

Ride to the top of the World

A bunch of ten crazy motorbikers decided to get together and ride to the top of the world. This diverse and motley group of adventurers were brought together by Chandan Lahiri of OutThere Adventurers. "I had to go to Ladakh and decided to bring in a bunch of friends together to accompany me on what was to essentially be a reconnaissance trip," says Chandan. He got on to the internet, spoke to his friends and finally, after about three weeks he had a team.

Four of the guys coming in from all parts of the country. Abhijit Ganguly, an old buddy of Chandan's from yesteryears and who currently lives out of a backpack travelling the country, VD the disease (only his mother still calls him Vinod D'Sa), Nawal Ahuja from Mumbai and Arjun Chandran from Hyderabad - his mother and Chandan used to be colleagues about 20 years ago). Delhi made up the balance six members of the Expedition team. There was Brian Martin, an Englishman who is now married to a Bengali and settled in New Delhi, Sanjit Singh a photographer, Sanjay Chaudhary, a real estate agent, Arnab Dutta who runs a creative boutique, Ashok, the mechanic who does all our bikes (though he came along as a friend more than as a mechanic) and Chandan who ended up leading the team.

They kickstarted their bikes and left for unknown lands on the night of June 23 and spent an incredible 14 days on the road - well actually no roads as you shall see.

Here is their incredible story...

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What an experience. What a ride. Ever since the group of ten came back from the incredible heights of the region, and it still haunts the memories. Lonely Plant describes the Manali to Leh motorbike ride as one of the ten toughest in the world. Obviously they have not ridden down to Tso Moriri. But then, the ride to Tso Moriri is not on roads. Sand, gravel, rocks, boulders and rivers make up what is a part of this world nestled in a corner of this Earth, with virtually no human habitation all along the way. We hoped to do it in a day but the 60 odd kilometers in to Tso Moriri and the 104 kilometers back on to the highway at the More Plains was more than either man or machine could endure. Skids galore, bruised knees, hurt egos, but fortunately no busted bikes, made up the ride to Tso Moriri. But it was all worth it when almost from 20km out, we caught our first glimpse of the marvellous lake. The colour of the water - or the sky for that matter - is something dreams are made of. Every conceivable colour in the blue spectrum was represented. And to imagine that the whole lake freezes up in winter, maybe we could organise a ice hockey tournament there!!!

Well, let us start from the beginning. We planned to leave from my house around midnight to hit Shimla by morning and then Manali by nightfall. The one thing we did not account for was the fact that this was the first time the ten of us were riding together and that itself would take some getting used to. Not to mention that VD had never ridden a Bullet before; and he had a pillion in Abhijit. Nawal sat pillion with me while Ashok gave Chaudhary company. Sanjit had mentioned way back that he would refuse to carry a pillion and believe me, had I known what we were up against, I would have done the same. Arnab and Brian were the other two solo riders. Good for them.

The group started assembling at my place from around ten and I was aghast at the kind of luggage most were carrying. No one had ridden in heights before and probably were expecting some kind of fancy holiday with hot showers, clean clothes and stuff. If only they knew. I sighed, looked up at the stars and wondered where to start. A couple of Eenie Meenie Minie Moe's later, Arnab drew the short straw. He and his fancy saddle bags with nothing in them. And he still had to carry petrol. Out came his stuff, in went a 5 litre can on each saddle bag and the rest of his stuff was literally stuffed into whatever corner was left in one saddle bag. The other, I explained, was for Ashok's stuff. A lot of stuff was unloaded. Next came Ashok. His huge duffel bag was emptied, his multiple change of clothes rolled up and squeezed into each inch of the remaining saddle bag. Ashok was aghast, the crease on his clothes were history. He was in such bad shape that he wanted to drop out of the trip there and then. I had to go away to the market to pick up some provisions before the shops shut and by the time I came back, Ashok's stuff was out of the saddle bag, packed back into his duffel bag and loaded and bungeed onto Chaudhary's bike. Not much I could do then.

Sanjit and Brian were fairly comfortable with their stuff, in any case they were riding single. Then came Nawal and he did not know whether he was coming or going. Or rather whether his clothes were coming or going. Out came everything, his rucksack became a limp assortment or nothingness, was emptied and the stuff he insisted on carrying was packed into my rucksack which was pretty much empty since all I was carrying was one T-shirt, one track bottom and one pair of cargo pants.

Earlier in the day I had gone across to the guest house Abhijit and gang were parked in, and managed to offload about sixty percent of the stuff they were carrying including a one kilo jar of petroleum jelly VD was planning on carrying. At the end of the trip he donated/gifted that jar to me.

Packing all the rucksacks and mats and sleeping bags and petrol cans and water jars took up a good tow hours and I insisted that each rider take a small test ride around the colony. Of course, no one complained of anything being wrong apart from the fact that the bike was difficult to handle with all the load in the back. Famished and tired by then, we decided to have a tea break before we pushed ahead. Mum decided to feed all of us including giving us piping hot cups of tea. When we were ready to get the show on the road, Mum wished us all well with a small tilak ceremony she always indulges in whenever anyone in the family is going out on anything important. Ten of us standing in line, getting tilaks, tikas and her blessings. We got on to our bikes and someone decided it was a good time to take some pictures. Took some photographs, in extremely bad light, and we managed to get on to the road an hour and a half late from the midnight deadline we had given ourselves.

We picked up gas from a nearby petrol station and headed for the border. Oh my God, the trucks. From ISBT to the border took us nearly two hours. Very very tiring. Once we hit the highway, we had a ball. Six thundering bikes, with their headlights blaring, it was quite a sight. Turned what few heads there were on the road at that unearthly hour. But then, heads turning became a way of life all the way through the trip.

Thanks to the delays on the way, we hit Ambala by dawn and stopped for a cup of tea when voila it was night all over again. The clouds came crashing down and for the next couple of hours we could not see our own noses. We crashed in the dhaba for some shut eye (I can bet the other guys will promise that I was the only one getting some sleep) and finished breaker waiting for the rain to subside, which by the way, did not show any intention of doing. When it finally condescended to convert to a drizzle, we started the bikes and started off again. Half a kilometer down, the rain came back down and drenched us from head to toe and all the crevices and orifices in between. All of us were ruing the lost three hours at the dhaba. If we had to get wet, why did we have to waste three hours. But life did not stop there. Short of Zirakpur, we came across a humungous traffic jam, a head on collision between a bus and a truck with a poor cyclist stuck in the middle. We did not ask for casualties since it certainly looked a very grizzly sight. Anyway, we were stuck at this point for another couple of hours and just when things started clearing up, Arnab's stomach decided to go on a spin. He found a nice quiet tree, squatted behind it and started on what was to be the first of many such visits.

Lunch time saw us near the pickle stop across Parwanoo. We picked up some pickle and stopped at a dhaba for a bite.

Nothing much was available apart from bread and eggs which is what we ordered. We asked for toast, and the guy took a loooooong look at our dirty dishevelled bodies and decided that we could not afford it. Somehow he was convinced that we could and off he went to make some toast. Then came butter and he gave up. No way could we afford butter!!!! And 50 eggs scrambled to a crisp???? Come off it. Had we seen our faces. Let us see some money first. Finally he was convinced that we were decent enough guys with money in the wallet to pay for what we had ordered. Food arrived. Apology for toasts, some gooey scrambled eggs and butter which ran out. But food it was and gave us enough energy to ride to our destination which, by this time had become Shimla and not Manali as planned thanks to all the delays. Half a day into the Expedition and already a day late. Well.....

