An Indian Summer shines light on home

Colin Regan

At the end of 2008 Colin Regan took advantage of his first period not playing county football for Leitrim for some years to travel to India, amongst other countries. These are some of his recollections from a trip of a lifetime.

It's funny how, occasionally, the further you travel from home the nearer you find yourself to the things that embody that very place.

No home is just a house. It's a stew of familiar faces and objects, memories, ideals and dreams, loved ones, friends and family that have all been slow cooked in your life's oven.

I have always felt that natural sense of belonging in north Leitrim. It's a soul soothing sensation, that of belonging. What triggers it is manifold. When away, no matter what road I return by, I have my signals, symbols, and landmarks that welcome me back and let me know I'm home again.

All these people, places and things surround my home and protect it and mark it out for me much in the same way my body and other organs frame my heart. And while I take the greatest pleasure in finding all these elements as I know and love them each time I return no matter how long or short my absence has been, it does not stop me enjoying watching them dissolve into the background as I leave them behind to explore new places either.

Wanderlust has always pumped through my veins, and my most recent trip took me to India for five weeks spanning December 2008 and January 2009, before moving on to South East Asia.

India was the furthest from Leitrim I had been, yet once there I found myself surrounded by the very things that make Derryloughan the place I call home.

I travelled for the pleasure of travel, but also partly to find an antidote. I did not believe I would find it in any great temple or in the words of a guru, but hoped it might slowly descend upon me as I left the sickness of the rat race behind. I travelled to try and cure myself from the vulgarities of the Celtic Tiger and all it represented; the excess, and greed, the short-sighted undertakings, the wanton consumerism. I hoped to extract myself from the thoughts and actions that had perverted the natural way of things, the ebb and flow of rural life, and had scarred and raped the very land that defines us and provides all that we need. I thought India might be the right place to start.

I jumped feet first into the heart of this untamed, crazy country, and found myself in New Delhi. The city spilled over with life and filth and odours and aromas and people and animals and vehicles and roads and hawkers and the helpless and the faithful, the infected and the unaffected.

My highlights of Delhi ranged from the goat market in the middle of the city where animal husbandry met high fashion (I'd never seen such good looking goats - thousands of them with painted horns and their coats carefully dyed, lots even adorned with flower necklaces) to the notorious Mandi Chow - Delhi's maddest street.

This street defined my impression of this city. Thick with people and vehicles of various propulsions, the only rules of the road seemed to be to blow your horn as often and randomly as possible, literally kick and push anything/one that cuts you off, small must give way to large, those of equal size—may the best man win, and everything gives way to the cows that are wandering the streets.

But a city is a city is a city. It was to the countryside I wanted to retreat, and caught a train in that direction the next morning. I decided on Shimla due to its relatively nearby location in the mountains and due to the fact that it could act as a gateway to McLeod Ganj and Dharamsala, home of the exiled Tibetan Government and the Dali Lama, where I wished to journey and volunteer for a time.

The journey to Shimla was epic. The initial five-hour train to Kalka from Delhi was relatively luxurious, but we then changed to a single gauge bone-shaker that chugged through 103 tunnels in 93km as we edged our way up into the Himalayas for five more hours. There were only six carriages on the train, with about 15 people to a carriage. As Shimla is a bit of a honeymoon destination for the locals there were three sets of newly weds in my carriage alone. The brides all had their hands and feet beautifully adorned with Henna tattoos (a pre-wedding ritual) and whether they were arranged weddings or not they were giving the lads plenty of attention en route!

Shimla, in the Northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, is a beautiful mountain town set on a ridge nearly 2,500m in altitude.

■ *A sports fanatic will find a game anywhere these cricketers were playing on top of a mountain some 3,600m high*

With my guide Mehar (far right) and his family in their kitchen.

