

Rijumati's Travels, part VIII: On the Road in America

Dear Friends,

It has been some time since I sent you a despatch. I have been struggling to find a voice with which to write about being in North America, especially during these remarkable times of Presidential election fever and economic meltdown. Many of the experiences I would like to share with you are still boiling in the cauldron, reducing down to their essence, but here is a short piece about a road trip that I did with my Russian-American friend Anatoly, who also took several of the photos.

Lots of love
Rijumati

On The Road

The myth of the Road Trip is embedded deeply in the psyche of America. To drive the vast expanses, hair blowing in the wind, heat beating down, the dust of the road swirling in clouds as one passes, nothing behind matters, only the possibilities ahead in sight, the sense of freedom and potential, not a care in the world.

Anatoly is the ideal road trip companion, a voracious driver, with a love of adventure, a delight in talking Dharma and owner of a lovely electric blue Toyota pickup. We covered 1000 miles in 3 days travelling from Fresno through the wonders of Yosemite National Park into the Sierra Nevada, camping in Death Valley National Park and then crossing the state line and descending to Las Vegas.



Our first stop in Yosemite was the Mariposa grove, home to many ancient giant sequoias, including a tree named Grizzly Giant who is 1800 years old. It is a rare moment in a lifetime to meet a living being of this age and size, to think that when this tree started life the Roman empire was at its height and Tibet hadn't even heard of the Buddha's teaching. The sequoias emanate majesty and awe, their huge girth, many metres in circumference boggling the mind. These are some of the largest living beings that have

ever inhabited our planet. I felt the desire to prostrate myself to these gentle giants, but feeling rather shy I settled for a hug and a bow instead!

How can one describe in words the view from Glacier Point, celebrated by photographers like Ansell Adams, written about by poets. These vast ice-sculpted granites of the Yosemite valley, including the iconic Half Dome and the breath-taking sheer cliff of El Capitan (nearly a kilometer high), have inspired countless generations all the way back to the native Americans who settled the valley 1000s years before Europeans ever came to these lands. Anatoly and I alternated between gazing in awe and frantic photography - a hopeless attempt to capture the uncapturable, grasp the ungraspable.



"You should go and stand over there" Anatoly pointed to a precipitous overhanging slab of granite, improbably balanced over a deathly abyss. I looked on in amazement, wondering if the thrill of it was worth the risk. Suddenly something daring moved in my soul. "Okay" I said as I jumped over the railing and the signs warning "Danger keep out." The fear tingled on my skin, the tiny hairs rising in anticipation of a deadly threat, as I clambered slowly on all fours over the rough granite surfaces, testing each hand hold, each foothold with utmost care. On three sides of this narrow ledge, 2 metres wide, four metres long was certain death. Gingerly crouching, edging forwards until the sheer drop became fully visible. The tiny specs of humanity in the valley below seemed like microscopic life forms, as though glimpsed through a lens. My breath was fast and shallow, the heart was beating hard. I composed myself, drinking deeply of the clear mountain air, before rising

onto two legs, gazing into the void, utterly alive to the fragility of human existence.

"How can trees grow on granite?" I asked in amazement. "Shall we stop?" said Anatoly. We pulled off Highway 120 just as it skirts the edge of the stunning lake Tenaya. High in the granite mountains at nearly 2500 metres, Tenaya's waters have an other-worldly purity, framed by cascades of rock and trees. The hard sculpted surfaces give almost no purchase for soil, yet through some incomprehensible tenacity great cedars and pines cling to the rock, bringing life and greenness to an otherwise barren mountain terrain.

And so we snaked our way out of Yosemite's monoliths and lakes, picking up Highway 395 at the volcanic crater of Mono Lake and heading south for Death Valley National Park. Highway 395, passing between the ranges of the Sierras, resembles the ideal image of the open road. Immensely straight, darting between deserted mountains, one seems to be aiming for infinity, as the perspective of the carriageway leads the eye to a distant vanishing point. What better symbol for the road to freedom, than these awesome stretches of desert asphalt?

