When you receive an invitation to ride up the Himalayas with a world first and uniquely designed tour just for the girls, there can only be one reply – I'm in! And that’s just how it happened. Here I was about to venture across the world to face a whole new challenge and adventure.

The tour had been created by Denise Ferris from Australian tour company, World on Wheels, who had decided it was time to create a new tour entitled ‘Safaris for the Soul’. A tour with much more to it, and from my experience kicking around on motorcycles, a bike tour that would provide the heart and soul with a much more lasting experience to remember.

**DAY 1**
**ARRIVAL IN NEW DELHI**

With the relief of 30+ hours in transit over, we finally arrived in New Delhi late on our first night.

Sporting the annoying ‘cankles’, we ventured off to find the rest of our ladies’ tour group.

Now, all the travel information warns you that if you haven’t been to countries such as India, you will be shocked as you first venture out. The smells, the noises, and the heat hit you instantly. The hooting of horns and the weaving of crammed roads packed with cars, bikes and tuk-tuks. It reminds you how you are indeed a long way from home, and now immersed in a totally different culture. Here, there are so many people surrounding you, but it’s what I came to describe as a ‘calm organised chaos’.

Our morning began with a scheduled day of gentle activities to recharge everybody in our group who had travelled from all corners of the globe. Getting stuck in the lift on the first trip to breakfast was not going to damper the day. Neither was the fact that it was pouring with rain outside. At least it was warm, at 26ºC, unlike NZ, which was averaging 12.
DAY 2
DEHLI – CHANDIGARH – KASAULI (65km)
With an early morning start to the day, we headed for the train station to begin our three-and-a-half-hour train journey up in the hills towards our Himalayan destination. This would be where we would meet our Royal Enfields and travel on to Kasauli for the night.

Now at a point where I thought we had seen ‘everything’, I was most sadly mistaken. Denise, our tour leader, had recommended that we grab a bit of shut-eye on the train, but this wasn’t going to be the case for me. The ‘culture shock’ was to continue. Coming to a country such as India you expect to see poverty, but nothing hits you quite between the eyes like when you see it up close and personal.

Houses were rare, with shacks the norm. The amount of people sleeping rough is just unbelievable – bodies spread in every possible place. Washing, sleeping, and using the bathroom in the street is commonplace, and the smell tends to kill any hunger you may be feeling. It’s also at about this point you start seeing just how good your own life is back home. Every major issue going on in your own world pales when compared to the hardship being faced by the people before your eyes here.

With a mixture of nerves and excitement from our group, we finally reach our bikes, and after a good briefing on the machines, how the roads function and what you should and shouldn’t do, we began the process of chucking on our gear to test our Indian riding. By this stage, we had attracted quite a bit of interest from the locals who all wanted to check out these fair-skinned maidens. Feeling like celebrities, we first undertook a bit of a practise in the parking lot for everybody to become familiar with their bikes before taking a deep breath and diving straight into the calm, organised, chaos of the Indian roads.

Nothing can really prepare you. You just have to do it. And forget every road rule you’ve spent years learning. Indicators… not really needed. Just toot. Want to pass on the inside – no problem – just toot some more. Want to pass on a blind corner – go ahead – definitely toot. And always watch out for the many dogs, cows and monkeys while you are at it. If you are worried they may move, give them all a toot. No need to look behind, just face forward and listen for any toots, as that’s what the vehicle coming up fast behind you will do. Toot!

Our first day consisted of only a short ride to our hotel, yet a few of the girls still needed a stiff drink at the end! But overall, everybody did extremely well. This was mostly a mental challenge, where we all learnt that once you got your head around it, you would be okay. Or were we just being optimistic…?

DAY 3
KASAULI – SHIMLA (80km)
Our second day of riding began with many of the group feeling a lot more confident. Once the terror wears off, and the knuckles release a bit, you slip into the groove of how it all flows. We left Kasauli and headed for Shimla. Although the traffic wasn’t quite so busy as it was back at Chandigarh, it still gave you no chance to let your eyes wander too far from in front of you, as being ready for the unexpected was essential. Dogs and cattle are always on the road and quite often sleeping. With animals all being so highly respected in India they all seem to be living the life of Riley, wandering around at their own pace and only ushered off the road when they cause too much traffic disruption.

This would again be a short riding day, climbing a little higher in altitude. We were all a little pleased as it meant the heat receded to a more comfortable level which didn’t see you pass out on the side of the road when you had your turn at the corner man system. Rene, a lovely lady in her very young seventies ventured out today on the back of a bike with Denise. A truly inspirational lady, she proved to us all that age means nothing when you enjoy motorbikes.

