

The convoy is kept tight on the treacherous roads through Rotang Pass, which translates as 'pile of corpses'



★ Rated Travel

Biting the Bullet

Meet a crowd of strangers, collect a 500cc Royal Enfield Bullet and ride for two weeks into the world's greatest mountain range. Bring on Enduro Himalaya

Words Jim Bowen **Photography** Mykel Nicolaou

This is apple country. You can see and smell them everywhere, dominating the landscape, vying with the simple houses built on seemingly inaccessible slopes and the strong scent of indigenous marijuana that permeates the crisp air. It's the first day of Enduro Himalaya and our destination is Sarahan, around 90 miles away. It doesn't sound like much but for our first experience of Indian speeds, unfamiliar bikes and regularly changeable weather and road conditions it requires the concentration of a Bol d'Or racer on the night shift. There have been a few falls already, but as far as I can tell of these 30 armoured strangers there's no heroes or lunatics – they're just getting the hang of the terrain.

The Enfield is as capable as it is inappropriate, yet nothing else would do for this journey. Riding a modern trail bike would distance yourself from the heart of the Himalayan experience, and the Bullet is happy to slither across mud, rubble and gravel if the pace is forgiving. Ask too much of it over rough terrain, though, and it will dismantle itself with increasing regularity. There are plenty of mechanics spread throughout the pack to gather the pieces and get people moving with the minimum of inconvenience, but a steady throttle hand and the ability to avoid the bigger bumps pays dividends.

The support team is impressive. Not only are the mechanics on hand for speedy repairs and evening services, but they'll also swap bikes with you if they diagnose a problem that may take longer to fix. We have medics and doctors on two and four wheels, an ambulance, and cash-carrying trouble-shooters to smooth out any bureaucratic inconvenience. The ratio of medical staff to 'clients' provides a sobering reminder of the hazards ahead.

From Sarahan to Sangla we start to climb again and are treated to views of the most spectacular and remote valley that follows the Baspa River. Only day two and it's getting harder to concentrate on the riding. I can't believe what I'm seeing. Roads are carved into the sides of impossibly high mountains, spectacular drops end in distant turquoise rivers. Ancient villages

and Buddhist temples are scattered throughout the valley and everywhere the locals are as fascinated by us as we are by them.

The roads seem to be a major source of employment. Despite the remoteness they are heavily used by every type of vehicle imaginable, and constant repairs and alterations are vital. Gangs of workers toil at the roadside as giant trucks pass only inches from the faces of women and children. Entire families live where

▶ **There's rarely any real road rage. Just a mix of strategic racing and good manners, a class of co-operation unseen in our culture**

they work, shifting their canvas roof and few belongings as they move on to the next perilous section. There is no machinery but tiny hands and crude tools – this is manual labour at its harshest.

Our accommodation is generally more sophisticated than I expected, as is the food. A lunch stop on the road will consist of a bright canvas roof and an earth floor with stone tables and seating. Hyenas are more common than hygiene in some of these shacks, but the steaming hot noodles are hugely satisfying as well as providing much-needed central heating.

The features of the locals change along with the landscape, becoming unmistakably more Tibetan and Nepalese. River crossings and challenging sections of what are known optimistically as 'motorable' passes arrive with added frequency. Hour after hour of eye-popping, vertigo-inducing, ever-changing scenery battle with the road ahead for my attention. It's a serious assault on the senses.

We camp out one night (admittedly in multi-bed tents with shiny new porcelain bathrooms) surrounded by snow-capped peaks and closer than ever to the stars. Laughter, satisfaction and relief fill the air as the troops share stories and cheap Indian booze around the campfire long into the icy Himalayan night. When I finally sleep I look like a fully clothed baby, complete with woolly hat and gloves.



Unpredictable – river crossings are a real test



Prayer flags at the monastery in Manali



'The Doc' charms flagging riders by the campfire



Too exhausted to kickstart his bike, a beleaguered Jim attracts curious onlookers

On the whole, India has a magnificent command of the English language and you will hear it spoken beautifully in the strangest of places. They use the words 'highway' and 'code' but seemingly never together. I'm beginning to prefer this crazy rule-free road system to our set up at home. Use the horn all day – but to communicate, not insult. There's rarely any real road rage in this country, just a mix of strategic racing and good manners, a class of co-operation unseen in our culture. As I'm mulling this over we happen to stop at the oldest monastery in the world and gasp for air. This place takes the breath clean away.

We leave the greenery behind and things begin to feel different. Endless hairpin bends are covered with a fine layer of dust as the road becomes a sci-fi moonscape, craters and shingle covering the ground that slopes gently towards raging rivers. Those suffering with vertigo are given a slight reprieve as the drops ease to probable (rather than certain) death. One of the riders folded early, terrified by the magnitude of what lay ahead. If you have an advanced fear of heights, dodging fatal falls en route to Mount Everest on a mercurial motorbike seems a curious decision.

Surprisingly, the Enfield's lungs cope admirably during the final push, seemingly unaffected by our dwindling oxygen. The bike is racking up affectionate pats on a daily basis now. Perhaps it's the altitude talking but I'm developing the kind of feelings towards my Bullet that I had previously thought unlikely as well

as improper. There is a knack to starting, changing gear and stopping and it's been sometimes frustratingly slow, generally very comfortable, but always thoroughly entertaining.

The higher we climb, the greater our sense of achievement. Our spirits soar as we reach the Baralacha Pass at 16,500 feet. Those that hiked up the last 500 feet on foot were rewarded with snow

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leopard prints on the ground and walnut-sized lungs for their trouble. To be standing so high yet looking down on huge mountains is incredible. This may be as close to heaven as some of us will ever get, and it shows on our faces as a rare moment of silent contemplation spreads throughout our ranks.

We wind our way back down to Shimla over the next few days and reflect on what has been a truly awe-inspiring experience. From Buddhist monks and ancient monasteries to relentless saffron salesmen. Dazzling Tibetan prayer flags against bright blue skies over swaying bridges. The chaos of animal-filled roads and lethal barrier-free ledges. The ever-changing landscapes and ever-present mountains. The endearing charm of the Royal Enfield and the gang of 30 determined misfits who came home in one piece, bitten by the Bullet. **Bike**



Battling the ice en route to the Baralacha Pass

COUNTRY

Holy to some, deadly for others, the sprawling Himalaya Range is home to the world's highest peaks. The thought of riding these tortuous mountain roads may be daunting but determination, not necessarily experience, is key.



Enduro Himalaya

Cost **£3450**

+ **£380 (approx) for visa, insurance and sundries**

Contact www.endurohimalaya.com

Bike tip Don't fall off a mountain

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