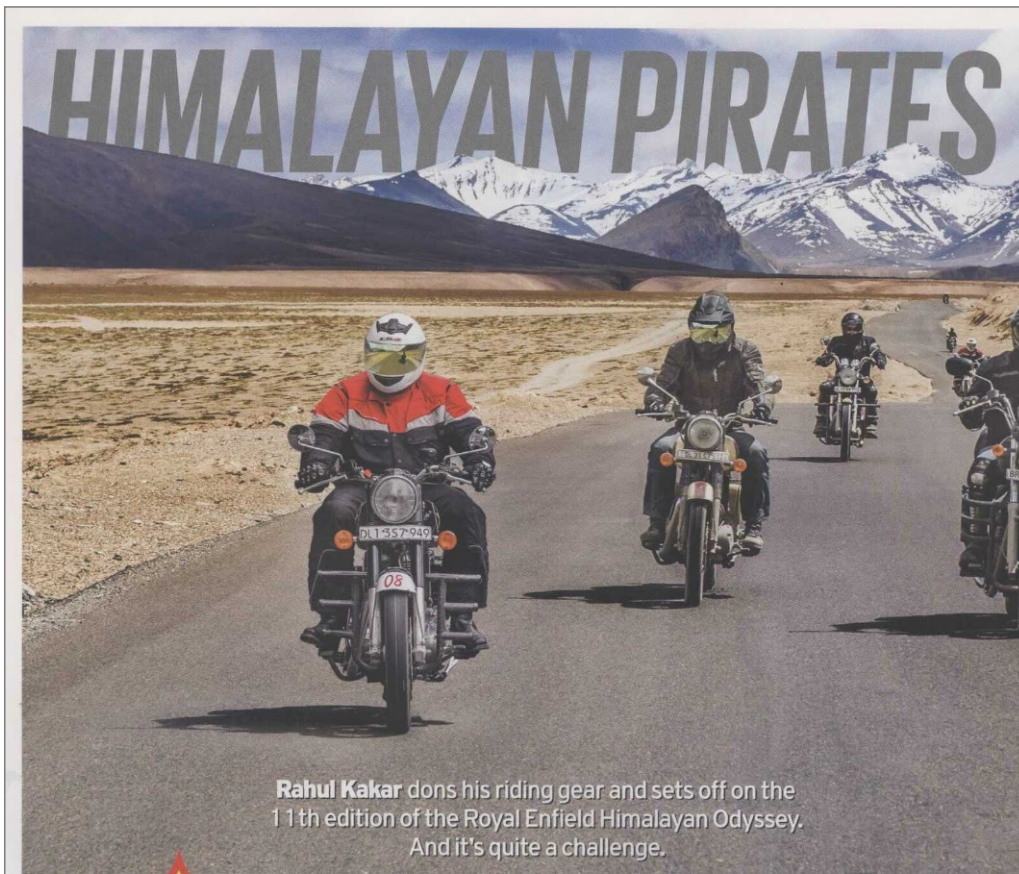
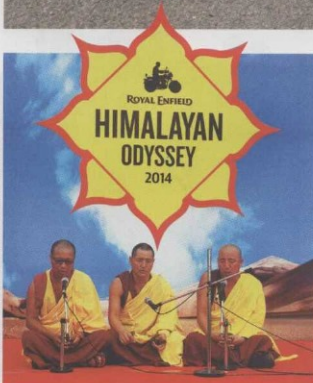


News monitored for: Royal Enfield



Rahul Kakar dons his riding gear and sets off on the 11th edition of the Royal Enfield Himalayan Odyssey. And it's quite a challenge.



PHOTOGRAPHY RAHUL KAKAR, VIR NAKAL ROYAL ENFIELD

I have put on weight. An excess of close to 8kg! No, I'm not referring to my body weight; this is the weight of the riding gear strapped onto me for Royal Enfield's Himalayan Odyssey 2014. Covered with armour from head to toe, it was as if I was prepped for war. No complaints, though – this riding gear was most crucial for keeping me protected against unsympathetic weather and, most importantly, in case I had a fall.

Excitement to get onto the bike and set off for this epic journey was paramount. But first, some important things had to be taken care of. A thorough medical examination was conducted to ensure that each of us was medically fit to attempt this strenuous ride into the Himalayas. There was also a detailed briefing about the route, and the dos and don'ts through the ride.

Soon after the introduction of the riders participating in this 11th edition of Royal Enfield's

annual ride, I was allocated a brand-new Royal Enfield Classic 500.

