

# Racing in the valley of gods

If rocks and mud have become mundane to you, consider India's Mtb Himachal. Here you'll find yourself traversing mountains, skirting round villagers, dodging wild and domestic beasts and maybe even the odd passing deity...

📍 & 📷 Huw Kingston





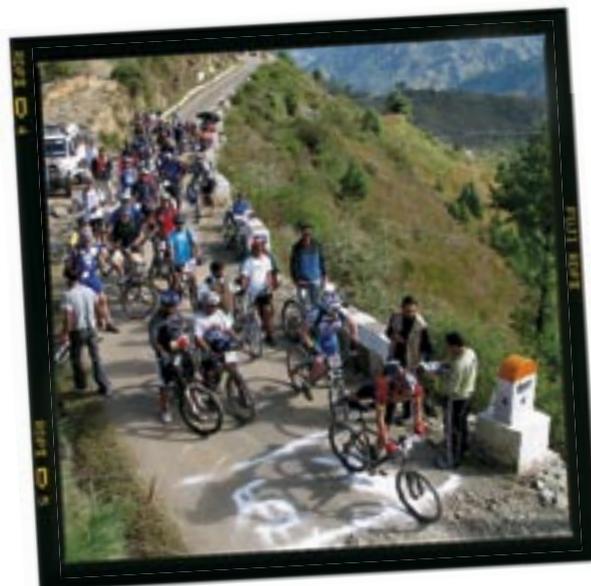
A bridge crossing provides a rare flat section – and a panoramic view

**T**hey'll move, they always do, I thought. Up ahead, two villagers were nonchalantly walking down the track, most of their bodies obscured by the fully laden wicker baskets on their backs. I screamed in a language no-one could understand, hoping they'd step off the track. No reaction. The computer read 45kmph; I started to brake. Which way to go? Which way would the human barrier in front of me go? If we both went right, then there was a chance I'd ride off over the cliff into which the road was cut. Go left, young man. Braking harder, screaming louder, I went left. So did they, leaving a narrow, rocky gap before the cliff wall. 30kmph. I can just squeeze through the gap. He stepped further left but I was committed. Then I saw, in the corner of my eye, the shaft of his axe pointing back towards me from under the basket. I ricocheted off the wall, felt the axe shaft skim past my thigh and I bounced into the old man. Still screaming, now some form of apology, to a road ahead that was clear again.

Mtb Himachal was like that. You never knew what you'd meet on the track. You never knew how fast to take those hundreds of blind corners. Go fast because you were racing; go too fast and find yourself mixing it up with a herd of cows or goats, a truck on its side, baboons brazenly making love in the road or even a god. Yes, this would probably be the only mountain bike race in

the world where there was the possibility of bad karma from taking out a deity on the track. At the same time as we were racing toward the Kullu Valley, some 200 deities were being carried on palanquins from all the surrounding villages and districts to attend the Dusserah, the annual conference of the gods. Not for nothing is Kullu known as the Valley of the Gods.

Mtb Himachal, probably India's only mountain bike race, was taking place for the third time. Organised by some local outdoor enthusiasts, the race ran from their hometown of Shimla, the former summer capital of the British Raj, some 700km to finish nine days later in Manali at the head of the Kullu Valley. While not reaching dizzying Himalayan heights (the maximum altitude was Jalori Pass at





**Squeezing by: obstacles in India are about as varied and unexpected as anywhere in the world**

just over 3000m), there was plenty of up and down in a race through the Himalayan foothills; 'foothills' that would be large mountains in most other countries. I'd spent a large amount of time in India over the years, time spent skiing and trekking, but Mtb Himachal would be my first time on two wheels.

What I didn't expect or plan for was to spend an additional four days in Delhi while Air India searched the world for my missing bike. Four days that I'd planned to spend acclimatising up at Shimla were now endured running out to the airport to push things along, monitoring the crisis in onion prices in the Indian media and even whiling away time playing bingo with a dozen middle-aged Indian women in a restaurant near the hotel.

"It wouldn't have got mixed up with air cargo would it?" I asked on day three. "Of course not sir. Impossible. But we will ring them." "Of course not," was the reply.

On day four I walked into Air India Lost Baggage. "Mr Kingston, we have good news. We have your bike! We have found it in air cargo!" Of course. My beloved steed, custom built, Rohloff equipped steel hardtail, had been at the airport all along.

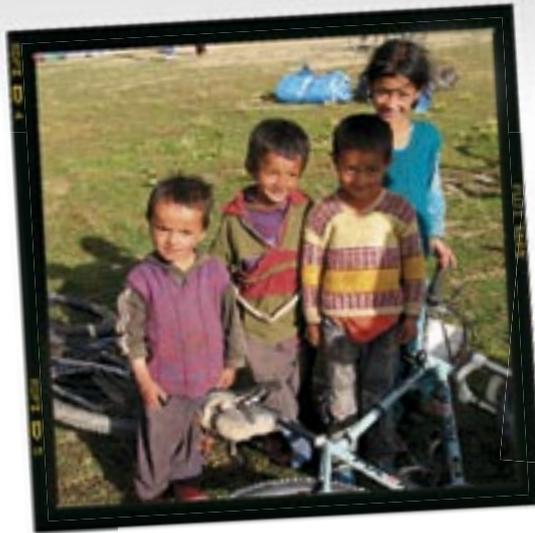
I had just enough time to take a 10-hour taxi trip to Shimla, to register for the race and rebuild the bike. Not the best preparation, but at least I was there, on my own bike.