It was already dark when we arrived in Death Valley National Park looking for somewhere to camp. Everything was Panamint: we crossed over the Panamint mountains, dropped into Panamint valley and went through the tiny town of Panamint Springs, eschewing the mild lure of its dim motel lights for a desert encampment. Finally we found a small road off the main highway and searched for a track to take us into the sands. By the time we had constructed the tent, Anatoly had cooked us a delicious noodle soup and we were drinking an evening mug

of tea, the night sky had completely enveloped us. The stars glittered brilliantly, constellations traversing the night sky in utter clarity. Cygnus, Cassiopeia and Vega overhead, the Great Bear on the northern horizon pointing to the Polaris, Jupiter descending in the west, the splash of the Milky Way brushed over the dome above us, I felt the joy of being touched by yet another infinity. The unfathomable vastness of the universe without mirroring the unfathomable vastness of the universe within. Anatoly and I talked about consciousness, myth, imagination with the joy of friends sharing the preciousness of this fleeting human life. Suddenly I noticed that the clarity of the stars had dimmed, at almost the same moment Anatoly asked "what is that light on the mountains?" Sure enough the peaks of the western Panamints were radiating an unearthly silver-white glow. "Of course, it's the Moon rising!" Soon the white desert sands began to awake, glistening mysteriously, our bodies casting long occult shadows as the gibbous Moon rose in the East. All night She bathed us in her blessed radiance, illumination from an altogether different realm.

There is something utterly indescribable about watching the sunrise in the desert with the backdrop of the Sierra. I woke early, prompted by the inexorably slow deflation of my camping mat which left me sore, achy and dozing indecisively about whether to emerge from my seductive sleeping cocoon into the cold of the desert morning. The rich midnight blue was just giving way to the dawn hues of yellow and orange over the eastern peaks as I poked my head out of the sleeping bag. Anatoly was breathing heavily, still soundly asleep. Over the next hour the mystic light of the Moonshine began to give way to the clarity of the dawn. Contours and gullies in the far mountains highlighted by the long shadows gave them a powerful extra dimension, the bushes and grasses anchored in the sand began to seem small and known, rather than a night-time tangle of mysterious forms. Soon the red light of the rising sun sent the Sierra a rich pink and the valley floor began to dazzle with the white sand. The silence was deafening, there was nothing to compete with the buzzing of one's thoughts.



Death Valley is one of the strangest places in the world. Created by spectacular tectonic shifts it is in places nearly 100m below sea-level and sinking. The geology of this whole region is awesome. Leaving the immense granites of Yosemite one is suddenly in a land of endlessly shifting rocks and sands; crumbling sedimentaries, rough volcanics, powerful greens, jagged blacks, rich reds; finally passing into far flung limestones as one crosses the range of the Spring Mountains into Nevada. Each rock type defines the landscape in a unique way, shaping the contours, the fractures, the landslides in a tell-tale pattern. The granites create smooth surfaces fractured by straight traceable cracks. The softer sandstones and conglomerates tumble in a chaotic mash of breaks and faults, leaving sharp jagged edges and a myriad of tiny grooves. The limestones, easily eaten by the mild acidity of rain, form sharp spires and turrets, grey rivulet channels etched into the stone. At the very lowest point of Death Valley is Badwater, where the slow trickle of mountain water finally emerges along a fault line, its labyrinthine journey through the rocks having laden it with saline solutions so that Badwater has become a natural salt flat, a white plane of crystals endlessly renewed by the water and sun.

As one travels to Death Valley there are periodic references to the satanic origins of the landscape. On the way there are the immense spires of the Devil's Postpile. In Death Valley itself you'll find the Devil's Cornfield as well as the rather more recent satanic addition of the Devil's Golf Course. Anatoly and I named one particular rock formation the Devil's Organ Pipes. Why is it that the Devil is so often accredited with awesome natural phenomena around the world? Musically it is said that the Devil got all the best tunes, since on the seventh day after the creation God was too tired to play, so maybe the same is true of the spectacular landscapes. Or perhaps the reason is that the immense of the epochs of transformation that have shaped Death Valley with such intricacy seem rather un-Godlike, so they must have been created by his nemesis.



"Shall we check it out," said Anatoly, "Sure!" I consented as we passed the sign for Golden Canyon. A host of SUVs and pickups at the trailhead parking seemed to indicate a place of significant interest. Strange that in the vast silent emptiness of Death Valley we alighted on the most peopled place! Golden Canyon is just that, a narrow gorge flanked by sandy golden yellow cliffs that opens into a labyrinth of ancient eroded gullies and stream beds.

