

Rongdo Valley, Ladakh, India

Todd and Donette Swain



Looking up canyon from the Fatha Gompa at Daksa and the Rongdo Valley by Todd Swain

Motivated by Joie Seagram's 2013 American Alpine Journal quote concerning the Rongdo Valley "...we were once again astounded by solid-looking rock walls several hundred meters (sic) high on both sides of the valley—a rock climbers' paradise..." and armed with great local information from Andy Selters, we visited the Rongdo Valley in July 2019. Our logistics were arranged by Rimo Expeditions and, as a result, things went very smoothly.

The mouth of the valley is a hard day's drive from the Ladakh capital of Leh. Two days of hiking from 3800-4200m in wilting heat got us to our basecamp. There is indeed a lot of granite in the central part of the Rongdo Valle although, upon closer inspection, much has large expanses of exfoliated arches and flakes, making climbing less than perfect. We also found that, even at 4000m, it was generally too hot to rock climb in the sun in July.

Trying to avoid said loose rock and heat, we established two fine routes up a solid wall about 90min above the summer herding village of Daksa (shown on some maps as Fatha, after the nearby gompa). The climbs are on a cliff on the right side of the canyon and the cliff has two prominent waterfalls. Both routes climb about 150m up the wall to the left of its central waterfall.

The climbs require about a dozen quickdraws and gear up to a blue Camalot. Both lines can be rappelled with two 70m ropes. The left route was established first and is called The Cavorting Kid (E2 = 5.10b = VI+/VII), whilst the right route is a grade harder and named The Frolicking Yak. Both routes were named after small critters we saw in Daksa.



The Fatha gompa in Rongdo Valley by Todd Swain

The local villagers in Rongdo were extremely friendly and helpful; it was a joy to spend time with them in their homeland. It would be a very worthwhile trip just to trek in the area and spend time observing the villagers' lifestyle and infrastructure.

Following the Rongdo Valley excursion, we met with local climbers at the small climbing gym in Leh and got a list of potential rock climbing areas to check out. We subsequently did a week-long reconnaissance to the south and east of Leh. We drove over 800km and in addition to seeing amazing scenery and wildlife, found decent roadside granite near Debring, Hymia and Tangste. We established a half-dozen new rock routes on the road trip and at Shey, which is just south of Leh.

Our final ten days were spent in and around New Delhi, where we saw the amazing historical sites and immersed ourselves in all that urban India has to offer. We also visited the Indian Mountaineering Federation Museum and climbed with local climbers at a brand-new, state-of-the-art climbing gym. We were smitten enough with Indian climbing that we returned to southern India in December and spent three weeks climbing around Bangalore, but that is another story...