

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC  
ADVENTURE

# Lost

## Highway of the Himalaya

By Matthew Power  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMI VITALE

SEALED OFF FOR 15 YEARS BY WAR AND INSURGENCY, QUIET HAS COME TO KASHMIR. NOW INDIA'S "JEWEL IN THE CROWN" IS OPEN AGAIN TO VISITORS. THE BEST WAY TO SEE IT ALL: FROM A HUMMING, SPUTTERING, ENFIELD MOTORCYCLE.

CAUTION! OBJECTS IN MIRROR MAY BE 20,000-FEET TALL: The rugged peaks and emerald valleys of the Kashmir Himalaya are the perfect backdrop for one of India's wildest road trips.

The mercury has topped 90 degrees at 6 a.m. when I leave Delhi; the sun is a wavering molten penny in the city's morning haze. My pony, a Royal Enfield motorcycle, is loaded down with enough gear for a month-long trip, and I've already sweated through my first day's clothes. I haven't even reached the city limits when a sputtering auto-rickshaw, a sort of three-wheel golf cart used like a taxi, pulls alongside and its driver points out the hundred-yard-long stripe of gasoline I've left on the road behind me, spurting from a disconnected fuel line. It's an ominous start to a 1,500-mile journey.

The plan, such as it is, is to ride north from the teeming capital, leave the sweltering plains of North India, and climb up to the disputed valley of Kashmir along the India-Pakistan border. India and Pakistan have fought three wars over the region since 1947, but following a cease-fire agreement in November 2003, the border road through Kashmir is open, and free from Pakistani shelling, for the first time in 15 years. From Vale of Kashmir, the valley's romantic proper name, I will cross the great Himalaya, following the disputed border through the mainly Buddhist region of Ladakh, in an attempt to reach the Khardung La; at 18,380 feet, it's billed as the world's highest road.

On a planet as thoroughly mapped as ours, political disputes often present more difficult challenges than does the physical landscape. The road through Kashmir is off the scale on both counts. It is perhaps the greatest feat of road-building ever undertaken, and just happens to run straight through one of the world's most politically charged conflict zones. I decided to wait to tell my mother about it until I got back. Driving in Delhi is a deeply unsettling experience. Rickshaws, fruit carts, and scooters jockey for position with cars, trucks, and buses with passengers on their roofs, like competitors in a citywide *Ben-Hur* chariot race. Throw into the mix stray dogs, sacred cows napping in intersections, armies of beggars, camels, and wedding processions with marching bands. The Delhi municipal council recently passed a law that all elephants are required to have reflectors dangled from their posteriors, which seems funny until you come up fast on a gray wall of pachyderm butt while rounding a corner on a foggy night. When I moved to Delhi from New York City, I soon realized why so many taxi drivers seem to come from South Asia: Imagine a city where every driver is a New York cabbie.

There is ostensibly a motorcycle helmet law in Delhi, though women are exempt (the anti-hair-mussing lobby presumably made sure of that), as are Sikhs, whose religion does not allow them to remove their turbans. It is not



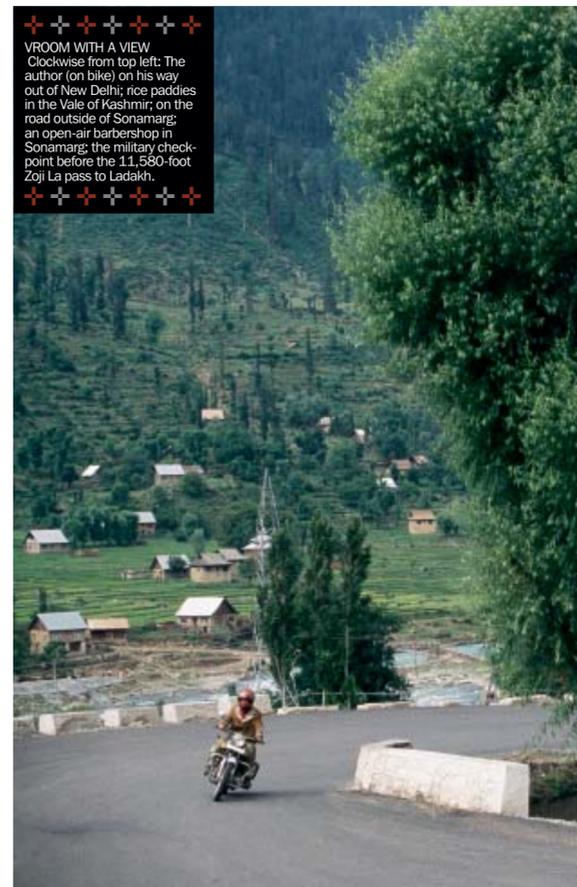
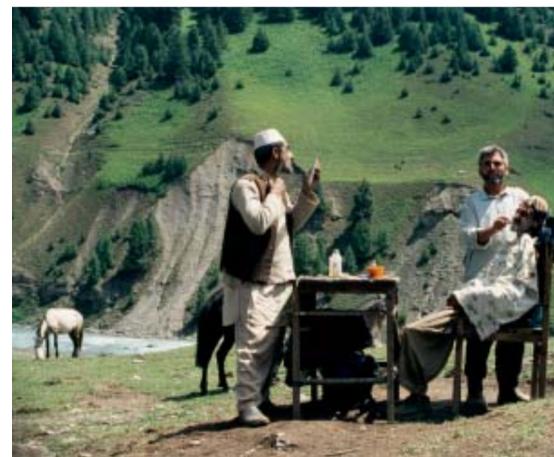
at all unusual to pull up in traffic next to an entire family occupying a motorcycle: father driving, mother in immaculate sari riding sidesaddle, a kid wedged between them, and a happy, burbling baby bouncing on the gas tank. Last year the World Health Organization declared Delhi traffic among the most dangerous on the globe, so it's little wonder that motorcycle safety is a low priority. Somehow, you get used to it.



