

LAND OF THE MAHARAJAS

March 2015

The sign by the side of the road in Delhi read "DON'T LET THE HAPPINESS BE DELAYED", so I gave the throttle a bit more of a twist and sped off towards the Land of the Maharajas.

I'd been meaning to visit Rajasthan for a long time and to be able to do so on a motorcycle is a real bonus. Vintage Rides of India hire Royal Enfields to folk like me and on this occasion I'd also got the benefit of a man and a van. The man being a mechanic and the van doubling as my luggage carrier.

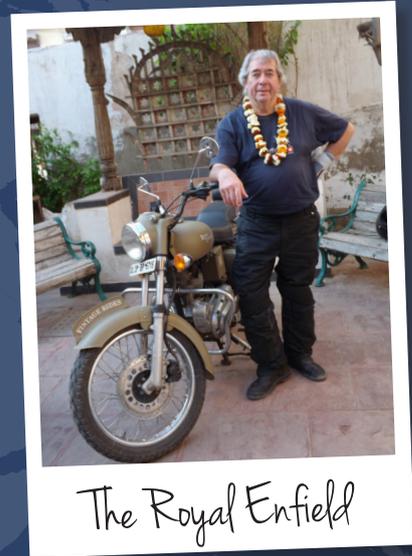
Delhi rain soon gave way to Rajasthan sunshine, although not scorching hot yet. There was a scattering of white painted chimneys with black sooty tops littering the flat fields. Many of them were belching smoke and firing bricks made from the local red earth. Piles of bricks were stacked neatly in the fields before being transported by carts pulled by camels.

A misty start to the second day and a tour through a small town with four inch deep mud for roads, many of which were closed. I probably lost an hour in the interests of tourism. The mechanic was right; I should have gone around the bypass. I was treated to blue skies once the mist had lifted and I rode on into sandy landscapes and Bikaner, the Pearl of Rajasthan. I stumbled across a wonderful collection of First World War weapons, including a Bi-Plane gifted to the Maharaja's exhibition in Junagarh Fort.

The following day I departed soon after dawn, navigating my way out of town through the gathering hoards and sacred cows that were wandering the streets grazing on piles of rubbish. Heading west I rode deeper into the barren Thar Desert on tarmac roads as the mercury level kept rising and my factor 30 failed to stop my nose looking like a ripe strawberry. The midway point to my destination of Jaisalmer is home to the Bishnois tribe, keen environmentalists and although Hindu forsake the tradition of funeral pyres and bury their dead to save wood. This concern for trees is ever present as fence posts and even building props are made from stone.

By late afternoon it was so hot that passing trucks moved the air so that it felt like a blast in the face from a hair dryer. Pleasingly my new vented jacket worked well. Tomorrow was a day off, which would give my right leg a rest from kick starting the 500c.c single cylinder Enfield. I must confess to letting the willing mechanic kick start my bike for me as I tired late in the afternoon heat.

In the distance from the roof of my hotel the Jaisalmer Fort looked like a giant sandcastle, built on a sandy mound with many castellations and low turrets. It was a relaxing walk around the labyrinth, visiting Temples and Havelis. Havelis were rich merchants' houses, known for carved mesh windows and vertical internal shafts that allowed the wind to blow through and cool the house. They also had rich painted walls and carved ceilings to show off the wealth of its owner. Many are now guest houses.



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LAND OF THE MAHARAJAS (cont.)

I sat motionless as he held my nose between his finger and thumb whilst bringing the cut throat razor up to my chin, then he began shaving my face in time honoured tradition. I really enjoy the outcome of a shave and head massage in India, it's a ritual that leaves you with the smoothest of skin and no need to shave for at least another three days. I didn't leave the tiny barber's shop for some time as I sat in the chair watching the cricket between India and Bangladesh with what seemed like half the town's menfolk. Much excitement ensued when India won!

Jaisalmer was supposed to be a day off from motorcycling but my Guide to the Fort and local town turned up on a small motorbike which we used for transport most of the day. This time I was a pillion, perched on the back, no helmet. When I set off I had no intention of shopping in the slightest and was assured that "shop is selling only best pashminas" and "it's only for looking, not buying" but a fool and his money... I do hope the girls are happy with my purchases.

I had a leisurely departure on Friday, setting off for a night under the stars amongst the dunes. The roads became rougher and then covered in deep fine sand, making mini dunes of their own. That's when it happened. I hadn't eaten sand like that since approaching Pointe Noire in the Congo back in 2006. I just wasn't strong enough, with my broken wrist to hold the front end when it went. I lay there; face down in the sand with my bike on its side. Fortunately it was to the right, if it had been to the left, my broken wrist might not have held. In the end it was only my pride that was broken.