With a bit of free time to wander the area of Shimla in the evening, we discovered it to be an amazing village providing endless amounts of shopping and a nice place to soak up the culture. It was also a time to learn that monkeys that ran freely everywhere are not keen on Kiwis getting close to take photos. Lesson learnt!
DAY 4
SHIMLA – SHOJA (160km)
Shortly after departing our luxurious hotel in Shimla, we began what was to be an absolutely magic day on the bikes. Taking a new route that had been chosen by Denise, the riding turned out to be breathtaking. Finally, we were away from the hustle of a hundred tooting horns and the continuous mouth full of diesel fumes, instead taking in fantastic, twisting open roads that were in pretty good shape for India. Apart from the occasional vehicle, the odd monkey, and the regular cow every kilometre, we had the road to ourselves. This was about the time you had to remind yourself that the brakes on your Royal Enfield were not the best, so knee down riding wasn’t an option!
After 100km of fun, there was a quick picnic lunch before we were off again, although this time would see a few far more interesting surfaces. Here we went from dust to gravel, to rocks, and not to forget small river crossings. All traversed successfully by the whole team, there were also many little villages where the local children would run out when they heard the bikes approaching, all wanting to ‘high five’ the passing riders. Many were sweet kids, although the odd one wanted to play ‘let’s knock the rider’s shoulder out of joint’.
Our bed for the night saw us rest up at the Banjar Retreat in Shoja. Quite an isolated place, we saw ourselves turn back to the basics of life. WiFi became a distant memory (not that that’s a bad thing), and regular power cuts kept things interesting.
I wondered if we were the first people to stay in a while, as it had that certain ‘aroma’. Still, a huge positive was the surroundings with the most breathtaking views, ever.

DAY 5
SHOJA – MANALI (115km)
Today we had 115km on the bikes with a few more character-building road surfaces to deal with. That sort of distance isn’t usually regarded as big, but riding in the congestion is a continual brain strain, with an endless number of things to look out for.
We made a quick stop off before lunch at a textile factory where we were very privileged to be allowed in to see the process of the ladies hand weaving beautiful scarfs and shawls. It was amazing to see the women working so precisely on items with such ease. Without actually seeing for yourself the hard work that goes into producing such items, you could never truly appreciate the labour intensity and true value and worth of these items. In support of these hard-working ladies, the shop in front of the factory was quickly filled with 14 bike riding ladies from across the world, shopping up large on some very beautiful shawls to take home.
Today’s destination was Manali, a popular tourist destination at the foothills of the Himalayas that is evidently very popular with honeymooners and hippies. This may have something to do with the fact that everywhere you look, you are surrounded by marijuana plants growing wild. And I do mean everywhere! As we rode into town, the aroma filled your helmet and you began to wonder if the smell alone may make you giggle your way off the bike.
The following morning, we were woken early by a mixture of dogs barking, a squawking noise coming from the bushes that resembled Jurassic Park, and also the sound of rain. This would see a sigh of relief, as this was to be our first rest day.

DAY 7
MANALI – JISPA (125km)
Today saw many of the girls stressing about the upcoming ride to the Rohtang La pass. We had been informed that this would come with challenges and we were to expect some rough terrain. Alongside that, we were now about to climb to 3978 feet and the effect on us all from the altitude would be another concern. Denise’s morning prep talk ensured everybody that they all would survive the day and that everybody was capable. But I think a few of the ears didn’t hear any words after the ‘rough terrain’ was mentioned.
With attitude meds dispersed, we were off. With a GoPro mounted on my helmet, I didn’t want to miss any action if anyone was to fall into the mud. This was going to be a fun day. Within 5-minutes we had our first ‘moment’. Damn, I hadn’t turned the GoPro on yet! It was only a mild slip off on some rocks and there were no injuries other than pride. We continued to climb some lovely roads till our first stop for morning tea. It was at this point that many of us started feeling totally out of breath and looking a little green. The altitude was beginning to be felt.

As we approached the top of the pass at Rohtang, you couldn’t help but be gossmacked at the mountaintops and scenery. A quick stop off for group photos and a look around soon saw us back on the bikes, although now the day would become interesting.

Shortly after leaving the top, we encounter mud. Not a little bit of mud, but up to your knee mud. Although I found this hysterical, others in the group weren’t so amused. My theory was that if you were going to fall, at least it would be a soft landing. And as I watched a number of our group get either stuck or slide out, all mud encounters where with style, and thankfully resulted in no major injuries.

Arriving in the remote village of Jispa, we were fortunate enough to arrive as the town began its yearly festival. Feeling the thinning air, it was a challenging stroll to the centre of town to check out what was happening, although you could imagine the laughter when we discovered half the town playing bingo! Rumour has it, it was the early stages of the festival and there would indeed, be more to the event.

Wandering back to our hotel, a few of us joined in with a group of young dancers who we found practising on a side road. As we laughed and danced, the struggles with air intake were becoming more of an issue, not that we were going to let a little lack of air stop us!

**DAY 8**

**JISPA – SARCHU (110km)**

For me personally, this day won’t be forgotten. Yet again, our day began with beautiful Indian weather. Luckily for us, we had good fortune from the weather gods and we all knew things would be so much harder if the ground had been wet.

Today saw another morning of challenging terrain, but the most challenging aspect was the climb. Problems resulting from lack of air was becoming very real, and despite being equipped with altitude pills along with regular reminders to drink plenty of water, the atmosphere was literally sucking us dry.

