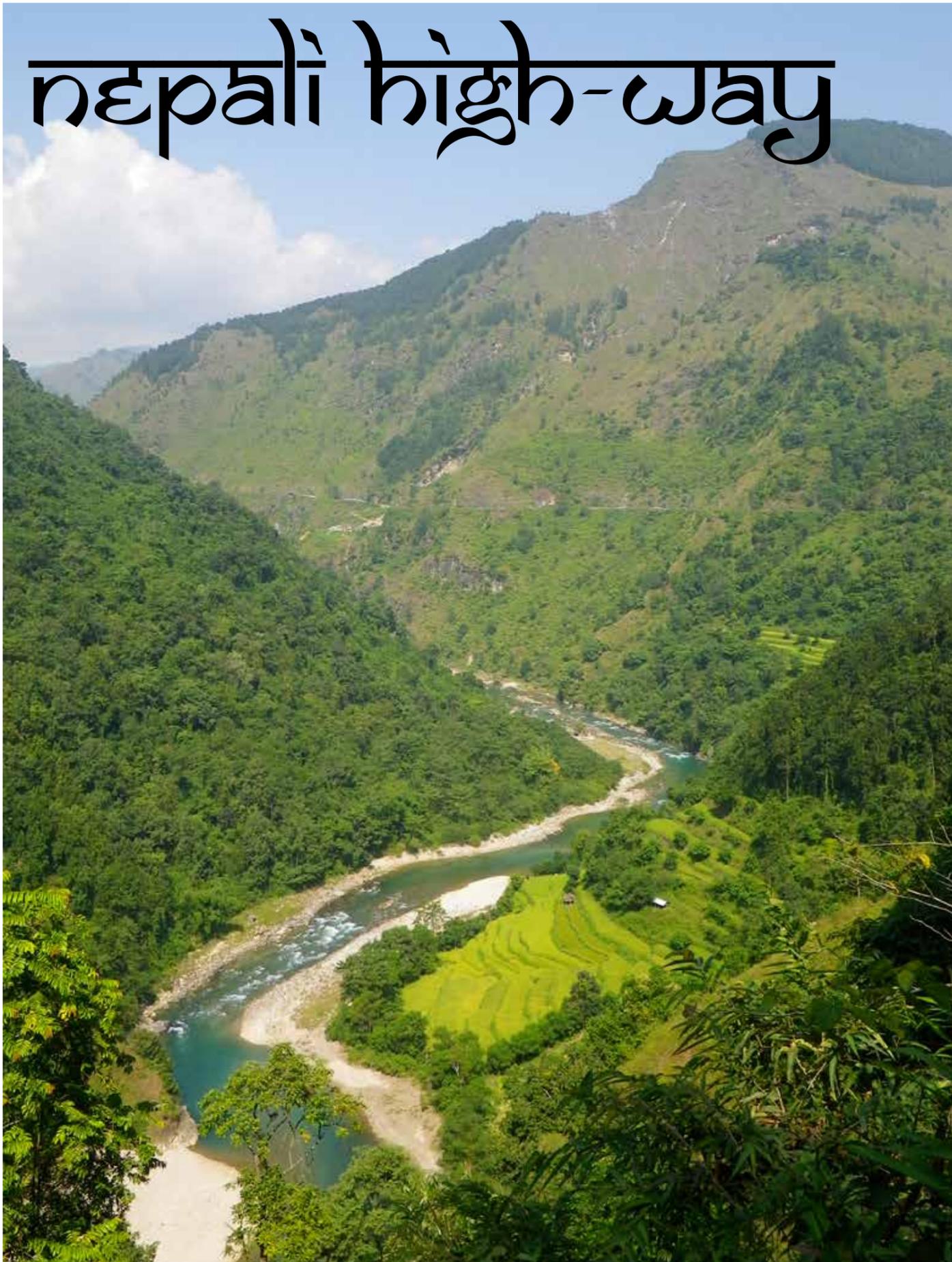


# nepali high-way



## Honda Activa 100

Words and images: Evangeline Neve



Never in a million years did I think that I would be here, looking down on a view like this, having ignored the naysayers – and possibly good advice, too – by riding out here on my little Honda Activa, all of 100 brave cc.

