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Mysore Butt

The hills weren't the high point of mountain-biking in India. Try dancing girls, flying swamis and one slightly bedraggled Hero

BY TED CONOVER

IT HAD a nice self-contradictory ring, this mountain-biking expedition in India. Sort of like camping in war-torn Namibia, another trip currently offered by one of the adventure outfitters, a *why-would-you-want-to-do-that?* appeal. Real adventure is hard to buy, after all—real adventure involves finding yourself in a fix and using your resources to somehow get out of it. But trips like these seem to have a fix built in. Bicycling through India? How about Rollerblading the Alps?

The reason I felt there was genius and not stupidity behind the offering was that, as a \$100 option, you could elect to do your pedaling on a Hero, an Indian-made mountain bike. It was \$100 because that is how much a Hero costs. Others might choose to bring their \$1,500 Treks, with aluminum frame, alloy rims and Shimano Deore XT four-lever, twenty-one-speed rapid-fire shifters, but I would ride a five-speed Hero, simplicity incarnate, no sweat if it got stolen. Mainly, it appealed to my love of hardship. I ordered a red one.

The clincher was that Bernard suggested the trip. My previous trip with Bernard had been a year before, when he'd finagled us two free seats on a 747 cargo jet that was bound for Australia—with a cargo of eighty-seven thoroughbred racehorses, six bison and some tiny Spanish ponies. He is that rarest of creatures, an American eccentric. Flamboyant, irreverent and utterly spontaneous, he works as a photographer, supporting two children and a saintly wife, who, amazingly, seems to like him just as he is.

With his billowing Indonesian print shirt, green silk scarf and walking stick, Bernard was easy to spot at the crowded Air India check-in counter at New York's JFK airport. He was haggling with the ticket agent over his two extra bags, at least one of which, you could be fairly certain, contained mostly cowboy boots, jodhpurs and berets. Through alternately charming and bullying the man, Bernard finally succeeded in bending the rules and saving \$246. But the persuasion required more work than usual, and he took it as a bad sign.

India began on-board, with pungently perfumed travel kits, curry and after-dinner betel nuts and *soanf* (fennel-seed digestive) served by flight attendants whose *bindis* (the dot between the eyebrows) matched their saris. My seatmate, an Indian banker, urged

me to visit Sai Baba, his spiritual master, a man known for producing golden rings from thin air. But as the first round of drinks wore off, the conversation of my fellow cyclists threatened to break the spell. They were comparing inoculations, and most had gotten many more than I.

"What, you didn't get the meningitis vaccination?"

"You haven't started taking chloroquine for malaria?"

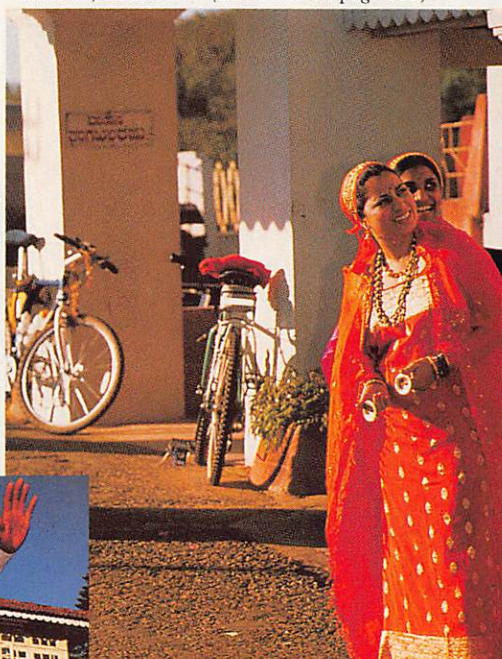
One woman, Felice, a boutique owner in her sixties, had even begun rabies shots.

"In advance?" I asked nervously.

"More than 15,000 people died of rabies in India last year," she said. "You think dogs aren't going to chase us?"

"I... I don't know." In the lounge at Heathrow, our group huddled around a copy of *The Hindustan Times*. India, we learned, had the (continued on page 162)

Along the way, the group curried favor with locals, including two Coorgi women, right, and a stick dancer, below. Below, right, assembling the bikes.



(continued from page 160) highest rate of road accidents in the world. There are four or five fatalities per hour. The group looked glum.

