

Adventure

Travel

ISSUE 117: MAY|JUNE 2015 £3.99

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Epic cycling: the Himalayas

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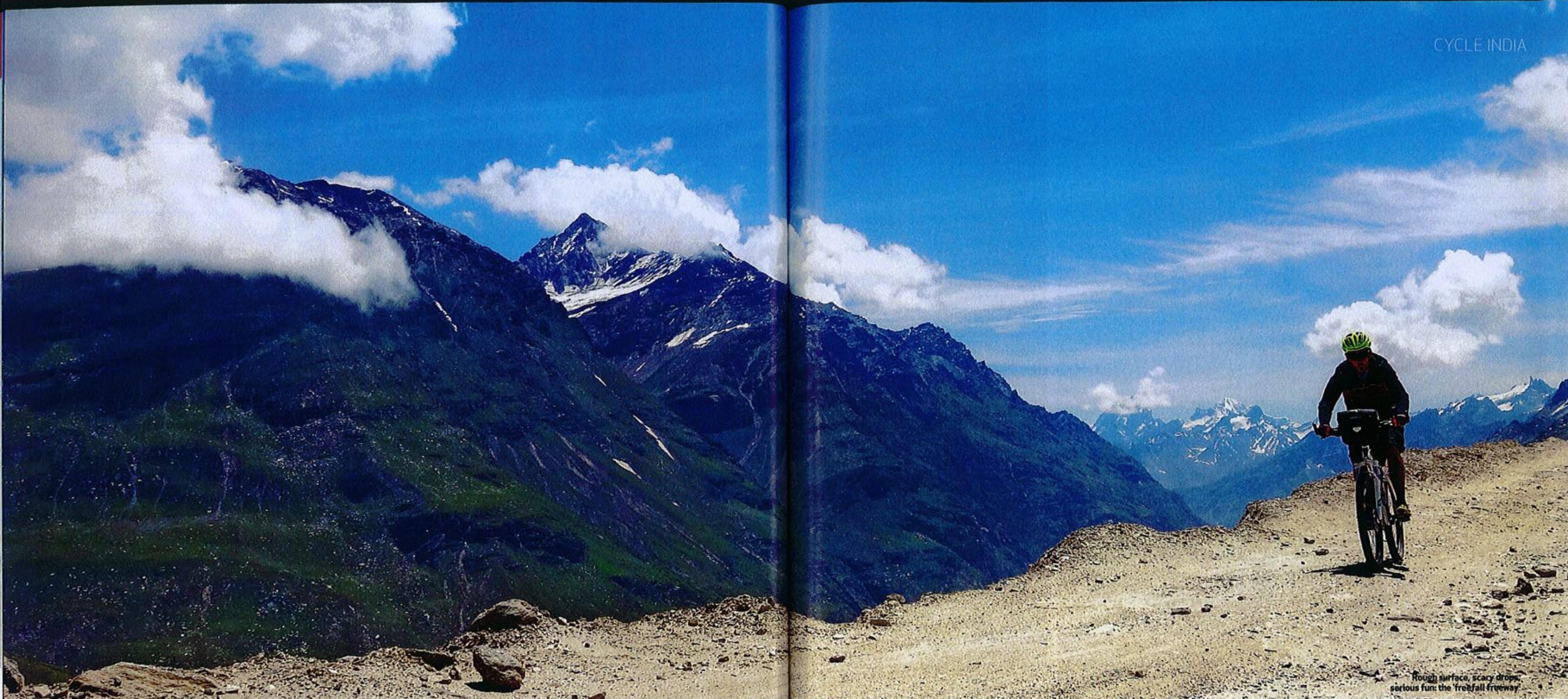
Don't panic mum! Tim and Laura Moss spent a month cycling through Iran, and it felt the safest country they visited on a round-the-world trip. The people are embarrassingly friendly and the scenery is stunning too

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Fourteen pages of men's and women's travel clothing and shoes on test – don't pack your case without it!

