

BULLETS, CAMELS, ELEPHANTS & TIGERS

PART 1



Having spent a lazy summer swanning around the Cotswolds, John Stevenson was getting bored. Patrick White, who was recovering from a serious illness, was also bored, having not been on a bike for nine months. Both wanting to extend their biking horizons, we braved an adventure north – all the way to Birmingham. The destination was that bikers adventure park, The NEC Bike Show.

Without the use of maps, compass or satnav, we explored the show, narrowly avoiding bankruptcy at the likes of BMW, Norton, Ducati, Brough etc., until we found an oasis of calm and a very friendly welcome at the Indian Rides stand.

Narendra, the founder, and his wife Gopika asked us if we had ever thought of going to India. John replied “Yes, it is somewhere I have always wanted to go,” whilst Patrick, looking horrified, said “You’ve got to be joking!”

Fast forward to early February 2019. Patrick, having been encouraged, maybe bullied, by John agreed that - although it was pure madness - they should just do it. By the end of February having, in true Indian style, negotiated a good deal for the tour, flights were booked with British Airways and deposits paid. At this point it seemed like a good time to do some extensive research into what we were actually letting ourselves in for.

The Tour was to last 15 days, but as we considered ourselves to be “gentlemen of leisure”, we added a day on the front and several days on the back. When planning and booking we worked out a strict budget, but over the following months that gradually fell by the wayside. The months from the end of February to the departure were filled with obtaining visas; having lots of jabs; getting International driving licences; a long search for a map of Rajasthan; endless shopping trips and searches on eBay for suitable biking gear; enough first aid kit to equip a small ambulance plus large quantities of Deet for the expected mosquitoes.

Then one day we found ourselves at Heathrow Terminal 5. Having checked in the luggage, we settled down at Costa in the departure lounge and said “Well there’s no turning back now!” The big positive was that we knew that we were going to have excellent biking weather.

10 hours after buying some ‘Scottish medicinal mouth wash’ in the Duty Free at Terminal 5, we looked out of the aircraft window to see New Delhi rushing up towards us out of the smog. A car from our hotel collected us from the airport and gave us our first taste of Indian driving and traffic. India, having been part of the British Empire, had all the familiar infrastructure: driving on the left, pavements, roundabouts, pedestrian crossings, traffic lights, English road signs, only you just ignore all that. The police just stand and watch the ensuing chaos.

After checking into our hotel we went for a climatization walk - a circular tour of the area around the railway station. We were in awe of the volume and variety of traffic, which included cars, lorries, bicycles, scooters, motorbikes, ox carts, Tuk Tuks, cycle rickshaws, dogs, cattle, goats, pedestrians and handcarts. It all appeared totally chaotic. The deafening cacophony of horns and engines which continued 24/7 almost made you forget that the air was over 40C and heavy with pollution.

Contrary to all the scaremongering, the smell was no worse than most other cities. To get a real flavour of Delhi we took a ride in a Tuk Tuk across New Dehli centre at rush hour – until you have experienced that you don't know you are alive. We also rode the Metro, which was so modern, efficient and clean we thought we had been transported to another planet.

That evening we enjoyed our first 'real' Indian curry followed by a good night's sleep. The next morning we were collected from our hotel by Indian Rides and whisked some 4 hours away in a mini bus to Mandawa and our hotel, The Mandawa Haveli. It was essentially a town centre manor house of historical and architectural interest, and we felt that we were now experiencing true India. Parked in the front courtyard were our trusty steeds for the next 15 days; 14 new Royal Enfield 500cc Bullets in British Racing Green. Wow, let the fun begin!

That evening over dinner and a few bottles of Kingfisher, we got to know the rest of the tour group which consisted of us, 4 other Brits (3 of whom were IAM members), 1 Dutchman, plus 3 French couples and of course Narendra, our tour leader. As well as this there was the support crew of 2 with their minibus for our luggage and a variety of Royal Enfield spare parts. These two guys we renamed Hudson and Jeeves as we could never remember their proper names and when we did remember we couldn't pronounce them.