An interested spectator in downtown Delhi

It's an old station town from the Raj days, although the only immediate visible sign of that legacy is the large protestant Christ Church in the centre of the town, which, considering the vernacular of the surrounding architecture, looks like it was hauled here on the back of four elephants as a memento from home by a visiting Viceroy circa 1864, when the town was declared the summer capital of the British Raj in India. (Incidentally, the last such Viceroy to India was none other than Lord Mountbatten who delivered India its independence in 1947; I visited his once home, known as the Viceroy's Palace, located at the end of a scenic 5km walk from Shimla's centre. It was akin to Lough Rynn and Kilronan Castle in their heyday.)

It was in Shimla that I met Mehar Singh who would become my guide to discovering the India I yearned for. We got talking when I stopped at his stall of woodcarvings to ask directions to the Monkey Temple (the monkeys that roamed around the town had proven most unhelpful concerning directions). His unbridled enthusiasm saw him immediately abandon his workstation and take me to the temple which was located on the top of Shimla's highest ridge.

Hanuman (the Hindu monkey god and to whom the temple is dedicated) just happened to be Mehar's favourite god and he wanted to pay his weekly respects. Our conversation roamed to my desire to get into the real Indian countryside, and preferably do some hiking and 'home stays' in the mountains. Mehar immediately made himself available as my guide, and the next morning I arose at 5.30am to meet him and catch a bus to the Pabbar Valley, heading through this mountainous state's highest peaks en route.

The bus journey was like nothing I have ever experienced before; the driver started with a prayer to Ganesha (the Indian deity with the head of an elephant and the body of a man) and he was clearly confident his god heard him for he drove as if death was something that could only happen to other people for the entire seven-hour journey.

The roads—and I use that term most generously for at times they deteriorated into dust tracks, or gravel covered surfaces with the traction of a high-heeled 18-year-old on the night of the Leaving Certificate results - climbed the sides of these mountains at such a gradient the bus only got out of second gear when he reached the top at which time he threw caution to the wind and the pedal to the floor. This was despite the fact we had cliffs prone to landslides on one side and stomach churning drops on the other.

No rollercoaster has yet been devised to match this adrenal rush. That said, Indians hold a much less fatalistic view of road accidents than we do. While we stress: 'Speed Kills Kills Kills!!!', along the way they have cheery little signs advising: 'Safe driving brings peace and prosperity'. My driver must be a very troubled, poor man....

After seven hours we left the confines of the bus only to transfer to a run-down jeep in which we travelled similar roads for another hour, only faster. One travelling companion drew my attention to a fresh landslide and cheerfully stated: "Big crash here, jeep and lorry, many people die".

He followed this bombshell with that unique Indian gesture, which I've christened 'The Neck-Wink'. It involves a complete collapse of the muscles on one side of the neck, only for them to regain their strength moments before the head hits the shoulder, followed by a kind of half wink come blink.

It was pitch dark by the time we arrived (somewhere) and started trekking into the wilderness. Fortunately there was a full moon and the hike was spectacular as we followed an almost dry riverbed before climbing higher and higher into the mountains.

We arrived at Mehar's homestead in one piece after a great night hike. It was here I found what I had been looking for - a way of life so simple and unaffected I felt the ills of the western world drift away. It later struck me that this was akin to the rural Ireland my parents grew up in, around the times of electrification, and this was one reason why I felt so immediately at home.

I was welcomed into Mehar's family's kitchen, a tiny clay structure practically moulded from the red earth itself, too low to stand up in, and separate entirely from the main structure. His father, mother and two sisters were waiting with some food already being prepared. The oven was basically an open fire that extended from the floor with a hole in the roof above it to let out the smoke. We ate with our hands, and then sat barefoot and cross-legged, relaxed and talked.

His father is a small farmer growing beans, sweet peas, pumpkins, garlic, onions; the list goes on. The main source of revenue, though, is from the orchard; apples are one of the region's main exports.

