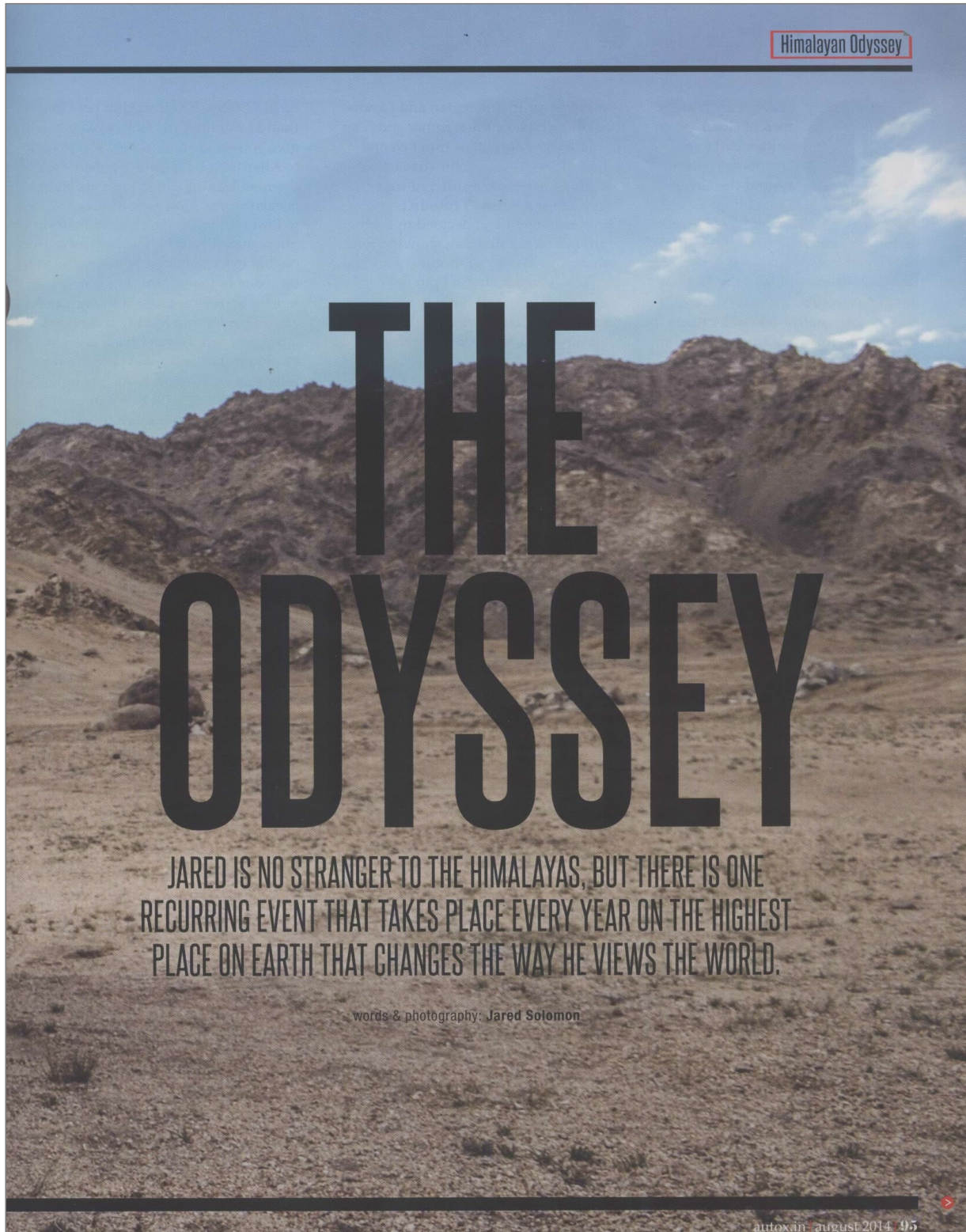


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Himalayan Odyssey

# THE ODYSSEY

JARED IS NO STRANGER TO THE HIMALAYAS, BUT THERE IS ONE RECURRING EVENT THAT TAKES PLACE EVERY YEAR ON THE HIGHEST PLACE ON EARTH THAT CHANGES THE WAY HE VIEWS THE WORLD.

