

# The Burnt Piston



**Issue 3 September 2019**

The Official Magazine of the Barossa Valley Classic Motorcycle Club



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## Epic Ride

July 2019  
by Craig Feutrill

# Himalayan Heights



Photo: Amar Sharma

0.001 of a second. That's all it took to respond "yes" to Mike Ferris's question 'would I like to lead the 2019 World on Wheels Himalayan Heights tour'. This is the flagship tour of the company, and to be entrusted to running it—and running it well—quite blew me away. Hell yes, count me in!

I've done 7 tours with Mike, three of them over the Himalaya including his very first tour in 1995—when his company was Ferris Wheels Motorcycle Safaris. That tour, to put it mildly, was a slight disaster but one that ended magnificently. We left Delhi a little late in the monsoon season and ended up being trapped in Leh, in the central Himalaya because of massive snowfalls and blizzard conditions. Waking from camping between two high passes with your tent and bikes buried under a 6 inch snowfall was, ummm, enlightening to say the least. Khardung La (highest motorable road in the world) was attempted but ended on the way up when a blizzard set in that froze our brakes to ineffectiveness—and our gloves to the handlebars. The good side, we eventually flew out of Leh back to Delhi—the most visually sensational flight I have ever taken—and ended up touring Rajasthan with some Poms we met in the Himalaya. I have some extremely vivid and funny memories from that journey, but then, I was much younger and perhaps a little more foolhardy with my brain cells.

Arriving in India for the 2019 tour, I was collected at the airport by Mr Amar Sharma, a true Gentleman that I had first met in 1998, my second Himalayan trip. My most recent journey to India was in 2004 so it was 15 years since we'd last caught up. Amar talked of the changes in his country as we headed to the hotel through the mayhem that is India. That much hadn't changed! Over the next couple of days I sorted the first aid equipment, got used to the extreme heat—which after the winter chills of the Adelaide Hills was wonderful—and collected the last 6 of the tour participants from the Airport. We were now ready to go! The 4 hour train journey from New Delhi to Chandigarh went quickly as we were all chafing to get to the bikes. A quick how-to on riding them and a safety talk about riding in India (might is right) and we were off to our first night in the Himalayan foothills—Kasauli. 10 bikes, 11 people from all over Australia, one New Zealander and Bill, our token Texan began wending our way through the heat and traffic toward the—we were hoping- cool of the mountains.



L to R: The Ed, Garth, 'Farmer', Bill, Lois (NZ), John, Cathy (pillion), David R, David F, Les and Colleen at Kasauli.



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# Himalayan Heights

Continued

India is a magnificent country but in the 15 years since my last visit, a few things had changed. The population had increased by quite a few millions and the middle class had increased exponentially. Almost everyone now, it seemed, was on wheels of some sort. Cars, trucks, busses and motorcycles filled the roads. The burgeoning Indian middle class had discovered two things—motorcycles and mountains and the makers of the Royal Enfield had capitalised on this in spades. The Enfield Himalayan, loaded to the gunwales was seen everywhere, all headed to—or from—the mountain regions singly or in packs. There also was an abundance of the classic Enfield such as we were riding. The song of the mountains it seemed, was a Royal Enfield single cylinder.

The heat of the plains prior to getting to the foothills was Biblical as we all had jackets, gloves and Kevlar jeans on. Finally as we started to climb after lunch it began to cool down and we started to really enjoy the scenery and roads. That night was our first reintroduction to high strength Indian beers. Off to Shimla the next day, the riders more confident and the scenery more spectacular. Shimla was the old British Raj Hill Station where they ran the Government during the blistering heat of summer on the plains. Finding a plethora of typically Victorian British buildings in the Himalayan foothills is quite incongruous.



The plains were very hot!

A good night rest after drinking a few Godfather beers saw us on the road to Manali the following day. By now we were hankering for the high passes. The weather however had decided that we needed to experience at least one day of monsoons and it was wet. Very, very wet.

A rest day in Manali, our bikes were cleaned and tended to by the two mechanics travelling with us, Hafij and Pinki, readying them for the first of the mountain passes the next day—Rhotang La—about 13,000 feet up. The day dawned with beautiful sunshine, shaking off the monsoon of the previous day, we set off and after quite a few hours reached the top of Rhotang. All good. The descent however saw chopped up roads, fast flowing rivers to cross and our only injury of the tour. Just prior to the lunch stop there was a long water crossing with the torrent rushing over large boulders and huge broken cement drainage pipes. We gathered and helped each bike through but unfortunately Les bounced off a rock and onto his left side breaking two ribs.

His riding was finished for the duration!



Les and his ribs heading down from Rhotang La to a meeting with a large rock in a fast flowing river



Our Sikh mechanic Pinki dressed for the monsoon. His turban under the plastic shopping bag



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Continued

After getting Les to a small, local hospital that night, broken ribs were not yet confirmed, but he did enjoy the strong painkillers! He was confined to the 4WD from this point forward until we could get him proper treatment in Leh—a couple of days away.

The next day saw us travel from Keylong to Sarchu, a camp site at 4,200 metres (just under 14,000 ft) after traveling over the next high pass—Baralacha La (4,850 metres, 16,000 ft). Now it was getting cooler with much old snow and ice. Sometimes we were travelling between 20-30 ft high walls of ice either side of the narrow road which made oncoming traffic quite a challenge.

