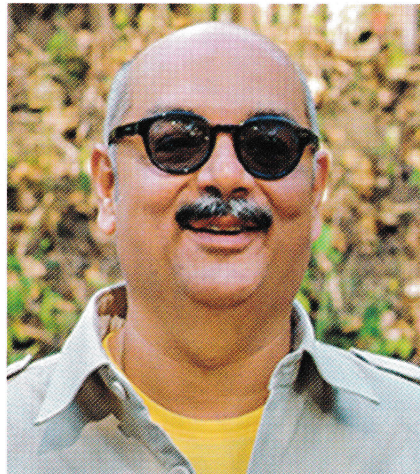


Recently I went with Team Overdrive for the Independence Quattro Drive 2016. I was returning to Ladakh after some 12 years and the changes blew me away. Some of course are welcome, but some are heartbreaking. It's great to see the growth in tourism and the better availability of places to stay, food and other essential amenities. Travelling through this lovely but difficult region has become easier, and Ladakh is certainly more tourist friendly now. Sadly the development has been haphazard in many places and the city of Leh has become a complete mess. It used to be such a charming mountain town. But now it is an unplanned city full of chaos and ugly structures. Once this entire region was very eco-friendly and litter free. But now you find garbage piled-up in many places, including the world's highest sand dunes in Hunder. In fact, rubbish is the last thing you should be seeing in such a spectacular region. But sadly, the truth is even some parts of Ladakh have now become like the other parts of India. Fortunately, the people remain unspoiled and continue to be friendly, hospitable and largely honest in their dealings. But how long this will last is anybody's guess; eventually they are sure to succumb to the wily and greedy ways of the people of the Indian plains.

I also noticed one other very important thing. Bike tourism has come of age in India. For a long time I have believed, "The best way to see a country is through the windscreen of an automobile or the visor of a helmet." Now it appears a lot of people have decided to see Ladakh through the visor of a helmet, and we came across innumerable groups of bikers. Earlier this 'Self-Ride Bike Tourism' was largely limited to foreigners. But now you see a large number of Indian riders too. Some ride in large groups wearing the same-coloured riding gear. Others are in smaller groups, and we even came across several solo riders. The bike of choice, of course, remains the Enfield Bullet. But we did see some riders on KTMs and other bikes too. Most ride on rented bikes and are part of organised bike tours where they have professional lead riders, support crew, relief riders, sweep vehicles etc. All this, of course, comes at a cost but also makes the ride that much easier and stress free. There



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are also those who ride on their own bikes, and many overland tour operators also work with this option. Then there are those who organise their own rides and ride in a group or solo. These guys have more of an adventure as they need to do everything on their own. Many also shun regular hotels or tented camps and camp and cook on their own at their favourite locations. Because Ladakh is sparsely populated, and the law and order situation is also good. It offers multiple choices and locations for self-selected campsites. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that around every corner and beyond every hill is a new discovery waiting to be unveiled.

Obviously, this 'Self-Ride Bike Tourism' generates a lot of business. Some people I spoke to said, "Bike tourism in Ladakh has become very big and produces a lot of revenue. It can even be compared to the heritage hotel tourism we see in Rajasthan." Interestingly, this has all happened without any involvement of the government. It's the adventurous

riders and enterprising specialised tour operators, hoteliers and camp owners, who have given birth to the sector of 'Bike Tourism'. And maybe it is thriving and doing so well because the government is not involved.

One other thing I observed is the growth of 'Bicycle Tourism'. Being on a motorbike is one thing, but riding a cycle is something else. In this high-altitude region, where the air is thin and short on oxygen, even walking can be a strenuous exercise. To cycle here means you really are a very special person. Most of the special persons I met were part of a cycle tour operated by specialists, and they had a van following them with their luggage and support. But we also came across some superheroes who were cycling on their own and carrying their own gear. Interestingly, most of the tourists on

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cycles were foreigners. But I am sure in time to come this will also change and more Indians will opt for such 'Active Fitness Holidays'.

One thing that impressed me most about the adventurous bike and cycle tourists was that, without any exception, they were all wearing helmets and attired in the proper riding gear and boots. Many also sported body armour and this included the Indian riders. Normally, we Indians don't care a hoot about safety and most avoid wearing helmets. But here everyone was wearing proper safety gear. They also ride in a disciplined and careful manner, which is most welcome and the need of the hour. But why such a dramatic change in road and riding behavior? Is it the fear of the difficult terrain and heights? Could be. But I choose to believe that they have seen others following safe riding practices, and having been introduced to this bike culture, they have willingly adopted it. Now when will we see this happening all across our county? Not anytime soon, I think. **OD**