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Introduction

When I think about trust, I think about trust falling. You know the one you do at sleepovers and playdates? One person falls and trusts the other to catch them. In my case, I am both people – my mind trusting my body not to fall, my body trusting my mind to guide it. Throughout the experience I am about to share with you, my body and my mind went through this exact exercise of trust. The product of this was a very spiritual experience of fascination, realization, and respect. So without further ado, I hope you enjoy.

The City in the Sky

I stared out the tinted glass, watching the lush Chinese grassland around me zip past. I could smell the leather coverings and the Snapple stain that infected the backseat. The car was stuffy. My grandma who we were visiting then, was in the backseat. She was going all the way over to the mountain but refused to come up the gondola. I didn't see the point.

When I exited the ruby red car, my brown and white clunky hiking shoes hit the gravel. My eyes traced up the ridge of the mountain above me. The sun gave the floating city in the sky a beautiful glow. I walked up to the sign-in area, where the ground turned from gravel to cobblestone. As we walked up to the ticket counter, we discovered the place was as deserted as a 1970s mansion wine cellar. I stood, indifferent, my long brown hair swishing at my lower back. My mom, with her olive skin and short black hair, was an annoyed black bear and my cousin Zia was still on her phone looking as calm and content as a cat sitting in a window watching the snowfall. We all looked over to the gondola that was supposed to take us to the beautiful Buddhist temple “In the sky.” The temple hung supernaturally off the edge of a giant mountain.

As we looked in front of the gondola, we saw a sign; it read: “貢達拉關閉 抱歉給您帶來不便。” Or, in English, “Gondola closed sorry for the inconvenience.” My family and I were feeling discouraged and considered going back. After a spurt of arguing between my mother and cousin, we decided we were to take the steps, the steps that looked as if they had not been touched in over a thousand years, the same steps that could crumble under a single pinkie, for all

we knew. As we approached the stairs, we looked up, and the rows of mossy cobble seemed to tower over us past the moon and into the sky.

As I took my first step, I realized how steep the steps really were. I felt myself get lightheaded. After contemplating my life choices, I decided I was going to get to the temple no matter what happened. After that, we started checking the elevation level every 10 minutes.

1000 Feet

I was stunned by the view. Even though we were not that high up yet, it was staggering. The trail was thin, little specks of dirt flying off the cliff's edge, falling to their inevitable demise. Occasionally, you would see a hardy juniper hanging off the rock wedging its roots into the seemingly immovable cliff-side. Sometimes, they would throw their little blue berries down the hill and try to hit your head. After only 1000 ft we realized if we kept eating every time we stopped, we would soon run out.

1350 Feet

It was at this point, we were completely out of service. It was official that if any of us were to be attacked by a mythical creature, we couldn't call the police. At all times, all three of us were exasperated. Not only by the fact we couldn't see progress in our hike up the many steps, but also because we were almost completely out of water. Every once in a while, you would see a natural spring on the side of the steps that dripped down the rocks on the side of the trail. Little by little dripping. Moss forming at the bottom with lichen everywhere. The spring would have been helpful if it weren't so close to the moist wet rock below. At this point, we realized we should start checking our elevation every 40 minutes instead of just ten because we would notice our progress more.

1738 Feet

The sweet smell of honeysuckle grazed my nose as I trudged along the crooked steps. As the noon sun rose far above our head, I looked into the distance and saw a faint line of red on the cliff. The vibrant color was made out of ground cinnabar. The Chinese have been grinding cinnabar since 16,000-25,000 bc. It creates an imposing vermilion. This temple was one of the only ones that still had the same red paint on the original roof tiles. It could only be described as arresting. I stared at the strip of color in the distance, my backpack bouncing on my back and the steps getting steeper and steeper. It seemed, as I stared at the red, that the whole world disappeared. And then, it was just us. Just me and the vermilion haze. My whole body still moved around me, but my mind was completely occupied, drifting away in a stream of ruby.

2355 Feet

I snapped back to reality after what seemed like a lifetime. The red (that was once a haze) seemed significantly closer now. I could make out some of the giant platforms branching off the temple that housed a giant gold Buddha. It was now that my attention swayed towards the lush background of the trail. The bushes, ferns, and trees coated the landscape, creating a thick blanket of green covering us and blinding the sun.

3678 Feet

An hour later then we were there. The torii at the entrance towered over us as our feet touched the sacred ground. I remembered what it was like back in the car when we were driving here, I thought about how far we had come. The ground moaned beneath our feet. My hand touched the rail on the side as I peeked over the edge and saw the deep valley below us. The sight of the elevation we'd climbed raised my blood pressure and made my mind race. I walked closer and closer to the first Buddha. Standing at 30 feet, it lifelessly loomed over me. I kneeled on the plush red and gold pillow at my feet. I bowed my head and prayed three times.

Thoughtfully, I rose and sighed the smell of incense clouding around me. Looking around, my eyes were drawn to the drawings on the sides of the wall that swirled and bent, depicting old tales of the monkey god and dragons. The beautiful gold paint lined the railway as my eyes followed it down towards the next platform. My mind was consumed by the beauties around me, the Buddha that had shaped religion in that area for thousands of years. Suddenly, my ancestry told me what to do. I walked around the Buddha three times, each time touching the left shoulder. The whole place was magical. It had an aura The aura of a place savored and worshiped for thousands of years and hundreds of generations. It felt sacred. Untouched. Alone, separated from the world around it. As I peered off the edge of the railing, I felt free, unaffected by the rest of the world. I stared off into the mist and reflected on my life outside of this temple, outside of China I pondered the thought for what seemed like a lifetime. In that moment my soul seemed to disconnect from my body, from this world into nothingness. After that moment, I admit I have no memory, it's only blurry fragments. I recall walking down the mountain, driving back to Shanghai and getting home, but nothing less and nothing more. One thing I will always remember, though, is that feeling, that feeling of thoughtfulness and gratitude. That, I will take with me my whole life.