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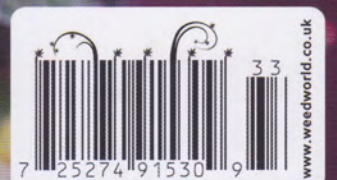
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INDIA

“The Land of Charas”

By Frenchy Cannoli

Photos by @himalayan_connection @himalayan_escape

India should have been high on my wish list when I choose to live a nomadic life at eighteen, it was as much a part of my childhood fantasy as the Thousand and One Nights or the mysteries of the African continent; it was the magical and spiritual destination of a whole new culture of Peace, Love and Psychedelics. My youthful attraction was however smothered by the superior attitude of travelers coming back from India, as if spirituality, wisdom and knowledge could be acquired by simple osmosis; they all sounded fake, many were.



A few years later, when I had no thought but to go back to Mexico and South America, a weird coincidence changed the direction of my vagabond life; I was often relying on the Chinese divination book of change, the I Ching, in my twenties to insure the rightness of my choices, a survival remedy to my cluelessness and fearlessness of the

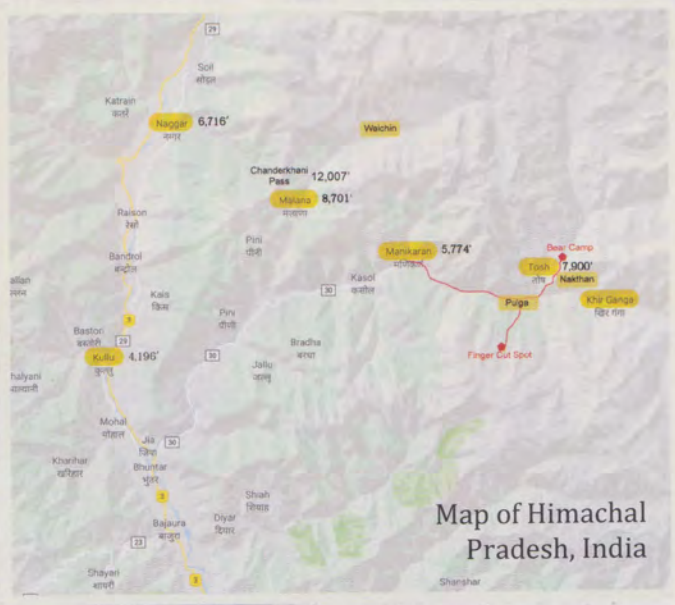
unknown, I believe. On a sunny winter day, a close friend, Bruno, was having an I Ching session looking for confirmation on his next move and the commentary of the hexagram implicitly implied that he should travel with myself and my travel partner of the time. It was fine by us but then where were we going, on an Amazonian adventure or to India?

The argument went on for a while and I lost, the destination was to be India, the trip was to last three months, we were on the road by the end of the summer and the trip lasted in fact a full year. It took me a few months to understand and appreciate the culture and the country, my heart was taken by another continent and India is not a country you fall in love with at first sight. It is way too overwhelming for that.

It was not long before I came to the land of Charas, at the feet of the Himalayas, that I truly fell in love. The first two months in the Parvati valley collecting resin on my hands changed me deeply.

Manikaram was the end of the road in the Parvati valley in 1980, a little hamlet around a hot spring, an important holy place to Hinduism and a sacred ground to Charas connoisseurs. Here, we were totally confident, and absolutely unprepared to spend weeks in the wilderness of the Himalayan mountains making Charas, not only did we want to go beyond the last village and summer pastures of the valley, we were planning to go to a bordering valley through the Pangchi Galu pass which is a mere 15,000 feet (4,800m)¹ in altitude with no map, food for only two or three days, no sleeping bag or a decent pair of hiking shoes at that. It took us a whole day to reach the limit of the tree line and face a very long alpine valley, a range of mountains with eternal snow at the far end of it and no discernible pass, it took us only a minute to decide that it wasn't such a good idea after all.

Plan B was to get back down and on to the other side of the Parvati valley, the sunny side of it, where Cannabis was abundant, and find some fields to rent; we set up camp for the



Map of Himachal Pradesh, India

night and while prepping small wood for a fire with a pocket knife I cut my left index finger to the bone. I could clearly see the white of the bone when bending my finger. It was bad and I was days away from any hospital. I wasn't however quite ready to give up my first season in the Land of Charas for a trifling cut. We packed a chillum. Once we had smoked it to the stone I applied the remaining silver ashes to my cut, which had bled profusely by that time, and used rolling paper to bandage it up. I did not bend my index finger for months to come. I had no thoughts of getting to civilization and to a doctor but since my hands were the only tool I could use to collect resin I was not starting the season in the best conditions. The following day we improvised again and followed bear tracks through dense bushes to get down faster to the bottom of the valley which is not the wisest move, especially smelling of blood and carrying any amount of food.

