

BY PETER CHOWLA

Rough Riding

A SOLO TOUR ON AN ANTIQUE BIKE IS A RECIPE FOR BEAUTY, THRILLS, AND DANGER

In Remote Lands



WHAT COULD BE more exhilarating than feeling a rush of cold, fresh mountain air while a classic motorcycle purrs beneath you and snowy mountain peaks surround you? Sounds like an adventure in the Rockies? While that would be fun, it just doesn't compare with a 3,000-mile solo tour across the Himalayas in northern India on a 1966 Royal Enfield.

My plan was to leave New Delhi, India, situated in the arid region beneath the Himalayas, and circle close to the country's borders. This route involved passing the Pakistani border, crossing the states of Jammu and Kashmir, skirting the Line of Control, heading east towards China and Tibet, and, finally, following the Spiti and Sutlej rivers back down towards the Indian plains.

Into the Mountains

I timed the trip to avoid the monsoon season, because riding through knee-deep puddles of muddy water didn't seem appealing. However, I encountered two small problems anyway. First, the monsoon season is unpredictable, so I still slogged through downpours, flooded roads, and mud when it happened to rain on my second day in the plains. Second, summer is no time for riding through northern India. You just sweat, sweat, and sweat some more. Every time I stopped, within five seconds, my shirt would be soaked and beads of perspiration dripped off my chin.

My trip into the Himalayas also coincided with the Amarnath Yatra, a religious pilgrimage of Hindus to a holy cave in Kashmir. This timing had its advantages and disadvantages. It meant that I could often stop for free snacks and tea at the many community-run stalls along the mountain highway, but it also meant that I spent some mornings choking down diesel fumes from buses,

SUVs, trucks, and army convoys heading to the Yatra.

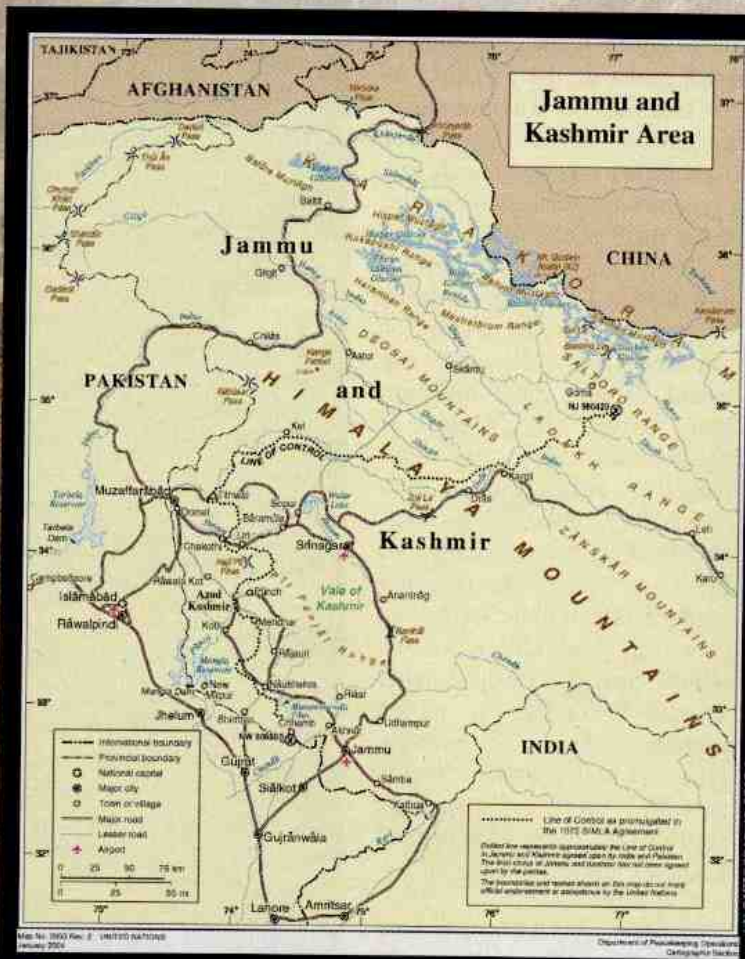
One day, an unfriendly bump from one of the troop carriers nearly sent me careening over a cliff. I stopped with just a few inches to spare. That's when I realized that this journey would take great physical and mental exertion if I was to finish with my body still intact.

