

BONDING OVER BIKING

Anuradha & Manas Dewan recently completed a biking expedition that took them to 40 towns and across 18 countries. Sunny Rodricks talks with the couple about their hair-raising ride

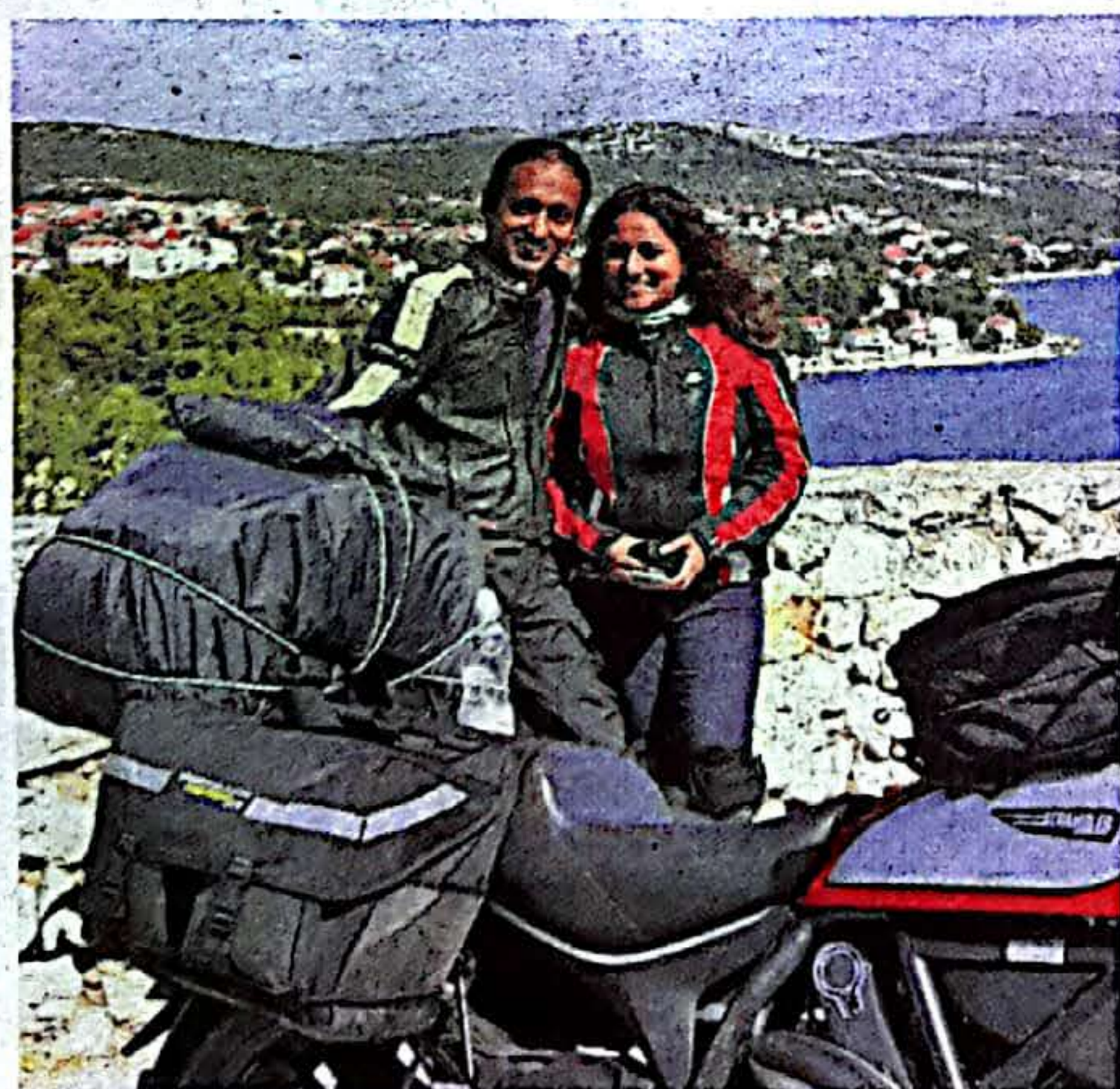
A glance at Manas and Anuradha Dewan and you wouldn't believe that these lovebirds are a married couple who have just returned from a 20,000km road trip across Europe and Asia that covered 18 countries and 40 towns. The biker couple rode through a dense jungle in the Czech Republic, they zoomed past forest fires in Spain and they even entered the war-ridden country of Bosnia during their four-month trip to celebrate their 18th wedding anniversary. They documented it in detail on their blog, aptly named Dosti On Wheels. We caught up with the duo to talk about their passion for bikes, their journey and more.

