



The Himalayan Challenge – The Rough Road to Kathmandu

*by Bjørn Schage
Pictures by Gerald Brown (ERA) and Bjørn Schage*

3 weeks on Indian and Nepalese roads, "Delhi Belly", cows, goats, dogs and monkeys in the road, total anarchy in the traffic and mountain passes reaching over 5000 metres: THAT sounds tempting!

At least that's what Trond and Bjørn thought as the application form for the Inaugural "Himalayan Challenge" popped into the mail box.

The car was ready too: After Peking to

Paris 1966 Frøya, our 1960 Plus Four, was just aching for new adventures.

Well perhaps not completely ready. We didn't expect her to be totally unruffled by 14.000 kms in China, Mongolia and Russia on roads we Norwegians don't even find on the way to our cabins in the mountains. She's done her fair share of shorter rallies too, both the Monte Carlo Historique and in Norway.

So, our first task was to take her all

down, inspect every nut and bolt, change everything that looked worn, and quite a few things that didn't look worn, and put her back together again. We also made some changes inspired by experience and sent her on her way to India.

Our first hotel was The Imperial in New Delhi. The organiser warned us not to get used to the excellent standard. It might not be as good in the weeks to come.



A bridge too far?

signs of good luck in red clay both on our foreheads and on Frøya's bonnet. Little did we know how much we would need it (photo 2).

First stop was in the town of Chandigarh where we once again stayed in a very nice hotel. It went downhill from there, so to speak. The next day it started raining and it didn't stop for quite a while. The closer we got to the foothills of the Himalayas, the more the roads deteriorated, and the steeper it got. Going up to the hotel for the night we started smelling burnt clutch. We didn't see that one coming, and neither did a number of our contestants. One actually retired on the spot. We had no such intentions and got help from friendly Indians towing us up the steepest hills where we couldn't keep a decent speed, for example because more than 100 cows came down the same way taking up most of the road (photo 3).

The weather forecast started to be worrying as they anticipated more than 200 mm rain in less than two days. It went from "weather" to "natural disaster" in a very short time. We had less than 200 kms to the hotel in Manali that day but used more than 10 hours on the journey. We simply weren't prepared for roads this bad. We started out saying that this was like driving a Monte Carlo rally on steroids and ended up realising that this was worse than anything we had encountered during Peking to Paris. Messages started ticking in about bridges being destroyed, something we witnessed ourselves coming down to the valley and saw whole settlements of the poor being flushed away by the angry river.

Because of the missing bridges our way up the valley as the first stage to climb the real mountains, was by an alternative route. It was getting dark and all Indians run with full head lights, making for little visibility for us oncoming. Heavy rain only tackled by the standard Morgan wipers didn't make things

We picked up Frøya at a customs warehouse in the outskirts of town, and on the way back we got our first lesson driving in Indian traffic. It's hard to believe how the Indians drive, but one can safely say that anarchy reigns and that traffic regulations are looked upon as mere guide lines. The driver we had from the airport said: "You need three things in the Indian traffic: Good brakes, good horn and good luck". It's strange, but the traffic actually flowed quite nicely considering all the cars, lorries, buses, tuk-tuks and motorcycles wanting to take up the same space on the road. We're quick learners having previously had some lessons in China and Mongolia, so apart from probably having been relieved of our driving licences back home for the way we drove, it went quite easily back to the hotel (photo 1).

Before start both car and crew were blessed by priests chanting and drawing



Our first meeting at the customs warehouse



Queue of cows

is everything, and it wasn't our turn this time (photo 4).

There weren't many bridges left over the river, but the organizers found one that wasn't flushed away by the flood. It wasn't primarily meant for cars, but as long as it was wide enough we crossed our fingers and pushed on (photo 5).