The ride to Shimla was wonderful. The weather was nice, the road was good and we did Shimla in pretty decent time. The first time the quality of the ride up ahead hit us was in Sanjauli, short of Mashobra. There was a traffic signal where we had to stop and then there was this pretty steep climb up. All of 20 yards or so, but that killed the bikes and the riders. First gear, half clutch and still the bikes decided to go in reverse. Cars honking behind us, cyclists with stupid grins on their faces overtaking us, it was embarrassing. In the middle of a market, there were these six guys struggling with their bikes as rank amateurs. Added to that, four of the bikes had pillows making the total luggage being carried well upwards of a hundred kilos which made matters worse. How in the name of God were we to do the steep climbs to Leh and some of the world's toughest roads if in the middle of the city the bikes gave up!!! That was when we decided that we had way too much luggage which had to be offloaded. (Fortunately, everyone else agreed.)

Well, we reached Mashobra and camped. Well, first we waited for a friend of mine to emerge. There we were in the middle of the road, ten lost souls, waiting for my friend to emerge from the woodwork. Finally Shaukat did emerge, Riju in tow. We sat down at a dhaba for some tea and pakoras and jalebis. Decided to have dinner and crash for the night. Dinner was ordered and I took off with Shaukat to pick up petrol for his Gypsy. Came back an hour later to find a near mutiny on my hands. Dinner was finished and some of the guys had moved to the camp site only to find there was no one who knew how to pitch a tent. All the guys were tired and wanted to crash. Ashok was still cribbing about his crushed clothes. And there was no electricity at the camp site!!! Electricity at the camp site, guys must be joking. Anyway, that was a discussion I did not want to get in to. Arnab, Brian and me got together to get the tents up which got done pretty smoothly with the bike headlights shining light on the proceedings. We could not figure out how to get the damn outer flies on and decided to let them be. Finally, a place to sleep. Tents were allocated and by the time you could say MASHOBRA, one could hear snores coming from inside them.

Abhijit was still somewhere on the road and keeping him company was his old friend - Old Monk. I decided to go and get him. Found him, sat with him and the Old Monk joined me in conversation for the next hour or so. Both of us came back to the camp site found Arjun waiting for us. The three of us yapped some more and then suddenly out the blue we heard a shout, "You want me to lick your nose?" Was someone among the team having a nightmare or what. The three of us looked around, fortunately there was a moon out, and found a group of guys had driven down in a car and stopped at our camp site while one of them decided to patch up with his girl friend over the phone. And very loudly at that. While this conversation was going on, Arjun was unloading some stuff from the bikes. He had his back to the road. And Arjun may be heavily built but he was wearing a jacket. He has long hair and that must have attracted those attention. Well, a bird in front is better than two at the other end of the phone line! A torch shone his way, I think a comment or two was passed and then...Arjun turned around. Not only does he have long hair, he also has a pretty hirsute face. One look at this apparition which the boys thought was manna from heaven, and the car started and they were gone. That was a great laugh.

Anyway, the bottle decided to empty itself into our respective gullets and decided to call it a night. Despite all the allocation of the tents, Arjun slunk into one and Abhijit decided to dose off looking at the stars, right out in the open. I also wanted to sleep out but did not relish the thought of the stars staring down at me all night. Got two bikes parallel to each other, put an extra outer fly from one of the tents over it, and crashed. If only it rained and the ground under the bikes decided to give way, I would become pasta. Fortunately it was a rain free night and I was alive and well when I woke up the next morning to find all the others were up and the tents were unpitched and rucksacks almost packed and loaded.

I had to be a little discreet after last night's rumble in the jungle. Morning chores were over, aloo parathas and curd made the stomach a much happier organ of the human body and that was when I broke the news - we have to offload stuff. People looked at me with glazed looks in their eyes obviously forgetting last evening's experience at Sanjauli. But then reason found its way from under the depths of 'necessity' and a whole ruck sack was packed to be left behind at Shimla. A good thirty kilos or so. Abhijit refused to leave his Hugo Boss behind, though.

Ashok took a look at all the bikes, tightened some nuts and bolts, Brian topped up engine oil and we were on our way to Tatapani a little after 10 in the morning. Way too late, but then, people were very tired after the first day's ride and we decided to take it easy in the morning. Target Manali, a good eight to ten hours ride away.

The road from Shimla to Manali was breathtaking absolutely wonderful. Virtually no traffic, riding along the River Satlej, halfway decent roads, in fact this ride prepared us for the road ahead on to Leh. Some decent climbs, hairpin bends, gravel, sand, sharp turns, et al. I would recommend this as an acclimatisation for the Manali-Leh route compared to the one through Bilaspur. Stopped at Alisindhi, a small town for a cup of tea and later at Jhajhu - population 75 - for lunch. Took over the shop, scrambled our own eggs, in fact cleaned out the town of all the eggs they had, some chhola and bread. Great lunch. The weather was packing in again and it looked like rain. Me and Nawal decided to go on ahead to try and beat the rain, but then the rain was ahead

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of us and meeting us head on. And meet us it did. No rain coat, nothing to protect the rucksacks, the rain pelting down while all the way we could see the sun shining down with all its glory on the next hill. That kept us going on and finally we could see a sliver of sunlight on the road ahead. And sure enough, there it was, no rain. No rain for a long time in this little town - Rohanda - we halted in. Rummaged through the sacks to find some bits of clothing which had beaten the rain, changed, had a nice warm cup of tea, went ahead for a few kilometers more and waited for the other guys to catch up while we watched the sun set over the distant hills.

About an hour later, the guys caught up. With stories to tell. Brian fell big time when he skidded on a long mud patch, foot stuck between the wet ground and the bike, waiting for help, VD's bike was kissed by a speeding Tata Indica, Arnab had a near skid, as did Sanjit. From then on we decided to ride together. In any case the hills were more or less over and we would be hitting Mandi in due course. It was nearing sunset and no one planned on riding on these hills at night, not after the skids and falls. It was after seven and yet again, we were short of our target town - Manali - and decided to park in Kullu.

We crossed Mandi and decided to grab a bite. Cleaned out another dhaba - awful food - and headed for Kullu which we reached a little before midnight. No one had the heart to pitch tent, so we parked in a hotel. There was running hot water and everyone had a bath. After yesterday's long ride in the heat from Delhi, getting drenched in the rain, the long ride, camping, and then hot water. People had a blast. Except probably Abhijit and me. We had our old friend, the Monk waiting for us and we started off. Slowly the rest of the gang joined us while Ashok and Nawal snored away their blues.

We decided to start early the next morning since we had to get the bikes checked and prepared for the adventure ahead. If they were in the condition they were in now, there was no way we could reach Leh. And there was this friend of Ashok's in Manali. Breakfast was over and we started loading the bikes. There were a few of us with no rain gear and decided that it was probably a good idea to get some protection on, particularly after the drenching of the last couple of days. Too much trouble finding a shop selling rain coats, but there was a shop right next to the hotel selling tarpaulin. Got makeshift ponchos made which made a lot of sense knowing that the drenching would leave us by after this. Something also told me now that we had protection, it would not rain any more. Yeah, right.

