

4/6/2004

e-Postcard from Darjeeline, India

One Up, Three Down (to the tune of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home")

"Well there's just one up and then three down, Hurrah, Hurrah
There's just one up and then three down, Hurrah, Hurrah
There will always just be one up, one up
And there will always just be three down, three down
One up three down
One up three down
Till Johnny comes riding home"

Song lyrics worked pretty well.

I'd already tried chanting it as a mantra for hours, "Owwwwwuuuummmm, monnay padmay one up three down owwwwuummm." That just didn't stick in my brain.

I'd tried delivering it in the personas of well known people, "Well pilgrim, round these parts one up and three down is the way it's done." That didn't stick well either.

Poetry was a dead bust.

"One.
One up.
Alone, singular. Echoing solitude.
One.

Three.
Three down.
A triad, a trinity. Multilayered harmony.
Three.

One. Up.
Three. Down."

It just didn't resonate.

All the approaches were part of a struggle to remember the shift pattern of the Royal Enfield Bullet 500 motorcycle I was riding through the foothills of the Himalayas in India with my wife, Stephanie.

Just about every bike I've ever ridden was shifted with my left foot in a familiar one down / four or five up pattern.

The Enfield, being basically unchanged since the late 1930's, was shifted using the right foot in a one up, thee down pattern.

The shifting being done with my right foot on the Enfield also naturally changed the rear braking duties to my left foot. It was the motorcycling equivalent of simultaneously patting your head, rubbing your stomach, hopping on one foot, chewing gum and whistling in exactly the opposite pattern that you've done it with all your life.

Of course, in India, you're not just riding the bike with opposite controls, you're riding the bike with opposite controls on the left side of the road while weaving between countless monkeys, dogs,

ponies, goats, camels, oxen, cows, elephants, chickens, wild pigs, push carts, bicycles, pedal rickshaws, motor rickshaws, cars, trucks, busses, scooters and motorcycles, all sharing the same 200 feet of road and moving in a wild variety of directions, each with a sensational difference in velocity and purpose.

We had escaped the maddening cacophony of sights, sounds, colors and sensations of Delhi's 16 million people and the competing duality of timeless beauty and merchandising madness of Agra and found refuge on a tiny, one lane twisting road leading into the heights of the mysteries of the Himalayas, the highest mountain range on earth.

As we ascended higher and passed 7,000 feet in elevation, we rode into the clouds. Moving silently through the trees, the mists closed in around us. As we glided slowly through the dark forest people and animals materialized as ghosts from the gray, gained form for a fleeting second as we passed, and were swallowed again by the white in our wake.

The fog was ethereal, mystifying and alive.

I resisted the spell of the mists and concentrated on the twenty feet of roadway I could barely see as it unreeled from the base of the fog.

One up, three down. One up, three down. One up, three down, I repeated with some urgency.

The switchbacks in the tiny road were tight, and left little room for error. The road climbed steeply. A missed shift or a false neutral at an inopportune moment would be disastrous, as the choice between a rock wall or a sheer drop was not one I wanted to make.

I beeped my horn to warn oncoming pedestrians or vehicles as we rounded yet another blind corner, the fog closing in tightly.

As we entered the 180 degree corner the motor chugged slowly, straining to pull us up the steep grade.

Just then a huge bus swept into the corner at impossibly high speed. The driver's eyes widened as he saw us dead center in the road.

My brain seized. I forgot the lyrics. Relying on instincts laid down over tens of thousands of riding miles I instinctively pulled in the clutch, shifted down with my left foot, jabbed the rear brakes with my right foot to tighten my line into the apex, dipped into the front brake to set the chassis and load the front tire for a hard left evasive maneuver, and rolled on the throttle to power out of this crisis in first gear.

That all would have worked perfectly on any one of our bikes, but not on this Enfield.

Because of the reversed foot controls on this ancient British design, I had managed to shift up into a higher gear, bring us to a near halt and drag down the engine to the edge of stalling. As the engine wheezed and made one last revolution, I realized my error and looked up.

The driver and I locked eyes.

We both knew the physics.

He had five tons of fully loaded bus headed our way, complete with bags, packages and people clinging to the top. It was a tiny one lane road in the mountains. There were no shoulders. He could drive it off the cliff and kill every one of his passengers to save us, but that didn't make much sense considering the number of people he had aboard. The math wasn't in our favor. His eyes said, "Sorry, but I have no choice."

It was going to be up to me.

My mind flashed quickly over our week in India. We had seen so little of this country of over one billion people, but had learned so much.

We had been enchanted by its unique mix of cultures, languages, religions and tribes. We had been charmed by its amazing art and handcrafts. We had been amazed by its temples, tombs and monuments. And we had been seduced by its friendly, charming and warm people.