Riding *high*

Known as one of the world's most spectacular and dangerous journeys, the Manali to Khardung-La route in the Himalayas climbs over India's highest vehicle-access mountain passes. **Tracey Croke** cycles it on a two-week mountain biking trip



Rough surface, scary drops, serious fun: the 'freefall freeway'

The gorge looks like a reluctant host to the rusted and twisted trailer that fell into its rocky jaws. The truck sits on its rear end, jammed in the ravine's throat with smashed headlights staring up at me. The open graveyard is a compulsory exhibit for all who travel this way.

It could have been a momentary lapse of concentration, caused by tiredness or the lack of oxygen, that claimed this soul and the drivers of several other wrecks I'd seen along the route. There is no room for bad judgment on the unstable gravel edges of this hellish highway to the heavens. It only takes a shower of rain to cause a landslip, and glacial waterfalls tumble across the roads.

Although the road is commonly

referred to as a highway, I use the term loosely. Especially where it's been hacked out of vertical cliffs, with overhangs and deathly drops earning it the reputation of the 'free-fall freeway.'

A truck driver I spoke to thinks cyclists who take on this journey are "brave and a little bit crazy." Up to this point I've loved every moment of it, even the challenging climbs. But right now a mix of thin air and fatigue mean I can see his point of view.

This is probably a good place to point out that, even though I've built up a good level of mountain bike fitness, I'm not really cut out for monster climbs. I have a condition that causes my spine and ribcage to stiffen, which restricts my chest expansion and renders me with a below-par lung capacity. Part of the treatment to counter the progression of the condition is

Who's writing?



Tracey Croke is a travel writer and photographer who loves writing about

roughly-tough travel, off-track adventure and anything involving a bike. Her quest for a good story has seen her venture into post-conflict Afghanistan to join a pioneering expedition across the Pamir Mountains, sleep in a swag next to a croc-infested billabong and have her smalls rummaged through with the muzzle of a Kalashnikov. See more at www.traceycroke.com and follow her on twitter: @TraceyCroke.

exercise, hence my slight obsession with mountain biking and pushing my limits and my lungs. But at 5,200m, I may have taken on too much. I need to suck in the thin air faster than most and I'm struggling.

Behind me is a glorious nine-day journey, over 500km and four enormous mountain passes. Today I'm tackling my fifth. I've logged 37.5km, gained 1,800m of height and I stopped counting the hours of climbing at six when I was held up by the Indian Army, who maintain this strategically important route.

The army had set off a blast in the side of the mountain to control the drop of a precarious-looking overhang. A few minutes earlier and I would have been ahead of the mayhem. An earlier decision to stop for a pee cost me an hour while they cleared the rocks from the road.

About 300 or so cyclists attempt this great Himalayan challenge in the summer months each year, not just to take on all the climbs from Manali to Leh, but to conquer the biggest beast of them all: the Khardung-La. It's a straight up 39km from Leh, with no undulations but spectacular views over Ladakh, the 'land of high passes.' According to my bike computer, ahead of me is the final 1.5km climb. I'm almost there.

I feel as though I can almost touch the top, but I'm at breaking point. My previous experience at altitude is questioning whether I should go further. After coming all this way, I'm considering giving up and descending. I sit for a while and drink water in a slightly befuddled contemplation. Right on cue, a couple of scavengers start circling overhead as if they're just waiting for me to keel over. ►

'Drivers in India will squeeze through an impossible space, even if it means remodelling the vehicle'



View stop: wide open flatlands of the Tsarap River

It's in these moments of doubting weakness that a little encouragement carries the most weight.

"Keep going, you're nearly there!" A woman urges from her jeep window.

"Hey lady, brave, brave!" A truck driver shouts.

Buoyed by their enthusiasm, I feel my doubts start to dissolve. I grab my bike and, with a revitalised determination and freezing winds whipping around me, mount and fall straight off again. Eventually, somehow, I pick myself up and slog on.

