

IN JULY 1998 WE were heading west into Kashmir across the Zoji La and it had been raining for the past several days. This mountain pass is nowhere near as high as some of the others we had done in the last week; at a rather modest 11,600 feet it was not comparable to the 18,000s and 16,000s we had recently conquered.

But it was certainly one of the most challenging, particularly in the wet. The pass is narrow, steep and twisty, barely wider than an Indian Tata truck in many places but expected to cope with two-way traffic, including the lengthy convoys of army trucks on this military supply route to and from the border regions.

Precipitous drops to the river valleys below threatened the unwary at every corner. The surface of the road, if this goat-track could be called such, was rough and rocky to the point of being tortuous and was hidden for substantial lengths by deep, fine, powdery dust, somewhat like the notorious bulldust of Australia's red outback. And when it was wet, it was soap-suds slippery.

With us were Allan and Carlene, from the delightfully-named suburb of Humbug Scrub in the Adelaide Hills, and by their own admission surely the most vertically-challenged couple ever to throw four short legs over an Enfield. Allan was finding it extremely trying, with his lack of ground contact undermining his confidence in these conditions, so I offered to take Carlene on the back of my bike until we were through the worst of it. I think they were both quite relieved.

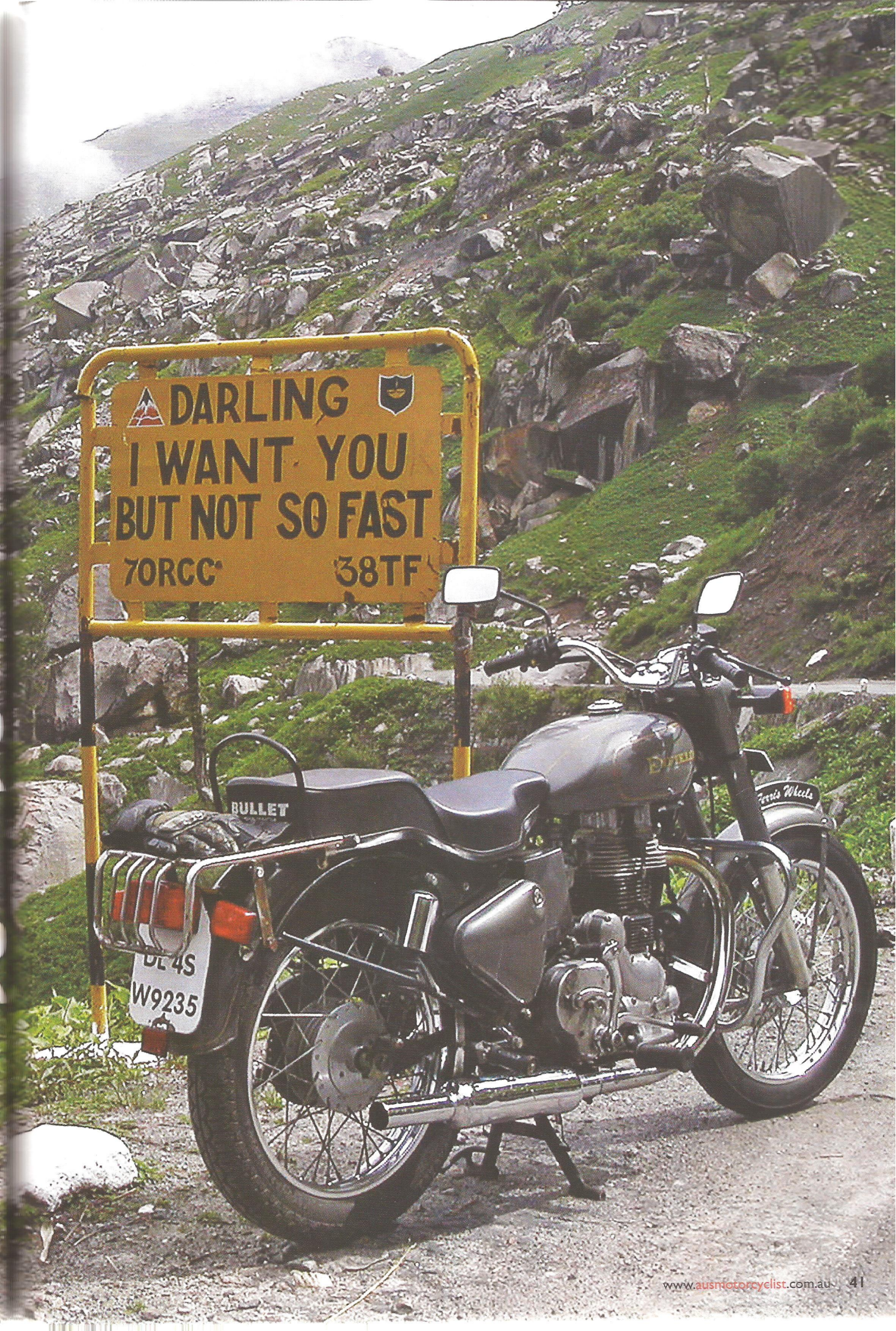
We had been delayed by a puncture on one of the bikes and a broken chain on another and it was now dark, and cold, and still raining. The dozens of oncoming Tata truck drivers, as is the mysterious way in India, alternated their headlights between full high beam and completely off, rather than simply dipped. And the headlight of the poor old Enfield, it must be said, wouldn't dazzle a rabbit at five