Tanks had to be topped up and Chaudhary with Ashok and me with Nawal, went off towards the petrol station. Tanks topped, looked around and there was no sign of the rest of the gang. Shoot, now what. Went around town a couple of times, no sign of them. Asked a few guys on the road if they had seen a group of bikers and a few of them pointed towards Manali. So off we went in search of them. Not to find them, till we reached the outskirts of Manali. Another chaos greeted me. Abhijit decided to go on a stroll, Ashok decided to look for his mechanic friend. Arjun and VD wanted to grab a bite, Sanjit was saying something, Brian looked kind of lost and Nawal decided to shop for gloves. Somehow managed to get everyone together and headed off towards the workshop which was supposedly somewhere near Holiday Inn. And then it hit me again. The bike, man. There was this little rivulet with a bridge across it. As I was on the bridge a cow decided to cross the road at the very same time. Well, I stopped, let it trundle past and started on my way across the bridge, and helloooooo another climb. Ok, no sweat, but no, the bike decided otherwise. As I was struggling with the throttle and the first gear at half clutch, there was this very same cow, ambling away ahead of me. That was the giddy limit. A cow overtakes me, when here I am on this major Expedition, trying to ride through the world's highest roads. No way was my bike doing it.

Got Nawal to dismount, turned the bike around, somehow got into an incline, checked for cows on the bridge and zoomed down, picked up speed and somehow managed the climb just as the bike was deciding to stall again or not. Found the mechanic and told him to do whatever it was that needed to be done so that I could go forward and not back to Delhi.

Arshad had a very glazed look on his face and his eyes looked as if he was seeing an apparition. "Do you plan to climb Rohtang with this luggage?" he asked. Well, we kind of looked at each other and told him that we were planning to offload some of the luggage in any case. Another rucksack was offloaded at Manali while Arshad did up the bikes. VD's bike was running completely dry, the rockers were out, the tappet rods were bent. And the bike was still running beautifully despite VD insisting on riding it like a two stroke. That took time. As did mine in which the front sprocket was changed to a 15-tooth as was VD's. Arnab's chain lock looked kind of in its last days and was changed, chains were tightened, brakes checked, engine oil topped, chow mein, thukpa and momos hogged and it was near sunset.

Plan? Can't hit Pang as per our original plan, or Sarchu or Darcha or Jispa or Keylong or Koksar. It looked like night was on its way, the weather over Rohtang looked kind of iffy and we decided to stop short of Rohtang. At Marrhi, the last staging joint before Rohtang. Two days riding and two days behind schedule. I was now wondering how long we would be on the road. At this rate, the 14-day trip would end up being a month and more. And Nawal had a plane to catch and Arjun and me had trains to catch. Well, let's cross that bridge when we get to it. Not that I knew that there would be no bridges on this journey of ours. The one there was (at Pang) was broken!

We left Manali after dark and rode all the way up to Marrhi, a climb of a good 4,000 feet in a matter of 20 odd kilometers. Me and VD rode on first to catch the dhaba before it shut and the rest of the guys joined us about half an hour later. Lots of fancy food. Got to know the difference between good atta and not so good atta. Sanjit explained it all to us. If it is white, it is not so good, it is maida which is harder to digest. He insisted on seeing the colour of the rotis before he ordered them. Well, we all live and learn.

Arnab was feeling sick. His stomach had been acting up for the last couple of days and here he was up in the hills, riding a

bike, when everyone had told him that he had serious vertigo. The altitude got to him and the oxygen I was carrying came in handy for the first time. Ashok had a whiff too. Abhijit decided to visit our good old friend's house next door and I advised him against it. Good man, he agreed to give the Old Monk a go by.

We parked under the canopy of the Snow View dhaba, not that we saw any snow at that of night. The mats were out as were the sleeping bags, the oxygen lay close to me, ready for use. Soon enough everyone was snoring. When it is said that people have trouble sleeping at high altitudes. Here we were at 11,500 feet and everyone was sleeping and snoring in the bargain.

The next morning was cold, clammy and chilly. The fog hid everything in site and from what the locals told us, rain was just around the corner. The tourist taxis started rolling in a while later and each had a different story. After polls and opinions and decisions and counter-points, we decided to risk it and head on through the clouds. We had all heard of a walk in the clouds, but riding through clouds with only the handlebars in sight, was not very romantic to say the least. But we got lucky. The weather got better, the clouds parted to give way to the first splendid view of mountain and valleys with the sun playing wonderful game of hide and seek on the mountainside. Rohtang happened soon just as the shops were readying to welcome the first tourists. We had the whole pass to ourselves. The last remnants of snow were there to see, very dirty I might add, and we all took our little walks around the place revelling in the fact that we were on top of our first high pass at 13,000 plus feet. The Beas river is said to have originated here and there is small temple dedicated to that.

Prayers were offered and Maggi, bread pakoras, tea, photographs and about an hour later we pushed on. The adventure had really begun. We crossed Rohtang and the terrain changed dramatically. From green to brown. From trees to rocks boulders. The ride to Koksar was decent enough for a while. The road became a little tougher and narrower, there were trucks parked virtually all the way in and the ride was all downhill. A came to an overturned oil trailer which was the reason there was a jam on the road. Being bikes we got through pretty easily, past the overturned truck and through the engine oil spilled on the road to realise that we were only five bikes. A quick head count found that Sanjit was the one who was missing. He was last spotted taking pictures a few kilometers back. We waited and waited and waited and then waited some more for him to catch up.

Finally Sanjit emerged. He had taken a detour towards Spiti and decided about 15km later that it was the wrong road. Retraced his steps and finally found us waiting for him. And we rode on. We reached the Koksar Nallah and fortunately there was a bridge across what looked like a completely impregnable, raging river. And to think that one actually had to ride through it before the time the bridge was built. The river looked like one which would be a perfect one to undertake white water rafting, with rapids in the very high grades. And this was in the morning. We had no plans to wait and watch what happened to it later in the day when the melting snows would really raise the water level. We rode on. The ride up to Tandi was absolutely breathtaking. The rode was a gradual downhill, the weather was perfect, a little chill in the air and we all had a ball. Tandi and its promised petrol station happened a little before mid day. By this time Arnab was really really sick. He had taken every pill recommended by various people at various times and his stomach had bloated up as a balloon. He lay down in the cot near the petrol station waiting for the promised wind to break loose and get put his stomach back in the position it usually is in good times. Fart he did and bingo, he was as good as new. All the tanks were topped up. Met up with Steve, a biker from England who has been riding around India for the past year and more. He decided to ride with us.

A few of us reached Keylong and passed the town and we decided it was a good time to regroup. This regrouping was getting me worried a bit since Keylong was just 7km and half an hour from Tandi and we were already spaced out as a team. Got to do something about that, get the guys to ride at the same speed. We turned around and parked in Keylong for a wholesome momo and thukpa lunch.

The ride to the next town, Jispa, was pretty uneventful. No traffic at all, lush green fields on both sides of the road with some occasional slush on the road. We were greeted with a traffic jam at Jispa. Two truckers decided to have a chat right in the middle of the road. I wanted to make up time and decided to weave in between them. Did too, but then there was this ditch right in front of me, right next to one of the parked trucks. Thought there was space enough for me to get through. Had Nawal get off and remove a boulder from the way and I got the bike into gear and inched closer. Right between the truck and the ditch, my bungee net got stuck to a hook in the truck and the bike tilted left. I put my foot down to steady myself, but then there was the ditch I didn't remember. My foot hit air and a nanosecond later there I was in the ditch with the bike precariously balanced right above me. Jumped up, a couple of guys got off and put the bike upright again and thankfully nothing much had happened to me apart from a bruised ego and a scraped arm. Looked around sheepishly, had a stupid grin on my face, told everyone I was fine and rode on to Darcha.

