

Reaching Enlightenment in McLeod Ganj

by Dan Levesque on June 30, 2017



We made it to the Himalayas, and the Himalayas made our entire trip in India. I mean, the bus getting there was absolutely terrible—but being up in the mountains for 10 days was the best thing we've done so far.

McLeod Ganj is 2,000 meters above sea level and surrounded by even higher mountains, including a 5,500 meter snow-covered peak looming in the distance. And because it's also the location of Tibet's government in exile (including the Dalai Lama himself), the place is strongly influenced by Tibetan culture—and this in turn has enabled a pseudo-hippie community of expats from Western countries to set up shop in the surrounding hills.

The place just has good vibes overall—people are more laid back, the Buddhist influence is strong, and the mountain setting is surreal and humbling. After all of the chaos of India down below, this place was a diamond in the rough.



View from our little trek into the main town.

By chance, we happened to arrive just in time for me to go catch the last of a series of three talks given by the Dalai Lama at the main Buddhist temple, so I jumped on that opportunity.

Unfortunately, it was all in Tibetan. Nobody told me that there wasn't going to be any translation available. Or that there was a translation if you happened to bring a pocket radio and some earbuds... Which it turned out most of the other tourists were doing. Maybe I could have used my phone and gotten the English version online, but smartphones were banned inside... So needless to say, I was super disappointed that I got up early and walked all the way there for no reason. I did get to see the Dalai Lama in person, but he's just a guy in a robe, so yeah...

We did other things too. On one of our hikes, we got caught in a crazy hail and rain storm up on an exposed mountain ridge. We had to run down quite a ways to get back to shelter in a little shack we'd seen further down.

Even though we were prepared for the weather to take a bad turn, in this case we were caught off-guard: soaking wet, pebble-sized hailstones bouncing off of our heads, and walking through a newly formed river that hadn't existed at all just 15 minutes prior.

We eventually made it back to our hostel—soaking wet, but alive. In ten days, we probably saw 3 mid-afternoon hail storms.

There's a lot to enjoy in McLeod Ganj. Tons of Tibetan and Buddhist cultural stuff around, lots of interesting people to meet. Quite a few places served up vegan and/or organic foods, so we finally caught up with some of the vegetables we'd been missing in our Indian food diet.

One of the most striking things about the place was that the whole town is situated on a big hill at the base of a mountain, and there aren't that many cars around. So every time you go somewhere, it's like a mini-hike. Going to lunch or running an errand meant going there downhill and returning uphill, or vice-versa. It was refreshing to be able to get regular exercise just doing regular day-to-day tasks.



Check out those clouds rolling in over Jan's head. Just a few minutes later we were in emergency mode.

But best of all was the ability to be comfortable and enjoy ourselves in one place for an extended period of time.

The trade-off of long-term travel is that you get to see a ton of stuff, but at the expense of getting worn down from time to time. It can get exhausting when some simple everyday

tasks are hard (like finding decent Wi-Fi, or getting food that's not loaded with dairy or meat, or just getting around in general).



5,500 meter-high mountains seen from the Triund campsite above McLeod Ganj.

But in McLeod Ganj we got to take a break from the chaos of India, enjoy some natural beauty, and rejuvenate—all while surrounded by the richness of Tibetan culture.

It's just that the whole reason *this place*—this Tibetan refuge in India—exists at all is sort of depressing. Lots of the Tibetans here are refugees that had their home taken from them some 60+ years ago.

The Current State of Tibet is Complicated...

Tibet was autonomous for most of its history, and with the integration of Buddhism it became the Tibetan Empire in the middle ages. That ended in the 13 century when the Mongols conquered China and eventually Tibet, thereafter making Tibet part of the Yuan dynasty for about a hundred years.

Once that dynasty fell in the 14th century, Tibet regained its independence for nearly four centuries. It then fell under the rule of the Chinese Qing dynasty from 1720-1912, before

regaining its independence *again* following the fall of the last Chinese emperor and establishment of the Republic of China.



Janice overlooking the home of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile.

Then WW2 happened and the Japanese invaded China. Then the Communist party of China defeated the Nationalists in a civil war, and established the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, which still persists to this day.

In 1950, the PRC, then still unrecognized by the United Nations as the legitimate government of China, invaded Tibet. It was a quick victory for the Communists.

Tibet was allowed to retain its government for the time-being. Due to the emergency and ensuing instability in Tibet, the then 15-year-old Dalai Lama was officially given full powers as **head of state** of Tibet following the invasion.

While allowed to retain some of its autonomy despite being under the official de-facto control of the PRC, the ensuing years saw Tibetan militias skirmishing with the Chinese army. This eventually became a full-fledged uprising in 1959, during which the Dalai Lama

and many of his supporters fled over the Himalayas into India (with the help of the CIA) and were permitted to establish a Tibetan government-in-exile in McLeod Ganj.



Trekking in the Himalayas at 3,000 meters in elevation.

By all accounts this was devastating for the Tibetan people. Hundreds of thousands of Tibetans lost their lives, and hundreds of thousands more are still listed as 'missing'. Those who didn't flee were forced to accept the de-facto rule of the PRC government. Many more died during the Great Leap Forward and ensuing Cultural Revolution.

The Chinese occupation of Tibet is ongoing—the only thing that stops this from being a global human rights issue today is that the initial invasion took place so long ago, and that the secrecy and censorship of the PRC have kept many of the details of the invasion and subsequent occupation under-wraps.

This isn't really any different than if China rolled into Laos today and declared it part of China. Or if India invaded Nepal and made it into its 30th state. Or if the United States went into Canada and annexed an entire province against its will.



A Himalayan Glacier at the Indrahhar Pass.

The difference is that the question of Tibet's sovereignty is so far away—both in distance and in time. The time for a global response would have been in 1950. It's hard to see the issues now because the Tibet region is kept closed-off to foreign tourists unless they're part of an approved tour group. And there's misinformation on both sides—the Dalai Lama and Tibetans in exile claiming that China is guilty of Tibetan genocide, with the Chinese claiming that Tibet joined the PRC by its own volition and that the separatist forces were a minority.

What appears to be true, however, is that close to 200,000 Tibetan refugees are still living in exile today in 2017. Of the thousands of monasteries in Tibet pre-1959, only a handful remain intact today. And that Tibet is a glorified tourist destination for **millions** of Chinese citizens each year, with foreign travelers only given limited access.

Either way you cut it, a lot of Tibetan people have suffered greatly over the past half-century. We didn't get a chance to visit Tibet while we were in central China back in 2014, but we probably got a more authentic and less depressing version of Tibetan culture by visiting McLeod Ganj in India.



The pro-Tibet sentiment is strong in McLeod Ganj.

I didn't expect it to be as enlightening an experience as it was, but I came away with a profound respect for Tibetan culture. It's just a shame there isn't a free and peaceful Tibetan state to go and visit in earnest. Maybe one day.