GET FIT. DO HILLS. START NOW**

Health:

If at all possible don't come into Ladakh with injuries or illness. It'll screw you over. A niggly little cold at home may turn into a respiratory nightmare at 4000 metres. So do yourself a favour and get the flu jab in the autumn and get rid of those colds before you go. Likewise annoying little minor injuries; Get them all sorted well before the trip or at least have the right gear, medicines or kit to properly manage them in the boonies. That's on you, no one else.

Unless you have a Krupp Steel constitution, chances are that you are going to get sick over there. Its India. Shit happens and it probably will.

I can guarantee that within a week of meeting each other, you will all be discussing the current state of each other's bowels, you will learn what "Fart with follow through" means, toilet paper will be a bargaining tool and Imodium will be your best friend.

When I got a serious dose of the squits early on in Leh, after two days I took the antibiotic Azithromycin 500mg which worked wonders. After popping the bombs I went from semi delirious to almost normal in about 6 hours. I can recommend it as part of your Ladakh medicine kit

Get some electrolyte replacement powders or tablets, they'll help a lot when the squits hit. (also when a bit dehydrated after not drinking enough water on the treks, the stuff will quicken your recovery)

Leh has a multitude of pharmacies and you can get a lot of the various pills and potions you may need if you run out or need more. And they are a hell of a lot cheaper than at home.

Don't get hung up on the food. It's extraordinarily good in all the hotels, in all the camps, in all the tea houses and in all street food stalls. In fact the food is fantastic everywhere. You will love it. So just eat it. There's little if any meat (a bit of chopped up chicken on occasion) and you won't miss it. The variety of the food and accompanying spices will blow you away and is nothing like the Indian food here. Its far far better.

So the food is largely not the problem. (Just stay away from any samosa stall Joe recommends....)

Its the water. Make sure your cutlery, plates and cups are completely dry (I got my bad squits from a wet plate) and use hand sanitizer religiously after toileting and before handling any food or drink.

Use sterilizing tabs to sterilize all your water unless you using bottled water. (Donna and I used both a steripen and tabs for all our water out trekking and while it may seem overkill using both, it worked for us....)

Oh and whisky does not sterilize your toothbrush after you've accidentally stuck it under the tap. And you will. Just dry it out thoroughly before using it again.

BTW: Indian chocolate is not that pleasant. Take a heap of NZ chocolate/snacks.

Gear:

Imagine you're going on a mid winter multiday tramp in New Zealand. Take that gear and add another layer. That's about what you'll need. Take your winter sleeping bag. If you don't have one, get one. No matter how warm it is during the day, its bloody cold after the sun sets, particularly when the wind gets up. Small streams freeze overnight.

Take three pairs of undies - you don't need more. (A pair to wear, yesterday's pair drying on your day pack and tomorrow's pair. You may want a 4th pair for emergencies or you can go commando – up to you)

A long sleeved collared shirt and a good pair of long trekking pants will be great to keep the sun off. It's pretty intense sun at high altitude and without protection you'll burn quick.....

You'll likely walk each day in one or two layers depending on how warm it is, maybe a third if going over a high pass and/or its getting cold. A nice lightweight high loft downie will be your second best friend after the Imodium.

And remember, if the weather turns bad, it will get really cold, (at those altitudes it doesn't rain, it sleets at best or snows....) so over-trousers are worth a thought and a decent light to medium weight rain jacket, good gloves and a beanie that covers the ears. (The local Ladakh beanies bought at tea houses and in Leh for a mere few rupees are fantastic. You'll look slightly ridiculous but you will have a warm head.)

Now go look at your boots. If you happy that they (and thus your feet) could handle a couple of days of potentially walking in snow then all good. If they are a bit lightweight, then perhaps consider getting a more suitable pair. It may not snow, in fact probably won't, but if it does.....

One of our crew was almost crippled by blisters on the soles and heels. The ground you will be walking on is unforgiving, hard, sometimes rocky, sometimes dusty, often rocky and dusty. I used gel inners and loved them. But whatever you use, make sure your boots and feet are well sorted.

Apart from trekking gear you going to need something to change into at night and a change of clothes for the hotels. That's about it. You don't need much. So try and keep your pack weight down to 15kg and under. Not only for the poor pack mules that have to carry it each day, but when leaving Leh, being so high, the airline likes you to have as light as luggage as possible. And you'll want room when you leave for those nice Pashmina shawls and yak hair rugs....