Mountain biking will no doubt take off in India. Hercules Bikes sponsored the race. They sell 10 million bikes a year in India — not many that would suit a gruelling stage race through the Himalaya, but they see the potential. Firefox Bikes, an offshoot of the venerable Muddy Fox brand, are available in India and recently Trek has seen the potential and set up some dealers. Once at Shimla I met up with Dhananjay and Mohit, the driving force behind Hercules Mtb Himachal. They'd pulled together a team of some 65 people, 23 jeeps and three trucks to support the race. The Indians never do anything by halves! They were supporting the 40 of us that lined up for the start; 27 Indians and 13 overseas riders. We were an eclectic mix. A seven-man team from the Indian army had been picked from 70 hopefuls at a selection camp to receive four months' full-time training at altitude. Gulam, Kashmir's sole cycle coach; Dickie, a Sikh from Delhi with a passion for cycle touring; Vineet, a gear freak from Delhi riding a downhill bike; Dinesh, an IT specialist from Bangalore who'd never seen the Himalaya but never stopped smiling when he did; and Dutta, a Mumbai grape farmer, who had ridden around India and was here for his first race — barefoot.

### SUPPORT NETWORK

Internationally there were a couple of riders from the US including Joe Cruz, a semi-pro rider who was taking in the race as part of a tour through Pakistan, India and Tibet. There was Alun, a Welsh builder, Louie from Belgium who could never understand why things in India worked a little differently to back home and Ray, a laid-back mountain biker from Ireland as keen on the weed growing on the trackside as the riding. Matt from the UK was more used to racing motorbikes through the Himalaya; and Fil Giles, from Australia, decided early on that photographing every child and chatting to every villager was the purpose of his race. And if the barefoot biker was doing it tough, then Alex from England showed the way for the singlespeeders.

The expectation was of grinding out 70km to 90km a day over nine days, a ride of attrition to see who would survive to the end. As it transpired, each day was split into a number of race stages and cruise stages. You might race for, say, 15-30km, then cruise



under non-race conditions to the start of the next stage. This gave time to recover, to take in the surrounds, to refuel. The daily distance was still ridden, but the racing itself became a faster-paced set of shorter stages. The riding took us on dirt tracks or single lane tarmac roads winding through lush valleys and Himalayan villages. The villagers would be out to cheer; schools of children would line the track to clap in unison. Snowcapped mountains rose above the greenery to tempt us north and the post-monsoon autumn clarity of the skies assured crisp views.

The race out of Shimla laid out what we were in store for. The first race stage saw a 1000m descent through forest on rough, sometimes muddy trail. A few cows were dodged and a low-slung power cable offered decapitation potential but fortunately we all kept our heads. There was no escaping the fact that you were in big hill country. Many race stages were continually up or continually down with altitude gains or losses of 1500m or more in one hit. While not overly technical, there was plenty of challenge in the riding; keeping your wits about you to ensure you didn't miss a corner and plunge hundreds of metres to a river gorge below; bone jarring descents on rocks the size of housebricks. In true Indian fashion each rider was issued a timing book with carbon copies to be signed and countersigned at the beginning and end of each stage. Food and drink was supplied at plenty of feed points along the way.

The organisers took care of most things. Camps were set up at the end of each day with hot water to wash off dust and sweat and food to refuel with. Food was both plentiful and extremely tasty. A masseur was even on hand to aid recovery. The plastic waterbottle is a scourge of India but dehydration is a potential scourge of the mountain biker. One truck was given over to transporting crates of the stuff. And like in any major shipment, the good oil was hidden among the cargo, and Cobra, a local beer, could be found on occasions to ease parched throats.

In the race itself there were probably too many categories for the numbers involved: Solo National, Solo International, Solo Masters National, Solo Masters International and a team version of each of these (where two riders rode the race together). It ensured that many riders went home with a trophy or even a substantial cash prize. The prize pool of 600,000 rupees (approx \$20,000) was probably a bit over the top and was certainly not the driving force for the riders taking part. Of the 40 who started, 28 completed the whole race. The army team was dominant, taking six of the top 10 positions. Ramesh Chander Joshi (16:04:54) was the overall winner with American Joe Cruz (16:40:26) and Wahengbam Diben Meetel (16:48:35) rounding out the podium.

