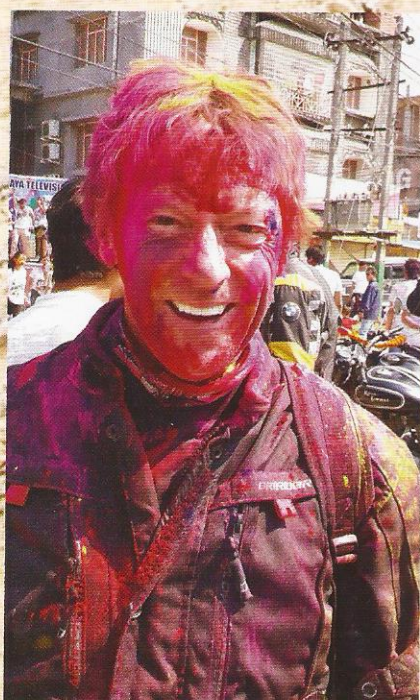


# Don't mention the war



Words and images: Mike Ferris



Kashmir has long been a troubled place full of turmoil. Official maps of India and Pakistan overlap and both include all of Kashmir, while on the ground their armies eyeball each other across territory claimed by both. In mid 1999 the situation exploded and 135mm artillery belled into lethal action while helicopters provided air support, and into this cauldron of warfare rode the Ferris Wheels Himalayan Heights Motorcycle Safari. Tour leader Mike Ferris had to make some decisions.





**W**e were aware of the situation of course and had been monitoring proceedings very closely. When we reached the Ladakhi capital of Leh, 200km east of Kargil, we were advised there was 'an escalated level of activity' in the region. Common sense seemed to indicate a gracious retreat was in order for our tour, rather than continuing on the intended route through Kargil and into Kashmir.

I called together the riders for our own little council of war and advised that, in my professional opinion, we should abandon plans for visiting Kashmir. We could use our Plan B and return to Manali via an alternative route, taking in the picturesque lake of Tso-Moriri and some beautiful arid desert scenery across the Moreh plains.

Left: The road was still open to civilian traffic, but the situation could change minute-by-minute. Below left: Indian gunners were unleashing 135mm artillery shells from their Bofors guns with huge percussion shockwaves felt 30 metres away.

There was an extended moment of silent reflection before one rider summed up what appeared to be the sentiment of the group: "I didn't come here to see another dumb f\*cking lake. I came to see Kashmir. Is the road closed, or is it still open?"

### Majority rule

I had to concede our advice was that the highway was actually still open despite it being right in the centre of

the excitement. Indeed, it appeared the road was a main target of the Pakistanis, being the primary military supply route to the frontline. We had been informed the road was still open to civilian traffic, but the situation could obviously change minute-by-minute.

The mood of our riders was apparently ▶

Above: Into the abyss.

Below: They wanted to continue with the tour as originally planned, war or no war.



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Left: Bullets as far as the eye can see.  
Below left: Being on the edge isn't always a bad thing.  
Right: A definite bucket-lister.  
Above: The Royal Enfields hack the tough going.

checked our papers, and simply waved us on. We reached the town of Kargil and the military presence was overwhelming, but once again the soldiers at the checkpoint gave us only short shrift before waving us straight through. We could hear the unmistakable sounds of heavy-artillery fire from not very far down the road, so I sought clarification from the officer in charge.

"Are you sure the road is safe for us to pass?" I queried.

"Yes," he replied. "Please go! But it is best that you perhaps travel quite smartly."

Our group needed no further encouragement. By the time I'd put on my helmet and started the Enfield, they were haring off down the road and I found myself tail-end Charlie rather than fearless intrepid leader.