India is the world's largest democracy. While only 15 languages appear on its currency, over 200 are recognized and utilized. While predominately Hindu, it claims over 100 million Muslims as citizens, as well as countless other major religions and sects. It is remarkably geographically diverse, ranging from tropical beaches to jungles to vast plains to deserts to the shoulders of the highest mountains on earth.

It is incredibly vibrant economically. Since giving up on the utopian dream of self-sufficiency and opening its markets, India has made a startling transformation in the opportunities available for its people. For example, in the late '80s there were only a few auto brands available, with a 40 year old British design dominating the market. Today, there are more brands available than you can count, with all the world's major manufacturers scrambling to see who can build the most factories the fastest.

The economic miracle in India is best expressed through the middle class. In short, there are more citizens in the middle class in India than there are people in the United States. A middle class market of over 300 million means amazing numbers of washing machines, toaster ovens, beds and alarm clocks being produced, distributed, marketed and delivered. Each item produced, distributed and sold creates jobs every step of the way.

While there are still huge numbers of people in India in poverty, the number of well paying jobs continues to grow, and more and more families are climbing the economic ladder to build better lives for themselves and their children.

Another telling statistic is in the sales of scooters. For a young family, a scooter is the first motorized form of transport. They move from a bicycle to a scooter, which can provide them much greater range for commuting to jobs, education, shopping and family. We saw innumerable families on scooters and small displacement motorcycles, father at the controls, youngest child between his legs, older child behind dad, mom sitting side saddle on the back with a baby in her arms. A family of five, motoring serenely down the highway at 40 miles an hour running a slalom of camels, rickshaws and pedestrians. In April of this year, Honda produced over 200,000 scooters and small motorcycles for sale in India. That is a single manufacturer's output, and is a significant indicator of the direction of this economy.

In the last quarter of 2003, India's economy grew at over 10%, besting China's growth rate and pegging India as the fastest growing economy in the world.

If that doesn't make you sit up and take notice, consider that last year India produced over 400,000 engineering graduates, and that number is expected to rise significantly in the coming years. The road between Agra and Delhi is literally lined with technology universities. The few open spaces between the rapidly expanding campuses are being filled with the foundations of even more technical colleges. Even in the remotest villages of the high Himalayas we saw posters for technical colleges and training opportunities.

This is a nation that is only beginning to mobilize its population for global competition. While the U.S. churns out more lawyers, pumps more saturated fat into its obese citizenry and hypnotizes them with I.Q. lowering television, countries like India are gearing up to dominate this century.

With a history that spans millennia, a diverse and energetic population, and a sense of national purpose, pride and unity that has been drained from America by self-serving, self-aggrandizing, polarizing factions, India makes for formidable competition on the world stage.

Perhaps the only things that can stop it will be lack of fresh water and the celestial darkness of religious fundamentalism creeping over from Pakistan.

But at this moment, I was consumed by our own impending celestial darkness, delivered courtesy of Darjeeline District Bus 433.

One UP, three DOWN, I screamed at myself. I jerked in the clutch, pulled up repeatedly with my right foot, cracked open the throttle, dumped the clutch, pushed out with my left hand, rotated the bike over and made a dive for the left side of the road. The rock wall rushed up fast as the wake rocked us from the bus passing inches off our starboard rear quarter. I kept the throttle on, pushed down hard with my right hand, rotated the bike back over, tiptoed along the left edge of the pavement and curled back into the road around the rear corner of bus number 433.

I looked in my mirror, but the fog was already swallowing it, the dim glow of its tail lights already disappearing, like the burning eyes of a demon sliding into the depths of hell from whence it came.

We motored on.

Be well,
Doug

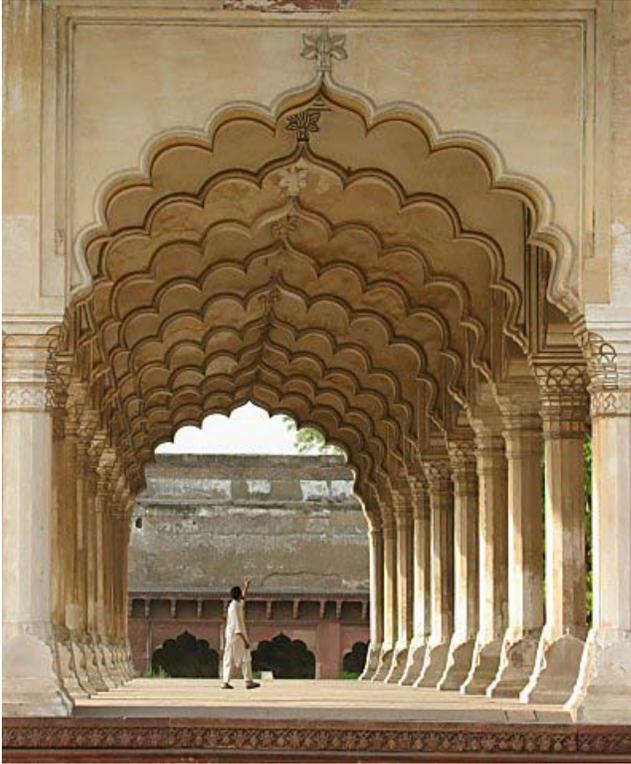
PS – some photos of our journey so far follow



Ready to ride. Royal Enfield Bullet 500.



