



ANTS IN A
LANDSCAPE
TOO LARGE TO
COMPREHEND

"This is the most powerful experience I have had while sitting on my bike."

Mumbled quietly in a gruff Scottish accent, these words were an attempt to express the feeling that was overwhelming our wide-eyed, two-wheeled group.

We all felt it.

Knobby rubber tyres moved slowly over meticulously placed stones. We teetered at balancing speed between small buildings far enough apart for two bikers. Little hands of local children late for school reached out to touch our mysterious, bright metal horses. Their smiles of curiosity filled our hearts while towering mountains filled our eyes. The chilly morning breeze smelled of incense as it passed by, popping prayer flags to attention on its way down the valley. The school bell tolled, children scattered and the village faded under the cover of browns, greys, stark shadows and piercing highlights created by the world's tallest mountains.

Our knobby rubber tyres rolled on.

We were in Nepal, and we were on our bikes. There is no mistaking it; this was one of those moments when you ask yourself, "How the heck did I get here?"

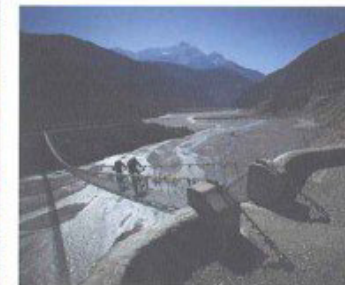
Logistically, it required an 18-hour movie-thon to Bangkok followed by another 3 and a half hour flight to Kathmandu, a few days of riding and acclimatizing, a flight to Pokhara and then another flight to Jomsom.

In terms of making the decision, all it took was the word Nepal.

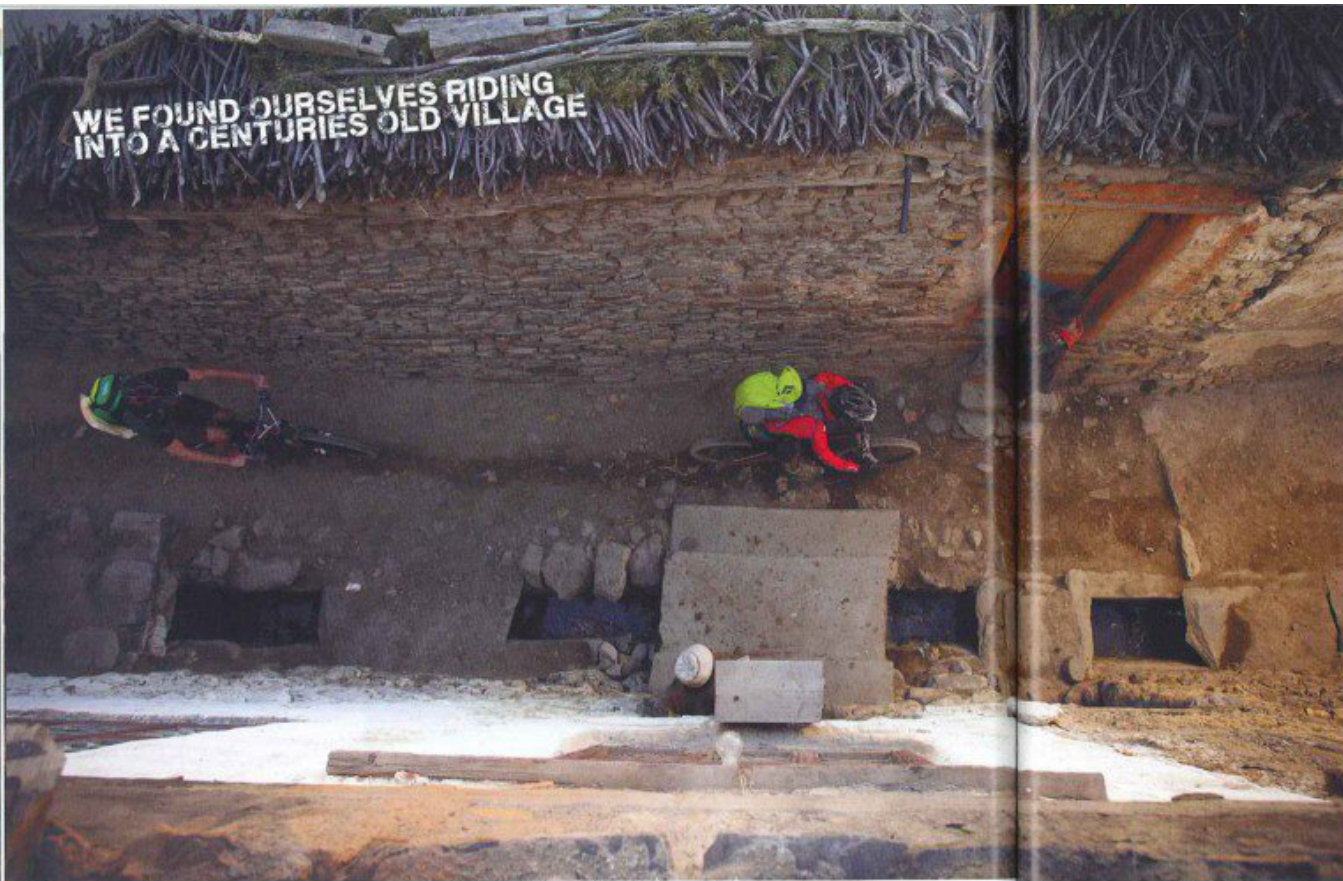
Just say it... Nepal.

