



Cultures clash in Enduro India as riders from around Europe ride 2,000km through the social and geographical melting pot that is southern India

After five successful years, is Enduro India finally getting a case of Delhi belly or is it still vindaloo strength?

Words: Simon Bowen
Pics: Mykel Nicolaou

the spice route

It's probably true to say that most riders have heard about Enduro India these days. The Bath-based company have the highest profile of any adventure travel operation in this country and not immodestly claim to deliver 'the Adventure of a lifetime'. Being big and bold in your advertising campaign doesn't necessarily make you the best, but many thousands of paying customers have been on their trips made famous by the traffic chaos and Royal Enfield Bullet and nearly all of them speak highly of their experiences. So just what is it about chugging around India (a country that is as foreign as it gets) on prehistoric motorbikes that gets people frothing with excitement?

Make no mistake about it – you have to really *want* to do this. It costs a great deal of money, five grand at the last count, and you stand to lose half that amount if you can't make the plane on the day. And there are far cheaper ways of seeing India on a bike; a flight to Delhi will sting you around £500 and to rent a Bullet for a week will be considerably less than that. But Enduro comes with a massive dollop of organisation and back-up that is second to none. People like, no *need*, that kind of insurance on an undertaking as big as this. And then there's the camaraderie, as a group of 100 total strangers face a punishing event that brings them all together in a rousing finale. The focus is on not only completing the adventure, but also handing over a considerable quantity of cash at the end of it to established charities. £228,000 was shared between four such charities after the 2008 Enduro India event, a huge lump of money in anyone's terms.

10 years have passed since my first visit to India and just over 60 years since it celebrated independence from the British. Times have changed considerably for this ancient and exotic nation that has embraced the epoch of information technology, along with a competitive spirit to out-grow their northern neighbours, and seemingly, India is firmly in control of its destiny. But during the Enduro, I would soon discover how little of an effect 'new India' has had on its masses.

The Royal Enfield, besieged by low-cost locally built Japanese alternatives, is still holding its own as the quality brand to be seen on, and being seen would prove to be somewhat unavoidable throughout this head-turning fancy-dress procession. If any of its inhabitants had ever seen Mad Max, we would all be in the shit. Turning heads

is a dead cert with such an unusual congregation – dressed largely in a mixture of garish body armour and motocross apparel – thundering through villages like a band of futuristic murderous Vikings. Screeching to a halt, consuming every coconut in sight, shaking a few hands and roaring off again.

From the groovy ex-Portugese resort colony of Goa to beautiful Kottayam in the Kerala backwaters, 90 like-minded riders had embraced the notion of 2,000 kilometres of dust and grime, poverty and beauty, spirituality and danger as a rather alluring alternative to a couple of weeks getting pampered and fat in a soul-less resort. You can't pigeon-hole the people who ride this event; from ex-racers to businessmen and yes, the odd hairy biker, it's an eclectic mix of riders at the best of times.

The first day is a steady 100 mile introduction from Anjuna to Palolem to familiarise ourselves with our transport and the Indian way of motoring. Our bikes belong in old black and white movies. *Wall Of Death* specification drum brakes, Bakelite tyres and spacehopper suspension combined with a right-



Rush-hour in Delhi makes the M25 look like Bonneville. But surviving the traffic is all part of the experience



By the end of each day you'll be covered in dirt and dust, but amazed at what you've achieved and seen

hand gear change that offers as many false ratios as real ones. There is a second lever to assist in selecting the one neutral that you actually want.

Fortunately Indians drive on the left side of the road, not that keeping to the correct side comes with much compensation as there is normally someone or something coming towards you head-on. You soon learn that the only workable system is one based on vehicle size and enthusiastic use of the horn. 'Might is Right' forms the content of the Highway Code in India. The more you sound your horn, or the louder your horn, the more serious you are about making your move. This ruling is combined with sizing principles. Excluding the cow (which has ultimate right of way), a bus has more authority than a medium sized truck, which masters the car, which has the upper hand over the motorised rickshaw, which terrorises the motorcycle, the bicycle, pedestrian. Learn quickly and have sharp reflexes, as it's not uncommon to approach a bend to discover two over-loaded racing buses coming towards you at once. Once mastered, you can sit back and enjoy the ride.

By day three, most have mastered the Enfield. We hover between 40-50mph as any faster would

...DON'T MENTION CRICKET I LEARNT OR YOU'LL NEVER BE ALLOWED TO LEAVE. SURELY THIS MUST BE THE HAPPIEST PLACE ON EARTH...

threaten the rider's dignity and livelihood. From Shimoga to Silent Valley opens the eye to increased greenery, and not a hippy in sight. Every sense approaches overload as we inhale the smells, sights and sounds of our surroundings. It soon becomes apparent that India is crammed with industrious and resourceful people. Villages and towns are full of folk going about their business. Mostly women, it's true. In the countryside, men have realised that women

are best sent out to work while they relax during the day, an excellent social climate. In between villages are roadside stalls selling tea, coconut and sugarcane juice and mobile phone accessories, squeezing a living from the land and its visitors.

Wherever you go there are people (not surprising given that there's 1.2 billion of them in India) who are bemused, intrigued or full of questions. They are smiling, wanting to shake hands, asking your name and destination and wishing good luck. Don't mention cricket I soon learnt, or escape is impossible. Kids line the street to wave and cheer us on – this must be the happiest place on earth. The vast majority are untouched by the economic growth around them and are still very poor – living on less than £1 per day - and yet very rarely do we see anyone with their hand held out expecting charity. The humbling nature of this experience is a well-documented part of the Enduro experience and doubtless the reason so many people return a second time. The smile is the key here. Remove motocross helmet and mirror-lensed goggles, bare teeth in a non-aggressive fashion and any concerns or barriers among the pedestrians are broken down in an instant.

