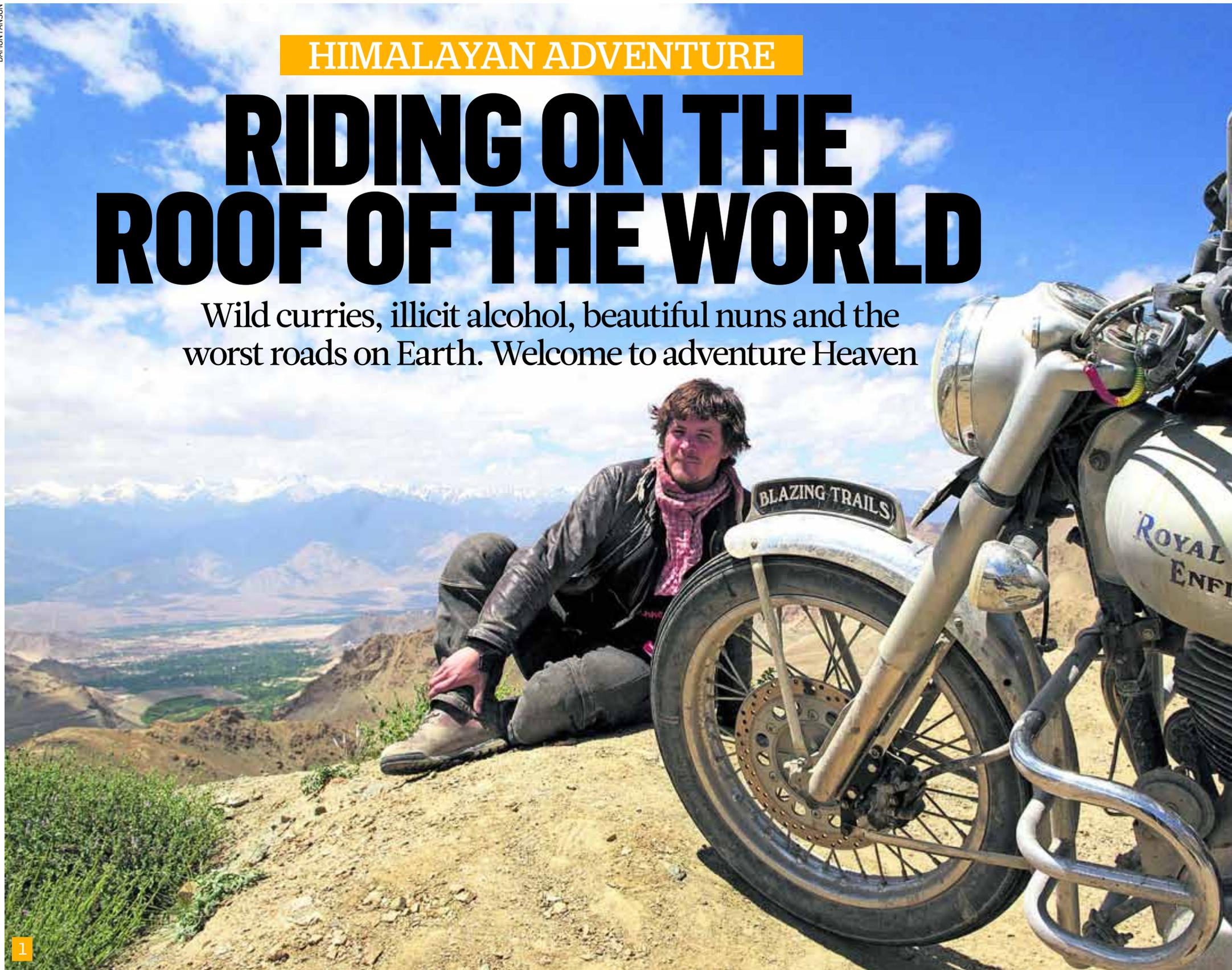


DAMON TANSON

HIMALAYAN ADVENTURE

RIDING ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

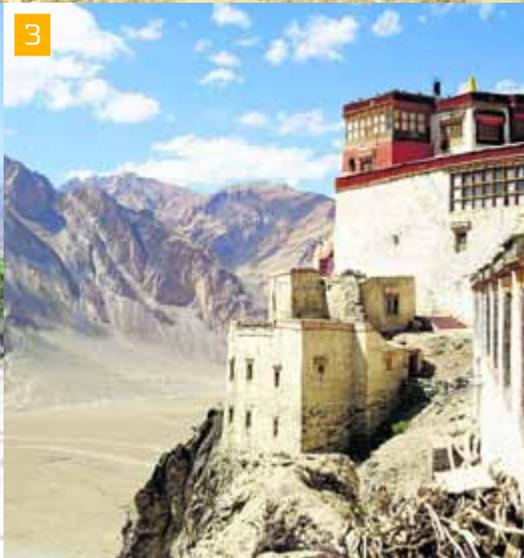
Wild curries, illicit alcohol, beautiful nuns and the worst roads on Earth. Welcome to adventure Heaven