But when we arrived in southern central India, the organizers, Inner-Asia Expeditions, whisked us out of congested Bangalore in a coach; ahead, in a picturesque wood, our support staff of eleven—roughly, one for each member of the group—parked the expedition truck and prepared the bikes for us. Our first twenty miles were downhill, on a paved road adjoining a national park. Our guide Vikrant, a large man on a small and smoky motorcycle, zipped back and forth, checking our condition and making sure we made the right turns.

My Hero. It was, as every new bike should be, shiny. And red, with big, fat tires. It looked great. But at about kilometer five, the reality began to sink in. The Indians, to whom the mountain-bike craze was new, had gotten a couple of things wrong. There were extraneous chrome fenders, a kickstand and a quivering five-foot traffic flag, all of which jiggled and clanked. There was a big, bouncy spring-loaded seat ("HERO COZY," it said). Every time Bernard pedaled (he had ordered a Hero too), one side of his crank struck the chain stay. The handlebar grips slipped off when you leaned on them. And the handlebars themselves had been welded funny—the left side was two inches higher than the right.

But these were details. As the others sped by, we of Team Hero, having no choice, allowed our bicycles to break us in. Our destination was Mangalore, on the west coast, south of Bombay. Our route from Bangalore would take us over roughly 600 kilometers (400 miles) of red-dirt back roads in ten days—a moderate pace of about 40 miles a day. Since there were no maps of the backcountry, a state water engineer had assisted the organizers in the planning.

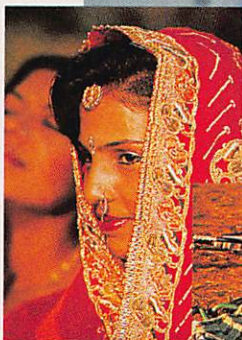
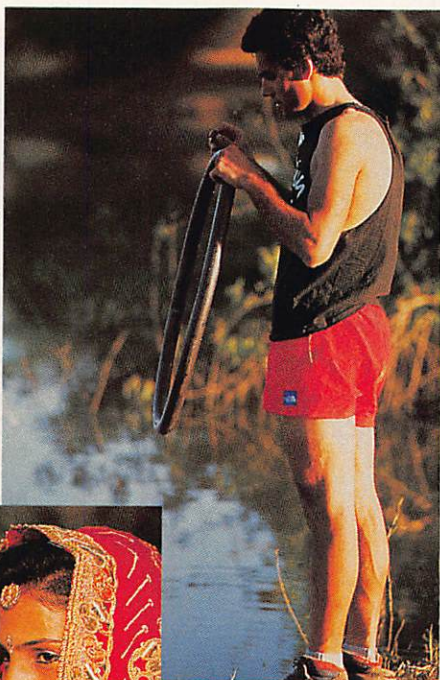
The eleven Americans were on two wheels, the ten or so Indian support staffers on four wheels, in a truck and a bus. An intermediate fitness level was all that was required for the gentle ups and downs of most days' rides, since if you got tired the bus would pick you up. Most of us were therefore qualified, though poor Felice of the rabies shots was recovering from bronchitis and often found herself left behind. Felice was the oldest group member; I was the youngest, at 31. Between us were two other women and seven other men. Our leader—blond,

fit, handsome and middle-aged—was Stacy Standley, the international director of InnerAsia Expeditions and a former mayor of Aspen.

Most days involved eight or so hours on the road, at least two or three of them resting, eating lunch and stopping for roadside pictures, a guzzle from the water bottle or a visit to the watermelon and coconut vendors. This was the Indians' summer, with days starting cool and dry and climbing up into the eighties and nineties. Half our nights were spent in hotels. The other half, we camped in a circle of tents set up by the crew in the hours before we arrived. Once, we camped on a bluff above a river; once, in the courtyard of a large motel, across the street from the Halebid ruins; once, in a sort of public park, with an all-night

police guard. The cops, with their armored car, succeeded in intimidating and keeping away the scores of curious kids who thronged us before the police's arrival but did nothing to scare the cows, who walked with impunity through our camp at dawn, munching on candy bars and apples and the long garlands of carnations that had been presented to us by the town fathers the afternoon before.

