



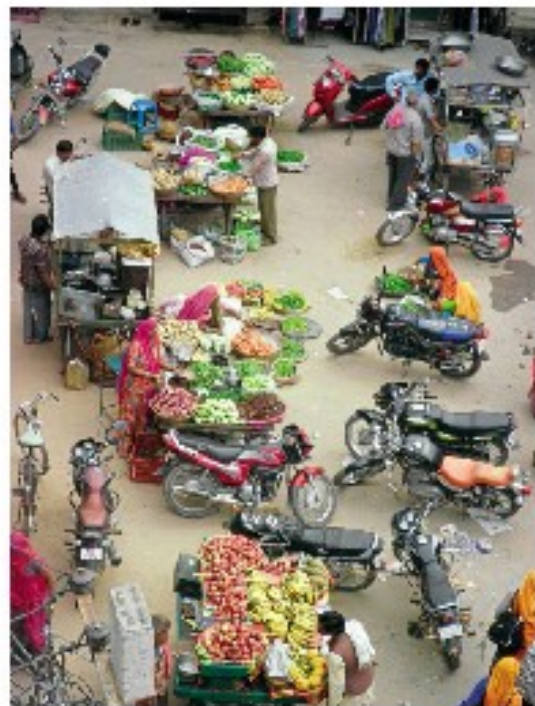
A JOURNEY LIKE NO OTHER...

Ever thought of flying to India, buying a bike and heading off into the infamous traffic? Jack Southan and his mates did just that...

WORDS AND PICTURES: **Jack Southan**

I flew out to India with my brother Ben and friends Jack and Ray. Our reasons may have been different but our goal was the same: to buy bikes and ride them down the length of the sub-continent. I had ridden before, but none of the others had even sat on a bike, let alone ridden through such a thoroughly manic country. Needless to say, the odds were stacked against us.





New Delhi, the nation's capital, is chaos; a whirl of dust and noise. After four days struggling to readjust to a massive cultural shift, the heat, the poverty and intensity of the place, we escaped on a train heading south towards Pushkar.

We spent a night in a grubby backstreet hotel in the Mughal city of Jaipur, before continuing by bus the next morning, rumbling across the northern Rajasthani plains, and arriving in the sacred lake town of Pushkar as the sun was going down. Now this was just the place we were looking for – large enough to find what we needed, but small enough to find our feet and get to grips with the culture.

KITTING UP

Buying a bike in India is quite different to a quick dealer visit in the UK. The fundamentals are the same – how much, which model – but everything else is more complex. We began by asking around at the rental shops and mechanics dotted throughout the busy marketplace.

Most people spoke decent English, and were more than happy to help. Especially when they realised we might be spending a sizeable amount of cash, at least by Indian standards. Friends were phoned, and friends

ABOVE: It took a few weeks, but they all found bikes in the end.

FAR LEFT: 120cc Honda Hero was Jack's choice for touring the Sub-Continent.

TOP RIGHT: Pushkar market, where everyone seems to own a 125.

ABOVE RIGHT: Temple with goats, just outside Ajmer.

of friends, cousins and all manner of distant relations appeared on a mishmash of makes and models, each ready to make a sale. Of course everyone was hoping to make good money, so it took us time to extract some realistic prices.

Mostly the bikes were old and damaged, so we sounded out the less obvious sellers. We met Harri busking in the market square. He was a nomad, and took us to the outskirts of town where he lived with his wife and three young children, their home a plastic sheet supported by sticks pushed into a sand dune. We drank chai as Harri phoned some friends.

Not long after, two bikes roared up, spraying dirt and sand as the wheels slipped. They were old Kawasaki workhorses, beaten and battered to hell. Kneeling in the sand we haggled back and forth – the bikes looked tired and the asking price was high.



In the end, we told them we had to think it over, and headed back to town. Eventually we bought bikes belonging to the staff at our hotel. Perhaps we paid a little over the odds, but we had all become friends and knew we weren't being cheated. Harri was disappointed, but I think he understood.