All set for the ride, I lined up with 71 other Royal Enfields at India Gate in Delhi, where monks chanted prayers and blessed all the riders as we set off. Keeping in mind that the Classic 500 I was astride was a brand-new piece of machine, I had to nurse it for the first few hundred kilometres for it to run-in properly. This resulted in slow progress initially, and the hot Delhi weather only made me feel like an egg in an oven. Not discouraged, I pictured in my head the snowcapped mountains that lay ahead and carried on.

It took us a while to get used to riding together in a considerably large number. However, slowly, most of us had figured out our comfortable riding speed and the convoy, although moving together, soon staggered into small groups. To ensure that all the bikes were on track without any hiccups, regroupings were conducted

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after every few hundred kilometres.

The ride upto Manali was really smooth – it took us through scenic routes and smooth paved roads. However, it was only post Manali that the real fun began. It was a complete transformation of weather, terrain and scenery. Yes, the challenge had bumped up to Level 2. Riding through the Rohtang Pass was a unique experience – it was covered with snow and infested with tourists. We weaved our way through what could, at 13,054 feet above sea level, possibly be the world's highest traffic jam.

What lay beyond the pass was surreal and absolutely worth the effort of riding through the heavy traffic. Snow-capped mountains as far as the eye could see and some surprisingly well-paved tarmac – surprising, considering the harsh weather conditions at this altitude. However, the smooth ride did not last for too long. Things got adventurous rather shortly. The cold weather →

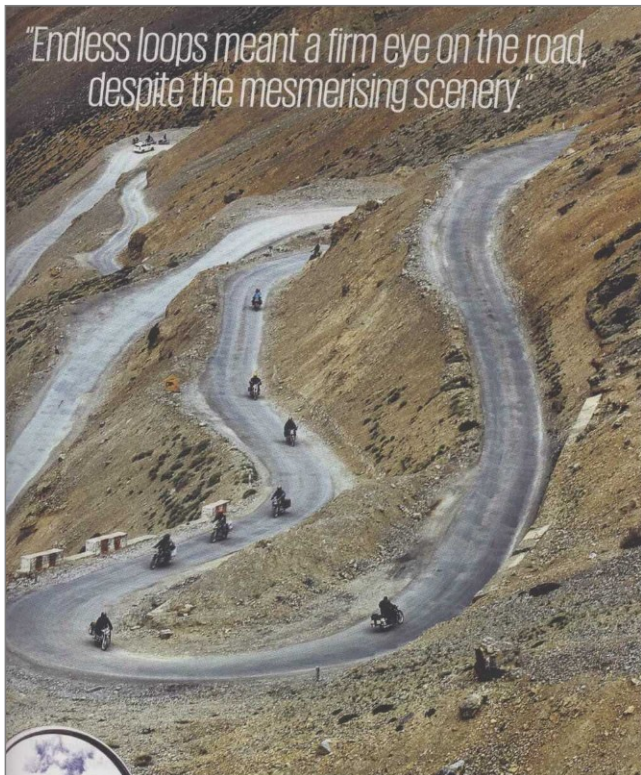
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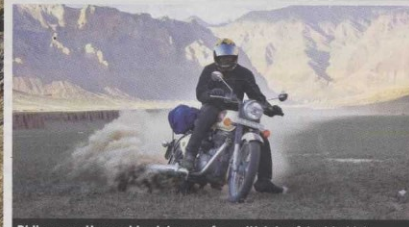
Deep water crossings were easy to tackle by gauging the depth, observing the vehicle ahead and taking the appropriate line.

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Not only the riders, but also the locals were excited and welcoming.



Riding over the muddy plains was fun, with lots of dust to kick.



Baralacha-la had plenty of such high corridors of ice.



← transformed into really cold, thanks to the rain gods. And if that wasn't enough, the road surface got patchy at places, lacking tarmac, and thrown into the mix were some massive potholes too. The overnight stay in tents at places like Tandi and Sarchu only added to the adventurous experience.

For some of the riders, these rough patches were quite a challenge and took a fair bit of crawling through. On the other hand, some of us had a blast dodging potholes. And the ruts that couldn't be dodged were best dealt with by standing on the footpegs. A more exciting challenge came in the form of water crossings which, apart from demanding good balancing



Bikers at the Reunion were given a warm welcome.

skills, required good judgment of gauging the depth and choosing the appropriate line to get through. It was just as exciting to ride across endless hairpin bends. The combination of postcard-pretty scenery and kilometres-long visibility through the More plains made for a brilliant riding experience.

It wasn't all just about riding. Also adding to the spirit of the ride was the Reunion at Leh - a celebration open to Royal Enfield riders from across the country. There was music, performances, fun biking activities and, of course, a lot of interacting with like-minded bikers. The crisp, cold air was abuzz with camaraderie.

And with that, it was time for me to shed that extra weight of the riding gear and bid goodbye to the mountains. Till the next Himalayan Odyssey, of course. **AI**