FINALLY OUT OF THE CITY, I proceed north on the Grand Trunk Road, the historical trading route that connected Calcutta to the West via the Khyber Pass. The Grand Trunk is one of India's best roads, which is to say it's paved, and I cruise at top speed, which on a Royal Enfield is about 55 mph. The bike rattles, hums, and shifts gears with a sound like that of a handful of lug nuts being dropped into a blender. With the noise muffled by a helmet, however, there is a solitary delight unique to motorcycles, a kind of poor man's flight.

After six hours of straightaway through wheat fields and villages, I jog right and enter the foothills of the Himalaya in the state of Himachal Pradesh. The road gets curvy, and the roadsides grow thick with pine trees. A pit stop reveals the predominant shrubbery in Himachal to be head-high wild marijuana plants. This greenery, as much as the scenery, is what drew legions of hippies here more than 30 years ago. Every few miles along the road, boys stand next to stacks of plastic-bagged white bread, which passing tourists buy to toss to the roadside troops of door-handle-clawing rhesus monkeys. Apparently the monkeys have struck some sort of deal with the bread sellers, because they could easily have taken all of it at once, and eaten the boys, too.

After 12 hours, dirty as a coal miner and exhausted, I notice a funny wobble and look back to see my first flat tire. A wooden matchstick has forced its way through the tread. The foot pump gets me enough tire pressure to make it to the nearest shop, where an ace 12-year-old mechanic pulls off the back tire, patches the tube, reinflates it and bolts it back on at



VROOM WITH A VIEW  
Clockwise from top left: The author (on bike) on his way out of New Delhi; rice paddies in the Vale of Kashmir; on the road outside of Sonamarg; an open-air barbershop in Sonamarg; the military checkpoint before the 11,580-foot Zoji La pass to Ladakh.

Indy-pit-crew speed. The bill is 20 rupees, about 50 cents. I collapse into a dreamless sleep in a \$6 hotel in the hill town of Jogindernagar, the overheated engine cooling down in the night air of the foothills.

When you finally get it in gear, a well-tuned Enfield makes a lovely noise, its single 350-cc cylinder producing a slow heartbeat that picks up along with your pulse when you accelerate. It's a bike of British design, a two-wheel tank that during colonial times was imported from England. In the 1950s, a factory opened in Chennai (also known as Madras), and Enfield's engineers decided to stick with a proven thing. For more than 30 years, they barely changed a bolt on the machine, churning thousands of near-identical Enfields off their assembly line, year after year. (My model, a 2003 Bullet Machismo—no joke—sports some of the first innovations in the bike's 50-year history, including an optional front disk brake and a gear shifter on the left side, like practically every other motorcycle in the world.) The advantage of such continuity is having thousands of mechanics across the country who know how to fix almost any problem that arises. I would eventually meet most of them.

Anticipating these inevitable breakdowns, my mechanic in Delhi outfitted me with enough spare parts to build another bike. I don't know how to use most of the parts, but I figure I could, in an emergency, trade them for a ride to the nearest town. The spares are all kept in a huge steel box bolted to the luggage rack, which makes me look a bit like a pizza delivery guy, but I really have no one to impress.

The next day, after tracing the cooler foothills above the oppressive heat of the plains, I drop down again to reach the sweltering regional capital of Jammu. The huge Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, J & K for short, makes up the southern two-thirds of the disputed Kashmir region (Pakistan controls the northern third) and is divided into three parts. The mostly Hindu region of Jammu makes up the southern portion of the state. The mostly Muslim Vale of Kashmir lies to the northwest, and the predominately Buddhist high-altitude desert of Ladakh borders China on the state's eastern edge. The entire



MR. FIX-IT: The amazing 12-year-old mechanic

conflict began. The dream of a sovereign Kashmir smoldered until the late 1980s, when accusations of vote-rigging by the Indian government in the state elections ignited a violent independence movement. That movement, supported by Pakistan and repeatedly crushed by the Indian Army, started a cycle of terrorism and overwhelming military retribution that, by some estimates, has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

In the 1960s and '70s, during the heyday of the Hippie Trail, when Western travelers crossed Asia overland to reach the hypnotically swaying palm trees of Thailand and Bali; Kashmir, along with Kabul and Kathmandu, was one of the highlights of the route. Between Maoists and the Taliban, tourism to Kathmandu and Kabul has plummeted. But with the peace overtures made in the fall of 2003 by India and Pakistan,

Kashmir is poised today, however tenuously, to regain its former allure for travelers.