Finally I was among the dunes on a woven bed, with a quilt for a cover and a camp fire glowing in the dark. The stars were immense, although I didn't recognise any of them. I was so close to the border that my mobile picked up a network from Pakistan. No chance of going there though.

By necessity it was an early start the following day and I was soon travelling along a boring, straight road in the direction of Jodhpur. The Enfield engine was thumping away as I rode through a string off small villages with houses made of circular stone walls and domed thatched roofs. Entry to every village attracted waving kids and smiling women with their pierced noses and colourful dress.

Riding between each village brought back nostalgic sounds of the sixties. Accelerating away and then rolling off to change gear, created the sound that only a one lung engine can make, barking as the revs climbed and then sighing as I changed up. Something like, brrrrgh - ooomm, brrrrgh - ooomm. You'll know if you've experience the sounds of a 60's one lungger. Arrival in Jodhpur was crazy. Fast, dense traffic, with each vehicle fighting as if their life depended on it. I guess that if you got it wrong the outcome might well have an impact on your life.

Sanity had now been restored and I was sat on the roof top writing the final part of this bulletin. It was dark, very warm and the beer is chilled. The night's entertainment was in full swing, with at least two drum bands belting it out below and an Imam making his last call to prayer. All three were accompanied by the horns of vehicles trying to make their way, to who knows where. In front of me was the Fort, all lit up on the hilltop and behind the Blue Palace. I'd ordered some food and another beer.

Tomato sauce, bloody tomato sauce! I was in one of the best restaurants in Jodhpur and they serve me a dish of tomato ketchup with my Vegetable Pakora. What is the culinary world coming to? The offending red stuff was soon removed and replaced with green chillies, much more appropriate.

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I visited the Mehrangarh Fort before leaving Jodhpur and heading south in the morning. It was the Maharaja of Jodhpur, after playing polo in London in 1897, wearing his famous trousers who gave rise to a new British fashion in horse riding breeches and the name Jodhpurs was adopted thereafter. An uneventful ride to my overnight stop, midway to Udaipur, except for the petrol tank leak, which the mechanic fixed with plastic cement. He was good enough to stop smoking while he affected the repair.

The road started to climb soon after I'd left this morning, up into the tree clad hills, providing both a welcome breeze and occasional shade, very pleasant. There were monkeys everywhere, up in the trees and all over the road, waiting to be fed biscuits by passing tourists. Dropping down the other side I was exposed to the full force of the sun again. The landscape was now green and semi fertile with crops growing and trees blooming. I stopped at the side of the road to watch an old man, who sat on the beam behind an ox, riding round and round in circles as the ox turned the wheel, that pulled the chain of buckets that lifted water from a well and into the irrigation channels. Timeless.

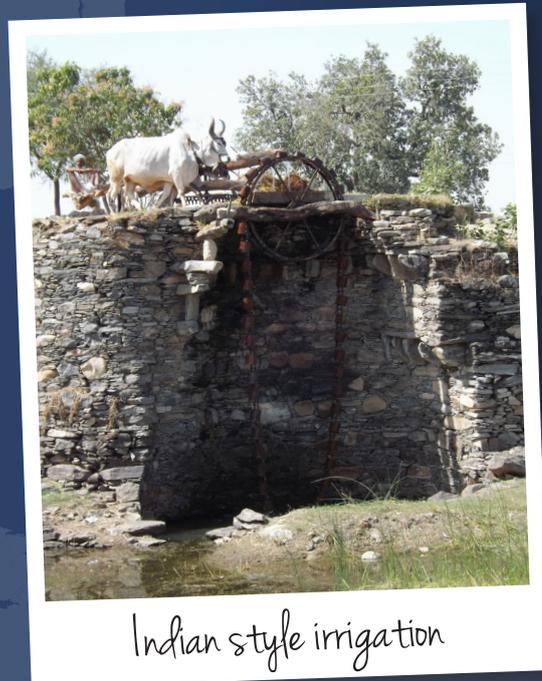
Udaipur is a popular place and the farthest south that I was to ride. I'd managed to arrive in time for lunch and an afternoon off the bike. The town, known as the Venice of the East is built around a series of lakes, with many Palaces, one of which is built on an island and looks as if it's floating.

I'd gone to collect the shirts that I was measured for earlier as it lumbered down the narrow road, swaying from side to side, forcing me to jump into a shop doorway clutching my new purchase to my chest. If it had flapped its ears I'm sure that it would have taken the shop awnings with it. It's not often that you get up close and personal with an elephant and that was close!

