



Finally. After weeks of preparation and a whole load of "Can't do's", finally what I set out to accomplish has now been accomplished. A new record has been created. The world's three highest motorable roads - Khardung La, Tanglang La and Chang La have been traversed in a single day. And what a ride it was. Here is the story. Originally the plan was to attempt the record on August 25. But due to some personal commitments, my departure to Manali got delayed by a few days. Finally on the night of Aug 28, around 9 in the evening it was, I kick started my bike and was on my way to Manali. The previous few days went into preparing the bike and making all the adjustments required for a trouble-free ride. I have to thank Ashok for the wonderful job he did on the bike, it behaved like a dream.

The weather was nice and the highway on to Chandigarh was clean. This was the first time I was doing a long ride alone, and it tended to get a little lonely along the way. Stopped at dhabas, had some tea, made some friends, saw some drunks and was on my way again. Chandigarh

happened in the early hours of the morning and I decided that a good night's rest was in order. Checked into a guest house which looked as if guests were not all that welcome there. Broken toilet seats, leaky faucets, et al. Anyway all I needed to do was sleep and off to sleep I went.

Very early the next morning I was woken up with a bad dream after which it was impossible to fall asleep again. Maybe the tension of the ride ahead was getting to me. To top that, it was raining cats and dogs and all the other animals that made up the passengers in Noah's famous ark. As soon as the rain abated a little bit, I was on my way. It was awful. It was not really raining, but there was enough water falling from upstairs to make the road slushy. Which was all right except that every passing vehicle sprayed a whole lot of mud and slush right onto my visor and glasses. Tough one.

Anyway, Manali happened around five in the evening and I headed straight for Arshad's workshop to get minor touch-ups done on the bike - engine oil top-up, chain tightening, etc. Right opposite there was a decent hotel (very decent in fact) and I checked in there for the night. After talking to people and re-looking at the map and the distances, I knew that the ride was a tough ask starting from Manali. A few reasons made me reverse the plan - (1) Khardung La was shut for traffic in the evening, (2) I did not have the necessary inner line permit to get to Khardung La and had to be obtained from Leh, (3) all the three passes would have to be travelled by night, and (4) that would not give me time enough to acclimatise to the heights one would reach in such a short time. And being alone was not such a hot idea to be falling sick.

So the plan was now to get to Leh, get the necessary permissions and attempt the three passes from Leh instead of Manali.

So off I went around lunch on August 30. The road had deteriorated over the past couple of months and I had to encounter a sudden and pretty major mud slide in the dark. What made it worse was that it was right around a bend and I saw it at the last minute. Swishing and skidding all over the place, very tentatively at that, I managed to negotiate the one foot deep mud patch over what seemed like ages and finally reached Darcha a little after eight and packed up for the night. The next day was to be Leh and I needed a good nights rest.

I left Darcha after a paratha breakfast with the hope of reaching Leh by nightfall. The dhaba guy told me that taxis take around 12 hours to get to Leh and I might take longer. The road to Leh was decent, Tanglang La top was COLD, the More Plains were gorgeous as usual and I hit Leh at around six in the evening which was a little over ten hours from the time I left Darcha. Pretty good going I thought and the long continuous riding did not seem to bother me too much. As soon as I hit Leh, I headed for the World Garden Cafe to meet up with the guys from our old hang out. They recognised me immediately and I was given an extremely warm welcome. Sat there for a bit, chatted up with some guys who had come over from Bombay, and made friends with a couple of lovely ladies from France. Checked into a nearby guest house (which reminded me of the one in Chandigarh) and dropped off to sleep. The next day would be spent in getting the permits for Khardung La!!!

It was Sep 1 and the Ladakh Festival was just getting started. Spent some wonderful hours at the Polo Grounds watching the cultural shows put up by the various villages and taking pictures. Unfortunately, I misread the flash readings completely and the photos have come out a bit dull and lifeless. But what a show it was. Gorgeous.