Mission Impossible

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metres. This was extremely difficult going, even for the best of riders.

Our support vehicle had been delayed by the inevitable army convoy, so I had now dropped to the rear and I instructed our group members that, in the event of any further breakdowns, please leave the bike by the side of the road, hide the key under the front tyre, and cadge a lift with one of the other riders in order to get to the safety of our hotel as quickly as possible. We were all hungry and tired, it had been a long day, and already something like nine or ten bikes out of 14 had been dropped in these appalling conditions.

Carlene and I came upon one of our bikes leaning against the rock wall, rather damaged and obviously out of action. We found out later what had transpired. Ol' Charlie, at 74 the elder statesman in our group by far, had impressed everybody with his riding

skills and ability but eventually fatigue had taken its toll. Blinded by oncoming headlights at a very narrow section of the pass, he had parked as wide as possible and teetered on the very edge for a second before he felt the bike starting to go over, and had wisely stepped off. He slumped to the ground and watched as the bike plunged over the precipice and vanished into the darkness.

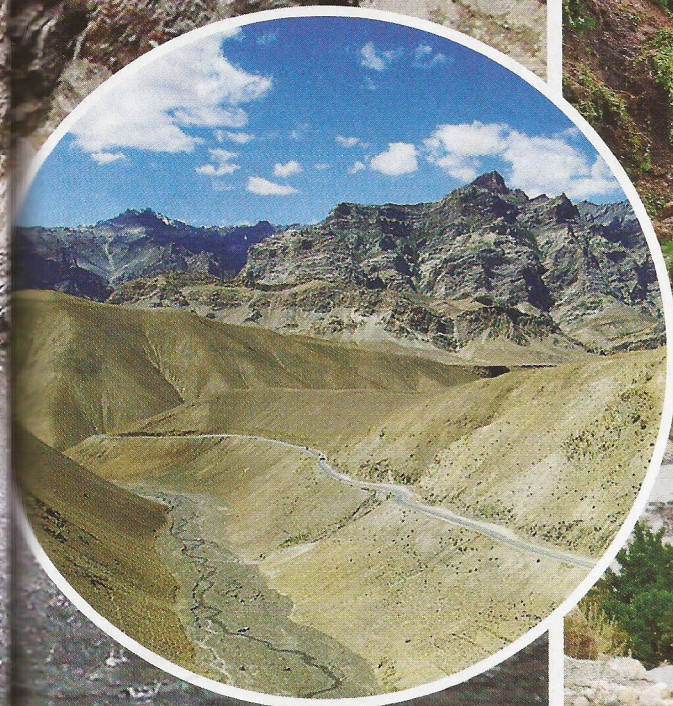
Commotion ensued, as 20 or more Tata truck drivers emerged from their rigs in a rather excited fashion. They helped Charlie to his feet and made sure he was okay, then turned their attentions to the wayward motorbike. Flashlights revealed that it had come to rest only 20 or 30 metres down the rocky scree slope, so Indian manpower at its best swung into action.