The cops at the check post noted down our details and said we could camp next to the river across the bridge on the grassy patch. There it was, green and resplendent and it looked like as good a place as any to camp. We crossed the bridge and found ourselves in front of the green patch of grass, our proposed camp site. The only problem was a sliver of river decided to run between us and looked more than waist deep. A crowd had gathered around us and we decided to move on. Camp we had to, and a camp site we had to find. We were pointed down the road to a track which led down to the river bank and off we went. Sure enough there was a track, all of five feet wide, full of boulders and gravel and going down at a 45° downhill incline. We wanted to camp and did even stop to think what would happen to food tonight or how in the blazes we would be able to ride up the hill again.

Anyway, we reached the river bank, and set up tents. Wanted to put up a campfire, but there were no trees or logs or twigs to

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be found. By this time, I was really low. Fever was coming on and I slept like a log in a tent. And it was windy and it was cold. I had experienced such serious wind conditions. The tents were flapping like there was no tomorrow. I was out like a light. The other guys trudged up the hill to some dhabas on the road and grabbed their bites. Abhijit as usual imbibed. And I think some of the other guys did too. I was barely awake when they came back. I just slept on.

The next morning I woke up feeling pretty refreshed but not yet completely out of my feverish state. Packed the tents and the luggage and somehow, actually quite peacefully, managed to get the bikes up the hill back on the road. The guys had breaker, I had nothing except tea and a couple of Crocins and decided to move on with our adventure. And it really began a few kilometers after Darcha when we were faced with our first river crossing.

Well, not actually a river, but a waterfall which decided to run across the road, making the crossing across water which was way more than knee deep. We all waited. A Sumo came and crossed. It looked daunting to say the least. After waiting for a few minutes, I had had enough, I was going through. During the days I spent with my father in Kashmir, I had been witness to causeways such as these as I was aware of the number of casualties and fatalities these kinds of things caused. With a prayer on my lips I started the bike, revved it a couple of times and ran through. Nearly got stuck a couple of times, but then managed to run through, albeit by getting my feet very very wet in the icy cold water.

One by one, everyone gathered the courage to come through. The pillions walked across, all of them after taking their shoes off. What a celebration. It was a major achievement for everyone and we knew now that the adventure had really begun. Brian had never done anything like this before and he exclaimed, "WHAT NEXT???" He was obviously enjoying it, likewise everyone else.

A few kilometers later, a second one. Pretty much like the previous one and by now we guys were pros. We could go through like a knife through butter. Well, butter which has been frozen overnight thanks to all the underwater boulders. Piece of cake. Never mind the Toyota Qualis which was lying stranded right in the middle of it. Could not go front or back. The driver and one passenger were sitting with very sheepish looks on their faces. And the funniest was they were not even getting off the vehicle to push it. Which was being done by some truckers who were stuck because of them.

A few foreign riders had joined us by this time. Very scruffy and ill mannered. One them, with a pretty babe riding pillion decided to be a hero and went through, trying to ease past the Qualis. Bad idea. Got stuck big time. And because of the way these guys were acting, no one rushed ahead to help them or push their bikes out. That got these guys really pissed and they lumped all Indians in the same basket and called out pretty uncomplimentary names, bringing ancestors and progeny into the picture. Pretty sad I would say considering that they are tourists visiting India.

Well, some truckers were coerced into lending a hand and the Qualis was finally pushed back (not front where it wanted to go) to make way for the rest of the vehicle to run through. And like I said earlier, a piece of cake. Except some of the guys did not take off their shoes this time. Ashok did, of course.

And then the climb began. All the way to Zing Zing Bar (nice name, I like it, except there was no sign of a bar up there at an altitude of 15,000 feet). Completely barren landscape, awesome. Climbed some more and stopped just short of Baralacha La. The oxygen was so low here that the bikes gave up; we were still surviving, though barely. Ashok had a puzzled look on his face. He had never encountered something like this before. He started a couple of bikes, revved them, shut them down. Did the same thing on a couple of others. Suddenly he had a brainwave. He removed the rubber cover which goes into the air filter and bingo, the bikes had a different sound. Happy as the proverbial cat who has just had his milk, he purred that this would get more oxygen to burn the petrol. Not that we argued, we did not know what he had done and did not care as long as the bikes did not give up on us. The rubber covers remained like that till we came back to Manali a fortnight later.

Arjun and Sanjit decided that this was a good place to break a personal record. They took out their respective toilet rolls and walked up the hill looking for some kind of shelter. Trees???????? Must be joking. There weren't even boulders here. We all promised to look the other way. In any case who wanted to see them anyway. Job done, they had a triumphant look on their faces - this was highest point they had ever done the job ever. Called for a celebration. Some dry fruits came out while the bikes cooled, some pictures were taken and we were again on our way. Across another hair pin bend and some hundred feet higher, we came across a pristine lake, the colour of which was a wonderful shade of blue. A huge lake, no wonder its name is Vishaal Taal.

Suddenly Abhijit turned to me and said, "Chandan, I think I will make use of that cylinder you are lugging. My vision seems to be getting blurry." Out came the wrench, and a couple of turns later, Abhijit was busy taking in pure oxygen. The colour came back to his cheeks in no time. Nawal was starting to feel very uncomfortable with altitude sickness hitting him quite hard. I forced him to take lots of water, which he did to an extent, but to the extent required. Diamox tablets finally found their ways down various gulleets, Crocins the others.

No point waiting here, though, and we went on and hoped we would be riding down, which we did, but in what fashion.

The snows were melting big time. Would you believe it, this was summer and the snow was in a losing battle with the 'scorching' sun. What that meant was that on the way down from Baralacha La, we were riding through a river which did not seem to find a way down the hill but ran parallel to the road. There was no way we could stop our feet from getting wet, and after a time just gave up. Finally we hit reasonable heights and finally the plains near Sarchu.

We found a small temple on the side of the road and decided to stop for a breather. Nawal was in real bad shape and he lay down on the ground. He just could not take it anymore. Lots of water and lots of oxygen later, he got on to his feet. We knew that

we could not travel much further tonight. Some operators had put up a camp across the road. I decided to check it out and did. But by the time I got back, people had decided to head for Sarchu which was a few kilometers down the road. Nawal was feeling better and decided to push on. Sarchu is the last town in Himachal Pradesh and there was that police post again. We checked in our details, crossed over in J&K and decided to crash in the Nepali dhaba we found. The person seemed a nice guy and we got the whole place to ourselves.

The gossip was enchanting. The group was settling into a rhythm, bonding was getting cemented and everyone was in it together, wet shoes and all, which by the way were trying to catch the fading rays of the sun to dry themselves. Why, don't ask me, if what we had gone through was any indication. Every time the shoes got halfway dry, there was another nallah to get them wet all over again. Food was sumptuous and we hogged as if there would be no food tomorrow onwards.