It's amazing how much you can gather from body language, gesture, and all other forms of non-verbal communication, and when his father said something to Mehar I knew he had just offered me a drink. Mehar, who doesn't touch alcohol and indeed feared it, was shaking his head; I was nodding mine. As quick as lightening out came the bottle and I knew it could be only one thing—poiteen, Indian style.

It was made from maize and went down smooth as a whistle. After three healthy tumblers of this stuff his father and I were getting on like a

house on fire despite the fact we shared not a word in common.

When the time came to sleep my boudoir was the wooden upper floor of the adjoining barn, which I was sharing not only with Mehar and his cousin, but with his two sisters, whose side of the room was concealed by drapes.

The aroma of the place, courtesy of the cow residing below, brought me back to my childhood and in particular one night I fell asleep with my father in a shed near our house as we waited for a cow to calve. I slept like a baby and was awoken by the unmistakable sound of said cow being milked - the spraying of the milk against the side of a bucket being music to my ears for I knew what was coming next; sure enough, just ten minutes later Mehar's mother presented us with piping hot Chai, milky tea, with sugar, cinnamon and ginger. It was almost 7am.

The full extent of the view that awaited me, largely hidden the previous night, blew me away. We were high in the mountains that surrounded us on all sides. A hearty breakfast (rice, beans, lentils and a curried vegetable akin to okra) and Mehar and I were off on a hike that would take us to the highest peak.

The day was glorious, and as we hiked higher and steeper into the mountains we stopped by random huts and homes of Mehar's friends and family all of whom greeted us warmly and always with their own distinct version of chai.

The halfway point, some five hours into the hike, was his sister's house. Her father-in-law was seated outside doubled over with age, and leathery and brown as a mule's hide from the sun. He lifted his head from what he was doing - turning raw, cleaned sheep's wool into knitting wool with dexterous hands that showed not a sign of arthritis or rheumatism. When he finally recognised Mehar, with whom he clearly had a close relationship, he started to cry with joy. It was a touching moment, and he welcomed me like a son too, kneeling, hands to hands and forehead to forehead. No one, including himself, knew his exact age.

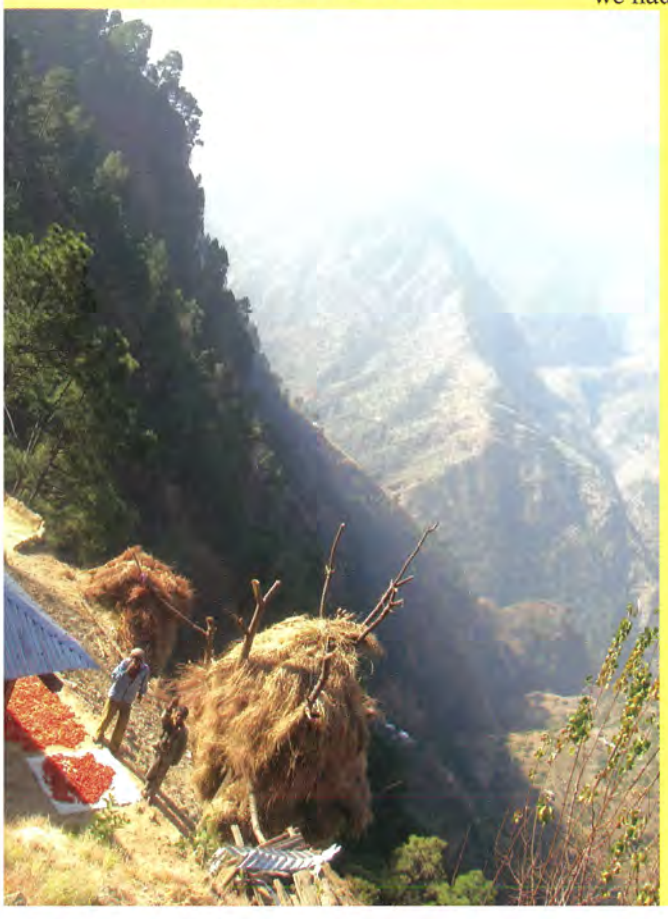
We had a sumptuous feast of wholemeal pancakes with ghee (a kind of liquid warm buttery oil and is considered the piece de résistance of any rural Indian meal) that stood us well on the final steep incline.