Heading to Baralacha La – which sits at 4830m – it wasn’t until after lunch that the fun really began when 5-minutes into the afternoon journey, we were faced with glacier melt. Basically, a torrential river now crossed the road where we needed to pass, and there were piles of trucks and cars lined up waiting to cross. A delay of over three hours ensued as traffic struggled slowly to get through. Bikes were being pushed through and the whole event became quite the ordeal. Eventually, our amazing crew of drivers and mechanics challenged the deep water on our bikes and got them all through. Some of the girls jumped in the van and took the dry route, while a few of us linked arms and waded through.

The day seemed to be ending well, that is until I realised that due to this extra bit of unplanned fun for the day, I hadn’t kept my water intake up. And now I was going to pay a hefty price.

After a bit of wonderful TLC from Denise and my Australian roommate Lida, I was able to join the world again the next morning. Luckily, I was still in my riding gear, as we were on the road for 6.30am... Yawn!
DAY 9
SARCHU – LEH (260km)

This would see our longest day in the saddle, and boy, did it feel long! The highlight was riding the Gata Loops, a famous section up the side of a rocky mountain with 21 switchbacks. Not only fantastic riding, the benefit is you can see the road loop for miles below and above you, which is a bonus when you really need to wee on the side of the road and want to check there’s no-one coming. This is India remember – just do it!

Once again, 260km isn’t long in the big scheme of things. But when you have terrible roads and a million army trucks to pass on tight cliff edges, it’s an extremely long day in a bumpy saddle especially when you’re also climbing to the second highest motorable road in the world – Taglang La at 5,328 metres. Our bikes were struggling for air just as we were, coughing and spluttered continuously and adding a bit more ‘adventure’ to the ride.

Nonetheless, we made it up the top, had a few smiley shots, and we were off again. Unfortunately, our lovely leader, Denise, had a nasty off this day which saw her with a fractured collarbone and ankle. It was a strong reminder to us all, that no-one is invincible and hats off to an amazing lady and tour leader that still managed to ride on for quite some distance over bumpy terrain till she could get some aid.

DAY 10
LEH – THE TOP!

The day had finally arrived where we would achieve our goal with the final climb to the top. The moment we had all been waiting for.

After the previous day of riding, the whole group was completely shattered, so we were given a short reprieve by not venturing up till mid-afternoon. After a quick briefing of the politics of actually getting up there through the security checks, we proceeded on this final leg. We had been warned that half the road up was in good nick, but the final 20-odd km’s was not too flash. I chose to offer up my back seat to pillion another Kiwi lady, Rhonda, who really wanted to experience the final climb on the Royal Enfield. We were both determined to make it up there on the bike, no matter what the road surface.

Finally, we arrived. We had all made it safely to the top. Of course, the scenery was breathtaking as it had been the entire journey. This was the point of realisation that the joy had been in the journey and less about the destination. We as a group of strong, determined woman had nailed this challenge. We had climbed the highest motorable road in the world and achieved everything we wanted to. The feeling of personal accomplishment was nothing short of amazing. We had nailed this!

DAY 11
LEH – HOME

Today was bittersweet as we said goodbye to our hardy Royal Enfields. These amazing hunks of metal, which had carried us all through so much rugged land, climbing the highest mountains, had all done it without skipping a beat. Well, maybe there was a cough or two, but they’d done it.

We were all sporting tired and sore bodies. But feeling a huge sigh of relief that we had made it safely to the end, we were also looking forward to getting back into our own beds. Flying down from Leh rather than riding back meant we were soon out of the discomfort that high altitude produces. With a day spent checking out an orphanage that Denise uses the trip to support, it seemed like only a blink of an eye had passed between battling the elements to get to the top of the Himalayas to now battling the Indian customs to try and reach my departure gate on time. One thing I certainly wasn’t going to miss was the incredible amounts of traffic, but as for my Royal Enfield, it had now found a special place in my heart.
JUST FOR THE GIRLS

With this safari being not just your typical motorcycle ride up the Himalayas, but a special ‘designed by a woman for women’ adventure soul safari, there was the daily opportunity for yoga and meditation with our own dedicated Yoga teacher Nadine. Part of the Safaris for the Soul team, it provided us with the perfect way to recover from the stresses and strains of riding on challenging roads. With optional classes in the morning and evening each day, we were all able to spend plenty of time rejuvenating body and mind.

SAFARIS FOR THE SOUL
HIMALAYAN HEAVEN

Safaris for the Soul established by Denise Ferris, Australasia’s most experienced female International Motorcycle Tour Guide, Director of World On Wheels, Registered Psychologist and Soul Coach, offers global adventure soul safaris for women. Safaris for the Soul provides boutique, two-week travel experiences to exotic cultural locations, incorporating yoga and meditation, spiritual connection, the fun company of like-minded travellers, contributing to the local community and, of course, adventure! If that sounds like you, visit www.safarisforthesoul.com.au for more details.