

HIMALAYAN TOUR



Right: Typical street scene encountered on the trip.

Far right: There is camping – though the tents are large and comfortable.



Himalayan high roads

To ride a motorcycle in the Himalayas, and over the highest navigable pass in the world, is a motorcycling experience second to none... plus a great way to overcome a lifelong fear of heights.

Words and Photographs by Terry Clark

If you are looking for a biking holiday that involves relaxing, 'High Roads of the Himalaya' is not for you. If you are looking for adventure and something completely different, then this is most definitely right up your street. It's a tough ride that for the most part requires a high degree of concentration but it surely will qualify as the ride of your life.

Himalayan Roadrunners Ltd is one of the top companies operating in some of the most difficult and testing motorcycling arenas in the world and I put my faith in the company to get me and my wife safely from the hustle and bustle of Delhi to the 'Last Shangrila' that is Ladakh – a Tibetan culture clinging on to medieval values in a rapidly changing world.

Surprise, surprise, Enfield Bullets are the choice of most tour companies and Roadrunners have some of the best bikes there is. For the most part, they were faultless; mine even had an electric foot!

Our minibus ride from Delhi to Kalka proved to be a fascinating experience in itself. For six hours I put my faith in a driver who successfully weaved his way through a pack of camels on the road, countless dogs and extraneous wildlife that littered the road providing ready-made meals for vultures gorging on roadside tips. Every lorry seemed intent on a close encounter just for the hell of it. This was real India, a country bursting at the seams and an infrastructure that's as stretched as a piano wire. But, amid

the chaos, it all seems to work... well, most of the time.

I was thankful we had the services of two experienced mechanics, an excellent driver in the support truck and the expertise of tour leader Rob Callander, who also happens to be the managing director of Himalayan Roadrunners. A handful of Brits were joined by Americans and a Swede.

Our first day's ride to Shimla provided light entertainment as those unfamiliar with the foibles of quirky gearboxes and the hard-to-learn nuances of 50s technology got to grips with their mounts. I have to say, it's not all hard riding and there is time to take in some culture. Shimla really is a jewel of a city, once favoured in the days of the British Raj and at that time, the capital of India during the hot summers. It must have been bliss to get out of Delhi and into the foothills that surround Shimla, parts of which still have a British feel about them.

We gradually made our way to Manali and the Solang Valley and it's fascinating to see so much contrasting countryside in just one day's riding. As we made our way up some of the less well known passes, no one was left in any doubt as to how tricky it was going to get. From Manali to Keylong we stopped to take pictures at the top of Rothang La Pass. At just over 13,000ft it was time to compare respiratory systems. I was breathing fine, but the recommendation to take in more



Right: Scenery is spectacular throughout.

water than usual was creating its own problems. There aren't many trees about at that altitude and finding a quiet corner for a call of nature proved interesting for the men and downright amusing for the girls!

Oh, I forgot to mention the fact that this tour does involve camping. However, there's no need to panic. The tents are comfortable and the Sherpas conjure up amazing three-course meals on a mountainside.

Each day we continued to climb higher and my asthmatic-sounding 500cc Bullet now performed more like a 250. But still it chugged on up mountain pass roads that tested the most experienced of riders and at 16,500ft we felt on top of the world. Had I overcome my fear of heights? Nope! Whenever I could, I hung to the cliff face and when I had to ride near the edge, I was so focused I looked only at the road yards ahead of me, totally ignoring all taps on the shoulder to admire a soaring eagle or a grazing yak nuzzling tufted grass emerging from a melting glacier.

And so we climbed ever higher, passing Tibetan Nomads who gave us quizzical looks, their mules laden to the point where the poor animal waddled under the weight. To say the scenery is stunning is an understatement and there's a great temptation to keep stopping for pictures. From towering mountain passes we descended into the stunning Kullu Valley and on into Manali; a fascinating town with a very friendly feel to it. It's less frenetic than Delhi and there's a quiet calm about the people. Cards were despatched home and it was a novel experience to be given a strip of stamps and then have to put the glue on using a pot of Gloy and brush!

Below: Breathtaking scenery is a constant throughout.

Bottom: Passing a stricken truck on one of the mountain passes.