We pushed hard to reach the peak before sunset and I needed all my fitness to stay with the mountain goat that was Mehar. It was challenging and exhausting but as we finally reached the summit the reward couldn't have been greater. Behind us was the valley we had ascended, some 3,600 metres below, in front of us lay an incredible view across the Himalayas, some of which were snow peaked and reached into China. And right beside us, was a cricket pitch

It was clearly rough and ready, in a clearing that might put you in mind of Mullies pitch back in the 1980s if it sat on top of a mountain instead of beside its lazy river. Seven or eight young boys were engaged in a match, one of whom was Mehar's youngest brother. He was attending a school up here and stayed with a cousin for weeks on end. This was where we would spend the night.

Water is a major concern for this small mountain top community - they hadn't any rain since the end of September,

■ *Locals drying chillies in the sun*



■ *Mehar's father looks back down on his homestead- where I spend my first night in the mountains*

and had to trek a round trip of 5km to a nearby river: this was my first sight as the sun went down - lines of men and women carrying the water of life on their heads for the night's dinner and the morning breakfast and wash.

Our host family had seven children, five under nine-years-old, the baby just nine-months. Their niece was also staying with them as was Mehar's brother! The niece was a beautiful 15-year-old girl who waited on us hand and foot. Quite literally! As is the custom, one of the girls of the house washes the feet of the men at the end of the night (before or after dinner) and they insisted I receive the same honour. Despite my protestations, which, I must admit, could have been stronger, I succumbed to a warm water footbath/massage. It was one guilty pleasure.

The kids had never seen video footage before, and couldn't get over my recordings of their singing and playing. The innocence in their eyes was arresting, remarkable and inspiring. Again there was no electricity in this house and its absence created an inclusive ambiance.

We were gone again before sunrise, hiking and rambling, sampling more moonshine and chai, dried goat meat, and an open air cold shower at various houses along the way.

The next day we returned to Mehar's house, and carried sacks of produce from their vegetable garden to the bottom of the valley from where we would take them to a market to sell. When we made the road clearly I was looking every bit a man who had spend the past four days in the same clothes,

■ *View from the top*

sleeping in sheds with animals, and hiking for miles as a number of people also waiting for the transport ushered me to the river and assisted me in washing my runners and combats in the clear, cool water. I hadn't once glanced at a reflection of myself in the last three days and had no idea of my appearance. A lack of self-consciousness is a really refreshing thing and was something I experienced throughout India.

My other experiences in this vast, exciting country left me equally refreshed and with renewed appreciation for the human condition. From the exiled Tibetan monks in McCloud Ganj whom I briefly had the privilege of teaching English to, to the Boy Band wannabe who engaged me in existential talk at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, most holy site of the Sikh religion, and on to the Monty Python-esque silly-walks of the flag lowering ceremony at Attari on the Pakistani border.

Of course, the poverty, the filth and squalor of the cities, the polluted waterways, the disease, the aggressive begging in urban centres all took their toll and required getting used to, but never once over-powered the positives of India for me.

All the above and so much more took place in a part of this country so small it would be the equivalent of a traveller visiting only Leitrim when they came to Ireland. But for those of us from Leitrim, we know any visitor could have the time of their life in this nook of Ireland alone, because like the India I experienced this place is all about people and place rather than ticking boxes on a tourist map.

And we know that home, no matter how far you are from it, can always be replicated by the kindness of people and the sharing of the human experience. refreshed and with renewed appreciation for the human condition.

■ *On top of the world—the view from the top of the Pubbar Valley. China in the background*