words & photography: Jared Solomon

autoX in august 2014 95

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## Travel

**T**he Odyssey is an ancient Greek poem written by Homer. The poem centers around the Greek hero Odysseus and his ten-year journey home after the fall of Troy. The title of this legendary poem is the origin of the word Odyssey, which in the English language means, 'a long wandering or voyage usually marked by many changes in fortune'. This very definition could not have better described the Royal Enfield Himalayan Odyssey, where every year a group of Royal Enfield enthusiasts and adventure junkies embark on a legendary journey through the most scenic, yet treacherous terrain known to man.

The 11th edition of the Royal Enfield Himalayan Odyssey got underway in June 2014 and a total of 67 riders from across India had signed up – and joining them was an Indian expatriate from Kuwait, three international journalists from the UK and the US, and of course a handful of Indian auto journalists. Every year the route might change but the ride always starts in Delhi and moves towards Leh, the capital of Ladakh, and then return to Delhi where it ends. The route is always pre-planned, but as I mentioned before, the journey always has a change in fortune for the riders, as weather and terrain usually prevent the group from following their original route.

This was my fifth trip to Ladakh and my second RE Odyssey, so I am

no stranger to this region and I know all too well how the weather gods can affect a journey. I flew into Leh and had three days to acclimatise to the altitude. Last year I suffered tremendous altitude sickness as I couldn't hold in my excitement and decided to wander around on my first day, showing total disregard for the environment and its effects on my body. So I put my ego aside this year and humbly lay in bed for the first day. The second day I felt acclimatised and went shopping for supplies like bungee cords, batteries and rain gear to keep my camera equipment from getting wet. The third day was the Royal Enfield North Reunion party, and the next day the second leg of the Odyssey began.

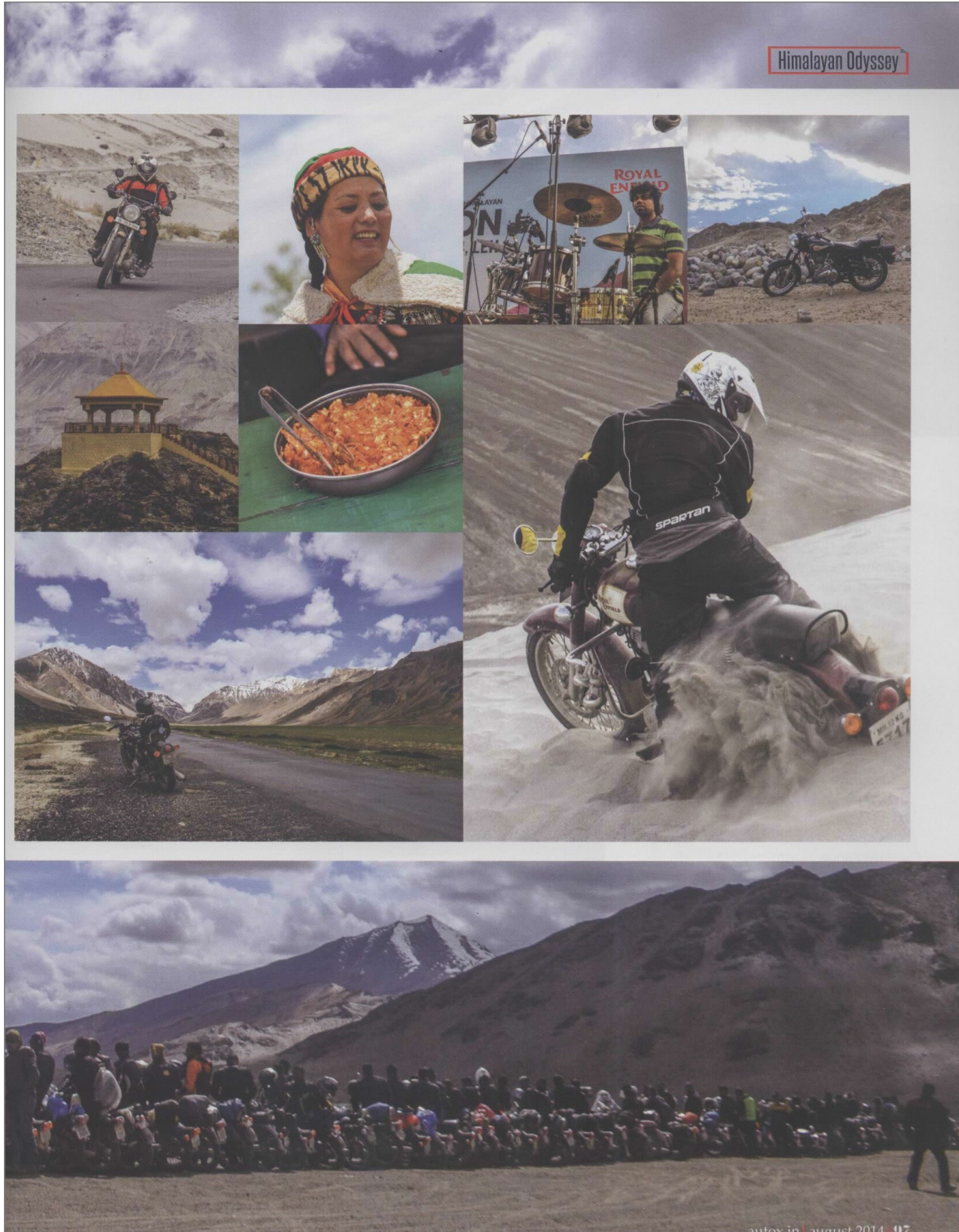
On the way up to Leh, the group was supposed to travel to Leh via the more scenic and more dangerous Spiti Valley route, but heavy rains, landslides and flooding meant they had to come up via Jalori Pass and then through Rohtang Pass. The second leg began in Leh, where I was handed over the keys to a brand new Bullet 500 – the one with the carbureted engine. I had a wonderful experience with this bike when I rode it to Rishikesh last year, so I was happy to know that I would be riding a powerful and effective machine on some of the world's most dangerous roads. Our first ride was towards Hunder in the Nubra Valley. The ride takes us over the highest motorable pass in the world called Khardung La or Khardung Pass – since 'La' means pass in Tibetan. Khardung La sits at a disputed height of 5,602 metres