Ropes were produced and two brave souls made their way down to the

stricken beast. They tethered it as best they could and then, one either side holding it upright in order to minimize further damage, they and the bike were hauled back up the cliff by many noisy but gallant comrades above.

By now several of our other riders had managed to arrive at the scene through the gridlock of stopped trucks. They attempted to start Charlie's bike but to no avail, and then someone pointed out the reason. The battery compartment had burst open during the tumble, and the battery had disappeared into the abyss.

No amount of coaxing was likely to persuade our two truckie heroes to venture back down there to look for it so, following instructions, they moved the bike out of harm's way and Charlie (rather gratefully, one suspects) jumped on the back of another rider's bike and they moved on toward our

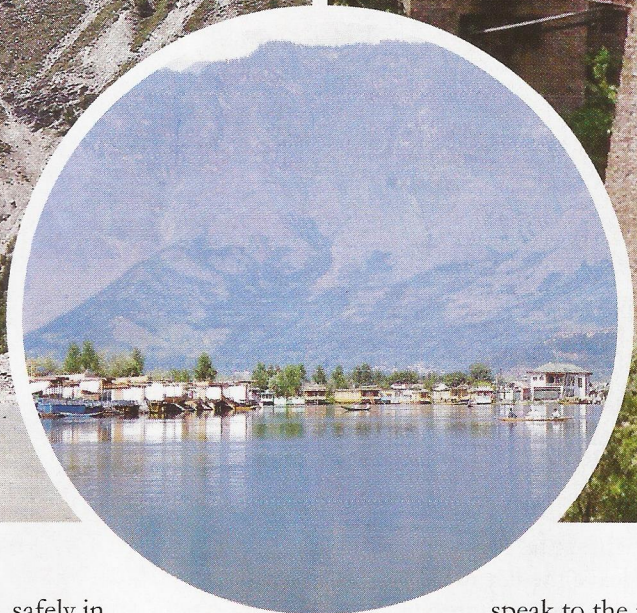
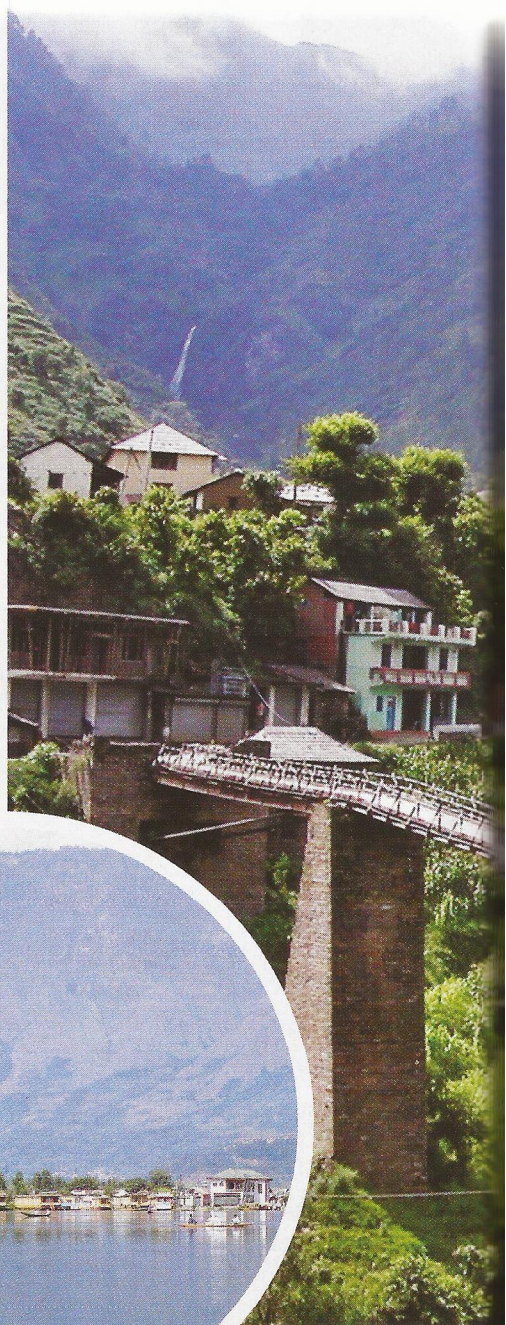