I bought a 120cc Hero Honda Splendour, one of the most popular bikes in India, while Ben went for a Hero Honda HF Deluxe, Jack a Bajaj Discover and Ray a Bajaj Platina, all of them basic little 120s/125s that according to the official stats could manage an unlikely-sounding 212mpg.

We then had to get the legal paperwork for the purchases sorted, which is unconventional to say the least by European standards. You first need to get a document of ownership transfer and a signature from both parties, though this is really just a formality because as a westerner you can never legally own the bike – essentially you are paying the seller to become a custodian of the vehicle. It doesn't make any sense, but then a lot of what happens in India doesn't.

After a week, we had managed to cover all the legalities and assembled toolkits, while others had mastered their machines, appreciating that the way to learn to ride in India was to just get on with it. Finally, we were good to go.



TOP LEFT: Puncture repairs outside Udaipur – finding a street mechanic was a cheap and hassle-free alternative.

TOP RIGHT: Main road out of Nadiad, flooded under four feet of water.

ABOVE: Sitting on the dock of the bay...

FIRST RULE...

The first day was rather eventful. We set off early in the morning up dusty trails winding out through the foothills, heading towards the city of Udaipur, two days south. We spent hours lost in the labyrinthine city of Ajmer, back and forth through packed, narrow streets. Ben was bashed by a Tuk Tuk while squeezing his way through a bustling market alley, and we were stopped at every turn by curious bystanders: "Where do you come from? Where are you going?" Then just a few minutes down the road from all this chaos, we rounded a bend to see a beautiful, serene temple sitting on the banks of a lily-covered lake. India has a habit of surprising you.

We rode for 14 hours that first day, through industrial towns, into open countryside and past vast sugarcane fields. There were no major problems, but then as night fell we naively decided to push on into the darkness. And so we learnt our first important lesson on the Indian road that evening – never ride at night. Ever.

Up to this point we had successfully ridden as a group by staying in formation and in line of sight, but within moments of the sun going down we were separated, dazzled by headlights glaring through the dusty air. Horns blared and trucks hammered towards us three abreast on single lane roads. Buses forced us



LEFT: Jack No. 2 had never ridden a bike before, but took to the Bajaj Discover.



off the Tarmac into the dirt and cows appeared like wraiths at every turn. We couldn't see, we could barely swerve between the potholes and we were constantly avoiding deadly head-on collisions. It was hell. After an hour or two we managed to find each other, against all odds, and stopped at a 1970s-style motel somewhere around Ranakpur to sleep off the exhaustion.

Lesson learnt, we survived, and the next day rolled by without incident. By the time we reached Udaipur and its mesmerising lake palace, just 300km from Pushkar, our spirits were once again high. My brother came off and injured his knee on a particularly gravelly hairpin while riding up a mountain trail above the city with a drunk old man on the back of his bike. That's another story, but it held up the trip for about a week while he healed. There's not a lot you can do about personal injury along the way, apart from carry an extensive medical kit, have a phone and know where the nearest hospital is.

Back on the road we passed through amazing desert expanses, with rivers carving green stripes through the yellow sand. The road conditions were bad, with foot-deep potholes and cracks you could fall into. But the scenery was spectacular, the weather was generally good and the riding was never dull.

We had a few punctures along the way, which was to be expected, and at first we fixed them ourselves. But after several hours sweating by the roadside, we realised it was far easier to take the wheel to the nearest repair shop. These are everywhere in India and they charge very little.

Our luck with the weather ran out when the monsoons hit in mid-September and a two-day downpour flooded the roads. We spent a miserable week in a town called Nadiad, in the state of Gujarat, staying in a room that looked down through iron-barred windows onto a bus station and beyond to a fetid green pool that bred mosquitoes. We waited day after day for the floodwaters to drain, and after seven dreary days, when desperation took hold, we took a



ABOVE LEFT: Young, free... and on the road in India.

LEFT: Highway 222, the dream road.

