

## ACTIVITY REPORT

# LHASA TO KATHMANDU

## Mountain biking across the roof of the world

Part 2

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**There** is more to the Lhasa to Kathmandu extreme MTB experience than simply cycling in the shadow of Everest – there's Dahl Bhat, Lake Yamdrok and no FB! Just be careful which books you pack for you downtime . . .

This is concluding in the mini series looking at mountain biking in the amazing country of Nepal. Last month we looked at single-track mountain biking in the Kathmandu Valley and also riding the majestic Annapurna Circuit. This month we look at the epic Lhasa to Kathmandu ride which passes through the very heart of the Himalayas – with views of the highest mountains in the world and which includes riding in Everest's shadow.

Less than five years ago the entire road, over 1,000km, gravel track, now, thanks to the Chinese much of it is now paved with smooth blacktop. However there is still enough off-road and adventure to keep any mountain biker happy, and the completion of the one of the greatest roads in the world will stay with you for a long, long time. The scenery is stunning - Nepal has eight of the world's highest mountains, plus more than 240 peaks over 6,000m. It is through these geological giants that

you will cross on your mountain bike from Lhasa to Kathmandu.

There are few countries in the world that are as well set up for independent travel as Nepal. The country's indie travel infrastructure is relatively recent and still less than a million tourists arrive in Nepal each year, so it's not completely overburdened. Wandering the trekking shops, bakeries and pizzerias of Thamel and Pokhara, it's easy to feel that you have somehow landed in a kind of backpacker Disneyland. Nothing quite compares to Nepal in terms of culture, scenery and the people. Many aspects of Nepal are still deeply rooted in the past and ultimately hindered by a lack of development and investment. However, this stands right next to the bustling, thriving and progressive Thamel district in Kathmandu, with its modern coffee shops, in which groups of young backpackers now sit down to 4 USD lattes in front of their

Priceless



Another snow covered mountain

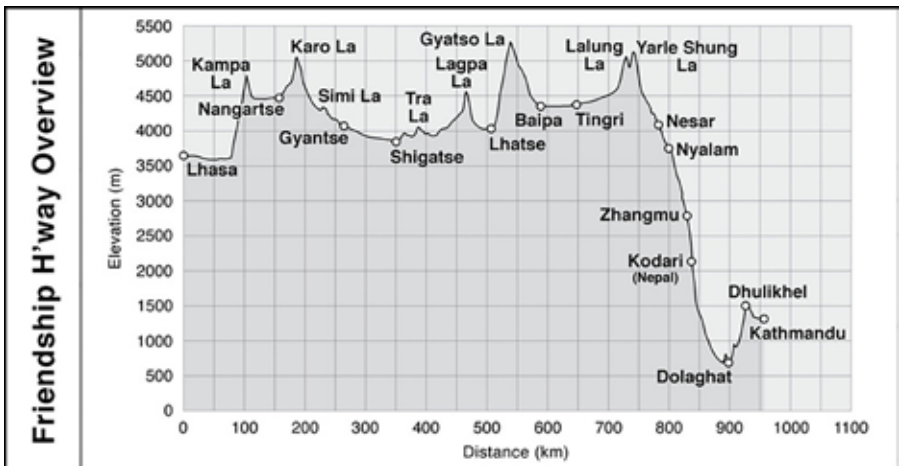
Macs. Once out in the countryside, there lies a quite different Nepal, where traditional mountain life continues at a slower pace, and a million potential adventures glimmer on every mountainous horizon.

### LHASA

The number of mountain bike operators and shops in Kathmandu has grown massively over the last five years, and the dusty, bustling and vibrant capital is where most trips start and finish. If you haven't

The Rongbuk Monastery





The adventure never stops



Sights of Kathmandu



the start, but then some of the expectation has been removed. In addition, although it's only 1,000km you will be exhausted. It's a monster journey through the mountains, landslides, Chinese custom checks, and high-passes. It is much better to fly. Nepal has changed rapidly since it became a Democratic Republic in 2008 and is now embracing modernity and many freedoms that were previously prohibited. Widespread poverty and wealth inequality is still very evident, and in 2011 it was estimated that 25% of the population surviving on 1.25 USD per day. It is very easy to ignore this as you ride through the countryside on your 20,000 AED bike; however, thankfully this situation does not detract from the experience or the welcome offered to you by the Nepali people.

been to Kathmandu, there is so much to see and do. For a few days as you adjust to the altitude, climate and different food you will learn to love this city, whilst trying to avoid the slow moving traffic and rickshaws. A number of airlines offer direct flights from the UAE and will allow you to bring your own mountain bike. If you decide to hire one from the local agent, the good news is, bikes are generally the latest models.