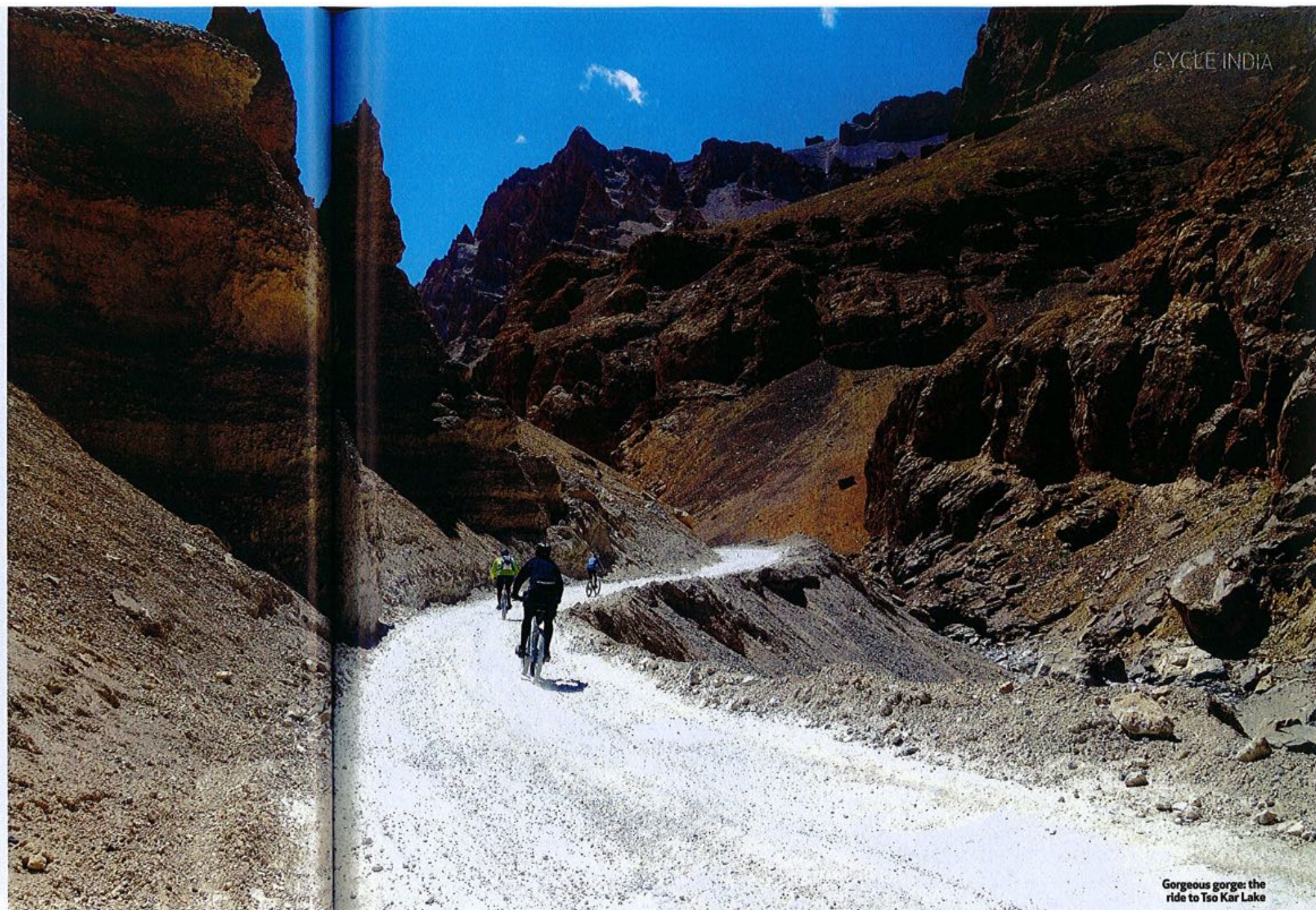
I get my final push from my cycling buddies who got ahead of the army's rock blast and have delayed their descent to wait for me in the stiffening wind chill. I'd met them 10 days earlier in Delhi, the meeting point for this cycling adventure. Among them is a cycling club record breaker, a gold

standard Alps racer, a sports scientist for the New Zealand cycling team and an Olympian.