ABOVE: Jack finds he has a fan base in India.

chance and rode our bikes into the 10in of water that remained.

DISASTER!

Gujarat was industrial and desolate, felt claustrophobic and exhausting. We found ourselves riding through some of the busiest cities I've ever seen. Tens of thousands of motorcycles, cars and trucks clogging the streets, all battling for road space. Vadodara was bad, Surat was worse, and the stress of these places started to form cracks in the resolve of our group.

We split up briefly in Surat after an argument at the end of a long day, and the tension we felt in this place took its toll. But the grinding repetition of day in, day out riding through dense traffic and uninspiring terrain finally ceased as we hit the State of Daman and Diu in the south-west, and saw the sea for the first time.

We rode into town along a smooth, broad palm-lined road, breathing in fresh sea air. Clean air can be a rarity in India, and it's easy to forget what it's like after a month riding across the plains.

Daman is a tiny self-governing coastal state, surrounded by the mass of Gujarat on all sides. It's also the only place for hundreds of miles where alcohol is legal. It feels like a South Asian Tijuana, a forgotten and debauched frontier town.

BELOW: There were hold-ups on Highway 222, but only of this sort.





We spent a few days swigging Indian rum by the ocean before heading off towards the city of Aurangabad along Highway 222. This turned out to be one of the best roads in India – the clouded valleys and open farmland of northern Maharashtra is breathtaking, and the riding was fantastic as we wound our way through the green hills.

For the first time, the trip made sense. The day before arriving into Aurangabad, caught up in the beauty of the ride, we found ourselves still on the road as the sun was setting, and remembering our first rule of riding in India, decided to lay up for the night. With nowhere to stay, the best idea appeared to be to climb to the top of a nearby hill and make camp on the crest.

Pulling the bikes off the road, we camouflaged them with branches and grass as best we could, then set off up the rocky slope. The climb was much steeper than we'd thought and about half way up I saw Ben's bag go tumbling past me. It contained all of our paperwork, passports, electronics and money. It bounced for a while before disappearing into the darkness, too far to go back for.

Exhausted and (to put it mildly) annoyed, we made the summit and set up camp just as flashes of lightning started to fork across the sky around us. We spent a cold, damp and sleepless night huddled under a small rocky outcrop, and as the sun rose in the morning we retreated down hill, more tired than the night before.

Miraculously, we found Ben's bag hanging in a small tree, the strap fortuitously caught on a branch.

TOP LEFT: They spent a night on this hill - little did they know...

ABOVE LEFT: Hilltop base camp - lost documents, stolen bikes...

TOP RIGHT: Forget Givi - that's what you call a luggage rack.

ABOVE: Hidden bay, somewhere on the coast, and no one minds if you ride your bike on the beach.

Moods improved a little at this point and we started to talk about breakfast, tea and where we would head to next. Then my brother said, 'Guys, where are the bikes?' Our camouflage branches were scattered on the ground and the bikes were nowhere to be seen.

For the first time, the seriousness of our situation dawned on us. We were isolated in an area of the country we didn't know. We had no way to move on and we had no food or water.

But as always, India has a way of working things out. A few men appeared as if from nowhere; you're never really alone here, and you get approached constantly. These two guys were dressed in white robes, one sporting an orange neckerchief and the other a turban. They greeted us with a smile and asked us what we were doing out here on our own.



RIGHT: Fishing in Kerala.



"Our bikes – they've been taken. Do you know what happened to them?" We asked.

"Oh yes."

"Great! Where are they?"

"The police have them. They are stolen from northern Rajasthan."

After another 15 minutes or so we managed to explain that in fact we had ridden them all the way from Rajasthan and that they really were our bikes. The two men seemed rather impressed by this, and before long their friends and family showed up to take a look at us. After several photos, many handshakes and much laughter (on their part), the police arrived.

They told us they had taken the bikes after they had spotted the odd number plates, which were registered to a different state. It was very unusual for Indians to ride this far on these little bikes, they explained, so they had assumed this group had been stolen. They had done their duty and impounded them.

