

**TRAVELS IN INDIA** by Harald Lindemann

A few years ago I heard about a trek through the Indian Himalayas by Enfield 500s and liked the idea. So last year I booked myself in and started to save. Time went by quickly and sooner than I expected I found myself winging my way to Delhi.

At Delhi I met the crew that I would be travelling with, two New Zealand couples, a couple of mates from Queensland, two more from Victoria, two Pommy expats from Hong Kong and the tour cameraman from Sydney, who was making a doco of the trip.

The tour, organised by Mike Ferris of Ferris Wheels, took us north from Delhi through the province of Himachel Pradesh through Jammu to the city of Leh and up to the highest point navigable by road in the world, the Kardung pass (5,602m) near the Chinese border, then east to Kashmir near the Pakistan border, south through the Punjab and back to Delhi – a trip of 2425k. It doesn't sound far for three weeks does it?

I had prepared myself by making sure that I had all the right gear – for safety (good call), for wet weather (we one day), cold weather (none at all), cameras (lots of piccies), medicine chest for any and nearly all ailments (useful) etc. I tried to get fit for the trip, but really, it wasn't enough. I should also have gotten in some off road practice as well because about 50% of the roads were not quite there. What none of us could prepare for was the psychological impact.

India is both compelling and confronting, through its culture, its variety of lifestyles and religions, and of course the sheer poverty that prevails throughout the society. You never get away from it. It slaps you in the face every day, everywhere you turn. That and the dirt and the amazing juxtaposition of poverty and wealth that is so obvious and is part of the way of life.

The riding was, for the most part, challenging. Traffic in India is just plain looney based on our standards. Four or even five lanes of traffic on a road designed for two. Vehicles forever shoving and jostling for that extra inch of space on the road, horns constantly blasting, constant overtaking through blind corners, might is right.

Out of the towns the traffic was less, but the roads often deteriorated from fine bitumen highways to goat

tracks with no warning. No funds for signs. In one day we might ride on good roads, gravel roads, ball bearing roads, muddy roads, roads under repair and roads that make the Oodnadatta track look preferable. And most of this was on mountain roads so you were forever distracted by the scenery which was just marvellous. Road repair gangs mostly used pick and shovel and crowbar, with the occasional bulldozer thrown into the mix.



Cooling the Clutch on Rhotang La

The most memorable road was the Rohtang Pass road (3,978 m) which was mostly mud on the way up. It was absolutely exhausting. Riding through sometimes axle deep mud is taxing. Add to that having to kickstart a bike that was continually stalling because of overheated clutch plates, and coping with the lack of oxygen at

that altitude. I was continually breathless and had to stop often to get myself ready for the next push. At 3,600m there is 40% less oxygen available for you to breathe. That day we did 8½ hours of riding to make 130k and burnt out 4 out of 12 clutches, broke two mirrors and one headlight. Most of us fell down at least once. I fell down three times. At least the landings were soft.

There is a lot to see in India that is interesting. We rode from the Hindu south to the Buddhist north, across to the Islamic west and through the Sikh south - west. The culture of the various areas is strongly influenced by the regional religions and this often predicated what we experienced.



The Enfield &amp; Harald at Khardung La

We did however mostly focus on the riding and, of course, occasionally its consequences. Some of us came down with altitude sickness. The occasional person had a fall which necessitated a spell in one of the support vehicles.

My moment came when on the third last day of the tour I was slowing down on a mountain road to join my fellow travellers at an observation point when I was sideswiped by a Tata truck that just barrelled past me. I ended up with a couple of cracked ribs, a hole in my knee that took 12 stitches to repair and a crushed foot due to the bike landing on it. The truck drove over the carry rack of the bike crushing all my camera gear in the backpack and disappeared. I walked (hobbled) to the support vehicle feeling on top of the world and that I had probably used up all my good karma at once. The mechanic rode the bike down the mountain.