About ten miles outside of the city of Jammu, in 110-degree heat, my clutch cable snaps. The bike, stuck in high gear, lurches to a stop. The four-hour crash course in motorcycle repair my mechanic gave me in Delhi spins through my sunbaked head. With the help of a passing mechanic dressed in a loincloth, I pull off the gas tank, drain and open the gearbox, fish out the snapped piece of cable, reassemble the pieces, thread a new clutch cable, and replace the gas tank. I am not mechanically inclined, and now find myself stuck with a rather temperamental machine. I am sunburned, and covered in oil, truck exhaust, and dust. I am in love.



AFTER A NIGHT in an overpriced \$10 hotel, I head up a winding mountain road into the Pir Panjal Range, which separates the Indian plains from the Vale of Kashmir proper. I am just starting to get the hang of passing, which in India is treated as a sport. If you are stuck on an uphill behind a slow-moving truck, with a rock face to your left and a several-hundred-foot drop to a rushing river to your right, and you are coming to a blind curve, you are expected to pass. Very often I round a bend to see two buses barreling straight at me. There's a sort of de facto caste system regarding right-of-way on Indian roads, with machine-gun mounted army trucks on top and motorcycles way down with the dogs, monkeys, and goats. I can't decide who are the more pathological drivers, the Muslims, who believe in eternal life, or the Hindus, who believe in reincarnation. At least the Muslims don't drink.

The road surface climbing into the Pir Panjal is smoothly tarred, and after a little while it occurs to me: of course, for the tanks. The highway leading from Jammu is the only direct supply route from the plains of India to the Kashmiri front line. The road carries hundreds of thousands of troops and their equipment to posts along the border. Machine-gun nests dot the roadside like mile markers.

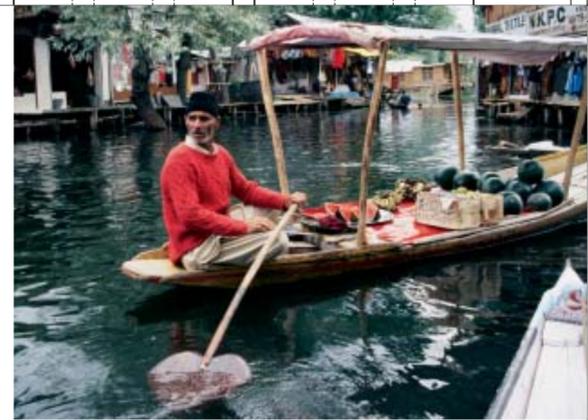
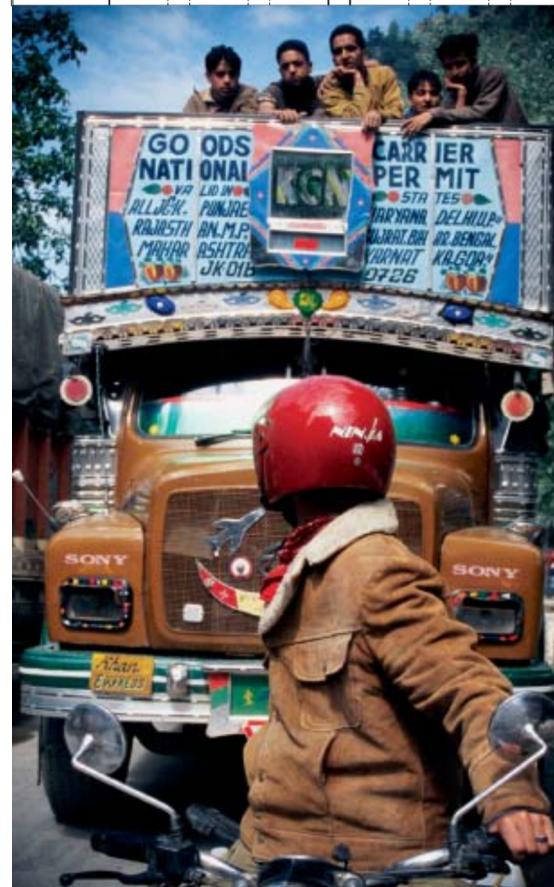
I go farther and farther up into the mountains, a fork of the Chenab River a thin line hundreds of feet below. The army engineers who built the road also found time to invent some catchy safety slogans, which are posted on signs every hundred yards. They range from the suggestive ("Go Gently on My Curves," "I Want You Darling, but Not So Fast") to the chauvinistic ("Stop Gossiping and Let Him Drive") to the foreboding ("Be Mr. Late, Not Late Mr.") to the unintentionally funny ("Rolling Stone Ahead"). And safety is no joke. At one point I see a van lying on its roof like a dead cockroach. Later I see a truck rocking back and forth in the middle of some Class IV rapids at the bottom of a ravine.