A changing India means that roads are far better than on my last visit. The hustle and bustle of the carriageways is full-on, but tempered by fresh tarmac on the highway sections it gives the opportunity to enjoy the ever-improving scenery in some comfort. These sections are in the minority however, as we spend most of our days dodging potholes, beasts and buses. The Enfield chugs on regardless and I'm developing a harmony with my

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

Very simple: you raise your £5k entry ticket, have an extraordinary time in an amazing place on a motorbike and a load of money goes to various charities. The benefactors are The Rainbow Trust (rainbowtrust.org), WWF (wwf.org.uk), Wildlife Conservation Society (wcs.org.uk), and Adventure Ashram (adventureashram.co.uk), a new charity focusing on health and hygiene in rural areas of India.

The total costs – travel, food, accommodation and organiser fees are deducted from your money, and the remainder divided between the charities. It's a solid business model that works very well for everyone concerned.



Staying the night in the Jungle Hut reserve means that tigers prowl below you while you sleep. If you sleep, of course



Pheasant missed the first time but went round for another pass



DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES?

Taking part doesn't require a high level of fitness or advanced riding skills, but you do need passion and commitment. It's a safe (as soon as you get off the bike) and extremely friendly place that does require a liking of spicy food, an open mind and a sense of adventure. Those who think riding 18 miles to Box Hill is a day out will have their eyes opened. The days are long, very hot and mentally demanding. Many take their bike test just to take part and bizarrely, many of these first-timers cope better than experienced bikers. Take the rough with the smooth, be prepared to room-share with strangers and you're already well on course.

The event is extremely well organised, as you'd

expect after five years of fine-tuning. There is a considerable team of mechanics, medics, organisers, trouble-shooters and team leaders, carefully blending in amongst you at all times, and all in touch with each other, so no need to worry about anything except staying on and having a good day. If you do have an off, you'll be surrounded by back-up in minutes.

The 'Adventure of a Lifetime' claim is a fair one – it's genuinely epic. Raise the required entry fee of £5k, or as in most cases, raise half and stick your hand in your pocket for the other half, surrender to the magic of what is a remarkable country and dine out on the memories for a long time afterward.



The heat is intense in the valleys while road surfaces change from good to atrocious in minutes. Yellow-jacketed rider denotes a marshal, in this case grizzled superstock racer Rhys Boyd

Pot is freely available



personal museum piece. It has a comfortable riding position and a decent seat and that's about it. No frills offered and none required. This is motorcycling at its most basic and given a choice, I wouldn't swap my Bullet for a proper bike out here. More power means more trouble in a country that uses a garland of Marigolds in the absence of seat belts.

For animal lovers, the trip is about to become more interesting. We leave the royal city of Mysore towards the Jungle Hut, a tiger and elephant retreat in Masinagudi where we are to enjoy two nights surrounded by mountains and wildlife, many of us stay in tree huts listening to the hyenas, bears and tigers that lurk nearby. On towards Ooty and for many of the Bullet riders, this was to be their greatest

day on two wheels – a dizzying and seemingly endless section of hairpins. It's remarkable how fast you can go on an Enfield when you've got the bit between your teeth. A few riders have malfunctioned since our departure, but nothing overly demanding for the medical crew. "It's usually dehydration and Delhi belly but there are the inevitable fallers" explains chief doc Kip Dwyer.

The presence of very real danger is part of Enduro's appeal. You could actually get hurt, and people do, but the medical back-up is excellent and you'll always be back in time for work two weeks later. With a few cuts and bruises, perhaps. The route is carefully planned to ensure that your mind is constantly bombarded with new sights and sounds. After two hours descending the mountain from Kodai, we are faced with a horizon filled with cultivated green hills, adorned with immaculate tea plantations, rivers and waterfalls. This is Munnar, the jewel in Enduro's crown. Christ it's beautiful. Even the hardest cynics amongst us melt at this point.

In many ways Enduro India has raised the bar for how adventure travel companies now have to operate. They've raised a few eyebrows along the way with their mix of laid-back, professional, educational and emotional way of doing things. Everyone is pushed hard but motivated and rewarded on a daily

basis. Founder Simon Smith, a man who comes from a city background and has the demented energy of a nine year-old whose eaten too much sugar is clearly obsessed by conservation, India and motorcycles, in that order. Mention wildlife and you'll be drowning in facts and figures as his eyes light up. Despite a month on the road, the crew remain passionate and jovial – and it's a crew that consists mainly of former customers.

It's the last day of riding and despite fatigue, nobody wants this 10-day adventure to end. It's certainly not just another bike trip in a different country. For most it's an epic journey in another world, proper old-school discovery in an age when most of us thought such things didn't exist. Thoughts of home and all the worries of modern life have evaporated. We are filthy grinning explorers, we have faced impossible challenges, conquered them, and have seen the bigger picture together. This is the magic of Enduro and even today I'm not quite sure how they do it. Strangers are now friends and the emotion is intense as we head off to complete the last stretch.

Nearly everybody made the finish on two wheels but it's not a walk in the park – some ended up as pillions through injury or illness. Five years in and Enduro India shows no signs of losing its unique place in the market.

www.enduroindia.com TWO

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