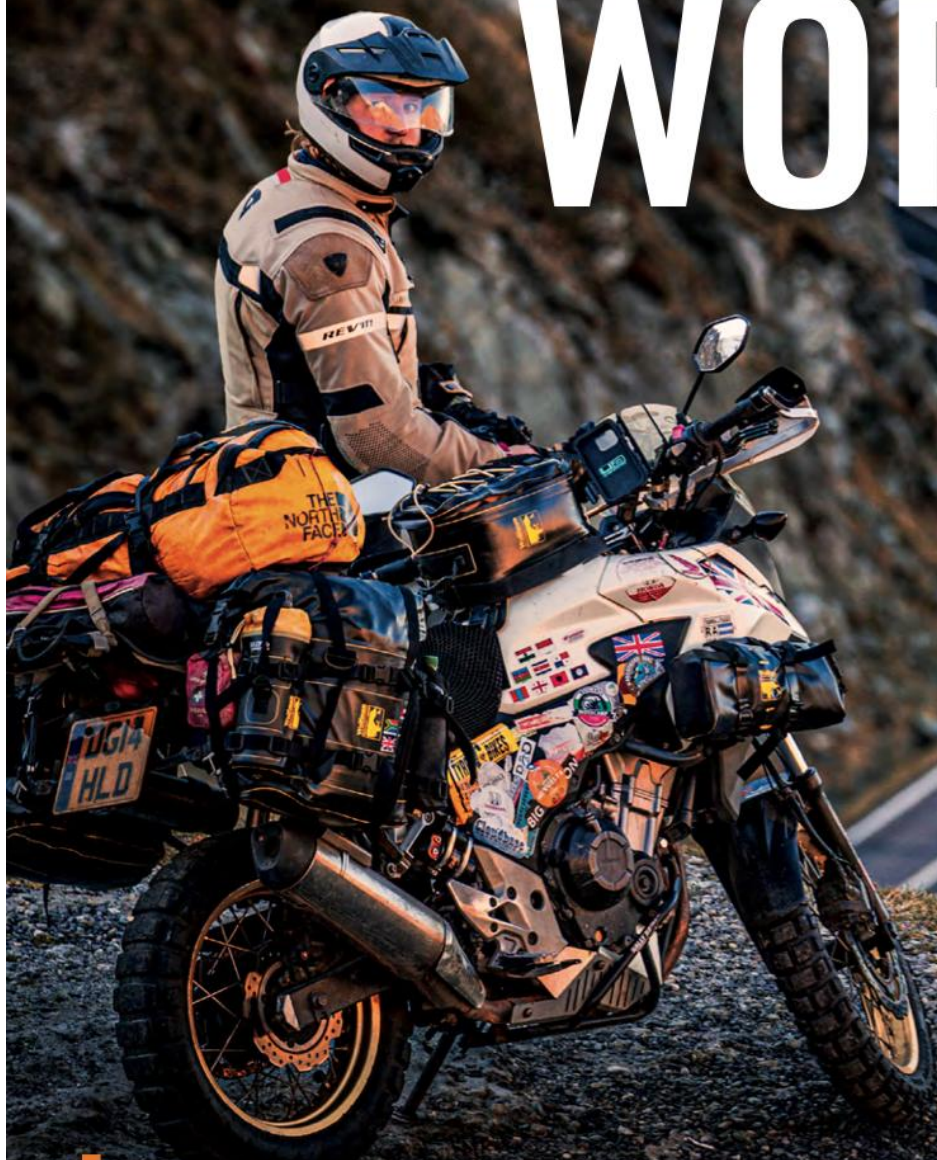


ADVENTURE BIKE RIDER

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RIDE THE WORLD



TRAVEL EUROPE, NORDEN 901 EXPEDITION & SUZUKI V-STROM 1050DE TESTED, RIDE THE PENNINE WAY

THE LAND OF KINGS

NIGEL SAXON PROVES A RETIRED DAD HAS WHAT IT TAKES TO BECOME A FEARLESS ADVENTURER ON THE JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME THROUGH INDIA

PHOTOS: NIGEL SAXON AND JOSHUA JOHN



Aged 61, and with retirement beckoning, I wanted to kickstart my newfound freedom with an adventure that combined a love of bikes with a passion for travel. I wanted to do something completely new that would take me out of my comfort zone and be as far away from the nine to five as possible.

