

■ STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY MICK MATHESON

HIGH ON THE HILLS

Like goats up a mountain, a bunch of Aussie motorcyclists tackle the Himalayas and discover a world they'll never forget



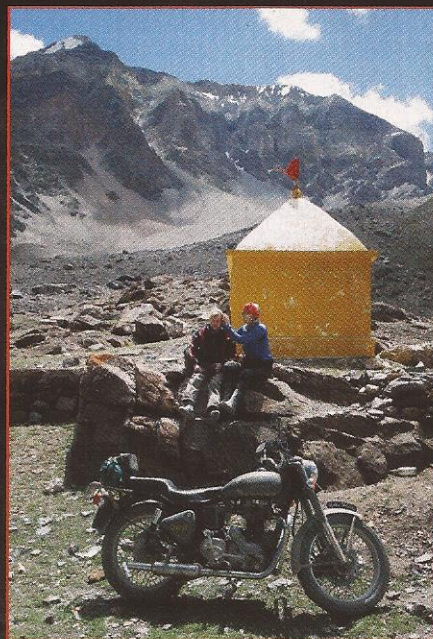
Standing on a gravelly patch of dirt that seemed to be the only flat ground within cooee, I could pick out the bikes way down below. They crept up a zigzagging track that laboriously made its way up the path of least resistance out of a river valley that was higher than it was wide.

When I looked back where we'd come from, the horizon was above me and not far away. On the other side of the river, which was a few hundred metres below, the bare, crumbling rock face of a Himalayan mountain towered into the sky. It was as if someone had taken the outback and made it vertical. The dry wind and deathly silence — except for the faint crackle of the bikes — reinforced the desolation.

The colours were amazing, too. The usual browns and greys of rock, dust and dirt dominated but in myriad shades — some subtle, some brutal. There was orange, white, green, purple and more and all of it was rock. The sun glinted off some of the them, others appeared jet black in the shadows. It was one of the most beautiful places I had ever been in.

Reluctantly, I scampered back up the mountainside to join the gang on the road while we waited for the other bikes to make their way up. Denise Ferris was there, smiling as always. I didn't need to say it, as it'd been said many times already as we rode through this incredible land: she has the best office in the entire world. She and husband Mike do this for a living, but the rest of us were having the most adventurous holiday that the majority had ever experienced.

We'd come on the tour to ride the highest road in the world, a remote, rough and narrow route that'd be well off the beaten track if it weren't for its claim to fame. It'd take us three weeks to get there and back, during which we'd see some of the most amazing scenery anywhere, experience one

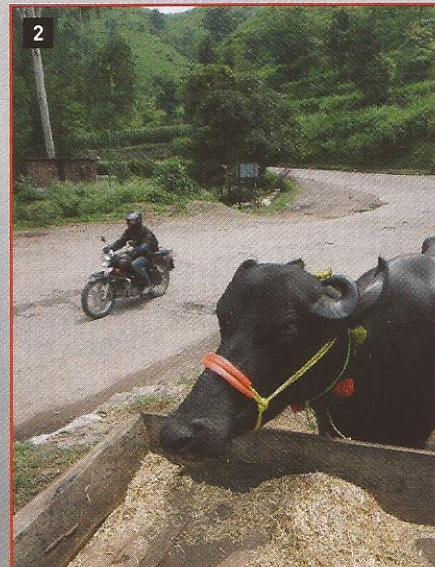
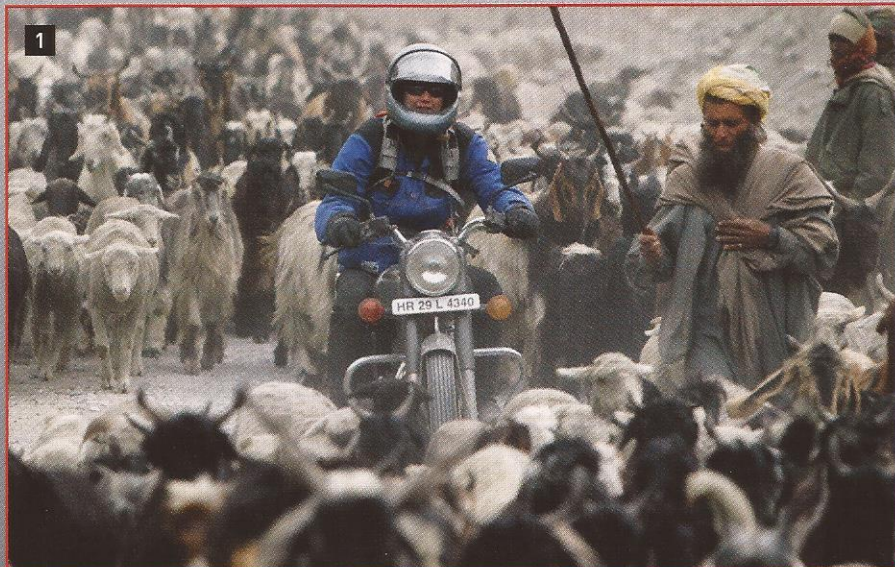