Indeed the army guys were impressive, given all were riding with flat pedals, cotton tees and bikes that would rank at the bottom end of a UK race line-up. Their sheer fitness had them flying on the ups and their lack of fear ensured either a flying finish or a flying over the bars. There was a certain danger to being around some of these guys on the downs; race

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etiquette was often not to the fore. I pondered on how good it would be to take this raw talent to a modern training institute for some weeks with a bit of technical training and better gear.

### POMP AND CEREMONY

What Mtb Himachal did very well indeed was ceremony. At the start in Shimla we were flagged off by the chief minister of the state of Himachal Pradesh and a military band followed the round of speeches and media conferences. The presentation nine days later would put a World Champs to shame. Our rag-tag bunch of 40 riders were treated like world champions as we were presented to an outdoor auditorium full of invited guests. Stage lighting, booming music and speech after thanks after speech after thanks...

Nothing that could conceivably be produced for an event was missing — trophies, medals, event shirts, certificates for finishing, for placing, for a category. It is the Indian way: a slight feeling of going over the top.

It is also the Indian way to avoid conflict and pay heed to the respect for certain institutions. While Mtb Himachal had a booklet of rules running to many pages, the implementation of some depended on the consequences. When I caught one of the army team taking a shortcut on a race stage, I reported it and fully expected him to be disqualified as any cheat should be and as the rule book suggested. The organisers were reluctant and the compromise was that he not appear in the final results but be

allowed to continue riding. The reason given was that should he be disqualified he would likely be court martialled from the army. Even after all the time I had spent in India, I found this hard to believe. However, toward the end of the race I caught up with a very dear old friend, a retired brigadier in the Indian army, who confirmed that the rider would bring such shame on his regiment that he would have to lose his job.

There were a few accidents, probably the worst befalling Reinhard Mauch from Australia. Some local children had innocently strung cassette tape across the track, thinking it would be fun to watch riders break through their ‘finishing line’. Pinning it down the track at 40kmph+, Reinhard saw the thin tape glistening in the sunlight, assumed it to be strand of wire and jammed on the anchors. Over he went to land on face and head. Much blood, helmet pieces, worry and an evacuation to the nearest hospital. The end result could have been so much worse than numerous stitches, missing teeth and a badly bruised and cut face. Like the trucks he sells back home, Reinhard’s a tough bugger and three days later he was back on the bike.

Mtb Himachal provided an eye-opener to the wealth of mountain biking opportunities available in the Indian Himalaya. While it is easy to look at the tracks traversing the highest altitudes for your Himalayan mtb fix, there is a mass of great riding on almost traffic-free tracks at lower altitudes, many of which are rarely visited by tourists.



### THE RACE

Hercules Mtb Himachal is a nine-day mtb race covering some 700km in the Indian Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh. It starts in Shimla at an altitude of 2200m and finishes in Manali in the Kullu Valley. About half of the distance is racing with interconnecting cruising stages. This makes it reasonably fast paced for those competing hard but equally suitable for those primarily there for the experience of mountain biking in India. Go to India with patience and an open mind as the race will be a mix of superb organisation and slight chaos, with the former easily winning out.

The 2008 event starts on September 27 and this year may include a rest day along the way. The entry price will be around \$600. Full details at [www.mtbhimalachal.com](http://www.mtbhimalachal.com).

### GETTING THERE

The nearest international airport is Delhi; numerous flights from Europe daily, taking about eight hours. Shimla is about 10-12 hours train, bus or car journey from Delhi. There are flights

from Delhi but restrictions on luggage makes this an unlikely option. From the finish in Manali, it is a 14-16 hour bus ride or 12-hour car trip back to Delhi.

### CONDITIONS

Expect primarily rural roads and tracks, ranging from single lane sealed roads to doubletrack rough jeep tracks. While there are probably some 12,000m of ascent (and equal of descent!), most of it is rideable (many Indian vehicles are not powerful enough to get up hills that are too steep). In 2007 there were a couple of non-race stages where you may need to push or carry your bike on so-called ‘hike & bike’ sections. While some will feel the effect of the altitude, it is not a major issue for most, particularly if some time is spent acclimatising in Shimla and surrounds. The event is manageable for intermediate riders with a reasonable level of fitness.

The post-monsoon weather is generally fine but rain is a possibility. Night-day temperatures are generally of the order of 10-25 degrees.

### WHAT TO TAKE

A bike you know and love is the order of the day. While better bikes are now available in India, this is only in one or two outlets in the major cities. You’ll need to take any tools and spares with you and hope that you can’t fix the problem, one of the other riders can. For simplicity, a hardtail has a few less components to let you down.

All food and drink is provided during the riding, as is camping equipment. You might wish to take some of your favourite ride foods such as gels, sports bars and powdered drinks.

### HEALTH

The reputation of India for imparting sickness from food and water goes before it, but the reality is much improved. To the best of my knowledge, no-one in the race in 2007 suffered majorly from any problems. The food at the event was excellent and well prepared and bottled water was available in good quantity. Common sense, a good first aid kit and any relevant jabs will ward off all but the worst of luck.