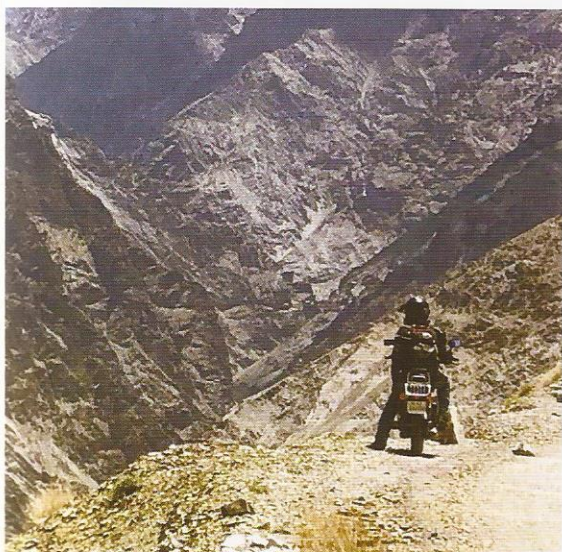
But just two kilometres further on an incoming Pakistani shell exploded into the hillside no more than 200 metres from the road. I saw 15 brake lights illuminate simultaneously and chaos ensued as the guys tried hastily to do U-turns. One fellow stalled his bike and another laid his down gently in the confusion. And then an officer appeared out of nowhere and yelled that we were almost through the danger zone and we

one of bullish adventure and they wanted to continue with the tour as originally planned, war or no war. I'd have risked a mutiny if I'd tried to pull rank and insist on withdrawal, so I chose the only other course of action available. I had them all sign a hastily drawn-up disclaimer promising they wouldn't sue if they went and got themselves killed, and we proceeded on the original route.

I was secretly certain we wouldn't get within 100km of the festivities.

### Too close for comfort

There were several military checkpoints on the approach to what was being called 'The Active Zone'. Each one stopped us,



should continue. There was more madness as the bikes were turned around once again, then we literally found ourselves in the thick of it.

### Over the top

Incoming Pakistani shells were landing on our left. Indian gunners were returning fire from our right, unleashing 135mm artillery shells from their Bofors guns with huge percussion shockwaves we could feel 30 metres away. Then they turned and stood gaping, open-jawed, as a colourful group of foreign tourists scrambled through the middle of their war.

The surface of the roadway was littered with spent shell casings, still smoking, which made for rather edifying obstacles on a bike. The acrid smell of cordite hung in the air. Soldiers were running every which way and I nearly ran into one. I smiled at the potential irony of an infantryman finally seeing active service, only to be killed by a lunatic tourist on an Enfield.

I regained the lead and raced the group through as quickly as I dared. After only perhaps five kilometres we were in the

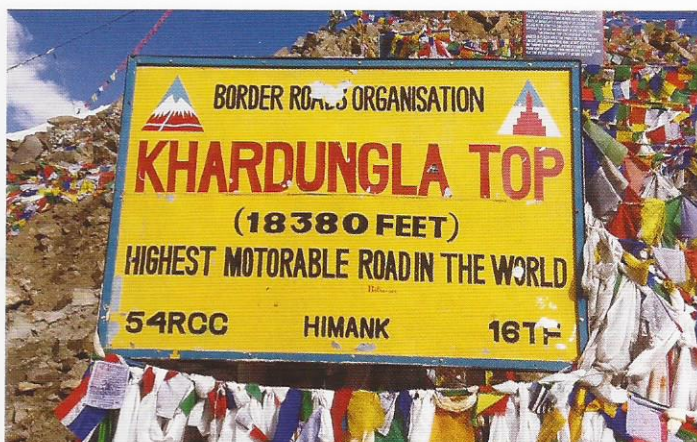
clear, but I kept going until we made it to the next little town 10km further on.

### Big news

As we regrouped and caught our breath, we attracted the attention of a TV news crew sent to the region obviously to cover the war. Someone pointed them in my direction and suddenly I had a camera in my face and a pretty young thing with a microphone was asking, in effect, what the hell we were doing there. I managed to regain enough composure to put on a nonchalant voice and reply we'd heard Kashmir was an exciting destination and wanted to see it for ourselves.

### Get a grip

A few hours later, in the safety of their home in Delhi, my business partner Amar's family turned on the television just in time to see his Australian tour group make the six o'clock evening news.



It was too close for comfort. I don't mind living on the edge occasionally, but clinging by the fingernails is taking things a bit too far.

ADV



Ferris Wheels was subsequently renamed World On Wheels and is the longest established operator

to be running Royal Enfield motorcycle tours in the Himalayas. [www.WorldOnWheels.tours](http://www.WorldOnWheels.tours)

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