Kathmandu, Nepal, has been my home since 1996. My first form of transportation was a bicycle and a few years later I learned to ride a scooter, and despite winter chills and monsoon rains I have never had the desire (or the money) to drive a car. As the city has grown and the traffic has become ever more chaotic, my confidence upgraded right along with it, to where driving in the city has just become second nature to me. That's despite the cows, farm carts, people who can't drive but have cars anyway, buses that are too big for the narrow roads, and the complete predictability that everyone here fails to adhere to any form of traffic law.

Then a few years ago I decided to start riding my scooter around the rest of Nepal. The roads are awful, I know, but were the rest of Nepal's roads really that much worse than Kathmandu's? Were they worse than terrible? The answer, as it turned out, was yes. And no.

I'd been invited by an old friend to his wedding, in his home town: Ridi Bazaar, in the district of Gulmi, to the west of Kathmandu. Long distance bus rides are not really my thing anymore; I've had enough to last me a lifetime.

"I'd love to come...I'm thinking of riding the scooter down there," I told him.

"Oh sure, you can do that. My brother does it in a day. Just leave early." Famous last words.

Leave early we did – I went with a friend. I thought it would be more fun, safer, and that way we could trade off driving and make better time. And also, of course, we could put extra strain on the little engine; but maybe I hadn't really thought that part through.

Picture Nepal on the map as a slightly crooked rectangle. Our travel route is another crooked rectangle inside of it. Nepal still doesn't have many roads, though there are a number under construction that promise to connect cities better and faster. Until then, we make do with a disjointed network that often involves driving partially out of your way to connect to the only road that will take you where you really want to go.

Early, before the sun has come up, we leave home, driving out of Kathmandu in a south-westerly fashion. The predawn departure is an attempt to avoid the wave of trucks and buses that clog this, the most travelled route out of the Kathmandu Valley. After leaving the city we drop down a set of switchbacks that take us to the Prithvi Highway, the main road that links Kathmandu and Pokhara, Nepal's second largest city. It's a beautiful drive, and a road I'm familiar with, both by bus and scooter. The Prithvi Highway follows the Trisuli River, and is strewn with small villages and plenty of places to stretch your legs and buy some small fried fish, roasted corn, bananas picked that morning, or anything else you feel hungry for. It's also a major trade and tourist route, ferrying goods all over the country, folk to and from Pokhara, and others to raft the river that runs to our right, fuller now after the summer rains.

In several places the road has been washed out by landslides from the monsoon, and the traffic flows like treacle as drivers go around and over boulders and rocks, while attempting to avoid the river's edge. Still, I'd have to say that it's a pretty good road, with lots of traffic and what are, by Nepali standards, pretty competent drivers.

It's October, and the weather is beautiful at this time of year. Autumn and spring are the best times to be on two wheels in Nepal: the evenings may be a little nippy but I like that, and the days are bright, sunny, breezy, beautiful.



# “It’s all too much for the little engine, and she dies every forty-five minutes”

It’s the best time for epic views, as well; the hills and farmland are shades of bright, refreshing green after their recent three-month showers, and the Himalayas come out and show off, too.

I think I might find the Prithvi Highway a little more intimidating if I hadn’t been up and down it so often. The road ranges from a mere few metres above river level with farmland stretching off to your left, to places where the left is a sheer cliff, and the right a steep drop down to the same river – but a lot less inviting.

At about the 100 km mark, in the now down-at-heel town of Mugling, the road branches in two directions: straight, over another river joining the Trisuli, and left, following the river south.

We go left, towards the southern city of Bhairawa. The road here becomes truly awful in places, while interspersed with patches of newly paved blacktop. There seems no logic to the patchwork. Gradually we leave the hills of mid-Nepal behind us and the road becomes straighter and flatter, though not much better. There are long stretches of dust and gravel that would imply road construction if I hadn’t been here often enough to know better. It’s just the way it is.

Bhairawa is a large, dusty city, similar to many others in the Terai, the Nepali plains area. A flat strip along the southern border with India, it’s hot here, and gets much hotter in summer, unlike Kathmandu’s temperate, seasonal climate. Much of Nepal’s industries and large-scale farming are located in the Terai, as is a good segment of the population.