of the most incredible cultures on Earth, push our riding abilities to new levels as we punted Royal Enfields along rotten tracks beside sheer cliffs, and experience things only India can lay on.

India hadn't been remotely beautiful at first. We pulled out of Delhi on a train while slum dwellers squatted to crap between the tracks. Delhi is a shock to Aussie systems — crowded, hot, humid, filthy by our standards and alien. Five hours later, we had a one-kilometre introduction to India's traffic and Royal Enfield Bullets.

Mike said he took us by train to Chandigarh before letting us loose on the bikes because the roads are much quieter than Delhi's. As we rumbled away, accidentally braking instead of right-foot shifting and losing count of the neutrals in the gearboxes, we could only wonder at the chaos of Delhi because this was unbelievable.

There were few rules, no order, zero



control and total confusion — at least, that's the way it looked to me. But I remembered Mike's words: school like a fish; go with the flow. As I relaxed and flowed, it was easier. And when I used the horn as a polite way of saying I'm here, I was included in the melee by the Indians.

That first day's ride was only 125km or so but it was exhausting. By the end of the trip, we were experts on Indian roads but day one was a serious challenge, with some rain thrown in for good measure. The destination was worth the effort, though. Shimla is a mountain town in the lush foothills of the Himalayas. Buildings clutter the steep hillsides and the narrow ridges offer the only flat ground anywhere. It was also our first taste of high altitude — a mere 2200m but enough for us sea-level dwellers to feel puffed at the top of the stairs. We pondered the 5600m pass ahead with some trepidation.

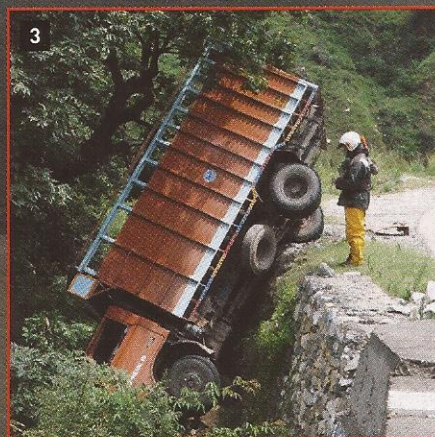
The first days of the trip were similar. The roads were full of cattle, horses, donkeys, monkeys, dogs, goats and the occasional elephant, as well as thousands of lumbering, colourful trucks, little hatchbacks, bikes, bicycles and pedestrians. The roads were constantly winding and the ride was often intense — as exciting and adrenaline-filled as a flat-out scratch up the Black Spur.

Day two, according to Mike, is a common crash day and, sure enough, we had a few small ones, but no one was hurt.

We eventually reached our first pass but we couldn't get more than hints of its grandeur as it scrambled up into thick mist on the mountain. Trucks materialised just 20m ahead, but everything was going so slowly it was okay. As usual, there was no end to the traffic and it soon ground to a halt. Bit by bit, we wriggled our bikes through and came to a hairpin bend awash with deep mud and surrounded by onlookers being entertained by all kinds of vehicles struggling through.

Anne had never been out of Australia

before and rarely been on a motorcycle, but when I'd said I was doing this trip she asked if she could come as a pillion. She'd done brilliantly so far, dealing with a confronting introduction to India at Delhi airport, the discomfort of the Enfield's back seat and the exotic cuisine. She sat tight, too, as I ploughed into the mud, lost momentum and stalled mid-bend. People cheered as I kicked the machine into life again and revved the poor thing until it pulled us out of the mire.



Few rules, no order, zero control and total confusion — at least, that's the way it looked to me

1. To think, we complain about CBD traffic
2. "I sure could go a steak right now"
3. Best learn from others' mistakes



The altitude hit some people hard, especially the fittest ones



BITING THE BULLET

First built in England in the 1950s, the Bullet is still built new in India, with 350 and 500 engines. We last tested the charming thing in the 2006 yearbook (Vol 56 No 12). These are fast and powerful bikes in their native India, although the laws there have just been relaxed to allow even Hayabusas to mix it with the jumbled traffic.