I'd never been to India before, but after a chance encounter with a biker who'd ridden extensively throughout the coun-

try, I decided to book a 12-day tour of Rajasthan. Known as The Land of Kings, it is India's largest state and covers a land mass the size of Italy. It has a population larger than the UK and borders Pakistan in the northwest, separated by the arid Thar Desert.

To ride through a region of such diversity and scale was a mouth-watering prospect. I left my job at the end of 2022 and two weeks later, I was boarding a flight to Delhi. I soon

settled into my plush hotel, and knowing that curry would be my staple diet over the next fortnight, I opted for a last taste of western food by dining at the Hard Rock Café. The live band played Steppenwolf's anthem *Born to be Wild*, reminding me of the cult classic movie *Easy Rider*.

In the opening scene, Peter Fonda's character deliberately throws away his watch at the start of his epic ride across America to the soundtrack of this song. As I listened, it struck

me that this was symbolic of my new life. Without the time pressures of work, I was looking forward to setting my own agenda and having the freedom to enjoy new adventures.

The following day I met our tour hosts, Josh and Koshy, for a briefing along with six other adventure seekers from America and the UK. We were an eclectic bunch. There was retired insurance salesman David from Yorkshire with his brave new-to-biking wife Andrea, and there was John, a retired

The famous Jal Mahal, or Water Palace, in Jaipur was an impressive sight



LAPD cop with his wife Lisa. We also had another Nigel, a head-hunter from Hampshire, and finally Scott, a construction engineer from Utah in America who had recently sold his business.

As we got to know each other over dinner that evening, it was evident that we were all at a similar time of life with a shared thirst for more than just a holiday. Only one of us had been to India before, but everyone was well travelled and three of the group had even trekked to Everest Base Camp.

A BAPTISM OF FIRE

Heading into the Delhi traffic chaos the next morning was not for the faint hearted. Riding required nerves of steel as we took evasive action

around tuk-tuks, trucks, cars, buses, and bikes, all incessantly using their horns like bats use sonar.

Still on the outskirts of Delhi, I experienced a heart stopping moment when an absent-minded truck driver decided it was time to pull over for a chai break, literally running me off the road. No harm done and the first of many defensive riding lessons learnt. We soon adjusted to using the horn constantly like a local and experienced a variety of incredible sights, sounds and smells. The occasional aroma of roadside rubbish contrasted strongly with intense wafts of fragrant jasmine incense, all in the space of a few metres.

That afternoon we took a detour to the village of Abhaneri to visit a historic stepwell: an ancient construction built to provide villages with a year-round water supply. Appearing a bit like an inverted Mayan pyramid, the 1000-year-old Chand Baori stepwell is the largest in India and plunges 30m into the ground with over 3,500 steps. It's been restored as a tourist attraction and provides a lush habitat for hundreds of squawking parakeets.

Later in the day, Scott had a puncture which, combined with slow-moving traffic caused delays so we were still riding as night fell. Night riding in India was not part of the plan, and although we instinctively rode more carefully, all of us

WHO'S WRITING?



Nigel rode his first motorcycle at the age of nine, inspired by his Triton riding father, and has had bikes ever since. His current ride is a Triumph Bonneville Scrambler, but there are two more '70s Japanese trail bikes in the shed awaiting restoration.

He is a veteran of many motorcycle tours on a diverse range of bikes including trips to France, Italy, Spain, India, Mexico, and America.

Based in Dorset, and recently retired from a corporate career split between logistics and marketing, Nigel is looking forward to finally being able to spend more time riding, writing, and travelling, preferably at the same time.



were soberingly aware that the road hazards we had encountered during the day still existed at night, we just couldn't see them. I admit there were a few moments when I was seriously questioned my holiday choices.

Finally, we closed in on our hotel in Jaipur and navigated the final few metres of the intense city centre traffic with the tantalising prospect of that first beer a few minutes away. Then, at a set of traffic lights, the local police draped a haphazard string barrier across the main access junction to stop traffic for no apparent reason.

The local drivers became more and more impatient and agitated, manifested by blaring their horns, of course. Eventually a cavalcade of limousines, protected by motorcycle outriders, whisked the Prince of Jaipur by, probably on his way to dinner. The police nonchalantly released their not so high-tech traffic control device which had the same effect as dropping the starter flag at an F1 race. It was every man for himself as we struggled to keep up with our guide for those last few hundred metres to the hotel.

I arrived there mentally and physically exhausted. It had been a baptism of fire, but I had made it unscathed and felt ecstatic. I wasn't just 'Dad' anymore, I was a fearless adventurer.