I reach an army checkpoint, the first of many; fill out some forms, and drive straight under the 10,000-foot peaks of the Pir Panjal Range and

**THERE'S A SORT OF DE FACTO CASTE SYSTEM REGARDING RIGHT-OF-WAY ON INDIAN ROADS, WITH MACHINE-GUN MOUNTED ARMY TRUCKS ON TOP AND MOTORCYCLES WAY DOWN WITH THE DOGS, MONKEYS, AND GOATS.**

region erupted into war in 1947, 1966, and 1971. There was a six-week skirmish in 1999, and most recently in 2002, the nuclear-armed neighbors came perilously close to starting World War III. India and Pakistan have the second and fifth largest armies in the world, respectively, and even today hundreds of thousands of troops guard the thousand-mile-long border, from the Great Indian Desert and the Arabian Sea to the 25,000-foot peaks of the Karakoram Range on the border of China.

When Pakistan was carved out of the remains of British India in 1947, the Hindu maharaja who ruled the Muslim-majority Vale of Kashmir, which British India had always considered its "jewel in the crown," was given the option of joining Muslim Pakistan, Hindu India, or remaining an independent kingdom. After delaying a decision for several months, the maharaja chose India, touching off an invasion from a newly minted Pakistan. To counter, India swept in from the south, and five decades of



PASS WITH CARE Clockwise from top left: A Tata truck bears down on the author; paddling the waters of Dal Lake; Ladakh's 12th-century Lamayuru monastery; the view from an all-too-common tire repair shop; a rare Himalayan straightaway.

into the gaping black hole of the heavily guarded Jawahar Tunnel. At a mile and a half, it was Asia's longest when German engineers built it in the 1950s. Choking on diesel smoke and rock dust in the dimly lit tube, I try not to think about the likelihood of a landslide or flat tire midway through. Finally, after what seems an eternity but in reality is probably six minutes, I come out on the other side, above a broad, brilliantly green valley of flooded rice paddies, with forested hills climbing up to an encircling wall of mountains. Kashmir.



"WHO HAS NOT HEARD OF the vale of Cashmere/ With its roses the brightest that earth ever gave?" So asked Thomas Moore in his 1817 epic *Lalla Rookh*. Kashmiris have always held their homeland's legendary beauty close to their hearts, and the view over the sparkling valley after the darkness of the tunnel makes me see why. The Vale of Kashmir lies at 5,300 feet, allowing a temperate climate. Old men, knee-deep in paddies, plant violently green bundles of rice in the mud, and orchards of apples, walnuts, apricots, and almonds edge the fields. Shops selling the "world's finest cricket bats" of Kashmiri willow dot the roadsides, and ten-foot-thick *chinars*, Persian plane trees planted by the Mogul conquerors of Kashmir four centuries earlier, form a natural canopy above the road. Emerging from the burnt, dry lands to the south, the valley is a revelation. There is a sign at the lookout point: "Welcome to Kashmir: Pride of Owner, Envy of Neighbor."

By sunset, I reach Srinagar, the summer retreat of Kashmir. The Mogul royalty spent six weeks every year traveling by elephant along the route I just completed in a few days. Srinagar's pleasure gardens, fountains, and ruined Mogul palaces still climb the mountains that surround Dal Lake. The city is in the height of its tourist season, and crowds of Indian visitors, who've come here to escape the heat, flow along the promenades by the lakeshore and bargain for pashmina shawls in the shops. Delighting in commerce, Srinagar bears few signs of the conflict that has ravaged the valley for 15 years, except for the Kalashnikov-slung Indian soldiers crouching behind sandbag bunkers on every corner.

During the 19th century, the local ruler forbade the British from owning property in Srinagar, so they came upon a very British solution: They built hundreds of beautiful, ornately carved Victorian houseboats in the middle of the lake, with floating gardens alongside, and had themselves paddled about in elegant gondolas called *shikaras*. The boats are the city's biggest attraction, and in the summer



THE ART OF REPOSE: Relaxing on Dal Lake

months, when the temperature in Delhi often reaches 120 degrees, Indian tourists book them solid. Unbelievably filthy, wobbly-kneed, and dazed from a 12-hour ride, I check into the New Gulistan Palace, a beautifully restored houseboat with chandeliers, Persian carpets, and great Kashmiri Mogul food. I still feel the vibration of the engine echoing through my nerves, and I am rocked to sleep by the haunting sounds of the Muslim call to prayer reaching from the mosques of Srinagar across the still lake: "*Allah . . . u akbar*" drawn out with languorous devotion, harmonizing with its own echo.

In the morning, I go to see Aziz Wani, the managing director of the Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Department. I make the mistake of picking up the morning paper on the way to his office. The lead story is about a grenade attack a few days ago at the nearby hill resort of Pahalgam, which killed five Indian tourists and injured dozens more. It is the first such attack, specifically targeting tourists, in nearly a decade. Lashkar-e-Taiba, a principal militant group in the Kashmir independence struggle, depends on the sympathy and support of the Kashmiri people, thousands of whom make a living from tourism, so the militants immediately sought to distance themselves from the attack. The newspaper headline read "Lashkar to Tourists: Enjoy!" No problem.