On the road to Shimla the weather cleared up and it got quite hot. It got so hot that the engine temperature started to rise also. Our temp gauge had stopped working too and the radiator cap was leaking. We tried to fix it but it didn't work. On the contrary; the lower radiator hose burst and emptied its very hot content over the oil pressure gauge sender. As this also stopped working we got a big red light on the dash board. This reminded us eerily about when we got a total engine failure in Tatarstan in Russia,

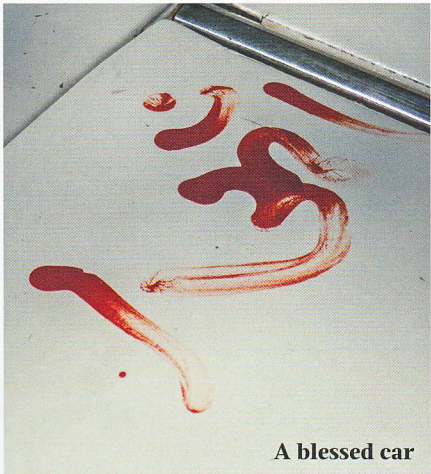
easier. Once a big lorry came at us in the part of the road that we liked to call "ours" (calling it a lane would be too much). We tried passing him on the right side only to find ourselves in the middle of a big heard of black cattle that he had obviously tried to avoid. With no road description to the hotel other than the assumption that we were going up the valley, we passed rivers, lakes, mud and newly fallen rocks on the road. We were longing for a G&T in the bar by now.

As the final stretch of road up to the hotel was blocked by a mud slide 1 meter high and 10 meters across, we had to park our cars some way away and carry our bags knee deep in mud over the slide before we were

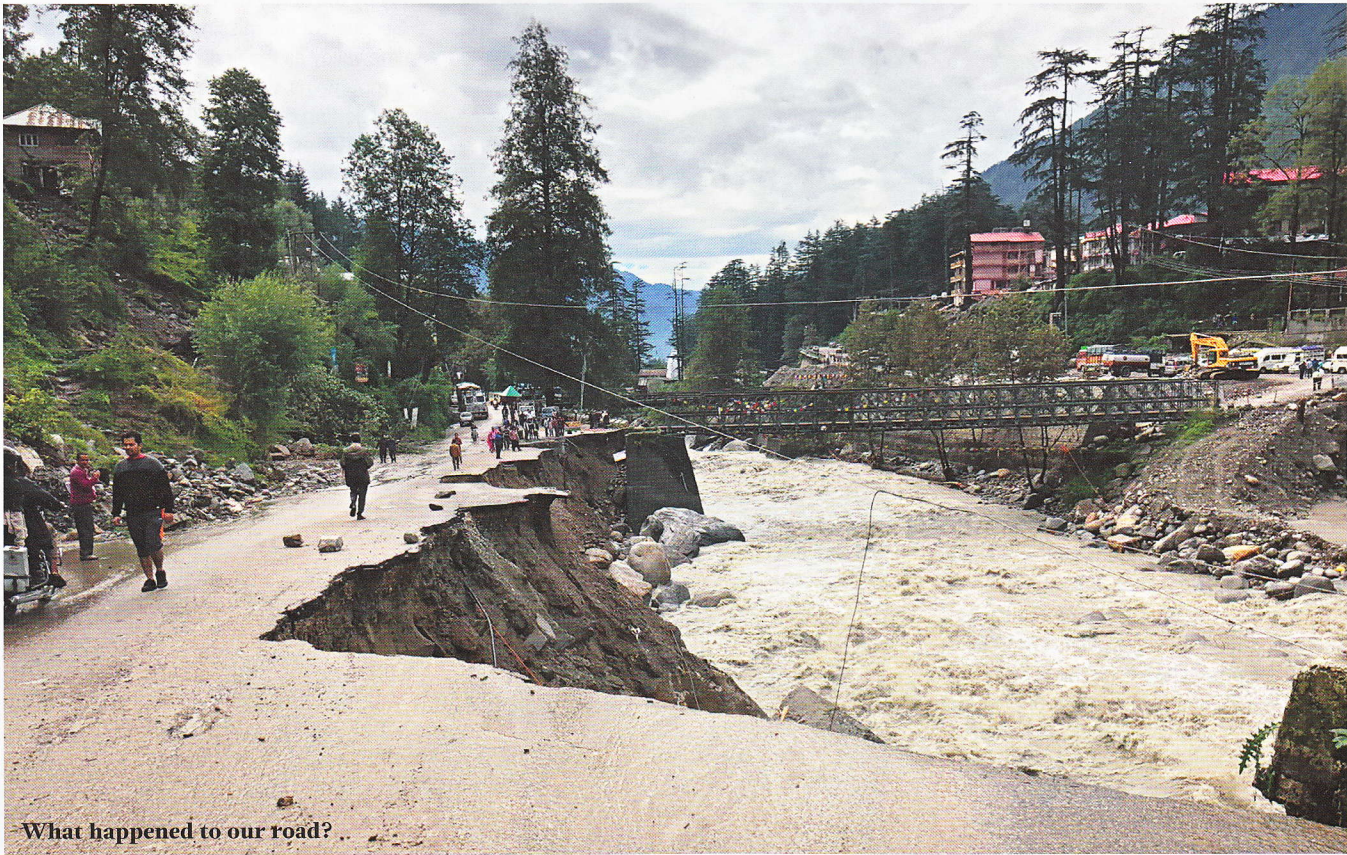
taken the last kilometre on the back of a lorry.