And this is where we join the large East-West Highway which spans the width of the entire country; 1,024 km from the Mechi River that forms Nepal’s eastern border to the Mahakali River in the west. At the halfway point, a metal sign with flaking paint and a newer but broken marble slab sit unobtrusively on either side of the road,



waiting to be noticed. We are in the precise middle of this unique and fantastic country that I love so much, and which has become home. It’s as good a place as any – better, in fact – to stretch our legs, empty our bladders, and take some photos.

There are a few places where the road goes gently up and round about a little, but mostly it’s flat and completely straight. In Nepal, this is a rarity. Of course, there are other vehicles, but the road isn’t crowded. And certainly, herds of cattle cross regularly, but the terrain is so flat you can see them coming. After years of windy up-and-down Kathmandu driving, this is a revelation, and a joy. But prolonged periods of this uninterrupted, joyful speed introduce a problem I’ve never encountered before.

My scooter overheats! Yes, I know it’s old and has an awful lot of kilometres on it and the suspension isn’t up to par anymore, but this? This is a whole new problem. I can only guess that the heat in the Terai, coupled with sustained speeds of oh – 60? 80kph? have done her in. It’s all too much for the little engine, and she dies every forty-five minutes or so, whereupon we pull over and give it a break for

a while. If there’s a creek nearby we scoop water out and pour it on the visible parts of the steaming undercarriage and exhaust and generally let her rest until she deigns to go again. And like this we reach Butwal, another of the plains’ hub cities.

It’s been a while since we’ve been to Ridi Bazaar, our final destination, and as most of the distance is behind us, we happily conclude that most of the trip must be too. We stop for a fortifying helping of momo, a Nepali buffalo meat-filled dumpling, and call our friend to let him know we’re not far, we’ll be there soon!

Again, famous last words.

A clean and tidy little city, Butwal is much nicer looking than other cities and towns in the area, and perhaps because of this I feel extra shocked at the state

of the road once we leave the city to drive north. In places, it can scarcely be called a road, with potholes the size of lunar craters and rock, gravel and concrete all competing to give you a flat tire. Small waterfalls run down the cliff face to our right, running across the road to join the river raging far, far below us on the left. If we weren’t so far from home, I would seriously question the sanity of continuing, but really, how can we go back now? And call me a coward, but I am very, very glad to not be pulling this crazy trip solo. There is almost no-one out here – it would not be a good place to break down. Alone.

We slow to almost a crawl. The road is just too terrible to do much else. There is also a certain concern for our tires – and the sheer drop, with nothing to stop our fall.

It seems a long time before the road improves and we enter the sort of bowl shaped valley leading to Tansen, Palpa. This historical hill-top city was once a hub of trading between Tibet and India. It’s an ancient yet buzzing town still, and a place I’ve spent too little time exploring. Ah, well, maybe someday. We’ve got a wedding to attend in the morning. If that is, we ever get there.

Tansen is surrounded by beautiful pine forests, and we drive through them and up onto the ridges the city is built on, and beyond, heading for our elusive destination.

Somewhere on that crazy road between here and Butwal we must have climbed to a much higher altitude than I’d realized. The sun sets as we finally start descending. Rice fields and distant rivers are even more beautiful for the tinting, but we’ve no time for photos any longer as we desperately try to reach Ridi Bazaar safely, down an endless, unfamiliar, dark switchback road.

‘How can we not be there already?’ is what we keep asking each other, even as a smashed, rusting, abandoned bus appears around a bend in front of us, the front reduced to an accordion after meeting the rock face headlong.

When the small bridge that we recognize as the entrance to Ridi Bazaar finally materializes out of the blackness, it’s almost anticlimactic. All I can think is; I’m exhausted, I need a beer, and I am not going back that way.



A Nepali wedding generally consists of days of ceremony and elaborate detail, plus repeated movement of groups between the house of bride and groom and temple. In this case the bride is from Kathmandu, and everyone is pressed for time. Tradition is not abandoned however, it’s all just packed into one crazy day, culminating in a dinner on the roof of our friend’s family home, the food cooked over an open fire in pots large enough to bathe in. It’s not an opulent affair, more like a family gathering, with two people excitedly joining their lives; in a country with predominantly arranged marriages, this one is a love bond. Not that it’s a deal breaker here – most of my happily married friends do, in fact, seem

to owe their joy to someone else’s matchmaking or an astrologer’s calculation.