**EMERGING FROM THE BURNT, DRY LANDS TO THE SOUTH, THE VALLEY IS A REVELATION. THERE IS A SIGN AT THE LOOKOUT POINT: "WELCOME TO KASHMIR: PRIDE OF OWNER, ENVY OF NEIGHBOR."**

Mr. Wani spends several hours extolling the delights and virtues of visiting Kashmir, from trekking and rock climbing to paragliding and heli-skiing. The grenade attack at Pahalgam is a "minor, insignificant incident." Though I'm sure the people who were there would have disagreed, I can't argue with his point that "if we look at this globally, there's not a single place where this is not happening." Tourists still flock to Casablanca, and Istanbul, and Bali, and Bombay, and Madrid. And New York City.

Wani has the numbers to back up his enthusiasm. By this time two years ago, he says, fewer than 10,000 Indian tourists had arrived in the valley. So far this year there have been 136,000. For foreign tourists, the number has risen from 165 in 2002 to 1,044 this year. Wani feels that

**Five More World-Class Rides**

Every continent seems to have at least one vast, fabled stretch of highway to test the endurance of any rider. Here are five of the world's greatest long-haul motorcycle trips.

**1) AFRICA: Cape Town to Cairo**  
This 7,145-mile overland route from South Africa to Egypt is not for the faint of heart. Highways in East Africa vary from pavement to hippo wallows. Border guards expect bribes and political turmoil is common. Such is the trade-off for a ride past remarkable wildlife and cultures from the Masai to the Pyramids.

**2) THE AMERICAS: The Pan-American Highway**  
Also known as the Interamericana, this network of

roads stretches some 16,000 miles from Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, to Tierra del Fuego, Chile. The only break in the route is 60 miles through the lawless jungles of the Darien Gap on the Colombia-Panama border. Most sane riders dodge that stretch with a boat ride to Ecuador.

**3) ASIA: The Hippie Trail**  
Once required stopovers for every VW bus going from Amsterdam to Bali, Kabul, Kashmir, and Kathmandu still define the Hippie Trail. Kabul has been a mess recently but a few hardy souls still set out through Turkey and Iran only to detour through the deserts of southern Pakistan to reach India and beyond.

**4) AUSTRALIA: The Bottom of the World**  
There's no shortage of coastal rides down under, but none can top the 2,500 miles from Sydney to Perth. Vast stretches of outback are punctuated with towering sea cliffs and world-class surf breaks. There's only one major hazard: Wallaby crossings are no joke.

**5) RUSSIA: The Trans-Siberian**  
When Russian engineers complete the trans-Siberian highway (optimistically targeted for 2009), it will be the longest single road in the world, connecting Moscow with Vladivostok and passing through the largest pine forest on Earth. Until then, riders will have to jog south on the dirt tracks of Kazakhstan and Mongolia. —M.P.



**THREE MILES HIGH AND RISING** Clockwise from top left: Riding below a row of sacred chortens in Ladakh; a novice monk outside Leh; hitchhiking, Ladakhi style; life in the fast lane; a 350-cc hand-warmer at the base of the Khardung La.



tourism is Kashmir's best hope for prosperity. There is no heavy industry, so agriculture and tourism are the mainstays of the economy. Also handicrafts, like papier-mâché, carpets, and shawls. "During the worst of the militancy, in the early 1990s, it was a good time for handicrafts," he tells me, "because people spent all their time indoors."

I meet up with my friend Basharat, a Kashmiri journalist I know from Delhi, and we explore the city for several days, wandering around the teeming marketplace, being paddled through the maze of waterways in the lake, where merchants in boats sell vegetables, postcards, film, saffron, and bricks of locally grown hashish. Basharat is a huge fan of Steinbeck and Kerouac and he wants to write the "Great Kashmiri Novel." He tells me stories about growing up in Srinagar, how many of his friends were seduced into joining the insurgency and ended up killed in the conflict. "When we were kids," he says, "the militants were our heroes. They were fighting for a free Kashmir, and the greatest honor would be to have them ask us to join. We would walk around pretending our cricket bats were Kalashnikovs." When he was barely 13, he went to a local militant leader and asked if he could join the fight. "He told me, 'Go back to school, kid.'"

Sitting on a houseboat porch and drinking a local tea of saffron, cardamom, and almonds, it is easy to forget about all the suffering endured by Kashmiris in 15 years of conflict, even as Basharat tells me that not a single family in the valley has been unaffected. The Mogul gardens, called Shalimar Bagh, have alleys of chinars, spring-fed fountains, and enormous roses. I watch a smoky-red sunset from the Pari Mahal, the "house of the fairies," high on the mountainside above Dal Lake, and the exquisite sublimity of the scene makes me understand why this valley has been so hard for either



PROOF: The Machismo, at front, atop the Khardung La

India or Pakistan to relinquish. Basharat, like many Kashmiris, is a realist and a romantic simultaneously. Though some, he says, still dream of an independent Kashmir, they know that neither country will ever permit it.



AFTER TEN DAYS IN THE VALLEY, I am ready to press on to higher country. I will be following the exact route, from Srinagar to the high Himalayan town of Leh, that was traveled in 1950 by another NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC writer, Enakshi Bhavnani. What I will do alone, in a few long days of riding, she completed in "two months over desolate trails, with full field equipment, five servants, 20 ponies, food and luggage, plus feed for the animals."

