

Leh to Shimla

written by Marcus | 9 October, 2015



There's always a fine line between keeping the momentum of the trip going to seek out the next chapter of the adventure and knowing when it's time to stop and rest. Kirsty will tell you that I have no idea where this line is drawn, and she's probably right.

‘Your true traveller finds boredom rather agreeable than painful. It is the symbol of his liberty-his excessive freedom. He accepts his boredom, when it comes, not merely philosophically, but almost with pleasure.’-Aldous Huxley

Words of wisdom from Huxley

15th August – 16th September 2015

We return to the saddles on a bright, sunny afternoon, leaving Leh to take on the ‘highway’ towards Menali. This is another road of some infamy amongst touring cyclists with the promise of high passes, challenging road conditions but the reward of some of the finest scenery the Indian Himalaya has to offer. It was only cleared of snow in early July and will be closed by late October once winter takes hold again.

Our welcome travelling companion Tara is still with us but less welcome are the stomach bugs that refuse to stay away. The rest, food and cocktail of tablets don’t seem to have shifted them completely but with blind hope that they are receding we carry on.



Team Thorn

We keep the next two days short, with a visit to the huge Thiksey Monastery on the way to Upshi then camping in a field at Lato. Upshi is an appropriate name as from here the road begins going skywards and continues to do so for 60km. Stopping at Lato helps break the workload up.



Thiksey *Monastery*



Huge Buddha, Thiksey Monastery



A nice place for contemplation and meditation

As a team we're all faltering with unexpected altitude headaches (we're at 4000m), sore knees, sickness and general weariness . One rest day is followed by another when we wake up to heavy and cold rain which would make the rest of the climb unpleasant at best, but more likely very dangerous. While warming up in the nearby guest house we meet a variety of other two wheeled travelers.



Camping in Lato

Firstly, one half of a Scottish tandem crew (<http://www.peggytandem.com>), Linda was glad of some company while her husband Jimmy was lying ill next door, another victim to the Indian levels of hygiene. Tandems on this road are incredibly rare so to have two in one place must be a first! Their world tour was prompted by their children having backpacking adventures making them think "Why don't we do something like that?".



Valley below Lato

We also have an unexpected flying visit from Sergi, the Russian we'd met in Dras. Although it's now midday, the sun has come out and he's pushing on to the top of the hill having started in Leh that morning. Fast and light still looking to be the sensible option but it'll still be hard going to make it before dusk.



Mountain stream, Lato

Two Polish cyclists then arrive. They used to be backpackers but decided to buy second hand bikes in Delhi and headed for the mountains. Cutting your teeth as a cycle tourist on the Leh Menali highway can only be described as incredibly bold but they are coping well and have made quick progress. Their \$70 bikes and panniers made from converted school backpacks show that a lack of expensive equipment shouldn't be a barrier to just getting on with the journey.



This lady was spinning wool on a bobbin while she walked
After three nights in Lato we wake to sunshine and clear heads
so continue on. The road is smooth and steady and up we go.

Passing 4500m the speed drops to a crawl but it's hard to know how much of the difficulty is down to the lack of oxygen and how much is the sickness. Most likely a nasty combination of the two and we take to stopping every 5km for a sit down and a breather.



'Only' 24km to the top

Above 5000m and the lungs are working hard. There's a huge snow drift alongside the road then a steep rough section pushes us to the absolute limit. Cycling up here is challenging enough but we also witness a few superhuman runners taking on the La Ultra Marathon. For endurance athletes there's always something bigger, longer, higher, more difficult but this 330km epic must be hard to beat, let alone complete.



Are we nearly there yet?

One of the support drivers for the race, Danny is wild with enthusiasm when he sees us inching up the hill and calls for us to stop. He loads us up with Snickers, energy drink, cheese spread and biscuits but we're too exhausted to show our true level of appreciation.

We turn through one final hairpin and get a view of the stupa and flags that must surely mark the summit. It's as much as we can do to pedal the last 200m then we're at the top. We've arrived at the Tanglang La which sits at 5328m and a sign proclaims it as the 2nd highest paved road in the world.



Tanglang La- 5328m

The highest is still claimed to be the Kardang La, north of Leh who's summit sign show it as 5602m. In reality, modern GPS has shown that it's only 5359m and there are several higher roads in India and Tibet. This doesn't stop thousands of t-shirts being sold to motorbikers who have ridden to the top to claim their 'highest road conquered' accolade.



On top of the Tanglang La

We're breathless, dizzy and weak-legged so after stumbling around to take a few photos we wearily swing back onto the bikes and try to get down the mountain again. A rough unpaved road slows down our progress so once it levels off as we arrive at the small encampment of Debring it's already time for dinner and sleep.



Meal time entertainment in a parachute tent

Because this stretch of the road is closed for 8-9 months of the year, the settlements along it are only temporary. They mainly consist of parachute tents housing dhabas that offer basic food and shelter for travellers and truckers. Once the snow starts falling these will all be packed up and shipped out until next summer. The food, music and hospitality are all largely Tibetan while the language is now Ladaki, so we say 'Julay' for hello instead of the 'Salam' of Urdu speaking Kashmir or 'Namaste' for southern Hindu regions. English is still spoken as a common language, after Hindi for all of India though, and we can usually find someone who can just about understand us.



Herding horses on the road from Debring

After breaking camp by a mirror smooth lake we're out into the Morei Plains, a high altitude desert that's a welcome relief after yesterday's climb and reminiscent of some of the scenery on the Pamir Highway.



Debring



Morei Plains

Pang is another temporary village of tents and stone shelters

alongside the claimed 'Highest Army Transition Camp in the World' and a road workers' settlement.



Descent into Pang

In the morning we have to push our bikes up the steep bank from the river where we had camped while 30 or so road workers stare at us and ignore my calls asking for their help. After an hour waiting for three pancakes to be made we set off for the next big climb.



Off to work they go. Road repair team, Pang.

Passing through a narrow gorge we then power up a steep hairpin onto a road that is barely more than a ledge carved into the cliff face. Anyone familiar with programmes with titles like "Worlds most Dangerous Roads!" will probably have seen something like this, where the buses are cm away from tumbling over the edge. Overtaking is impossible for most of the way so some luck is required to make it round the blind corners without coming face to face with a speeding tanker.



Right on the ledge.



A candidate for 'the worst bus journey in the world'



If you hear a horn, pull over. Quickly.

The rugged climb to the top of the 5077m Lachung La takes us 4 hours to complete but we feel much stronger than we did on the Tanglang La. Once again the body's ability to adapt to altitude surprises us.



