the banter

July 19

news, views & events for SCMC members

Summer Smokey meet • SCAA presentation
Adventure India - Part 1 • Balgedie Toll meet
Tales from the Good Olde Days 4

SCMC clubnights: 7.30pm, every 2nd Wednesday at *Ye Olde Hotel, Leuchars
*and every 4th Wednesday from May - September during summer

Big Coo 1

Adventure India – 1

The Idea came from Steve Brown, a long time friend of mine from my Air Force days in Germany, "How do you fancy a bit of an adventure'' he says, it's going cheap!" Well that got my attention.

The title of the adventure was "India's lost world" and consisted of a 14 day 1900Km ride through the 7 states of N.E. India onboard the new Royal Enfield Himalayan with a company called Nomadic Knights. The cheap part came from two riders who had paid their deposits but then dropped out, so the two positions were open for grabs with the balance to pay - a saving of $800 or £650 in real money.

The trip was to start on March 18th so flights, Jabs, visa's, travel insurance, International driving permit, hotels etc etc all had to be sorted pretty quick, as I'm one of those retired people I had plenty of time to chase round after everything.

Nomadic Knights supply the bike, fuel, accommodation, food, mechanics, back up trucks, and a medic, all included in the price. All I had to do was get myself and my biking gear there. They also supply an information pack with all relevant info needed to help you prepare for the trip.

The packing was an interesting task, helmet, boots, riding suit, body armour, plus normal clothes, and keeping within the 20KG airline limit and getting it into the bags I already had, lets say it took quite a few trial packs to get it just right.

In the meantime another friend from the same Germany days had heard about the trip and Mick Brelsford had found himself a place with us.

With flights from different places in the UK it was decided that we would meet in Delhi for our onward flight to Guwahati, so on March 15th I flew out of Glasgow bound for India.

We arrived in Delhi from the UK at different times and then had a bit of a layover before our onward flight to Guwahati. We arrived there after dark to find the total chaos that is India, we had opted to arrive a day early so had to make our own way to the start point which was a jungle resort in Brahmaputra, we managed to find a Taxi that would take the 3 of us and our gear there and settled a price before we set off (as we had been advised). The driver assured us he knew where he was going (he lied) and after a 30 minute drive through traffic you would not believe he decided he didn't know the way and had to call for directions.

Mac & Steve

We finally arrived with adrenaline coursing through our veins - but after calming down we could not stop laughing at what we had just experienced.

We met up with Alex Pirie and his team that evening and some of the other riders that would be Joining us for the next 2 weeks and had a bit of a meet and greet and a few well earned beers.

Day 1
We basically got all our stuff sorted out, all documentation required for the journey was taken onboard by Alex's wife Vidyah, she would be dealing with all officials at border checkpoints. One thing we Brits left behind in India is Bureaucracy - doing a trip like this without a fixer or speaking the language would be nearly impossible. We got to choose our bike for the trip and got it set up to suit. My bike had 68Kms on the clock and with the soft panniers and tank bag fitted had enough room to carry the essentials. The rest of my gear would go in the support truck and would be available at our stop point each night.

Due to a problem at Delhi with the ATM's we couldn't get any Rupee's, so a trip into Guwahati to "the" ATM was sorted by Alex and off the 3 of us went in another Taxi. Doshed up, we then did a bit of sightseeing courtesy of our taxi driver who was really chuffed that he was showing 3 brits around his home turf, much to the envy of his fellow drivers. At the end of the tour (which lasted about 2 hours) he dropped us off. The fare was 1200 Roops (£12) for the 3 of us, but he was over the moon when we each gave him that amount.

By the time we got back to the resort the rest of the riders had arrived and we all had dinner together. Our group had 3 guys from the states, 2 couples from the UK (who would be 2 up), 1 guy from Australia who had attempted this trip before, but suffered an accidental broken leg on the first day - so he was back again to complete what he missed the year before. 1 guy who we found out later was a police rider with the Met team involved in the controversial tactics of running moped thieves off their stolen machines. 1 ex Army officer, 1 multi millionaire who spends his time riding adventures all around the world, and our three.