With mist rising off Dal Lake, I kick-start the bike and ride to the town of Sonamarg. At the military checkpoint there, I wait four hours for the pass to open. Zoji La, which leads from Kashmir to the (Continued on page 88)

## Kashmir Adventure Guide + + + + +

**GETTING THERE:** International flights to New Delhi arrive at the Indira Gandhi Airport. From there, Indian Airlines (<http://indian-airlines.nic.in>) and Jet Airways ([www.jetairways.com](http://jetairways.com)) have regular flights to Jammu (one hour; \$300 round-trip), Srinagar (one hour; \$275), and Leh (one hour; \$400). In Kashmir, taxis and buses run throughout the region, though the 270-mile Srinagar-Leh highway is closed November to June. Call the Jammu and Kashmir Road Transport Corporation (+91-112-2455107) to schedule a ride.

**MOTORCYCLE TOURING:** Motorcyclists will need an international license (\$10 from AAA; [www.aaa.com](http://www.aaa.com)) and reasonable road riding experience before setting out in India. Numerous outfitters organize motorcycle tours; check out [www.ridehigh.com](http://www.ridehigh.com) and [www.ferriswheels.com.au](http://www.ferriswheels.com.au), or the list provided by Royal Enfield ([www.royalenfield.com/touroperator.asp](http://www.royalenfield.com/touroperator.asp)).

Lalli Singh of Inder Motors in New Delhi ([www.lallisingh.com](http://www.lallisingh.com)) is perhaps the most famous motorcycle mechanic in India and will arrange custom group tours, or for a fistful of rupees (or dollars or euros), he will outfit you with a well-tuned Royal Enfield, plenty of spare parts, and even a training session in bike repair.

**ACTIVITIES:** The Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Department ([www.jktourism.org](http://www.jktourism.org)) should be the primary resource for those headed to Kashmir. Through its Web site, visitors can arrange anything



GOING YOUR WAY: How to ride the roads of India

from a pony trek in the resort town of Gulmarg to a Jeep tour of Ladakh's Buddhist monasteries.

In Srinagar, the primary attraction is the Shalimar Bagh, the 17th-century formal garden built by the Mughal emperor Jahangir. Take a stroll or rent a *shikara* and pass the afternoon floating languidly along. From Srinagar, catch a bus to Sonamarg, the "meadow of gold," for a trek to the expansive Thajiwass Glacier.

In Jammu, take a trip to the nearby town of Katra to join more than 4.5 million Hindu devotees on the eight-mile pilgrimage to the shrine of Vaishno Devi anytime from March to July.

In Leh, tour the nine-story Leh Palace, which predates the Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet, or escape the city to the remote Nubra Valley on a safari arranged by Explore Himalayas ([www.indiamart.com/explorehimalayas](http://www.indiamart.com/explorehimalayas)). From there, you'll proceed by foot or camel up the 18,380-foot Khardung La, the same pass the author reached on his motorcycle journey.

**LODGING:** In New Delhi, reserve a flashy, business-style room at the four-star Connaught Hotel (\$120; +91-112-3364225) or stay at the more affordable Centrepoint (\$64; +91-112-3324805). In Srinagar, call the Houseboat Owners Association (+91-194-2450326) to book a night on Dal Lake. Hotel Premier (+91-191-2453436) offers rooms for \$18 in Jammu, and central Leh's Lharimo Hotel (+91-198-2252101) has \$30 rooms with balconies overlooking the city.

**SAFETY NOTE:** There's been a standing travel warning on Kashmir for some time, but in light of the cease-fire, it may soon be lifted. Check with the U.S. Embassy in Delhi (<http://newdelhi.usembassy.gov>) or the State Department ([www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov)) for the latest warnings. Though part of Kashmir, Ladakh has remained largely peaceful, making the region's greatest danger altitude sickness; visitors should spend at least 48 hours acclimatizing before attempting vigorous travel. —Thomas Berenato

## Lost Highway of the Himalaya

(Continued from page 50)

high-altitude desert of Ladakh, is too narrow to allow two-way traffic, so it is opened in opposite directions every three hours. While I wait, a little kid approaches me. He pops open a film canister and shakes something out into his hand. It is a tiny fur-covered ball. I'm puzzled until he holds it up to my nose. Musk. It's the scent gland from a musk deer, a species that is endangered throughout the Himalaya. The kid wants 100 rupees for it, about \$2, which means I could talk him down to a buck. I hope, as much for the people's sake as for the animals', that this isn't the future that an increased tourist trade will bring to Kashmir.

When the road opens up, the assembled vehicles all take off at top speed, fighting for position and overtaking each other along the cliff edge. The pass leads up through forests of conifers and rivers milky with glacial till. The road surface worsens the higher we go, and I find myself behind a bus. I watch its wheels sink down into the mud-filled potholes to gauge how deep they are before I splash through. And then a miserable cold rain begins to fall. I put on all the long underwear and leaky rain gear I have and ride, sopping wet, over the pass. Gujjar nomads, who have brought their flocks of sheep and goats to the high meadows for the brief summer, sit staring at the roadside with their cloaks tented over their staffs, and lone-some army sentries do the same with the barrels of their Kalashnikovs. Dirty snowbanks tower over the edge of the road, which is closed seven months a year, and the bike shakes and jounces and protests over the cratered surface.