■ **What inspired you to take a road trip across Europe and Asia?**

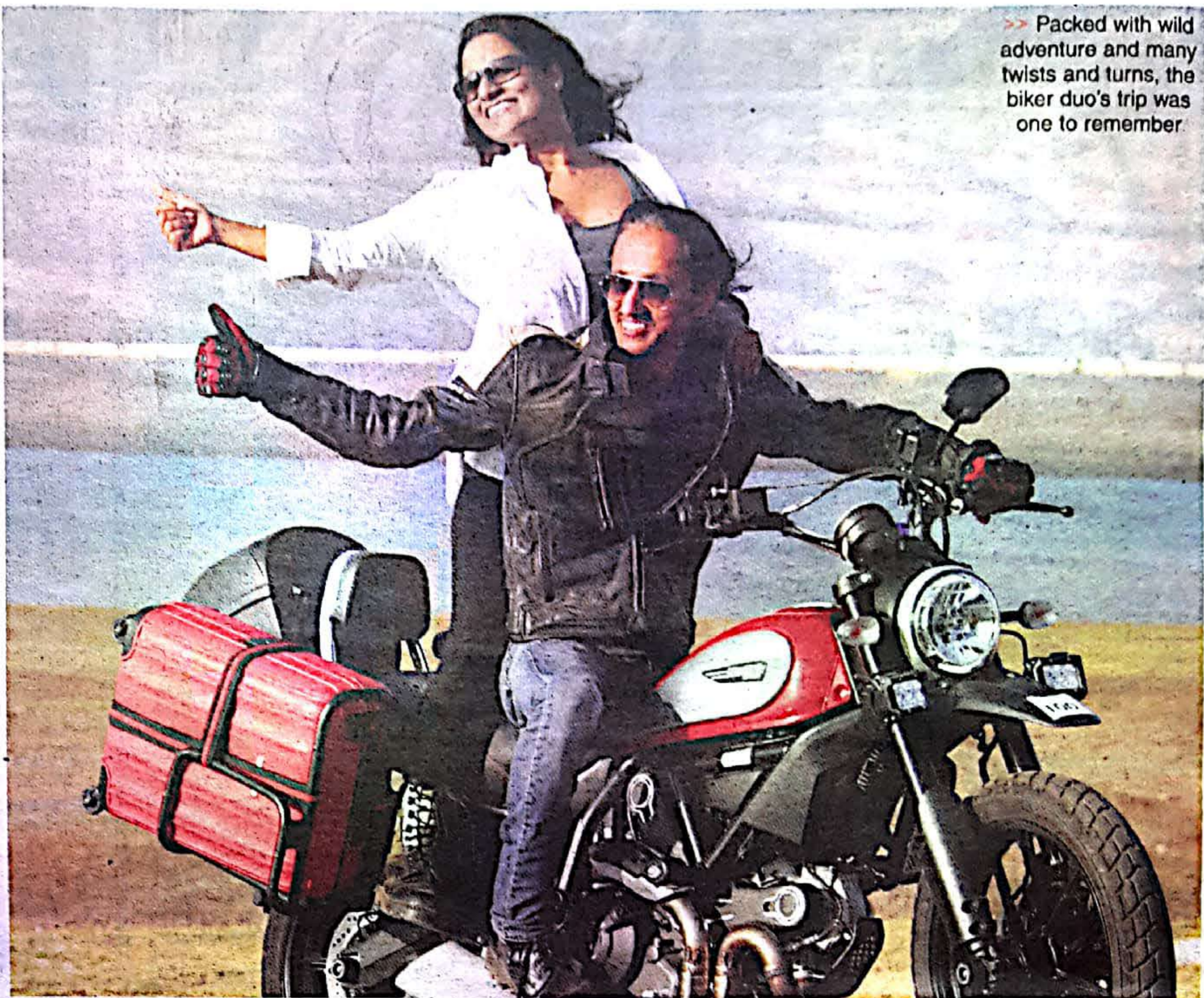
Manas: There's a saying: 'Four wheels move the body; two move the soul.' The cliché holds true for me at a deeply personal level. I have always loved the freedom and connectedness offered by the two wheels. In the summer of 2017, I turned 42. That summer I quit my job for the ride of my dreams, this time to find my soul. We had a long cherished dream — to explore this beautiful world, to experience the wonders of nature and to bond with people from all over the world. In short, to understand humanity. Our initial idea was to ride our motorbike from Europe to India, but our research told us that there were a few areas along the route that were extremely volatile. So we decided on a shorter route. Ultimately, we settled for a ride of 18 countries. Why 18? Because we were celebrating 18 years of being a couple.