THE PINK CITY

After a much-needed good night's rest, we spent a day off the bikes exploring Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan known as The Pink City. Legend has it that Maharaja Ram

Singh II had the entire city painted pink especially for the 1876 visit of Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, pink being the traditional colour of hospitality in India.

We'd arrived the day after the annual Kite Fighting Festival and the trees were festooned with abandoned brightly coloured kites. Josh warned us to be careful of the kite strings when we rode out of town the next day. The cunning kite fliers attach shards of glass to their strings to cut down their competitors and these were left strewn across the roads.

Setting off early the next morning, we headed south-west towards Pushkar. About 50 miles into the journey, the vast Sambhar Salt Lake appeared, an expanse of 90 square miles of crusted salt glistening in the sunshine like fresh snow. We turned off the main road onto the dry lake for some playtime in this surreal, otherworldly environment, tearing up and down, causing dust storms and racing each other towards the horizon.

It was a normal day at the office for Scott who hailed from Salt Lake City and was an expert dirt rider completely at home on the surface. I was looking less accomplished but still grinning from ear to ear thinking that experiences like this were exactly what I came for. Covered in salt and dust, we reluctantly headed back onto tarmac to ride to our lodgings.

No fancy hotels for us tonight, we were staying at the idyllic Camp Land's End safari lodge, just outside Pushkar in the shadow of the Aravalli mountains. A perfect day was rounded off with local food, traditional dancers,

and a fire eating display around the campfire, the team swapping tall tales of their salt flat racing prowess into the night. John also entertained us with stories of his life as a cop in Los Angeles. By his own admission, some of them were actually true and they were all best appreciated through our 'beernoculars'.

HELLO MR BOND

An early morning departure from the camp saw a long climb through the hills enroute to the city of Udaipur, known as the Venice of the East. Riding through the mist I was amazed to see a tipper truck carrying a cargo of a live elephant who didn't seem best pleased with his travel arrangements. He stomped and trumpeted his displeasure causing the truck to sway precariously from side to side as we rode past.

We continued on through villages where elderly turbaned gentlemen with impressive moustaches watched while women adorned in colourful saris did all the manual work, skillfully carrying heavy loads on their heads. Incredibly our guide told us that these hard-working ladies had a life expectancy of just 40 years.

On reaching Udaipur, we rode nimbly through rush hour chaos before diving down a narrow, cobbled alley and up to the door of the charming Amet Haveli Hotel. It was certainly a welcome

sight nestled in a prime spot overlooking Pichola Lake. No wonder Udaipur is often described as the Venice of the East. The centre piece of the view was the magnificent Lake Palace, now an exclusive hotel and famously featured in the James Bond film Octopussy.

A day off the bikes saw us visiting Udaipur fort and palace which is the home of the Mewar dynasty of rulers, history's longest unbroken dynasty. Returning on foot to the hotel, our way was temporarily blocked by an elephant casually ambling up the back streets, encouraged to avoid crushing all in his path by his handler.

Sad to leave Udaipur, we travelled northeast towards Jodhpur on the expressway, stopping at a most unusual temple to a Royal Enfield Bullet motorcycle. The story goes that 30 years ago, a young man, Om Singh Rathore, lost control of his motorcycle, hit a tree and died on this spot. Although the police took the bike away, it mysteriously kept reappearing at the crash site, apparently on its own, day after day.

The villagers started worshiping the Bullet bike, believing that the spirit of the unfortunate Om Singh was still riding the National Highway 62 and helping travellers in distress. It's now become the Bullet Baba shrine with the original bike encased in glass and decorated with marigold garlands. Local folklore says that if you are

THE BIKE

The Royal Enfield Himalayan provided was ideal for the trip. It's a simple, robust, and reliable machine in its natural habitat.

High speed touring was not on the agenda, so the 411cc single-cylinder engine providing 24.5bhp was certainly sufficient to cope with the varying road conditions and had enough acceleration (and braking) to avoid the many hazards encountered.

The riding position was firm but comfortable, although being over 6ft tall, my knees did rub on the front frame designed to protect the tank and carry extra luggage.

The foot-pegs were in a good position to enable sustained stand-up riding and the suspension and ground clearance proved adequate to cope with both road use and the off-road terrain.



travelling on this road and you don't stop and pay your respects, then proceed at your peril.

We went on to experience a nerve shredding ride into Jodhpur's chaotic city centre, but we were confident we would survive having previously paid homage at the Bullet Baba temple.