On the far side of the Zoji La, the rain clears, and I enter the vast, dry moonscape of Ladakh. The whole region lies in the rain shadow of the Himalaya; south of here, the monsoons that give life to the northern Indian plains slam up against the impassable wall of 20,000-foot peaks. The grass is withered; the trees of the valley are already a memory. I cruise along at 30 miles an hour, drying in the air. At a tea shop I spread my wet socks, steaming, over the red-hot muffler to dry. This works a little too well, and I have to scrape some sock off the muffler with a pocketknife.

The "highway," which appears straight on a map, in reality performs exquisite acrobatics, folding back upon itself, clinging to cliffs' edges, and dipping in to side valleys to cross rickety bridges built by army engineers. At the end of a 200-mile day riding on the dusty, smoky, potholed road, I am punch-drunk and incoherent. Still, two weeks into the trip I feel like the bike is an extension of my body, and I have become as unconsciously attuned to its responses as I am to my own breathing. Motorcycling is pure physics, centrifugal and centripetal forces held in perfect

balance by the tenuous glue of friction. I trace the arcs of a thousand curves like a comet.

The road to Leh runs right along the Line of Control, and a weather-beaten sign advises me that I am "Under Enemy Observation." Last summer was the first in years that there has been no Pakistani shelling along this stretch of highway. I stop at a gas station in the town of Dras (whose claim to fame is being "the second coldest inhabitable place on Earth," a bit of hyperbole based on a minus-60-degree cold snap back in the 1990s), which was heavily shelled during the 1999 conflict. The pump is pocked with shrapnel holes.

The air at 11,000 feet is so dry I go through two gallons of water a day and don't sweat a drop. During a rest stop at the Buddhist monastery of Lamayuru, a teenage monk in burgundy robes approaches me and starts spewing out facts about Royal Enfields: horsepower, top speed, mileage. His enthusiasm is so great and my shoulders are so weary from riding that for a moment I am tempted to toss him my keys and switch places.

With my backseat empty, I can pick up hitchhikers, who are plentiful here. Ladakh is known as "Little Tibet," for its Buddhist monasteries and temples, and has an otherworldly landscape of sandstone pinnacles, mesas, and canyons carved by glacial rivers. Cars are rare among Ladakhis, and many walk great distances between villages and hardscrabble farms in the river bottoms. Private buses might pass only once a day. I give a ride to an old Sikh man who would have walked another ten miles to get to work.

Westerners are still enough of a novelty in almost every Ladakh village to attract a swarm of little kids who run out and try to high-five me as I zoom past. Farther along I find a group of children walking up a mountain road to their village after school. One of them waves me down, and before I know it I have five on my bike, packed Delhi style: two on the backseat, one standing on each luggage rack, and one sprawled on the gas tank. I make the mistake of showing her which button is the horn. We ride in first gear up the hill for a couple of miles until we reach their village, but I think if I'd driven them back to Delhi none of them would have objected.

There's a myth of the Western biker out here, propagated, strangely enough, by hordes of young Israelis who come to India when they finish their compulsory military service. Mostly in their early 20s, they buy beat-up Enfields, chop them out like Dennis Hopper, and do the circuit from the beaches of Goa in South India to the mountains of Ladakh. They are, as a group, a bit edgy, a bit brash, and completely fearless. Perhaps growing up in Jerusalem makes vacationing in

## Lost Highway of the Himalaya

Kashmir seem like a relaxing choice. Most are combat veterans, and I come across guys who had been tank commanders and snipers at an age when I was losing sleep over my college exams. Leather tassels and dreadlocks flying, leaving a cloud of unleaded hash smoke in their wake, they are the Hells Angels of the Indian roads, with preposterously overloaded bikes: two frame packs, toolbox, girlfriend, conga drum, guitar, perhaps a puppy stuffed in their shirt. I can't help but admire them, though the Indians certainly don't.

Another common sight on the roads are the tar-covered road-builders, laborers from Nepal and the Indian state of Bihar who break rocks by hand and stir them into boiling, smoking vats of tar. This concoction is spread, inch by inch, over hundreds of miles of Himalayan roads. They earn good wages, \$3 a day, and their backbreaking labor, far more than any machine, is responsible for the engineering marvel over which I've been traveling. Their children play with rocks by the roadside, fated from birth to take over the job. Despite spending their entire lives cloaked in a miasma of tar smoke, the first thing any of them asks me for is a cigarette.



AFTER TWO DAYS I REACH LEH, the Tibetan Buddhist capital of Ladakh. At the end of a 13-hour ride, I am so exhausted I fall asleep curled up under the bike, with my helmet on. Leh is at 11,500 feet, and I feel the effects of the altitude, so I spend a few days lying low. Many more Western tourists come to Leh than to Srinagar, as evidenced by the cybercafes, the "French" bakeries, and the igneous interpretations of falafel. The town is a green oasis of poplars, whitewashed temples, adobe houses, and vegetable gardens amid the dun-colored crags of the Himalaya, and a decent room in a guest house is \$3 a night. After I acclimatize and work the Kashmiri goat out of my system, I am ready for the last push.