Day 2: Tepesia-Tezpur (Assam) - 166Km
Alex called us all together and went through everything that we needed to know. We were then issued with our guidebook for the trip which covered every day's riding with route, maps, distance, hotel, and useful tips and background information about the area. Alex was leading with his wife Vidyah as pillion, and ABU bringing up the rear, 14 bikes riding as a group - what could possibly go wrong?

This would be our first 'on the road' day and would take us from Guwahati (Assam) to Tezpur (Assam) a distance of 166Kms on mainly tarmac roads. I say mainly tarmac because the pot holes were so big you

could lose a Tuk Tuk in them - and without warning the tarmac would just stop and suddenly become a dirt road, complete with pot holes of equal size. This seemed to be the norm throughout the tour - random pieces of tarmac would appear only to disappear again back into dirt; which left you wondering why that piece of tarmac had been laid in that particular place.

Alex had explained to us the "Marking junctions" routine he incorporated in the ride, this allowed us to ride at our own pace and stop to take pictures if we wished. If you happened to be behind the leaders and the direction of the route changed, you would come across one of the group waiting at the junction. You would then stop to mark the junction and he would set off to catch up. You would then wait until the rider behind you caught up and then you would carry on - and so on, and so on. Alex's tail-end Charlie was a great guy called ABU - he rode with us and ensured we didn't loiter too long.

Riding conditions were hot and dusty, traffic was a bit manic for the first day, but Alex's advice to expect the unexpected and ride accordingly stood us in good stead. Use of the horn was described thus in the guide book:
'Although vehicles can be driven with bald tyres and non existent brakes, it is imperative that the horn is working. The average Indian driver will use the horn 10-20 times per KM and using it can mean anything from "I am travelling too fast to stop and if you don't get out of the way we both will be in great peril" (Rapid multiple blasts) or,
"I haven't used my horn recently" (Bored blast).

Our first day saw us practising using the horn but feeling guilty about using it. However, in the days to come we would use it like everyone else using the roads did, and we soon become proficient at getting other road users to either move over, or stay where they were to allow us to get past.

The Himalayan was comfortable and the riding position was good. It also had decent performance for getting past traffic and good suspension for the rough bits. We rode for about 2 hours before stopping at a roadside shack for my first taste of Chai, a sweet milky tea, which went down really well despite the temp now indicating 32C on the bikes temp gauge.

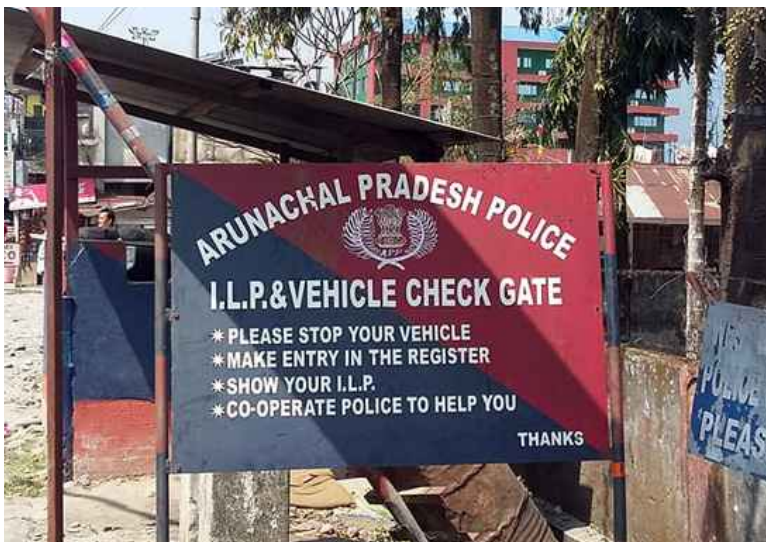
This would set the routine for the rest of the trip and we would sample many different shacks with different tasting Chai - if you were brave enough! Whatever roadside food was on offer, the thought of a dose of the trots while riding a bike did not really appeal, and I was into the second week before I sampled these tasty delights.