Think of the mystery, scale and wonder that fill your deepest curiosities. Think of the people. Think of the landscape. Shoot, think of the geography. Can you point it out on a map? These are all reasons I had for going, the sum of all that is enshrouded in that simple two-syllable word; Ne-pal.

As our feet blurred into circular infinity and our legs pumped without connection to our minds, we watched and admired everything that moved by. We were ants in a landscape too large to comprehend.



WE FOUND OURSELVES RIDING INTO A CENTURIES OLD VILLAGE



It is a concept I have encountered before, and even become used to at times, but this was different. This was the Himalaya. These were the tallest mountains in the world.

Dwarfed by named and unnamed peaks, I wondered how people could survive here. I wondered how they manage the brutal winters and barren landscape, and how self-sufficient they must be to do so. As my mind puzzled over these questions that a westerner with no issues a few taps on an iPhone screen can't fix, we came to a place of answers.

Maybe not direct answers, but more understanding.

Through connections made by our local guide and fixer, we found ourselves riding into a centuries old village tucked away behind rolling hills and the overpowering Himalayan backdrop.

Far less bustling and populated than the previously mentioned village, this one seemed more like a ghost town. Most of the community was out tending their fields when our little convoy stopped and our local guide gave a knock on a small wooden door. It opened and there stood the man of the house, greeting us with hands together, a bow of the head and a warm "Namasté".

He showed us into the earthen home. It was dark, but as our eyes adjusted, it reminded me of the storage area underneath my own house; stacks of firewood from ground to ceiling. We followed our host up steep clay steps to the centre of the home where all of the rooms, stairways, ladders and doorways met. There, we were led up a ladder made from a single wood log, to a rooftop overlooking the village and surrounding mountains.

Prayer flags whipped in all directions, so numerous that they created their own symphony over the powerful dissonance of the wind. Others were on their rooftops too, knocking the dust out of rugs, stacking firewood, mending torn pants and any number of other household chores. Villagers even kept their chickens on their rooftops, kind of like a fenced-in backyard. Fenced with firewood, of course.

Asked to sit and enjoy a comfortable rug, our small group collapsed in smiles. Guarded from the wind by a wall of firewood and warmed by a cloudless blue sky, we all struggled for words. In fact, I remember a long, silent period when only our eyes could say what was on our minds.

Then came the tea.