The Khardung La, the world's highest civilian-use pass, is 25 miles uphill from Leh. I leave early in the morning, having been warned that the daily snowmelt could make the road impassable by afternoon. A day's drive beyond the pass is the base camp for excursions on the Siachen Glacier, where the Indian and Pakistani armies have been engaged in a high-altitude standoff since 1984. With gun emplacements as high as 22,000 feet, the Siachen has as many casualties from altitude related illnesses as from artillery fire. Even with the 2003 cease-fire, neither side has shown any sign of retreating.

The road, unpaved above 15,000 feet, winds upward beneath colossal peaks and leads first to the military camp of South Pullu. There will be a wait for the pass to open, as it is socked in with clouds. I meet another Enfield rider, a Punjabi named Anul, who has ridden here from Delhi over three 18-hour days.

"What's the rush?" I ask.  
"I could only get a week off of work."  
"So you're spending six days on the road for a one-day vacation?"

"That's the whole idea," he replies, lighting a cigarette and then swinging his arms to get the feeling back in his fingertips.

It is so cold as we wait at the checkpoint—among army trucks and jeeps, the world's highest traffic jam—that I leave my bike running. I warm my frozen hands on the pulsing engine block, trying to bring them back to life. It seems unfathomable that back in Delhi it is 110 degrees in the shade. And then it starts to snow. Hard. Shivering soldiers from the tropics of southern India smear Vaseline on their faces and stomp around in their Korean War-era Mickey Mouse boots.

Finally the road opens and I follow Anul as we climb toward the pass. The edge of the road drops down into a steep scree slope covered with ice. Leh, a green smudge nearly a mile below, is visible through the clouds as if from a plane. The shaggy black silhouettes of yaks amble across the road, which by now has six inches of snow covering it. Motorcycles aren't meant for snow. My back tire skids and fishtails.

Anul, grinning ear to ear, pulls up and shouts to me over the roar of his engine. "I'll teach you how to make an Enfield four-wheel-drive!"

I follow his lead as he takes off singing a Bollywood show tune, dragging both sneaker-clad feet through the heavy snow as outriggers. Sleet and snow sting my face and tap against my helmet like a snare drum. A truck gets stuck in the snow and we squeeze past it, ditching the convoy and heading up the pass alone.

The principles of internal combustion don't apply to the Himalaya. Gas simply doesn't have enough oxygen to catch on fire. Even cigarette lighters won't ignite. The Enfield sputters and stalls out, and I repeatedly try to kick-start it. My brain seems to be following a similar pattern.

At one point I rev the engine for more than a minute, desperately trying to get traction in the snow. Anul, merrily wrenching his bike out of a snowbank, looks over at me and laughs.

"Are you in neutral?"  
Whoops.

Later, at a more sensible altitude, I will try to convince myself that, had I been getting enough oxygen, I would have at least thought twice about driving on the edge of a cliff, at

18,000 feet, in a snowstorm. But right now, my addled brain tells me to push on.

Just when I am about to give up and either drive back down or start making snow angels, the cavalry comes to the rescue, in the form of a massive Indian army bulldozer piloted by a grinning soldier, scraping the road clean. Anul does a little victory dance and thunders on up the pass.

A mile on, we reach the top of the Khardung La. At 18,380 feet, it is almost 800 feet higher than Everest base camp, which is about 700 miles southeast. The sun comes out, rapidly melting the snow and instantly burning my face and hands. Not content with manning the world's highest public road, the (obviously bored) soldiers stationed here have constructed the world's highest temple, world's highest tea shop, and world's highest urinal. Buddhist prayer flags, strung along the ridgeline, hum in the wind, shredding and fading in the punishing atmosphere. I sit at the top for a long time, breathing very slowly, head pounding, waiting for the snow to melt enough to go down. I can't see what the Indians and Pakistanis are fighting over in these mountains. Nothing is meant to live here. The only pleasure of this place comes from reaching it, celebrating a fleeting, wheezy victory, and then leaving.

It's more than 500 miles downhill back toward Delhi, through the existentially vast landscapes of the Himalaya, over five mountain passes with haunting names that stick in my head for hours, like nursery rhymes: Taglang La, Lachlung La, Baralacha La. There are stream crossings of glacial meltwater at every bend, some so deep I have to pace off the water in my sneakers to make sure there are no boulders or holes to dump me over midstream. Far below, the road loops back and forth upon itself like a coiled snake. Nomad children stand alone at the roadside, waving at me. Little yellow and purple mountain flowers grow sheltered in the leeward sides of boulders. I spend the night, for a dollar, in tents made out of surplus parachutes.

Coming off one of the passes, the road stretches out for miles before me, sloping perfectly straight down into a broad, desolate valley. I click down through the gears to neutral, reach forward and turn the ignition key to "Off." The pulse of the Enfield's motor, the heartbeat and soundtrack of the journey, goes still. I roll downhill at the same speed for miles, with nothing but the wind whistling around my helmet, the steady tug of gravity beneath me and the enormity of the land around me. ▲

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