

[FEATURE]

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ROOF-TOP FESTIVITIES

The world's highest festival is back and better than before!





The Outback Festival was back for round two. A great success in its first iteration, the world's highest adventure music festival was all set to come around again in Stok, just outside of Leh in the middle of September, and Harley-Davidson joined forces with us at Xploearth to take a group of Pan Americas up to the venue for the occasion.

Himachal had been devastated by the monsoon over the past few months. Entire mountainsides had been washed away, and the loss of life and property had been both swift and cruel – as things like this tend to go. The development in the region, particularly the new highway to Manali, had been absolutely obliterated in places, and the tourists earlier flocking to the region were advised to stay home for the foreseeable future. All those going to Leh were advised to fly in or take the long route through Srinagar, avoiding the destruction along the main highway from Manali. All this was openly available information, spread far and wide by the mainstream media.

What was not being shouted from the rooftops however was of far more interest to us at Xploearth. The roads to Manali and beyond were as close to empty as they've been in the past 20 years, with the fear mongering at an all time high. A largely tourism-driven economy was suffering like it hadn't in decades, peak season having been reduced to absolute nothingness. If one bothered to do their homework, it was clear that the main road was completely operational, albeit a little worse for wear at points – a far more gorgeous approach to Leh than through the sweltering plains of Punjab and Jammu.

So keeping all of that in mind, the group of Pan Ams congregated in Manali two days prior to the festival, with a number of goals in mind. First of all, we wanted to take an adventure bike and do adventure bike things, taking on the damaged roads, high altitude and everything else that came along with it, on our way to an adventure festival. Secondly, we wanted to help out our friends en route – the local hotels, dhabas and the like – partners in all of our adventures and often saviours to boot, the least we



could do was provide these people business in their time of need.

Keeping that in mind, a band of merry men set off down the road towards Leh. A night in Jispa came first, with the aim to help everyone acclimatise. The following morning we set off early and made short work of the largely tarmac roads and surmounted the iconic passes en route to our destination. Routine stops were made at Sarchu and Sonam's dhaba at Pang. The altitude is always a tricky customer to deal with, and the road work roughly between Lachalung La and Pang provided a stern off-road test. We even got some changeable weather en route, including sleet and snow, climbing up to Tanglang La, but the Pan Am soldiered on and we rolled into Stok in the dying light of the day.



The following morning marked the start of this year's Outback Festival, which would carry on for the following two days. Hundreds of adventure motorcycle enthusiasts rolled into the venue, seemingly out of thin air (we hadn't seen a soul on our run from Manali to Stok!). The motorcycling and BMX stunt boys had the milling crowd enthralled, and we were treated to talks by the likes of Vijay Thomas and Amit Sadh on all things motorcycles! Music lovers got their fill with BFR Sound System, Taba Chake and many more. Most importantly, this year's edition saw clear skies – a marked improvement from last time out when the cold September rain had decided to play spoilsport. The festival saw a solid mix of local and out-station participation, both in terms of

TOP: The festival enthralled enthusiasts of all ages. BELOW: It isn't called the world's highest motorcycling-music festival without reason! BELOW RIGHT: Harley's badges of honour can only be earned!





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TOP RIGHT: A highlight of the festival was the stunt performance with the Hero Xpulse 200 4V.
BELOW: Every H.O.G. group has unique jackets with interesting badges stitched on



the attending public, the stalls on display and even the performing acts – a great concept for those bound by the love for all things outdoors adventure to come together and have a good time! Despite the revelry on the evening of day one, the Pan Am cohort was up and about early the next morning, riding off to Wari La and beyond for lunch before returning in time to enjoy the second day of the festivities. The group set out early the day after the festival was over, and made for Manali. A stellar group of riders who had their priorities right, on a trusty motorcycle that is yet to surrender in the face of everything we throw at it! We got rain, hail, sleet and snow all the way back but the Pan America chugged along without missing a beat and the adverse conditions only made the hot showers on arrival all the sweeter. Another successful run on Harley's big ADV for the books.

The biking community is full of people who have made their name in the amphitheatre of the mighty Himalayas. They revel in the adulation they receive for traversing these timeless mountains. To those willing and able, I implore – get out on your bikes, ride through the mountains and show all your friends and followers that the same areas that were devastated not so long ago are now healing, even if that kind of news doesn't get the same kind of clicks. Don't haggle with hoteliers, using their weakness in terms of tourist influx as a bargaining chip to save a quick buck. Help the locals back to their feet the same way they've helped travellers during long, difficult journeys for decades and decades now, and remember – every small bit goes a long way! **tc**