hotel. Unfortunately, he forgot the instruction to leave the key under the front tyre and slipped it into his pocket instead.

Carlene and I caught up with them and a few others just before the hotel, at nearly eleven o'clock at night. About eight of us dragged our weary bones off the bikes and stumbled into the foyer, just as the music on the hotel speakers burst dramatically into the soundtrack theme from the Tom Cruise movie 'Mission: Impossible'! Impeccable timing.

Meanwhile our support crew had come upon the damaged bike and tried to start it. It was in remarkably good shape considering its fall from grace, and was rideable.

They immediately identified that the battery was missing and they were carrying a spare, but there was no point replacing it when the key was



also missing, safely in Charlie's pocket a further 30km down the mountain. They free-wheeled it as far as they could with the help of gravity, then there was little alternative but to drive to the hotel, retrieve the key from a mortified Charlie, and return to collect the bike as the clock ticked past midnight.

It should be mentioned here that Kashmir was going through very troubled times, with the separatist militia escalating their terrorist activities. We had advised all our group members to be on the alert for suspicious behaviour, and to avoid crowd scenes.

But we were still surprised during breakfast the following morning when an official-looking army jeep swept into our hotel carpark and a very self-righteous Commander demanded to

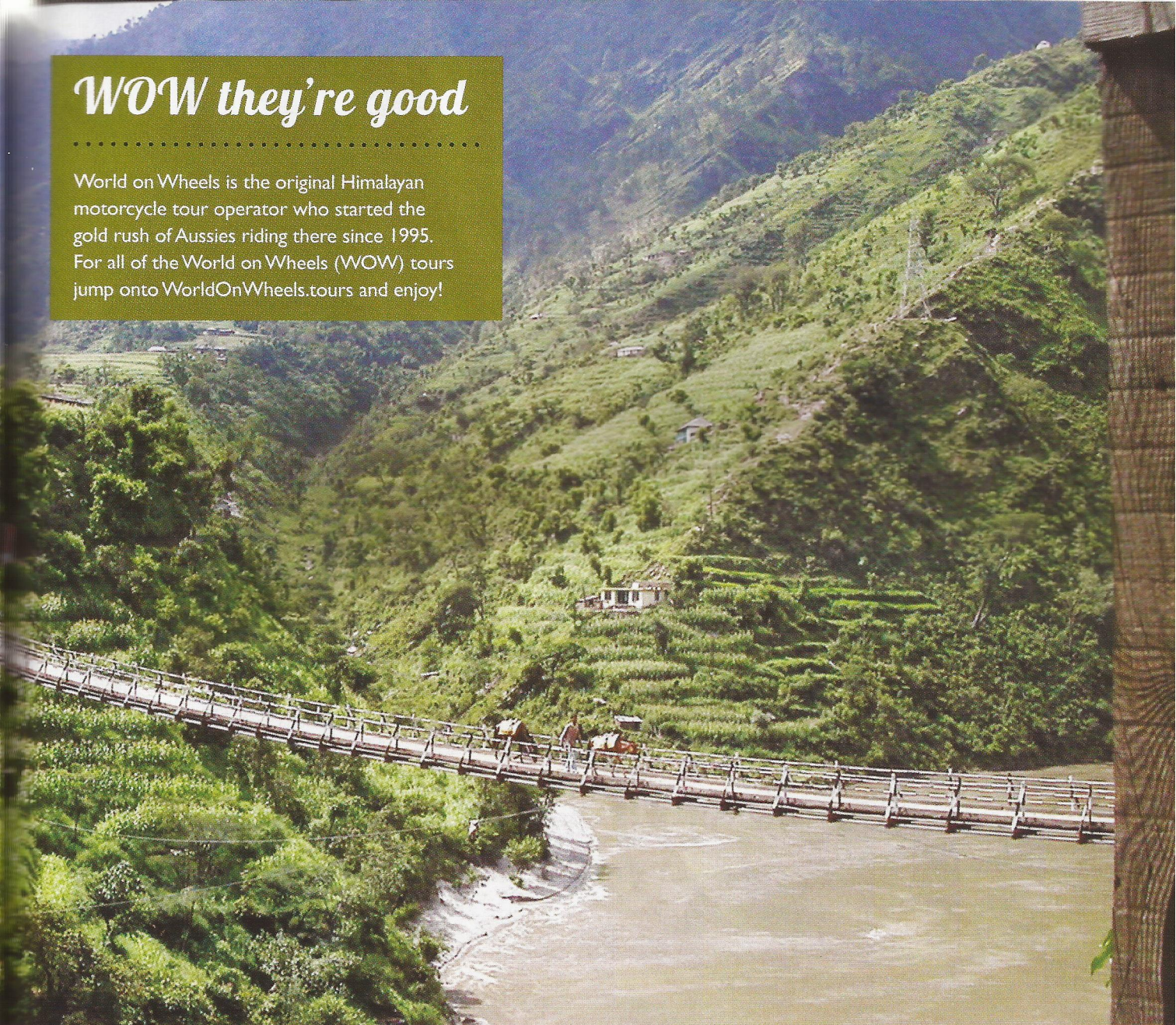
speaking to the motorcycle tour leader.