Climbing the Lachung La



Lachung La. 5069m

Also surprising is the magnificent view that unfolds as we roll over the top. With everything that we've seen so far on this trip I was afraid that some 'scenery fatigue' would be creeping in, preventing me from fully enjoying yet another panoramic mountain vista. But the Himalayas are as varied as they are high so each valley and each peak has it's own characteristic and this one is very special.



Tara descending from the Lachung La

From the warm reds and oranges of the Morei Plains we now have cold greys and blues topped with a permanent blanket of white snow. Below us is a vast bowl that we pick our way down into before hauling up the other side onto the modest summit of the Nakee La.



Nakee La. 4758m

Rolling along for the next 10km it's hard to keep my eyes on the road as the sheer drop down into the deep valley to our left is so mesmerising. Some stern words from the stoker encourage me to concentrate a bit harder on not getting too close a look and to watch the road ahead.



Traversing from the Nakee La

Then we come to the Gato Loops, 21 hairpins scribbled across the hillside like the calling card of Zorro. With the evening light now reflecting off the rocks around us it's another wonderful moment that confirms that I'll never have my fill of mountain scenery. We camp soon after the bottom and spend the evening drinking in our surroundings



The Gato Loops, 21 hairpins dropping 450m



The Gato Loops



Truck on the Gato Loops



We survived the Gato Loops



Camping near the bottom of the Gato Loops



View from the tent

After 20km of an undulating road that follows the river valley we pass through tents and huts at Sarchu then battle a head wind in a wide valley while the road begins to edge upwards again. As things begin to get more difficult we meet a small group of supported cyclists who feed us fudge and advise us to stop there for the night as the road ahead deteriorates further. It's an enticing prospect as there's a small lake with a grassy ledge alongside but we haven't got any food for dinner so have to push on.



Huge landscape, tiny Marcus



Sarchu Playstation



The road from Sarchu

The road becomes rocky and steep with short sections that require every ounce of power from our legs to launch ourselves up and over the obstacles. We ride up small streams where the melt water is pouring down from the high peaks above us and we're frequently passed by trucks and tankers who have just about enough room to get by without us having to stop. The tankers are ferrying huge stocks of fuel to supply the remote settlements who will probably be cut off for most of the winter.



More testing tracks on the way up the Baralacha La

But on a perilous corner on the narrowest section a traffic jam forms with vehicles waiting impatiently in both directions and no obvious way to sort out the problem. We push our bikes past and leave them to sort out the mess, expecting to hear the crash of a truck falling off the cliff but thankfully it never comes.



Every truck carried this instruction, and it was always obeyed with enthusiasm.

A light snow flurry begins as we approach the last settlement before the top which is now just 200m above us. We decide to stay in a dhaba for the night and hope it's clearer by the morning. Our shelter is little more than four dry stone walls with a polythene sheet forming the roof but they have plenty of cosy quilts and blankets to keep us warm. I buy some thick and colourful woolen socks just for good measure.



Sleeping at 4700m requires some seriously warm socks

Luckily the morning is clear and the road ahead to the top of the Baralacha La is now visible. It's only another 5km but

continues to be very difficult so we're glad that we stopped when we did. This is our last major pass on this stretch of road and it's one of the most beautiful.



Baralacha La, 4850m.

We now have a lot of altitude to lose and the smooth road that rolls off the top is inviting us to get down quickly. As we gather pace and drop through a collection of tents that form Zing Zing Bar, round sweeping bends, over bridges, past road workers, the landscape begins to change.



The road down from the Baralacha La







The stark coloured rocks of the high altitude roads are slowly being smothered by vegetation, waterfalls, streams and lakes. Eventually it gives way to a full alpine view with thick pine tree forests and fields of grazing sheep and goats. Although this area is sometimes cut off in winter there are now permanent dwellings and even a proper hotel or two. It feels like we've emerged from the wilderness.



Vegetation starting to appear



Glacier on the way to Keylong

A couple of short climbs keep our legs in check and allow the rims to cool down after the lengthy descent, then we arrive in Keylong, our first proper town since Leh which we left 9 days ago. We gorge ourselves on WiFi and curry.



Hillside opposite Keylong

While pushing the bikes through a section of deep sand on a climb after Keylong the next day we meet a French cyclist who

gives ominous news of the road ahead. Our plan is to turn off the main highway towards the Spiti Valley but we're told that the first 60km of this road will be 'une mare de nuit'. The dusty road we're on is no dream either as the fine sand is constantly kicked up into our faces by the passing cars and trucks.



Backpack baby



The steep valley on either side of us has impossibly perched fields and grazing stock that ought to be secured to stop them sliding down the cliff. After the climb the road rolls nicely on with a few undulations until we reach the base of the final climb of the Leh Menali Highway, the Rohtang La. We have the now familiar sight of the road turning into a rough track and ramping upwards but we get our heads down and begin winching up.

The Rohtang La peaks at 3978m and from the top there's a 2000m descent down into Menali. We're only taking on the first 5km of this beast of a climb though and turn off at Gramphoo. This is the beginning of the road towards the Spiti Valley.



Sunset just outside Gramphoo

After a short way we spot two small tents with two touring bikes parked alongside. They belong to two Englishmen, Mark and John so we ask if we can join their campsite. Although Mark lives in Tokyo and John in Paris they always manage to meet once a year for a 3 week cycling trip in some beautiful parts of the world. We share advice on where they should go next while they in return offload medicines and food supplies that they no longer need. As the night draws in we can see the headlights of trucks and cars slowly crawling up the pass high above us and the clear skies reveal a dazzling display of stars.



Mark and John

In the morning we face the nightmare road and we quickly realise two things: progress is going to be so slow that we'll

never manage the 63km to the Chandra Tal lake that we were aiming for in one day. Secondly, the boulder strewn road is not helping Kirsty's sensitive stomach as she's launched off the saddle and bumps back down again every few seconds. She decides to try and get a lift and we're fortunate that two cars pull over soon after we've stopped. To lighten the load we take off the front panniers and rack bag and they are strapped to the roof of the car while Kirsty is wedged into the back seat. I'll be continuing on the tandem on my own for this section.



Not tandem friendly roads, or any kind of vehicle.



A lamb being rescued



She really isn't pedalling on the back!

Kirsty speeds off in the convoy while Tara and I continue tackling the challenging road. One comment from Himalya by Bike is that "...the road is so bad even the goats won't walk on it...". In some parts it's a boulder field and in others we're attempting to ride up a flowing river. Calling on skills learnt from my mountain biking days I manage to get through most of it while still on the bike but there are just a few soggy foot moments too when the rocks and water come together to throw me off.