We set off again heading for our night stop in Tezpur and by late afternoon we had put the first leg of the journey under our tyres. The bikes were now in the hands of the 3 mechanics that travelled in the support truck - any issues would be sorted by them and they would have the bikes ready to go again in the morning. A warm(ish) shower and a cold beer were the order of the day.

Word of 14 bikes arriving at the same time at a hotel in Tezpur soon got around. The locals were really interested in coming to see who were riding the bikes and asking riders where they were from; where we were going; and why were we doing it? Many asked if they could take their picture with us, others just stood and looked on as if we had horns growing out of our heads! It was only then that we realised very few Europeans had actually visited that part of India; as until very recently getting into these states was difficult and a bureaucratic nightmare...so we enjoyed our 15 minutes of fame!

Day 3: Tezpur-Bomdila (Arunchal Pradesh) 155Km
We were up and about for breakfast and a 09.00 set off for our days riding - but not before we refuelled - another spectacle that drew the crowds to watch

Border checkpoints



First fuel-up

Big Coo 2

14 bikes in a line-up getting fuel. Again we had lots of requests for pictures.

When we finally got going again the roads were a mix of tarmac and dirt with lots of pot holes, cows, monkey's, Tata trucks and buses belching out black exhaust fumes. Tuk Tuks, and every cobbled-together kind of cart you could think of were all trying to get from A to B. Utter chaos.

The Indian's have a strange use for their indicators: if you come up behind a vehicle the driver will indicate right, so you back off expecting him to turn. But when you back off he puts the indicator off, so you move to overtake again and on it goes again - apparently this is their sign for you to overtake; but it can also mean 'I'm turning right', So again we had to expect the unexpected.

A couple of hours riding and we could see mountains through the haze. The air temp was showing 36C on the bike gauge and it wasn't even midday yet! So a stop for Chai and a bite to eat went down well. Setting off again it wasn't long before we started to climb, Tezpur was 48m amsl and Bomdila is 2415m amsl, so we had a bit of a climb to negotiate.

We rode through the small village of Sessa only to be turned back at an armed police checkpoint, due to explosives being used in some roadworks ahead. Unfortunately the road remained closed until 16.00 and as it was the only road to Bomdila we would just have to wait. Alex gave us the option of going back to Tezpur or waiting till 16.00 and riding the rest of the way. The only problem with this suggestion was that we would be riding in the dark with just our headlights on unfinished roads. We opted for the latter - after all we were here for an adventure!

We finally arrived at our accommodation about 20.00 and had our evening meal washed down with some beers. Bed consisted of a board on top of a wooden frame with a one inch thick mattress to lie on - not the most comfy but it didn't stop me crashing out!

(To be continued)

Mac MacDonald

WANTED- Your holiday stories!

Rent-A-Crowd 1

Adventure India – 2

Day 4 - Bomdilla-Tezpur 155Km

Due to the roadworks we would have to get going early or else risk being stuck waiting for the road to open again, we managed a quick clockwise walk around the grounds of the Buddhist temple and answered many questions by the inhabitants before we set off. The views that greeted us going down were spectacular and scary at the same time, the road had no barrier along its edge and the drop off in some places was sheer, and we had ridden that same road the previous night in the dark.

Time was against us and we had to "Make progress" this allowed us to test the wee Himalayan's ability to deliver the goods which it did with no issue's at all. The road in some places was a single track with no traffic control so when trucks coming from the opposite direction just keep coming in convoy we had to take to the rough stuff at the side of the road this certainly was "Interesting" but no problem for this wee bike, I don't think any of the riders had a bad word to say about it. Day 4 ended back at the hotel we had left the day before and lots of discussions about the road we rode in the dark.

