

H-D PAN AMERICA TO LADAKH

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TOP OF THE WORLD

Trial by fire (and ice!) for the Harley-Davidson Pan America as it takes on the world's highest motorable road





HE CALL FROM RAVI AVALUR, THE HEAD

of the Harley-Davidson business unit at Hero Motocorp, was not unusual. The contents of our discussion were however not the usual banter about biking gear, our alma mater atop a pine-infested hilltop, or the advantages of raising the gear lever two notches so that a pair of fat-toed, waterproof boots from Klim could be useful through lively water crossings. The conversation was brief, yet startling.

“Could you lead an expedition up the Key La?” he asked.

“Yes”, I replied, even before he had managed to finish his question.

“On Harleys,” he added.

In the minute’s silence that ensued, as I struggled to drum up a coherent response, he cut the call, quite sure that the connection had dropped. By the time he called back I had regained some composure.

Obviously I wasn’t going to do this but decided to humour him.

“Let’s take this slowly,” I said. “When you said Harleys which ones did you have in mind? The Fat Boy?”

“Actually, the Pan America,” he replied.

I sat down and thought about the project. To be fair my first port of call was the internet and YouTube provided a host of reviews on the Pan America.

The first video sighting of the Pan America was to say the least — abrupt! The face of a shark and the tail of a manta ray. Unusual fare for the motorcycle world no doubt. Casting the cover aside, I began turning the pages of the book. A new engine with hydraulic valves that never need adjustment, putting out 150bhp. 250kg killed the rising enthusiasm a little but then, almost all the 1250cc bullies on the block tilt the scales to a similar weight. Feet ‘full flat’ on the ground when stationary, thanks to an automatically lowering setup, when stopped, seemed more than useful!

Soon the high ground clearance, off-road footpegs, Brembo discs, rider modes, and the appeal of a grunty engine had my undivided

Top: At the top of the mighty Key La pass. **Facing page, top:** Riding in this fine fech-fech is incredibly tricky as there are plenty of jagged rocks lurking under the surface

attention. Manually ‘turned-off’ Traction Control was the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back.

I called Ravi and said “Yes”! More out of curiosity than a burning desire to try climbing the shortcuts up the Gatta Loops on a high powered, heavy, Harley-Davidson!

Four Harley Pan Americas rolled into the Himalayan Resort and Spa at Manali a little after sunset on October 11, 2021. The next day was spent lounging around Manali in an attempt to acclimatise the new arrivals. An over the top lunch at the Ride Inn – the go-to place for bikers transiting to Leh. The chunks of meat served up are heavenly and convinced me that vegans live only half a life! The bikes meanwhile, that had been ridden down from Delhi got their share of caring and we were all charged up to carve new trails in the mountains.

A short phone call to Sissu as to the whereabouts of Raja Ghepan, the local deity who tours the Lahaul Valley at this time, confirmed my misgivings. Raja Ghepan was in residence at Sissu with no travel plans whatsoever. When Raja Ghepan is on tour the weather is benign. Once back, the weather is free to run amok. Looking up satellite images showed a cyclonic storm forming in the Bay of Bengal. We were going into Ladakh at a time when passes close and the road is buried in snow. Adventure awaits!

The start from Manali was in glorious weather and by the time we pierced the Pir Panjal massif by slipping through the Atal tunnel it even started heating up. The tarmac came to an abrupt halt at Gramphoo, the start of our off-road orientation to the H-D Pan America. Rocks, slush, gravel and sand were thrown up in no small measure by the infamous stage of the Raid de Himalaya. Amarinder

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Sandhu, owner of Himalayan Harley Chandigarh and rally rider of immense repute, rushed into the stage as if he was gunning for a rally podium. Nostalgia must have overcome him, reminding him of his Raid de Himalaya win in 2000, because he soon disappeared in a cloud of dust! That was the eye opener. This bike could move fast over dirt!

Irrespective of his skills, the pace, though not outright rally speed, was not far behind. I too tentatively urged my steed faster, soon getting over my reticence to open the throttle wide, as the bike handled most of the undulations with a more than fair degree of grip. Surprising for a bike that weighed in at a quarter tonne and had a 19-inch front wheel with which to deal with the riverbed road of Chattru. Lunch at the *dhaba* was scarcely over that the clouds gathered and the first flakes came down. Unbelievably, sleet mixed with snow, as we retraced our steps to Sissu and onwards to our homestay at Gemur. Another surprise was the efficacy of the heated grips to fight the freeze that surrounded us.

The next day's early start from Gemur saw us ripping the tarmac to Baralacha La. A brief stop at Deepak Tal for pictures and we were off climbing the pass. Rumours about the bike gasping for air at altitudes above 13000ft were dispelled — the Harley pulled like a train even at 16000ft. The first serious test of the vehicle's off-road capability was a rock-fall on a new road alignment being constructed at the top of the pass. Boulders and huge slices of slate blocked our way. Standing up and gingerly tip-toeing was the only way over the debris. The Harley tight-rope walked the rock field and emerged unscathed. All five bikes completed the task albeit with a dab here and a struggle there. Only one bike keeled over. Totally surprising us all.

Onwards to the fech-fech carnival that awaited us beyond Sarchu and the Ting Ting bridge. I don't know who named it and how many shots of rum he had under his belt when he did, but the moniker

Above, left: The Harley-Davidson performed flawlessly on its expedition through some of the world's harshest terrain. **Above:** This is the highest a Harley-Davidson has ever been on planet Earth!

survives to this day. Suddenly we went from the Raid de Himalaya to the Dakar in Mauritania. Over a foot and a half of fine talcum powder filled deep rocky ruts that ran for kilometres. We raised a storm of our own, the dust billowing out as small explosions. The wind, not to be outdone, blew from behind us and soon the cloud we raised engulfed us so completely that our vision was completely obliterated. The air filters drew in the murky fech-fech time and again — and still did not choke up!

We got into Pang as the sun was going down. The temperatures wasted no time in going sub-zero. Basic accommodation. Maggi noodles. No electricity. Millions of stars though, millions. Vir Nakai had his legs stick out of the bed by 2 feet at least. No option but to sleep with your boots on to avoid frostbite!

The next morning saw us warm ourselves on the Morey Plain, and later climb an insanely rocky outcrop to get a helicopter view of Tso Kar. Back an hour later we hit smooth tarmac to climb the 17,000ft high Tanglang La effortlessly. The stock tyres did lose grip on the descent at shady corners that were beginning to freeze with black ice but fortunately nobody suffered gravel rash and the ride to Leh was incident free.

October 16, 2021 dawned flawlessly clear. We did not realise it at that time but we were going to make history by the time night fell. Five Harley-Davidson Pan America motorcycles would successfully make the ascent up a freshly cut track to Key La, a new pass at 18,600ft. The gravel ascent intermittently strewn with rocks and debris would be the gnarliest track we had climbed all year. The Pan America was more than up to the task. It was the human element that started flagging once the altimeter climbed past the 16,000ft mark. But with the end in sight, there was no give in anyone. We gained the summit, that was being lashed by icy winds, in a freezing -12 deg celsius. The expedition to Key La was done — and we became the first to take any Harley-Davidson, any where in the world, to as high an altitude as this.

By October 17, 2021 the skies darkened and the expected storm hit. We ran back through Kargil and Srinagar just making it over the Zoji La to safety. Those that doubted the folklore of Raja Ghepan's tour plan stayed back and were marooned for a week in deep snow at Sarchu, Pang, Leh and Kargil. We made it back, with our Pan Americas safe because we knew it wasn't just folklore. ☒

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