“..the road is so bad even the goats won't walk on it..”



The road became a boulder field



More river than road

We're both exhausted by early evening so it's with a great deal of relief that we arrive in Batal, not only because we can rest our battered bodies but also because we can see that Kirsty has arrived safely and is waiting for us. Her journey was no less eventful as her car had to be pulled out of one of the streams by a 4x4 and then suffered a puncture. We eat plenty then bed down in the stone shelter alongside the dhaba.



Dhaba in Batal

In need of a short day we take a detour to Chandra Tal (Moon Lake) and set up camp on a hillside overlooking a number of glaciers tumbling down from high peaks. We share this idyllic spot with just a few horses but it's hard to fully enjoy the moment. Kirsty has had a rotten couple of days with the sickness returning and compounding her feelings of having had enough of bouncing around on the back of the bike. These roads have been incredibly tough to ride on a double bike but doing it while sick has been even more formidable task.



Camping above Chandra Tal

The priority is for her to get diagnosed and get well while at the same time take a break from cycling.



Early morning near Chandra Tal



Prayer flags, Chandra Tal



Chandra Tal

Kirsty insists that she goes alone to Menali to find a doctor and a hotel and there's not much time for me to protest before she's hitched another lift with a family heading in the right direction leaving me and Tara to ride on. We part company for the first time in over a year, aiming to meet up again in Shimla.



Kirsty heads back along the 'river road' and on to Menali.

In a melancholic mood Tara and I scramble up the Kunzum La and complete the traditional kora circuit of the buddhist stupas at the top. Dropping down into the Spiti Valley is torturously slow but as many other cyclists had told us, the suffering is worth it to experience such a magnificent landscape.



Scaling the Kunzum La



Scaling the Kunzum La



Stupas form a circuit for the traditional kora at the summit of the Kunzum La

At several points along the road landslides have blocked the way but teams of JCBs seem to always be on hand to get the rocks cleared as quickly as possible so the delays don't last long.



Pink pebbles line the mountain nalahs



The road was being built before our very eyes



Spiti at last





On my own the bike now gets called a 'long cycle' but is still 'very good!'



Tibetan style houses

The Spiti River is like a mass of interconnecting streams, twisting around each other with no defined main channel. Gulleys are lined with pink rocks and enormous scree slopes threaten to form another blockage in the road or bury whole convoys of trucks without a trace.



If the land is flat then crops are grown. Lots of potatoes and wheat.



The Spiti River

There are several monasteries and nunneries with many perched high on the mountainside to give inspiration and solitude to the inhabitants' meditations.



Key Gompa (monastery)

While taking a rest day in Kaza we catch a lift up to Key Gompa and witness the morning prayers. It's a fascinating experience with rhythmic chanting accompanied by the occasional beat of the drum, ringing of bells and blasts from a horn. As it progresses various accessories are added by the monks, from coloured ponchos to conical hats finishing with an elaborate gold fan to form a tiara round their heads. Even some of the monks seem to be finding it hard to keep a straight face when they look at each other.



Morning prayers in Key Gompa.



Prayer wheels, Key Gompa



In Kaza we collect our Inner Line Permits from the well hidden Additional Deputy Commissioner's office. It costs nothing but allows us to continue on the road ahead that comes very close to the Tibetan border. If we manage to cross the deep gorge, swim the river, evade the Indian army, cross into Tibet, evade the Chinese army and start an uprising then they'll know who we are.

I also manage to contact Kirsty who is on a course of

antiamoebic drugs and beginning to feel better. I buy some of the same as although my bouts of illness haven't been as severe as Kirsty's, it does keep coming back in a similar cycle so I'm keen to get rid of it for good too.



Shopkeeper and son



Shichling, Population 87+2

After Kaza we spend a night in the dorms of Tabo monastery and join the monks for their morning prayers. It's not just us that are yawning given the 6am start, some of the younger monks are only 6 years old and struggling to stay awake. Founded in 996 AD this is the oldest continuously serving buddhist monastery in the Himalayas and there are some incredibly vivid murals preserved in the gloomy rooms of the mud-walled buildings.



Tabo Bridge



Stupa at Tabo Monastery



Ancient murals, Tabo Monastery

A rare treat of 30km of paved road takes us to Sumdo, the checkpoint for the Inner Line Permit where we enjoy some samosas in the army canteen. The soldier who looks after us while we eat describes the land 2km to the east as “..Tibet, captured by China..”. The communities on this side of the closed border include families that have been divided by the Chinese occupation. Their relatives are on the other side of the range of mountains right next to us but it's unlikely they'll ever be able to cross over to see them ever again.



On the way to Sumdo

The road gets worse again, damaged by yet more landslides. There are plenty of men and women kicking stones around in an attempt to improve it but it looks to be a slow process not helped by the fact that they also need to look after their children in what must be one of the most unsuitable workplace creches we've ever seen. The average wage for this job is just 300-400 rupees (£3-4) per day.



Landslide repairs



The hardworking hard workers

An arduous climb takes us to the pretty town of Nako which

clusters around a manmade lake and is surrounded by fields and orchards. Apart from this oasis the landscape around us is elemental, just rock and water on a scale that is hard to comprehend.



The climb up to Nako



Nako



Somehow an orchard grows amongst the vast slabs of dry rock



Down from Nako we follow the river again. Through Dubling we pass tin shacks with wood being stockpiled in preparation for trying to survive what must be a very harsh winter. Just after the turn off for Pooh (no bears seen) we're beckoned into a roadside booth at an army base, expecting a routine passport and permit check but in fact getting a cup of tea and some fresh pears. The soldier explains that it's just a nice gesture they offer for passing travellers.



Kinnaur characters near Pooh.

We spend the night in 'The Little Chef' in Spillo. Sadly they don't have an Olympic Breakfast but while we eat pirantha and fried eggs in the morning we sit and chat with Karl who we'd crossed paths with a few times over the last two days. He's travelled through many parts of the world by bike and at the age of 68 is still hungry for more adventures. Provided you still have the desire there's no reason to stop doing what you love just because you're not as young as you used to be.



We seem to be on the wrong road when we leave Spillo. Not only is it smooth with asphalt, there are two lanes and a white line painted down the middle. This is the first 'proper' road we've seen for several hundred km. It lasts for a glorious 20km before the more familiar rocks and sand return.

We leave the 'Inner Line Permit' area as the road turns west and away from the Tibetan border. Dropping down further we see more trees, more colour, cows, saris, hear the sound of hacking and spitting and the temperature rises. We're entering 'India' again.



