

Motorcycling the Himalayas Part 4

The Last Days

Story and photos by Koz Mraz

If your body hasn't acclimated to high altitude, it's challenging in many ways. At 18,000 feet we all, had some level of high-altitude sickness. As amazing as it is to stand at the base of the world's tallest mountain we were all eager to head down to lower altitudes. The roads are brand new, banked with guardrails and this could be one of our best days of riding through the most majestic mountains in the world. But the mountain makes her own rules. Little did we know that the ride out of Everest would be the most dangerous and the most challenging riding of the entire trip.

Overnight it began snowing, not light flurries, but white-out snowing. Yesterday's picture-perfect



weather had turned very sour. Welcome to Mt. Everest. And to make things worse, today's ride was over Pang La Pass, a high mountain pass at an elevation of 17,076 feet above sea level. It's one of the highest mountain roads of the country. This meant that the weather here could be even worse up top. Miles of snowed-out tight switchbacks up one side, and then back down the other. The only options were to wait it out here freezing our asses off at high altitude or soldier on. So much for the easy day of riding. We decide to push on.

The weather worsened and every thousand-foot rise in altitude which meant a few degrees colder, so cold that stopping anywhere at any time was out of the question, just keep moving, we had to keep going. My Alpinestars gloves that had so effectively protected me earlier were virtually useless. As we rose in altitude, snow and fog thickened at every turn and the threat of black ice loomed.

The chase vehicle driver told us later that it was eight degrees at the snow covered top of Pang La Pass and that didn't factor in wind chill. The road is more than 3000 feet of vertical climbing and there are 64 switchbacks up the south side and 41 down the north. There are few photos of that day and Rob confirmed that this ride was truly on the ragged edge, even for him. When we arrived safely at Shgar, Rob congratulated the group. His term "boys" for the Himalayan 7 no longer applied; he now thanked the *men* who braved the elements, for our riding skills and fortitude. We toasted... we survived!



Arriving at our hotel a busload of German tourists scurried over and wanted photos with us. They had seen the CCTV news segment about our border crossing. The Himalayan 7 had attained celebrity status in Tibet. *“Where are you from, What are you riding? Where are you going?”* The questions flew. We later found out the segment included video of us riding through villages, recorded by Chinese surveillance cameras. The Chinese use a Grid Management system in Tibetan Cities. Grid management is part of a broad governmental objective to enable it to carry out “social management” alongside “stability maintenance.” Thousands of cameras are placed in discrete and intentionally obvious places all monitored by Chinese authorities. I found out what those cameras looked like and from then on gave the one finger salute as I passed. Let’s see if our celebrity status affords us free speech.



Shigatse Tashilhunpo Temple was founded in 1447 by the 1st Dalai Lama and is a historic and culturally important monastery in Shigatse, the second-largest city in Tibet. The monastery is the traditional seat of successive Panchen Lamas who are second only to The Dalai Lama. It contains the world's largest gilded copper image that stands over 85 feet tall.

It was here the police state became painfully apparent. Passing through metal detectors, physical pat downs, baskets filled with confiscated lighters to prevent self-immolation. The Chinese military wielding firearms and fire extinguishers watch over the crowds with binoculars. I only saw one other group of western tourists my entire stay here. It's just not that easy to get in. Himalayan Roadrunners provides all documents, papers, passage and protection.

The legend of the Himalayan 7 was growing to mythic proportions. Every time we stopped for gas or at a village restaurant, crowds would gather, children cowered in fear, we now were the Wild Ones, Shiva's Slaves, rabble rousers on Royal Enfields roaring into town wreaking havoc or...just having lunch.

Stopping at Yamdruk Tso Lake, a mysterious Chinese girl dressed in red approached me. She didn't speak English nor I mandarin, but it was obvious she wanted a photo with one of the renowned Himalayan 7. The Red Chinese were now following us everywhere.



The ride to Lhasa was picture perfect. Motorcycling the most majestic mountains in the world. The air was crisp and crystal clear; the smooth double-lane paved road was nestled in wide-eyed expanses surrounded by snow-capped mountains that cut straight to the sky. Majestic mountains stood directly before us at 25 thousand feet, as we rode through fields filled with herds of giant yaks, we paused to let farmers cross their goats, and stepped in the history, mystery and beauty that is Tibet.



We are in Lhasa, our final stop, 1000 miles, 15 days, we pulled over on some random street corner, unloaded our saddle bags and are immediately ferried off to some unknown hotel. The bikes are gone, the ride is over and I'm having separation anxiety, It all happened too fast. The drivers, the Tibetan fixers and the chase truck are all gone. I never said a proper goodbye to Royal Enfield AX2909. She cared for me when things got tough; selflessly giving her all when my life depended on passing diesel belching tractor trailers as massive tourist busses targeted me head on. Atop Pang La Pass at eight degrees Fahrenheit I warmed my frozen fingers on her hot engine as she happily purred. Getting me through thick and thin she preferred to be kick started, not like the other Enfield's who would roar to life with a touch of a button. Ah well, it was a brief affair but I am confident Royal Enfield AX2909 will treat her next passenger with the same selfless determination she did me.



I came to Kathmandu to ride 1000 miles through the Himalayas and joined a Nepalese biker gang, Shiva's Slaves. Rode through the most difficult terrain in my life, saw the most incredible mountains and met amazing tribal Tibetans whose seemingly simple life exemplifies an inner peace sorely lacking in modern western culture. This is, without a doubt, a motorcycle adventure of a lifetime.

You can read the day by day 24 part Blog at www.kozmoto.com

Helmet – Shark Evoline Series 3

Gloves – Alpinestars Equinox Outdry

Boots – Alpinestars Campeche Drystar

Jacket – Scorpion Sports

Pants – Scorpion Sports