The night at the campsite at Sarchu tested our acclimatisation with a few of the group requesting Diamox to reduce the effects of altitude sickness.

A beautiful day dawned next morning and we were off to cross Taglangla (5350 metres—17,582 feet) on our way to Leh. After crossing the high pass, there was a magnificent descent down to the Indus Valley which brought warmth and a feeling of exhilaration as each lungful of air seemed to bring increased energy as we got lower and lower. We only dropped to 3,500 metres but it was such a difference from the oxygen depleted heights. Just putting your socks and boots on at Sarchu took a full 10 minutes as bending over you had to rest from the exertions frequently.

Now Taglangla has a special place in my heart because it was a photo of the obelisk in Australian Motorcycle News in 1994 with Mike Ferris next to it that compelled me to ring him and join his first tour. With “Unbelievable is Not It?” inscribed on the totem, I just had to go there and find out for myself if it was true. I can assure you it is! My first trip in 1995, because of the massive snowfalls and my altitude sickness, I don’t believe I got a picture, but each trip since I have.

Dropping from the cool of the mountainous heights to Leh brought a return of the heat and after a few 8% Godfather beers that night we had some important business to attend to at breakfast the next morning. Our token Texan Bill needed to be



Photos: Amar Sharma



1998, a younger Ed, teapotting on the obelisk



2019—21 years later, teapot stance perfected



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# Himalayan Heights

Continued

made an honorary Australian. How better to do this than invite him to have some Vegemite on his morning toast! I had carried the tube of Vegemite since Adelaide and placed it on the table over breakfast. The group descended on it like vultures on a cadaver! Even those who didn't necessarily like Vegemite, had some. Bill was intrigued and devoured a couple of pieces of toast and Vegemite and although unsure of the taste enjoyed the experience—more so, he said, because it was with us 'Ossies'. At Leh, Les got confirmation at the hospital of his busted ribs and bravely decided to finish the tour in the 4WD. His wife Colleen was enjoying riding her Enfield so it was a happy group that was to ascend Khardung La that day.



Bill the token Texan  
and Vegemite

We didn't head off to Khardung la until mid afternoon. Too late according to the Police and Army checkpoints we had to go through. All our details including bike registration and passport particulars had to be supplied at each checkpoint—it is a Military region after all! We managed to get them to agree to our trip as long as we didn't spend more than 1/2 an hour at the summit. And so we were off. As you get higher and higher the bitumen deteriorates until about 12 km from the summit there is only dirt, rocks and rivers. It was slow going and quite a few of the riders did manage to fall off, though thankfully with no damage to themselves. Eventually—and it was eventually as the going got slower and slower, the top was reached. We all had made it and with some warming lemon chai in our bellies, crowded around the marker for the obligatory photographs. This was what the trip was about. 18,380 feet up—on a motorcycle—bugger all oxygen and a view to die for (though not literally).



The 'road' to  
Khardung La

After a brief rest, and with the military warning still fresh in our minds, we began the descent to the warmth of Leh. After the rough 12km section of road was dealt with, some tried the 'angel gear' descent where neutral was selected and they tried to get to the bottom of the 30 km long road without starting the engine. All I could think of was sinking a couple of Godfather beers. Colleen's birthday was celebrated in great style at the hotel that night—even with some Jacob's Creek wines.



Top Of The World Ma! 18,380 feet up.  
We made it and were damned pleased about it!  
Amar Sharma to the left with Hafij, the mechanic



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# Himalayan Heights

Continued

It was all downhill from here! After a day touring monasteries (Gompas), we had a celebratory dinner on the terrace at the Dragon Hotel in Leh as we were heading west—and down—to Kargil the following day. We were travelling from Buddhist Himalaya to Muslim Himalaya—and it became very noticeable in the faces of the locals. After a brilliant day on the bikes following some scenic roads reminiscent of the roads taken in 1998 and 2004 we came to Lamayuru Monastery which dates back to the 11th century and has about 300 monks attending it and other monasteries in the region. We then set off for Kargil, a town which was virtually abandoned a decade or so ago due to the troubles with Pakistan in the disputed Kashmir region. Now the town is populated and thriving, however the Indian army is very noticeable through many checkpoints, 50 vehicle convoys and armed guards prominently situated. The pub we stayed in was firmly in the Muslim camp—no alcohol!! Or so it seemed.... The owner managed to find us some 8% Godfather beers which we could drink on the terrace. All good. It was just before dinner, I received a text and photo from my daughter informing me I was a Grandfather again. A boy. I may have wept a tear of happiness at the news.

The following day was the last on the bikes. A 205km ride to Srinagar—well within the red zone where the Aussie Gov't DFAT website states rather formally; *'We advise against all travel here due to the very high risk. If you do travel, you should typically seek professional security advice. Be aware that regular travel insurance policies will be void and that the Australian Government is unlikely to be able to provide consular assistance.'* The ride was long and slow due to the pilgrimage that was underway at the time, but eventually we reached Dal Lake, parked our trusty Bullets, kissed them goodbye and boarded the Shikaras for the trip out to our houseboats where we were to stay for the next couple of days. Houseboat is a bit of a misnomer and they are nicknamed "floating palaces", built according to British customs. The houseboats are generally made from local cedar-wood and measure up to 125 ft in length and are quite sumptuously appointed. Floating markets, lavish dinners and relaxation went too quickly and then the flight to Delhi and 40 plus hour journey home. Next year?



Photo: Amar Sharma