

A REAL ADVENTURE

CLASSIC CAR JOURNEYS HIMALAYA 2013



You're doing it again?!

Friends were slightly in awe, but yes, we were doing the Classic Himalaya for a second year running.

The thing is, this trip by Steve McCullagh is different to his other Classic Car Journeys. To drive 4x4s on rough unmade roads - often just rocky tracks, up mountain passes to an altitude of 15,000 ft is an interesting journey alone, but add in the unpredictable weather of the Himalaya and you do have an adventure.





Roads can be washed away and water crossings can become floods, but in the capable hands of Steve McCullagh and his Himalayan partner Virender, it is all an exciting adventure in spectacular scenery. We and six other pairs were in Toyota 4x4s, while two intrepid Aussies, in the autumn of their lives like most of us on the trip, tackled the journey on Royal Enfield motorcycles. Steve and Virender, who has lived all his life in the mountains - we christened him the Crocodile Dundee of the Himalaya - were also on Royal Enfields, and a group of local mechanics followed as sweepers in a pick-up truck.

The Royal Enfield 500s, built in India, are now well made reliable machines that give a taste of what British bikes used to be, but updated with fuel injection and disc brakes.

Despite the rough and remote terrain we were free to drive on our own using a tulip style route book, but it was hardly needed in the remote regions as there was frequently only one road.

In 2013 the route started from Amritsar on the Pakistan border, and following some sightseeing we boarded a train to Ambala where we picked up the vehicles and set off individually for the climb to Shimla.

People on Steve McCullagh's trips are always interesting as, having chosen this sort of holiday, they are self selected as people looking for something a little different. They don't want to settle for the ordinary.

Agnes ranged from a young lady of 26, travelling with her ex school teacher father, to a chap of 73 'now enjoying the fruits of his labours'.

Both Kate, the 26 year old, and Kim, a devil may care lady travelling with her husband, had never driven on anything other than smooth tarmac, but though a little apprehensive at the start, took to it like ducks to water, and were thrilled to have done it.

The beauty of Steve McCullagh's tours is that they use route books like a rally, but are not against the clock. Indeed, Steve emphasises that blasting along at speed will miss the point of the journey, for the remote Spiti valley

and the high passes of Kunzum and Rohtang are breath taking, not to mention glaciers and 1,000 year old Tibetan monasteries, and swooping down to run alongside turbulent rivers in stunning valleys.

For us, the tea stops in remote tents in the mountains, and the fascinating old hotels based in old forts or a converted (though still mostly original) Maharaja's Palace (the Maharaja still occupies the top floor) were all part of the attraction, as well as the 'camp' in bamboo 'cottages' with a late evening bonfire and grilled mutton kebabs.

In the larger towns we stayed in luxurious hotels - morning tea on the balcony in Manali overlooking extensive flower gardens was so relaxing, and in New Delhi at the end of the trip The Claridges is able to provide all the pampering anyone could wish for.

Sightseeing is often optional on Steve's journeys, with time and space to visit temples and monasteries if that is your wish, or shop in street markets and explore the back streets of the fascinating mountain towns.

For many, the Classic Himalaya might be their first experience of driving in India. Steve gives a thorough briefing and useful advice, and on both our trips everyone took to it very well with no accidents and no problems. There is something quite liberating about the Indian way, if you need to you can drive the wrong way round a roundabout without anyone being phased - the rule is look out for both yourself and everyone else, make allowances and carry on, there is no road rage in India.

Our second Himalayan adventure turned out to be quite different to the first because it coincided with the great floods and Steve and Virender simply re-wrote the route and avoided the problems. Even so, we would have been happy to repeat the previous year's route. It's just so much fun and so interesting, and it's unlike anywhere else.

Steve's Classic Himalaya is a reasonably priced, well organised way to visit places you would probably not get to any other way, and we are very likely to be back for a third time!!

www.classiccarjourneys.co.uk

