



Photo by Mary Frances Dunham

Indian Summer

By Mary Frances Dunham

The bikes are primitive and the traffic is heavy, but India is a place a cyclist can call home

When an opportunity came last year for my family to spend the summer in India, our college-aged daughter wished to "do" the whole country, from its southernmost tip, where it meets the Indian Ocean, to the Himalayas, where it touches the sky. I hoped to insert some cycling into this odyssey, which would be done mostly by train and bus. In order to travel light, I left behind the folding bicycle that I generally take on trips. According to the guide book, I could rent a bicycle in some Indian cities. The promise of an instant bicycle, without transportation or storage problems, outweighed the advantages of bring-

ing my own bike.

As it turned out, I spent most of the journey watching others ride rather than riding myself. Wherever we went, cyclists and their bicycles claimed my attention. My family humored me in this unorthodox form of sightseeing. They waited patiently while I photographed not tombs and temples, like a normal tourist, but the bicycles parked at their gates. This specialized view of one of the world's most ancient civilizations was a narrow one, but the more I indulged in it, the more addicted I became. Where, but in India, does one see such extraordinary bicycle scenes? There were vendors with entire shops on their

bicycles; cycling husbands toting wives and children; bicycle "trucks" carrying lumber, oil drums, sacks of rice, crates of eggs, stacks of furniture or cages of parakeets. Where else does one see bicycle "school buses" overflowing with children?

In the cities, mopeds and motorscooters seemed to prevail over bicycles. In towns and rural areas, however, the bicycle was still the dominant form of transportation. In fact, they are still so commonplace in India that a political party has chosen a bicycle for its logo. I looked at a poster bearing this bicycle emblem. Its design seemed particularly cogent. Its spoked wheels recalled a long tradition of symbolic wheels in Indian culture: chariot wheels of gods and heroes in Hindu temple sculpture, wheels of time and life in Buddhist art, Gandhi's beloved spinning wheel, and the summation of all such wheels in the stylized wheel on the national flag of India. Whether chosen by accident or instinct, the bicycle logo belonged to this venerable line.

I could tell the status and origin of cyclists from their appearance. Sikh business men wore turbans, trim beards and flapping trousers; Punjabi office workers preferred tight fitting pants and long flowing shirts; laborers wore lungis, the Indian sarong. Upper-class school boys clad in flannel trousers, shirts and ties contrasted with their less fortunate contemporaries in tattered shorts and T-shirts. Liberated Indian women in saris sped by on mopeds, but only school girls rode bicycles. Drivers of mopeds and motor-scooters religiously wore heavy helmets, but their passengers, often women and children, wore none. Once I saw a group of Indian cyclists in racing outfits. Otherwise, few Indians, except for children, ride for sport.

Indian bicycles seemed unchanged from my days spent in the country years ago. Now, as then, they retain the classic look of their forefathers introduced in British times: sturdy one-speed machines, equipped with front brakes only, touring handlebars, a broad saddle, mudguards and a two-sided chain guard. Most Indian bicycles also have a U-shaped kickstand whose base goes on the ground under the back wheel. When parked, the bikes stand firmly upright on their own. Painted black and weighing more than 35 pounds, Indian bicycles look as heavy as they are. Hardly aerodynamic, they nevertheless give a superbly comfortable ride.

In keeping with its proud policy of economic self-sufficiency, India manufactures all its own bicycles; none are imported. The names "Hero," "Hercules," and "Phillips" appeared most frequently, followed by "Raleigh" (Indian made), "Gramo," "Avon," and "Shaka," to name a few others. I was told by a bicycle store

owner that about 4,000 "Hero" bicycles are produced daily in India for home consumption and export. Bicycles are currently priced between rupees 600 and 1000 (about \$60-\$100), depending on the reputation of the model.

My daughter longed to take an Indian bicycle home with us to New York. Instead, we settled for a few of the intriguing accessories that could be easily carried: brightly

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colored oil-cloth covers that can be snapped around bicycle frame tubes, and water-proof saddle covers in a variety of shiny designs. One of these was stuffed like a cushion. We resisted buying the heavier items: chromed side-view mirrors, bicycle bells, and headlights. We succumbed to buying an Indian bicycle lock, a circular padlock that is screwed permanently to the back stays of a bicycle so that its shaft can encircle the rim of the back wheel. The key stays in the lock when the bicycle is in use. It is removed only when the lock is closed. I was surprised that this lock was considered sufficient protection against thieves, but Indians whom I questioned only laughed at my doubts.