I then headed for the police station and made friends with the SHO...I needed his blessings. He would flag me off, sign in the log book and send a message to the check post short of Khardung La (at South Pullu) to let one crazy biker through at an obscene and unearthly hour in the morning. The permits had happened during the day and I was all tense, apprehensive of the coming ride. World Garden Cafe happened again, and I had a bottle of beer to soothe the nerves and a bite to eat. A few more hours and around 3 in the morning the Expedition would be on its way.

September 2, 2003. I woke up a little before three in the morning and found that it was not that cold outside. Some comfort. I padded up nevertheless knowing that Khardung La would be freezing. The bike was loaded up and after a couple of nervous cigarettes at 3.45am I was on my way to creating a new world record.

The road to South Pullu was a breeze. Saw some trucks parked by the way, obviously waiting for the barrier to open in the morning. By the time I reached Khardung La, I was freezing, my fingers were numb, the hands would not move and the brain was not functioning up to scratch. It was dark, not a soul in sight. Much as the weather told me not to, I had to take off my gloves, fill in the log book and take a couple of pictures to prove that I was there. The one which I had to take of myself through the self timer was a killer. Could not see a thing with which to focus the camera. Switched on the headlight, placed the camera on my rucksack and somehow managed to take the picture with the hope that it would turn out ok. Stayed at Khardung La top for a little over five minutes and before my entrails froze over, I was on my way back down.

South Pullu was the next stop, the sun was lightening the skies and the truckers were up and about, as was the chai-wallah. The warmth of the glass of hot tea thawed my fingers somewhat and a bit later I was on my way back towards Leh and the friendly SHO who would once again stamp my log book. That done, I was on my way again. The weather turned out to be real good and the ride was great all the way up to Karu from where I had to take the detour to Chang La.

There was a small township called Sakti on the way and the whole road was being re-laid which made the landscape even prettier since I did not have to constantly look for the potholes and gravel and sand and rocks on the road which seem to be endemic to this ride. But a little after Sakti was crossed and the climb began, the landscape remained beautiful, but the road constantly and progressively deteriorated. The climb was steep, there was no traffic at all, all the way to Chang La, but the sheer magnificence of the landscape made it all worthwhile. A little less than six hours after I left Leh, I was at Chang La top which is the world's third highest road. An Army battalion was in charge of the pass and they turned out to be Gurkhas, which was the regiment my father was from and that brought back many warm memories of my younger days with the troops. They mentioned that the pass was under three feet of snow just last week. Lucky me. And there I was, with my original plan, to be right there with three feet of snow for company. Thank God for small mercies. They graciously offered me some tea and biscuits which doubled up as my breakfast and I was on my way again. Two down and just one more to go - Tanglang La, the world's second highest road.

The road from Karu to Upshi and then on to Rumtse was good. Met some sheep and their shepherds on the way. Just 30 odd kilometers away was my final frontier. The climb started again, a steep one, along pretty bad roads, and at 1339 hours I was at the top of Tanglang La. Met up with a couple of Israeli bikers on the way and they were having a tough time with the cold and the altitude. Took some pictures and I was then looking forward to riding down the More Plains with a song in the heart knowing that my Expedition had been successful.

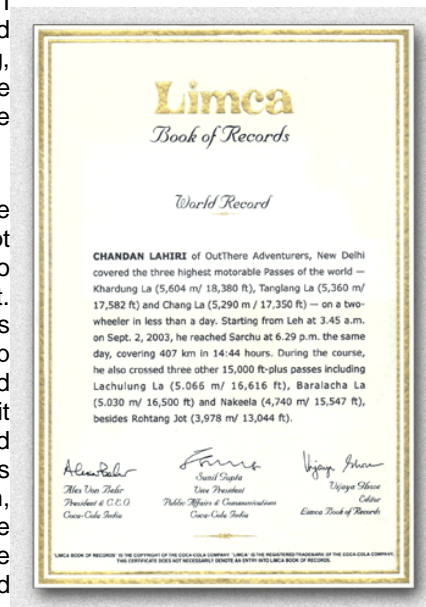
Twelve odd hours of straight riding and just a few more to go before I crossed the border of Jammu & Kashmir into Himachal Pradesh at Sarchu. It turned out to be more than a couple of hours and I finally reached Sarchu for the culmination of the Expedition at 18:29:30.