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1. Peter Stilwell living out his biking dream on the way to Khardung. 2. Stilwell with outrider Adam Lewis. 3. The 11th Century Stongdey mountainside monastery. 4. Geoff Hill checks his fingers for frostbite on the Wari Pass. 5. Six-year-old Kunza Lomo, who Geoff Hill agreed to 'adopt', tries on his helmet



Left: Buddhist shrines were a regular sight, as were rocky roads. Few on the trip had experience on loose surfaces, but all coped. Above: Stongdey monks know how to carry off a headpiece

By Geoff Hill

I normally phone out for curry on a Sunday night, but the other week I thought I'd pop out for a change. Lovely place, you can't miss it. Just fly to Delhi, take a domestic flight to Leh in the Himalayas and walk up the main street to the Ibex Restaurant.

I recommend the Chicken Tandoori.

It was no ordinary night out, but then this was no ordinary trip: two weeks' riding 1000 miles of the wildest and highest roads in the world, 400 of those on dirt tracks made of sand, mud, gravel, rocks, rivers and, in one memorable case, snow.

Still, at least I knew who to blame: Peter Stilwell, who was sitting next to me tucking into a Rogan Josh washed down by a bottle of Kingfisher. He'd won a 'Biking Dreams' competition with Bennetts and was enjoying fulfilling one, along with childhood mate Vince Stephens.

I was there to chronicle their travels over two weeks with Blazing Trails, the bike adventure company set up by Suzie and Damon l'Anson which organises tours in India and Nepal.

Leh is the breathtaking starting point for the toughest and most remote of Blazing Trails' trips. It's not breathtaking just because of the seething mass of humanity, sacred cows and less sacred donkeys. No, it's also because at over 10,000ft, you're all set for the headaches, giddiness and altitude sickness which Blazing Trails thankfully gives you a day to get over.

After that, every ride on an Enfield starts with a small but important lesson in how to start it. The newest UK imports may come with new-fangled electric start, but Blazing Trails uses lovingly-maintained examples of older models that need kick-starting carefully; a process which involves either your ankle turning blue with bruises and the air around you likewise with cursing and swearing, or a smug grin as the 500cc single phuts softly into life.

WHAT'S THE STORY?

■ Riding through the Himalayas is a dream adventure for many bikers – and now it's a more accessible dream than ever before. The most fitting way to do it, as Geoff Hill did, is on an Enfield Bullet, the single-cylinder living fossil still manufactured in India.

The four-speed gearbox is on the right in the old British style, resulting in much hilarity for the first few miles as several of our group of eight tried to brake and found themselves causing grievous bodily harm to the gears, accompanied by looks of weary horror from the mechanics, Jamal and Ramji.

At least the plan for the first day was a gentle 90-mile introduction on Tarmac, letting us get used to the bikes as we tootled along merrily, making extensive use of the most important button on any vehicle in India – the horn.

It was all so civilised that Peter was even wearing a well-pressed white shirt with cufflinks, since a chap has to set an example in the Raj. It was all going swimmingly until our first stop at a roadside shack for a refreshing cup of chai, the hot, sweet, milky tea that soon becomes addictive in India.

"Mmm. Bit suspicious there's no traffic coming the other way," said our outrider Adam Lewis, a superbly skilled biker who was taking a break from an around-the-world journey which started in 2006 and shows no signs of ending. His suspicions were right: the shack's proprietor confirmed a landslide had blocked the way ahead, and a team was trying to dynamite it clear.

After two hours, Suzie had had enough. "I know a short cut. Let's go," she said, leading us back up the road and along hours of mountainous farm track. Steep hairpin bends of sand and rock with optimistic tractors coming

the other way, that sort of thing.

Finally, as the sun sank behind snowy peaks, we rolled into the courtyard of a hotel in the mountain retreat of Lamayuru, in the shadow of a 1000-year-old monastery – home to 150 monks, some of whom looked as if they'd been there from day one.

The showers were cold, the beer was colder and the curry for dinner was hot, but we were so tired we couldn't have cared less which order they came in.

The next day, every few miles we pass another Indian Army barracks. The country spends an estimated £4 million a week guarding these northern regions, disputed by Pakistan ever since Partition in 1947 and now even more disputed with the brooding presence of China in Tibet to the north-east.

"They'd be better spending it on the roads," I thought grimly as we bounced west along a route to Kargil, with stretches of decent road tempting us coyly for a few miles then disappearing into a boulevard of broken dreams.

