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King of the Himalayan hills

REVISITING INDIA FOR AN EMOTIONAL MOUNTAIN JOURNEY

BY **GEOFF HILL**

ON a blistering hot day 16 years ago, I sat on a Royal Enfield in Delhi, just about to ride home to the UK.

I had only passed my bike test two years before, and as I set off into the chaotic traffic, fear and excitement were fighting for victory in my heart.

Excitement won, and several bike adventures later, I sat again on an Enfield in Delhi about to recreate some of the same journey.

This time, though, I was not so alone. Around me were 71 other riders about to set off north on the 11th annual Himalayan Odyssey to Leh and back, a round trip of 1,700 miles.

And this time I was on a modern Enfield with electric start, fuel injection and solid engine and five-speed gearbox. This was opposed to the old one that I still have, but on which every bit that could fall off on the way home did, since Enfields back then were made of little more than tinfoil and hope.

It was 46C as we rode north from Delhi, and even the Indian riders were struggling, but in the midst of the heat and dust, women in kingfisher-bright saris sashayed along the verge, carrying small forests or haystacks on their heads.

At last we climbed into the cool of the mountains, and hit the twisty mountain curves overlooking scenery which would have had Switzerland hanging its head in shame.

Until our planned route was blocked by a landslide, meaning a diversion 9,000ft up a dirt track, then down the other side.

By dusk, soaked by countless river crossings, we camped in the grounds of a Buddhist monastery inhabited by a single ancient monk.

It was bitterly cold, and wrapped up in every item of clothing I had, I slept, as above a full moon glittered on the snowy slopes.

And then, after a day of mud and snow and the worst surfaces imaginable, the evening blessed us with a perfect road, sweeping down to Leh for next day's annual Himalayan Reunion.

Dancers danced, bands played, bikers and mechanics tested their skills in competitions, and I somehow found myself coming second in the Himalayan Open Arm-Wrestling Contest to a Sikh gentleman by the name of Mr Singh, who was 6ft 4ins in just about every direction.

"Well done," I said, shaking his hand with what was left of mine.

"Thank you, brother," he said, crushing my ribs with a mighty bear hug.

World peace now safely assured, I began to look around at the happy throng of riders drinking beer or rum, the band playing on the stage, the giant screen beside it showing footage of the trip we had made and the posters advertising forthcoming Enfield ride-outs, social events and races.

And in that moment, I felt a deep and heartwarming sense of happiness, that the old and venerable make of motorcycle I had ridden home all those years ago had now become turbocharged

with coolness.

We rode the twisty curves in the cool mountains





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THE FACTS

- For details of the Himalayan Odyssey and other tours, visit royalenfield.com/rides. For Royal Enfield stockists in your area, visit royalenfield.me.
- To get a taste of what the trip involves, search for 10th Royal Enfield Himalayan Odyssey on YouTube.
- Geoff's Valparaiso Drystar jacket, £250, and Joey boots, £80, were supplied by alpinestars.com and he used the Rough Guide To India, £8.40, from Amazon.

RIDE TIME
Geoff set to go





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SCENIC ROUTE Enfields rest before the high arid valleys



HERD WHEEL Wondering if goats get the right of way



RAPIDS PACE River crossings left riders soaked



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