Ferris Wheels sources its bikes from Lalli Singh's workshop in Delhi, which is also where the mechanics work. It's an amazing shop, below ground with a spotless, white marble floor.

The Bullets on tour are 500cc disc-brake models, a good thing for better safety, but with only kickstarters, four-speed gearboxes and right-foot, reverse-pattern shift. This doesn't take long to adjust to, although you inevitably get it wrong sometimes.

We had just one major breakdown on the trip, despite some bikes having upwards of 80,000km on the clocks. That bike's piston crown broke off, but it was repaired in hours.

I wouldn't want to tour India on anything else and almost everyone else found a soft spot for the Enfields after a short time.



Another friend, Bronwyn, got caught in the middle of it, too, and quickly took control by stopping the trucks and enlisting the locals to help. Suddenly Hafiz, one of the mechanics, appeared from nowhere and got her going again. She'd been nervous as hell before we set off but, like everyone, was quickly gaining confidence and having a ball.

Cold wind and blanketing fog disguised the top of this first pass, Rohtang La, at almost 4000m. Walking around took our breath away at this height. We wouldn't drop below 3000m now for days. And boy, would we feel it.

But first we would be blown away. Just over the Rohtang, the clouds broke and the Himalayas opened before us. The road streaked back and forwards below us on its way down into the next valley, which was out of sight below the arc of the mountainside. The ground was rocky and harsh, with stunted growth, patches of ice and snow, and cascades of white water falling endlessly.

Our second night in the high country was the trip's only camping night. We arrived to find a corral of semi-permanent tents complete with ensembles that flushed into a

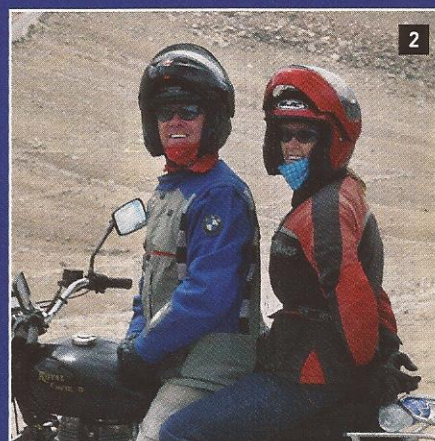
hole outside. It was a beautiful place in a flat valley up to one kilometre wide with wall-like hills either side. Anthony, a typically laconic and funny Kiwi, joined me, Bron and Anne to go marmot hunting with our cameras. Marmots are big rodents that live in burrows all around here and we got close enough to have a good look before they bolted underground.

Then Anthony and I decided we could ride our Enfields up one of the hills. Yeah, right. The ground was rough and rocky, the bikes struggling for power up here and, at least in my case, my energy levels weren't their usual standard either. We failed miserably. The girls were too sensible to have come along, a good thing as I lost the plot and dropped the bike at no speed at all.

We found unhappiness in camp. The altitude hit some people hard, especially the fittest ones. Young Greg actually collapsed, while Alex, older but very fit, put himself to bed for 14 hours feeling like death. Altitude sickness is awful and those of us who'd dosed up on the right drugs were feeling fortunate, if not necessarily 100 percent.

Those of us up last walked to our tents

Roads were constantly winding and the ride was often intense



RIDING FERRIS WHEELS

Their Himalayan Heights trip is the Ferris's favourite but not their only tour — they run tours elsewhere in the region and as far away as Turkey and South America. For Mike Ferris, it's the ride that started it all some 13 years ago, after he'd quit his corporate job and, on a whim, decided to ride an Enfield into northern India. Denise has discovered the magic of the place since joining Mike in the business, and often leads tours.

The tour includes all accommodation, meals, the bikes and a modest but very capable support crew, including the unflappable Amar, ever-laughing Alam and quietly capable Hafiz. You pay for your flights, drinks and souvenirs. I didn't tally all my expenses but I reckon about \$9000 all up would be about right. Damn good value for a three-week adventure.

And it is an adventure, nothing less. Having travelled rough on my own many times, I was a bit concerned a guided tour would be like having my hand held, but the way the Ferris trips are run, this isn't the case. You really feel like you're one of the first to ever ride a Royal Enfield through the Himalayas.

At the same time, organisation is good enough to ensure less experienced travellers — and riders — have the confidence and support to do something truly extraordinary. I saw riders excel themselves when their comfort zones were squeezed hard. And mate, did they revel in it.

