

[ FEATURE ]

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# AIN'T NO MOUNTAIN HIGH ENOUGH...

*Exploring Zaskar valley with  
a posse of Harlistas*





**T**he can of Red Bull let out a satisfying hiss as I pried it open, watching the tail lamp of the previously stricken biker making its way into the distance tentatively. I greedily gulped down the caffeinated liquid, grateful for the burst of energy it provided as we descended slowly from Shingo La and towards the Zaskar Valley. The radio crackled, my coordinates were demanded, and after assuring those ahead that all was well I downed the rest of my beverage before swinging a leg over the Pan America and took off towards the rest of the pack.

The light-headedness that accompanied picking up multiple bikes that had tipped over at 15,000 plus feet above sea level had abated, and was replaced by piercing clarity of thought as I proceeded on my way. Now that I thought about it, the juxtaposition of the Red Bull and a Harley-Davidson couldn't have been more apt. The brands are two of the world's most successful marketing exercises – in both cases the products are immensely successful, encapsulating what the brand stands for in a tangible form. The energy drink stands for fearlessness, pushing boundaries, straying from the boring norms of convention and so much more. Harley-Davidson

represents iconic motorcycle badassery in the best possible way, but most importantly the spirit of motorcycling brotherhood, fraternity and community. Both have their naysayers – for some they just leave a bad taste in the mouth – but for ardent loyalists the brand symbolises nothing less than a deep devotion and a way of life!

My deep train of thought came to a shuddering halt as I happened upon another bike that had tipped over. The chaotic weather patterns this year meant that the high passes, usually open by now, were still covered in snow. Though the authorities had done a stellar job of cutting a narrow passage through the snow, the ice walls stood close to ten feet high at points on either side. The descent from Shingo La into the Zaskar Valley is still dirt, and a combination of the snowmelt and the heavy trucks plying that route had ensured deep slush all the way down to the base of the mountain – ensuring that every rider in the group had to earn their entry into the magical land.

Getting back to the job at hand, however, I huffed and puffed and got the machine upright again, and it cranked up without complaint as if nothing had happened. Just like that, man and machine were off



again, grumbling lightly about confidence being shot to bits but never ready to throw the towel in.

After taking the Pan Am through Spiti and Ladakh last year, both the top brass at HD and us at Xplorearth had full confidence in its abilities to go anywhere if the rider was capable (and brave) enough to. Zanskar was the obvious choice, with a combined mission to show not only the owners of the motorcycle, but the biking community in general what Harley's big ADV can do. Plans were put into motion and a group just short of 20 made their way to Manali for the start of the event.

Zanskar is a magical place – the final frontier when it comes to a biker's pilgrimage into the Himalayas. It's a throwback to Ladakh of yore, prior to the building of the brilliant highways and tourist influx into the region. The roads (if you can call them that) are freshly cut into the mountain, full of varying terrain and obstacles to encounter through the day's riding. Tarmac makes very scarce appearances. Add to that the changeable weather conditions of early June and you have yourself and extremely challenging and technical ride, putting both man and machine to the ultimate test.

And so we made our way to Padum and beyond – through rain, sleet and even snow past the fabled Drang-Drung Glacier and towards Kargil. We spent a day visiting the War Memorial at Drass, paying homage to the heroes of this nation and giving the bikes some well-deserved TLC, before taking the tarmac to Lamayuru. From there we took the iconic route back to Padum via Sirsir La and Singhe La, a





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## ZANSKAR IS A MAGICAL PLACE – THE FINAL FRONTIER WHEN IT COMES TO A BIKER'S PILGRIMAGE INTO THE HIMALAYAS

real feather in the cap of any motorcyclist who has completed the journey! To conclude, one last run between Padum and Manali to end an epic adventure.

Both man and machine alike acquitted themselves honourably all the way through. Our aim at Xplorearth is always to show a rider what both they and their machine are capable of, often by pushing the individual outside their comfort zone and watching their confidence, belief and skill grow. The group had to deal with tarmac, rocks, slush, bits of ice and snow, and even the immensely tricky fesh fesh along the way, and all the riders came back far more confident going off-road than they could ever have imagined!

As for the motorcycle, it chugged along faultlessly throughout – dealing with all the punishment it was put through without complaint. The beautiful engine never skipped a beat, providing all the power one could want even at extreme altitudes. The brakes were superb, even when subjected to the near insane

9km descent from the turnoff to Lingshed village all the way down to the Zanskar river! The various riding modes provided the perfect level of TCS and ABS intervention – something that was particularly impressive as compared to most other makes and models, which tend to have both kicking in just a tad too aggressively. Off-Road Plus mode (for the more skilled riders) was particularly liberating, and one could really feel the raw power of 150 horses just waiting to be unleashed with a mere twitch of the throttle. Most important in an adventure like this was the durability of the machine – no matter how many times it went down, where we took it or what it was put through, the Pan Am just kept going. Though this is something one would expect from an adventure motorbike made for just this purpose, we've lost count of how many premium ADV's have put their proverbial hands up after a few drops or sprouted electronic issues and like the moment they hit high altitude!









So here's where my long drawn spiel about the Harley-Davidson brand comes in. The Pan-America a superbly capable machine that can truly go anywhere, but purchasing it means more than just entering the premium ADV sphere – it means entering the Harley-Davidson family. HD symbolises motorcycling brotherhood like few others – their philosophy of “no man left behind” was there for all to see on this ride – as ride leaders it was extremely refreshing to see a group going out of their way to ensure every last one of their group made it through every day, both physically and in high spirits. Moreover, nobody does brand experiences like Harley, whether it be seemingly limitless merch (one of the riders claimed to be wearing HD boxers, or so he said!) or going out of their way to organize tons of events every year to keep their customers engaged and connected, whether it be H.O.G. Rallies, bike festivals or rides like this one. The value of such brand-customer experiences cannot be underestimated and really make owning one of these machines all the more enjoyable!

Zanskar is and always will be a special place to ride. It leaves no place to hide, testing you not only as rider and motorcycle, but also as the human being traversing those mountains. Both the machine and men astride it showed that they had not only the capability but also the heart to make it out the other side despite whatever the mountains threw at them – an experience that changes you forever! **tc**



ABOVE: The Pan AM does not give up, no matter what you put it through. BELOW: The ride to Zanskar is a test of both man and machine, pushing both of them to their limits