The Indians love world records, whether they're true or not

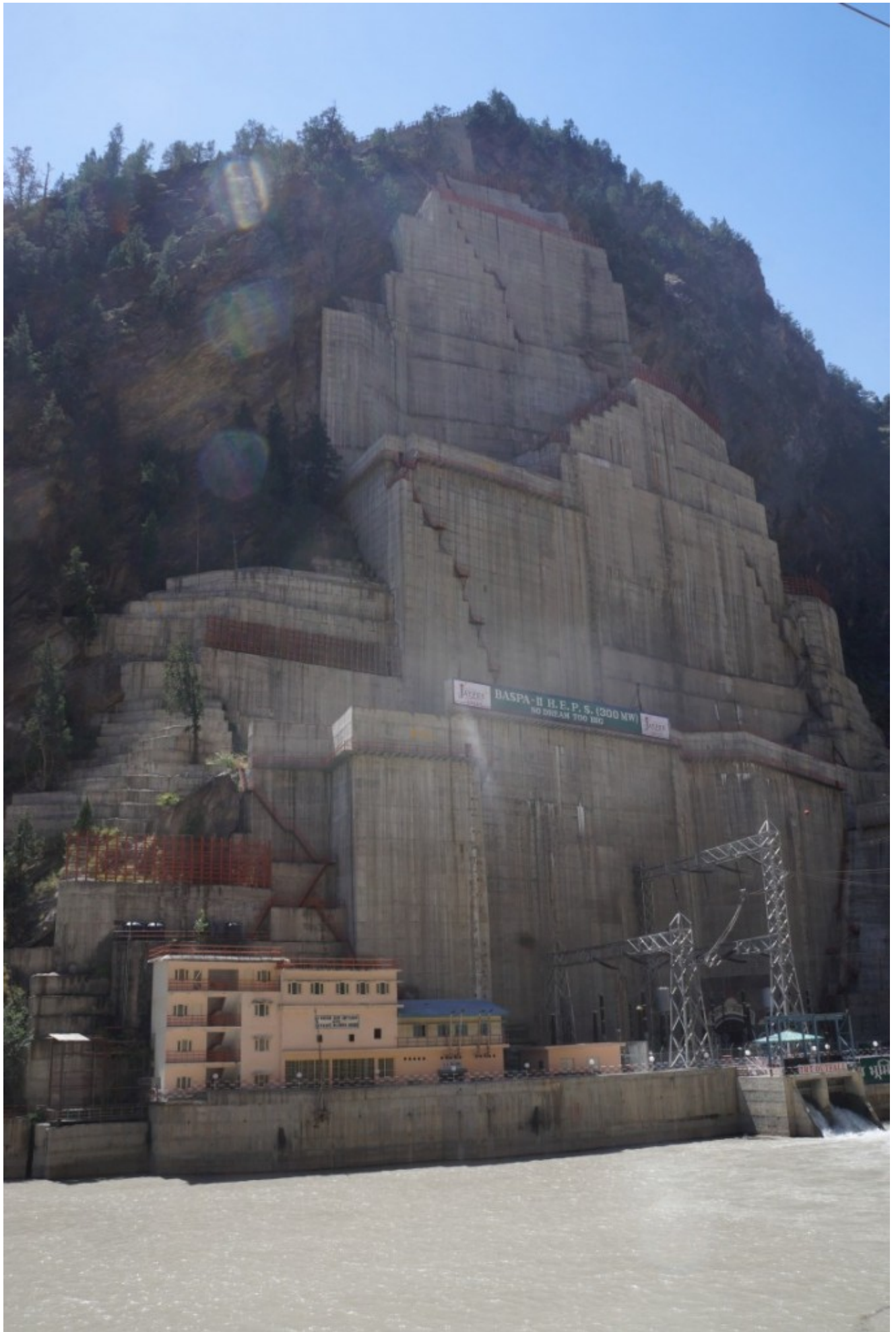


A million tons of rock dangling over the road

The chocolate brown Sutlej river rages below us, picking up tributaries from the mountains and gathering pace. There are huge hydroelectric plants built into the hillside. 1/4 of India gets its electricity from Himachal Province thanks to water and gravity.



A confluence of blue into the brown Sutlej River



Enormous Hydro Power Plant

A new power plant is being constructed south of the village of Chilling but drilling for the pipelines last summer caused a landslide that destroyed the main road below. The resulting diversion is still in place and involves an extra 15km and a 600m high steep climb which we take on begrudgingly. On the way up we pass troops of monkeys and verges filled with Marijuana then the small reward is a view back down to the valley below, where we should have been riding.



Roadside herb garden

My front brake cable had snapped while I was trying to tighten it up earlier in the morning, thankfully while stationary and thankfully before the long fast descent into Tapri that we now enjoy.



Enjoying our bonus climb

Finding some WiFi I manage to catch up with Kirsty who is on the decline again and still in Menali. The course of pills had only had a temporary effect and she's feeling worse than ever. Our rendez-vous in Shimla can't come soon enough.

We're in the Kinnaur Valley now which is a road builder's nightmare. Near vertical cliffs leave no option but to carve a notch in the rock which is our pathway through this stunning valley. Trucks and buses squeeze under the overhanging rock with nothing but a slim armco barrier or the occasional concrete block to catch them if they get too close to the edge.



Kinnaur Valley road, an amazing engineering feat



Kinnaur valley road



Kinnaur valley road, mind your head

At Jeori, we decide over an ice cream to hitch a lift up to Sarahan where we stay in the basic dorm of the Hindu Bhimikhali Temple. A snoring Swiss backpacker makes for a restless night's sleep that is brought to an abrupt end by the morning prayers being broadcast at high volume from 4am. But we'd planned an early start anyway and hit the road at 6:00am as we want to make good progress today.



Too lazy to ride another bonus climb to Sarahan



Bhimikhali Temple





The morning sunlight creeps down the mountainside as we plunge back to Jeori for a quick breakfast. Then onwards and downwards for most of the morning. The roads are busy with vehicular, pedestrian and bovine traffic and as we pass through each hectic town the utmost concentration is needed to make it through safely.



Early morning descent from Sarahan



By lunchtime we've covered 70km and stop to refuel and rehydrate. The air is hot, humid and thick with oxygen. We can almost drink the air and both Tara and I feel stronger than ever having been up high for so long.



More faces of Kinnaur

Which is just as well as the afternoon will be spent climbing up to Narkanda. A winding road for 37km that will take us from 900m back to 2800m. It begins in dense jungle and finishes in fresh pine forests steepening up towards the top with a broken road surface and curious monkeys watching from the branches of trees.