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WHAT TO TAKE:

- Plenty of hand wipes
- A good supply of painkillers – you're highly likely to get a headache at altitude
- If you take leathers, pack lightweight waterproofs
- A torch – there's no mains power on the side of a mountain
- A face mask – some roads are very dusty
- Open-face helmet is best or flip-up with goggles or tight fitting sunglasses
- A body belt for passport and visa, etc
- High factor sun block
- US dollars – remember you can't legally take rupees into India
- Plenty of T-shirts to create layers
- At least a couple of toilet rolls
- Antibiotics for nummy upsets – your doctor should prescribe these
- Immodium or similar – think yourself lucky if you totally escape the Delhi belly
- A decent quality sleeping bag – one that packs really small

REMEMBER:

- You will need a visa. Forms can be downloaded from the Indian Embassy
- Malaria tablets – recommended, but in my opinion not essential
- Seek advice about altitude sickness – no one was desperately ill, but we are all different
- To keep small denominations of money in your pocket on the tour – tipping is expected
- To make sure your travel insurance company understand exactly what's involved on your trip
- Most airlines are now very strict on excess baggage – coming out of Delhi cost me nearly £40 and I was only just over
- Drink more water than you normally would
- Leave yourself some free time at the beginning and end of the trip

FANCY A GO?

A good deal of organisation is needed to organise a trip on this scale and already a date has been set for at least one tour to Ladakh High Roads of the Himalaya from 21 July to 3 August, 2007. For details of this tour and others by Himalayan Roadrunners Ltd, visit the website at www.ridehigh.com email roadrunr@ridehigh.com or write to PO Box 3, Veshire, Vermont 05079, USA.



Our first real encounter with infamous passes came as we made our way up through glaciers and to the summit of Rothang La Pass (13,000ft). The following day we were to go ever higher and over the Baralache La pass at 16,500ft with sheer drop offs that tested my nerve to the limit and whenever I could I kept to the middle of the track. We camped at about 13,000ft and enjoyed a slap-up meal before crashing into our sleeping bags. Altitude sickness affects people in different ways and most of the party suffered no more than a thumping headache, which is easily put right by the usual pain killers. The secret is to drink plenty of fluids and that doesn't mean alcohol.

From Brandy Nala to Stok we took in two passes – Lachhulang La at 16,613ft and Taglang La, the second highest motorable pass in the world at 17,582ft. My ears popped as we made our way down to the valley floor to follow the Indus river and our overnight stay in Stok. We spent the evening in nearby Leh, a magnet for travellers and those seeking out the 'Last Shangrila'. I have to rate it as one of the most fascinating places I

have ever been and one can only admire the locals who stretch the bounds of imagination to extract the odd dollar from passing tourists.

We camped in the beautiful Nubra Valley before setting off for the infamous Khardung La Pass (18,380ft). Wow. What a ride, but, to be honest, it wasn't as scary as the picture I had conjured up for myself. But read on. I had to go back over the same road the next day and a lot can happen in 24 hours.

It rained all night; serious rain – spots as big as a 50p piece. From previous motorcycling trips in mountainous regions, I knew small mountain streams that flow at will across the roads would now be raging torrents. It didn't bode well the following morning when we arrived at the army check point at the bottom of Khardung La. Nothing was going up or coming down. The road was blocked and the ever-growing number of vehicles took little solace in watching a vintage JCB make its way slowly up to the blockage way out of sight.

After a frustrating wait we (motorcycles) were ordered to mount and see if we could make it to the top.



Above: Line-up of the hard-used Royal Enfields.

Above left: Mud, glorious mud...

This proved to be one hell of a ride. Boulders strewn across the road and, yes, I was right. Rivers had washed away the road and it was a case of picking a line across the newly formed river and going for it. It became colder and snow covered the road. I reached the top after passing countless gangs of workers frantically trying to recreate a road from crushed rocks. I was exhausted and as the eldest member of the party, pretty chuffed my wife and I had come through it unscathed. Others had not been so fortunate and had decked it, but were happy to tell the tale. Suddenly this band of bikers had become a united team. We had all made it... now we had to get down the other side, which was equally testing.

Many beers were sunk that night back in Leh. Tales were exchanged and friendships cemented. Rob and his team from Roadrunners had inspired enough confidence in everyone to make it through to the end... it had been tough, but then we all have to push ourselves from time to time. For one, I'm proud to say I've ridden the great Khardung La Pass.

What now? Well, I reckon they should start two-up pre-65 trials. It might just catch on!

Below: Taking a breather, in the shadow of the mountains.

Below left: Roads encountered ranged from extremely muddy, to extremely dry.