Spanish lessons can prepare you for Mexico, and Mexico can prepare you for Peru, but nothing, as far as I know, can prepare you for India. The first preconception to go was the idea of impoverished, teeming throngs. Bombay and Calcutta are like that, but the countryside is lightly settled and often gorgeous. We rode upon the Deccan plateau, one of the few places over geologic time never to have been submerged beneath the sea. It's some of the oldest land on earth, and human life upon it seems similarly ageless: There's nothing like India to make an American feel he comes from an infant culture. Every few miles, we would pass through another ancient village. The people in these towns, women in spectacular saris and men in drab lungi skirts, exist outside a market economy. There is no trash in villages because,



So sari. . . Top, a pit stop at the Hemavati River; center, scene from a wedding, happened upon en route; above, camp at Mercara, in the Western Ghats.

we slowly realized, nothing is sold in wrappers. We would collect our garbage after lunch, only to watch local kids raid the bag for precious novelties like plastic mineral-water bottles.

With our colored Lycra shorts, iridescent bikes, Oakley Blades sunglasses, webbed gloves and helmets, we were for the Indians a rolling future shock: a curiosity of the late twentieth century passing through the Middle Ages. Tourists stayed out of these towns, so when we appeared, people tended to stop whatever they were doing. When we stood still, they would walk right up to us and stare without embarrassment. When we went riding past,

and twice when Bernard leaned against it, drink in hand, he was politely shooed away by the caterers. The third time, to my horror, he handed his drink to one antagonist and, with a demonic grin, proceeded to shimmy up the pole. In his beret and cowboy boots. The room was hushed. Then applause broke out, from Americans and Indians both: Intercultural ice had been broken. Bernard slid down, a sensation.

Bernard also has a libido of elephantine proportions. Much time was spent, at the trip's beginning, in discussion of the chances of bedding an Indian maiden. Casual seduction was difficult, said Tye, a cyclist who was an old India hand, it being

Ghats, gathered around for a preprandial chat with our host, the innkeeper, one Swami Ananda Turthe. Swathed in a saffron robe, with a shaved head and wire-rimmed glasses, he was everything you could want a swami to be. While others of us inquired about his monastic training and discipline, Bernard asked if carpets could really fly. "Only a few of them," said the swami with a hint of a smile.

Neither the men nor the women on the trip could keep their eyes off the saris. Even the poorest women in that countryside wore brilliant saris; pedaling across bridges, we could look down at the riverbanks and

The young Indian girl was a spectacular beauty. As her dance heated up, Bernard's condition grew progressively worse till, finally, he collapsed backward off his chair.

they would call out greetings, sometimes from so far across a field that you could barely see them. In villages, the readier ones would run alongside us and ask "You are from?" "Your name is?"

At first it gets you, the weirdness of Third World recreation. Most of those in the group, each generally riding a cycle worth \$1,000 to \$2,000, plus carrying maybe \$500 of clothing and equipment, represented property equal to the annual income of four to ten Indians. And it feels funny to be on vacation in a place where all the adults are working, where kids are the only ones who play. Most Indians make some \$200 a year, less than some of our monthly phone bills. Fuel is so scarce that cow pies are regularly collected, reshaped, dried and then sold for fires.

But there was no air of desperation in these villages, and we did not fear theft. People made us gifts of bananas and flowers, just for stopping to talk to them. And unself-conscious as they were in coming up and staring at us, we were soon less embarrassed by ourselves as oddities and felt increasingly a part of the exotic landscape.

Bernard, of course, was never embarrassed. A master of the grand entrance and the sweeping gesture, he is outrageous and extroverted, the life of the party. And he hates being told what to do.

The second night, we were feted at a reception given by our Indian travel agency. It was a fairly posh affair, underneath a party tent behind the grand suburban house of a company bigwig. The tent was supported, circus-style, by a single pole in the middle. It wasn't a stout pole, either,

a traditional society where women do not circulate freely, and families keep an eye on courtship. The code name for a woman who might mess around is "free spirit." Hear that, and you are at least on the right track.

At our palatial hotel in Mysore (literally palatial; it was once a palace), we were treated to a program of dance, song and magic after dinner. The dancer was a spectacular beauty, somewhere in her late teens or early twenties. Her mother and sister, pretty much behind the scenes, sang an a cappella accompaniment to her dance, which told a story of love lost. She had one of those incredible swiveling necks native to Indian dancers, double-jointed vertebrae, and her hands and feet were slender and expressive.

