

# MONKEY BUSINESS IN INDIA

*Following an ancient trail in the Himalayas means accepting some risks, but monkeys never made it onto the danger list. Until now...*

Words and pics Dan Milner

**L**angur monkeys can grow to a metre long and weigh 26kg. One misses Tracy Moseley by a whisker as it leaps across the trail. It's the closest we come to landing an instant YouTube hit and is the latest ingredient in our Himalayan adventure: a 12-day out-and-back ride to the Pindari Glacier.

I've joined Tracy on Mountain Bike Kerala's epic ride through the steep Himalayan foothills and deep into the

enormous 6,000m-plus peaks of India's highest mountains.

The trip itself is schizophrenic. For the first few days we weave through dense jungle, earning fast descents by puffing up steep climbs. We finish each day swooping through villages and backyards of chickens and tethered goats. Jeeps wait to shuttle us to our hotel and endless dishes of curry. This is our gentle acclimatisation before the true Pindari experience with its five days of high-mountain riding begin. »



Riding under such majestic peaks is pretty magical



Hot noodles make good trail fodder when the temperature drops



It's not all snow and rocks – there are plenty of trees in the foothills



What's left is mile upon mile of crumbling, paved trail that snakes its way through some of India's best-suited mountain bike terrain



If mules cross these, so can we. Just don't look down, OK



It's a journey of discovery and reward and, apart from Christer's four-day affinity for toilets, is largely without mishap. With each day's increasing isolation, it's clear that this really isn't a place to get injured. A broken arm or ankle sprain would mean a two-day journey out on the back of a porter, if you're lucky – or a mule if you're unlucky.

**Keeping track**

We bear this in mind as we poke handlebars around blind bends on the narrow trail, never knowing whether we'll meet monkey, cow or local villager ahead. Any of these is possible because the trails here serve a purpose: access to the villages that dot the steep, terraced hillsides. Cars don't figure here. Where jeep tracks exist, they are temporary, being washed away or buried under landslides during the summer monsoons.

It's on a recently 'reopened' jeep track that we find ourselves bumping along at dusk, heading out of Bageshwar to the start of

the high-mountain chapter of the trip. Our jeep churns through gushing torrents on exposed hillsides and lurches across the debris of recent landslips.

The Pindari name for our tour is a little misleading. We will only see this tumbling sea of ice on day eight, at our ride's furthest point, the 3,626m high Zero Point. There we'll U-turn and begin four days retracing our steps. But the trip's namesake glacier is the reason behind the construction of the trail we're riding, when in 1830 the British commissioner GW Traill ordered the trekking path to be built.

What's left is mile upon mile of crumbling, paved trail that snakes its way through some of India's best-suited mountain bike terrain. Traill's trail sees almost no bikes. Mike McLean's guiding outfit is the only reason riders pedal this trail, and it's with surprise as much as enthusiasm that locals greet us along the way.

And that's understandable. An initial 1,600m climb up steep trail too broken to ride holds little appeal, but Mike has a solution up his sleeve: porters. In 25 years of adventure biking I've never had someone carry my bike, and I struggle with the concept. Is it pride, stubbornness or testosterone? For five quid each we can have our bikes carried and pushed up the five-hour haul to the 2,940m Dhakuri Pass. I warm to the »

**ALTERNATIVE TRAIL SKILL**  
**HIKE IT OR BIKE IT?**

Every good adventure demands some hike-a-bike action and this trip is no exception. Being able to carry your bike means you get to access some of the world's most rewarding rides. So pay attention to your upper body strength if heading to the mountains. Practise slinging your bike onto your back in one smooth motion, pivoting the rear up and lifting the front second, making sure it doesn't snag on your pack. Alternatively, rest the bike upside down with the down tube on the back of your neck for better weight distribution. The first method is good for shorter hikes, the second more comfortable but puts your neck close to the chainrings, so watch your step. A bashring can help here. Spec your bike light enough to carry but don't skimp on components that will need some burl, such as tyres.



## He pedals his Kona hardtail in £2 tennis shoes, but keeps our £4,000 rigs in sight on all but the most technical of descents



A welcome brew, Himalayan style



After the first week we bid the jeep goodbye and head into the hills

idea of redistributing my wealth to local villagers. It's the best fiver I've ever spent, and a scrum of porters jockey to grab the lightest looking of our bikes.

Our porters are rallied by Pankaj, a humble, energetic Indian mountain biker. He's Mike's trail guide and fixer, the local guy who sorts the accommodation and mules and

jeeps and makes sure everything works, without the haggling that would otherwise accompany Mike's attempts.