Day 5 - Tezpur-Dimapur (Nagaland) 220Km

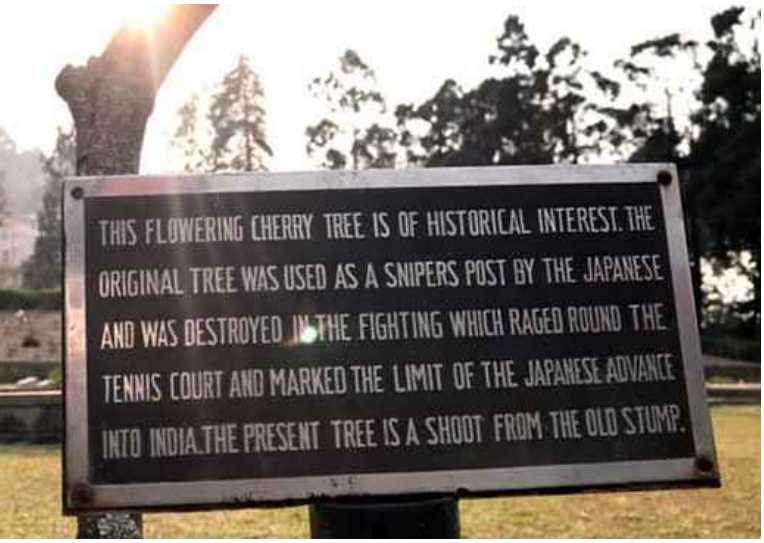
Normal start time for this leg of the journey and again like everyday it started with a brief from Alex on what to expect and a check to see if everyone had the guidebook with them and had read it to know, where they were going, how far it was, and what hotel we were stopping at that night. He continued on to tell us about "The Naga's", Nagaland wanted Independence from India and a long fought campaign had been going for many years this was one of the reasons why this part of India had been so difficult to get into, and even now the Indian army would not venture into certain area's.

A no mans land existed on the road we were going to ride and the brief was "Stop for nothing" when we got to that point we were to keep in a close group and just keep going until Alex stopped. Seeing Indian troops on foot patrol and jeeps with GPMG's mounted and manned did bring home the fact that things could happen here.

Fortunately nothing happened and our day continued through a flat countryside of what looked like paddy fields with brick furnaces every mile or so, what I thought was paddy fields turned out to be clay pits for making bricks. While on the subject of furnaces the temperature according to notes I made in my diary for today 21/3/18 went from 37-45, so our camelbacks were really useful while on the move, copious bottles of water were consumed when we stopped the last thing we needed was dehydration.

Day 6
Dimapur-Kohima (Nagaland) 80Km

A short leg today which would allow us to spend some time at the site of one of the battles fought in this region against the Japanese during WW2,



Tennis Court WW2 battleground

Soldiers keep watch

"The Battle of the tennis court" is well documented online, but actually standing there and imagining Japanese soldiers fighting with Indian's and British soldiers gave me goosebumps. Mick was quite emotional and it wasn't until we looked at the gravestone he was standing at realised that it was that of his Grandad, this was one of the reasons that Mick had joined the trip at short notice, but hadn't mentioned it till this time. Heavy stuff which needed a beer or three - however it was not to be as no alcohol was available here, bugger!

Day 7 - Kohima-Imphal (Manipur) 140Km

Each time we crossed into a different state it was like travelling into a different country. I mentioned earlier that one of the things the Brits had left behind was Bureaucracy, as we crossed into a new state every bit of paperwork was scrutinised and sometimes rejected with little reason given, without Alex's wife Vidyah on the case I think getting through these border posts would have been a nightmare.