There are laundries in Leh where a cheap 24hr clothes wash can be had, and you can also easily wash and dry stuff in your room overnight as the air is so dry that things dry quite quickly.

What you won't need on the treks, you'll be allowed to leave in a base-pack back at the hotel, so take a dri-bag or similar for that sort of stuff.

If you get really stuck with what to take, email me and I'll send on a gear list put together by Inaugurals Richard and Heather who are India veterans. We found it really useful as a guide.

Gear we were glad we took:

Buff: If you are like me and suffer sun activated cold sores, this was a Godsend. You can cover your mouth and nose and still breathe. Its also great as a scarf, balaclava, hairband, handkerchief...

Wide brimmed hat: The sun is intense at altitude and anything to reduce sunburn is helpful. (Donna and Sharon had lightweight shawls they also wrapped around their hats and faces giving them a slightly exotic looking, but very effective covering)

Pack cover: It's dusty and your pack will get filthy so the pack cover takes the dust and keeps the pack clean. Ditto for your day pack.

A good day pack: A decent and well fitting 20 – 25 litre day pack that will carry your water, f/a kit, lunch, camera, jacket, drying undies and whatever other accoutrements you need for the day will make your back very happy. Your child's school pack ain't going to cut it...

Decent head lamp. Refer to the opening paragraph. Enough said.

Stretchy washing line: Tent, hotel, back of the bus.... They cost next to nothing at various outdoorsy type shops and weigh nothing as well. You'll be glad you took it.

Camelback: The 2 litre camelbacks in the back of the daypack was for us the easiest and best way to carry and use water. Just sip away all day. And easy and quick to refill when needed. Carting bottles is fine, but when you need a drink, you gotta stop, take off the backpack, get out the water bottle.....

Gear we wish we'd taken:

Heavier gloves: I took woollen gloves and light weight wind/shower proof gloves and wore both at various times. But I felt that if it had got really cold I might have had issues. A pair of 3 season gloves might have been a better option than the lightweight ones.

Sungloves: Sunscreen only goes so far and if you burn easily, then lightweight sungloves to cover the back of the hands in particular would have been great.

Ear plugs: All I'll say is dogs at night in Leh and Tsomoriri. You'll find out.... (and always volunteer for the back rooms)

Misc Stuff:

Money: There are ATMs in Leh and it's easy enough to get money on the credit card. (You put the card in the slot and then take it out *before* starting the transaction, not like here where the card stays in the whole time. A small thing I know but it took me a while to work that out. Must have been the altitude...) There are also money exchanges for cash and if you shop around you'll get a decent rate. Hoard your lower denominations like the 10, 20 and 50 Rupee

notes. Much easier to use than 500 and 1000 Rupee notes. You'll get a very sour look when you hand over a 1000R note for a coffee.

Beer: There was one alcohol outlet we found in Leh (Turn right at the Post Office on the main street and it's down on the right about 30 metres.) and the beer was 360R for 4 x 500ml Kingfishers. Forget the wine, its awful. Any spirits you want, best to get in DF on arrival in New Delhi and take with you. (Hint: Joe likes the finest malts.....) And put it in your pack when you go from International flights to Domestic flights.

Internet: Don't expect much. It'll either be working in Leh or it won't. It probably won't. When it does work expect slow speeds. So you social media addicts could be frustrated.

Trains: Donna and I didn't use trains (other than New Delhi Metro which is the cleanest railway system you'll find anywhere.) so really can't comment. But some of the Inaugural crew who sallied forth to various other exotic Indian locales after Ladakh, found the Indian train system a bit of a nightmare. One thing to offer is, if you booking a train from New Delhi Station to wherever, then book from *New Delhi*, NOT *Delhi*

So that's really about it.

You are going to an amazing place and will have a wonderful time.

The scenery is jaw dropping, mountain backdrops are awe-inspiring and the local Ladakh people are some of the happiest and friendliest you will meet anywhere.

The food is fantastic.

The monasteries and palaces you visit will be stunning.

You will have a profound sense of achievement at the end of it all

And you will make some lifelong friends.

So go have the best holiday you will ever experience.

Good luck and happy trails.

Oh. One last thing:

GET FIT. DO HILLS. START NOW

Cheers!!

John Nicholls and Donna Bower

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