

RIDING HIGH

By Bullet to the very roof of the world.

Paul Hempel shares an Enfield adventure...

Photos by Paul Hempel and Gaurav Jani



Like many motorcyclists, I had never considered the Himalayas as a riding destination before seeing the movie *Riding Solo to the Top of the World*. However, when I heard that film maker Gaurav Jani was organising rides to the areas he had filmed, I immediately jumped at the opportunity. And so, there I was at 18,000 feet, light-headed and coughing up dust let into my lungs through a singularly pathetic face mask. I'm glad that I didn't listen to the dire warnings from Rowena about the effects of extreme altitude upon the human body...

The plan was for me to fly into Leh, a small Indian city at 3500 meters elevation on the north side of the Himalayas, where I would meet Gaurav and begin my ride. After a rest day to acclimatise to the altitude, the first several days would be spent exploring Ladakh, the Indian state in which Leh was located, before returning to Leh for a rest day – both for myself and the motorcycle. Afterwards, the hard part of the trip would begin, the crossing of the Himalaya from the north to the south along the Manali-Leh highway. Joining us would be Gaurav's girlfriend, Deepa, who would ride pillion with Gaurav on the easier sections. For the more strenuous sections, she would take a bus or catch a ride, and meet us at the end of the day.

After a day resting in Leh, I first got to see my mount for the tour, the mighty Royal Enfield Bullet Machismo 500. Yes, Machismo is the model name, it said so right on the side panel, and left me anxious to live up to expectations. We rode on NH (National Highway) 1 down the Indus River towards Srinagar. Being a national highway, it was a major road, it was even two lanes and paved. It also had random diversions over the rocky plains, just to keep things interesting, but it was the best road I was to see while I was there. The purpose of this first day's ride was to get me accustomed to the Bullet, and probably more importantly, to let Gaurav know how much of a mistake he was making by letting me ride his bike.

On my third day, I was finally ready to start seeing some serious altitude. We were heading to Pangong Tso, a lake on the disputed border with China, and at an altitude of 4250 metres (14,000 feet). To get there, we had to go over the 5360 metre Chang La pass. This was to be the first of several 5000 metre passes we were to cross in the next ten days. It was also the first of several occasions when I saw Western tourists wearing oxygen masks. Fortunately, thanks to Gaurav's enforced acclimatisation period, I was able to avoid this particular tourist experience.

A few things become very clear on those

first few days of riding. One is that Ladakh is truly a stark place. Sheer mountain cliffs and barren rock everywhere, with greenery only in some of the river valleys. It was also strangely beautiful, and I was constantly amazed at the subtle variations of colour in the rocks. When I got home, I found that I had a surprisingly large collection of photographs of rocks. I don't know what I was thinking, but perhaps it was the lack of oxygen responsible for my photographic choices.

Another thing which quickly became clear was that the higher the elevation, the worse the road. In the valleys, the roads could be surprisingly good, but the condition of the roads deteriorates with altitude, and at around 4750 metres it appears that attempts to maintain pavement are just abandoned. Above 5000 metres (16,400 feet) the roads are just rough dirt and rock tracks more suited to trucks than to motorcycles.

The rough roads brought with them diversions and construction delays. Particularly memorable was the traffic jam and 20 minute delay at 5500 metres (18,000 feet) on the ascent to Khardung La. Many of ➤



At Chemre Gompa, on the first riding day; while Paul and his gear were still clean



The road along Pangong Tso. The land was totally desolate, but the colours of the rocky hillsides were a constant source of amazement



Pangong Tso (lake). Despite the mostly cloudy skies, the waters of the lake were amazingly blue



There were several streams to be crossed each day, but fortunately it had not rained for several days so the water levels were low

RIGHT: The literal high point to the trip. Walking 20 yards on level ground to take photos was exhausting work

the road repair crews at altitude had the latest in construction technology: a two-pound hammer. Repairs were quite rudimentary. Fill hole with large rocks. Take hammer and make small rocks from large rocks, fill spaces between large rocks with newly formed small rocks, finish by putting dirt over the top. These repairs were fine for the military trucks, but made for rough going on the Bullets. Prior to this trip, I had been strictly a pavement rider, and so I was quite worried about riding through sand, water, mud, and over rough rocks. Fortunately, the Bullet was more machismo (sorry, 'Machismo 500') than I was, and so long as I took my time the Bullet was very forgiving of the rough road surfaces.

Riding the Bullet was a strange experience for me. I have two old Brit bikes, a café Norton Model 99 and a BSA Victor Enduro, but neither of them had prepared me for the Bullet. My biggest challenge was the heel-toe shifter on the Bullet. Several times each day throughout my entire trip, I would be riding along and all of a sudden find myself coasting along without power because my heel had accidentally hit the shift pedal. As one would expect, this would typically happen at the worst possible time, on the roughest sections of road when I would rise slightly on the footrests. In addition, compared to modern bikes, I had thought that my Norton and BSA were low revving...

