

To remind you of whatever happened last, I am giving you a glimpse of the last narrated event in our trip.

Mar 17, sunday:

I had a hazy thought that ramana was talking on the phone. It was true and I was awake. Ramana had woken up early in the morning. He did not wake us up. I saw the time. It was 10 AM already. I was wondering why did ramana not wake us up. We were supposed to leave the place at 9 AM. Before I could ask him why he gave me a vicious smile and looked outside. It was raining as if Indira was angry with menaka that she did not come with him. I just banged myself back to the bed. The next thing we thought were, oh my god! what do we do now. We can't do trailing and hiking in rain. We watched weather forecast in TV. It said it is going to be thunder storms for the next few days. What?? after my car giving troubles, after the rental car agency giving us troubles at night, after driving for 16 hours, after having dreams of hiking and trailing, not this, for heaven's sake.

We started praying that the rain will stop and we will be able to have some fun in our trip. We hoped. Hope is the last thing to die. We thought that its the end, but again, "if its not good, its not the ending, because the ending is always good".

So, finally menaka did agree to go with Indra. The rain stopped at 1 PM and brought back the cheer and spirit in our faces and minds.

AMaaaa! I am hungry. Thats what we would have cried if we were at home. But, only KFC (kentucky fried chicken - a fast food chain) could listen to our cries. It was time for me to take the wheels and drive in the humid, rainy weather. But, we had a great car. So, driving was turning out to be fun. First, food. We had lots of food. We knew we had to go on a hiking trip and so we cannot come back now and then to eat food. We filled our water bottles and left for our first hike - the laural falls. From gatlinburg, laural falls was only a few minutes drive. It was almost at the foot of smoky mountains. We all were very prepared for the day. We wore suitable clothes so that even if our clothes get wet, we don't get drenched. We also wore sports shoes so that climbing is not tough. While driving through the roads of smoky mountains towards laural falls, we saw that the over night rain has made the world greener. We opened all our windows and our moon-roof. We took in all fresh air, fresh from the earth taken out by the rain. We went to the spot which said, 'park your car here, follow the trail to laural falls'. We did the same. We kept back our mobile phones, wallets, etc. and took our cameras and one shoulder bag full of mineral water bottles. We started off and followed the tar trail towards laural falls. The falls was 2 miles ahead and we thought we will reach there in ten minutes. The fun of trailing showed in front of us when we did not even finish off a mile in the first 15 minutes. We suddenly realised that we should go back home and get fit. But, our energy to see the falls arose better when we heard the water falling at a distance. The scenery around was so fabulous that we stood staring without talking for almost a minute. Vatte took so many snaps. So, we hiked along towards laural falls and we saw it finally. There was no one around and we all ran towards it when we saw it. Nature is so attractive so pulling that it makes you realize that it is mother to everyone. Everyone behaves like a child taking full freedom of his mom. We just threw off our shoes and bags and ran inside the falls. We did not want to get drenched, but we just couldn't help it. We went and stood in front of the falls and amazingly we could not face the force of water. The water had become forceful because of the over night rain. It reminded me of my chemistry teacher telling me "Patience pays, the one who had patience,

ruled the world". There were rails on both sides and we held them tight. We held them tight and with all mustered courage took a look at the falls. That time, when I was looking at the falls standing just under it, with my eyes wide open, I did not feel anything other than bliss. I did not feel who I was. I just felt like falling in love with nature.

Oh yes, we took a reel full of photos all over the place. We were all drenched in the next hour that we played with laural falls. We all decided its time to go and enjoy the other places. I turned back and told ramana "We did wait till the rain got over and held our hope flags high and we were paid royally."

Time to go back and adventure the other places. We were told by our informers that chimney tops cannot be missed at smoky mountains. So, the next stop is chimney tops. We drove to the foot of chimney tops. It was 3 PM. When we reached there, we were surprised to see the board there saying it will take 2 hours to go up and come down and it was only 2 miles again. What???? Two miles and two hours. We thought it was a joke. We were great hikers and we could do it within an hour. hahaha. I can just look back and laugh at it. This time we took off with great vigour and took our mineral bottles. We crossed many bridges with small rivers with great current running behind. The path was not tar here, it was full of mud. The mud was wet and our pants were spoilt. Oh no, we never bothered about it. We just went on and on and on for the next half hour. The path was now getting steep and steep and more steep. It took us almost an hour to go half way. It said in between that we have to go for another mile. Then we thought back again how good hikers we were. Mrunal's mineral water bottles were empty. He saw a small stream going near by. He just went and filled his water bottle with that water and drank it. We stared at him and stared at each other. Then, ramana tasted it, then me, then ali, then vatte. Then, we all emptied our water bottles and filled it with the stream water. The stream water was more tasty and it seemed like there were more minerals in the stream water. This was fun. We moved on drinking water and taking out water (you know what I mean.. hehehe). So, we went on with the steep trying trail. It was a real test to our stamina. We went by the side of a full current river, going in between fallen trees, muddy soil, drizzle, clouds, et al. The more and more we trailed, the more and more we were getting anxious to see the chimney tops. We have travelled so far and we have not yet reached the tops. But, we realized that we were trailing in between clouds. So, finally we thought we finally reached some where. We thought wrong. It said don't go behind this mount. We were disappointed. But, vatte suddenly saw a fallen tree which was hiding a path from us. This path said go beside this and not behind that. We crossed the fallen tree to reach the tip of the mountain. We had reached almost 1500 feet above ground level. We were careful to go and take a solo photo each at the cliff. It was like a suicide point. As such I am scared of height. My legs are still getting cold if I think of standing there. But, I stood there and took a photo. Suddenly, we realized that we were all alone. We were the only party that reached. On our way up in laural falls, we saw a couple coming down. But here, there was no one. After spending almost half an hour at the top of the world, we started leaving. Now, we saw quite a number of people going up the hill. All were hanging out their tongue. We cheered them and said it was not far enough and it is worth going on top. We went back to our car and it was already 6 30 PM. It was a little sunny. We were all dead tired to go for any more hikes or trails. We said we will just go for a small drive and then we will go back to the motel, take bath and have good food.

