

[ FEATURE ]

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# ROCK N' RIDE

*Riding a motorcycle to a music festival - held on the rooftop of  
the world - that sounds interesting, doesn't it?*





**M**otorcycles and pop culture always go hand in hand. Make that motorcycle a Harley-Davidson, and a crazy number of epic scenes and references spring to mind. What really ties the entire imagery together, however, is the distinctive music to go with the presence of these beautiful machines - whether the Last Ride from Ghost Rider or everyone's favourite, Arnold Schwarzenegger making short work of some baddies before gunning down an expressway on a Fatboy, with Bad to the Bone playing in the background.

The thought behind the Outback Festival held in Stok (on the outskirts of Leh, for those wondering!) late in September seemed to be just that - evoke those very sentiments of badassery and unbridled freedom that motorcycles can bring, by marrying the pillars of adventure, great music and an all-round good time for like-minded people sharing the passion to come and enjoy. Though the event was sponsored and supported by Hero Motocorp and Harley-Davidson India it was open to all, with a strong number of 4x4 junkies also showing up from far and wide.

The idea sounded epic to all of us at Xplorearth, and once Vijay Thomas from Harley sounded us out about leading the Pan-America contingent to the event, we were only too pleased to accept. The only decision to be made was which route to take. Only two options made logistical sense - the Srinagar-Kargil axis or the "main highway" to Leh, through Sarchu, Pang and the like.

We chose the latter without second thought, despite it being trickier - as has always been our way. The bike had exceeded expectations wherever we had taken it so far and we had no doubts about its capabilities. The riders had also proven themselves on our Spiti expedition a few months prior, with a large number thirsting for more of the mighty Himalayas mere months after their previous excursion.

Many reading this will wonder what all the fuss was about - the roadworks in the region have been exceptional over the past couple of years, and the road from Manali to Leh is more or less smooth tarmac all the way through, barring a couple of rough sections and water crossings which have also become extremely manageable. The catch, however, was doing this run at the end of September, with a massive weather disturbance looming overhead, on the back of one of the heaviest monsoons these areas have seen in years. Landslides were common, snow



wreathed the passes - blocking them out for days at a time more than a month before that kind of weather was to be expected - and if you crossed Baralacha La and it snowed at the other end before you could get through, you could be marooned in Sarchu or Pang for days.

The weather prediction for the duration of our ride to the Outback looked absolutely dire, with rain and snow expected the entire way there. We knew the weather apps were only accurate about 50 percent of the time though, so despite all the riders getting absolutely soaked on their way into Manali to start the ride, everyone went to bed excited and optimistic about the days to come. Fittingly, we witnessed a downpour of biblical proportions that went on through the night and well into the next morning, a foreboding precursor to what was to come. Fortunately, the first day's ride was only till Jispa (to afford the group some extra acclimatisation time before we hit the really high passes), so we took off once the showers had paused and made our way towards the Atal Tunnel and beyond. Progress was halted about half an hour later, with a boulder the size of a small house blocking the road. The bikes wiggled their way through the debris and the backup vehicles followed soon after thanks to the authorities working with unbelievable efficiency to clear the road. The weather only worsened on the other side of the tunnel, and by the time we made camp for the day, everyone was soaked and freezing. Baralacha La was blocked out with a foot of snow, and our best laid plans could soon need altering.

The evening was spent by the heater, albeit slightly damp still, drying off gear and talking about all things



**A SMALL DIRT TRACK WAS SET UP BY HERO, WHERE RIDERS COULD TRY THEIR HAND ON THE NEW XPULSE 4V**

motorcycles. The fraternity that is so synonymous with being a 'H.O.G.' was as strong as ever, and just like that everyone had been accepted as brothers (and sisters!), knowing they could rely on one another to complete this adventure safe and sound.