When the introductions went round, I remember sucking in my cheeks to gag a spill of nervous laughter as I visualised myself epically failing to keep up. It turned out their elite ability comes with equal measures of encouragement, humility and laughter. As they see me approaching the top, they cheer and make a human archway to celebrate my final few metres towards the multicoloured fluttering prayer flags and a sign that says: 'Khardungla top (18,380 feet). Highest motorable road in the world.' Which it actually isn't, since modern measurements all agree that its true height is 17,582ft (5,359m) and the Suge La in Tibet is 71m higher.

But right now that doesn't matter. The demons have been beaten. I'm hugged

'The profile of the Manali to Leh highway and the climb up to Khardung La reads more like a heart rate monitor'



Gorgeous gorge: the ride to Tso Kar Lake

by angels and engulfed in an enormous sense of achievement.

The journey started with a two-day bus ride from Delhi to Manali. I'd already learnt during my short drive from the airport that Indian truck drivers are highly skilled at hurtling past each other with centimetres to spare. I hoped the rough surface and mighty drops of the Himalayas might slow them down a little.

In general, drivers in India will squeeze through an impossible space, even if it means remodelling the vehicle. No scratch or dink is accidental; it's a calculated trade-off for getting from A to B. Surprisingly, there is little road rage. And it's not unusual to see a bony cow or two meandering among the chaotic traffic.

"The rules here are really simple," Julian our guide told us at the start

of the two-day drive. "You give way to bigger vehicles. So bikes are pretty much bottom of the pile." This rule still applies even if the vehicle is on the wrong side of the road – sacred cows excepted. I employed my usual coping mechanism and fell asleep.

When I first saw the profile of the Manali to Leh highway and the climb up to Khardung La, I burst into a fit of laughter. It read more like a heart-rate monitor than a holiday. It roughly goes like this: slog up one or two thousand metres, undulate, thunder down. Eat. Sleep. Repeat.

A daily average of 55km seems OK until you throw in all the other challenges: day after day in the saddle; energy-sucking altitude; changing terrain; unpredictable hail-to-sandstorm weather; dodging oxygen-deprived drivers; putting up with a

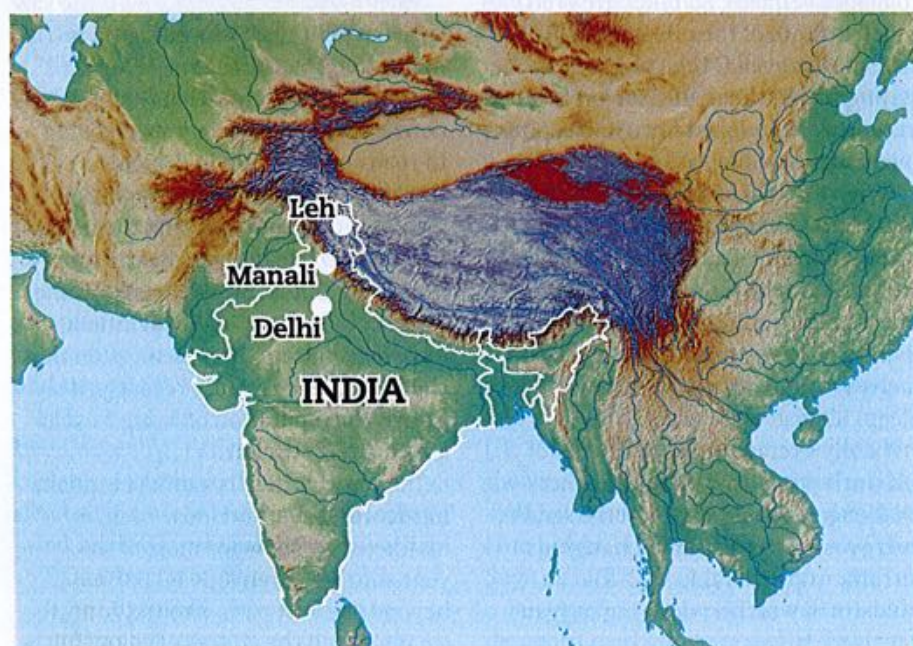
likely case of the trots and so on.