Helpful road sign on the long climb to Narkanda



Parking for bikes and beef

We arrive in the ski station town over 12 hours and 110km after leaving Sarahan at dawn and treat ourselves to a smart hotel and a huge dinner.

It's then a pleasant ride along an alpine ridge line towards Shimla. Himachal is the fruit basket of India and it's apple season at the moment. The roads are packed with hundreds of trucks laden with crates of apples picked from the vast orchards that line the slopes below us.



Apples by the truckload



Candy floss?



Proud owner of this well groomed yak

Battling with increasing volumes of traffic we finally arrive

in Shimla and make our way up to the town centre on the ridge of a hill. Famous for being the summer capital of India during the British Raj, the entire government used to move from Delhi to this hill station to escape the heat from March to October. It has the feel of an English Spa town with the grand Gaiety Theatre, a provincial church and a library that wouldn't look out of place in Cheltenham.



St Michael's Church, Shimla



The Viceroyal Lodge, Shimla. 1/5th of the world's population used to be ruled from here

This is the end of our Himalayan odyssey, since leaving Srinigar we've ridden over 1500km and climbed somewhere in the region of 30,000m. We celebrate with the luxuries of pizza and beer while on the streets there are celebrations for Lord Krishna's birthday.



Krishna celebrations



Krishna celebrations



Mass cooking for the celebrations

But the celebrations for us at least are slightly muted as there is still one member of the party missing. Kirsty was not feeling well enough to make the 8 hour journey from Menali so is waiting another day before heading across. It means she misses saying goodbye to Tara who has a flight to catch from Delhi in a couple of days. Tara leaves Shimla in the morning on the tiny 'Toy Train' that winds its way down to the plains far below. Her journey now will follow ours in reverse as she flies into Bishkek then takes on the Pamir Highway. After that it's Cairo to Cape Town early in 2016 (www.followmargopolo.com). Hopefully we'll ride together again but who knows where or when.



A temple with houses squeezed around it, Shimla



Shimla knitting group

After 10 days apart Kirsty finally arrives by taxi that evening. I'm shocked by how gaunt and frail she looks. I think

we both underestimated how serious amoebic dysentery could be and I can only imagine how awful the last week has been for her. She's on yet another course of drugs prescribed by the doctor in Menali and so far she's making good progress in that she can walk more than a few steps and eat, more than can be said for a few days ago.



Filling up at the Wake and Bake café, Shimla



Every kind of fruit available!



Head waiter at The Indian Coffee House, Shimla

Shimla provides a comfortable place to stay, good places to eat and monkeys for entertainment so we decide to stay for as long as necessary to get Kirsty back up to strength.



Baby monkey being groomed



Don't get too close



Dancers at the Shimla Apple Festival



Dancers at the Shimla Apple Festival



Dancers at the Shimla Apple Festival

As we were warned, India shouldn't be underestimated. Every day we've had moments where we have to stand and stare with a look of total awe at a landscape that verges on the surreal. But with the beauty comes the beast and carrying on such arduous riding while sick has taken a heavy toll. Physically and emotionally drained from the experience I should have recognised that we needed more rest but instead we pushed on. From this there is a lesson I hope to have learnt, particularly for Kirsty's sake.



As Billy Ocean once said..



Yes you can!



Kinnaur hat

Delhi to Srinigar to Leh

written by Marcus | 9 October, 2015



Flying has some advantages as a form of transport over traveling by bike. It's quicker for one, 100's of km pass by in minutes and hours instead of days and weeks. It's certainly less physically demanding with the stairs up to the plane being the hardest climb you're likely to encounter. The seats are generally more comfortable, it's unlikely to rain or snow or reach 45 degrees inside the cabin too. Hang on, why are we cycling to New Zealand instead of flying?! Airline food for one. But hopefully the last year's worth of blogs provides a

few more reasons too.

The biggest difference though is the shock of the change. Hopping on a plane at Heathrow and then stepping out in Delhi would take some serious adjustments. At least our flight from Bishkek to Delhi wouldn't be quite such a severe difference thanks to the gradual move east leading up to it, but we had been warned that India would still be a very new experience. 1.2 billion people, 26 provinces, 22 different languages and 33 million gods (aprox.). Just scraping the surface of this enormous country was going to be an assault on the senses.



Indira Ghandi Airport

28th July to 14th August 2015

Sitting on the floor of Indira Ghandi Airport reassembling the bike understandably draws a small crowd of curious but silent onlookers, something we'll have to get used to. A brief test ride around the arrivals lounge confirms that everything is

intact and fully functional which is always a huge relief.



Rebuilding the bike in Delhi Airport

It's a 20km ride into the city and we brace ourselves for what we expect to be some of the worst roads on the planet. But for the first 10km or so the only significant event is a pinch puncture on the rear wheel, no doubt caused by a poorly fitted tyre when I pumped it up at the airport.

Yes there are lots of cars, buses, tuktuks, rickshaws, bikes, trucks, cows. Some of them are going the wrong way down the road, all of them are beeping their horns continuously (apart from the cows). Somehow the tandem moves smoothly through the middle of it all with barely a hitch. We get lots of thumbs up and calls of "Double cycle! Very Good!" from the tuktuk drivers.



Most cyclists make our load seem quite light

It's only when we get to the final 5km or so that the volume of traffic increases ten fold which prompts some risky manoeuvres as people try to squeeze through impossible gaps. Patience is required along with some sudden bursts of pedalling to make progress to our hotel.



Dodging traffic in Delhi

Here our thanks go to our generous friends and family as we dip into the hotel voucher that we were given before we left and check into the Hotel Ajanta. Again a crowd quickly forms around the bike while I wait for the staff to work out where they're going to put it. They find a space in a neighbouring hotel lobby, we dump the bags then explore the streets by foot.

It's a seething mass of activity everywhere we look. Barbers shave their customers from stools perched on the pavement. A man is working through a huge pile of ironing using an iron filled with hot charcoal. Carts of fruit and veg continuously trundle up and down the road stocking up the small kiosks. Down every alleyway a hundred other people are doing a hundred different things. The noise, smells, colours are all at maximum volume and its exciting and daunting to be in the middle of it all.



A man making wedding garlands filled with money

Jainist temples sit alongside Hindu temples, Mosques and churches. Whole streets are dedicated to just selling wedding invitations or rice or hinges. Monkeys climb among the lethal looking tangle of electricity cables. I get my ears cleaned by a man in a red hat with a metal stick, all the time he mutters "hard dirty, hard dirty".



Lakshmi Narayan Mandir Temple



Specialist sari edging shop



Enough wax came out to make a candle.