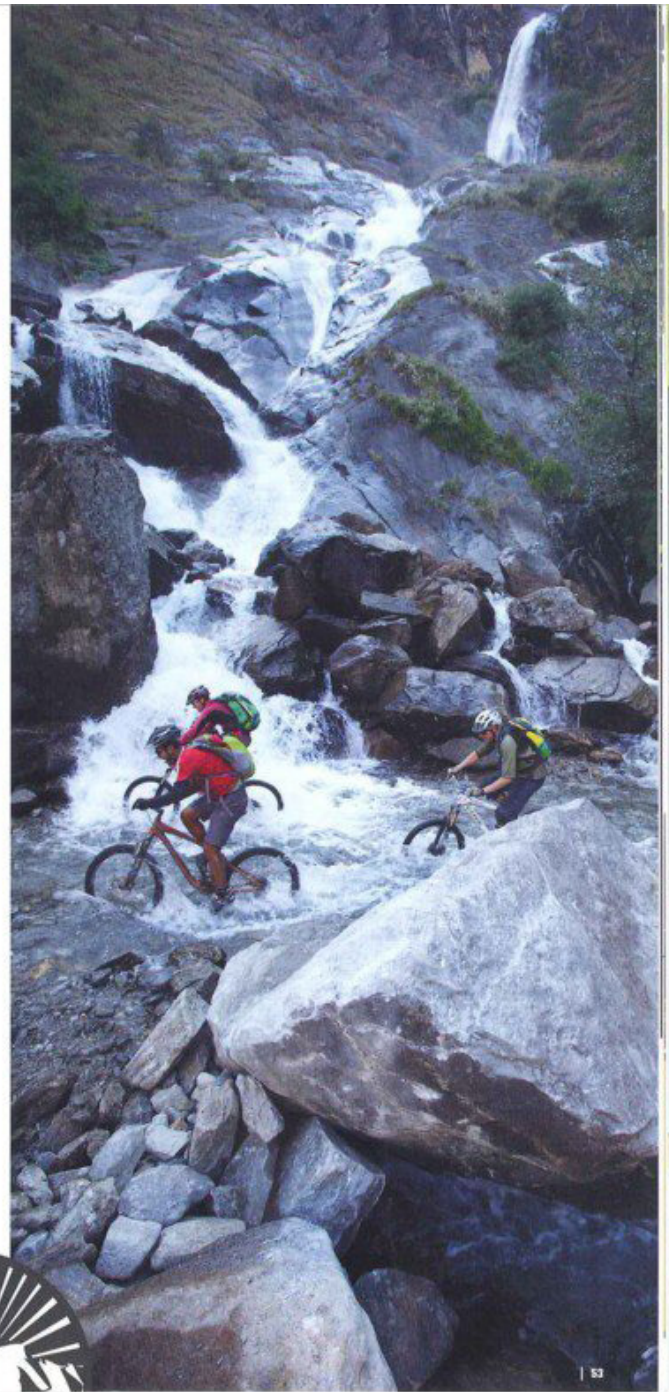
Sweetened with yak milk and a side of apples and seasonings, we sipped. It was as

if the tea itself had become a symbol of the experience we were taking in. We all sipped our experience slowly, in fear of ending it one swallow too soon. None of us could bear the thought of leaving that moment. Then more tea came out and we all breathed a sigh of relief that it would last one cup longer.

Seeing the volume of wood on our host's roof (and in his house), as well as everyone else's roof in the village, I asked where they get all of their wood.

"Here. We gather it all around here," was the translated response.

Looking "all around here," I didn't see a single forested area. It just didn't seem like a place where trees would grow, so I gathered that our definitions of "around here" were very different.



Basically, life is difficult and everyone had spent every opportunity since last winter gathering wood from anywhere they could find it. That was my understanding of the conversation.

Likewise, on a tour of the rest of the house, which had been lived in for hundreds of years by the same family, we saw rows upon rows of yak meat drying from the ceiling.

Again, life is tough and all preparations must be made.

We bid farewell to our gracious host, thanking him repeatedly, and then apologizing after an awkward, slow motion over the bars (handle bars) experience on our way out.

Our ride up to the village had been strenuous but pleasant. We slowly worked our way past people singing in their fields, bells dingling around yak's necks, saying "Namasté" to all we passed. Still, of course, surrounded by intensely tall mountains.

Our ride down from the village, on the other hand, was the exact opposite. Fast and flowy singletrack that made sure you were paying attention. There was certainly no time for looking around and Namastés. In fact, all of the descents were like that.

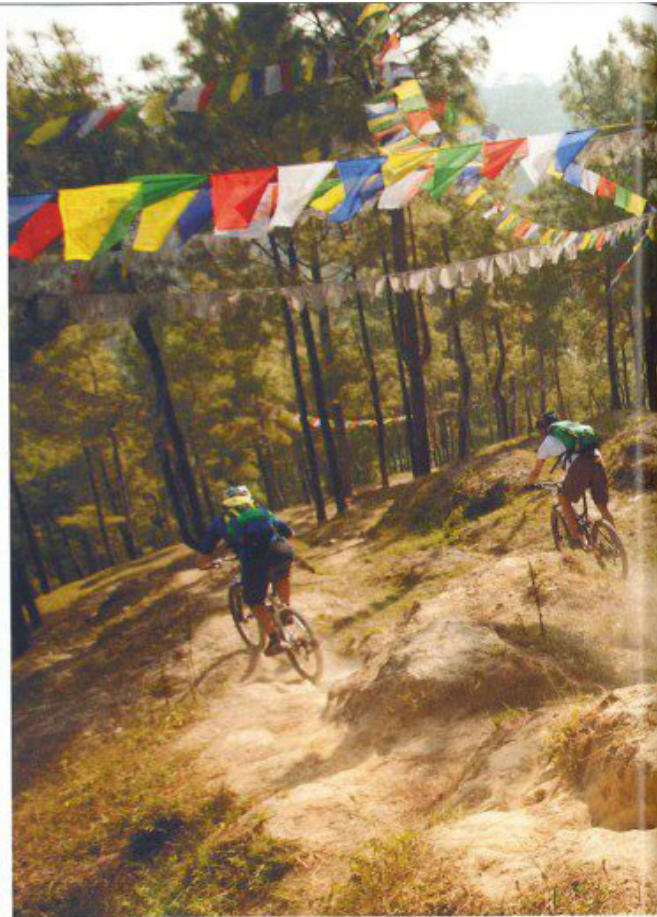
It was a mountain biker's paradise.