The highway, carved through the Himalayas in 1987, was built and is maintained by the Indian Army's Border Road Organisation (BRO) – a defence ministry agency specialising in road construction in difficult terrains. It's the only way of getting supplies to the military and the hardy people who live in the Ladakh region bordering China. Supply trucks and tourists in Jeeps or on Royal Enfields have been taking their chances on this route for decades. More recently, it's grown the reputation of being a cycle adventurer's dream.

The route, which is a mix of asphalt, hardcore, gravel and loose rock, is blanketed by snow for most of the year, cutting off anyone who lives beyond the first pass. Around June, the ice melts and the charge of colourful ➤



Diverse scenery on the way down Rohtang Pass, 4,114m



trucks carrying anything from food and military supplies to statues of Buddha begins. The race starts to build the next section of road before the winter snows arrive a few months later. Life is hard for the families who manually prepare hardcore and live in makeshift camps beside the road.

The fact that adventure seekers can go white water rafting, trekking on frozen rivers or riding camels across the desert in this region not only paints a picture of the diverse landscape, but also conveys how unpredictable weather ebbs and flows, colliding with mountain ranges and creating changing climates. Over the course of a day, green can give way to a dry and stunning starkness by crossing one mountain pass.

'The ability to jump surprising ruts that cut across the roads and control the occasional skid on loose rock was a bonus'

While tackling the route it will be necessary to negotiate the occasional fast-flowing stream of water, but if that's not your idea of fun, you can always hitch a lift on the support Jeep. I prefer to take my chances on two wheels. I learnt from my time living in flood-ravished Queensland that it only takes 18 inches of fast-flowing water to sweep a four-wheel drive off the road.

We left the lushness of Manali behind on the first day. After cycling through evergreen pines and smooth hairpin bends, the grind started up to the Rohtang Pass. At 4,114m, it's the baby of the high five, and as this was the 'warm-up' day, our support team set up camp halfway.

Nepal-style quality lodges haven't quite travelled to this side of the

Himalayas yet. Adventurers here have to be self-sufficient or supported. With nothing available for more than half of the route, food, water, medical kit and repairs need to come with you.

Pink and green tents were already standing to attention as we pulled into camp. Smiles went all around when we discovered that a shower tent and two portable loos had travelled with us. At dinner, eyes widened at the three delicious courses that magically appeared from a small kitchen tent.

The next day soon had our gritted teeth grinning as we crossed the pass and got our first glimpse of sunlit glaciers. Our expressions stuck on auto-exhilaration for the long way down into the river valley below.