The young officers drove us to the local police station where the police chief made us go through all the formalities of our documentation.

But we needn't have worried. When he noticed the other officers had left the room he seemed to brighten up a little. "Sorry to keep you so long," he said with a grin, "but I had to make this official in front of the

ABOVE: These gentlemen reassured Jack and friends that their bikes hadn't been stolen.

ABOVE RIGHT: Tunnel on the road to Kerala.



other men. You are all free to go. But come, I'll buy you breakfast!"

Eventually, the bikes were returned, albeit Ben's handlebars broken and the front wheel twisted at an acute angle. So we got a chai and waited for the local mechanic to make repairs. Eventually we got back on the road and headed for Aurangabad.

BACK TO THE COAST

The city was huge and chaotic. Pollution misted up the sky in a murky yellow and the noise of the traffic roared in our ears. We negotiated our way through the packed streets until we found a guest-house with air-con, and booked rooms – cold air was a thing of magic after weeks spent in sweaty 35 degree heat.

The next morning we set off early towards the famous cave complex north of the city. Carved by Hindu, Jain and Buddhist monks in the fifth century as an escape from the distractions of the world, the cavernous hallways are hewn into the towering rock faces. Vast intricate temples – complete with carved elephants and spiralling towers – are chiselled out of the grey stone.

We rode south-west for several days until we hit the bright coastline again. The road was narrow but smooth, winding under the vine-slung trees, fording shallow rivers and meandering through picturesque little villages. Long abandoned Hindu temples sat among the trees though as always, India has made a practical use for such things. Washing was hung on lines between the ancient carvings, and sheets laid out to dry across the wide stone entrances to the grand chambers within.

We crossed rivers in drop-tail ferries, blasted up steep and soggy mud roads until we emerged from the jungle wetlands and hit the main highway again, cutting straight through southern Maharashtra and directly into the holiday hotspot of Goa.

There, we found paradise in the form of Palolem beach. Long stretches of white sand, lined with coconut palms and bamboo cafes bordering the ocean. We chained our bikes to some trees, loaded our gear onto our backs, took off our shoes and walked down through the soft sand. We rented a couple of bamboo huts just behind the tree line (less than £5 a night) and settled in for a short break – we had been on the road for two months by then.

BELOW: In the tea plantations of Munmar.





On our third night there, a huge thunderstorm came in across the ocean.

Coconuts hammered down onto the thin roofs as the high winds buffeted the trees. The thunder was so deafening that sleep was impossible so we got up and watched the storm rage across the sea.

The further we travelled south, the more tropical the scenery. The roads cut through thick groves of banana palms and spice plantations, and the air became saturated with humidity. It was early November, and we fell in love with Kerala, one of India's most accessible, comfortable and probably easiest places to visit.

INTO THE HILLS

Heading inland, up into the Western Ghat mountains, we found the road that would take us up to perhaps the most beautiful place in southern India; Munnar. It is an old Raj-era hill station wrapped in the green hills of the tea plantations, an escape from the heat and humidity of the plains.

The early morning mists clung to the bright green patchwork of fields as we emerged from the forested slopes and crested the plateau above the plantations. The roads were incredible – hairpins and sweeping curves on perfect black Tarmac – perhaps the best roads we had seen. We whiled away many days riding around Munnar, up to chilly Kodalkanal and trekking through the rambling hills. The air was clear and forever scented with the delicate smell of tea leaves, which were laid out to dry in the sun.

But as the time disappeared and days merged together, we decided that if we were ever going to finish this journey, we had to leave. So we saddled up and moved out, the road from Kodaikanal to Kochi turning out to be the highlight of the trip. You will never find a journey of such utter beauty, stretching through countryside so incredible, anywhere else in the world. If you want to ride in India, you have to find this road.

We spent the night in a tiny village in the lower foothills, surrounded by fields of tea and soft pink

ABOVE: This is where your cuppa comes from.