I had done it. The three highest motorable roads in the world had been crossed in a span of 14 hours 44 minutes and 11 seconds.

As it was still light on the horizon I thought of pushing the envelope a little further. Could I actually hit Manali tonight? There was still Baralacha La to be crossed, which was a bad pass to be doing at night and it was sure to be night by the time I reached there. I decided to go for it. Three hours later, a little after 9:30 at night, I was at Bharatpur and stopped for a bite before attempting the crossing of Baralacha La. Which I did quite comfortably. But just after I crossed the pass and headed for Zing Zing Bar, the bike started spluttering. Switched off a few times. I started it again. And then it happened. A couple of kilometers beyond the pass, at a little over 16,000 feet, in the middle of nowhere, the bike gave up completely. It just would not start. Try as I might, it refused to come to life. No traffic, at an altitude that can drive a fit man to sickness, with nowhere to go. I looked helplessly towards the pass hoping to find a pair of headlights coming my way which could give me a lift to a nearby town...but sad luck - nothing. After about half an hour of hemming and hawing, I decided enough was enough. Unloaded my sleeping bag and lay down on the road with the sparkling stars for company. I only hoped that it would not start snowing at night that would really have put the snorkers in my bonnet.

As it turned out, the night was pleasant enough (meaning no snow) but when I woke up in the morning it was all clouded over and the cold air really hit me as I snuggled out of the sleeping bag. I looked at the bike, said some nice comforting things to it, pack my sleeping bag, loaded the bike, put on my shoes, lit a cigarette, all the while patting and stroking the engine hoping it would come to life when I kicked it.

IT DID!!!!!!! Voila. I had a big throbbing machine again, and the whispering junk of machinery was a distant dream. It kept spluttering and stopping, but somehow it kept on moving. To Patseo. Then to Darcha. And to Jispa. No mechanic in sight. Keylong was sure to have one, being the district headquarters and all that. I seem to remember having seen a bike workshop during my last visit. Sure enough there was. Seventy odd kilometers and many hours later, I was at the mechanics and it was diagnosed as a blown rectifier which was duly changed and I was on my way again after about an hour. Ten kilometers later, the bike stopped again. No, it was not the same problem, the horns were working and the lights were blazing, but the bike would not start. Checked the fuel tap and it was dry. The main and the reserve. That was odd. Opened the fuel lid and sure enough there was fuel in the tank. The bloody tap was clogged. Managed to open it and clean it up so that at least the main tap was working. Filled up the tank at Tandi and carried an extra 5 liters of petrol to take me to Manali and then on to Delhi.



Hit Koksar and with that the rain. In fact the rain had started a little after Keylong itself. And by the time I reached Koksar it was pelting. And they say that beyond Rohtang is a rain shadow area. Funny thing, this environment. Waited at Koksar having momos for the rain to abate, which it did after a couple of hours and I headed on to Rohtang and then on to Manali. And the next day back to Delhi.

Thus ended one helluva a ride. In retrospect it was a crazy attempt. On these roads one should ideally have company, if not someone who knows how to diagnose a temperamental bike. And take more than enough spares, never know when you might need them. And some extra cash. God knows what I would have done if I had to load the bike on to a truck and cart it to Manali.

Wow, what a ride. A trip of a lifetime. Tough but in the end, very rewarding. And the next one is just around the corner. But with a large group this time. With four wheelers and bikes and lots and lots of fun. Wanna join in?