The days continued through the ups ►

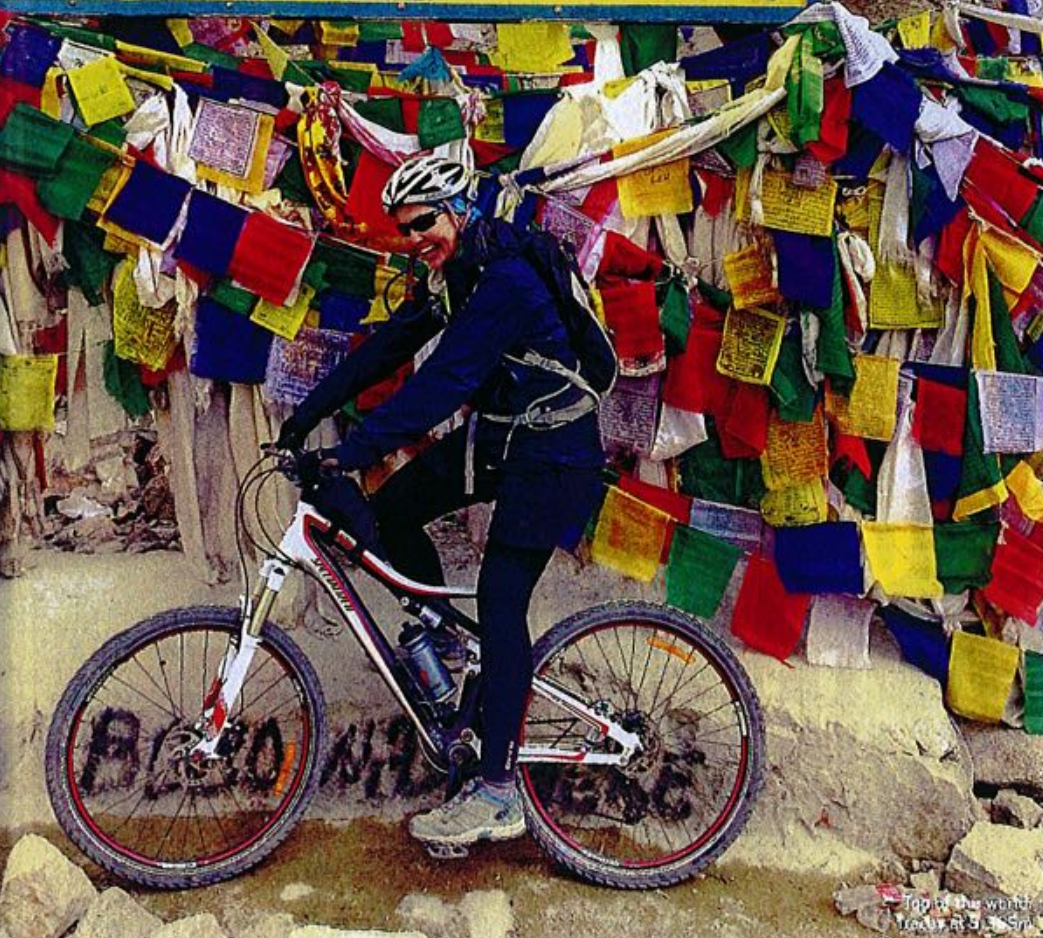
BORDER ROADS ORGANISATION

KHARDUNGLA TOP

(18380 FEET)

HIGHEST MOTORABLE ROAD IN THE WORLD

54RCC HIMANK 16TF



and downs. Sharp switchbacks and dizzying hairpins repeated but the landscape and views did not. Greenery gave way to arid shades of purple-brown, which turned into lush valleys, then abruptly interchanged with rust and latte-coloured gorges. Tumultuous rivers and trickling streams adorned wide-open flatlands. I came to think of this side of the Himalayas as a mountain range with a multiple personality disorder.

There are no narrow sections as such, but I was grateful for my single-track mountain bike skills when I met a truck or 10 in places. The ability to jump surprising ruts that cut across the roads and control the occasional skid on loose rock was both a bonus and a blast.

I learnt to appreciate the devilish climbs as much as the heavenly descents. For the experienced (and full lung-capacity) cyclist, the distances and gradient each day are not extreme, but the altitude and terrain make this a tough trip. Don't bother telling your legs to shut up. At this altitude you'll need to save your breath if you want to accomplish this ultimate cycling quest.

The Manali to Khardung-La route was a journey of personal and physical growth that tested my nerve, legs and lungs. Cycling that far up in the atmosphere forced me to dig deeper than I ever have before. And there I discovered a new level of determination. I faced demons, met angels and returned on a high – with an extra inch of lung capacity. Fact. **AT**

CYCLE INDIA

SCARY STORIES

Overhangs and steep drops give this route the nickname the 'freefall freeway' and in case that hasn't scared you enough, here are some more terrifying tales...

Piles of corpses

The word Rohtang, as in the Rohtang Pass, means 'piles of corpses' in Tibetan because many people have lost their lives attempting to cross it in bad weather.

Ice Road Truckers

The route is daunting enough to have featured in History Channel's *Ice Road Truckers: Deadliest Roads*, which showed truckers carrying supplies over the stormy Rohtang Pass (4,114m) to the town of Keylong, 125km north of Manali.