Taj Mahal at sunrise. Agra, India. 20,000 people worked for 22 years to build it.



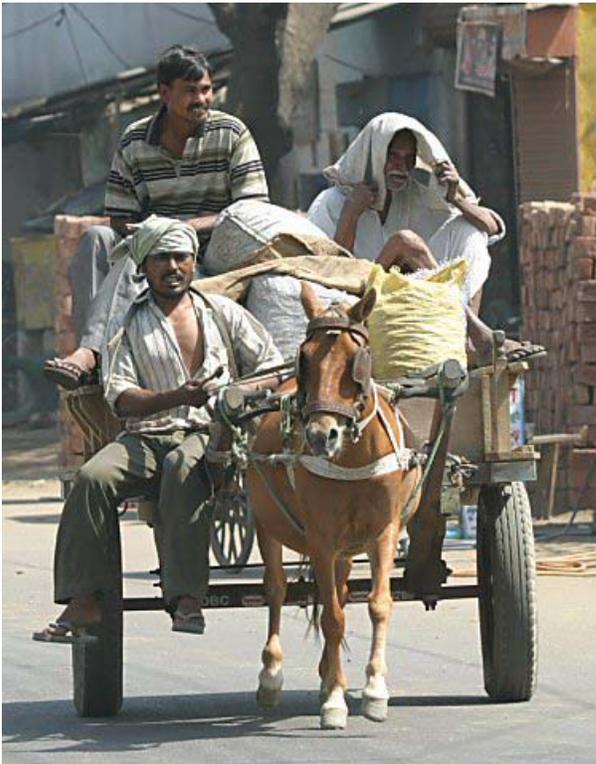
Arches at the red fort. Agra, India



Typical truck. Agra, India



Marble inlaid with precious and semi-precious stones. Every line, stem, petal and shape that you see is a hand cut and shaped piece of stone hand inlaid into a hand cut channel in the marble. This type of inlay work covers the interior and exterior of the Taj Mahal. Agra, India.



Horse cart, Agra, India



Camel pulling a wagon loaded with the wheat crop to market. South of Delhi, India.



Woman carrying load. On the road to Kalimpong, India.



Market corn. Kalimpong, India.



Shoe repair. Kalimpong, India.



Peanut vendor. Kalimpong, India.



Narrow gauge railway, Ghum, India.



Engineer stoking the fire of his steam locomotive. Ghum, India.



Asphalt roller. On the road to Darjeeline, India.



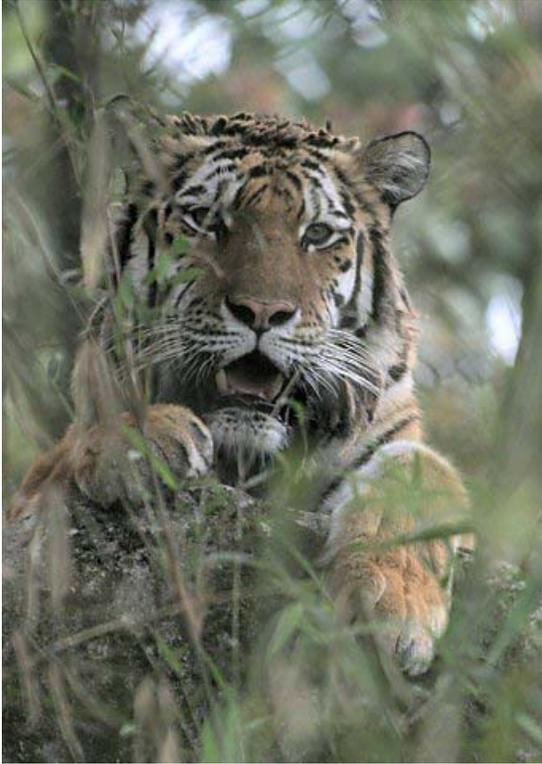
Giving pictures to a mountain family. We printed these prints from our digital camera with a small printer we are carrying on the bike. As we understand it, this is the first family photo they have ever had. On the road to Darjeeline, India.



Red Panda. Darjeeline, India.



Tibetan wolf eating lunch. Darjeeline, India



Siberian Tiger, Darjeeline, India



Snow Leopard. Darjeeling, India.