

MOTORCYCLING THE HIMALAYAS

PART II

RIDING THE RAGGED EDGE

By Koz Mraz
Photos by Koz Mraz and Jack Callander

MOUNTAIN

"I say without hesitation, that motorcyclists love the mountain. It is where we dance. We freely fall into gravity's demanding arms, then with a twist of the throttle are thrust into the next delicious curve. A graceful ballet of endless pirouettes lifting the spirit as we ascend, as we transcend, riding high, above the mundane until among the stars we fly. And the mountain is where we fight, wrestling perilous hairpin turns, battling hard against opposing forces, often for our life. Because if the mountain wins...we die.

It's where we face our fears, test inner resolve or chase foolish whims. Be it the path of least resistance or the hard arduous climb, it's here, from the top, the breadth of our journey is revealed. The passage past, we cannot change, memories blurred in rear view mirrors. The present moment holds infinite possibilities to a fulfilling future that we have the power to create...motorcyclists love the mountain." --Koz Mraz



The Himalayan Motorcycle Tour offered by Himalayan Roadrunners Ltd. does not, to me, warrant the title "Tour." "Tour" implies a series of preset, predetermined destinations filled with local color, sights, and sounds designed to ignite the imagination, and a refined cuisine to excite the palate of all. "Adventure Tour" is heading in the right direction, suggesting a slight potential of implied danger. Mind you, Himalayan Roadrunners provides ALL of the above in large doses, but I prefer to call this Kathmandu/ Everest/Lhasa trip an "Expedition." Webster's Dictionary: "Expedition" is a group of persons engaged in a journey or voyage made for some specific purpose such as war or exploration."

This adventure/expedition is a monumental effort of endless obstacles, challenges and variables that must be overcome on a daily basis, by all parties involved. The caravan of riders, support vehicles, fixers and Himalayan Roadrunners staff constantly battle against all elements and odds, natural and man-made, and once you think you've won, it gets harder. A metaphor of sorts, for one's own personal expedition in life's journey. Arm yourself with knowledge, bravery and skills, and soldier on. You will succeed and the rewards are many.

This expedition should definitely NOT be your

first motorcycle adventure. On a scale of one to ten, it's an eleven. Start with a tour of Europe or Thailand, then dial it up with an off-road journey to Bhutan and then perhaps, you're ready to tackle an 'eleven.'

I have always had a deep fascination with eastern philosophies and cultures, so the opportunity to motorcycle the mighty Himalayas, stand at the base of the world's highest mountain and visit the amazing temples and monasteries through Nepal and Tibet, was just too compelling.

"If I ever get out of here, I'm going to Katmandu."
Bob Seger 1975

Day 1 - The Arrival

Landing in Kathmandu we are greeted by Jack, Rob's 28 year old Nepali/American son and co-owner of Himalayan Roadrunners. He hustled us through the bustling airport and we were chauffeured away like refugees from another world. Hours later, another jet skidded off the same Kathmandu runway and closed the airport for an entire day. Already we're living on the ragged edge.

We stop at Old Freak Street, the epicenter during the "hippie trail" from the early 1960s to late 1970s. Hippies from all over the world traveled to Freak Street (Basantapur) in search of legal cannabis. This was hippie nirvana, since marijuana and hashish were legal and sold openly in government licensed shops. It was here a young Rob Callander came to Kathmandu to trek,

in a search for self- and that he did. Rob met a Tibetan woman, found a new home and became the very first to offer motorcycle trips through the Himalayas in 1979.

Krazy Kathmandu Kocktail

- 1 Part political unrest
- 2 Parts socio-economic instability
- Add a shot of 6.9M earthquake and a dash of corruption

Shake vigorously until chaos ensues. Pour into a boiling pot of tourism and serve freely in large doses.

If it wasn't that the Nepalese people are so incredibly warm, the history and culture so deep, and the blend of Hinduism and Buddhism so rich, I don't know why anyone would come here. It's a hot mess. The valley air, dense with pollution, hangs heavy over the sheer madness that is driving the streets of Kathmandu. Add the political pull between India and China and the aftermath of a disastrous earthquake. I don't know how they do it, and they do it with grace and a smile. And I bitch about traffic and smog in Los Angeles... never again.

We head to the Newa Chen Hotel, a 350-year-old traditional Nepalese home converted to a hotel. The doors and rooms ceilings are 5'6". We should have been wearing helmets because we're all over six feet tall and kept smashing our heads. I've got scars to prove it.

Since Rob and his son Jack have been traveling Nepal and Tibet for thirty years, they know more about this country than most Nepalese. They operate with a fleet of Royal Enfield Bullets, Enfield Himalayans and Vintage BSA 650's. They also know better than to start a 1,200 mile motorcycle ride through the Himalayas from the craziness of Kathmandu. The complete madness



that occurs daily on these roads would be far too intimidating for most, so we are bussed outside the city center for trial runs.

