

Testing Steeds

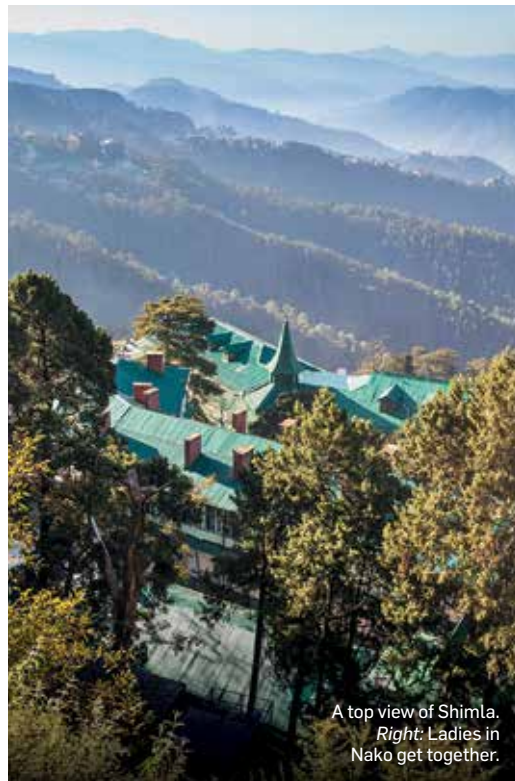
Biking enthusiast and the man behind establishing **Ducati** in India, **Ravi Avalur** tells the tale of his extreme biking road trip across the treacherous yet magnificent Hindustan-Tibet Road.



Ravi Avalur with Lisa, a gorgeous husky, at The Himalayan in Manali. His ride is the Ducati Multistrada 950.

1 DELHI TO SHIMLA 359 KILOMETRES IN 6 HOURS STOPOVER 1 NIGHT

We began our journey late. The post-lunch July sun blazed down on us till we crossed the Haryana border. The heat eased on the long, high-speed stretches along the GT Road. Crossing Chandigarh, we headed to Himachal Pradesh, riding past small towns and iconic sites, such as the historic Kalka-Shimla railway crossing and The Lawrence School, Sanawar (immortalised by Rudyard Kipling). The sunset along the beautiful, winding roads of Shimla's hills breathed energy into us as we reached our first stop. The Art Deco inspired **Woodville Palace Hotel** (woodvillepalacehotel.com) welcomed us with warm 'pahari' hospitality, culture, and cuisine.



A top view of Shimla. Right: Ladies in Nako get together.



2 SHIMLA TO SARAHAN 180 KILOMETRES IN 9 HOURS STOPOVER 1 NIGHT

Peace, quiet, and torrential rains accompanied us along the sweeping, high-speed tract exiting Shimla. Off-road diversions were the call from Chaba onwards. Road conditions worsened as we made a steep ascent to Dharanghati, and then a slippery descent to Mashnu. It is mandatory to carry proper off-road riding gear and crash protectors for this stretch as crashes are, perhaps, inevitable. We ended the day at **Hotel Srikhand**, Sarahan (hptdc.in).

3 SARAHAN TO NAKO 187 KILOMETRES IN 7 HOURS STOPOVER 1 NIGHT

Spectacular scenery aside, **The Hindustan-Tibet Road**—with roads hewn from the mountain's sides—is the deadliest motorway along the route. Wary of steep drops and landslides, we manoeuvred our way along the edge, avoiding fallen (and possibly falling) rocks and debris. A steep descent at dawn down a winding dirt trail to **Tapri** was followed by a steady climb to **Akpa** at 2,230 metres; then further up

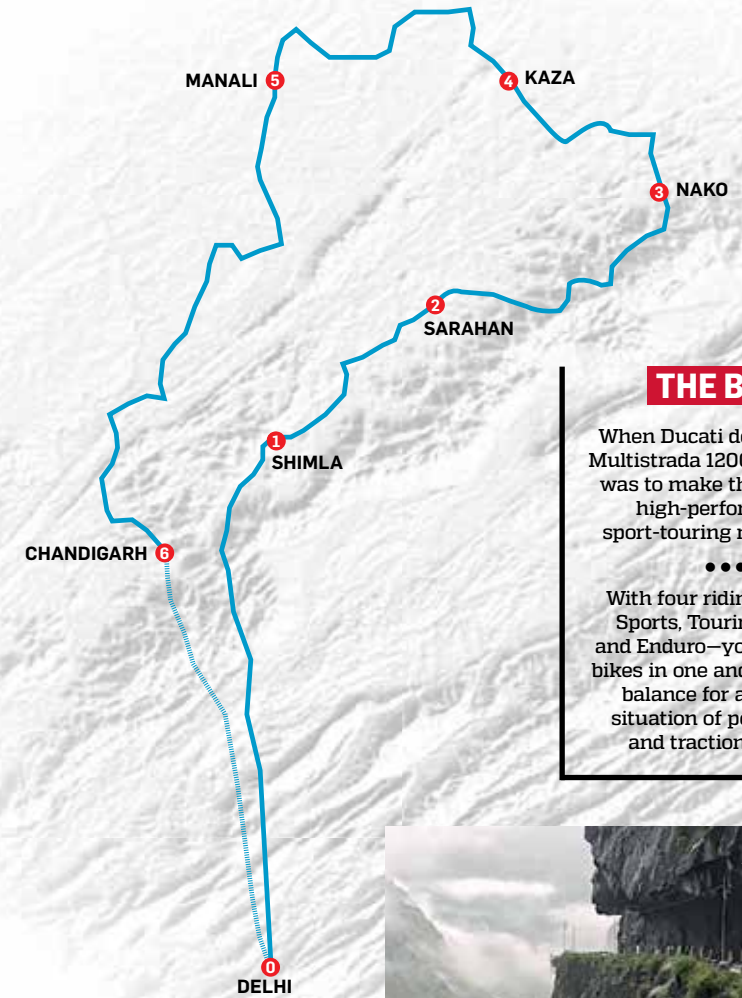
to **Moorang**, **Speelo**, **Pooh**, and onwards to the 3,622-metres-high **Nako** village. Stop at the **Velley View** café here to enjoy local delicacies, monitor your blood-oxygen levels, and acclimatise to the thin air.