Pankaj has only been riding for 18 months, but he launches himself scarily fast down any trail. He pedals his Kona hardtail in £2 tennis shoes, but keeps our £4,000 rigs in sight on everything but the most technical of descents. Khati, where we arrive in the dark that night, is Pankaj's home village and as we blast the last few hundred metres of trail towards our overnight guesthouse, he pulls ahead of the group and proudly leads us in. We've been riding and hiking for nine hours, but he's still grinning broadly.

### Simple pleasures

Our showers are buckets of hot water heated on the stove and brought to the simple, unheated rooms. It's a far cry from the kitsch hotels we've been staying at up to now, but delivers a real adventure feel. The evenings are cold and we warm up with lentil dahl and potato curries and loosen up with local beer, carried up on our mules, before retreating to our sleeping bags.

From Khati we follow the sound of the thundering Pindari River upstream, making it to the village of Dwali – a government

### ESSENTIAL INFO

#### HOW, WHAT AND WHEN

Mountain Bike Kerala guides the Pindari Glacier trip twice a year, in April and September. A 12-day guided package with all accommodation and jeep/mule support starts at £995. Extras are flights, evening meals and drinks. Daily flights to Delhi start at £450 with BA, Air India, Jet Airways or Etihad. A 120-150mm travel full sus bike is best: it's tough all-mountain riding at times, but make sure your bike is light enough to carry too. This is pinch-flat country – dual-ply tyre sidewalls are recommended. You'll need an 18-25litre pack with 3litre hydration reservoir, essential tools, waterproof jacket and an extra warm layer for the high mountains. Food is great. People are great. The riding is great. What's stopping you? [www.mountainbikekerala.com](http://www.mountainbikekerala.com)

trekking bungalow and a smoky tea shack – before the heavens open. Our decision to stay put saves us from a soaking, but leaves us a big day ahead.

It's a 5am alarm. It's dark and cold. Ice crusts the puddles on the trail. Mike rattles everyone into action, keen to reach Zero Point and begin our return before the possibility of another storm turns the ride into an epic. We »

It's with surprise as much as enthusiasm that locals greet us along the way



This tea shop beats Starbucks any day



roll out before breakfast and into a two-hour climb to the next village, Phukiya. They've been told to expect us, and at last we cradle hot bowls of porridge. It's 8am and I think about the people heading out on their daily commute at home. It might as well be a different planet.

At nearly 3,000m our breathing is laboured. The trail is almost all rideable, but I keep reaching for a lower gear that isn't there. Above the treeline, we ride beneath some of India's most dramatic mountains, their faces blasted with fresh snow. As the valley fans out flat like a rug laid before these mighty peaks,

we reach our third and final tea shop of the day, a stone building occupied by an orange-robed spiritual pilgrim.

The baba pours us tea and chats enthusiastically. I'm guessing he doesn't get too many visitors. Mike confesses that his Pindari trip has a 50 per cent hit rate – half his clients don't make it to Zero Point, occasionally because of snow, more often lack of fitness. We push on, six hours of climbing behind us, finally gathering at the trail's end, where the path unceremoniously tumbles into the abyss left by the retreating glacier.

### The end, my friend

Far below us a river gurgles in its infancy. Glacial meltwater pours down the valley, churning under ramshackle bridges that we'll cross again tomorrow. For a moment longer, we try to absorb our surroundings. We're tired but triumphant. Ahead lie another four days of riding, starting with a two-hour, 25km descent. We sling legs over bikes and push off with a single pedal stroke. Watch out monkeys, we're coming back through. 🌟

### TRAVEL HEALTH TIPS DODGE DELHI BELLY

Avoiding getting sick in places like India isn't luck, it's science. Here's how to stay in the saddle and off the toilet:

- 1 Wash your hands often and avoid biting your nails. Most trouble starts with grubby hands.
- 2 Only eat freshly cooked food. If you're eating from street vendors, watch them cook it to make sure it's safe, hot and fresh.
- 3 Avoid salads, unless you know the restaurant is washing the veg in clean (iodine or chlorinated) water. 'Natural fertiliser' is commonly used for growing vegetables, so avoid raw veg if unsure.
- 4 Peel fruit that's been handled, or wash it well in your own clean water supply.
- 5 Drink bottled water, or better still, take a water filter to refill your reservoir and only drink from that – also avoiding the eco issues that come with a million empty plastic bottles.