The extreme weather had fallen as snow in the passes, so the whole route had to be redone. We got a few extra resting days to catch up on our regular schedule and we got ample time to change a broken rear shock absorber. (Speaking to a leading member of an Indian car club at a later stage, he said that he wouldn't have taken his old Land Rover over those passes, even in the dry, so maybe we were lucky after all?)

Leaving the hotel the second day, we found that most of the road we had used was flushed into the river. There were also enormous rocks that had fallen where we waited for our lorry, so we realise that timing



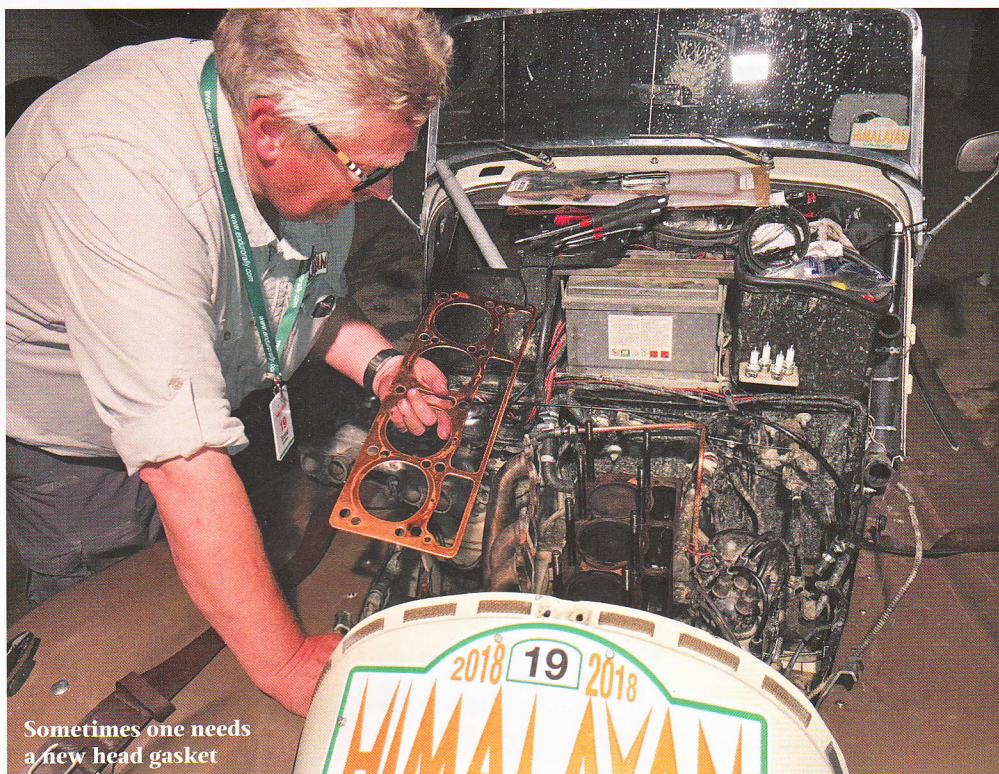
A blessed car



What happened to our road? ..

and it's safe to say that our spirits could need some lifting. They got it when we realized what had actually happened, and that the oil pressure was OK. The temperature was not ok, and after having done a roadside change of the lower hose, which we had brought as a spare, we weren't sure if the head gasket had had it. The engine seemed to be running ok, so we took our chances and drove on, filling water when needed. That was often enough.