4 NAKO TO KAZA 111 KILOMETRES IN 2 HOURS 2 NIGHTS (INCLUDES DETOUR)

An early start and we were off to the high reaches of Giu where we came across the monastery of 15th-century Buddhist monk, **Sangha Tenzin**, whose mummy sits in an upright, meditative pose (one can still see his teeth!). We rode up and onward past the 1,000-year-old **Tabo Monastery** and the giant menhirs lining the road. Soft, off-road conditions meant a fast, enjoyable ride over loose surfaces and through many little streams leading up to **Dhankar**. Surrounded by a cold, lunar landscape, with the mighty River Spiti flowing in the valley below, this remote village is a sight to behold. It's home to one of the most beautiful monasteries in the world, hence its name—the word 'dhan' means cliff and 'kar' means fort; together, they form 'fort on a cliff'. Reaching **Kaza**, we refuelled at the world's highest petrol pump and spent the night at the lovely **Sakya Abode** (sakyabode.com).



Prayer flags adorn a hilltop shrine above the Himalayan village of Nako.



THE BIKE

When Ducati designed the Multistrada 1200S, their aim was to make the ultimate, high-performance, sport-touring motorcycle.

...

With four riding modes—Sports, Touring, Urban, and Enduro—you have four bikes in one and a judicious balance for any given situation of power, ABS, and traction control.

5 KAZA TO MANALI 202 KILOMETRES IN 12 HOURS STOPOVER 6 NIGHTS (Includes an injury stop)

Between Kaza and Manali, we encountered pretty villages and no fewer than five serious river crossings. Slowly tipping over in an icy river is extremely painful. While it makes sense to cut off the engine at once to avoid water being sucked in, this is as easy as hitting a snarling bear on the nose. Be that as it may, we crossed these obstacles with the help of our experienced lead biker. A non-existent 'road' followed—it's just one hairpin bend after another of loose gravel—and lead us up to **Kunzum Pass**. The views, however, are breathtaking. Distracted, I found myself too close to the edge and hit the brakes, too hard, perhaps. I landed under the bike with a twisted ankle and torn ligament. With no option, I picked up the bike and rode up and past the 3,978-metres-high **Rohtang Pass**, weaving blind through thick fog till the pitch darkness gave way to the clear skies of Manali and our den for our stop here. As you can imagine, the sparkling lights of **The Himalayan** (thehimalayan.com), the modern, luxury resort with stunning views of the Northwestern Himalayas, were a welcome sight.



A steep climb awaits on the Hindustan Tibet Road.

6 MANALI TO CHANDIGARH TO DELHI 560 KILOMETRES IN 12 HOURS STOPOVER 2 NIGHTS

The Manali-Chandigarh road was a welcome stretch of smooth tarmac—Alpine scenery minus the brutal, rocky landscapes of the Spiti Valley. The black-smoke belching trucks, however, were a reminder of the pure air we had left behind. Fortunately, we got to Chandigarh in time for a good scrub. After a relaxing couple of days here, it was time to head back home to Delhi.

THE SURVIVAL GUIDE

How Long Will It Take?

Expect to cover a distance of 1,684kms in 13 days.



Which Bike Do I Take?

Ducati Multistrada 1200S or Ducati Multistrada 950



Who To Go With

Vijay Parmar, founder of Rally Raid De Himalaya (xraid.in), has over 40 years of competitive motorcycling experience and 36 outright wins in various rallies, including the Desert Storm. An expert biker, he knows the lay of the land well.



Fitness Level

You need to be an experienced rider to take this route as it is mostly uphill on a challenging terrain.

Difficulty

Hard

Bike Gear

Disc pads, front and rear; GPS and phone with mount and charging cable; waterproof cover for the bike's luggage container; bungee cords, spare fuses, bike manual, tyre-pressure gauge, and duplicate keys.



What to Pack?

Full-face helmet, balaclava, riding trousers, jacket, gloves, off-road boots, raincoat, waterproof trousers, belt pouch, plenty of socks, a Camelback water bottle, waterproof covers and packs for luggage, phones, and food.

DETOUR
Kaza-Komic-Kaza
A nice, easy winding road takes you to Komic, the world's highest motorable village. This isolated point also boasts the world's highest restaurant. Enjoy amazing views from the rooftop of the world!

CLOCKWISE: NISHAT MOHI; RAVI AVALUR; JANE SWEENEY/GETTY IMAGES

FROM LEFT: TREVOR THOMPSON/ALAMY; RAVI AVALUR