DESERT SAFARI

After a night in a hotel in Jodhpur, we rode on, the vegetation giving way to sandy scrubland with tufts of tumbleweed blowing across the road as we approached the Thar Desert. After glimpsing our first wild camels (somehow grazing on cacti) we arrived at the Pal Rajah Desert Camp just in time to be whisked off into the sand dunes for a Jeep safari with optional camel riding, complete with a cool box of beers to enjoy at sunset.

Before settling into our posh heated tents after another exhausting day, we were treated to a traditional dance troupe display. This proved too much of a temptation for ex-professional dancer Andrea who joined in, but she was almost upstaged by Sanjay, our support truck driver, strutting his stuff, much to the delight of the riders and crew.

The following morning yet another treat was in store. We headed back to the desert for some dune bashing and a bikes versus camel race, challenged by our camel

handler and new friend. Ishtar (meaning God in Hindi) was the self-proclaimed fastest rider in his village and he had thrown down the gauntlet for us to try and outrun him and his camel on the tightly packed sand at the edge of the dunes. We tried gallantly, pushing the Enfields hard on the unforgiving surface, but predictably Ishtar was victorious on his sure-footed ship of the desert. It was a well deserved victory.

Reliving the camel racing exploits in our minds, we headed east on long, straight roads, it was cold and desolate with very light traffic. The rhythmic beat of the delightfully low tech 411cc single cylinder engine was strangely comforting and allowed my mind to ponder on how liberating it was to have nothing to focus on except the open road. Cue *Born to be Wild* again playing in my head.

The traffic on these roads were mostly ancient trucks, massively overloaded and extravagantly decorated with garish chrome and tassels, constantly blasting their melodic airhorns. Allegedly, drivers' stimulant of choice to stave off fatigue from the huge distances is opium which is apparently cheaper than Red Bull. I'm glad we didn't know that on day one.

Our destination was the city of Bikaner which had the feel of a dusty Wild West frontier town nestled on the edge of the desert with few redeeming features.

After two weeks of travel, firm friendships were made among the tour group



Our accommodation for the night was a nondescript hotel with sleep marred by a large wedding party going on outside our rooms.

Leaving the desert behind, we travelled east towards Delhi and the scrubland gave way to rolling green fields and lush vegetation. By this stage of the trip, I felt almost Zen like having fallen completely under India's spell. The solitude on the road had stripped away any stresses and strains of work, and any worries that seemed important in my old life had evaporated. As a way of transitioning into retirement, I highly recommend riding India.

ONE LAST HURRAH

The final day of our journey dawned and we hit the road towards the industrial town of Rewari which suddenly emerged from the smog and consumed the motorway about an hour east of Delhi. It was as if India was serving up a chaotic cacophony of every hazard we'd experienced on the road these last two weeks, magnified twice and hurled at us for one last hurrah.

At the start of this trip, I would have been grimacing with nervous anticipation, but now I just laughed manically into my helmet, hit the throttle, and ploughed on through.

Our trip came to an end as we rode back into the Delhi hotel carpark where it all started from two weeks earlier. I admit I couldn't help feeling emotional at the enormity of what we had experienced over the previous fortnight. I reckon I must have got some grit in my eye but I wasn't alone in welling up as we turned off our engines for the last time.

This group of complete strangers had become firm friends during the journey. The experiences and achievements we shared together created a bond which I'll never forget and that will last a lifetime. I will miss the evenings we spent around campfires and hotel bars swapping stories with humour and enthusiasm.

And India itself had a profound effect on me throughout the journey. Meeting local people and discovering their history and culture was an enriching experience. And while the extreme contrasts of wealth and poverty were shocking, they were always thought provoking.

Like so many things in life, the journey was challenging at times but that just made it even more rewarding. Rajasthan is India's jewel in the crown and to traverse it by motorcycle was the perfect way to begin retirement, and the first of many more adventures. **ABR**

WANT TO RIDE IN INDIA?

We travelled in January and February, the driest and coolest time to visit Rajasthan. We had no rain and barely saw a cloud in temperatures averaging 21C during the day. Outside of these months, the temperature climbs to more than 45C and monsoons hit between July and September.

Western style hotels were prevalent in large cities, but once off the beaten track, our guides always made a beeline for 'havelis' which are beautifully restored former mansions converted into guest houses.

Petrol is cheap and stations are plentiful, and any spares needed for the indigenous Royal Enfields were readily available. Food and drink was incredibly reasonable, with an evening meal and a local beer averaging about a fiver.