or 18,379 feet. If you stay up here longer than 15 minutes, the lack of oxygen will give you severe headaches. The road up to Khardung La is quite horrible and the road leading down towards Nubra is even worse. However, as descend to lower altitudes the roads transform phenomenally and are super fun to ride on, but extremely dangerous at the same time due to the terrain. The scenery is mostly barren mountains though and as you get lower a muddy river flows alongside you. Hunder itself has plenty of sand dunes and some people would refer to it as a desert. In fact, Hunder is home to the last wild Bactrian camels in the world. Even though this was my fifth expedition in Ladakh, this was my first visit to Nubra – which I would like to add was nothing special. The next day we headed back to Leh, but coming up to Khardung La this time I was riding alone most of the time and got stuck in a small snowstorm. After waiting it out at a small teashop I decided to move on and made my way to Leh, where I had a nice hot shower and a well needed nap.

Our next destination was Tso Kar and to get there we had to ride over Tanglang La – also known as the second highest motorable pass in the world. The roads from Leh to Tanglang La are stunning and run through deep gorges and ravines that will blow your mind. The roads are mostly smooth tarmac all the way up to the pass, but as you come down the road worsens and you ride on loose dirt all the way to the beginning of the More (pronounced as Morey) plains. Just before the plains begin, we shoot