In a moment of crazy adventurousness I suggested to Anatoly that we scramble up one of the easier looking peaks to get the view and "be closer to the Angels." Anatoly always responds to a call of the spirit! Being an experienced rock climber he said that it would take about 40 minutes, I was surprised since it didn't seem very far, he turned out to be absolutely right! The problem was that we were scrambling up very soft conglomerate rock. So though none too steep it was liable to crumble beneath one's feet if one applied too much weight, or to come off in one's hand if one pulled too strongly. Anatoly led us up a sort of chimney, hugging the rising ridge from below as we slowly hauled our bodies up, leaving a small avalanche of dislodged pebbles and sand. At Base Camp One, a relatively flat saddle back ledge about 50cm wide, the view was astounding. Ahead the buttress of red organ pipe rocks that mark the head of Golden Canyon, to the sides the steeply rising jagged cliffs, behind the vast plain of Death Valley, shimmering in the rising heat, framed by the western range of Sierras. "You realise that we are climbing illegally" Anatoly said suddenly. "Well that didn't stop us before" I replied, thinking of our off road camp the previous night. "I mean that we are climbing without safety backup" he said. "Oh!" I replied uncomfortably at the implication that we were putting our lives at risk. "I'm more concerned about going down," I added after some further thought. Anatoly led the way up to the summit, managing to avoid a hairy crumbling ledge through a judicious traverse of a scree slope. "Good news from up here, Riju!" he shouted down as footholds of sand and rock sped away from under my feet on the scree. "I'm on my way" I shouted not even daring to look up for fear that I might lose my balance at this critical moment.

At the summit the views were even more spectacular, the intense blue of the sky offsetting every hue of rock one could think of from red to yellow to green to black to brown as one surveyed the cardinal points, "wow!" And what is more there was a well worn footpath leading away from the summit in the opposite direction. Another unexpected gift from the angels!

Lost in Las Vegas



After two days in the deserts and mountains of California Anatoly and I descended into a rather different archetypal realm, Las Vegas. No sooner had we crossed the State line from Shoshone to Pahrump (famous for its brothel ranches) than the seduction of Vegas began to work its magic upon us. Anatoly told me stories of people who had won millions of dollars at the casino slot machines and I began to wonder what I would do if I won the \$10m jackpot. Suddenly I was jolted into the awareness that the lure of Vegas was already playing upon my soul. As if the Sorcerer had his entrapment spells ready to be sprung at the State line!

As Anatoly and I dwelt on this magical pull that Vegas exerts, I realised just how badly the rest of the USA needs Nevada and Las Vegas in particular. Vegas is the City of the Dream, or the Nightmare, depending on which angle you look at it. In Vegas every dream, every fantasy, every possibility can be played out. The greatest of all American Dreams is that by luck or skill one can make it big, reach the top, be whatever one wants to be, and the casino's of Vegas are the very crystallisation of the Dream, they offer the hope of its realisation. This is why the USA desperately needs Vegas, it bears the archetype of the National Dream.

And there is another reason, perhaps even more urgent. Vegas, in holding all the desires and fantasies bears the shadow of America. Here the safe middle class family man can come and be a secret one-night Eros, here the bored housewife can come and feel like a Queen, here the young prodigy can gamble his soul for fame and fortune. Without Vegas all those fantasies would remain suppressed, festering and decaying the soul until becoming demons they erupt in a torrent of visceral madness. Vegas guarantees the sanity of the nation by being the realm of realised fantasies. "What goes in Vegas stays in Vegas" says the city's slogan; a city that markets itself as a safe haven in which to live out the irrepressible in the psyche.

Of course this is also a city of the most adept and self-conscious manipulations. "If you have a loaded gun in your psyche, Vegas will pull the trigger" Anatoly informed me with a degree of self-revelation. He had lived in Vegas for seven years and experienced both the Dream and the Nightmare. The man who mistakes himself for a big shot will find his every self-image flattered until the shirt is stripped from his back. The woman who longs to be the object of desire will find herself the very centre of the universe until her maxed-out credit card shatters the illusion.

At the heart of Vegas is The Strip, the colloquial name for Las Vegas Boulevard, and a synonymic reminder of the sexual and financial taboos that are ready to be transgressed. Here are some of the greatest hotels in the world for opulence and service; the Bellagio, the Wynn, the Paris, Caesar's Palace, Treasure Island, Luxor... each selling its own version of the same paradigm: immense success, luck, anonymous pleasure of every sense.

For instance the Bellagio, which opened in 1998, cost a spectacular \$1.6 billion. At the time it was the most expensive hotel ever built. Every detail of the Bellagio is lavishly executed. The reception hall sports a dazzling chandelier installation of giant glass blooms; the lake and

fountain displays are so intricate that they require 31 staff to maintain; Cirque du Soleil, one of the most daring circus' in the world is resident here; here are two of the most exclusive 5 star restaurants in America, Le Cirque and Picasso.