So, we again went on a beautiful drive and by the time it was dark, we were at our motel. We all took bath one by one and then we went down hill from Gatlinburg outside Smokies to a small town. It was only 20 minute drive. We went

and searched for a good restaurant. We roamed for half an hour and finally decided that we will have mexican food. With great difficulty, we found a mexican restaurant and it was closed. So, we decided to go back to Gatlinburg and have dinner at the mexican restaurant there. So, we went back and had dinner. It was sunday night and to our amazement, the streets were empty tonight compared to saturday. We figured out that there are many students from near by universities that come to visit this place on a weekend and must have returned back on sunday night.

We bought some beer and some gifts from shops on our way back to motel. Before going to sleep, we had made our plans for the next day. We will go through the New found gap to the North Carolina part of Smokies.

Mar 18, Monday:

We started early in the morning. It was raining as usual in the morning. But, it was not all that heavy. It was just drizzling heavily. Ramana took the wheels. He is a very careful driver. He generally drives at the speed limits. Never crosses it. So, we all as usual opened our moon roof and enjoyed fresh air as we moved through the clouds. As we were driving through the hills, we figured out why smoky mountians is called so. We saw that from all over this national park, fog comes out forest / park as if something was under fire. Fog resembles smoke here. So, the name smoky mountains. We drove for sometime listening to pleasant songs from our CD player for almost half an hour when we reached a beautiful view. This place was the border between North Carolina and Tennessee parts of Smoky mountains. From here, we could see the "new found gap". This term is for a highway that cuts across the smoky mountains and has been put the road transport recently.

In the meanwhile, what happenned to my car back home. I called up home and found that Ashish had paid for my car to be towed to the garage. The mechanic is closed on satuday and sunday. So, it will be only monday morning before ashish will give him a call and inquire about the problem. Till then, things were pretty much the same. Initial guess of people who had faced this problem before was, the repair could cost about 150\$. Thats too much for me for now. Yet, lets see. Today is monday. I will talk to Ashish in the evening when I come back.

So, the new found gap showed us the road to NC part of Smoky mountains. So, we drove for another couple of hours, before we could reach the information center. We inquired at the info center and found that there were a couple of places that we could visit that day itself and we can return back to our motel at Gatlinburg that night. The first place we went to visit was a falls. We started drivign and by the time we reached the falls, we were all eager to have another extravaganza. But, it was not as we had thought. It was a little less attractive than the other falls that we had seen. Nevertheless, the whole ambience was so quiet and beautiful that we could not resist some snaps. And so we did take some snaps and off we went back to another place where we were promised that there will be an elk. An elk is a rare kind of deer. The elks of this mountain forest were preserved with a tag clipped to their ears. And so we drove to see the elks. The road to see the elks was so trying. Finally, we reached to see the elk. And there was only on elk and that was too far for us to see. So, we used the view finder of our cameras to see the elk. It was not all that exciting. But, it was a good adventure. The next thing in our mind was FOOD. To go back to the Tennessee part of Smoky mountains, we took another route that went throuhg a couple of towns. We saw a lunch buffet at one town and decided to have food out there. It looked a decent place with lots of salads, etc for lunch. This waitress came to us and asked whether we

needed something to drink. When we said, we needed water, the lady said with a southern accent, 'u want ice in it'? Now, southern accent is so funny to some people that, they tell them, please speak english. When we heard the word 'ice' from the lady, we all started looking at each other... what did she say? Then, it stuck Mrunal that the lady was asking for iiiice. Now, Mrunal keeps seeing all these American civil war movies/serials, where there is lot of southern accent. After a minute, the lady left and we all had a hearty laugh at each other. IIIICE. hahaha.

By the time we reached backed gatlinburg after a long drive, it was time for us to spend some time here and there and rest back at motel. But, we were not all that happy to go back to Kansas from here. It was only three days that we spent here. So, what do we do? The discussion began and got diverted to politics and American politics. Mrunal is so passionate about American politics that he knows at any point of time where the president of USA is. It so happened one time that I asked him with fun, mrunal, where is the president now? he answered with all honesty and sincerity that he was in Wisconsin talking to a couple of cheese factory fellows. All people in the room were stunned to hear that comment. So, we all knew how Mrunal talks about clinton and his good presidential tenure. He supports him saying that his personal morality is of no concern for us. The topic turned to where is clinton from? Arkansas, Vatte replied. Where is arkansas, I asked. Its just a state away from us, replied Akbar. What is arkansas famous for, other than clinton? asked ramana. Hot springs, said Mrunal. Thats it. We had the answer, we will goto Hot springs national park the next day and then we will go home from there. Now, we started looking out for details of Arkansas and the way to reach hot springs and book our motels there, etc. After an hour, our plan for the next couple of days was fixed and we all were prepared to have a wonderful sleep before we could see the Hot springs national park tomorrow.

Our experience with the Arkansas park was very different. How different was it? You will see it in my last narration of our grand trip to smoky mountains.