

What you can do with a Bullet

Hello to all,

A couple of years ago Steph and I went to India, West Bengal and Bhutan. We had some logistical challenges getting our motorcycle into and out of India within the time window we had available so we rented a bike there. Our rental was an immaculately prepared Royal Enfield Bullet 500cc single, custom modified to mount our pannier boxes, tank bag and GPS.



Near Trongsa, Bhutan

The Bullet is based on a 1930s British design that was brought to India during the English colonial period for local manufacture. It has remained basically unchanged in the intervening years. We were told the only difference between a Bullet of that era and our rental bike was the change of one material used to braze one oil line.

At sea level, in perfect conditions, a factory fresh Bullet makes 22 HP. When we were at the top of the Himalayas crossing 11,000+ ft. passes, fully loaded, I have no idea exactly what it was making – but I guarantee you it was a lot less.

With right side shift, one up – three down, and left side rear braking, it was an ongoing mind-body coordination challenge riding the Bullet, especially when meeting Tata trucks on high Himalayan mountain roads.

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Typical Himalayan Tata meet & greet

And I use the term braking here in the most liberal sense of the word – braking on a Bullet is more of an idea, a concept, a theme discussed in low tones over chai, than a real concrete, physical reality. Braking on a Bullet is something akin to communication prior to the telephone. You mail in a braking request and wait patiently for the response to land in your mailbox, the timing determined by mysterious forces beyond your influence and control.

The Bullet encompassed everything that is charming about vintage motorcycle travel. A generous 2" of rear suspension travel, weeping gaskets and regular mechanical upkeep. Regular as in every few hours.



Leatherman vs. Lucas electrics

And that is where Alam comes into the picture.

Alam was our Indian mechanic who accompanied us on our tour. He rode in a chase truck with his driver/assistant and supply of spare Bullet parts (top end, bottom end, forks, wheel assemblies, etc.) Alam worked on our bike, and that of our guide, Patrick Moffat, every morning and every night and a lot in between. His cheerful demeanor never wavered no matter what the

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circumstance and he consistently demonstrated the dominant trait of Indian mechanics everywhere: they could repair and launch the space shuttle with a screwdriver, pliers and some baling wire. Their innovation, inventiveness and ability to repair anything with only a few well worn hand tools is truly incredible.

To give you an idea of the mindset and abilities of the typical Indian mechanic, Alam had a small scooter & motorcycle repair shop that he opened with zero tools. He couldn't afford any. To perform repair work he used whatever tools were still existent in the customer's bike's toolkit, which in India ranged from zero to not much. Eventually he scrounged a few worn out open end wrenches from other, older, mechanics in town who had scrounged newer, less worn, version of the same. When we met I had more tools in the bottom of my pannier box and my small enduro tool kit than he had in his entire, now prospering, repair shop.

Alam and I, as motorcyclists do everywhere, were soon swapping bike and riding stories. He told me of his adventures building a bike and his podium finish in an enduro (rally) race high in the mountains of NW India. All that with no riding boots, gear, gloves, etc. on the bike he'd cobbled together from cast-off, worn-out parts, all built with his collection of less than a dozen tools. He told me of his dream to build an American type chopper from a Bullet, just to show that it could be done. He told me of his dreams to build a motorcycle repair, sales, rental, and closed course race and riding area business – the first of its kind in India.

I thought Alam was a great guy, and reflective of the inventive spirit, entrepreneurial energy and youthful vigor that is building a new and vibrant India.



Alam in 2004, Bhutan

When we got back home I shipped him a bunch of business books, Hindi to English and back dictionaries and a few cool tools. I thought it was the least I could do to encourage and support his entrepreneurial efforts.

This morning I received the following bike photos from him.

Be well,
Doug

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