But the amazing fact about the Bellagio and all the venues in Vegas is their complete open-minded hospitality to each and every guest. There is none of your Old World prejudice about family or aristocratic ties, or the New World prejudice about looking like the perfect man or woman. Vegas will welcome each and every one with open arms, as long as you are prepared to enter her dream - and have the money to do so! The hospitality is staggering, free car-parking all over the city centre, fast food courts where a hostess comes up to offer you napkins as you dine, the staff at the world's most expensive hotels greeting even a dusty Dharma Bum fresh out of Death Valley as if he were a big spender. Vegas gives everyone a sense that they are special. That is part of the seduction.

I felt that I needed to propitiate the gods of Vegas by making a sacrifice, a sign that I had come to visit their realm in good faith. Evaluating my budget traveller finances I made a clear decision. "I want to blow \$20 in a casino" I said to Anatoly. "Okay" he said, if he was underwhelmed he did a good job of hiding it! "Do you want to play cards or slot machine?" "Oh, I don't want to think about it, something that is pure luck." So we went to the Wynn and wandered about the bewildering array of bright lights, alluring sounds and expectant slot machines, card tables and roulette wheels. As we walked about, I started to feel rather agitated, the choice was paralyzing. Jackpots ranging from \$1000s to \$1,000,000s were advertised with flashing leds and announced by electronic jingles. I started to feel lost, unable to decide on any option. We passed the Megabucks slot offering a \$1.6m jackpot. "Let's try here" I said desperately trying to come to some decision, any decision. So I fed in \$6, which entitled me to two spins of the cylinders. It was all over in about 30 seconds, I'd lost my Vegas virginity, and predictably it was a bit of an anti-climax. "Well the high jackpot means you get less chances to play for you money" Anatoly explained rather gently. "Oh, okay let's try something else then!" So we wandered around a bit more and finally settled on a row that called themselves 25c slots. This turned out to be something of a con since although each unit only cost 25c, it cost 3 units to spin the cylinders. I fed in the remaining \$14, my electronic host struggling somewhat with the rather ragged \$1 bills that I'd offered him, and sat down to spin the wheels. Spin after spin came so close to pay out, at one point three different bars even lined up and my credit rose slightly, but it seemed like the inevitable was just being delayed. On my final spin there was just a sliver of hope that I would be redeemed and then it was all over. I had come to the Wynn and lost. Yet in another sense I had won, having experienced, albeit cheaply, the hope and despair of the gambler's mind. I noticed a subtle voice that said "If only you'd been a bit more daring, say \$100, you'd have given yourself the chance of winning." Where did that thought come from? Was it hypnotically implanted or did it come in the air conditioning? Vegas is awesome when it comes to psychic suggestion.

Vegas carries so many archetypes that it is staggering. It is a city that is permanently re-creating itself. In Vegas, as perhaps nowhere else in the world, the developers will think nothing of tearing down a perfectly serviceable multi-million dollar building for no better reason than because the investor needs some new energy to come into his business. So the inhabitants of Vegas are continually being delayed and diverted by colossal constructions, in the very heart of the city. The latest of these, a sort of city within a city, is a \$9.8 billion complex of glass and steel, which boasts its own monorail and will no doubt break allsorts of financial records for the most expensive of its kind ever built.

You don't see the homeless on The Strip. Naturally even Vegas has a homeless population, but they are somehow smuggled away from the heart of the Dream, since they represent its shadow, the Nightmare of poverty, addiction and failure - everything that Vegas wants to deny. But in reality to play for the Dream is to play for the Nightmare. By the same logic that every visitor to Vegas can leave as a winner, he can also leave as a loser. In fact the logic of house odds *must* ensure that most people leave as losers, otherwise the casinos would soon go bust and Vegas would disappear back into the dry sands of western Nevada. I guess that most of us ignore that fact when we play the Dream.

The other noticeable omission is the newspapers. News from the world is not really welcome in Vegas, unless it is news of success, good fortune, the individual winning out against all odds - which most news is not. So it took several hours of walking the Strip and malls before Anatoly and I saw even a self-dispensing news stand. When one enters Vegas one is meant to leave the rest of the world behind, that too is part of the seduction.

And so we spent 24 hours tasting the delights of Vegas, really a very very brief introduction, but enough to feel the power and energy of the repository of Dreams that keeps the Myth of America from going bankrupt. Las Vegas is one of the wonders of the modern world, would you dare to pay it a visit?

***Rijumati, November 2008
to be continued...***