Today we came across some of the worst roads so far, dust and ruts were the order of the day. In some places I estimated visibility down to 3 metres and falling into some of the ruts had the foot-pegs digging in. On top of that, the 4x4's which were constantly up your backside and blowing their horns "to let you know they were there" because there was no way they could see to overtake, until I witnessed one do just that: " Expect the unexpected". By the time we reached our hotel that evening we were physically and mentally exhausted it had been the most demanding day so far, then to find that the hotel had no power was just taking the piss, the cold water from the tap was tepid, so a bucket and jug shower cleared the road grime and the first beer cleared the dust from my throat and the next 3 or 4 eased all the aches and pains.

Day 8 - Imphal-Silchar (Assam) 266Km

Alex wanted us to get an early start today as we had a long way to go, he advised us that this road was a complete mess the last time he used it so to be prepared for a long day. Once out of the town we joined a piece of pristine tarmac and to be honest we were quite pleased to have a bit of a break from the dust and pot holes, we were expecting it to revert back to the normal road type but it just kept going and going.

Town on a hill

Rent-A-Crowd 2

As we had an early start Alex pulled off for our first Chai stop and found out to his surprise that the road was like this all the way to Silchar, so it looked like an easy day ahead. Chai supped we headed back onto this smooth blacktop but were immediately aware of the effect pristine tarmac has on Indian drivers when coming towards us were 2 trucks side by side with a 4x4 overtaking both of them, this is where use of the horn has no effect and taking to the rough stuff at the side of the road is the only answer - his was not an isolated incident and a few close calls were experienced during the day.

Day 9 - Silchar-Aizawl (Mizoram) 172Km

At the end of this ride we would have a rest day and we were ready for it. The ride to Aizawl was uneventful until we got to the outskirts of the city which is perched on a hill. The road had degraded back to what we had come to expect but the amount of scooters had increased 10 fold and all seemed to be going in the same direction as we were and trying to find the best way between the holes in the road, it would be easier to say there were more holes than road. Looking in my diary it read's:

"The road was fine until we reached the hill leading up to Aizawl then the traffic built and the whacky races started, the condition of the road was like channels dug into the ground with hundreds of scooters all around".

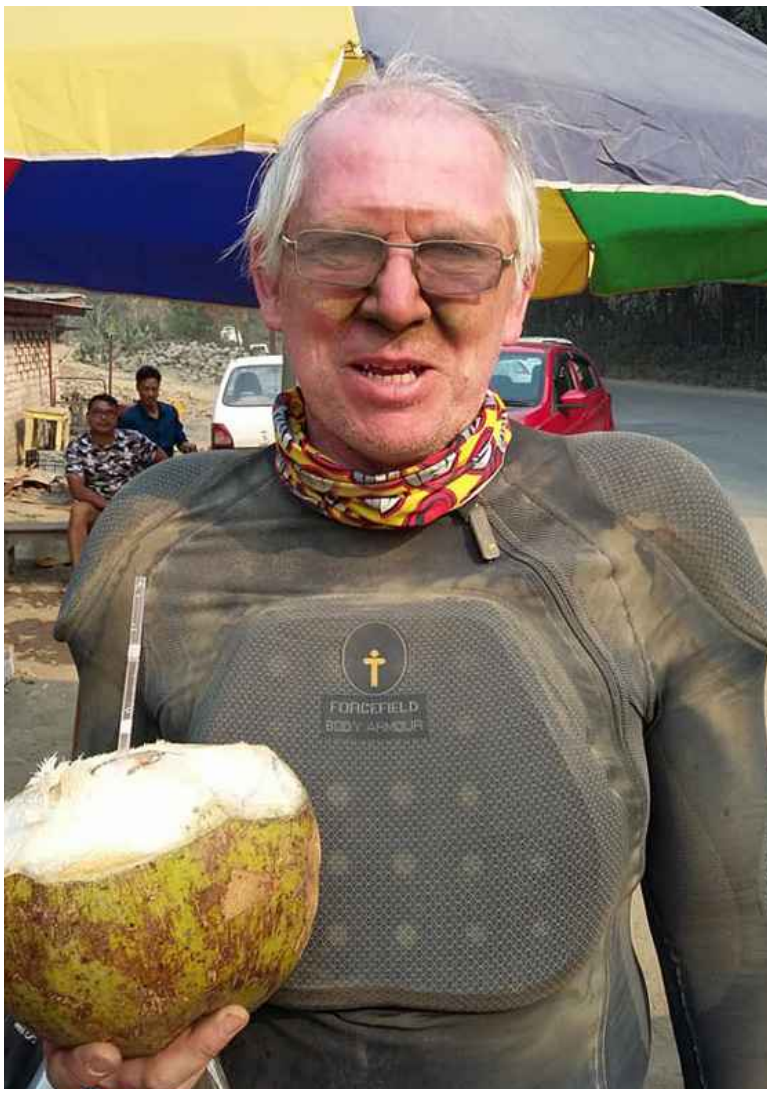
We stopped halfway up for a drink and to regroup for the last bit to the hotel, we stood and watched the traffic amazed that no collisions happened but how at close they nearly come to it! As usual we attracted a bit of a crowd but one driver was so interested he just stopped his truck on the road and got out to come and talk to us and see the bikes. He spoke pretty good english and the fact that his truck was now causing a major traffic jam didn't seem to phase him at all. The traffic just continued to move around the truck and it seemed the norm.

