RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Two Wheels in the Dust

Anne Mustoe

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About the Book

India is no place for the faint-hearted cyclist. The streets are jammed with cars, busses, rickshaws, animals, fortune-tellers, barbers, beggars and people sleeping or cooking.

In this hectic environment, adventuresome ex-headmistress Anne Mustoe found a pocket of calm: a man praying to Hanuman at a roadside shrine. Her curiosity about this magical Hindu monkey-god led her through the entire Indian subcontinent and back three millennia – to the origins of the Sanskrit epic, the *Ramayana*.

Beginning in Kathmandu in Nepal and ending in the tranquil hill town of Kandy in Sri Lanka, Anne Mustoe's amazing journey by bicycle is told with keen observation and the relish of the open road.

About the Author

Since she gave up full-time employment in 1987, Anne Mustoe has spent every winter abroad. She is a classical scholar and has run her own travel business, organising specialist tours to classical sites in Greece, Italy, Turkey and Tunisia. She is internationally renowned for her best-selling cycling adventures: *A Bike Ride, Lone Traveller* and *Two Wheels in the Dust* and she is also the author of *Escaping the Winter – all you need to know about spending the winter abroad* [all published by Virgin].

Read more about Anne's cycling adventures on her website: www.annemustoe.co.uk

Also by Anne Mustoe

A BIKE RIDE
LONE TRAVELLER
TWO WHEELS IN THE DUST

TWO WHEELS IN THE DUST

From Kathmandu to Kandy

Anne Mustoe


THE ROUTE
Chandigarh
NEW DELHI
NEPAL
Pokhara
Kathmandu
Agra
Ayodhya
Janakpur
Lucknow
Gwalior
Shivpuri
Jhansi
Chitrakuta
Allahabad
Patna
Varanasi
Ujjain
Indore
INDIA
Calcutta
Nasik
Ellora
Ajanta
Jalna
Aurangābād
Mumbai (Bombay)
Pune
Vijayawāda
ARABIAN SEA
Bay of Bengal
Goa
Hubli-Dharwar
Hospet
Chennai (Madras)
Mangalore
Pondicherry
Chidambaram
Thanjavur
Madurai
Cochin
Alleppey
Jaffna
Trivandrum
Rameshwaram
SRI LANKA
Cape Comorin
Kandy
COLOMBO
Nuwara Eliya
INDIAN OCEAN
Airport
My Journey by Bicycle
Train or Air Travel
Rama's Journey (exact route unknown)

Prologue: The Pilgrimage Begins

MY PILGRIMAGE BEGAN one morning in the dust of the Deccan. It was January 1992, and I was on my bicycle, trying to make my way out of the centre of Ujjain into open country. In the morning rush hour, I was fighting for my few inches of space in the turmoil of the narrow street. There was every conceivable sort of motorised vehicle, plus bicycles, cycle-rickshaws, bullock-carts, horses, camels and handcarts. Horns were honking, cycle-bells jangling, whips cracking and impatient drivers shouting. What little pavement there was, was so jam-packed with shoe repairers, barbers, fortune-tellers with their parrots, beggars, underwear salesmen, sleepers and homeless families cooking their breakfasts, that pedestrians had nowhere to walk but the road. They surged through the traffic in anxious clumps, compounding the confusion. Then there were the animals. Bristly black pigs rooted in the heaps of stinking garbage, grunting at the crows who cawed and pecked at them. Stray dogs yelped and dodged between the cartwheels. And through the middle of everything sauntered the peaceable holy cows of India, sacrosanct and unperturbed, pausing to chew a paper bag here and a cabbage leaf there. It was the usual Indian assault on the senses.

I had been in India for some months and had learned that it was no place for the faint-hearted cyclist. I just had to grit my teeth and barge along the road like everyone

else. But that morning, the dust was so thick and acrid with woodsmoke that I had to pull up to wipe my eyes. It was then that I noticed him.

He stood barefoot in his torn grey shirt and trousers, with a check scarf wound round his head and tied under his chin. The crowds were pouring past, parting round him, then rejoining and pressing on with little clicks of annoyance. The man stood his ground, eyes closed, hands together, lips moving, praying with the unselfconsciousness of a child. At the end of his prayer, he raised his joined hands to his forehead, lips and heart, then strode into the morning rush.