Now the serious riding began but first a safety briefing and bike check: Check 1 engine starts; Check 2 horn works; Check 3 – just ride! The first day of riding covered many aspects including ignoring everything we learnt back home, riding on road surfaces that were so bad that it proved England does not have any pot holes, just minor surface imperfections. We rode through rivers, deep gravel, sand and unmade roads, all while negotiating regular Indian traffic - which appeared to be complete chaos - plus avoiding cows, camels, pigs, dogs, oxen, monkeys, and of



The Mandawa Haveli.



Hudson and Jeeves

course, pedestrians, Tuk Tuks, rickshaws and thousands of scooters. In spite of all this, it was some of the best fun we have ever experienced on bikes and did wonders for our observation and filtering skills.

The following day we left Mandawa and headed for Bikaner, covering another good mix of road types and avoiding herds of camels. We were now really loving the Bullets, the big 500cc single, thumping away, exhaust burbling, plus the popping and banging on the overrun. We stopped off for a tour of the Fort of Junagarh then on to Bikaner, where we stayed in an ancient palace which now served as a 5 star hotel.

After a good breakfast of traditional Indian or European fare, we were back on our Bullets heading for the golden city of Jaisalmer, on the edge of the Thar desert. Dinner in the open roof-top restaurant watching the sun set on Jaisalmer Fort was spectacular. The fort looks like a giant sand castle rising from the sandy plains.

The next day started with a tour of the fort and the town, then more riding but this time out into the Thar Desert. After an hour or so our hotel for the night appeared as if like a mirage. It was a tented complex surrounded by huge sand dunes. Our next test was to access the site up a rather large and steep sand dune. Narendra filled us with confidence while we all waited at the bottom and watched him ride straight up as though it was a tarmac road. We then attempted to emulate him one by one, resulting in no one getting much further than halfway without the assistance of several locals pushing. Having proved we cannot ride bikes on sand dunes and any prospect of competing in the Dakar Rally completely dashed, we all transferred to camels.

That night we were entertained by local gipsy dancers and musicians, and slept under the stars only to discover, the following morning, that we were just as bad at riding back down the dunes.

We negotiated many roads that were covered in sand, some several centimetres deep, but the Bullets



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never let us down and we couldn't believe how versatile our bikes were, coping with everything thrown at them and proving you don't have to spend any more than about £4,000 to have a brand new bike that is great fun and full of character.

Later that day, arriving at our destination, Pokaran, we found our hotel to be a converted fort, complete with battlements and a large outdoor swimming pool. Could this get any better?



From Bullets to camels.

John Stevenson & Patrick White

Next month: 3 forms of transport - Bullets, trains, and elephants

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BULLETS, CAMELS, ELEPHANTS & TIGERS



PART 2

Diwali Group.

John and Patrick's Indian adventure continues from our April issue:

The next morning our departure was delayed due to lots of local families wanting to speak English and have their photos taken with us and the bikes. Eventually we left and rode on to Jodhpur, known as the Blue City, where we had a tour of Mehrangarh Fort, one of the largest forts in India, which from a distance looks as though it is carved out of the mountain.

Then back on our Bullets, which by now felt like old friends, and a leisurely ride to Chandelao, where we found our next hotel, which was like a converted palace. This evening we had time to walk around the village, which was obviously very poor but where the locals were so friendly and welcoming.

The following morning we couldn't wait to mount our bikes again for the next stage of the adventure. It didn't disappoint, with another great mix of road types, from newly-constructed tarmac to complete off-roading going through many very poor villages where the local children would run out to wave and shout. By early afternoon we had arrived at our next hotel in Ranakpur and after an excellent lunch and a rest we had a very different mode of transport – an open



The Bullets in front of Mehrangarh Fort

top, 4x4, 8-eater Maruti (Suzuki) Gypsies – which took us on a safari into the foothills looking for leopards.