There is always time between festivities to explore more of Ridi Bazaar, a town I love more each time I visit. Built at the confluence of two rivers holy to the Hindu faith – the Kali Gandaki and Ridi – it’s a famous pilgrimage site, with numerous temples and historic sites, made all the more auspicious by the fact that it is one of only a few places in the whole country where shaligrams are found. These smooth black stones contain fossils, are believed to represent the Hindu god Vishnu and are just plain beautiful.

All of these religious factors, particularly the holy rivers, make it an extremely popular cremation site for Nepali from the surrounding area. Life and death sit side by side along the river as it sparkles in the late afternoon sun: children swim naked, laughing and shouting to each other. A few metres further downstream a woman washes her family's clothes, and yet farther the river laps at a smouldering funeral pyre of stone and wood as the mourners stand nearby all in white, the funereal colour.

And on a rooftop, overlooking these rivers, we celebrate a marriage.

When we finally decide we have to get back to our reality – that's Kathmandu, to us – we head back only as far as Tansen. Here, instead of returning by the south road we head north into the Syanjya District, on what is in my opinion one of Nepal's most stunningly picturesque roads. It runs high above a river ravine, and while that is hardly new, as most of our trip has followed rivers, this one is special. The water far below us is a piercing turquoise. Each hairpin turn exposes ever more idyllic valleys and neat rows of farmland. And while there's still not much between us and a long drop, the narrow road is well paved and lightly travelled. The latter probably being the reason for the former.

It's a relaxing, extremely enjoyable couple of hours drive to Pokhara. This is Nepal's second largest city, built around a lake and a big tourist destination for both foreigners and locals; the Annapurna range is so close here on a clear day you don't even need to go trekking to experience it.

We decide to go easy on the old girl (that's the bike, not me!) and drive back to Kathmandu in stages. This is the first stop, and the next morning we drive on to Bandipur, a tiny village perched on a ledge barely wide enough for

its main street lined with buildings. The rest of the town's houses spill down the steep sides.

Getting to Bandipur does mean turning off the Prithvi Highway at Dumre, and the scooter again decides this is the right time to take a break – repeatedly. It takes a while, but we finally do get there. It is remarkably peaceful. Vehicles cannot enter the one main street and have to park outside it; it feels like stepping into the past as old men sit in front of shops gabbing and children play in the street. Old style buildings of brick and carved wood frame the scene. Also there are some great panoramic views of the Himalaya from here. You'd think it would become stale living here, seeing these mountains so often, but it never, ever does for me.

Up in Bandipur, the lodge owner, an old friend who's lived in Nepal even longer than I have, strongly recommends we cut our losses and toss my scooter on top of a bus for the rest of the trip back. I make polite noises but I'm not even considering it, and we're off the next morning on a wing and a prayer, literally.

It's only a couple hours trip and the engine holds strong, even on the dreaded switchbacks to take us back over the pass and into the Kathmandu Valley. In places here the road is so rutted our tires all but disappear into the ridges, and a slow stream of large-vehicle traffic necessitates holding your own.

It's slow work fighting the traffic to get home, and we are exhausted. Dust from the road and exhaust from vehicles that have never heard of emissions regulations, is so deep in our pores I'm still washing it out days later. We stop at our favourite little Nepali-Japanese restaurant on our way home despite our appearance, and I brag to anyone who will listen about my brave little scooter and how far she's taken us.

# OVERLAND

explore

# nepal

Overland Magazine has teamed up with FreeSpirit Adventure Tours to EXPLORE Nepal.

Ride with us for 12 days in beautiful Nepal and really get under the skin of this fascinating country which bridges India's northern plains and the high Himalaya.

[overlandmag.com/explore](http://overlandmag.com/explore)

Departing 10th May 2014

£2000 rider and £1200 pillion  
Including bike, fuel, accommodation and most food



FreeSpirit  
ADVENTURE



FreeSpirit Adventure has been operating motorcycle tours in Nepal and India for 11 years