And yet, just as your heart sank at rounding a corner to see yet another stretch of sand, gravel or mud, it would lift at the sight of a lush valley, bright with wild roses; or a group of children waiting for a school bus, their uniforms immaculate; or once, a beautiful Buddhist nun spinning a prayer wheel.

Even to gaze upon her face was like a meditation to me.

"Here," I said to Damon at the next chai stop, "how long does this crap road go on for?"

"All the way to Padum tomorrow, and then the same all the way back. And it gets worse," he grinned.

"Tell you what. I'll ask Ramji the assistant mechanic if he fancies a spin on my bike, and I'll jump in the back-up truck for a bit," I grinned back.

It was the right decision. Freed from constantly looking a few yards past the front wheel, I got the chance to look out of the window at stunning views and wave cheerily at roadworkers camped in makeshift tents, grazing yaks and plump marmots. One of these little

mammals even sat by the roadside, completely unconcerned as I walked over. Then, having decided I wasn't a golden eagle who was going to eat him for afternoon tea, he waddled off to sit on a nearby rock to keep a lookout for raiding Pakistani marmots.

Peter, meanwhile, had been so traumatised by the road that he had not only abandoned his cufflinks, but was sporting a shirt with at least two creases in it. Shocking. No wonder we lost the Empire.

"Spectacular. Great ride. Knackered," was his verdict on the day as he climbed off, covered in dust, at the campsite in the shadow of Rangdom, a monastery hamlet looking out over a valley which would have been a worthy setting for *Lord of the Rings*.

In the morning, we wound our way up another high pass, gazed down in wonder at the vast Drang Drung glacier, then wound our way down at length through the Zaskar Valley.

Its villages and hamlets, from the faces and clothing of the inhabitants to the Buddhist shrines, were pure Tibetan, yet the surrounding landscape, with its dry stone walls, grassy fields, willow and poplar groves, bubbling streams and white houses with thatched roofs, was disturbingly Irish.

It was all very confusing, so the only answer was to stop for the night at Padum, an end-of-the-road town with a frontier feel to its dusty streets.

After a tour of the highlights, which took about 45 seconds, we went on a pub crawl (to both of them), then decamped to what the guidebook called 'the least worst restaurant in town'.

Sadly, the Afghani Chicken was off, presumably having gone off to fight a US Army chicken in the mountains, so I dined on mutton which had seen better days, and fell into bed.

Thankfully, in the morning we found the best macaroon shop in town and a cafe selling delicious samosas and momos, like tiny Cornish pasties.

As we tucked in gratefully, on the *Continued over*

Bennetts Biking Dreams

Bennetts Biking Dreams was launched in 2010 to celebrate the 80th anniversary of Bennetts, the bike insurance specialist.

With £80,000 worth of dreams to give away, Bennetts received thousands of entries from bikers whose dreams ranged from the easy to fulfil (a new helmet) to the more complicated to deliver (a trip of a lifetime, such as riding along Route 66).

Now in its third year, it has fulfilled the dreams of 32 bikers. Celebrities who have shared their biking dreams with Bennetts include double WSB winner James Toseland and Premier League footballer Shaun Wright-Phillips.

■ **Entry is free online at www.bennettsbikingdreams.co.uk**



mountain beyond stood a trio of brightly-painted Buddhist shrines, like recycling bins – clean souls in the white one, dirty in the red, and the rest in the green for sorting out later.

And beyond that, the 11th Century mountain-top monastery of Stongdey, which we rode up to in the afternoon just in time to tiptoe into the courtyard and find the monks in fantastical robes and hats entertaining an audience of locals with dancing to the accompaniment of drums, cymbals and horn.

A junior lama wearing a plumed Victorian helmet bearing the words 'Horse Artillery' kept order with a sword and a grizzled ancient dispensed rancid yak butter from a pouch and rosewater from a McDowell's rum bottle, while two small horrors wearing dragon masks raced about demanding small change or else.

From a raised dais, the high-ranking lama, the Rinpoche, sucked on a boiled sweet and surveyed the scene with an expression that could have been infinite boredom or infinite serenity. He invited us for tea and biscuits in his inner sanctum, but neither that, nor the dancing, was the highlight of the day.

No, that was Kunza Lomo, the sweet little six-year-old girl who grasped my hand and wouldn't let go, even when I lifted her high, swung her around until she laughed and cried, and let her try on my bike helmet.

"You know," said Suzie as we hugged her goodbye, "it would only cost £100 a year to pay for her education, and change her life."

"Consider it done," I said. After all, it's not every day you go for a motorcycle ride, and adopt a little girl.