Late in the afternoon we reached what should have been our first destination: Tosh, a village reputed for the quality of its Charas. Our timing could not have been better. We crossed paths with a friend Bruno that we had met in Columbia, and two





Frenchmen, one of them had spent the last 15 years in these mountains. We did not refuse an invitation to share their camp and cannabis field. We were very conscious of the chance we had to not only be able to make charas in prized territory but more importantly to learn the many aspect of charas and to discover the marvel that is live resin collected from wild cannabis plants, the "jungle" charas.

In the morning, we had followed the tracks of bears as a short cut, and at night we had bear meat for dinner. We had a bear skin stretched on a frame in the back of the camp to clean, bear fat melting constantly in a pot, and racks of bear meat hanging over the fire. When we were not doing bear chores we were collecting resin which was a delicate operation in my case with my sensitive rolling paper bandaged finger. However, to be delicate and gentle while rubbing Cannabis flowers is key to quality and as such my handicap was to a point an advantage.

Charas is the most ancient and basic method of collecting resin, it is the gentle rubbing of the cannabis plant's flowers at the peak of their blooming cycle in order to collect the resin on the palm of one's hands. It is hardly done anymore in Hashish producing countries but remains the unique collecting methodology at the region around the feet of the Himalayas, in tropical regions with a high humidity climate like Bhutan, Nepal and Northern India.

I had waited until that bright autumn morning to make my first hand of Charas. I had had plenty of occasions to practice since my arrival in Himachal Pradesh, cannabis grows everywhere at the feet of the Himalayas, but the villages of Tosh and Nakthan at the end of the Parvati valley were recognized as producing some of the best charas in the region and I wanted my first time to be special.

Making Charas is quite simple, you first take the fan leaves off the plant, you then caress the flower between your hands with a gentle back-and-forth motion, you clean your hands thoroughly after every flower by gently brushing away leaf matter or other contaminants with the tip of your fingers, and start again until a sufficient layer of resin has formed on the palms of your hands and fingers. After rubbing the first flower you can hardly see a transparent layer of resin shining in the sun but you can feel the resin on your skin and its stickiness when you hold your hands together. The resin layering will thicken flower after flower, taking a light golden orange coloration that gets slowly darker until the resin layer becomes thick enough that it appears almost black. In order to collect the resin, you have to press and turn your thumb on the most resinous part of your other hand, snap the resin off and repeat the process until your hand is clean and your thumb holds all the resin. Then it is time to change thumbs and simply repeat the process on the other hand.

It is hard to find the words that can express the actual intensity of the experience. The field was small by local standards, a patch of semi-wild plants in a natural clearing of the forest a few minutes' walk from camp. Stepping from the dense forest into the small meadow packed with five-to-six-foot plants was entering a world of light and colors and into an intense and all-penetrating smell of tropical fruits and spices. I was in a daze at 8,000 feet, deep in the Himalayan mountains, facing hundreds of mature plants of all shade of colors, all expressing different terpenes profiles at the peak of their flowering cycle. Stepping in the middle of the plants was like entering a dense cloud of perfume constantly changing its profile, an aromatic orgy that you could literally feel on your tongue.

I have no clear memory of my first experience, it was too



overwhelming for details; the heat, the light, the color, the sound of the forest around, the feeling of the resin collecting on my hands and seeping into my body through the pores of my skin were all mixed up into a prodigious feeling of intense pleasure and connection with the world around, a sense of pure joy and total freedom. I however remember clearly the struggle of protecting my index finger from the flowers I was rolling gently between my hands, the constant fear of pain kept my touch really light and the layer of resin on the thin side but with basically no contaminant. The extra care I had to take was a guideline to collecting the ripest and cleanest resin, a light touch is the deciding factor of quality; the quantities were small with only three to four grams per hand and an average of three hands a day but the quality was unmatched.

I remember also the camp ground which was perfect but for the available water. We had a tiny pool fed by a spring that was hardly enough to wash dishes after a meal and which took a while to fill up. We shared our spring with a lot of wildlife at night (some of them big judging by the sound). Ablutions were minimal to the point of being non-existent outside a little water on the corner of the eyes in the morning and a thorough

washing of our hands, the tools we had to keep absolutely clean. I will never forget either how our best friends waited for us to enjoy for a few hours at the hot spring of Manikaram before partaking the charas we made, the gesture wasn't a demonstration of care for our wellbeing, more like a polite way to let us know how powerfully we smelled.

Living in the wild in the Himalayan mountains, gorging myself with bear meat and collecting live resin all day with the colorful splendor of a Himalayan autumn as a background was a mind-boggling, life changing adventure, I belonged in these valleys, the birth place of Cannabis according to the Vedas², and among these people; India in all its vastness, diversity and cultural heritage had become my new home.

References

1. I am guessing here by looking at maps of the region, we had no idea of the odds, we were trying to go to the next valley through a pass, uncharted territory was fun.
2. The Vedas are a collection of hymns and other religious texts composed in India between about 1500 and 1000 BCE. (http://www.ancient.eu/The_Vedas/)

Frenchy Cannoli is a consultant, educator and writer in the Cannabis industry with special focus on hash making using traditional methods. Frenchy can be reached through his website at: www.frenchycannoli.com or seen on Instagram @frenchycannoli.