I pushed my bicycle across to the roadside shrine, to find out which of the multitude of Hindu gods could produce such rapt devotion in the middle of a crowded street. I peered through the iron grille and saw a hectic vermilion face with staring black eyes. It was Hanuman, the monkey god, garlanded with marigolds and dressed in a golden frock.

My knowledge of the Hindu religion was fairly vague at the time. I knew that Hanuman was worshipped as the faithful friend. He was the divine helper, the solver of problems. The worried man in the check scarf had laid his troubles before Hanuman, then gone on his way with a lighter step.

I was suddenly curious to know more about this god; and my curiosity was to lead me through the entire Indian subcontinent, from Nepal to Sri Lanka, and back three millennia in time, to the origins of *The Ramayana*, India’s favourite story.

Introduction

THE RAMAYANA (RAMA'S Journey) is a gripping adventure story, a wonderful yarn in which the heroes are incredibly heroic and the villains monumentally villainous. Rama is the perfect man, Sita the perfect woman, Lakshmana the perfect brother and Hanuman the perfect friend. At the other end of the spectrum, Ravana, the Demon King, has ten heads, twenty arms, teeth like young moons and copper-coloured eyes. He and his man-eating army are so fierce that even the gods are terrified of them.

On my long cycle-rides, I always try to follow historical routes, to give an extra dimension to my travels. But in India, a country which fascinated me in a vague sort of way, there were no roads of real significance, apart from the Grand Trunk Road, and I had already cycled that. But if I turned to mythology for a change, I had the perfect journey.

Sita, the heroine of *The Ramayana*, was born in present-day Nepal, while Rama came from Uttar Pradesh in the north of India. Hanuman, his divine monkey helper, lived in Karnataka, in the centre, and Ravana, the villain of the plot, reigned in Sri Lanka. So the incidents in the epic span the whole of the Indian subcontinent, from north to south. I did my background research in London, mostly in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, but to follow the entire route of Rama's journey, from Sita's birthplace to the lair of the Demon King, I had to spend five winters in India.

I could have covered the distance in far less time, had I rushed about in cars and trains. But I chose my favourite means of transport, my well-travelled bicycle, because I value the insights that a bicycle brings – and I also find it less stressful than fighting my way on to India's heaving buses and trains. Everyone talks to a cyclist, especially in India, where the bicycle is the most common form of transport. Sharing the road, we somehow share a fellow-feeling, that transcends barriers of race and wealth. My bicycle takes me through the countryside and brings me into contact with village people and their customs in a way which would not be possible if I swept through on four wheels; I find out much more and have more time to think about it as I wheel my peaceful way along country roads. For poking around, meeting people and learning the inside story, there is no introduction quite so effective as the modest bicycle. Yet this is not a cycling book, written primarily for fellow cyclists. Anyone who is thinking of cycling in India will, I hope, find the book encouraging and will certainly be able to glean some practical information from its pages. But my bicycle is no more the book's *raison d'être* than the flights and bus journeys of other writers are the *raisons d'être* of theirs. It is simply the vehicle from whose saddle I have taken a free-wheeling, personal view of contemporary India.

Rama and Sita travelled from north to south, beginning in Sita's hometown of Janakpur in Nepal and ending their journey in the central highlands of Sri Lanka. My own travels took a slightly erratic course, because I was unaware of the Nepalese connection until I got chatting with a Nepalese businessman during my third Indian winter. This meant that I cycled the central part of the route first, then the southern sections, and ended with the northern run down from Nepal to the Ganges. But as *The Ramayana* has been the spur to my travels in India, I shall exercise a certain literary licence and bring my own

journey into line with the wanderings of my epic characters.

On the surface, *The Ramayana* is a magical, much-loved fairy tale, where Good triumphs over Evil and Hanuman's monkey tricks add the comic element. But because Rama is the incarnation of a Hindu god, his story arouses darker passions. In recent years it has been the cause of rioting and bloodshed between Hindus and Muslims in Ayodhya, Rama's birthplace, and in other cities across north India. Sri Lanka is engaged in a civil war between the Buddhist Sinhalese and the Hindu Tamils. So my route begins and ends in religious conflict, which spills over into politics.

As *The Ramayana* is the inspiration for my journey, it obviously dictates the route, leading me to some of the holiest Hindu pilgrim sites. But it must also govern perspective and the choice of material for inclusion. India is a heady, fomenting brew of peoples, languages, religions, cultures and landscapes, and no single book could possibly encompass the whole. *Two Wheels in the Dust* leans towards those areas of life where the ancient epic is still influential, even today. It is an exploration of the world's most ancient living religion, as well as a passing view of everyday life in modern India. To the Hindu, there is no difference between the two. God is all-pervading and is both.