The next day took us on real mountain roads full of hairpin bends and again the Bullets excelled themselves. We reached Udaipur and our lakeside hotel where we stayed for 2 nights and took in lots of sightseeing, some with guides and some on our own.

Leaving Udaipur we again rode lots of mountain roads then a stretch of off-roading to reach a lakeside restaurant for lunch and relaxation before pushing on to Bijaipur and a converted Maharaja's palace, which was to be our next hotel.



Elephants at The Amber Fort



Normal Riding India Style

colourful, having been decorated with millions of coloured lights and other decorations ready for Diwali and the start of the national holiday. Another converted fort was our next hotel and in the evening the Maharaja demonstrated his skills by cooking our meal.

We arrived in Jaipur on the day they celebrate Diwali and were all invited to join Narendra and his family at their home for this famous festival. We were even given traditional Indian clothes so that we truly felt like part of the celebrations. The party was held on the roof terrace of their house, which had a good view across Jaipur where the sky was lit up by fireworks continuously from dusk right through to dawn the next day.

The morning after involved yet another form of transport: elephants at the Amber Fort. Then later that

Pachewar Fort was our next destination, and the mix of roads was possibly even better than any we had done so far; up and down mountains on hairpins, great open roads with linked bends, a long off-roading section then crossing the top of a dam via the service road which included negotiating a railway line without a level crossing.

All the towns and villages were very

day we may possibly have broken a world record with 8 of us, plus the driver, travelling in a 4-seater Tuk Tuk across Jaipur. Even the locals seemed surprised to see that!

The next day we said our farewells to the group as they headed off to Agra to see the Taj Mahal whilst we travelled south by car to Ramthanbore National Park. There we took a safari in the Tiger Reserve, where one was actually seen and photographed.

Who could visit India without going on the Indian railways? Well we certainly couldn't so we caught a train to Agra for our final days of sightseeing which included the must-see Wonder of the World, the Taj Mahal.



A Tiger in The Ramthanbore Reserve

After a couple of days in Agra and countless more photos, we finally said our sad farewells to India and arrived back at Heathrow. Two men of mature years were back in England, very tired, with lighter bank balances but with fantastic memories and photos to enjoy for the rest of our lives.

Someone asked me what the three best bits were. Very difficult to answer as there were no bad bits but certainly some of the highlights were:

1. The Indian people, so warm, friendly and welcoming
2. The Royal Enfield Bullets, they look like museum pieces but took everything in their stride
3. Celebrating Diwali with an Indian family at their home in Jaipur

Would we do it again? Yes. Would we recommend it to anyone else? Yes, if you like bikes, just do it.

Would we recommend the tour company? Yes, 100%. They were www.indianrides.com

If you are thinking of doing a similar tour and want more advice, just let us know and we would be pleased to help.

Here are a few tips.

The System applied to riding in India.

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| I - Information | Too much on offer, best to ignore |
| P - Position | Anywhere you can find a space, but not restricted by the road |
| S - Speed | No chance, slow or extra slow |
| G - Gear | Any you can find in the box, they are all much the same |
| A - Acceleration | About 0-60 in two days |

Acronyms

- | | |
|-----|-------------------------------------|
| MAD | They all are and are all around you |
| TUG | Take, every man for himself |

POWDDERSS If the horn works and the engine starts that's all you need to check
OUR It's all too hectic, just react
IAMSAFE If you are awake that is all that is needed

Biking gear

Men - always the driver, t-shirt, shorts, flip-flops and sunglasses are essential, plus a mobile phone in left hand and probably being used. A helmet is legally required by the driver but optionally worn and often carried on the arm. No helmet requirement for passengers, normally at least 2 passengers on every bike.

Women - Sari and optional flip flops. They ride side saddle carrying a week's shopping and up to five children. All bikes are manufactured with a side step and sari guard, as side saddle is legal.

The Right of Way

In India only one thing has the right of way and that is the cow. Everyone has to defer to the cow without exception, even the President.

John Stevenson & Patrick White



2 Gentlemen of Leisure at The Taj