After riding the Bullet, I learned how wrong I was. In first gear and with the throttle shut, the Bullet would still chug away at a leisurely walking pace. This is a strange thing for me to say, but quite often during my trip I found myself glad at how slow the Bullet was, because it was reassuring to slog through the rough sections.

Each evening, we would stop at 'the best place in town'. Most nights we stayed in seasonal villages of tents with indoor plumbing, but one night the only (and therefore, best) place was a guesthouse without electricity or running water. The guesthouse might have been basic, but it allowed us to take a pass to the Nubra valley which was off the main tourist track. This was perhaps the most memorable riding day, with a lot of nice clean pavement and only a handful of other vehicles that entire day. I was feeling pretty adventurous, riding at high elevations on the Machismo Bullet, when at around 5200 meters (17,000 feet) I met up with some Indian bicyclists.

Mid-way through my time in India, we returned to Leh for a rest day before we started our crossing of the Himalaya. From this point onwards, Gaurav's girlfriend Deepa would be taking buses rather than riding pillion. The roads in Ladakh were fairly good because of the ➤



Watching the riders load their bikes was the morning highlight for the locals. On the back of Paul's bike, which the lama (monk) is leaning on, you can see he's carrying several 5-litre plastic bottles of fuel. The pair needed to carry five days' fuel supply to bridge the gap between filling stations



The riders visited a campsite of the Chang-pa nomads in the hills above Tso Moriri. Gaurav's friend the lama spoke to the blind old lady, and they were fortunate to be allowed to enter their yak-hair tent





After a few kilometres of beautiful new paved road, the road completely disappeared. Paul and Gaurav took to the open plains



BELOW: The summit of each pass was always marked by colourful prayer flags. Normally they would be faded and torn, but the Namshang La pass to Tso Moriri had a beautiful set of flags



The Manali-Leh highway had numerous diversions around places where the road had washed out. In these places, the soil was as fine as talc. Paul's mighty 500 Machismo Bullet could power through the fine dust, but poor Solomon's 350 Bullet needed a bit of help. At an altitude of 14,000 feet, pushing his bike was exhausting work. Fortunately, Paul was taking photos and Guarav got to do the pushing!

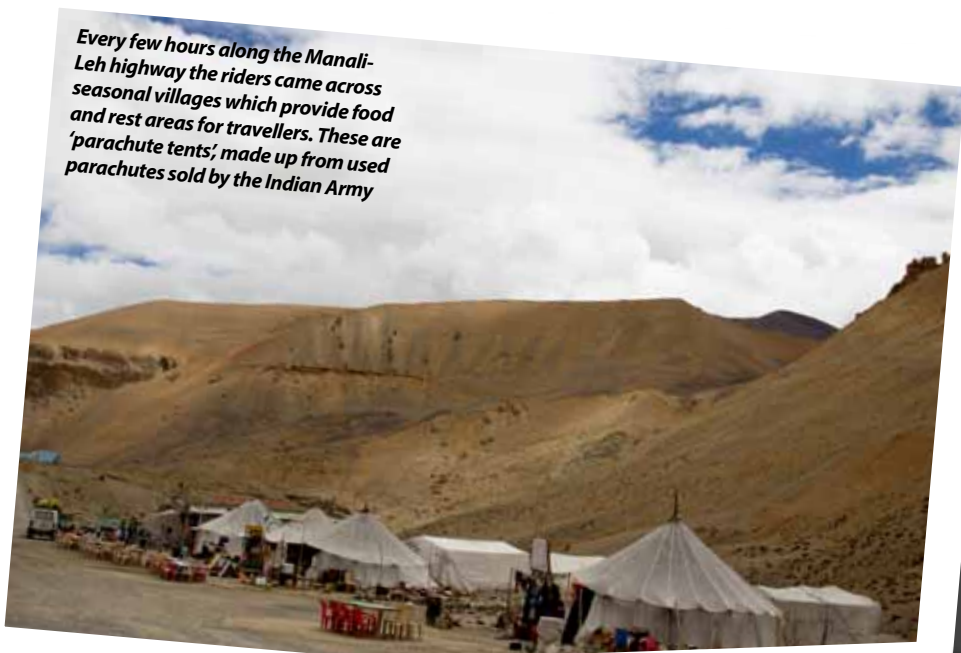
At times, the road seemed like an endless construction zone, but the diversions were just part of the fun of this trip. At least here there is proper construction equipment. Often, the construction equipment consists of a small hammer to break stones into gravel



You might think that the highest mountains in the world would be made of stone, but they're mainly sand and loose rocks. Erosion is a constant problem, and even when the road has good pavement it is usually strewn with sand and small rocks