I first crossed the Indian subcontinent from Karachi to Calcutta in 1988, as part of my West-to-East cycle-ride around the world. Pakistan, with its Muslim monotheism, seemed an easier country to come to terms with. When I crossed the border into India, I was perplexed by the Hindus with their complicated religion (33 million gods in some estimates) and shocked by the rules of caste. I cycled through the country in a fog, uncomprehending and unsympathetic. Although I was courteously received, I felt out of touch, an outsider. *The Ramayana* has changed all that. My search for Hanuman, which began in a crowded

street in Ujjain, has given me a topic of conversation which is deeply fascinating to Indians of all religions. It has taken me to parts of India I should never otherwise have visited and it has provided the key to at least some aspects of this ancient and complex civilisation. *The Ramayana* has been my passport to India.

Two Wheels in the Dust is really two books in one, because there is a book within a book. Each stage of Rama's journey is followed by an account of my own travels through that particular region. The two strands have been printed in two different types, so that the short epic sections can be picked out very easily. They can be read in sequence as a separate story or they can be skipped altogether by any readers whose interests are limited to the present day. But I hope that the two accounts will be taken together in the order in which they appear. Indian civilisation is deeply rooted in its ancient traditions and it is difficult to understand the contemporary scene without reference to the mythical past. By intertwining the two, and working in a few sections on Hindu religion, I have tried to shed a glimmer of light on at least a few of India's current problems.

The Ramayana is such an important classic, and so much scholarly work has been produced on its content and background, that the present book can only hope to scratch the surface. For those whose interest has been stimulated, I have added a bibliography for further reading.

For the cyclist, I have given the specifications of my bicycle and a luggage list in an appendix. When I read through the first draft of the book, I was struck by the loving detail in which I had described my meals and Kingfisher beers in the restaurants where I dined, but cyclists will know that food and drink are extremely important! As for accommodation, I cycled through parts of the country where tourists had never been seen and hotels

were non-existent. I was not carrying a tent, so the problem of where I was going to spend the night dominated many of my afternoons. But this very remoteness and vulnerability led to some of my most interesting encounters, when I was taken in and treated with the greatest kindness by people who had never come into contact with a foreigner before. Their hospitality was heart-warming. Even so, it was always a great relief to a townie like myself to arrive in a city, where I knew I could count on a hotel bed and water for a shower.

India is not a comfortable country. It is overwhelming in its size, beauty and diversity. There are palaces and temples, but their backdrop is poverty and the cardboard shacks of the slums. The noise, dirt and beggars, the staring crowds and the bureaucracy of petty officials can fray even the strongest nerves. Yet the atmosphere is never threatening. The eyes spark with interest and humour, never with hatred or resentment of the richer foreigner. At times, I longed to escape – but once I was back home in the sanitised West, the vibrant colours, the smiles, the scent of spices and jasmine, and the swish of silken saris in the dust haunted me until I returned. Love it or hate it, India is the ancient, fascinating, complex, irritating country which everyone should visit at least once in a lifetime.

1 *The Ramayana*

‘*He who reads the story of Rama, which imparts merit and purity, is freed from all sin*.’

THE RAMAYANA IS one of the oldest stories in the world. Like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the epic began as a series of folk tales which were passed down from generation to generation by wandering storytellers. Some scholars have traced its origins back as far as the fifteenth century BC, but more recent work on the language and style of the poem, together with its political, sociological and geographical content, has narrowed down the period of its evolution to around 750–500 BC.

According to tradition, the epic was composed in Sanskrit verse by the poet Valmiki. No one knows whether Valmiki actually existed as a historical person, but internal stylistic evidence does suggest that the central core of the story, Books Two to Six of *The Ramayana*, is indeed the work of a single poet, who wrote it down between the second century BC and the second century AD. Books One and Seven are generally agreed to be later additions.

Valmiki’s tale is secular and heroic. Rama is the perfect man – valiant, steadfast, truthful, just, faithful, gentle, handsome, learned in the holy scriptures, loved by everyone (Valmiki devotes hundreds of lines to descriptions of Rama and his virtues) – while his wife, the beautiful Sita, is the model of fidelity and loving compliance. Each was the other’s only love, so that they have come to stand for constancy in marriage. At Hindu weddings, even today, the

bride and groom are seen as embodiments of Sita and Rama and are worshipped on that day by the wedding guests. The form of words used by Sita's father, King Janaka, when he gave his daughter to Rama, are still part of the Hindu marriage ceremony.