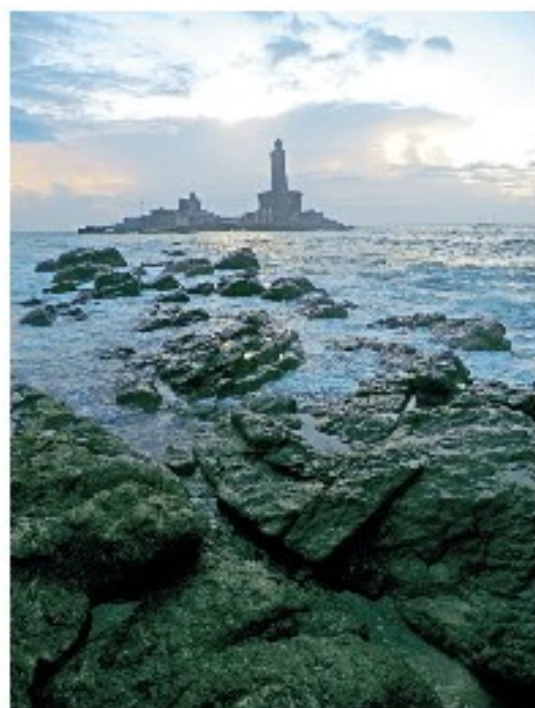
ABOVE RIGHT: Waterfall... but you should see it in the monsoon.

blossoming trees. The mornings are cold in the hills and dew glistens in the leaves of the trees and bushes. At 6am we started the bikes and continued down a small winding track, weaving our way towards the coastline and back to Fort Kochi. The road led us over waterfalls, past quaint Raj-era hill stations and through vast yellow blossoming valleys.

The final stretch along the western coast of India took us through the backwaters of Kerala, past the town of Alleppy, the bustling city of Kollam, the cliffside retreat of Varkala and the holiday hotspot – with its red lighthouse and busy beachfront – of Kovalam Bay. This last section of the journey was the easiest so far, the roads were good and the distances between stopping points relatively small. Kerala is the richest state in India, and the quality of life there reflects it. We ate fresh seafood at tiny roadside restaurants, swam in the ocean and rode our bikes through idyllic villages. It was bountiful and lush, and somehow seemed different to the rest of the country.



RIGHT: Roadside repairs, Goa.



As we neared the end of our epic ride, it looked like this would be a serene end, but we hadn't reckoned on a hard last day. As we crossed the state line into Tamil Nadu the Tarmac degraded into rubble. Being tired beyond belief and the finish so close at hand sent tensions between us soaring, and after a bad lunch, I argued with Ray and left, riding ahead alone for the first time on the entire journey. After a while I hit a particularly busy line of traffic, Jack caught up and as we worked our way through the logjam I heard his phone ringing. He pulled over, answered and his face dropped. Ray had been hit by a car.

We raced back, and found him by the side of the road, head draped between his knees. The bike was battered, the handlebars twisted and the tank scraped. Sandwiched between a bike and a parked car, he had somehow escaped without a scratch. So close to the end, we were counting our blessings at every turn. From then on it seemed that everything was pushing

ABOVE: Palolem beach - Goa really does look like this.

ABOVE RIGHT: This is the southernmost tip of the sub-continent - next stop, Antarctica.

BELOW: Make it. The boys took four months to ride the length of India on 125s

against us, keeping us from finishing. My exhaust managed to work itself free and fell off, Ben's bike got a puncture and we realised we had lost a lot of our tools some way back.

Repairs made, we rode under the sign for the town and into Kanyakumari. At last we turned onto the sand to see the Indian Ocean stretching out in front of us. This was the southern tip of India, and standing proud at the very end is an enormous statue, built on an outcrop of rock, poised like a monument to the magnificence of the country.

We parked our bikes, walked down to the water and for the first time realised just how far we had come. I took a bottle of rum from my bag, had a swig, sat down on a rock and watched the sun set over the golden water. With no more roads to ride and no more pathways leading south, we could at last stop after four months crossing a magnificent country. India had given us a journey like no other.

