



Destination: The Himalayas

Read on as the jetsetting
Suzan Crane transports us to
far off, exotic destinations

I've always had a passion for big, aggressive motorcycles, but the thought of me piloting anything larger than a scooter triggers panic. Thus, over several years in India, my passion for big bikes had aroused in me envy for those who boundlessly roam the country unfettered by bus and train schedules, free to explore with gleeful abandon.

Then one day a big biker named Troy – an expat American who proudly cites the thousands of kilometres he's logged on his Enfield Machismo (yes, the Machismo!) – invited me to ride shotgun on a journey through Kashmir and Ladakh in India's high Himalayas. Completing our posse was Gokarn from Turkey, his girlfriend Gili and Irishman Dominic.

Barely 50 kilometres from our starting point of Dharamsala, Gokarn's motorcycle hiccupped, coughed and died, the first of many malfunctions that would periodically impede our journey. An hour later, Troy's bike suffered a punctured tyre. Soon after, two stranded bikers required the skills of our

resident mechanics. I was quickly being introduced to the Enfield experience...

Circumnavigating omnipresent military convoys, eating dust for breakfast and exhaust fumes for lunch, we were consistently covered in grime as we needled our way over the world's highest motorable road and flew past Drass, the second coldest inhabited place on Earth. Various, we donned or removed layers of clothing as the frigid air pierced or the sun melted our epidermis, but not the snow glazing the adjacent mountains. How to describe the sensation of sitting atop a monster machine and being able to touch the icy veneer of a Himalayan hillside? No barriers, no windscreen, no division between nature and human. How to describe this utterly liberating, absolutely divine sensation as I sat perched on my passenger seat, two rucksacks tethered to either side of the bike, other than to say that it is an unrivalled travel experience?

The Enfield – formerly an English bike – is India's inferior version of a Harley Davidson. Big and imposing, the screaming engine is actually a subterfuge for a notoriously unreliable motorcycle. But that doesn't

discourage the throngs of tourists, including a healthy number of women, who hammer them into oblivion as they cut a swathe across India, the ubiquitous foreigner-manned two-wheelers littering the landscape like mosquitoes on a reconnaissance mission.

During the expedition, I was introduced to biker etiquette. You stop for other bikers in distress. You often invite a lone biker to join your pack. You serve as a message centre for riders who lost their flock. You always wave to other Enfields and often share a roadside chai. There exists a camaraderie and sense of privilege amongst the Enfield crowd.

After spending our initial exhausted night in Udhampur, we hit the road at dawn, passing the first of many checkpoints as we approached the three-kilometre Jawahar Tunnel (reputedly the longest tunnel in Asia) which divides Jammu and Kashmir. Chaos ensued upon our arrival in Srinagar, Kashmir's capital, a myriad of touts smelling potential customers like bloodhounds tracking a fox. Srinagar is famous for its houseboats fringing the city's two lakes. But with tourist industry waning due to Kashmir's political problems, the sight of five foreigners – dishevelled

as we were – provoked an onslaught of forceful sales pitches. Eventually directed to our pre-booked houseboat on Nageen Lake, serenity prevailed until the next morning when a shawl hawkler infiltrated our parlour, his wares strewn about on the floor. Renowned for their tenacious sales tactics, the isolation of a floating lair doesn't deter the determined Kashmiri vendors. The old city of Srinagar is also famous for allegedly housing Jesus' tomb, which we visited one hazy morning. It is believed that Jesus spent much of his youth and later years here and that he died and was buried in Srinagar. A book called *Jesus Lived in India* by Holger Kersten endorses this theory, as do several others that state Christ survived the crucifixion and travelled widely in the Far East, absorbing Eastern teachings (eventually eliminated from the Bible) before leading a happy family life in the Kashmiri Valley where Mary died.

Proceeding to Kargil via Zoji La Pass (3,529 metres), we planned to visit the remote Zaskar Valley. Our attempts thwarted by impassable mudslides and untenable river crossings, we redirected to Mulbeck, home to an ancient stone carving of a future Buddha and usually a quick pit stop en route to Leh. But again, a mudslide prevented us from advancing. The following day we traversed the 4,100-metre Fatu La Pass to Lamiyuru, the site of India's oldest monastery, having clearly segued from Kashmir's Muslim traditions to Ladakh's Buddhist culture.

A mountain outpost boasting unique Tibetan and Ladakhi customs, which is quite different from other regions in India, Leh has also evolved into a tourist enclave, featuring a range of amenities catering to the needs of foreigners. Humble guesthouses and higher-end hotels pepper the hillsides, sometimes tucked inconspicuously amongst the foliage. Coffee houses and Italian bistros provide "Western" fare, and souvenir shops and outdoor markets offer local crafts and traditional jewellery. But off the beaten tourist track, local life and native rituals persist.

In a small room discreetly situated in an alley in the middle of town, the resident seer wields her magic for several hours each morning. Few foreign visitors know of her existence, and on the two occasions that I attended her sessions, the room was packed with locals in need of physical, emotional or spiritual

healing. As I had been ill for several months and neither traditional nor ayurvedic medicine was allaying my symptoms, I was open to the possibilities promised by a faith healer. A trance-inducing ceremony involving incense and chanting prepared the seer for her work, and while I didn't understand a word being said, it was clear to me that the people there believed in her abilities as she, unguided, detected and ostensibly

alleviated the suffering of all in attendance. I watched in awe as this mysterious old woman literally sucked poison from each body. Then it was my turn. As one person gently nudged me to the forefront of the circle, the oracle lifted my blouse and, without any prompting by me, quickly identified my affliction. Placing her mouth – and later a thin copper tube – on the skin of my stomach, she sucked and spit, sucked and spit. And

then she was done. A friend who witnessed the account incredulously reported that she had extricated a large amount of green bile from my body. Was it a trick? I don't know, but from that moment on I was no longer ill. My appetite returned immediately, and the malady which had plagued me for so long permanently vanished. I have been rendered a believer in the unknown. And I don't need to comprehend how or why it worked. I just believe it did – and does. It remains one of my most poignant memories and experiences in a life crammed full of them.

After a few days enjoying the distinctive beauty of Leh, our Enfield crew prepared for an excursion to the fabled Nubra Valley via the Khardung La Pass which, at 5,604 metres, is the highest motorable road in the world. Nubra Valley boasts a strange and remarkable terrain: incongruous sand dunes enveloping tall Himalayan peaks. Surreal and beautiful in a stark, mystical sort of way – a cosmic cap to my recent oracle encounter.

No petrol stations exist between Leh and Nubra, so the guys packed extra fuel for the return trip. But inexplicably, 27 kilometres from Leh, Troy's bike sputtered and stalled, out of gas. In an extraordinary feat befitting this extraordinary excursion, our Enfield Machismo coasted the remaining downhill course and delivered us safely to the petrol stations and comforts of Leh.

My Enfield experience was complete, my passion for big motorbikes sated... a most remarkable spiritual and scenic journey, the reminiscence of which continues to inspire me.