Over the centuries, there was a shift in interpretation. Rama became an avatar, or incarnation, of the great god Vishnu and Sita an incarnation of Vishnu's consort, the goddess Lakshmi. Rama's battle with Ravana came to be seen as an allegory of the struggle between Good and Evil, in which the Good triumphs under God's leadership on earth.

Valmiki's epic has come down to us in three differing versions and there have been many later interpretations of the poem in the vernacular. The most important are Kamban's twelfth-century version in Tamil (which the south Indian writer RK Narayan has shortened and rendered most delightfully in English) and the *Ram Carit Manas (The Lake of Rama's Deeds*), written in Hindi in the sixteenth century by Tulsi Das. In Tulsi Das, Rama is consistently divine and the aim of the *Ram Carit Manas* is to encourage devotion to Rama as an incarnation of Vishnu. All the conflicts, discrepancies and character flaws in the original epic are eliminated to produce a harmonious, lyrical poem in praise of God.

In addition to the poetic versions, there are innumerable folk versions, which are recited at festivals all over India, each one with a different message or emphasis. For instance, folk versions sung by women often strengthen the role of Sita and portray her as a more independent and more spirited woman than she appears in the brahminic literary versions.

Zeus and Hera, with their retinue of Olympian gods, ceased to be worshipped at the fall of Greece, and even their shadows have faded now from our literary and poetic traditions. Homer's heroes, Achilles and Odysseus, are no

longer in any vital sense a part of our Western consciousness. But the Hindu gods and heroes are still as alive in modern India as they were in the days of Valmiki. The story of Rama and Sita is told to children at bedtime and performed at village fairs. *The Ramayana* is studied as a devotional text and used to illustrate moral precepts. 'Ram Ram' is a common form of greeting in north India and 'He Ram' were the last words uttered by Mahatma Gandhi, when he fell to an assassin's bullet in 1948. When *The Ramayana* was serialised in the 1980s on Doordarshan, the Indian government television service, it was the most popular series ever shown and the streets of India were deserted once a week, as people crowded round the nearest television set. Now, video tapes of the series are played in homes and teastalls on days sacred to Rama and Hanuman, when to watch them is considered as much an act of devotion as a visit to the temple. The epic is currently being put on to the Internet.

The Ramayana is a long and complicated story, an epic of some 50,000 lines, almost twice the length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined. It was my companion on my travels across India and I shall return to it again and again in the course of my narrative. But, as a preliminary, I shall try to condense into one paragraph the tale of Rama and Sita, the perfect couple, and Rama's faithful friend, Hanuman, that magical monkey in the golden frock who set his match to my fuse.

The Plot

Rama, a prince of the Kingdom of Kosala, was about to be installed as prince regent by his aged father, King Dasaratha, when he fell victim to a palace plot and was forced into exile for fourteen years. He left the capital city, Ayodhya, accompanied by his wife, Sita, and his devoted younger brother, Lakshmana. While the three were living

as hermits in the forest, Sita was tricked by Ravana, the ten-headed King of the Demons, who abducted her in his aerial car to his palace in Sri Lanka, where he tried to persuade her to forget Rama and marry him instead. Rama and Lakshmana assembled an army of forest creatures to search for Sita. Their general was Hanuman, chief adviser to the monkey king, Sugriva. By his supernatural powers as a son of the Wind God, Hanuman was able to clear the straits to Sri Lanka in one prodigious leap and discover where Sita was held captive. His army of monkeys and hears built a bridge over the sea, so that Rama could reach Sri Lanka and defeat Ravana in single-handed combat. When Sita submitted to an ordeal by fire, to prove that she had remained faithful to Rama, the Fire God, Agni, rose in person from the flames, with Sita safe in his arms. The happy couple returned to Ayodhya, where Rama began his glorious reign of eleven thousand years.