At the hotel there were many who had radiator caps to spare and we found one that fitted and set out the next day for a few regularity sections. We soon realized that we were being too optimistic and on the first stage the head gasket blew. Limping back to the hotel we got ready to change the gasket. We had brought one of those as well, and



Sometimes one needs a new head gasket



Our most useful gauge

On the road down to Rishikesh, one of the holiest cities in India by the Ganges and the place where The Beatles went to find their "spiritual awakening", we had a piece of road more than 60 kms that by normal western standards would not be usable. It was the only way down there, so we had to use it anyway. Coming down to the city we were more shaken and dustier than on the worst day in the Gobi. To make matters worse there was a total ban on alcohol and we were also told that the road tomorrow would be just as bad! After having quenched our thirst in litchi-juice we got to bed early (photo 7).

Continued Next month...

as the rest of the crews were enjoying life in the bar, we rolled up our sleeves and got to work. Sorely lacking a functioning water gauge, we also made our own bottle-o-meter to show if water was blowing from the cap. It worked flawlessly the rest of the rally and got to be our most valued instrument. Not many crews can do what we did on their own and as we returned to the bar we got a lot of free drinks and handshakes (photos 6 & 7).

As it turned out the new gasket was thinner than the old one, and after some adjustments of tappets and general fiddling about we tested the car only to realize that it ran better than before. The higher compression giving a bit more oomph also helped the clutch problem as we didn't have

to rev the engine so hard on steep hills. The rest of the rally we had only minor technical problems mostly related to shock absorbers. The real problem turned out to be the roads themselves!

There is no way we can explain how bad they were. They must be experienced. The primary problem was the enormous, overloaded trucks that were everywhere, no matter the size of the road. They dug up the tarmac leaving enormous holes like we have never seen before. Sometimes we felt we were driving in a mix of construction site, gravel pit and war zone. It didn't get much better by the Indians staring working on very long stretches of road at the same time, and obviously took their time finishing the work.





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Continued from last month...

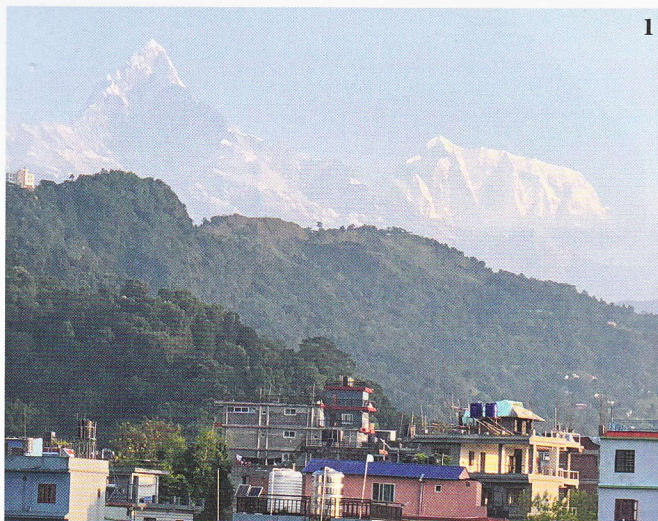
Our next ordeal was the Indian-Nepalese border. The authorities in this part of the world have a certain need to record any and all information from our travel documents, passports and carnets into big, more or less worn-out handwritten ledgers. They do it several times going out and a few times going in as well. One can wonder if anyone reads this information later. In Nepal the roads were, if possible, even worse than in India, but we were getting used to it and kept to our time frames. They were quite narrow, and at one point we were stopped by the police who informed us, quite correctly, that we were probably going too fast in a country where the general speed was approximately 35 to 40 kmh. The problem was that the other traffic miscalculated our speed, and on more than one occasion we had motorcycles

cutting in in front of us with very small margins. On one occasion there was no margin at all, and one of the other cars ran over one. Luckily there was little damage to the riders, but the bike was a goner. It turned out to be nothing 30.00 rupees couldn't fix, but the driver took it a bit more slowly after that. We all did, and we learned to anticipate the behavioral pattern in the traffic around us. Frequent use of the horn was also important, and we had installed an extra horn button for the navigator, which was used all the time. Quite a few of the contestants had incidents and we saw a lot of dents and scratches on the cars. One even had a front-to-front and had to be returned home for surgery. As they told us before start: Motorsport is dangerous! By the way; we made it home without a scratch.

We reached Pokhara in pouring rain, but

that didn't matter because we were promised a juicy steak for dinner accompanied by a beer. It was a welcome change from chicken tikka, naan bread and dal. Getting up the next morning the weather had cleared, and we saw the really high mountains for the first time, like the 6.977 meters high Maccapucchare (fish tail mountain).