Would a trip to India be complete without a visit to the Taj Mahal? Maybe, but as one of the most recognisable buildings ever built we're intrigued to see what it is really like up close. 2 hours on an early morning train takes us to Agra where a persuasive tuktuk driver convinces us to follow his recommended itinerary for the day. Instead of going straight to the Main Attraction we instead visit the 'Baby Taj' and Agra Fort first, leaving the Taj proper until mid afternoon.



Tomb of I'timād-ud-Daulah (baby Taj)

This proves a good tip as there seem to be fewer crowds and we get a much better opportunity to recreate the famous 'Diana sulking on a bench' photo. There's no doubt that this is a magnificent place, ornately decorated with coloured marble shards set against the gleaming white marble walls, it's hard not to be very, very impressed.



East Face of the Taj Mahal



Another two days in Delhi to take in the obligatory free walking tour and we're ready to leave. Only Delhi isn't ready to let us go without a little reminder. As well as the busy traffic we'd expected a bout of Delhi Belly while in India, from what we'd read and been told it's almost unavoidable. Sure enough we both begin to feel some rumblings in the tummy after only a few days in the country and we're not feeling our best. But we want to get out of this huge and filthy city and head North.



Colour everywhere

Our next stop is Amritsar, again on an early morning train. We load up with imodium and make the short ride to New Delhi station past dozens of sleeping bodies. They sleep in their rickshaws, tuktuks, on the ironing board, barbers stool, gutters and all along the station platform. In India, If you're tired just lie down and take a nap, even if you're in the middle of a central reservation. From the train we see slums built right up to the tracks and families are waking from roof tops and from under corrugated sheeting.



Sleeping tuktuk driver



Tired of ironing

Amritsar is the home of the Golden Temple (Harmandir Sahib), the holiest site for Sikhs and as a religion that welcomes people of all faiths and backgrounds the temple complex includes a free hostel for travellers. As we're about to check in a bright yellow Thorn touring bike comes round the corner being pushed by Tara from Canada (<http://followmargopolo.com>). She's just arrived from Pakistan having been fortunate enough to have ridden from Mongolia down through China and along the Karakorum Highway thanks to a generous 1 year Visa issued in Canada.



Tara the intrepid Canadian (<http://followmargopolo.com/>)

The temple itself is a shimmering edifice coated in 750kg of gold in the middle of the 'tank' of holy water. Turbans of varying design and elaborateness are on display amongst the crowds with many devotees in full ceremonial dress, complete with swords hanging from their waists. All the time calm music is broadcast around the temple complex which is a recital of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh holy scriptures) being sung by musicians in the centre of the temple. It takes them 2.5 days at 16 hours a day to sing the entire book, then they start all over again.



The Golden Temple, Amritsar



The Golden Temple, Amritsar

Overnight we are confident that our bikes will be safe being guarded by a snoozing Sikh lying next to them with his sword still by his side.



Ceremonial Sikh

Both Kirsty and I are still having tummy trouble and a suspect Lassi disagrees with Tara too so we spend more time than we'd like in the hostel trying not to go too far from the toilet. We do manage to brave the feeding frenzy of the temple canteen a couple of times though. This is the largest free kitchen in the world with up to 100,000 people a day shuffling through the precision conveyor system to receive their Dal, rice, chapati and super sweet masala chai. The sound of clattering metal trays passing through the vast washing up facility is like a rhythmic, deafening percussion orchestra making this the loudest kitchen in the world too.



Rice and dahl by the bucketload

Amritsar is only 30km from the Pakistan border. Tensions continue to run high between these neighbours and is symbolised by the famous Wagah border retreat ceremony that takes place every day. On either side of the border gates huge grandstands have been constructed that get filled with baying crowds ready to cheer for their country and verbally crush the

enemy that they can see just 100m away. It's worth the tuktuk ride to get there even with a change of vehicle half way due to a puncture.



Wagah border ceremony grandstands



Supporting Hindustan!

At 6pm a man in white carrying a microphone appears and begins whipping the Indian audience into a frenzy. But for every chant of "Hindustan!" There's a reply from the Pakistani mob. Then the soldiers begin their parade. In formal regalia that includes a fan shaped plume giving the impression of a mating cockerel, the soldiers perform increasingly elaborate goosesteps, high kicks and stand in intimidating stances with downturned thumbs, all aimed at their Pakistani counterparts who do the same in a mirror image of menace. It's surprisingly camp, highly entertaining and the crowds show their support with rising volume right up until the climax when both sides lower their flags in unison and slam the border gates shut. There's a good clip from the ceremony when Michael Palin visited during his tour of the Himalaya here: youtu.be/n9y2qtaopbE



High kicking guard at the Wagah Boder Retreat Ceremony

Tara has a similar plan to us and wants to head North. Together we all make an executive decision to take another train to Jammu after Amritsar. Firstly to avoid the hot, humid and dull, flat roads of the Punjab plains that wouldn't be much fun the way we're feeling. This also bypasses a town that very recently saw the local police station laid under siege. The unrest with Pakistan extends way beyond the ceremonial strutting and incidents like this are not uncommon along the border region. We're not too keen to get involved.