This is considered to be Valmiki's original story. It belongs, geographically, to north-east India, as is clear from Valmiki's detailed knowledge of the countryside in the early books and his vagueness about places further south. Historically, it may be an allegory of the southward thrust of the invading Aryans. These fair-skinned Indo-European peoples filtered through Bactria and Afghanistan into north India from about 1,500 BC and gradually spread southwards, supplanting the shorter, darker, indigenous Dravidians of south India and the Veddahs of Sri Lanka. In this context, Rama is obviously the victorious Aryan, while Ravana and his Rakshasas are the Dravidians and Veddahs. Hanuman's forest creatures may be the aboriginal tribal peoples, who formed an alliance with the Aryans against their Dravidian overlords.

Sadly, I have no Sanskrit, but the charm of the original language does creep through in translation. Sanskrit and Greek are members of the same linguistic family and their

epics are clearly born of the same, or similar, poetic traditions. Like Homer, Valmiki makes great use of conventional epithets, similes and metaphors, to brighten the text and help with the scansion. But whereas the Greek words and phrases are all firmly embedded in nature, those in Valmiki often have a metaphysical flavour, which is distinctively Indian. Homer's heroes rush into the attack like straightforward lions or rivers in flood. Valmiki's heroes fight 'like Time at the dissolution of the worlds'. Even everyday objects become things of poetic fancy: 'golden lamps which resembled gamblers absorbed in their dice'. Valmiki's similes are so picturesque that I sometimes find them irresistible and quote them in full in my own brief summaries of the text.

Flights of fancy appear in the contents too. Valmiki treats factual consistency and probability with scorn, and his numbers are too huge for contemplation. But the vivid imagination and staggering embellishment are all part of what the Sanskrit scholar Winternitz describes as 'a true popular epic, the property of the whole Indian people, high and low, of all religions'.

I have relied chiefly on the unabridged three-volume translation of *The Ramayana of Valmiki* by Professor Hari Prasad Shastri (published by Shanti Sadan, 1953).

2 Downhill through Nepal

(Winter 1998)

Kathmandu – Mugling – Narayangadh – Royal Chitwan National Park – Hetauda – Janakpur

'WHAT IS THIS angioplasty, please? I am not understanding the term.'

We flew into Kathmandu in mid-November, when King Birendra of Nepal was in London for medical treatment. The newspapers were printing daily bulletins on his progress after successful angioplasty, but none of them thought to explain what angioplasty was. So as soon as the locals heard we were from London, we became immediate experts. Their eyes opened wide in wonder, as we did our best to describe the procedure – the little balloon which is threaded up from the thigh to one of the coronary arteries, then inflated to clear the obstruction.

'What a wonderful thing! We are not doing that in Nepal.'

The Nepalese are inscrutable. They were awestruck at the medical technology, but none of them expressed any views at all to foreigners like us about the King himself, neither relief at his good progress, nor antagonism towards his rule. He was simply there, and it was difficult to tell whether he was above comment, below it, or just irrelevant to their lives.

Arriving in Kathmandu for the first time, I found it a disturbing city. I was not surprised at the lack of angioplasty, because I knew that medical facilities in

general were thin on the ground, with few hospitals and only something like one doctor to every 15,000 Nepalese. Illiteracy was up around the 75 per cent mark and education, welfare and public services were all depressingly lacking. The only thing that flourished, and it flourished startlingly in a city which was still mediaeval at heart, was information technology. Technology produced the most extraordinary contrasts. Tourists picked their way through filthy, garbage-strewn streets to send off e-mails or surf the net in cyber-cafés, while others climbed out of cycle-rickshaws, pedalled by ragged skeletons of men, to watch satellite television in smart hotels. Bills for Carlsberg, steak and chips and pancakes with chocolate sauce were cleared by Visa in the restaurants where the tourists gathered, while the pavement vendors scrabbled in ancient cigarette tins for their few rupees of change. Even the outsiders fell into two sharply contrasting groups – the well-fed, mountain-booted Westerners, mostly young and male, so different from the slight Tibetan refugees, who were trying to scrape a living by selling cheap quilted jackets and Buddhist prayer wheels. It all felt somehow out of joint, and I was glad that I didn't have to spend much time in the place.

My Ramayana pilgrimage was to begin in Janakpur, the birthplace of Sita. It lies in Nepal, just north of the border with India, and is a very awkward town to reach. I could either struggle across India with my bicycle on trains and buses, then cross the Nepalese border from the south, or I could fly into Kathmandu and cycle there through Nepal. One look at the map gave me the answer. I saw that the Kathmandu Valley stood at an altitude of 1,370 metres, while Janakpur lay down on the Gangetic Plain. What a wonderful downhill ride!