The last stretch up to Kathmandu was by the long, narrow, twisting road called the Staircase. It was packed with enormous trucks and it took us hours to get up. Coming there we were met by dust and smog like we haven't seen before. The roads were primary dirt and gravel and the traffic was absolutely chaotic. Trond was here in 1997 being mechanic for the Norwegian Morgan during the first P2P, and he couldn't see much difference since then, probably because of the earthquake they had in the spring of 2015.



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Our hotel was the very fashionable Hyatt Regence Hotel being a cool and calm oasis compared to the chaos outside. With nothing to fix on the car we decided to take a helicopter ride to see Mount Everest. We had a stop at Lukla Airport, which with its 12 deg. inclination and only 527 meters air strip is said to be one of the most dangerous airports in the world. From a height of approximately 5,500 meters we got a fantastic view of the great mountain. That's one to tick off the bucket list!

Going down from Kathmandu was just as painful as going up, and at one stage we thought all four rear shocks had had it. Turned out that they had over heated and after a lunch rest they were back to normal. Quite happily leaving the last Himalayan hairpin behind us we were now facing the challenge of the return trip over the border. It was even more chaotic than the first one, not being made any easier by the man with the stamp on the Nepalese customs control having taken his lunch break. When he returned there was a considerable pile of documents for him to process, ours

being down in the middle somewhere. Expecting a long wait, we were very surprised to hear our name being called and given the documents. Leaving the building we were tapped

on the shoulder by one of the lower officials demanding some compensation for swift services rendered. Quite stunned by this flagrant example of corruption we handed him 50 Nepalese rupees. It amounts to 40 pence, so we didn't feel too bad about it.

The rest of the border crossing was all about locating the customs and passport offices in a veritable sea of people, and at last we were through. Seeing the more than 10 kilometer queue of trucks on the Indian side waiting to enter Nepal, we realized that we had nothing to complain about.

Our last leg to Agra via Lucknow was uneventful. We were driving an enormous three lane motorway that was almost



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deserted (apart from the occasional dog and road worker) probably due to the inhibitive road toll of 70 rupees, and before we knew it we passed the finishing line at the Oberoi Amarvilas Hotel, overlooking the Taj Mahal.

It might not have been quite like finishing in Paris, where we were met by more than 30 friends and family, but it was a great feeling of accomplishment knowing that we had successfully made it all the way. There was a rumor about a wager that we wouldn't make it, and even a few of the Bentley crews (who otherwise didn't seem to think much of Morgans) came over to congratulate us.

After our head gasket incident, our place on the score board wasn't much to talk about, but we did get a handmade copper bowl for carrying water (should we ever need to do that again) and a big hand of applause. Then it was straight to the bar to down some well-earned champagne together with our new friends, and time to contemplate what we had gone through: Before the rally we had thought that the biggest problems would be the food, the traffic and the height in the mountains. The traffic was no problem, the food was monotonously Indian but otherwise ok and the height we never got to experience. It was the roads that took us by surprise. We would never have thought that we would drive on any surface worse than Mongolia, but we did. No normal Morgan would have made it, but luckily, we have Frøya who has showed us her super-powers! She was also loved by the Indians who popped out from nowhere when we stopped and wanted to shake our hands and sit in the car. We didn't notice many other cars getting this kind of attention.



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like holes in the wall, but they usually had what we needed and could perform almost any repair. There were enormous contrasts too, with a short distance between enormous poverty and endless luxury. We believe we would have to stay for a long time to understand the country.

Would we do a rally in India again? Probably not, but we have had a wonderful experience that we will always carry with us, and the desire to do more rallies with Frøya has not diminished. She's just a wonderful little car, isn't she?

For more info on Frøya and her exploits go to www.froyathemorgan.no

Most Indians seemed happy when we met them, but we have never seen so much garbage in the streets anywhere in the world. Ordinary shops and garages seemed more

Photo captions:

1. Maccapucchare (fish tail mountain), a fantastic sight
2. A typical traffic jam on the way to Kathmandu
3. Frøya in a rally traffic jam, on the Nepalese dirt roads
4. The road to Agra (and some good advice).
5. Nice view from the hotel room!
6. Varied rally cars including Citroen DS, Saab, 240Z, Mercedes – and Morgan Plus 4!
7. Crossing the finishing line in Agra



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