Vale Of Paradise

Emerging from the 1.5-mile-long Jawahar tunnel, the gateway to the Valley of Kashmir, I came upon an amazingly lush valley situated between huge Himalayan mountain ridges. After negotiating cliffs, gorges, rough roads, and foggy mountain ridges in the state of Jammu, this new vista seemed like paradise. I was in high spirits as I descended the mountain and entered the green valley, heading toward Srinagar, summer capital of Kashmir.

People ask, "Isn't Kashmir dangerous?" It is, after all, the site of a guerrilla war between Muslim fundamentalists, who want the state to join Pakistan, and the Indian army, which tries to make sure Kashmir remains with India. But the valley is not really hazardous: There are security forces everywhere, and things are pretty normal in most of the tourist areas. Security is an issue, but being a little street smart goes a long way. I was more intimidated by the army's constant checkpoints and inspections than by any militants. Actually, most of the Kashmiris love tourists, especially Americans, who come to enjoy the beauty of the lavish gardens and serene lakes in Srinagar.

The drive into the capital was a piece of cake compared with what awaited me as I left the Valley of Kashmir and headed



About The Bike

The Royal Enfield is the workhorse of Indian motorcycles, and the company, now owned by Eicher Motors, has been in the business of making bikes for almost 50 years. The Enfield first appeared in India in the 1950s, when it became the Indian army's ride of choice for the country's rough border roads and ill-maintained highway network. The army began purchasing the clunky, reliable Enfield Bullet en masse from Royal Enfield Motors in the UK. But demand soon outstripped supply, and the government convinced the UK company to set up a subsidiary in India. Thus, in 1964, the Enfield Motors India factory was opened in Madras. This factory produced the Bullet 350, a bike that had been designed in 1955.

A few years later, the UK factory was shut down, and Royal Enfield Motors went out of business. That didn't stop Enfield India from producing the same old Bullet. Between 1964 and 1984, the company churned out the exact same bikes, part for part. It wasn't until 1984 that the first change to the product line was made by changing the carburetor and gear ratios, and lightening up the body. But a true classic never goes out of style. My bike was a 1966 Bullet that had always been civilian owned, a rare thing in India, since the largest portion of the old bikes were sold to the





deeper into the mountains, riding towards Kargil. As I crossed Sonamarg and into the Himalayan rain shadow region of Ladakh, I went from a luxuriant, forested world into one that was stark and inhospitable, yet breathtaking. And while Kashmir is predominantly Muslim, filled with the morning call to prayer and women in elegant headscarves, Ladakh is primarily Tibetan Buddhist, with idyllic ancient monasteries on the mountainsides and pictures of the Daia Lama everywhere.

Stony Silence

From Srinagar towards Ladakh there is only one road, the Srinagar-Leh Highway, if you can call it a highway. The first half assaults drivers with rocky, steep dirt surfaces interspersed with muddy ruts. The conditions are extreme, especially when you're mounting the Dzoji-La, the first pass that separates the Valley of Kashmir from the barrenness that lies beyond. It's a good thing that an Enfield can take nearly any punishment thrown at it, because mine received plenty on this stretch.

From Kargil, the halfway point of the highway and the site of a 1999 mini war, the road entered a region of multi-colored rock cliffs and amazing stone hillsides. After Lamayuru, site of the oldest Ladakhi monastery, the asphalt wound through landscapes that could only look natural on the moon. Occasionally, I came across sparsely populated villages or descended into steep rock gorges. Some stretches of the road had been blasted into a ravine wall, and I was literally driving inside a cliff.