The following morning I would have been away bright and early if I hadn't had to wake the Car Park Wallah from his slumbers and have him unlock the garage. When I passed the women carrying a huge basket of litter on her head and her shawl down over her face it looked for all the world as if she was walking backwards. By late morning I'd reached the fortress of Khumbalagarh, a monster of a place with the second longest wall after the Great Wall of China. The wall undulated over the hills into the distance, punctuated by towers with bulging bellies. By late afternoon the temperature had peaked at 41°C and I was glad to have arrived at my destination. It was almost too hot to sleep that night.

Pop, pop, bang and I ground to a halt. The bike shouldn't have run out of fuel but it had and in the middle of nowhere, high in the hills. Seems the leaking fuel tank had continued to leak. "No problem Sir" shouted the mechanic leaping out of the van waving a length of plastic tube and a discarded water bottle. After one big suck and a spit, the bottle was full of a yellow liquid, syphoned from the van, which he then poured into the bike tank.

Read more overleaf...



LAND OF THE MAHARAJAS (cont.)

I was soon off again, bouncing along an unmade rocky road that shook me to my very core. I questioned whether I was on the right route but the advancing cloud of dust, out of which a bus appeared, convinced me that I was heading in the right direction. I must have bottomed out on the front wheel rim at least five times. Apparently this section of road only went on for 10 km but it seemed more like 100. The tarmac road was a welcome relief as I headed for Pushkar.

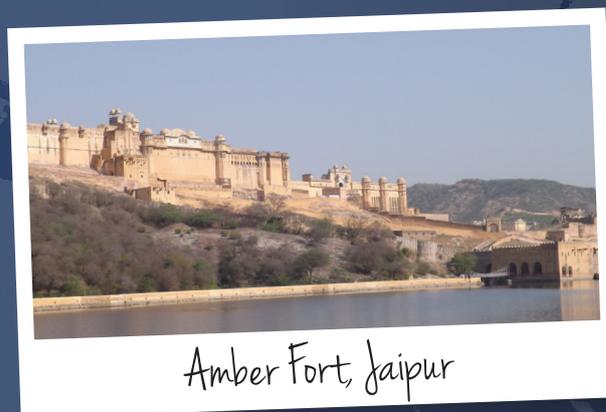
Pushkar is a magnet to both tourists and Hindu worshipers. It's a place of pilgrimage that all devout Hindus should visit at least once in a lifetime and is home to the world famous camel fair, held once a year in October or November. The town is spotlessly clean and all smoking, alcohol, eating of meat or eggs and displays of affection are strictly forbidden within its confines. Fortunately, I was staying outside of town in the Pushkar Resort that serves alcohol, meat and eggs. I wasn't sure about the affection. The Pushkar resort was originally constructed as accommodation for the cast and crew of the Kate Winslet movie, 'Holy Smoke'. No, I'd never heard of it. The property was subsequently expanded to form the resort that it is today. Probably the best facility I stayed in all trip, if not a bit soulless.

We were all lined up on the starting grid, backs arched and heads bent over the handlebars, engines revving, waiting for the barrier to raise before we raced across the railway line to see who could be first to the other side. The little Hero Hondas were no match for the majestic 500c.c. Royal Enfield. Why is it that there's only ever one shoe in the road, what happened to the other one? No one ever seems to lose a pair of shoes. The record was six on a bike. Two of the passengers were babes in arms, so I assumed that it was an entire family. I must admit to being three up one afternoon having picked up two lads who flagged me down in a remote community on their way home from school. There were squeals of laughter as we rode off down the road and much waving after I dropped them off.

I reached Jaipur, after an excursion across salt flats, early afternoon; time enough for a tour of the Pink City, Capital of Rajasthan and once one of the wealthiest cities in India. After the hustle and bustle of the City, the Diggri Palace Hotel, a splendid former Nobleman's residence, was a welcome respite with its shaded lawn and verandas. I was treated to a puppet show during dinner. The puppet booth was miraculously constructed on the lawn, seemingly out of nothing but half a dozen bamboo canes and a selection of patterned sheets.

"Petrol still leaking Sir" exclaimed the smiling mechanic, nodding his head from side to side. "No smoking near bike Sir" he continued. "I don't smoke" I replied. "No Sir, me no smoking".

The Amber Fort is a splendid building resting on a hill top a few kilometres out of Jaipur. I paid it a brief visit on my last morning before setting off for a day's ride on uncompromising roads. They really were rough, shaking me for hours until I reached my destination, a reconstructed Fort that only a few years ago was a pile of rubble but now represented all that's best in Indian heritage hotels. Stretched out in front was a flat barren plain and a sunset over the hills on the horizon. Simply magical. You may not be able to ride fast on an Enfield but you can ride far.



Contact Gordon

Email gordon@linbeck.co.uk for a chat or advice on your next motorcycle adventure.