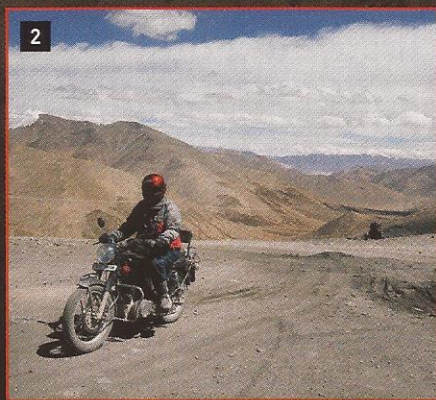
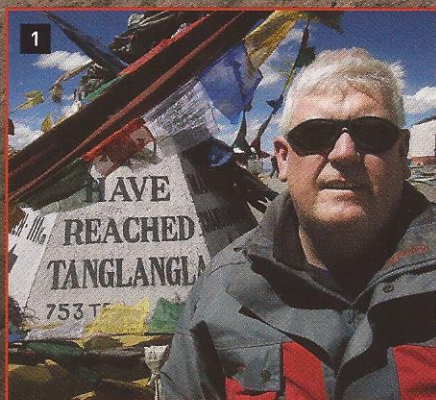
1. Motorcycles go where you look. Don't look right
2. Just another day in the office for Mike and Denise



It was as if someone had taken the outback and made it vertical



1. Terry stands 5328m tall
2. "What I wouldn't give for a KTM"



as a full moon peaked over the eastern mountains and spread a white glow over the stark landscape. I shivered at the sight and not from the cold.

The next day's ride was long, very tough but through yet more incredibly beautiful country. We had 270km to do, a hell of a long way here. The bikes cruise at about 60-80km/h on a good road but good roads are few and far between in northern India. With my pillion, I was working pretty hard, jealous of the solo riders who could stand up when the going got really tough. We swerved around potholes, dodged trucks, missed rocks and avoided getting too close to edges of deadly drops into oblivion. The odd wreck way below was a sobering sight.

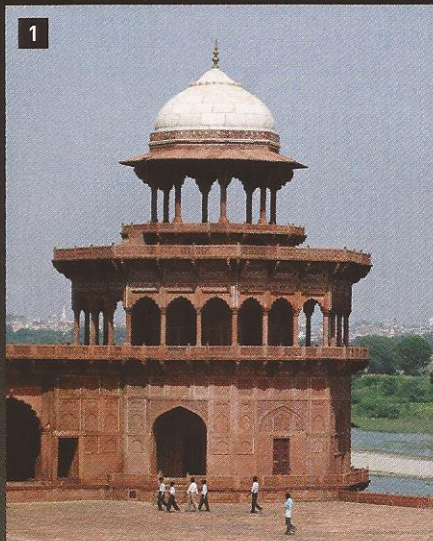
We reached the Gata Loops — 21 switchbacks climbing a nearly vertical mountain. Terry stopped to take in the view halfway up and his flash Shoei rolled off the bike and bounced about 100m down the hill. To its credit, the lid was intact except for the visor, but it'd never be much use any more.

I felt sorry for Anne on the back when we were squeezing past incoming trucks, often with just a few centimetres to spare between the metallic monsters and the unguarded cliff. I was too busy concentrating to notice the drops but she had nothing else on her mind. She's braver than me!

On our way into Leh, the biggest city in this region, we stopped at a nomads' camp at the end of a huge plateau where the sandy roads had been sometimes challenging. These people live a hard life but I had to wonder if they weren't the smarter ones. They had the opportunity to leave but chose to live here. No fences, endless space, pure air. Yes, but this was summer and it was cool; I couldn't handle a winter.

Soon we crossed Tanglang La at 5328m. Man, it's high. We all moved in small, slow steps, breathing hard and sapped of energy. And on we went to Leh, where we'd have a rest day and explore this remote outpost. We toured a Buddhist temple with apparently the largest indoor statue of Buddha and history going back about 700 years that you can see first-hand in the murals on the walls.

And crucially, we rode to the top of Khardung La, the world's highest road at an amazing 5603m. The poor Enfield, with two of us on board, wouldn't pull top gear on a flat road and struggled gamely up and up into the thin air. For once the mountains didn't tower so high above, as we climbed up to one of the highest points in this little area. From Khardung, we could look back down to the valley where Leh was hidden by hills. Snowflakes drifted by at the top, where thousands of prayer flags streamed in the



SURVIVING INDIA

India. Don't eat the food — it'll purge you mercilessly. Don't drink the water — it'll kill you. Don't use the roads — you'll be mince meat. Don't go through Kashmir — you'll be attacked by terrorists. The monkeys will give you rabies, the Pakistanis will shell you and your head will explode at the highest altitudes. What a place.