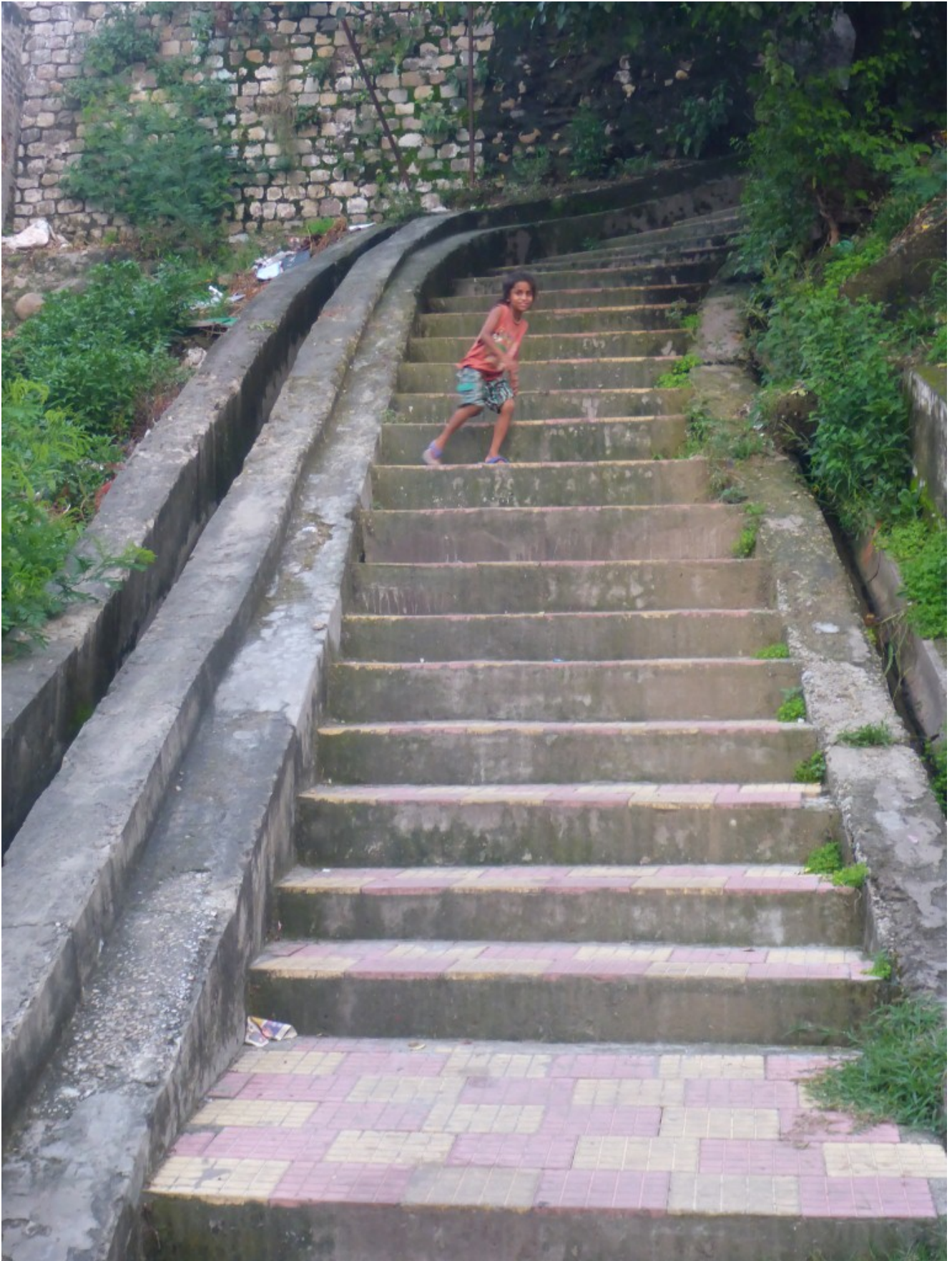
As with the train from Delhi we load the bikes onto the luggage car and find our beds for the overnight trip. But before the train departs a policeman storms onto the carriage and demands to see our ticket. I get dragged off the train and there follows a lengthy, and sometimes heated discussion about the fact that we hadn't booked the bikes and how we should take them out of the, otherwise empty, luggage waggon. I refuse and we reach a stalemate that leaves several hundred people waiting on the train and delayed by 15 minutes. The

promise of cash once we reach Jammu eventually resolves the situation and we're told that next time we really should book the bike in advance. Indians love procedure and beaurocracy.



Plenty of room, surely?

At Jammu an armed guard is watching over our bikes to 'keep them safe' and we hand over the demanded fee of 1000 rupees (£10) ransom to have them released. Then it's a fond fairwell to Tara as she heads to the bus station for the next leg up to Srinigar while we check into a hotel to allow Kirsty to sleep for the day. While I feel much better the sickness still has a hold on Kirsty so I head off to buy some antibiotics that Tara had recommended.



Steps to somewhere in Jammu

In an Indian pharmacy, if you know the name of the drug you can go ahead and buy it without a prescription. A system that

is not without it's dangers but very convenient and the course of Ciprofloxalin pills is less than 1/10th the price we would have paid in the UK.

While Kirsty rests and let's the drugs take effect I pop into the Raghunath Mandir temple that claims to have a representation for all the Hindu gods. With approximately 33 million of them this sounds like it should be quite something to behold but in fact I get to see several thousand pebbles (I didn't count them) set in cement within a network of different rooms. The main attraction is a huge polished, egg shaped rock, being worshipped as the coloured patterning looks similar to several images of their gods. A bit like seeing an image of Jesus on a piece of toast. I'm invited to pour milk on it then get sprayed with water and given a smear of red paint on my forehead as a blessing.



Namaste!

The rest of Jammu is on strike so most shops are shut. The police and army presence is heavy which may explain why, apart

from the closed shutters, there's no sign of any trouble.



Kite flying at dusk in front of a new temple in Jammu
We had planned to begin riding from here to get up to Srinigar

in Kashmir but there's no sign of Kirsty improving enough to be able to ride this difficult road. Instead we opt to take a shared ride in a Jeep to allow a bit more rest time while not eroding the time left on our Visa. This proves a wise decision.



Bike on board

From the safety of the Jeep we see that the road is incredibly busy, hilly and teeming with army vehicles. We later learn

that there's been another incident that day involving a Pakistani insurgent who has been captured further up the road from where we are now. The 7 hour journey takes 11 hours with all the added delays from road blocks.



Don't think much of the bike lane



Keeping the peace but causing traffic chaos

The final stage of ruceperation takes place on one of Srinigar's famous house boats parked on Lake Dal. The tradition originates for the days of the British Raj when some of these boats were constructed to overcome a law that prevented the British building on any land in the Kashmiri valey. Some are floating mansions, with huge walnut lined lounges and balconies overlooking the tranquil lake. Plenty more boats arrived to surround the lake and Srinigar became a popular destination for Indians and international travelers.

But the unrest in Kashmir hit the town hard and 7 or 8 years ago it would have been very unsafe to visit, so not many people did. With a bit more stability it looks like things are improving now but there's still a way to go before they return to the boom times. Google maps are as diplomatic as ever by not denoting the region as either India or Pakistan but many people, including our hosts think Kashmir should be neither and form a completely independent country. India though are keen to keep it as theirs and now have 700,000 military

personal stationed in the province making sure it stays that way.



Floating fruit shop on Lake Dal

On the lake the shops, taxis and souvenir stalls all operate from shikara boats and roam round the house boats looking for customers. A particularly long one is needed to get our tandem over from the mainland to our floating accommodation on the good ship 'The New Beauty' then back again when we're ready to leave. From Sikh Amritsar then Hindu Jammu we're now in Muslim Kashmir and have the joy of being woken at daybreak by the familiar Azan.



The bike gets a Shikara ride

By now Tara should be two days ahead of us but just before leaving Srinagar she discovered a crack in one of her rims and has had to take some time to sort out a solution. A nice result of this is that we manage to arrange to meet up with her again so we can all ride together.