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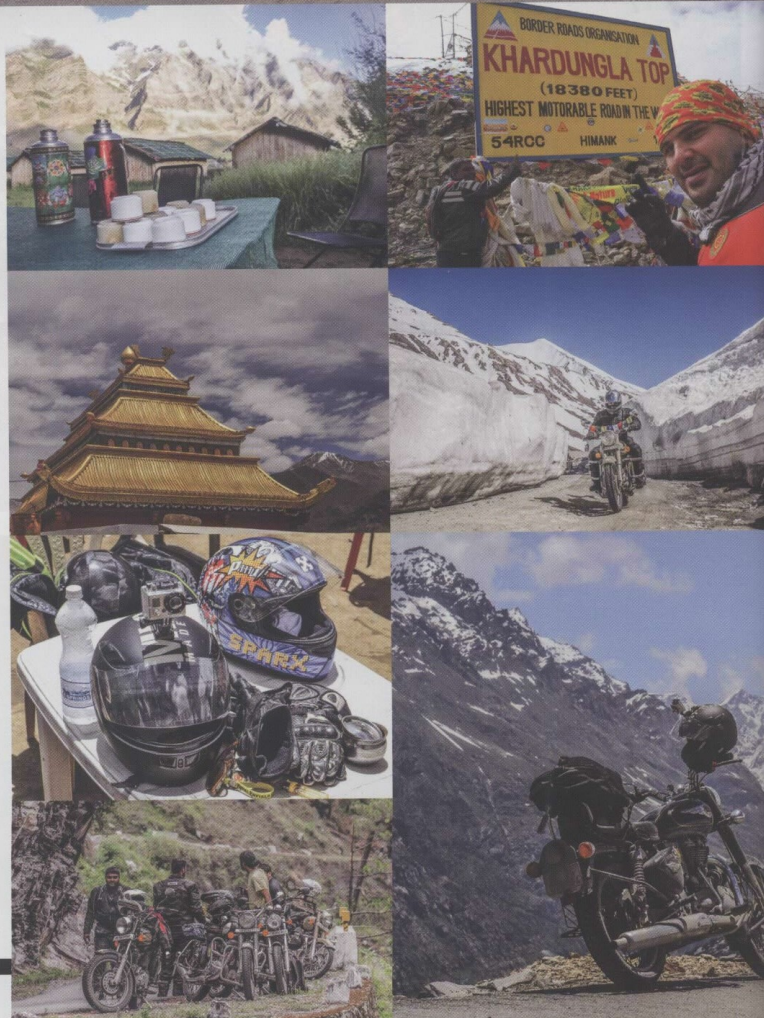


off towards Tso Kar lake, which is one of the most peaceful and tranquil sites we visited in the Ladakh region. The weather was on our side, but for some reason my Bullet 500 started acting up and it was coughing up and was not delivering peak power.

The next day was the longest stretch, as we had to cover 350 kilometres to head to Keylong – my favourite part of the trip. The roads run through all kinds of terrain including plains, rivers, steep mountain valleys, and high mountain passes. We reached the midpoint of Bhara-lach La where I had to figure out what was wrong with my bike. While I waited for the 'Trip Wagon' – the van that carried the mechanics and spare parts – every one else had crossed the pass and I was stuck in the middle of another snowstorm.

Santosh from Royal Enfield, who was leading the group decided to stay back with me, but as the weather got worse he decided that we should cross the pass before we get stuck in a blizzard, so with hardly any fuel left in my bike and with the bike's air-filter removed in the hope of solving the power issues, we trudged through roads covered in glacial waters and winds as cold as ice.

With complete concentration, we slowly crossed the pass and started the decent where the snow turned to rain, but the horrid rocky trails turned to smooth tarmac - which was one bitter sweet experience. Finally out of the



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madness, we were greeted by sunny skies, but unfortunately 50 kilometres from Keylong my Bullet 500 ran out of gas, and I had to flag down a fellow rider – who happened to be a 19 year-old young man – to help me with some petrol. We made the exchange of fuel between bikes and then together we headed towards Keylong where once again I got my much-deserved rest.

The roads from Keylong to Manali are perhaps the most scenic roads and in my opinion the most fun because you get to ride a lot faster. The pass with the best view, which happens to be Rohtang Pass,

is also on this route.

From there onwards to Delhi, you are greeted back to the madness that is civilization and the hordes of taxis and congested roads, along with inane tourists. While I do prefer the natural beauty and life of Himachal, there is still the vast majestic and peaceful calmness in Ladakh that draws me to it. But the RE Odyssey is an adventure of a lifetime that takes you through it all, as the word itself implies – a voyage of many fortunes where you can test your patience, skill, strength, stamina and courage – just like a legendary Greek hero once did. **EX**