I thought of her much the next day as I rode back along the long and arduous road to Kargil, a Shi'ite Muslim town where a polite request for beer at our hotel led to me jumping into a taxi with Jamal, followed by a breakneck ride across town, six whispered phone calls, three false alarms and finally a secret drinking den down an alleyway filled with guilty-looking sons of Allah.

Minutes later, I was scuttling back to the taxi carrying 10 bottles of Godfather Extra Strong in a hessian sack.

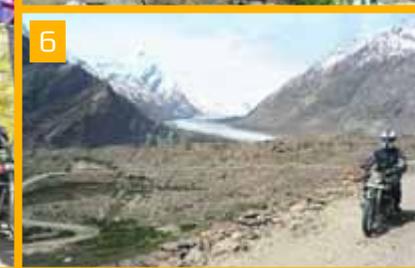


I was amazed at how the Enfield shrugged off sand, gravel, mud, rocks... it chugged through everything

Geoff Hill



1. Stilwell at the final destination of the adventure: the shimmering Pangong Tso lake straddling the border between Ladakh and Tibet.
2. Monks dancing at Stongdey.
3. Group shot of the tour group at Khardung.
4. Stilwell, feeling the adverse effects of high-altitude riding, mistakenly mounts a yak thinking it's his motorcycle.
5. The 1000-year-old monastery at Lamayuru in Ladakh.
6. Riding near the massive Drang Drung glacier.



Our success must have been an omen, as the next day was a glorious run back to Leh in time for curry and cheaper beer; and the day after, the steep, sinuous climb to the 18,000ft Khardung Pass, loftier than Everest base camp and the highest road in the world fit for motorised transport.

Throughout the trip I was amazed at the way the Enfield shrugged off sand, gravel, mud, rocks, ploughed earth at roadworks and regular torrents of snowmelt which turned the road into a raging river. You just stood on the pegs, and no matter how much the bike bucked and weaved beneath you, it chugged through everything.

In the afternoon, the track wound down the other side then swooped and dived its way down into the Nubra Valley, a symphony of river and sand dunes framed by alpine peaks. At last we came to the Shangri-La of Hunder, a village of bright temples and beautiful women cradled in a landscape of mustard fields and poplars.

Greeted by the friendly waves of homecoming workers and schoolchil-

dren, we camped in an apricot wood by a ramshackle monastery occupied by a sole wizened ancient the spitting image of Yoda. When I say 'camped', we were in lofty tents with carpeted floors, hot showers, delicious food and cold beer around a crackling bonfire.

However, just when we thought the road had thrown everything it had at us, next day the 16,000ft Wari Pass between Nubra and Pangong Tso was snowbound. In July. Having slithered and pushed our way through that, we found the road blocked by a broken-down truck. The bikes could get past, but not the back-up vehicle.

An hour of exhausting shovelling and rock shifting later, we were through, but it was tea time, there was another six hours to Pangong Tso, and only the suicidal travel on India roads after dark.

"You know, this trip has had so many highlights, but getting through that snow was both the biggest challenge and the biggest sense of achievement," said an exhausted Peter. "But it's really inspired me. I'll be back, believe me."

A decision was made to stay at Tiksey,

18 miles away, the home of a beautifully restored monastery. It was the perfect base for striking out for the final and most exotic destination of the trip: the fabled lake of Pangong Tso, straddling the border between Ladakh and Tibet.

As we rode slowly up the mountain roads in the morning sun, the colours which had become so familiar spread out before us: above us the aching blue of sky, then the snowy peaks, the mottled brown slopes, the green and yellow of the valley below and the icy blue of the rushing river which nourished it.

And then, at last, the lake at the end of our long and winding road. Blessed by sky and cradled by mountains, I looked down at the myriad shades of blue and green in its depths, and in that moment it encapsulated India to me: an exquisite gem as the reward for a thousand miles of heat and dust.

■ **Adam Lewis' website is www.shortwayround.co.uk.**

■ **Geoff Hill's Weise Hi-Viz rain suit supplied by www.weise-clothing.co.uk. Retail price £44.99.**

Blazing Trails Tours

The Ladakh tour I took with Blazing Trails is £2,549, not including international flights. Accommodation is in small but pleasant hotels, and on two nights in comfortable fixed camp sites with large two-person tents.

Riders should feel comfortable on dirt roads, although having said that, our group had limited or no dirt road experience, and while we all found it challenging, everyone managed.

Blazing Trails' other tours – in the rest of India, Nepal and soon South Africa – are mostly or completely on Tarmac. Prices start at £1,495. The company is highly recommended, with excellent local knowledge, organisation and back-up, including mechanics, doctor and luggage vehicle.

■ **Details of Blazing Trails tours: visit www.blazingtrailstours.com**