The adrenaline pumping downhill would then peter out into another maze of stone and clay walkways, squeezed between two and sometimes three-story buildings. The sunless damp air between tight earthen edifices smelled of livestock while the chilly shade promised a runny nose and visible proof of your own breath.

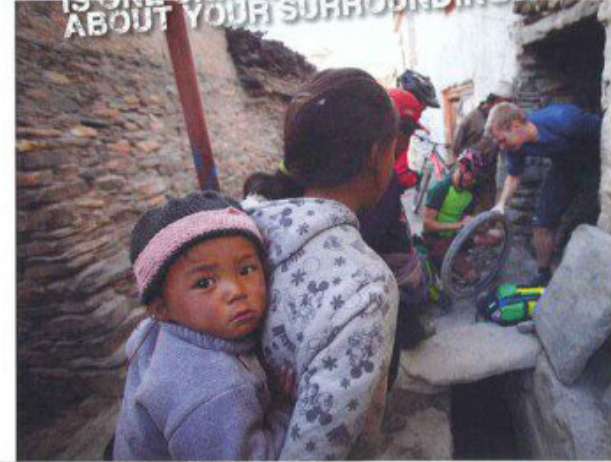
Rolling slowly and keeping an eye out for hazards like the usual stray chicken or missing stone covering the village's water duct (typically underneath the village's walkways), you couldn't help but notice how quiet and still it was. It's as if time had stopped, or just not affected those areas yet. Things were as they always had been and short of sitting on space age technology, we all felt a little further back in the history of things as well. After a long day of riding, I settled into the new rhythm of time, tranquility and reflection and did what the locals do.

I sat down for more tea.

This time I sipped with a man named Mukhiya, or Snow Monkey as he prefers. Snow Monkey, it turns out, would be more accurately called something along the lines of Mr. Nepal. Between hot slurps I found out that over the last twenty or so years, Snow Monkey has done everything from lead alpine climbs to many of the region's highest peaks, act as a porter on other trips,



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take point in conservation efforts for the snow leopard as well as organize and lead logistics for film crews. Last year he played a pivotal role in race logistics for the Yak Attack mountain bike race, a 400 km off-road suffer fest that crosses the world's highest mountain pass. If there is someone to know in Nepal, it is Snow Monkey.

It should also come as no real surprise that he even has his own line of sturdy, and quite stylish, wool pants. And for 200 Euros, he'll guarantee that they last longer than you do. A self-described "crazy walker," Snow Monkey told me of a walk, or trek, he completed from Pokhara to Jomsom in two days. We opted for the flight and having done my own share of backpacking, I don't think I could have covered that terrain in a week. He is also the only one to ever go over Thorong Pass, then back in one day simply because he decided it would be nicer to spend the night at home.

"I like to do things that are difficult," he told me. "I like to use my body."

Like all Nepalis, Snow Monkey is one tough dude. I think you have to be when you grow up walking over a 17,769 foot pass just to say hi to your neighbours.

Taking in my last sips of now tepid mint tea, I reflected on the fact that whether it was a conversation about wool pants with a mountain legend, kids running by my bike while I rolled through their village, mountains like I have never seen or a spiritual experience on a stranger's rooftop, that two-syllable word had delivered.

Nepal

The crazy thought is that I have only described one day from a twelve-day trip.

In an age where schedules are full, time always seems short and the digital world keeps offering us second-hand experiences at the touch of a screen, real exploring is still the ultimate teacher. And real exploring on a bike is one unique way to learn about your surroundings. It allows you the ability to cover a lot of ground, while always having the choice to slow down and look around. It gives you a sense of accomplishment equally in mileage and exhaustion. It challenges you and it rewards you.

Most importantly, it introduces you to people you might not otherwise meet, and takes you to places you might not otherwise go.

In this case, it took me to Nepal - where I too, had "the most powerful experience I have had while sitting on my bike."