I usually cycle alone, but this winter I was joined by two friends, Shirley and Suzanna. Suzanna and I travelled together from London to Vienna, where we joined up with

Shirley, who had flown there from her home in Ankara. None of us had been to Nepal before, but I knew the Indian subcontinent well and Suzanna had trekked in Ladakh. It was Shirley who suffered the culture shock, when we were mobbed by hotel touts and drivers of every sort of ramshackle conveyance immediately we left the airport building in Kathmandu. Using our bikes as battering rams, we scattered them all and forced our way through to the road. Then we cycled bravely into the city centre and found our own way to the Fuji Guest House, a deservedly popular mid-range hotel with a flowery little breakfast patio.

Since travel became my main occupation in life, twelve years ago, I have learned to focus my sightseeing. I think of the world as a giant, sumptuous fruit-cake, crammed with sights, scents, sounds, peoples and cultures, and the only way to enjoy it is to take it a modest slice at a time. The slice can be vertical, an in-depth exploration of a particular spot; or it can be horizontal, a thin sliver pared off a wide surface. My Ramayana slice was horizontal, covering the entire length of the Indian subcontinent, but limited in every place I visited to one particular topic. In Nepal, my only concerns were Rama, Sita and Hanuman, and they never visited Kathmandu. So, in that warm November week, I was free to enjoy the city, without having to worry too much about its history or styles of architecture. I could even switch off from it altogether and sit in the hotel patio with a novel if I felt like it.

My Kathmandu list was short: the Hanuman Dhoka (the old Royal Palace), named after the statue of Hanuman at the main gate, and the giant statue of the sleeping Vishnu, Rama’s great Original, just outside the city at Budhanilkantha.

Poor Hanuman turned out to be no more than a large heap of red cloaks, trimmed with gold tinsel, under a red and gold umbrella. Even his eyes, the most important feature for a Hindu worshipper, were buried under a pile of

marigold garlands. Inside the palace, we cast a professional eye over King Tribhuvan's bicycles, which were gathering dust in a jumble of His Master's Voice gramophones, standard lamps and other Western paraphernalia, then took a taxi out to the sleeping Vishnu. A five-metre giant, the four-armed Vishnu was reclining in a water tank, supported by the immense coils of the serpent king, Ananta. As we were obviously not Hindus, we were not allowed to cross the stepping-stones into the tank. We had to peer at him from a distance, through the railings. But at least we could have a look, unlike King Birendra. The Kings of Nepal are revered as incarnations of Vishnu, but none of them has dared look on this holy likeness since a seventeenth-century monarch dreamed that death would follow the view.

Souvenir-hunting is a problem for cyclists. For me, having two small panniers imposes a welcome discipline and I'm glad to have the excuse not to go shopping. But my two friends found temptation in every chowk, and one of my abiding memories of the trip is the rustle of their plastic bags, as they struggled to stuff their panniers, agonising over what to throw away to make room for the latest Nepali waistcoat, embroidered hat or hand-woven shawl – all of them totally unwearable at home. On our last afternoon in Kathmandu, I left them to it and took a rickshaw-ride to Durbar Square, to the small gilt-roofed temple of Maru Ganesh. The elephant-headed Ganesh is the god of auspicious beginnings and I queued up with the other departing travellers to crack a coconut at his shrine and pray for a safe journey. With no doctors out there, no detailed maps and no idea where we should spend our nights, I felt that we needed all the help we could get.

And Ganesh smiled on us. We had fought our way through the morning rush from our hotel in Thamel, along Kathmandu's main artery, the Kanti Path, on to the main Pokhara highway, and were just starting the great climb out

of the Kathmandu Valley, when my chain came off, three times. We all stopped and peered. Central Kathmandu is as flat as a pancake and I had never needed to change gear on the ride in from the airport. So it was only now, on my first steep hill, that the broken lever on my derailleur came to light. It had been snapped in two on the flight. As luck, or Ganesh, would have it, we were just opposite a small cycle-repair shed.

'Broke,' said the cycle-man.

'Broke,' said I.

'Come.'

With that monosyllabic exchange, he wheeled my bicycle a few doors up the road to another little shed, where there was a welder. A piece of tin was found and, between them, they cut out a perfect patch and welded it on. The whole operation took about ten minutes and cost me a few pence. I sailed away, my patched lever working like a dream, reflecting that in England I should probably have had to buy a complete new derailleur, or parts which would have taken a month to arrive! Travel in the developing world certainly has its advantages.