Finally, the last piece of road was in remarkable shape, and I congratulate the Indian army's Border Roads Organization for being fine Himalaya tamers. The biggest treat came about 35 miles from Leh, above the town of Basgo. After mounting yet another slope, the road leveled out on a tall plateau, and five miles of straight, smooth blacktop stretched ahead. The surrounding peaks seemed only a little higher than the road, and I

felt as if I were riding on top of the world. As I headed up to the summit, I was greeted by a view of majestic, snow-covered peaks at the far side of the Leh Valley. Cruising along as fast as I could (only about 50 mph), I whooped with joy, my eyes watering with the sheer thrill of the moment.

Reaching Leh, the capital of Ladakh, I felt like I'd been teleported to the final stop for tourists from all over the world, though most of them had arrived by plane. It seemed like there were more Israeli restaurants and German bakeries than Buddhist stupas. Outside of the town center are relaxing guesthouses replete with burgeoning Ladakhi gardens, which provide fresh organic vegetables for the gargantuan dinners served by the owners. Guests also enjoy sunny mornings on patios shaded by sunflowers, eating traditional Ladakhi bread.

Hidden Treasures

From Leh, it was easy to reach

Casualty List

- 1 chicken
- 1 dead dog (I ran over a corpse)
- 1 bird
- 1 luggage rack, welded six times
- 2 clutch yokes
- 1 clutch plate
- 1 rearview mirror
- 1 tire tube
- 5 cycle tubes, used to tie down luggage
- 1 battery box
- 2 rear shock absorbers
- 1 speedometer cable
- 3 accelerator cables
- 1 front shock absorber rod
- 1 front shock absorber cover
- 1 dipper switch
- 1 fuel hose
- 2 horn mounts
- 1 metal chain for locking things
- 1 heavy-duty water bottle, donated to the road
- 1 pair of gloves, donated to the road
- 1 pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses, donated to a river
- Innumerable: bugs and butterflies
- Countless: nuts and bolts, shed



the Nubra Valley, land of the highest everything, though I had to arrange special interline permits beforehand. Given that the valley provides the only access to Siachen Glacier, the highest battlefield in the world, it made sense that it was a restricted area. Entrance to the valley was via the mighty Khardung-La, the highest motorable road in the world, at a whopping 18,380 feet. On top is the highest traffic control office, usually without attending staff. Just below is the world's highest free tea stall, which never seems to be open to give tea to road-weary travelers. Next door is the world's highest temple. Thankfully, it bucked the trend, and its idols were not absconding! While the average motorcycle isn't designed to operate at such heights, the Enfield was amazing. It slowly plodded up the mountain, and, after a small carburetor adjustment, performed reasonably well given the conditions.

The Nubra Valley was a glorious sight, with the sun streaming down between towering palisades on either side, illuminating the wide Shyok and Nubra rivers and the green villages that hug their banks. Snow-capped peaks loom over rocky hillsides spotted with Buddhist stupas and gompas populated by ochre-colored lamas. On clear days, the peaks at the ends of the valley shine brightly in the clear air, and the only interruptions to the peace and solitude are military helicopters passing overhead.

Returning to Leh, I headed to one of the three high-altitude mountain lakes that dot the Eastern Ladakh. After securing another interline permit, I drove towards the Tibet border on my way to Tso Moriri. Winding up the stark valley, I passed small verdant villages wedged into the cliffs along the churning rapids of the mighty gray Indus river. After a night at the hot springs in Chumanthang, I pressed on to the Mahe Bridge, the last stop for civilians on the way towards Chinese-controlled territory. I gingerly drove across the wooden planks and onto the dirt track on the far side.