Night fell and along with the cold. My watch has a temperature meter and Abhijit wanted to know what the temperature was. Bets were going around. Someone said 0°, while someone else said "Must be close to 10°." Out came the watch. Abhijit said he would check the temperature outside the tent while he looked at the stars. He came back a while later and announced that the outside temperature according to my watch was 33°. Obviously it was too cold for the watch too! I opined that probably the batteries had run out. (Incidentally, it worked fine from the next day and works to this day, without a battery change.)

The stars. Oh wow. Nothing can describe the canvas that the stars painted in the night sky. All through the trip, I was reading in the papers the other day that there are sextillion stars in the sky. I do not know about the exact number, but during our whole trip, all of them gave us company. Twinkle Twinkle Little Star would surely have been written on the road to Leh!!! Awesome does not even begin to describe the splendour of the star sprangled sky.

The only dampener was that the foreigners who had called us and all Indians names had also decided to camp at Sarchu in the next tent to ours. We decided that the luggage was not safe on the bikes and had to unload everything (particularly petrol) and reload everything all over again the next morning.

Eight thirty the next morning, breakfast completed, Steve in tow, we moved on towards Pang. We found that some of the bikes required an engine oil top-up but the can of oil we were carrying was missing. Wonder what happened to that.

Well, we rode on and reached the army staging point and transit camp at Patseo. A humungous number of trucks were parked there. There was also a puncture repair shop. We shopped around and found a liter of engine oil for Rs 300. Expensive, but what the hell, we needed the damn thing.

The ride to Pang was pretty uneventful and we reached at mid day and stopped for lunch.

We would be heading for the famous More Plains next and the ride would be great considering that this would be the first time in many miles we would be on a stretch of road where you could see the road ahead for more than thirty feet! That also meant that some riders would have a tendency to rip it and do speeds which were unnecessary. The More Plains are dangerous, accidents and fatalities have happened to unfortunate bikers. All this was explained to the group and we pushed on. Almost 70km of nothingness. It was spectacular. A plateau at that altitude with absolutely nothing on either side except very large mountains. A lovely setting for a golf course. Or two. May four full scale 18 hole championship courses. Except for the wind which played havoc. The fine grain of sand was always in the air, going into the air, ears, nose, throat, not to mention, changing the very colour of our belongings and clothes.

Suddenly we were going up again. Very dusty roads, major potholes and loads of vehicles. Which makes life very difficult particularly going up since it does not give time to the bike to build momentum so climb. And to make matters worse, there was a whole convoy of army trucks standing on the middle of the road selling (?) diesel to the truckers going up towards Leh. This took up a lot of time, negotiating between the trucks, at times just waiting for some space to be created so that we could pass.

Anyway, a bit later we were there - Tanglang La. It was great. A tablet announced the fact that it was the second highest motorable road in the world. A temple was there for prayers which proclaimed that shoes were allowed inside the temple. A French group joined us in Sumos. We took lots and lots of pictures. Brian was not feeling too good and he rushed on to lower altitudes. We did too after a while deciding to stop at a dhaba for some much needed tea. But the next town was almost three hours away - Upshi which is where we stopped and topped up our tanks from the spare cans we were carrying.

Just before Upshi was our first view of the Indus river and greenery after Manali and it looked like were heading for civilisation and humanity. And sure thing, there was humanity all around. We were at a three point junction. We had come down one arm, going through to Leh on another and would be taking the third on our back when we headed for Tso Moriri.

Did we have tea at Upshi, I frankly do not remember, I don't think so. In any case, we moved on towards Leh which was now just a little bit away. Next stop, another Army town of Karu which was the first place to boast a STD sign since Keylong. Everyone wanted to call home to tell them that they were alive and well, but the lines were down and we decided to push on for Leh which was less than an hour away.

While we were at Karu regrouping and generally recharging and planning the next move, we saw a road sign which showed the way to Pangong Tso lake through Changla La. Changla La is also the third highest motorable road in the world. My Mind was already doing somersaults. Three of the world's highest roads on one stretch! Incredible. Had anyone done it, that is all three together? Could a record be set? Could it be a world first. What if someone attempted crossing the three passes in a single day? The idea took root and over the next few days germinated in my mind. I would attempt it later this season. Three of the world's highest passes in a single day. Some day soon...

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Finally Leh. The sign on the road said that. It was late by now and we knew that a friend of Brian's Yoga teacher was expecting us. Well, expecting us on the 26th and today was the 28th, but what the hell. We stopped at the only petrol station in Leh while Brian went off to make a phone call to the friend of his Yoga teacher. He came back nodding but with a strange look on his face.

"He is coming to pick us up. But, he did not know who I was and did not sound like he was expecting us at all. And I was told that they insisted on our staying with them. Strange," said Brian.

Not that we had a choice so we decided to put our embarrassment behind us and accept the hospitality. A while later he came and escorted the bunch of us to his house in Chuba.

House!!! We were escorted into a room with mattresses on the floor with low tables in front. In one corner there was a garlanded picture of the Dalai Lama, water bowls and lamps adorning the mantle. The essence of butter lamp permeated throughout the house. This was no house, this looked more like a monastery where young lamas come to learn. We looked at each other, took off our shoes and walked in. A while later cups of tea happened. We made the necessary noises about imposing on our hosts who very graciously brushed all our apologies aside and welcomed us into their home. They offered us three rooms for the ten of us which was way more than we either required or desired. We spent the next three days basking in the enormous hospitality of our guests. The way they opened up their home for us will be one everlasting memory which will remain deeply ingrained in each of our hearts.

After unpacking, we went out into the market to find some food. There was this 'happy' looking dhaba which was just downing its shutters. Many requests later they graciously agreed to feed us. A good spread of north Indian food was gobbled up in no time flat. Everyone called home with the information that the first half of our journey was now over and all of us were fine.

Dinner over, a few of the boys wandered over to the counter which had some appetising cakes and pastries displayed. Arjun, Arnab and Nawal grabbed a piece each. Time for payment came and Arjun left a hundred rupee note on the counter which somehow got covered with a newspaper lying on the counter. A dispute ensued with the shopkeeper wanting the money and Arjun insisting that he had paid. Finally the money was found and Nawal got a little upset. An altercation ensued between Nawal and the shopkeeper which could have got nasty had Nawal not been carted off back to where we were staying. Unfortunate incident. Specially considering that the food was awesome and we would have loved to go back there to eat every other day but then after the spat with the shopkeeper, going back there may not have been such a good idea.

World Garden Cafe became our hangout in Leh. Close to where we were staying, the food was good, the ambience laid back and really really inviting. The 'Set Breakfast' killed the budgeting, but it was all worth it in the end.

The day started very leisurely. At the offer of visiting the sights, many of the guys said that they not want to feel the big throbbing thing between their legs today. Finally Nawal, Ashok, Sanjit, Chaudhary, VD and me got on to our bikes and went visiting. First stop was the Leh Palace. A very unfortunate experience. The place was falling apart, there were gaping holes in the middle of the floor, stairs had long disappeared. And on the way in, there was virtually no one of the streets who could give us directions to get to the Palace. Admittedly renovation was on in full swing but the way the Palace has been allowed to disintegrate, is really pathetic. But the view of the city from the rampsarts of the palace was really breathtaking.