Bernard snapped to attention as she stepped out on a rug laid on the marble floor. Within minutes, he was completely smitten, transfixed. As her dance heated up, Bernard's condition got worse and worse. Finally, during the exquisite conclusion, he swooned, clutching his chest and collapsing backward off his chair, boots in the air.

A host of servants and assistant managers rushed to the scene. He was actually quite flushed, and the howls of those of us who knew him only confused those who thought he'd suffered a stroke. Once recovered, he brushed himself off and strode backstage to introduce himself. Later, he told me he'd had a nice talk with the girl . . . and her mother. Still in high school, he'd learned. Not a free spirit. Yet.

Then there was the time our group, lodged in a guesthouse high in the Western

see the cloth unfurled, patches of color on the brown land, drying in the sun after being washed.

There were other strange sights, like the chiseled-granite fence posts used to string up barbed wire, tree branches being scarce. Or the psychedelically painted, tasseled horns of hundreds of cattle for sale at a roadside market. Or the view from the bicycle seat as you pedaled slowly through a sea of sheep being herded along the road and they closed ranks behind you.

In America, with its more institutional environments, you can forget you have a nose; but India changes that. The Indians love aroma, and the air is filled with sweet, heavy incense; with essences of curry and livestock; with the smoke of fires, factories and buses; with the stench of sewage and carrion.

We got into the habit of looking overhead for the flocks of huge fruit bats that our passage would sometimes flush from their perches high in the trees that lined the road. Many of these were banyans, whose ropelike roots hung from high branches onto the shoulders of the road. One day as I was riding along, one eye on the road and the other on the strange flight of the big brown bats circling a nearby treetop, a huge form came at me from the corner of my eye. I instinctively ducked and just missed being knocked off my saddle by Bernard: Passing underneath a banyan root, he had grabbed on, let go of his bike and was swinging back in about a fifty-foot arc across the road.

"You crazy asshole!" I swore, my heart pounding, damn relieved it wasn't a bat. It took another thirty seconds or so before I

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could admire his insanity.

India is a place where bats fly during the day, and dogs—too thin and tired to notice you when the sun is up, whether they're rabid or not—rise at night to join in neighborhood bark-fests. It was in historic Halebid, our first night camping, that a Colorado rancher named Stan, kept awake for hours by the din, angrily threw a rock at the loudest cur. Amazingly, it connected. The sight of this unfortunate dog the next day, a large wound oozing on its forehead, somehow cheered us all.

The happiest sight, of course, was lunch. Every morning, the advance truck preceded us to a scenic orchard or park and began preparations. By the time we arrived, the chairs and long tables were set up, the white tablecloths unfolded and our places set with bottles of mineral water. Dani, our cheerful chef, would serve the chicken *biryani* he'd just prepared, the *chana dal*, the *malai dar anday* (hard-boiled eggs in spicy cream sauce), the crispy *pappadams*. Cool mango juice and beers made it difficult to contemplate the kilometers still ahead. Locals stared at this bacchanalian scene, like something out of the British raj, from a respectful distance, while Standley, the trip leader, explained to me why mountain-biking in India would be the New Tourist Wave on the subcontinent.

"The yuppie set of the Seventies and Eighties—the people who discovered trekking in Nepal—are looking for something new. They're a little older or they have kids. They want to see more in less time, with maybe a little less exertion. Trekking is going down in terms of U.S. tourists. But biking is the fastest-growing sport in the States. The yuppie group are all becoming mountain bikers, and they need someplace to go play with their toys." For this particular trip, they'll also need about \$3,000.

Having been mayor of Aspen (a cutting-edge place, as far as leisure time is concerned), Standley perhaps could read the writing on the wall. Certainly, I thought, polishing off a delicious 650-milliliter bottle of Knock Out High Punch Strong Beer, he was right about the move toward less exertion. Climbing into the sag-wagon bus and unlacing my cycling shoes, I decided it might be wise to get a little rest over the next twenty miles or so.

Ted Conover's *Whiteout: Lost in Aspen, an upstairs-downstairs look at life in the posh resort town*, will be published this month by Random House.