A hundred avalanches

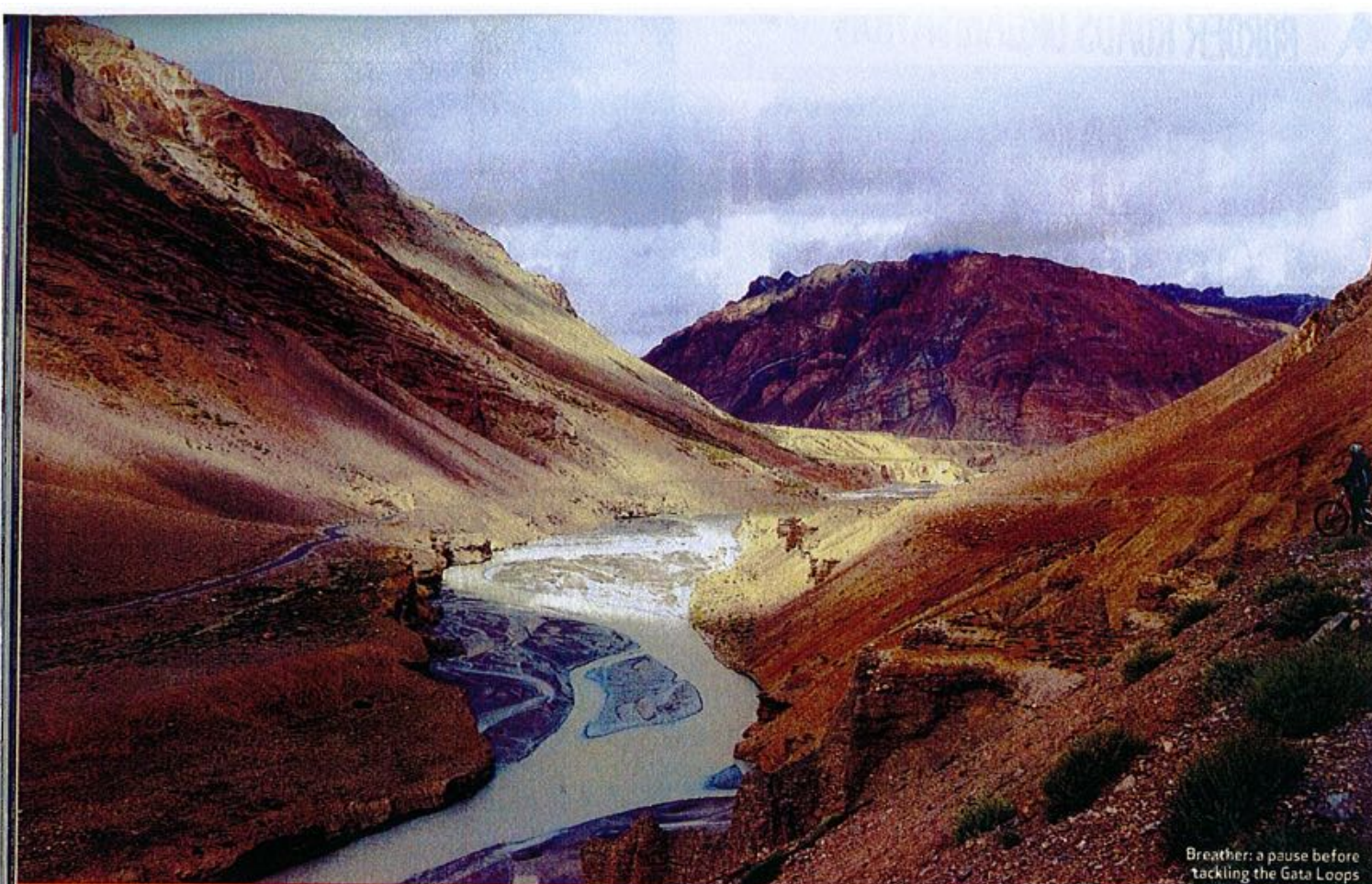
In September 2008, 400 people were stranded after some 100 avalanches blocked the Manali to Leh highway.

Catastrophic cloudbursts

The region is prone to cloudbursts, an extreme, sudden and unpredictable form of rainfall capable of causing devastating, life-threatening flash-floods. The phenomena usually occurs when moisture-laden clouds get trapped in the high mountains. Cloudbursts have claimed many lives in the Himalayas including one incident in Leh in 2010 that left over 200 people dead.