Seventy kilometers of sand and rocks later, the placid, crystal-clear waters of the 15,000-foot-high saline lake glistened in the afternoon sunlight, while the brown hillsides stood guard. On the



far side, snow-covered peaks glowed with vivid reds, oranges, pinks, and yellows at sunset. The only habitation for 35 miles in any direction was the village of Korzok (population 350), splayed around a stream delta along the western shore of the lake. In this unforgettable place, where children grow up never seeing a tree, the traditional occupation is mining salt, which is transported by yak caravan to the towns and then traded for grain. Hiking and watching sunsets that made the sky and mountains look like landscapes painted on a huge canvas, I pinched myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

From Ridge To Plain

I tore myself away to begin the long, grueling drive to the state of Himachal Pradesh. The Manali-Leh Highway (another liberal use of that word) contains four high-altitude passes, two major river crossings, some of the most astounding scenery ever beheld, and no permanent human habitation for 150 miles. While the quality of the road was less than spectacular, it was more than made up for by the panorama. But don't even think about trying this at any time of the year except May through September. The road won't be open, there will be nowhere to sleep and nothing to eat, and you'd probably die of frostbite or hypothermia in temperatures that drop below -49 degrees.

After two days of driving through vast mountain ranges inhabited only by nomadic herders, I arrived in Keylong to spy the first Indians, as opposed to Ladakhis and Kashmiris, that I'd seen in ages. It was a poignant reminder that my trip was winding to an end. Driving towards Manali, I split off the main highway and made my way on the seldom-used dirt lane towards Kaza and the Spiti Valley. While Keylong was relatively green, steeped in the scent of pine forests baking in the sun, Spiti was a return to the moonscapes of the Himalayan rain shadow, with vista after vista of bare rock and cliff.

In Kaza, I stopped to get another permit, since I would pass within a few miles of the Tibetan border. After cruising through the Kyi and Tabo monasteries, with their 1,000-year-old paintings





and magnificent scenery, I needed to conquer the obstacle of Maling: a section of road before a village of the same name that experiences landslides on a near-hourly basis. After waiting three hours for the army bulldozer to clear the morning slide, I went spinning and spurting up the steep, rocky, and extremely unstable road, and then charged across the brook on the far side. Watching small stones cascade towards me as I drove up a track barely wide enough for a jeep, I wasn't sure if I'd make it before the next slide came and wiped me out. I was happy just to make it across alive.

This set me up for a straight, clean shot down to Shimla, or so I thought. While there was but one road, it was anything but straight or clean. In Kalpa, I found the 20,000-foot peak of Kinnaur Kailash, towering above beautiful forested slopes, staring me in the face from sunrise to sunset — and, thanks to a full moon, all night as well.

Reaching Shimla was the hallmark of being back in India proper, with the return of traffic, Internet cafés, heaps of tourists, railways, churches, British architecture, and basically everything else Indian. Once I left Shimla, I had a long 230-mile drive to Delhi back in the plains. I wasn't looking forward to the heat I'd encounter ahead, because, for the last two months, I had enjoyed beautiful days and sweater-wearing nights.

The craziest thing about the trip was not the poor roads, nor the biting cold morning air, worrying about terrorists, or mechanical problems on my antique bike. It was leaving all that stunning beauty, both human and natural, behind at the journey's end. I could have spent years lapping up the luxurious magnificence of Kashmir. Maybe someday I will. **RB**

Horn Honking

Horns are used ubiquitously in India, especially as a safety device. Given all the big trucks and buses on the highways mixing with cows, camels, oxcarts, and bicyclists, a horn might mean the difference between life and death. But that assumes you can figure out why someone is honking at you. Here are some of the possible uses of a horn:

- When you want to pass
- As you are passing
- After you have passed
- When someone is coming in the other direction
- When you are passing a cyclist
- When you are passing a pedestrian
- When you are passing a cow (or yak)
- When you are going through a herd of sheep, goat, or cattle
- When you are angry with another driver
- When you want to thank another driver
- When you want to greet another driver
- When you want someone to move
- When you want someone to stop moving
- When you go over a hilltop
- When you go around a blind curve (and don't want to slow down)
- When you go around a visible curve
- When you turn onto another road
- When you enter a parking lot or driveway
- When you leave a parking lot or driveway
- Whenever you feel like it...