The route to the hotel was through the centre of town with numerous junctions to negotiate and after an hour or so we finally arrived at our hotel which had power, a shower, a fairly comfy bed, and a bar - bonus!

(To be continued)

Mac MacDonald

McDonald Road sign!



Dirty Mac!

Mud, glorious mud

Adventure India – 3

Day 10. Aizawl (Mizoram)

Touristy stuff today but not before we all had to report in person to the main police station to have our documents cleared, Alex organised the taxi's and we all went together, 3 hours later we left the police station with a stamp and had not seen 1 official in person. A bit of lunch and a wander about the town plus lots of pictures was the order of the day. As it got dark the one thing we hadn't seen for the previous 9 days arrived with gusto, I've experienced rain in Equitorial Guinea and this was very similar, our thoughts went to the state of the roads we had travelled on to get here and what they would be like after this, we would soon find out.

Day 11. Aizawl-Dharmanagar (Tripura) 205Km

Another long leg today but at least the rain had stopped and the sun had come back to dry the roads in the town. We went back down the hill to find torrents of water running down the channels we had avoided on the way up and understanding how the channels were formed in the first place. Once we were out of the city the roads were not too bad and we managed to make good time, however the rain was still hanging about and the waterproofs were dug out as the sky ahead and the lightning suggested we were about to get wet.

We came to a bit of a traffic jam and filtered through to the front to find a steep hill in front of us with numerous vehicles attempting to climb it and failing miserably in the thick mud this included 4x4's. Alex gathered us together and told us it was about a half mile to the top and we had to get up it in order to continue.

Alex set off first with Vidyah on the back and went past the 4x4's that were finding it hard going, and a good way up and out of sight round a bend. We set off and hit the hill the wee Himalayan pulled me all the way up to the top and hardly lost traction at all, however at one point I thought the bike was sinking into the mud but I was still moving forward, what was actually happening was the mud was building up on my boots and lifting me up, I must have looked like I was wearing platforms, by the time I got to the top I was knackered and the bike was thick with clingy clarty mud that needed to get cleaned off with a stick. We all got up the hill

More mud delays

Market mayhem

some easier than others but with no injuries and after a bit of a break at the top continued with no further quagmires. We came to the border checkpoint with Tripura and had to wait until 1600 until the market which was covering the road was supposed to clear, after that we would be allowed to cross.