Suzanna turned out to be a strong cyclist, who could breeze up hills that I could never contemplate and speed along the flat like a cheetah. And I knew from past experience that my ballerina friend Shirley was always professionally fit and agile, and could outcycle me any day of the week. So, although I was the most experienced cyclist, I was by far the slowest and had to do the most pushing on mountain roads. Yet we somehow managed to accommodate ourselves to one another: either they went ahead and waited for me under a shady tree, or they let me lead our small caravan and cruised along behind at the pace I set. To my relief, it was never a problem and I never felt under pressure to speed up.

It took us the whole morning to climb out of the Kathmandu Valley. Pollution gets trapped in the hollow and

for the first 20 kilometres we choked and gasped as trucks belched even more diesel fumes into the acrid haze. As we climbed, we could look down on the pall of dirty grey which swallowed all the capital's landmarks. Then, suddenly, near the top of the pass, we broke clear. The air sparkled, the sky was a brilliant blue and we saw the majestic mountains, piled range upon snowy range, from Ganesh Himal in the east right round to the twin peaks of Manaslu Himal in the west. At the summit, we sat on a wall, eating chocolate and dried apricots. The highway below us seemed almost vertical, a series of dizzying bends. Trucks and buses crawled cautiously round them, looking as small as Dinky toys from our eagle's eyrie. We overtook them all when we whirled down towards the rushing white waters of the Mahesh river. On mountain switchbacks, two wheels feel safer and are much more manoeuvrable than four.

By mid-afternoon, we had swept down the highway to Naubise, our Nepalese ordeal by fire. We had grown soft in Kathmandu, where every amenity was available to the Western tourist: clean, comfortable beds, en-suite bathrooms, and well-cooked food of every nationality. So it was a bit hard to meet our severest test of character on our very first day out. In Naubise, we had our worst lodgings of the whole trip.

We had decided to spend our first night there, as it stood at the junction of the Prithvi Highway to Pokhara, which we were following, and the Tribhuvan Highway, the oldest, most mountainous of Nepal's main roads, which leads directly south into India. Although no hotels were mentioned in our guide books, we reasoned that such an important junction must have a few modest places to stay. And, in any case, there were no guide-book recommendations before Mugling, which was another 80 kilometres along the highway, much too great a distance to cover in the afternoon when we were already tired after the climb out of Kathmandu.

There were two open-fronted transport cafés, which a local boy assured us were lodges. As group leader, I was deputed to inspect the first. An old one-eyed man, who was stirring a pot at the front of the café, said, ‘Go to Kathmandu.’ But he reluctantly sent a small boy to lead me to the accommodation. I groped my way through to the back of the unlit building, where I felt rather than saw a slatted-wood staircase, which had no handrail and led up to even inkier blackness. My courage failed me.

We inspected the next place together. It was run by a grimy couple, and the woman was considerably more positive than the man. She led us through the café, over the flowing stream from a hosepipe (used for washing-up), past a stinking latrine which was leaking across the corridor, and up a similar wooden staircase to next-door’s. This staircase was more manageable, as it had an electric light. Above was a large loft, most of it a grain store, though there were two small cubicles for guests. Each had two wooden plank beds with pillows and quilts of unspeakable filthiness.

I have travelled in many remote places and slept in some awful accommodation, but I had never seen a lodge quite so depressing as this one. We were in despair, particularly as we were sure that the grain would be a nesting place for rats. But what could we do? We could cycle no further and we were not carrying tents. I think, if I had been alone, I might perhaps have chickened out and caught the next bus to Mugling. I would have been too worried to spend the night on my own in such a hovel, when I was unfamiliar with the Nepalese and had no idea what sort of behaviour to expect. But there was safety in numbers. Catching a bus seemed like cheating, and we would have missed cycling a spectacular mountain road. So we swallowed hard and agreed to take the two rooms. At least we had sleeping mats and bags, so we could zip ourselves into our own clean spaces.

We filled up the rest of the daylight hours by strolling back up the hill to the last village we had swept through, which was slightly more salubrious, but had no accommodation. There we had our first meal of *dhal bhat*, the lentil, rice and curried vegetable dish which is the staple food of Nepal. There was a student there who spoke good English, so the unemployed of the village gathered round for tea and a chat. The student told us that he had really wanted to read medicine, and had good enough grades to do it. But the Kathmandu medical school was the only one in Nepal, and it took in only twenty students a year. To get one of those twenty places required the kind of influence which his family didn't have, so he had settled for microbiology.