Listen to the doomsayers and you'd never do anything adventurous. You wouldn't even ride a motorcycle or go outdoors anywhere in Australia.

But follow some simple advice and India is easy.

Eat only cooked food or peeled fruit and veg. Uncooked food will have germs on it. Oh, and melons contain concentrations of E. coli, so don't eat 'em.

Drink only bottled water. It's plentiful.

Use anti-bacterial handwash regularly.

Visit your doc well before the trip for the shots and pills you'll need. Many doctors aren't very clued up on what's really necessary, so do some research yourself and get a couple of opinions. Malaria, for example, is a low risk in the areas you'll visit on this trip, but most GPs will automatically prescribe anti-malaria drugs that you may not want. There's hardly a medico in Australia who knows anything about dealing with being at high altitudes, which is a worry; insist on Diamox or similar for dealing with it.

On the roads, forget every rule you know and love from home. Just relax, be careful and go with the flow. The chaos is actually fun. Before you ride off, Ferris has the right advice for you.

And accept the fact that Kashmir's sales people can buy from a Jew and sell to a Scot and make a profit from both, as the saying goes. They're more persistent, game and annoying than bush flies but that's the way it is — it's a cultural thing. Deal with it or you'll just get upset.

wind. This was the high point of the trip in both meanings of the word. We congratulated ourselves, and then slowly began to head back to Leh. I followed the lead of Mike and Denise and killed the engine. We rolled and rolled for miles — apparently the Ferris trip record is 34km without power, all the way down the hill. This was a hoot.

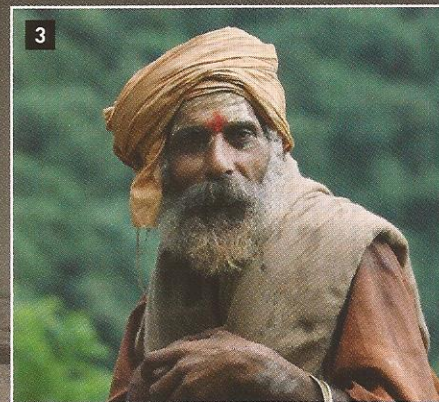
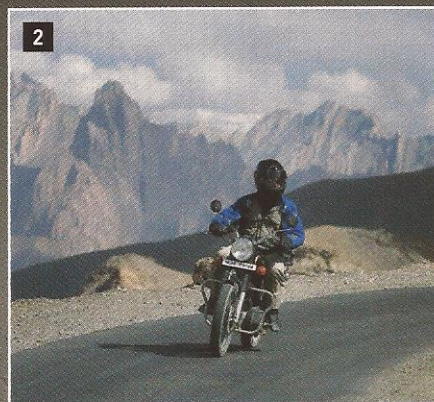
I could have stayed in Leh with the zen-seeking tourists, many of whom scoot about on Enfields, too. But we had to leave. The next couple of days took us into Kashmir and the middle of disputed territory that belongs to India but, with its primarily Muslim population, is eyed hungrily by Pakistan. There's a huge military and armed police presence here. We rode through, still awed by the majesty of the mountains, until we took a couple more days to rest in Srinagar, whose houseboats welcomed us on tranquil Dal Lake. We lived luxuriously on the water for two nights but were ready to move on when the time came. We'd by now settled into life on the road and got restless when we stopped for long.

But we were now out of the Himalayas

proper and into the last week of the tour. And there was still so much to do, including staying at McLeodganj where the Tibetan government in exile is based; we would see the Dalai Lama there. We were to see the famous Red Fort and incomparable Taj Mahal, too. But as I fired up the faithful Enfield — which I'd now come to regard and love as mine — to leave Srinagar, I kept casting my mind back to that moment on the little patch of flat ground somewhere back up there in the Himalayas.

I brought it out with me, in my mind, where it's as clear and tangible as if I were there now. There's a magic up there that won't ever leave me. I wasn't the only one to feel this way — most of us wanted to go back.

The Enfield thudded alive, freshly serviced by Alam and Hafiz and ready to tackle Indian traffic again. It wasn't time to reminisce yet and the adventure of India was still in full swing. Anne climbed onto the back, I snicked the bike into gear and we went out for another day among the wonderful, jumbled disorder that is India. ☺



1. Typically spectacular India architecture
2. Rare good tar, typical awesome scenery
3. Indian holy man — calm, quiet, revered