The one place in the Palace which was really nice was a dark room which turned out to be a gompa. We walked in and in the dark confines, apart from the ever present statue of the Buddha, pictures of the Dalai Lama and old scriptures resting on the shelves, in one corner there was this wizened old lama sitting there. "Julay," we greeted and "Julay," he replied. That was about how much we could talk with each other since neither understood the other's language. What he did understand however that the would remain here as solitary sentinel of the gompa at Leh Palace for another year before moving on Hemis.

VD decided that he had had enough and would go back and look for the bird in a bottle - Kingfisher. That left the five of us on our rendezvous for the rest of the day.

The next stop was the Shanti Stupa or Peace Pagoda, a Japanese style monastery. We reached the base of the Stupa and found a long flight of steps leading up to the Stupa. No one wanted to walk up and we were about to turn the bikes around when we were informed that there was a road which led right up to the Stupa itself. That sure sounded good and off we went. What a wonderful place it was. A small monastery before the Stupa itself was astonishingly beautiful. A sense of awe enveloped us and reverence flew through our veins. The Stupa itself is just a structure and people are supposed to walk around it paying reverence. The architecture was beautiful and the view of the city of leh down below was ... well... wonderful. Come to think of it, there was pretty much nothing on this trip that we did not find either wonderful or beautiful or breathtaking or awesome.

The Spituk monastery was next. On the road towards Kargil and Srinagar, across the airport and the air force base, the monastery is visible from far off, nestled on the hillside. A short climb up and were at the monastery. A few breathless steps up we came across the ever present prayer wheels adorning the side walls. We had seen people turning them and we did too. Only to realise that we were turning them the wrong way and calling back all our previous sins!!! Went back and turned them the right way around. Then there was this huge wheel with a group of Spiti tribals going around it. Wonderful photo opportunity but the only pictures were with Nawal's camera and something happened during the processing of the rolls. All the six rolls shot by Nawal were destroyed and along with it photographic memories and memoirs.

The statue of the Buddha was beautiful as were almost everything else we saw there. Chaudhary looked across at the air force base and exulted, "My helicopters are still there. I left them here for servicing." We were just hoping to see a flight land at

the air strip which would really be something to see, but no, the flights had landed earlier in the day and gone on to their next destinations.

We decided to take a break from gompas and monasteries and imbibe some patriotic flavour. There was the Hall of Fame paying tribute to the Indian Army and the Ladakh Scouts with a special section on the Kargil War. A very motivational place and we all had goose pimples seeing the pictures and reading accounts of bravery of India's brave soldiers. It was nice to see the flags of Dad's battalion - 3rd Gorkhas - and that of the Division he commanded - 8 Div - as participants during the Kargil war. The way the soldiers live and how they survive in such trying conditions was really an eye opener and our regard for the men in uniform went up many notches.

On the way back to Leh, we were crossing the Military Hospital and I thought of dropping in to visit my sister who, along with the family, was visiting Leh around this time. On enquiring I found that they had left for Delhi that morning itself.

The rest of the gang had gone on ahead while Nawal and me had gone looking for my sister. So the two of us decided to stop for a bite. It was past five in the evening and there had been no lunch. Famished was an understatement. We found a cafe run by a person of Belgian and Indian descent who was serving good Mexican food. Tacos with Salsa and Enchiladas were ordered and relished.

World Garden Cafe beckoned again. As we were trudging down towards it (me on the bike, hate walking), we came across a poor dog which had been run over by a vehicle. His back was shattered, his legs were gone, his jaws were locked, but he was alive. So traumatised that could not even wail. It was a pathetic site. The poor dog was trying to get up and failing miserably. He kept falling back in to the ditch. Brian took a polyethylene sheet, covered the dog and placed stones on all corners. But that worried the dog no end and he somehow struggled out of it. There was no way he was going to make it and Brian and Arnab went off to the market to find a vet or a chemist to help put the poor dog to sleep. This was Sunday and no chemist was open. And according to the locals, there was no vet in Leh. We did as much as we could and left for dinner.

Dinner at the World Garden Cafe was a long brown spirit for me and an assortment of international dishes for the others ranging from Israeli to Palestinian to Continental to good old Punjabi.

On the way back Brian and Arnab were walking back together. They found the poor dog still struggling and they decided to put an end to its misery. A huge boulder landed on his head and crushed his skull. A sad way to go for man's best friend.

The Dalai Lama was in town and Brian, a practising Buddhist, had to go and listen to his sermon. So he opted out of the trip to Khardung La. As did Abhijit and Arjun who wanted to explore the town and make the Penguin Bar richer. The rest of us decided to take the short cut leading to the road to Khardung La and got hopelessly lost. Chaudhary and Ashok went on ahead, Arnab had got left behind somewhere on the way, Sanjit, Nawal, VD and me retraced back and regrouped.

We then rode back on the road we were lost on and managed to find a track which was leading up to the main road. The track was pretty steep and bad and took a bit of time to get all the bikes through. The rest of the way was on a fairly decent road and we reached South Pullu for the customary checking of permits. By now it was getting cold and the altitude was starting to take its toll. Some of the boys had their Diamox tablets while I replenished stock from the army medical unit stationed there.

Finally, reached Khardung La. It was cold, it was windy, it was exhilarating. The highest road on this man's earth and we were there. A deep sense of achievement enveloped us all and the customary pictures were taken. We doffed our hats to those brave men of the Road Construction Company without whom this trip would not have been possible. They spend their days and nights, in summers and in winters, in rain and in shine, in sickness and in health. We met one Kartar Singh who was the leader of this motley group and we was just in his dungarees!!! We asked him why he did not put on some woollens and he said, "Saab, winter mein dalega." And here we were freezing our innards off.

It was not such a good idea to stay at 18,380 feet for too long and after about 40 minutes we decided to descend. Came back to South Pullu and Nawal promptly ordered a cold drink! He might have meant it as a joke but when it actually materialised, he could not say no. The rest of us had lukewarm tea and very cold pakoras. Back at the home, we slept like logs.

The home stretch started the next day with our ride to Tso Moriri. The plan was to reach the lake, spend some time and head for Pang. Or so we thought. Anyway...

We wanted to leave Leh early, around six, and that was one thing I just could not do. Keeping me company was Abhijit who had to groom his beard. That got Chaudhary very upset since he and Ashok were ready and waiting from six and it was already around eight when we left. But I did not realise how upset he was till we reached Upshi, the junction from where there was road leading to Pang and the other to Tso Moriri.

We stopped for tea and suddenly I found Chaudhary's spare cans of petrol unloaded and on the road, he and Ashok loaded up on the bike and saying their good-byes before heading for Pang.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Dada, we will talk in Delhi," was all Chaudhary was willing to say.

On enquiries with the other guys I figured that Chaudhary was so upset with the delayed start that he was willing to forego the trip to Tso Moriri and travel on to Pang. What got Arnab upset was that Chaudhary was taking Ashok, the mechanic, along with him.

Everyone, except me, spoke with Chaudhary who kept acting pricey and finally after about a half hour's coaxing decided to come along with us. Arnab by this time was fuming, and decided to systematically rape his bike. He went on ahead of everyone,

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clipping, regardless of roads, potholes or inclines.

This was one of the finest stretches we had yet ridden on. Lovely countryside, riding along the Indus, the landscape dotted intermittently with greenery and bare barren browns. On the way we stopped for a break and checked our engine oils and battery water which was pretty dry. Battery water was topped up. My bike was refusing to pull and slopes and Ashok adjusted the timing. Somehow my battery shorted and had to be rewired. Chains and brakes were tightened. A couple of army trucks went by and told us we were on the right track to Tso Moriri and had to take a right turn from Nimu.