During my 10 days in India I had noticed along with the cows and monkey's wandering about there were also a lot of dogs most of them very friendly, I was very aware of the problem with rabies and didn't do my normal thing of petting every dog that I saw like I do in the UK, but still said hello to each of them. While we were waiting I could hear a dog howling in the locality and was about to go have a look when Alex called me back, we'd had a conversation about dog's and how we both liked having one but what he told me then really made me feel sick and angry, in some states in India it is still legal to use dogs for human consumption, the dog which was howling was about to be transported across into a state where it was still legal and a blind eye was turned by the officials at the border checkpoint. I caught a glimpse of a truck with long cages which would be more suitable to hold chickens but inside each one was a dog which was lying on it's side and unable to turn or get up, I wanted to go and let them out but realised I would be in deep trouble if I did, I was so pleased to get back on the bike and away from that place, but the image of that dog has stayed with me since.

The time came to move on and we were allowed through the border post to find the road in front of us a mass of stalls and goods laid out on sheets on the ground, this was supposed to be cleared away by 1600 but obviously not today, Alex set off and with horn going rode through as best he could and we all followed, not one person in the market made any effort to move out the way for us but when a large truck joined us from the border crossing they knew he wouldn't be so careful.

Day 12. Dharmanagar-Silchar (Assam) 125Km

This morning when we assembled to load up the bikes we came to 14 spotless machines, all the mud from the day before had been cleaned off by the support crew, they really earned their pennies.

We were becoming old sweats with riding in India, we understood the hierarchy of the traffic and knew when we could push our presence and when

Dog dinner?

Back in civy street

we had to yield, this held good for me and the previous nervousness I felt had eased, but not disappeared, which was a good thing. We could see the adventure coming to a close and were not too happy about it, with an adventure like this and the way it had been organised we just wanted to keep it going. The road to Silchar was one of the newly laid Tarmac versions so the three abreast overtaking manoeuvres were back but we were ready for them this time.

Day 13. Silchar-Shillong (Meghalaya) 216Km

More good roads on this route with a steady climb up to the city at 1500m amsl, as we were climbing we could feel the temperature start to drop for the first time so much so that I had to dig out my jacket at one of our Chai stops, we sheltered inside as the rain started and the temperature dropped dramatically, we finished our Chai and got back on the road with a couple of hours riding left until our overnight stop. The sun came back out but the temperature still stayed low and while coming through one of the small villages actually saw snow accumulations by the side of the road.

Shillong is a major city and probably the busiest we had encountered so far, finding the hotel was a bit of a job as the traffic was that heavy the sight of a helmet was all that was visible, a quick regroup at the side of the road and we were back on course again. We were heading for the Bluberry Inn for our penultimate overnight stop and ultimate luxury after our previous overnighters. Everyone was feeling the same way about the trip coming to an end but we were having a laugh too with lots of beers and great food. Alex suggested if we liked to have a whip round to give the mechanics a wee bonus for their great work, we had no problems with that at all and we couldn't take the roops home anyway.

Day 14. Shillong-Tepesia (Assam) 100Km

Every good thing comes to an end and this was our last day of riding and also the last day of sunshine as it started tipping it down all the way. We were heading back to the start point at Brahmaputra resort and the many goodbye's to our fellow riders. When we finally got off our bikes at the resort it was a really emotional event with many of us unable to say very much. The resort put on a great meal that night and lots of beer was consumed. My transport was booked for 0600 the next morning to get me to the airport and onward via Delhi, Dubai, and finally Glasgow. I still look at the photo's I took of the journey and the memories will be with me forever.

Steve and me went to the classic TT and over a few pint's hatched a plan to revisit Alex and his crew for another adventure, so come August 2019 we'll be riding 'The roof of India' in the Himalaya's onboard the Himalayan's again.

If anyone is looking for a bucket list adventure then a trip with the Nomadic Knights should be up there, believe me you won't regret it.

(The end)

Mac MacDonald

Journey's end...and many goodbyes to our fellow riders!

WANTED- Your holiday stories!