The ghost of the Gata

There is a pile of unopened water bottles on the climb up the Lachulung La pass, which involves 21 hairpin bends known as the Gata Loops. The water is left by regular drivers for the ghost of the loops. Locals say he haunts the hairpins after being stranded there and dying of thirst. People have reported seeing an emaciated person standing by the roadside, begging for water, but when they give him a bottle, it falls through his cupped hands.



Breather: a pause before tackling the Gata Loops



LET'S GO

Want to do what Tracey did? Here's how you can...

The tour

I joined a 17-day tour with Red Spokes Cycling Adventure Holidays, which costs from £1,295, including all accommodation and support, not including international flights, a domestic flight from Leh back to Delhi or bike hire. See www.redspokes.co.uk.

How to get there

The trip started in Delhi. Airlines flying from the UK direct to Delhi include BA, Jet Airways, Virgin Atlantic and Etihad Airways. You'll also need to book a flight from Leh back to Delhi. Jet Airways, Air India and Go Air all fly this route; I used Go Air. Let the airline know if you're bringing a bike; it might cost extra. From Delhi it's a two-day journey to Manali and the start of the highway.

Accommodation

There is a good choice of hotels in Delhi, Manali and Leh, with few options in between. Red Spokes uses comfortable hotels in the cities; most other nights are spent camping.

Gear

Take cycling gear and clothes for 17 days and temperatures from 35°C to below zero. For me this included a sun hat, a warm beanie, two long-sleeved merino tops, a waterproof jacket and trousers, waterproof fleece-lined gloves, a down jacket and merino leggings for nighttime. Take good sunblock and sunglasses to cut out the strong UV light. You'll also need a sleeping bag that can cope with temperatures below zero. Sleeping mats are

provided but I always bring my own.

Most of the kit is carried in 4x4s. While riding you'll need to carry a daypack with water, lunch and snacks, extra clothing, a camera, valuables and photocopies of key documents (passport pages and insurance policy).

Bikes

Bring your own bike or hire a hard-tail mountain bike from Red Spokes (this costs from £185). I took a Specialized Era women's mountain bike which was perfect for the mix of terrain. It's a lightweight cross-country full suspension bike that climbs well, is fast on smoother roads and sucked up the bumps on the rough sections. The trip can also be done on a traditional touring bike, but it needs to have strong enough wheels, sufficiently wide tyres for traction and low enough gearing.

Tyres and spares

I used Schwalbe Marathon Plus Tour (2.0) tyres. They are robust and hardwearing and have a decent tread for the gravel yet roll well on the tarmac. They handled the terrain well and I didn't get a puncture.

Bring spares for any unique or high-tech items on your bike. Red Spokes suggests also bringing a multi tool, tyre levers, a pump, inner tubes, spokes, two sets of brake pads, a few chain links, a brake and a gear cable, a length of cable housing, a small bottle of lube, an extra set of cleats and the correct fluid and bleed kit for hydraulic brakes. No need to bring spares if you're hiring, though some people bring their saddle and pedals.

Visa

You need a visa to enter India, and there's a new system for Brits. It requires you to fill in a form at <http://in.vfsglobal.co.uk>, then book an appointment at one of 14 application centres around the UK and be fingerprinted. It costs just under £100. Also make sure there's six months left on your passport.

Vaccinations

There are no compulsory vaccinations for visitors to India, although Red Spokes recommends that you're vaccinated against Typhoid, Tetanus, Polio and Hepatitis A, as well as taking a suitable malarial prophylactic (although, according to <http://traveldoctor.co.uk>, the risk of malaria is low or very low in the areas this trip visits). If you have recently travelled in a yellow fever affected part of the world, you'll need a certificate to prove you've had the vaccination.

Money

ATMs aren't reliable, so it's best to take pound sterling, US dollars or other major currencies and change it to rupees in Delhi or Manali (it won't be possible along the route). You can only get the rupee in India and you need to spend it all before you leave.

Medical and insurance

It's not always possible to find good health care in the remote areas, so bring a comprehensive medical kit, and make sure you get insurance that covers a high altitude mountain biking holiday.