At Nimu there is a bridge which we crossed and started looking for the road to Tso Moriri. After searching for a while, we realised that was no road. And was to be our story for the next 60km. No roads at all, just sandy shepherd tracks. At times more than eight inches deep making the bikes skid like a novice on an ice skating rink.

60km should have been a piece of cake and completed in a couple of hours, but then this was the place with no road and just kept on riding with no Tso Moriri in sight. And no human to ask for directions.

Well, actually we did come across a group of labourers who we asked directions for. They had a very confused look on their faces looking at us jokers going where no man in his right mind would go.

A couple of Qualis' overtook us at breakneck speed and we realised this was the right way. And suddenly, there in the distance was a speck of blue which could not have been the sky. Yes, a lake it was. But was it Tso Moriri? Can't be. It was nowhere close to the beauty we had been told to expect. And it was small, looked more like a stream had decided to stop here and fill up a depression in the land. All of us were looking very tired indeed and wanted this to be the Tso Moriri. But, it wasn't. And it was getting late. Not a very good idea to get lost in a place like this, away from human habitation, with nowhere to go but ahead. He headed on. Dunes? The Thar desert probably does not have the kind of dunes we passed by and rode on.

Suddenly. Away in the distance, between two hills we saw the most wonderful colour of blue that any of us had ever seen. That colour was not part of the VIBGYOR, nor part of anything that man could create. Indescribable. That had to be Tso Moriri. Except that it was almost 20km away. The throttle revved but the bikes would not go beyond the stipulated first gear thanks to the sand on the road. Finally we reached the lake. But where the hell is this? People back in Leh had told us that was a regular PWD guest house and tented accommodation in Tso Moriri. There was nothing to be seen for miles. Ah, there it is. No. That is a trekker with his dome tent, certainly no PWD guest house.

"Nawal, take out your binoculars."

Nawal did the honours. Took out his binoculars, walked to the edge of the lake and looked around for a few minutes. Exultation. "Boys, there is a settlement with tents and structures I can see there. Let's go."

Without any other better idea, we went. Nothing. Riding along the lake was a good experience, but we were looking for a place to camp and more importantly, eat. Nothing except the beautiful lake which we were skirting. Could not even get a good look at the scenery because that meant taking eyes away from the road. A sure invitation to disaster as we were driving over boulders.

Yippee!!!! A man. Waving us to a stop. ITBP. Never so happy to see a man before. He took down our names and bike numbers and waved us on.

"Where?"

"About half a kilometer up the road, there is a village."

A village??? That meant food and a place to stay with human voices for company. Well, off we went and sure enough there was a village. A hotel and way down in the valley a tented camp. One group went to negotiate with the tented guys while another went to chat up with the hotel guy. After an hour, decision. We would camp in the tents and get food to eat. Expensive but what the hell. After what we had been through, no money was too much.

And the stars yet again. Incredible. Chaudhary went out and found some fancy army rum which we all imbibed. Arnab was feeling down and he went off to sleep in one of the four tents we were allocated. Finally after a sumptuous lunch of rice and lentils, we were off to bed.

The next day was easy. We wanted to leave early but Chaudhary did not want any part of it. He was, childishly I thought, taking revenge for yesterday. We were all ready from around eight in the morning, while Chaudhary did not even come near us or the bikes before nine thirty.

The two Qualis' which had overtaken on the way to Tso Moriri were also parked alongside us. They have been doing this route for over two decades. A good source for information.

"Is there a way to Pang from her?" we ask.

"Sure," they say. "Drive back the way you came for 43km and then take the detour to Pang for the next 60km."

Just 103km of bad roads and we get to bypass the most awful stretches of Tanglang La. That should be easy enough, we thought. Started out from Tso Moriri back on the dirt roads. 43km down the road we found the Qaulis' waiting to show us the way somehow knowing we would miss it. We took the U-turn to the left and were promptly greeted with a nallah. Arjun's knee was already giving trouble after some nasty falls and this last fall at this nallah was the giddy limit. He took off his shoes and socks, threw them to the ground, utterly disgusted with life and what he had got himself into. He did not want wet feet again and insisted on riding barefoot. Bad idea, as he soon realised and reluctantly put his shoes back on.

A few kilometers down the road and we were utterly lost. So far we had been on bad roads, tracks at best, but at least it

showed that there had been some movement on it and people and animals had travelled by it in the distant future. Not here. Not by a long shot. Not even a semblance of a track or a road. Every once in a while, a gonga of sorts probably marking the high points along the way. But no road, no track, no milestone, no one to ask, no food. Very bad news. But we trundled on.

We kept on going, God alone knows where. There was a map with us but no one knew how authentic it was, lest of all the shopkeeper we picked it up from. Abhijit and Nawal volunteered to be map readers and announced that we were headed in the right direction. So be it. Ride along for a few more miles. When suddenly, disaster. A lake was viewed in the distance.

"I am not going any further. After all this we are back at Tso Moriri," was the thought on everyone mind. But wait, Nawal's by-now-famous binocular had spotted something. A village. And a big one. Right next to the lake. "And look here," exclaimed Nawal, "there is supposed to be a lake here. Look at the map."

We all looked and the map was dotted with lakes. Either we were actually on the right track or we were managing to skew the map to suit where we were, we would never know. But sure enough, there was a village up ahead and that meant habitation ... and information. And if we were lucky food, or at least a cup of tea.

We rode on. Somehow the road realised our insistence and the quality and depth of sand increased leading to some more major skids and Arjun injuring his knee once again.

The village happened. Barren. A ghost town. No one in sight. And at least fifty huts all around us. Ashok wanted a drink of water and he found a tubewell. He trudged off, alone, water can in tow. He would pump the well, and just as the water spouted, he would rush forward to hold the can under the water. By which time of course the water would have stopped spouting. It would have been a funny sight had it not been for our fatigued minds and bodies.

"The lake was just not worth it," said Arjun.

"Where the %\$@*^ are we?"

No one answered while Nawal and Abhijit went back to the map. Lo and behold, we heard some unfamiliar voices behind us. Two wizened old women came out of the woodwork wondering which mythological characters we were and from which fable we had dropped out of. They did not understand what we were saying, we did not understand what they were saying, apart from the intermittent "Julay".

We said "Pang", they said "Pang" and communication was established. They knew what we wanted. They pointed up ahead, through the hills and indicated that we had to go around it. Could they be right? They did not look like they had ever left this village. Should we take their word for it? Did we have a choice? No. So off we went in the direction they pointed us in. More sand, more gravel, more potholes, more non-roads, more don't-know-where-we-are. But we were going ahead. Whether it was towards Pang or not we would realise when we reached Pang, if ever we reached Pang. For the moment, bash on regardless.

Every once in a while we saw tyre tracks in the sand and comforted ourselves that it must be the Qualis'. And we went on. Way up in the distance I spotted what looked like tents. We went further up. The sandy tracks moved in every direction at this point, one of which was in the direction of what looked like tents in the distance. We went a little further up.

