

**Subject:** Dispatch from the Subcontinent

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## **Welcome to India!**

Seven years after my 2011 motorbike tour of Northern India, I have returned to seek eternal consciousness. Or at least to see more of this fantastic nation. So how did this come about? It all started with my pal Woody Swain, who I know from the church lawn mowing crew and from Wichita's BMW motorcycle club. He's traveled extensively worldwide, but never to the Indian Himalayas. I told him this place was the best motorbike tour I've ever done, and that I'd go back in a heartbeat. I think he believed me.

Last November a couple characters from past adventures contacted me about signing up for MotoQuest's Touch the Sky Tour of Northern India. Capt'n Mike and Breadcrumb are always fun to travel with, so I said Heck, Yes! Added to that, the MotoQuest founder Phil Freeman was leading the tour. Phil has led me on many adventures in distant lands, so that sealed the deal. A little coaxing of Woody, and we were all in.

What I didn't expect is that Breadcrumb would drop out because of work demands, and Stu Nowlin would take his spot. Stu is my oldest motorbike friend on the planet, and yes that's a double entendre both ways. Stu hired me as a 16 year-old to be the shop gofer at a Honda dealership. Since then we have ridden for decades together on and off-road in the Midwest, Colorado, Utah, Baja, and Iceland.

Much has changed in this part of the world in 7 years and some parts are consistent. We're still riding India-manufactured Royal Enfields and the local rental agent in Manali is still Anu. He's an incredible entrepreneur and his business has expanded enormously. Ruggedly handsome, he looks like the product of James Dean meets Bollywood.

The bikes we're riding are Enfield's newest model, the Himalaya. It's better in every way than the old 60's era street-oriented sleds we had last time. The Himalaya has an all-new 411cc motor that puts out a crushing 23.5 horsepower. OK, that's not much, but the suspension is worlds better and the seat is all day comfort. It has disk brakes and the front one even works. The dashboard comes with a digital compass!

Our first day riding was about 75 miles up Rohtang Pass and back to Manali. The pass has stunning views of the Chandra river valley that go for miles. The road near the 13,000' summit used to be a deeply rutted, muddy stretch of misery. Now it's paved all the way, which unfortunately attracts more truck traffic. A "paved road" in this part of India is about a lane and a half with a rock wall or drop-off on either side. We're also riding on the left and overtaking on the right, so it gets interesting when two trucks meet from opposite directions.



Woody and Capt'n Mike at the summit.



The proud founder of MotoQuest Tours.

The adventure begins. We have 12 of us on the tour plus Phil, Anu, and a support team and truck. The next two weeks will be a wild ride.