'My parents are so disappointed in me,' he said sadly. 'They are poor farmers, illiterate people, who have saved up all their lives, and got themselves into debt, to send me to university to become a doctor. That has been their dream. But they don't understand the system. They don't realise that you haven't a chance unless you're related to the King or one of the ministers. And they don't even know what microbiology is. I do my best. I've found a side-job now in Kathmandu and that brings in a bit of money to help us along.'

We took our evening meal (*dhal bhat* again) in our own café, in the company of a sociable young Nepali, who drove lorries in Qatar. The rest of the locals drank quietly under the gimlet eyes of our hostess. Their tipple was neat, colourless alcohol, which came out of the fridge in triangular plastic packets. We three travellers had just one bottle of beer between us, as the prospect of a night expedition down the rickety stairs to the filthy latrine was too grim to contemplate. Then we screwed up our courage for bed. Blackouts are frequent in Nepal, but our luck was in and we climbed to the loft by the light of the dim bulb. I

took one of the two rooms on my own, while Shirley and Suzanna opted to share.

Some time after midnight, there was stumbling on the stairs and my bedroom door was kicked open. An irate truck driver in a navy-blue shell suit burst into the room and towered over my bed shouting. He was much the worse for drink and he had a prostitute in tow. As far as I could gather, he was accusing me of occupying a bed which he had booked for himself and was ordering me out of it. I refused to budge. He then began to plead with me.

'Come out here, just for five minutes, just to talk,' he wheedled.

My two friends came to the rescue. The Nepalis are short, small-boned men and we were three tall, hefty women. Our size and determination soon had the poor little truck driver cowering. He retreated down the loft steps muttering indignantly, while his lady friend stared at us and giggled. The rest of the night was uneventful, except for scuffling in the granary, followed by horrendous shrieks and howls, which we took to be the resident cats performing their rodent duties.

Morning brought the sun and, with it, optimism and a feeling of confidence. If we could manage the Naubise lodge, we could manage anything. The mountain scenery was unbelievably beautiful and we had ten days' spectacular cycling. As far as Narayangadh, there was always a tumbling, white-water river beside us – first the Mahesh Khola, then the Trisuli, then the mighty Narayani. And for three days, our ride was dominated by the magnificent Annapurnas. Down on the flat Terai, we went on an elephant safari to see the rhinos in the Royal Chitwan National Park; and for three hours we prowled the jungle on foot, under the protection of two park rangers. It was a fascinating day, but we were disappointed to see no tigers.

We had one more alarming nocturnal visit, when policemen burst into our room in another basic lodge,

searching for teak poachers (the Nepalese accuse the Indians of poaching teak, while the Indians accuse the Nepalese of poaching tigers). We peered at them through our mosquito nets like three startled Miss Havishams through the cobwebs. Then I rose from my bed and towered above them.

'I am not a poacher,' I said. 'I am a headmistress.'

They withdrew submissively. The rest of our nights were undisturbed.

Mountain bikers, for whom the antique Tribhuvan Highway from Naubise to Hetauda seems to be the ultimate Nepalese challenge, will no doubt despise us for taking the long and easy way round. The friendly Motel Avocado at Hetauda had a cyclists' log book, where the macho riders who had climbed to Daman, then on to the 2,840-metre Simbhaniyang Pass, noted their times and the numbers of broken spokes and punctures. We followed the rivers round those fearsome mountains, pedalling along good surfaces financed by the Indian and Chinese Governments. We covered 201 kilometres from Naubise to Hetauda, as against their 123, but for lazy cyclists it was well worth the detour.

The Nepalese lived up to their reputation for friendliness. We met a retired Gurkha corporal, who had set up a roadside teastall on his British Army pension. In Narayangadh, we shared Uncle's Lodge with a team of social workers, who were running a conference for small-town chemists on how to recognise AIDS and encourage safe sex. In Nijgarh, we spent a pleasant evening with the two proprietors of the local independent, English-medium school, whose own daughter was at a boarding school in Darjeeling, where the standards and facilities were better than in Nepal. And in our second-worst roadside lodge in the Terai, we were pounced on by a bossy Rajput from Ajmer, with a splendid Rajasthani moustache, who marched