| News monitored for: | Royal Enfield |

**10 WHEELS**

Royal Enfield becomes the first two-wheeler to do the South Pole Traverse. The story.
Royal Enfield takes the Himalayan adventure bike as far down as it can possibly go on the blue planet.

Santhosh Vijay Kumar, who rode to the geographic pole, tells t20S about the experience of a lifetime.

A 130 years of continuous production this year, Royal Enfield has firmly established itself as the oldest operational motorcycle brand in the world. Having been around that long, it had been taken to pretty much every corner of the globe by someone or the other. Except one – Antarctica, or more precisely, the South Pole. So, I was keen to do something special to celebrate its 130th, that's where I decided to go. This was herewith called the expedition. The Himalayas was the ride of choice as it is the line with the best off-road end in the RE lineup. Two RE staffers, Chennai-based Santhosh Vijay Kumar and Dean Cousens from UK Technology Centre would ride to the pole.

Preparations started a couple of years ago in the UK. Tech Centre and the bikes were tested in India and once in September 2022 and again in July 2023. And finally, the six-member team headed to Antarctica in November 2023. The riders would reach South Pole on December 18, nothing up a handful of bikes. Excerpts from a chat with Santhosh Vijay Kumar.

Is this ride was a last frontier kind of thing?

Yeah, it was the last frontier for us at least in terms of continent, but I also think it is the beginning of a series of epic rides that could be starting from here.

Was the reason for choosing the Himalayan as your ride?

The Himalayan is our most capable motorcycle for all terrains; this was the most perfectly suited motorcycle for pulling this off. The bike is built to go off-road; although this is not the kind of off-road that the motorcycle was intended for. It was very easily adaptable to do something like this and is a very friendly and user motorcycle to ride in tough conditions. So the Himalayan was a natural fit for us.

Can you tell us a bit about the modifications that you made for this ride?

The modifications were kept to a minimum. The motorcycle is more or less stock (unmodified). The only modifications were the smaller sprocket so that we could get better traction at lower rpm (engine speed), we used the stock front lockers because we were running low tire pressures, we removed the centre stand because we did not need it, and we removed the oil cooler — normally it is needed to keep the engine at the right temperature for regular riding, but because in Antarctica it was going to be cold, we did not need that. So, apart from that the motorcycle was pretty much a stock motorcycle.

Did you not get much of the compacted snow?

We didn't get much of that. Actually when we landed and saw the track, initially it looked compacted, but that was for a short distance. After that everything went haywire. So we got about 40 per cent good surface and 60 per cent bad surface.

Did you have any thin air issues there? You sort of climb up to the South Pole, right?

When you land at Novo, you land at minus 1,800 m. It's 1.8km above. From then you start climbing to the plateau. The highest point we reached was 3,500m. The plates, that's where you've left the mountains behind. Then it again falls back to 1,800m, but that takes about 1,000m to fall, so there is no major gradient. The altitude at the South Pole is 2,900m and the thickness of ice is about 2,500m, the ground is snow about 60m above sea level.

Personally for you, was this your first extreme ride or have you done stuff like this before?

I have been working for RE since 2008 and we've ridden to various places including Everest Base Camp.
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Dean Coxson succumbs to the temptation of doing the Himalayan on sea in the middle of nowhere

But in terms of sheer physical strain, I think this one was the most extreme. The original idea was to do 600 miles, but then, after everything went bad we couldn’t even reach the coast because of complete white-out. We were at the bottom of the peninsula and a lot of expeditions were called off. Our idea was to go from NTS to 650, which is the edge of the continent, and then start riding back to 600. But the visibility was completely gone. So we started off from 650 and did not stop so we didn’t want to take the risk and did a straight 30 hour ride (about 1100 km).

How was the ride experience for you at a personal level? I think for me it was the greatest experience that a person can have, to live 48 days with a bunch of people almost like our ancient ancestors who crossed the lands from Europe to the Americas. There isn’t any kind of choosers and it’s just six people and it’s a very enriching experience. I like solitude and there were days when I wouldn’t sleep and I would just be sitting outside and the wind would have died down and there is no noise because there is nothing living there and like you could hear your own heartbeat and like I said, it was as if it was on a different planet, this is possibly the closest experience you can have of that.

You were there during the Summer Solstice in the southern hemisphere... Yes, it was on December 21 and we also saw the solar eclipse, which was visible only from Antarctica on December 6. The sun was up for 24 hours a day throughout at a height that the sun rises at around 6am in the morning and all it does is to pass around in a circle around you. So there is no sunrise or sunset. And you see this brilliant solar halo, a huge ring. But after a point of time it gets to you because it gets very bright and you need to be wearing sunglasses.

You were there the entire 48 hours, did you enjoy it? Yes, it was great to be there. It was very surreal and suddenly you do and would be crashing for 24 hours...

What were your most memorable points in this journey? One was this camp at a place called Thirth, which is a fish dump, so we had to keep picking up fish and we were travelling, the aeroplanes drop the fish there and it’s 6000 ft from the South Pole and Union Glacier and a proper toilet has been built there and all the people going across Antarctica make use of it. It felt very surreal because we were travelling for five days and hadn’t seen any human beings and suddenly we saw one structure there that reminded you of civilisation.

Another day when we were on a glacier, the truck broke down and we tried to fix it but then we decided that we will fix it the next day and we were trying to use up all the wind and the wind was so strong that it almost blew away and there was ice on my head and hair, but we were still laughing having a great time drinking some whisky and we had bonded very well and are friends for life now.

Then at Nuns, when first took the motorcycle on the ice and snow and I got hard ice and saw how the motorcycle was behaving that was very special, that was the first time ever it had ridden a bicycle on this continent and then some Russians came from their station and some wanted to ride the motorcycle and he was like this was my dream. There were lots of great moments.

— Abhijit Mitra

Picture: Royal Enfield

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