

Bullets over Bhutan

By Robert Smith (abridged)

First published in Motorcycle Classics, July 1998

Note. Our current tour itinerary is slightly different, and our Bullets newer!

The Bumthang festival starts that evening. In a ploughed field, under a full mountain moon, maybe 300 cheerful Bhutanese are milling around in their best finery. We're promised firewalking. I envision chanting, red-robed monks walking barefoot over beds of glowing coals. Instead, a football goal-sized steel frame is draped with branches and leaves. When this is set alight, everyone runs underneath the flames, laughing. For this I travelled 13,000 miles!

From the crowd staggers a grotesquely masked dancer in a long white robe and crimson wig. Another, bearing more than a passing resemblance to Jimi Hendrix, lurches forward waving a streamered pole over his head. They begin a swaying, charging dance, cavorting recklessly, as the spellbound audience sways back and forth.

'They are hypnotised', says our guide. Stoned more likely, I thought.

They say it's the last Shangri-La: I prefer to think of it as a magic kingdom. Nestled on the south slope of the Himalayas, Bhutan is more easily defined by what's not there than what is. There's no TV, trains, cities, shopping centres or motorways – and few vehicles. The country's only traffic light, in the capital Thimpu, was deemed unnecessary and removed. In two weeks, I saw just three bicycles, and more cows than cars.

Snaggy snow-covered peaks pop out round each bend like crooked fangs; spectacular *dzongs* (a sort of combination cathedral – town hall) are tacked on the hillsides like brightly painted dolls' houses; endless twisting mountain roads courtesy of the Indian army – and not a caravan in sight.

The Indian army? Its presence bolsters Bhutan against an over-the-mountains invasion from Chinese-occupied Tibet, while a strong UN presence stifles any Indian colonial ambitions. Though poor, the 700,000 Bhutanese seem easy-going, friendly people, usually smiling and polite. As subsistence farmers, most families own a smallholding on which they grow rice, vegetables and chillies – their basic diet. Unlike India's vegetarian Hindus, the Buddhist Bhutanese add beef or chicken. Although their religion forbids killing, they'll eat meat if someone else slaughters it!

To maintain Bhutan's ethnic integrity, the present king, Jigme Singye Wanchuk, introduced several controversial programmes: repatriating Nepalese settlers; requiring Bhutanese to wear their national dress at all times or pay a fine. To keep out hippie travellers, a tourist visa costs \$200 a day – though accommodation is included.

In Siliguri, West Bengal, close to the Bhutanese border and a 2-hour flight from Delhi, we collect our mounts. Familiar territory to British bike buffs, the Bullet can challenge riders of modern bikes. The one-up-and-three-down Albion gearbox is notchy, has more neutrals than cogs, and the lever is on the right. Starting is pre-electric and requires finesse: stabbing at the pedal produces nothing more

than a cough. Using the ammeter to find tdc, a hearty swing brings the Bullet booming into life with a plump thumping from the tailpipe.

Pulling away is a breeze. The light clutch takes up smoothly. First is good from below walking pace up to about 15 mph. The next two cogs are evenly spaced, with a larger gap to top, in which the bike lopes along readily. Power falls sharply at altitude but is always adequate. The Bullet vibrates, too. Go much over 50 mph and you'd better have your own teeth.

Potholes cause the rear to hop, but the bike's low centre of gravity keeps it steady. Through unpredictable switchbacks, a sudden change of direction might faze some bikes, but the Enfield can be pulled up and given a new line without drama.

Topographically, Bhutan is a staircase riding from the Indo-Gangetic Plain into the Himalayas, climbing 20,000 ft in less than 150 miles. From the strip of tropical terai in the south to the northern peaks, there's only one valley flat enough for an airstrip. On these tight mountain twisties, the Bullet excels. Rugged enough for the unmarked speed bumps; insufficient power to get into serious trouble; one-lung slogability; and 300 mile-on-a-tankful economy.

Siliguri in November is mild and dry .We pull onto the EN31 to Jaigaon and the Bhutanese border – into the chaotic frenzy of an Indian highway.

The tarmac is broken and cratered. Untidy storefronts line the road displaying spare, grimy merchandise. Women (always women, sometimes children – never men) carry untidy bundles of firewood on their heads. Ferocious trucks blast through the tiny villages scattering goats, chickens, and children.

Jaigaon. Stamped and processed, we ride under the brightly painted arch into Bhutan, and a new town, Puntsholing. The transformation is dramatic. The dishevelled Indian melee is gone. The Tibetan-looking Bhutanese in national dress – the *gho*, a tailored cloak drawn tightly at the waist for men, and the *kira*, a full-length robe pinned at the shoulder for women – stroll the tidy pavements.

Leaving Puntsholing, we are instantly climbing. Switching along the mountainside, grassland gives way to scrub and pine, dwarf conifers cling to cliff face. We climb into cloud that condenses inside my visor. Below us, the great rivers of the Indian plain float through the haze like golden ribbons in a steam bath. The Enfield's steady throbbing becomes asthmatic: throttle wide open in the thin air, a rasping gulp accompanies each intake stroke.

At Gedu, less than 50 miles from the border, we've already climbed almost 7000 ft and it's cold. A roadside plywood shack says, surprisingly, 'cafe'. We encircle the wood fire in the corner of the bare room, warming our hands on tiny cups of hot, sweet Nescafe. We draw a crowd, of course. A circle of grubby, quietly inquisitive children surrounds the bikes. None asks for money.

Breaking through the cloud, the road becomes flatter, opening into broad alpine valleys. The road forks and we swoop along the side of a narrow chasm, white-water crashing below. The chasm walls widen and become shallower, opening into a broad valley of neatly laid brown rice fields. Here is Paro, Bhutan's second-largest community – a clutch of perhaps 20 two-storey houses lining a broad street 200 yards long with an open storm drain.

We head towards one of the houses. Painted beams exit through the stucco walls.. Above the second floor, a plywood sheet roof is weighted down with rocks. The narrow windows have no glass:

wood shutters hang from the frames. The dark, bare room has a counter near the door with a sparse arrangement of sweets, pastries and spirits. A wooden bench lines one wall, a rough table in front of it. It's impossible to age the faces around us, teeth gaping behind their sun-dried smiles. We warm ourselves with Special Courier whisky and freshly steamed *momos* – meat-filled pastry shells.

We soon learn that every small settlement has its cafe. In Thinleygang, it's run by a slender, pale-skinned Nepalese girl wearing glasses – the only person I see wearing specs in Bhutan. In Hongtso, the young Tibetan refugee who brings our tea has long black hair tied back, and shiny black streaks painted across her eyelids. The baby balanced on her hip is not hers, she explains, but her sister's. Right. She is leaving soon for Kathmandu, to find a husband.

At Yutong-La, the highest motorable pass in Bhutan at 11,635 ft, a Royal Bhutanese Police Mahindra jeep bounces towards us. The wailing siren and flashing red light tell us to clear the road. The King!

Spooked, I prod the Enfield's brake pedal and skid into a patch of mud, stalling the engine. Leaning the bike against my leg, I tear at the helmet, forgetting I'm still wearing my Ray-Bans. My ears nearly come off too. I throw the helmet, gloves and glasses to the ground, just managing to press my palms together and lower my head before his majesty's arrival.

The hereditary monarch appears over the rise in a wide-tyred Landcruiser. A puzzled smile crosses the royal visage as he flashes past. He's probably wondering what five untidy, leather-clad Westerners riding Indian motorcycles were doing in his country, I thought.

Bhutan is that kind of place. You just never know when you're going to run into the King.