It wasn't until we reached Kashmir, the northernmost state of India, that I finally rode a bicycle. This remote region on the western side of the Himalayas contains one of the most beautiful valleys in the world, the "Vale of Kashmir." Long popular as a trekker's paradise, it is ideal cycling country. The valley floor, a flat expanse of fields and lakes, is ringed with terraced and wooded hills. Ancient towns, mosques, temples, and sacred springs are scattered throughout the valley. Cyclists can pedal from one attraction to another in day-long "loops" or on longer expeditions, camping or staying at tourist lodges. The climate is temperate, the roads are well maintained, and the scenery is enchanting at every turn.

While our daughter went into the higher Himalayas for a week, my husband and I stayed in Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir. Most tourists stay in houseboats on the lakes and waterways that surround the city. We preferred a hotel with a view over the lakes, a choice that was especially convenient for cycling. Three bicycle rental

stands only a few streets away supplied tourists with bicycles for a mere "rupees six" (less than 50 cents) per day.

My husband accompanied me on a day's excursion to see two of the famous Moghul gardens located on the edge of the lake nearest to Srinagar. Setting out after breakfast, we followed the shore road. Its stately poplars shaded us from the morning sun. Frequently, we stopped to enjoy the view: the still lake in front with the tree-lined shores ahead and the silhouettes of hills and mountains in the distance all around.

The Moghul gardens are masterpieces of landscape architecture. Laid out by Indian princes more than 400 years ago, the gardens descend on slopes that have been terraced into lawns and flower beds. Water cascades from one formal pool to another, from the top of the garden to the lake itself. We wandered among the flowers and stretched out on lawns under the dense foliage of lofty trees.

Heading home the way we had come, we reached Srinagar as the sun was setting behind the city. The lake was busy with shikaras, Kashmir's gondolas, plying between the houseboats and the shore. We paused one last time to watch the darkening landscape brighten with the shimmering lights of the city.

On another outing we agreed to meet at a bridge on the other side of the lake. I was to ride ahead while my husband, who preferred to walk, followed on foot. I made my way through dense traffic until I came to the edge of the city. A stretch of smooth, quiet road ran through a tapestry of rice fields studded with groves of fruit and nut trees. The fields were a brilliant green, stretching to hills of an even deeper hue. Narrow canals wandered like footpaths through the trees while families of ducks preened on their banks.

On reaching the appointed bridge, I was struck once again by Kashmir's natural beauty. "Our" lake lay on one side of us. On the other side was an adjoining lake, equally large, rimmed with terraced fields. Nearby, a weather-worn houseboat was moored in a pond filled with lotus flowers. They stood high-necked on their stems, their broad circular leaf-pads floating beneath them. While I sketched the scene before me, a young Kashmiri woman came over to watch. Laughing, she commented in broken English on my efforts. In a while my husband joined me. We hired a shikara to take us home in luxury, bicycle and all. Lounging like pashas on deep cushions, we were softly paddled across the lake.

Other days I explored Srinagar itself. I would ride lazily down narrow streets that wound between ancient two and three-story houses. Their exposed timber work gave them a look of Elizabethan England. Humped bridges spanned canals

dotted with dugouts carrying colorful vegetables neatly stacked on their decks. I listened to cocks crowing in the neighborhoods and children chanting their lessons. Wandering on, I would find my way "by ear," until I rejoined the traffic of the central districts.

India's traffic is heavy, but safe. I attributed the lack of accidents to the local automobile horns, which give frequent, piercing warnings. Formerly, Indian horns were of the squeeze-bulb variety—their donkey-like braying was characteristic of Indian traffic. Now, the newer horns have lost all vestiges of that organic warmth. They no longer wheeze their messages, but shriek them fiercely.

In time I learned to tune out the sounds of the horns around me. I came to appreciate how effective they were in signaling the location of the vehicle behind me, whether to the right or left—whether near or far. I learned that drivers were not persecuting me personally, but were communicating their presence to the traffic in general.

From Kashmir we returned to New York at the cruel speed only airplanes can inflict. As I resumed my accustomed cycling back home, I experienced culture shock. My Japanese Raleigh felt underweight and capricious. I missed India's multitude of bicycles and the feeling of being accepted by motorists. Too often I had to turn my head to check the traffic lurking behind. Instead of those unforgettable warnings from Indian horns, I heard the squeal of car brakes making sudden stops. When I wanted to park, I had to find a suitable support for my bicycle and struggle to bind bike and post together with my unwieldy American U-lock.