■ **Among you, who rode the bike for more of the journey? Which country was the most difficult to drive in?**

Manas: We shared the pleasure of riding between us, although I hogged a little more of the ride than Anu (Anuradha). The most difficult parts of the ride included central France, where we biked in the near zero



>> Anuradha and Manas were welcomed by hospitable folks in every town at which they stopped



>> Packed with wild adventure and many twists and turns, the biker duo's trip was one to remember

temperatures and rain for days, and Bosnia and Albania, where we faced temperatures of up to 50°C. We also experienced thunderstorms at certain locations.

Anuradha: We faced forest fires in Spain and Portugal. This was another very tough section of the ride. Most people believed there was no way through, but in the end, we managed to find a way.

■ **You lived with the locals on your journey. Is there anything that stood out in this regard?**

Anuradha: Ours has truly been a journey of friendship and bonding. We were very blessed. Every host we stayed with made us feel welcome. Many of them took leave from their work; they cooked their special delicacies, took us around sightseeing around town and helped us experience their culture and way of life. Some even prepared Indian food to make us feel at home. Some learned Bollywood songs and wore Indian clothes to surprise us. It was truly a meeting of hearts.

One of the most memorable experiences was when our host, Mima, in the Seferhisar village in Turkey, braided my hair with a hand-woven garland and said, "I do not have a daughter, and this is how a Turkish mother would pamper a daughter." I had tears in my eyes and still get goose bumps when I think of the wonderful families and the experiences we had together.

■ **We learned that you were warned before entering Bosnia and Herzegovina. What really happened?**

Manas: Friends cautioned against it. "A war has just ended there... People still carry guns... It is unsafe... The roads are broken and animals roam the streets." There were various remarks made.

We reached the border crossing (from Croatia) into Bosnia, and we were exhausted. As we entered the border check post, we breathed a small prayer. We had heard a lot of strange stories about Bosnia. "Let it be smooth for us," we whispered. And it was more than smooth. In fact, we made our very first friend right at the border in the form of the passport control officer, Goran Komlenovic. He knew about Gandhiji, Indira Gandhi, Raj Kapoor and Bollywood. "Bosnia is friend to India," he said.

It was not Goran alone. Throughout our stay in Bosnia, we met people who were totally amazing! Often, when we were travelling at night in the Bosnian countryside, strangers would give us the phone numbers of their

friends and relatives along the route just in case we needed help. And they would call up later to ask if we reached safely. This was the hospitality we experienced across the hinterlands of Bosnia!

■ **Why did you decide to give major cities a miss on your journey and opt to visit villages instead?**

Anuradha: We had travelled to Europe several times before, and as such, the bigger tourist destinations were somewhat familiar to us. We wanted to explore tiny villages and the countryside where you could experience the real pulse of the country. This was one of the main goals of our trip.

Our idea was to live with the people like one of them, so we decided to stay with local people in their own homes. We used websites like Airbnb, where guests stay with local families, understand the lives of locals and are integrated into the local fabric. For us, this was an enormous opportunity to experience the local culture and we chose heritage properties in villages and the remote countryside.

■ **While leaving for Prague, you had to cover a dense jungle. You got lost and drove 70km across a cemetery. Tell us about that experience.**

Anuradha: What is a good road trip without a twist in the tale? And, we had our very own spooky story in the jungles of the Czech Republic. Our GPS malfunctioned as we were entering the country. It was 10pm on a new moon night, so it was completely dark and our GPS indicated that we were close to our destination. A few minutes later, we reached a clearing in the deep jungles we were passing through. "You have arrived at your location," the GPS announced.

We were in the middle of a dense jungle and we hadn't spotted a single human being in at least an hour. The shadows seemed eerily long and the road was so narrow that we could not even turn the motorbike around!

This was not what we bargained for! We were totally, hopelessly lost on some strange road, on a dark night, deep in the jungles of the Czech Republic. Our destination was a village called Svata and the landmark given was 'next to the cemetery'. It was past midnight when our motorbike roared through the silent streets of the Svata village near Prague. Our host Libuse Souckova, turned out to be quite a nice lady, and we finally managed to get a long-awaited hot shower. Na zdravi! We clinked glasses to mark the end of an interesting, rather spooky, ride into the Czech Republic.