A new dawn greeted us the following morning. The clouds had cleared, and though the road only opened after noon, the group made steady progress past the snow-clad peaks, riding gingerly over icy patches and fast melting snow. We made good time, and despite the flurries while crossing Naki La and Lachung La, we were at Pang by dusk. After a quick stop at Sonam's famous dhaba, we carried on into the night traversing the More Plains and Taglang La before descending towards Leh, thanking God and science both (ironically) for heated grips! We arrived in Stok just before midnight, the culmination of a truly fitting adventure that had led us to the highest adventure festival in the world.

A good night's rest later, we were ready to enjoy the festival and everything it had to offer. The music was awesome, with the likes of Parikrama, BFR Sound System, Girish & The Chronicles, Salman Elahi and many others performing. The food was spectacular, with the real feel of a cookout and provided a perfect accompaniment to the music and the motorcycles. A small dirt track was set up by Hero, where riders could try their hand on the new Xpulse 4V. Hero MotoSport's Dakar motorcycles were on display too! Special guest talks took place at various intervals through the day, with the likes of Vijay Singh, Maraal Yazarlu and Vijay Parmar (or dad, as I call him!) amongst others sharing their stories with all in attendance.

Another special characteristic about the event was where it was being held - an adventure festival which required you to partake in an actual adventure to get there - which made it unique as compared to other similar events that take place in far more easily accessible destinations. Though plenty did fly in to Leh for the same, majority of those in attendance had made the journey by road, which made the entire experience all the more rewarding in our eyes!

The best thing about the entire event however, was the like-mindedness and shared passion for adventure and travel (be it on two wheels or four) amongst the people who had shown up. Riders from across the country had taken the time and effort to make their way to the Outback, and it was incredible to come across individuals from such varying riding backgrounds, each with their own exceptional stories to tell.

The freezing Ladakhi September rain tried its best to play spoilsport on the second day of the festival, but



**TOP:** Seeing a real Dakar machine in the flesh was mesmerising! **ABOVE:** Motorcycles and music together have everyone smiling. **BELOW:** Which way would you head on a motorcycle?





## THE PAN AMERICA MAINTAINS A LOT OF WHAT IS GOOD AND FUNCTIONAL FROM ITS HARLEY DNA

the true spirit of adventure shone through in the end, and after a late start, proceedings continued as planned, capping off a great pilot edition of the Outback Festival – the first of many, we’re sure!

Harley-Davidsons are beautiful and iconic machines made to see the world atop. The only issue is that in most western countries where they are immensely popular, you can travel to nearly every corner on a beautiful tarmac road. In India, you may find a Harley in Ladakh or some obscure corner of the nation (one even summited Umling La not so long ago!) but the machines are best enjoyed on long highways or smooth tarmac twisties. The Pan America however, is a different beast. It maintains a lot of what is good and functional from its Harley DNA, but adds characteristics that truly make it a machine that can go anywhere, and go toe to toe with the others in its class while doing so. Most of the riders accompanying us had ridden traditional Harley-Davidsons prior to the Pan-Am, so we did wonder how long it would take for them to transition into real adventure riders – aware that the outcome of their trip may be unknown, but ready to take life by the smooth handle and adapt to the possibility of an ever-evolving plan in order to arrive safely at our destination. We were pleasantly surprised to say that the riders, much like their motorcycles, had made the transition effortlessly. Harley-Davidson may be a late entrant to the adventure motorcycling space, but with a seriously capable bike, and probably the strongest community in the motorcycling world they provide a deadly combination capable of enticing any biker to join in and enjoy the ride.

It had snowed on Baralacha La again during our time in Leh, so we had to exit via Kargil and Srinagar on the way back eventually. The mountains don’t care much for anyone’s best laid plans, particularly this year with the more erratic turns in the weather than ever before – but that’s all part of the magic of travelling to the Himalayas on a motorcycle that allows you to enjoy the experience despite whatever Mother Nature throws your way! **tc**



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TOP: The festival was made special by some pawsome company. ABOVE AND BELOW: As a motorcycle manufacturer, Harley-Davidson has always been synonymous with music festivals