My daughter dressed her 10-speed

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Panasonic in the Indian accoutrements we had brought back. The oil-cloth covers gave it a comical rather than decorative look and the simple Indian lock seemed too vulnerable to deter the sophisticated thieves of our city. Nevertheless, I gazed wistfully at her bicycle in its exotic finery. Momentarily I saw again the streets of India—a colorful, noisy world where bicycles still play a vital and varied role.

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On The Cover:

Author Glen Dines and company took time to enjoy their tour of France's Burgundy region, and beyond. For the complete, unhurried story, see page 12. Illustration by Glen Dines.

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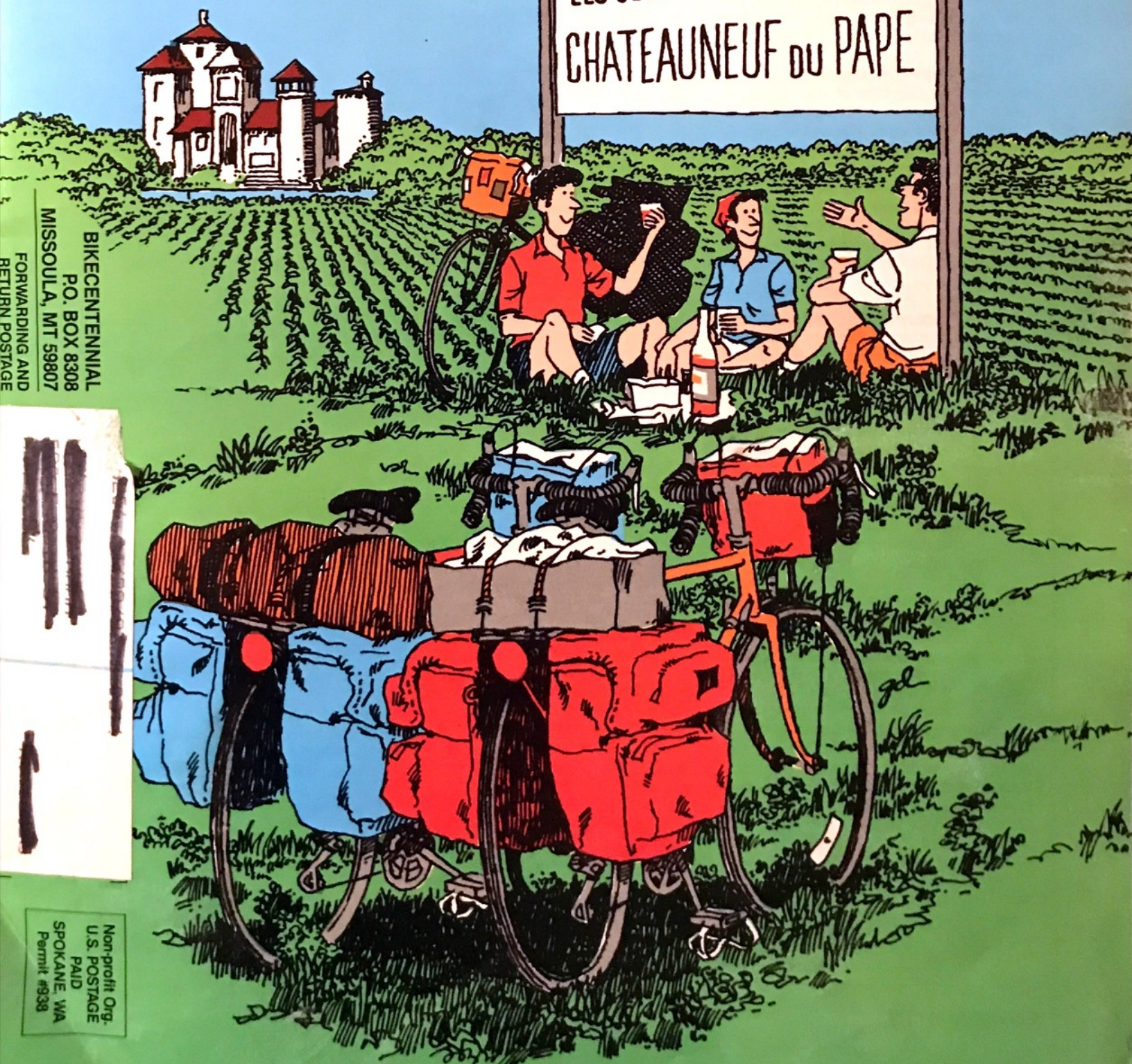
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