Every few hours along the Manali-Leh highway the riders came across seasonal villages which provide food and rest areas for travellers. These are 'parachute tents', made up from used parachutes sold by the Indian Army



Overnight, the riders stayed in tent 'hotels'. The Manali-Leh highway is closed most of the year, and so tent villages are created each season for the tourists



army and tourist presence, but the Manali-Leh highway turned out to be pretty rough going. While in Leh, Gaurav ran into an old friend of his who had ridden from Chennai to Leh via Srinagar. Solomon joined us for the Manali-Leh crossing. At first, I was concerned about the change in group dynamics, but Solomon turned out to be a great riding companion. Fortunately for me, he was riding an old iron-barrel 350 Bullet, because that was the only thing keeping me on the mighty Machismo 500 from falling far behind him.

Where the roads in Ladakh were barren and beautiful, the Manali-Leh highway was truly desolate. For this section of our trip, we needed to carry extra jugs of fuel, because it would be five days before we would meet our next refuelling station. In some areas, the highway would just disappear due to erosion, leaving us riding across dirt tracks on the high altitude plains. Off in the distance, we would often see nomadic herdsmen with their pashmina goats.

As the sun would set, strong winds would start, but fortunately by that time we would be secure in the night's accommodation. Fortunately, the winds would die down an hour or two later, but every evening I would be so tired that I fell right asleep despite the noise of the tent flapping in the wind.

One day, Gaurav met up with a Ladakhi friend of his who was a lama (monk). The lama came with us as we rode up the hillside camp site of the nomadic Changpa, to act as interpreter, and through the lama's efforts we were allowed to enter the tent of an old blind woman. According to Gaurav, many old nomads go blind, not from cataracts, but rather due to the corrosive smoke of the open fires in their yak hair tents. The Changpa would often have solar cells to recharge small electronics, but there was no refrigeration, so their diet tended to be limited. I often whinge about the stress and pollution of my life in Hong Kong, yet this trip makes me realise just how fortunate I am.

The Gatta Loops was a beautiful clear stretch of road, with clear views from the top to the bottom



Riding with Gaurav was an enlightening experience. Although he is a southern Indian, he has spent a considerable amount of time getting to really know the Ladakhi people. Following a wildly popular 2009 Bollywood movie filmed in Ladakh, there has been a massive influx of Indian tourists. While this has offered job opportunities for the Ladakhi, unfortunately a large number of Indian 'businessmen' have moved in as well. Throughout our trip, Gaurav made an effort to patronise establishments run by Ladakhi rather than outsiders.

When we had crossed the Himalaya and were on the southern side, the landscape gradually became greener. After ten days of barren hillsides, it was strange to see things growing on the hillsides. Over the previous ten days, there

The only mechanical mishap was a suspected leak in Gaurav's rear tire. Fifteen minutes were spent looking unsuccessfully for a leak, so a new tube was fitted. Perhaps a blessing by the lama would have helped?



The most stressful part of the ride was the constant danger of running into trucks when rounding blind corners. With enough warning, the riders would pull over to allow the trucks through, like Gaurav is doing. Often the road would be even more narrow than shown here, and combined with the loose edges to the road, Paul was often worried about sliding over the edge



Leh is on the north side of the Himalayas, and very dry because the monsoon rains all fall on the southern slopes of the mountain. As the riders travelled south over the Himalaya, the landscape gradually changed from reddish-brown to green

was dust everywhere, and there were several stream crossings each day. Now, the dust and the water would combine, yielding deep mud for my final riding day. At times the mud would be a wet slurry, while at other times it would

be heavy sticky goo. This proved to be the most physically taxing section of the trip, with the Bullet bucking and bouncing over obstacles hidden in the muck. At any point where we would hit dry ground, I would need to stop to catch my breath.

Things were made much worse by the insane jeep drivers coming uphill with loads of tourists, because if they stopped they would never get started again. By the time we finally reached Leh, I was definitely ready for a rest.

Before the trip, I had been quite anxious about the altitude and rough conditions, but in the end my fears turned out to be groundless. Gaurav built plenty of time into the schedule, so that I never felt rushed yet always had something new to experience. Gaurav and his friends are hoping to make this a regular group tour for next year. I would highly recommend this trip to anybody. This is not some luxury tour run by outsiders, but rather a tour run by somebody who is really dedicated to Ladakh and the Ladakhi people, with plenty of opportunities to interact with the locals. An unexpected bonus is that Gaurav is a talented photographer, and he took a large number of action photos for my memories. **Rc**



On the northern side of the mountains the team encountered dust or water, but on the southern slopes these combined to give produce deep and sticky mud

To join Gaurav on a similar ride of a lifetime, visit www.rideofmylife.in