

# *Start your engines*

*Our intrepid correspondent journeys to the roof of the world,  
astride a retro-styled Royal Enfield Desert Storm motorcycle*

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Photography: John Joseph McGoldrick/Arcadia Magazine





Admiring looks for the Royal Enfield (above); challenging road conditions and dramatic scenery (right and below left)



An inspiring setting for breakfast (above); not the place to lose concentration (left)

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As I rounded the latest switch-back on the dirt-trail, hooting in case yet another truck was hurtling towards me – I'd learnt my lesson by now – the view across the Spiti valley was enough to make me lose concentration.

A sheer drop below was the base of the valley, a mesmerising patchwork of ochre, brown and even some green, while ahead, only a few kilometres on, the snow-capped peaks of some of the mightiest mountains in the Himalayas showed how close I was to the point where Mother India surrenders her sovereignty to Tibet, and how far I had come in just three days of tough, bruising, exhausting but exhilarating riding.

No time to linger, though. I rounded the sharp hairpin, a dizzying drop to certain death on one side, an unforgiving, flinty and menacing angled wall of rock on the other – I was, I realised, at the apex of a huge fell made of limestone.

Then I saw it, a proud Indian flag fluttering in the breeze to welcome me. Beyond the flag was my goal – the 80 or so stone-built, wooden-shuttered, grass-roofed Tibetan-style homes of Kibber, at 14,500ft (4,420m) above sea-level, the highest inhabited village in the world.

Here on the roof of the world, life seems surprisingly normal; I rode through the village just after 3pm as schoolchildren left

the one-room building in which they learn and ambled along the track that served as their high street, smiling and waving at the mad English guy on his Royal Enfield Desert Storm.

They were clearly wondering why this lunatic had come all this way, and they were not alone. Why had I? I suppose 'because it's there', as legend-in-this-neck-of-the-woods George Mallory famously told a *New York Times* reporter who had the temerity to question why he was planning to climb Everest back in 1923.

Sadly, that was to be his undoing; his body, and that of his colleague Andrew 'Sandy' Irving were found in 1999 just a few hundred metres from the summit – whether they had reached their goal first remains the subject of speculation.

Why is it there? Well, the history of humanity has been in many senses the greatest species success story Charles Darwin might have dared to dream of – resolute, determined people clinging to terrain that to others seems uninhabitable; the Amazon, Inuit territory, Manhattan, the list is long.

Kibber, though, is different. Yes, it is remote, and only the resolutely determined will reach it. But once there one realises it is verdant, with lush, green agricultural land and surprisingly – or, at least, it was to me – horses that roam the sharply sloping terraced fields. For Kibber's existence is thanks to its position

on an old trade route between Tibet and Himachal Pradesh, the northernmost province of India, in which it belongs – which is why the Indian flag is displayed. It seems anachronistic in the way that Spain's big toe – Gibraltar, with its red post boxes and English-style pubs – seems anachronistic. Buddhism is the only show in town round these parts, and the people seem Tibetan rather than Indian.

The original settlers came to trade horses for yaks. And today, though certainly not wealthy – indeed, far from it – this is a welcoming place, with smiles and waves from everyone greeting me as I gunned my bike to head up through the village to its highest point, on the far side of town, before turning back.

As well as the school, with its painted slogans on rendered breeze-block walls exhorting pupils to learn, to strive, to be punctual and – above all – to achieve, there is a post office, a dispensary and, quaintly, a community TV set.

Then again, with views along the Spiti Valley, of rolling hills, sheer drops, precipices and Nature's palette of colours one way, and the mighty Himalayan peaks the other, an average day's programming might seem a little tame.

I had come, I had seen I had shaken hands with beaming schoolchildren, who demanded to know from whence I had

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come. When I told them 'the Kullu Valley', their faces fell – until I said: 'And before that, London...' It seemed to make their day.

At last, I powered up the Royal Enfield (I mean, of course, my beast of a motorbike rather than the antiquated standard-issue British Army rifle) and headed back down the valley.

A jolting, bumpy, pothole-avoiding seven-mile ride brings you to Ki Gompa, a Buddhist monastery perched atop a natural rock citadel. It is well worthwhile stopping here for *chai*, and to glimpse the way of life of the monks (aged eight to 80), their life-style having surely changed little over the monastery's 800-year existence. In the first walled courtyard there is an enormous swastika inlaid into the tiled floor. That such an ancient and potent symbol of goodness should have been appropriated by the Nazis (albeit reversed) for their evil purposes remains shocking, the equivalent for Buddhists of inverting a crucifix.

### Kaza is like the Wild West, with a high street flanked by wooden boardwalks

A switchback above the clouds (right); flags adorning Buddhist shrines add a splash of colour to the roadside (below)



A few kilometres further down the valley – more vertigo-inducing switchbacks, sheer drops and interesting driving techniques by local truck drivers safely negotiated – I approached the trading town of Kaza.

It's like the Wild West here, with a high street flanked by wooden boardwalks and trading shacks offering everything from fruit and vegetables to sun cream. I optimistically entered a branch of the state bank in an attempt to draw cash; the cashpoint had a sign over it saying, simply, 'Shut'.

I asked an armed policeman who seemed to be standing guard – you learn not to question such things fairly quickly in this region – when it might be open again. 'Waiting engineer Srinagar,' he advised. 'Maybe seven days.'

There are plenty of *dabbas* here – shacks serving up bowls of dal and rice. There is little meat available – and even if there



were, lack of refrigeration and constantly interrupted power supplies would make it a foolhardy choice. I typically paid around 80p for pretty much all I could eat, and today was no exception.

After a short sojourn in an internet café to check my email and assure myself everything was as it should be at home, I just had time to interview an Israeli traveller who wanted to talk about how much she despised Israeli politics before it was time to turn the bike back around and think about retracing the grueling journey back to base camp in the Kullu Valley two days' ride away.

My trepidation was fuelled mainly by the knowledge that I would once again have to do battle with the notorious Rohtang Pass. Taken literally it's name means 'Pile of Corpses', a reference to the number of people who have met their end here.

Short of calling it 'The Road to Certain Death', it's hard to

imagine a more intimidating name. It's also not hard to see how it earned its sinister moniker; though; at 13,000ft above sea-level, it's a rapidly descending series of switchbacks and hairpins with sheer drops to the side.

That the dirt trail is more like a mud-rink adds a certain frisson to the experience, plus you have the added terror of lines of trucks skidding uncontrollably – brakes are little use in these conditions – in both directions when there is scarcely enough width for one.

I will simply finish by saying that I came close to meeting my death twice on the way down. But that, as they say, is a story for another day.

*Extreme Bike Tours offers the Mighty Himalayas Discovery Tour. For more information, visit [www.extremebiketours.com](http://www.extremebiketours.com)*



A Tata truck makes its way along the Rohtang Pass (far left); more relaxing elements of the tour (left and below)

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