Decision was to move on to those tents and ask for directions. I thought I saw something moving in the distance. No one believed me and thought I was hallucinating. Then another movement and this time Sanjit saw it too. Everyone looked and sure enough there was something moving. By this time Nawal's binocular happened again and sure enough there were a couple of trucks that we were seeing. Trucks meant roads and that meant Pang was close by. We all uttered a silent thank you to those wizened women at the village behind us and zoomed off to hit terra firma again. A few minutes later, the More Plains. Pang 38km. Happiness and joy. High fives all the way around. Arnab had had enough by now and his shoulder was aching badly. Ashok took over the rider's seat and we clipped on to Pang.

This 103km stretch took us nine hours to complete and was by far the most gruelling that we had encountered. The Lonely Planet guys must definitely do this stretch and then the Manali-Leh route which they categorise as one of the ten toughest motorbike rides in the world, would be re-categorised with the Upshi-Tso Moriri-Pang route taking up places one to ten, no problem.

We halted at Pang for the night. The tent was wonderful, almost like a sheikh's, ready for dancing girls, while we reclined on the mattresses laid out on the floor.

Ashok and Abhijit took over the kitchen to cook egg curry. Boiled eggs accompanied the Old Monk. Brian and Arnab grabbed some shut eye. Me and Abhijit caught up on old times and old friends.

After dinner, we all slept. Abhijit kept some foreigners company for half the night and by the time he came back inside, there was no quilt for him. He tried snuggling into Sanjit's and VD's but they, in their slumber kicked him out, with the result that Abhijit slept without any covering. Major fever erupted the next day.

Arjun was in distress with his knee. It was sprayed and bandaged, but many of us thought it was more in the mind than physical. Anyway, breaker over, we moved on. The Pang bridge over Brandy Nallah was broken so we had to ride across the nallah. Nallah!!! What we found was a raging river. A good 70 feet across, with very strong current and water which was up to our thighs. How the hell would we ever get across.

Some trucks came and went, a couple of Sumos did too. Made it look easy. The water was cold, deep and daunting. No point in wasting time. I found what looked like a way, diagonally across the river and went for it. A couple of shoves and I was across. Chaudhary had decided on another route across and Brian followed him across it. So did Sanjit. VD tried next. And got suck

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right in the middle of the river. Let go of the throttle and suddenly everything was in the river. We all rushed in and dragged the bike out. It was too late. Water was all over the bike, inside the silencer, in the spark plug, all over. Wait.

We all got together, uprighted VD's bike on its rear wheel while some of the water drained out of the silencer. Ashok opened the plugs and dried up the innards. Voila, a couple of kicks later, it roared into life.

Arjun had had enough by this time. He stopped a passing truck and hopped on to it and made the rest of the route to Manali in it. His excuse was that we were getting late and he had to get back to Delhi in time for his train. We all nodded our heads in understanding, but we all knew that he had had enough of riding pillion on a motorbike.

Nawal became Arnab's pillion and for the first time I knew the joy of riding solo. Great!!! But we had lost about two hours crossing the famous Brandy Nallah. Lunch was at Sarchu - mutton, no less.

Abhijit was in very bad shape with a raging fever. No lunch, but a couple of Crocins and we were on our way again. We were attempting to cross Rohtang and reach Marrhi for the night. But we still had Baralacha La and Lachalang La to cross and the two crazy river crossings before Darcha. We pushed on. By the time we were near Baralacha La, Abhijit was having trouble sitting on the bike. He was riding pillion with Chaudhary. We found him lying on a bench outside the gumpa marking Baralacha La. Woke him up and he gobbled up a Combiflam. We drove straight through Baralacha La and Zing Zing Bar and reached Bharatpur. A few of us stopped at a dhaba for tea. Abhijit went inside another one and came out fifteen minutes later completely recharged with no sign of the fever. It remains a mystery to this day, what happened inside that tent for fifteen minutes!!!

We crossed the two rivers before Darcha fairly easily. The snows had melted over the past few days and the water level was way down compared to what we had been through on our way up. At Darcha, we had Marie biscuits with jam, Sanjit had a soup, we all had tea and moved on.

Keylong definitely looked possible and maybe even Marrhi given that there were no more nallahs to be crossed. We rode on. Night had fallen and we had to be extra cautious. Every once in a while, there would be this stretch of mud or slush right around a bend where we least expected it. A little before Keylong, the unexpected happens. A brand new nallah. "Where the hell did that come from?" we all wondered. This was certainly not there a few days ago. Shaken and worried about what we would find up ahead, we reached Keylong.

And Brian blew his fuse big time. After what we had all discussed about no more nallahs, here was another one. And he was leading the group and was not at all comfortable riding at night with the unknown factors we were encountering. He screamed and raved and ranted and there was no way he was going further tonight. Well, neither were we, but he kind of lost it.

Brian's outburst shook me up a little bit. Not so much because of the way he reacted, but more because of the thankless part of organising and leading an Expedition such as this. I knew he was tired, as we all were. Maybe he could have kept his emotions in check for a bit.

Anyway we kissed and made up over pegs of rum and pieces of very good mutton.

We left early the next morning. The weather over Rohtang looked very dicey and it was certainly raining there. We could see Rohtang enveloped in thick rain clouds all the way from Keylong. But nothing prepared us for what we encountered. One hair pin bend short of Rohtang it was dry. The bend taken, the sky was pouring its heart out. And it was freezing. Added to it, the clouds made visibility impossible. Some of the guys had gone ahead, some were lagging behind. Sanjit and me were riding together.

Despite the rain and the cold, Rohtang was like India Gate or Chowpatty or Marina Beach. Crowded. Children riding horses, youngsters doing the bhanga, some even riding tubes down some slopes which still had some snow on them. Suddenly I found some familiar looking bikes parked on the side and thought I heard someone yell my name. I looked around, saw nothing except the two bikes which belonged to our group. Went inside a couple of dhabas and finally found Chaudhary, Ashok and VD sipping some very warm inviting tea. I joined them while Sanjit insisted on getting wet in the rain.

We decided to move on since there was no indication if and when the rain would abate. And there was no sign of Brian or Nawal or VD, they must have gone on ahead. The rain had reduced to a drizzle but the clouds were still there. And so were the tourists, the most dangerous commodity on such roads. Many of them first timers on such roads and heights, but who thought they were still on the plains. Clipping at speeds with no idea of mountain manners, never taking their hands off their horns, many of them drinking, dangerous guys. We went ahead slowly down the road towards Marrhi when Arnab's bike decided to give up. Ashok decided that water had gone into the electricals and shorted stuff inside. Some basic 'jugaar' later, the bike started and we were on our way yet again to find Brian and the rest of the gang at a shop in Marrhi.

Nawal had a plane to catch and he and VD rushed on towards Manali to catch up with Arjun so that they could together take an overnight bus to Delhi.

The last bus to Delhi leaves Manali at five in the evening and by the time we reached the bus stand, there was around ten minutes to go. Good-byes and fond farewells were exchanged and Arjun and Nawal were on their way to Delhi while we rode back to get the bikes checked for the return journey.

We went on to Kullu and the same Numan Guest House we had stayed on the way in. It was a great night, great conversation and a sense of deja vu now that the trip was almost over barring the home stretch back to Delhi which itself was pretty uneventful. Wide open roads, loads of traffic, drivers who did not have any road sense, obscenely fast trucks, stuff we had forgotten over the past fortnight. Leh and Ladakh and Tso Moriri seemed so far away. With a heavy heart and moistened eyes we drove into Delhi and back where we started from a little before midnight on July 6 after what can best be described as a trip of a lifetime.