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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.

I have put on weight. An excess of close to 20 kg! 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 cruel 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 350.

All set for the ride, I lined up with 71 other Royal Enfield riders at India Gate in Delhi, where medals were distributed and blessed all the riders as we set off. Keeping in mind that the Classic 350 I was riding was a brand-new piece of machine, I had to nurse it for the first few hundred kilometres for it to run 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 unsculpted 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, regroups were conducted.
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after every few hundred kilometres.

The ride up to 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 turned 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. Yes, beyond the pass was surreal and absolutely worth the effort of riding through the heavy traffic. Snow-capped mountains so far as the eye could see and stunningly well-

Deep water crossings were easy to tackle by gauging the depth, observing the vehicle ahead and taking the appropriate line.
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Endless loops meant a firm eye on the road, despite the mesmerising scenery.

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.

Barunacha-ri had plenty of such high corrugations 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 Tirthan and Jeshta 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 ones that couldn’t be dodged were best dealt with by standing on the footpads. A more exciting challenge came in the form of water crossings which, apart from demanding good balancing 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-perfect scenery and kilometre-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 Himalayan at Lah — 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 sheer 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.