Kashmir is 80% muslim

First thing in the morning we all roll out of town, Tara's Thorn now sporting a \$10 front wheel in shiny chrome. That wheel is about to be given a very tough time as up ahead lie the Himalayas and some of the most challenging roads in India.



When we stop, the villagers stop to look



For the next two days we're climbing with that famous Led Zeppelin rif going through our heads on repeat. We go up gradually at first through a tree lined valley, then after an overnight stop in Sonamarg it gets more serious as we take on the Zoji La Pass. The last 10km of this are rough and steep with a few stream crossings so we're ready for noodles and chai when we reach the 3500m summit. At the base of the slopes opposite the tented Dhaba (tea house) the remains of a snow field is being used as a venue for a toboggan run. Our legs are too empty to ride down to it but it looks like fun.



The green valleys of Kashmir



The first major pass from Srinigar, The Zoji La



Soldiers on the Zoji La taking photos of us talking photos of them



Climbing the Zoji La



The trucks give us plenty of warning with repeated blasts of the horn



Top of the Zoji La

A bumpy descent takes us into the second coldest inhabited place on the planet (-60 degC recorded in 1995) for food and

sleep. It's been hot today though. Here we meet up with a Russian cyclist, Sergi, with an enviably lightweight set of kit so that he can move quickly over the rough hills. We look back accusingly at our heavyweight machines for making the riding so difficult for us.



Down from the Zoji La



-60 degC recorded in 1995. +30 recorded today.

From Dras the road into Kargil is lovely and smooth with some fantastic fast descents. Along the way we pass several long

convoys of army trucks and a few checkpoints that don't bother to stop us. This is all part of the very visible military presence, while the less visible armed soldiers watch us from high on the hillside. We're also joined for a few km by Zaver, a strong Indian touring cyclist who's covering 4500km over two months at the age of 59.



Yet another huge army convoy



Zaver: Older, better dressed and faster than us.

After a rough and ready camp site near a river the now unpaved road bumps us up to Mulbech. Here we leave the predominantly Muslim region of Kashmir and enter Buddhist Ladakh. To signal this change we see colourful prayer wheels, fluttering prayer flags and a huge carved Maitraya Budha standing tall on a rock face overlooking the road.



Prayer flags and prayer wheel in Mulbech



The landscape changes from soft greens to hard brown rock

Kirsty has been feeling a lot stronger since Srinagar but now it's my turn to feel under par again so we ascend the next pass, the 3800m Namika La, at a leisurely pace. The road is quiet and there are rumours that there is a road block back at Kargil though we never find out if this is true or why it should be closed. Landslides are common so it's possible that was a cause, or maybe more military action.



Climbing the Namika La



Descending from the Namika La

Dropping down a smooth road off the summit we arrive at a river crossing with a small meadow alongside. Kirsty scouts it for camping potential and other than a feisty baby yak that enjoys chasing her back to the bike it looks to be a good place to end the day.





A rare opportunity for a shower



Where there's vegetation, there's a village

Despite being the highest point on the Srinagar Leh highway, when we reach the Fotula La at 4200m we barely notice the altitude. Our time in Tajikistan and Kyrgystan has set us up for this and it seems our bodies are still well acclimatised. Altitude training will definitely be used before I run another marathon.



Fotula La Summit



We were welcomed to the top of each pass by hundreds of prayer flags

Also tackling this climb are a dozen or more riders on a group tour with the aid of a van carrying their kit. Chatting to one of them at the top he tells me he's from Mumbai and never been to the mountains before, let alone cycled over them. An impressive feat and he was understandably elated to have made it up there.



Down from the Fotula La

It's been great having Tara for company as we get to compare Canadianisms with Anglicisms ("What is or-reg-enno?" "Oh you mean Or-ig-ah-no!") and having a cyclist in our photos puts the landscape into perspective much better than the back of my head can. There is also the benefit that Tara carries the bible of Himalayan cycling: Himalaya by Bike. This invaluable guidebook written by Laura Stone gives intricate levels of detail for the main routes through these mountains. From which Dhabas to eat in, to road conditions, suggested side trips and the all important elevation profile, it tells you everything you need to know to survive and enjoy the trip. Almost every other cyclist we met was also using it but somehow we had left

without a copy so Tara became our tour guide.



Stop and stare

One gem of advice from The Bible is to take a turn before the

monastery town of Lamayuru and follow a precipitous minor road high above the valley. This takes us through a kaleidoscope of rock formations with swirling patterns of purple, orange and red. Below us a lunar landscape of cratered white and cream looks like an enormous brain. Luckily we've got the narrow road to ourselves and can't help riding with open mouths as the unbelievable scenery unfolds in front of us.



Quiet side road above Lamayuru



‘Brain’ Landscape



Finally we need to drop back down to the main road and lose altitude via the 17 twisting hair pins called the Jalebi Bends. By the end we have a new entry into the top ten of favourite roads to ride.



The Jalebi Bends



Colourful sunset on our campsite in a ruined building

With the major passes on this stretch now behind us the final 100km into Leh should be relatively straightforward. The Delhi Belly has other ideas though and both Kirsty and I have returned to our weakened state. We split the distance into two days taking our time, but giving our full effort to get over the two 400m climbs that stand in our way before the final slog into Leh itself.



Tibetan culture becoming more prominent



A monk catching up on the latest score in The Ashes
Hotel Kang La provides the ideal resting place for us to

recoup some energy and try and get better. The cyclical nature of the illness (3 days bad, 3 days good etc.) suggests a parasite, perhaps Giardia so we dose up on suitable drugs to try and combat it.



Leh High Street

Leh is a very popular tourist town and provides a wonderful selection of cafes and restaurants with mouth watering selections of Western, Tibetan and Indian food that is just the antidote to the omelette and Maggi noodles diet we were on in the mountains. We take great pleasure in sampling most of the menu in most of the restaurants with the momos from the Tibetan Kitchen being a particular highlight. Unfortunately we're too late to see the Dalhi Lama who gave a sermon on the mountainside just outside Leh two weeks ago.



Residents of Leh

Being well fed, well rested and generally well is important as the road ahead doesn't get any easier. We have some even higher passes to climb on the Leh Menali Highway then some notoriously rough roads through the Spitti Valley. There is an airport in Leh so the option to fly out would be tantalisingly easy to take. But the Himalayas are proving addictive and we're here to ride our bike over them, we just have to hope our bodies are up to the task.



One of the many gems of information from the Border Roads Organisation



Jammu Hipsters waiting for the bike shop to open