Eighty percent of the traffic here is comprised of 250cc motorcycles and scooters, and the remainder is transport and tour buses. I've motorcycled thousands of miles in China and Indonesia and completely understand the rules of the road here. Rule #1: There are no rules.

Americans are used to the Right of Way. In India and Nepal, it's First Right: Whoever is first has the right of way, which means everyone is vying for the same space at all times. The concept of using turn signals is completely counterproductive; that would give away your intentions. Seemingly disobeying any and all traffic laws whatsoever, they weave through opposing traffic ignoring all signals and signs, carting around families and packed with goods. All the endless honking is not in anger; it's actually a way of communicating their presence for your safety. You will see a calm focus on their faces under any circumstance and a skill level unmatched. One of the riders is a newbie and wisely chose to ride in the chase vehicle for the first day out of the city.

There are seven riders on this epic journey: three Aussies, one Kiwi and three Yanks (I christened us The Himalayan Seven). The ride to Pokhara was harrowing; the brutal traffic is relentless. What was I thinking? First of all, I packed for Everest and an 18,000 foot altitude. However here and now it's 85 degrees, eighty percent humidity and I am wearing heavy black leathers sweating my ass off. The roads are a wreck, potholed and pitted in pathetic disrepair.

The smells are even worse. Sucking in dust and plumes of black diesel exhaust so thick you can't see through them, we ride the ragged edge at every turn. This is trial by fire in Survival 101 for the beginners. For the seasoned riders, an exercise in defensive riding, and for the adventure veterans, great fun! At the halfway point we stop in Bandipur, a beautiful little mountain town with a European feel. The ride up is full of extreme ascending hairpin turns and it's here that another rider almost drops his bike and twists an ankle. Two men are out and it's only Day One.

Pokhara, The City of Lakes, is the second largest city in Nepal. A tourist mecca at the edge of Phewa Lake is also where the Royal Enfield motorcycle event is held yearly. 1,500 riders from





dozens of clubs from Nepal and India gather here to celebrate motorcycling the Himalayas. I was fortunate enough to meet Shiva's Slaves MC of Kathmandu as well as Hearts and Tears MC from right here in Pokhara. Pokhara is a hub for anything and everyone heading to Mt. Everest, and home of the World Peace Pagoda which overlooks the entire valley.

Day 2 - Push for the Border

The Friendship Highway was closed in 2015 after the 6.9M earthquake. It was a well paved, easily traversed trade route between Nepal and Tibet. Boulders the size of houses came raining down on the border town of Kodari, forever sealing its fate. Three years later, an alternate road and border finally opened. This alternate route is the only way to get to Mt. Everest and into and out of Tibet and is, in many places for many kilometers, what amounts to a dry riverbed of rock and



soft sand with 1,000 foot drops. It's completely inconceivable that this is the only International trade route from Nepal to Tibet...but it is. Add the dust and massive transport trucks, and the prior day's riding of mad traffic seemed like a walk in the park. I was totally unprepared for this. You're only in first gear, feathering the throttle, riding over jagged rocks and down bone-jarring dips while being pushed to the cliff's edge by massive diesel trucks.

It's here our third man went down. He survived and was back on the Enfield but after seven hours of the most challenging riding I have ever done, I had to know why we weren't

riding the fleet of Himalayans, Royal Enfield's off-road motorcycles, on this insane terrain. Rob's answer was to the point. "This is a fourteen day journey." Rob explains, "During that time only six hours are really hard, difficult riding so it doesn't make sense." I happily replied, "Thank God, we're done with our six hours then." Without breaking face Rob blankly replied, "No, this accounts for only two." and left to attend to more important matters.

The Himalayan Seven, Rob, his son Jack, the Chinese fixer and the chase crew pull up to the new Chinese border in Kerung-- a massive, imposing structure. We are greeted at the Nepali side with smiles, and very few formalities besides checking our passports and saddlebag contents. The bridge crossing into the Chinese side of Tibet is intimidating. We can only ride halfway, are stopped by guards, must dismount, and then walk our bikes to the actual Chinese border. This is it, this is where the rubber meets the road. My heart is pounding as I walk the motorcycle past armed Chinese guards; we have come so far.

Rob leads the way and stops at the checkpoint. A conversation ensues, it becomes heated, our Chinese fixer is raising his voice and chattering in Mandarin to the guards, Rob is rattling in Nepali when suddenly a high-ranking official storms out of a glass mirrored office, stares at the commotion for five seconds, waves his hands in the air, barks orders and storms away. The scene goes completely quiet; Rob turns to us and says that we need to go back to the Nepal border, now! As we walked our motorcycles back to the checkpoint my heart sank.

I knew this was a risk, we all knew. I had booked this journey ten years prior, and the Chinese pulled the visas because of unrest in Tibet. This very trip had been cancelled for the last three years because there was no border. Rob warned us all, he was clear that his first time at the new border would determine if there would ever be another Himalayan Roadrunners Kathmandu/ Everest/ Lhasa journey again. I was getting sick to my stomach considering we may have to relive the prior two days all over again.

To Be Continued...

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