I introduced myself, whereupon he asked which member of our group had been involved in an incident last night on the pass, please? About 12 hands went up in the air, to the merriment of all but our stern-faced Commander.

He asked who had crashed his bike over the edge, to which Charlie duly 'fessed up. The Commander told him that his camera had been found at the scene, and would Charlie please accompany him to his office nearby and recover it. Charlie said, No way chum, I have my camera right here with me, see? The Commander then insisted it must belong to one of our other group members who had spent some time at the accident scene last night, and would that person kindly come forward.

WOW they're good

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We all had our cameras and were by now beginning to smell a rat but our token American, Larry, stepped up to the plate and said, Hey, I've finished my breakfast so I'll go take a look at this mysterious camera.

He and I had a quiet conversation aside and I advised him not to do this, but to cut a long story short Larry, who had "seen some action in 'Nam," ended up jumping in the jeep with the Commander to go and confirm that the camera did not belong to our group at all. What actually transpired, and again we didn't find this out until after the event, was that the camera was not in the Commander's office at all but was in fact still in situ at the top of the mountain pass. Larry was gone for two hours, by which stage I had set the rest of the group off on the

next leg of our journey and I was waiting for him alone at the army base, becoming more than a little anxious.

Larry eventually returned with quite a story. He had been taken back to the scene of Charlie's little spill, where a camera was pointed out to him at the side of the road. Larry said, Hell, that's no ordinary camera, anyone can see that's a booby trap with all those wires hanging off it. Our Commander, who must have been in line for a promotion if he played his cards correctly, then asked Larry to sign an affidavit declaring that this was not our camera, which Larry promptly signed 'Albert Einstein'.

The small crowd was then pushed back some distance and an army sharpshooter with a rifle shot the offending device, which blew up with considerable force.

Evidently a trouble-maker in the crowd the previous night had sought to take advantage of the commotion in the darkness and had laid his booby trap, expecting someone to pick up the foreigner's dropped camera and thereby detonate the explosive.

His probable aim was to damage the road and thereby interrupt the military supply route, without concerning himself with the collateral matter of innocent casualties. It did not escape our attention that these innocent casualties might very well have been our own mechanics, if the militant had been just a little smarter and placed his bomb on our motorbike instead.

All's fair in love and war so they say, and this incident brought home to us the stark reality of daily existence in this undeclared war zone of beautiful but perennially bedeviled Kashmir. 🏍️