The 1,000km ride from Lhasa to Kathmandu starts in the Nepalese capital. If you bring your own bike, it will be taken to Lhasa by road with the support crew. More than likely you will then fly to rejoin your beloved piece of carbon. Part of the enjoyment of riding a route is seeing new scenery. It is possible to drive with the bike to

The ride starts in the mythical city of Lhasa. Made famous by the book and the movie "Seven Years in Tibet", Lhasa is one of the highest cities in the world at 3,490m,

La Paz in Bolivia being the only notable contender. When crossing from Nepal to Tibet, or to be more precise the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) this spring I had a copy of the book. Unsmiling Chinese customs officials quietly removed the offending material, as it is on their "undesirable" list. Those with Kindles were luckier and managed to keep their propaganda. Landing directly in Lhasa you will definitely need a few days to acclimatise both to the altitude and the change in food. Lhasa means, "place of the gods" and has had a turbulent recent past. Now it is like any large, modern city, and only has a small Tibetan quarter. The first thing modern travellers arriving in Tibet will notice is that Wi-Fi is widely available, just like in Nepal. The second thing you will notice is that Facebook is not. This is China and certain basic freedoms are restricted.

The route from Lhasa to Kathmandu is historically important and for many centuries has been an important commercial route for trade caravans. As you travel from north to south, you will see different types of traffic and fleets of mountain bikers in colourful, technical kit. On a mountain bike the whole trip takes an average of 11 days – the distances you ride each day are not huge, and you will find yourself stopping many times to take in the sights – one of the most beautiful is the lake of Yamdrok. At a breathtaking height of nearly 4,500m, the turquoise colour of the water is made even more vivid by the stunning backdrop of the snow covered peak of Nojin Kangsang, which, at a height of 7,191m dominates this snapshot. All of this as you crest the Kamba La Pass at a lofty 4,700m. If you simply go with the intention of completing it as quickly as possible you will miss many of the additional experiences. A loop to take in Everest Base camp, although long and dusty, is a must and having your



The Potala Palace



Stunning campsites in Tibet



Fertile farmland of Tibet

photo taken, riding on a dirt track with the highest mountain in the world in the background will trump most people's Instagram posts. For the duration you will, as always in Nepal, be fully supported both by Nepali mountain bike guides, cooks, drivers and a whole host of other staff. This contact with the locals is also part of the experience and should definitely make your ride more enjoyable.

One of the best things about mountain biking amongst Nepalis is *the food*, then, on the other hand one of the worst thing about Tibet or China is the food. Dahl Bhat is the Nepali staple, and consists of rice and lentils, with a spicy vegetable or meat curry. It is gorgeous. Having Nepali support crew, will ensure your plate will be refilled and refilled until you can eat no more. Momos are another traditional food, are similar to a dumpling and contain a variety of fillings, both meat and vegetable either fried or steamed. Many people come back from expeditions at altitude having lost huge amounts of weight – I don't know how!

Despite the best efforts of the Chinese, there are still monasteries and stupas left to see in Tibet. One of the most famous is the Rongbuk Monastery on the Everest Base Camp loop. At this point, your final days in Tibet are all downhill. From the top of the Tong La pass at 5,200m to the border at Zhangmu make sure you have gloves and a hat! From this bleak, wind-swept outlook, draped in prayer flags take a final glance at Shishapangma, the last 8,000m peak that you will see. Standing isolated and alone, it is still a long way off, but its immense bulk is impressive. If it is climbing season (spring or fall) try to imag-

ine the mountaineers on the snowy slopes, who you have no chance of spotting, but are working intensely for the chance to stand briefly on the summit, 8,027m: over three vertical kilometres above you.

As you start to descend the 90km, downhill stretch to the border, you will be aware of the change in landscape, as the dry, dusty and barren high altitude plateaus are replaced by more humid and steamy rainforest. It is more than likely this is the longest downhill in the world and the road can only be described as spectacular. It is now paved, (again, thanks to the Chinese) and you will want to stop at every bend to take pictures. Avoiding the huge stationary queues of decorated lorries transporting goods to Nepal is part of the many varied experiences. The border crossing is exactly what you expect when leaving one of the most tightly controlled countries in the world. Chinese flags fly everywhere and after being stamped out, you cross the high bridge with a red line in the middle, indicating you are back in Nepal. Despite the crossing being named "The Friendship Bridge", and having just ridden The Friendship Highway for the past two weeks, there is a change of mood as you enter Nepal. Your final taste of China are the two Chinese soldiers standing upright and staring into the horizon. Forming a human gate for you to pass through – they do not smile or flinch even when you wave your camera at them before rush across to the safety of Nepal. A change of atmosphere is tangible as you rushing towards the far side, Facebook and the fluttering prayer flags alongside

the very unique Nepali flag. Chaos returns and smiles are genuine. Even the flag lifts the feeling of happiness. The Nepali flag is over 2,000 years old and is the only national flag in the world that is not either a square or rectangle. The two triangles of its design symbolise the Himalaya Mountains and also the two major religions, Hinduism and Buddhism. The crimson red represents the colour of the rhododendron and also the brave spirits of the Nepalese people, the sun symbolises fierce resolve – a very nice way to finish a bike ride.

As we fully immerse ourselves back in Nepali life, we realise it is a public holiday – three or four days of holiday and festivals. Flowers and paint are liberally scattered over the road. To start the roads are quiet, but approaching the capital it starts to get busier. From the border it is a "relatively" short distance to Kathmandu, with some strenuous uphill sections. The race from Kodari, the first Nepal town across the border and Kathmandu is frantic as thoughts turn to coffee shops, cheesecake, restaurants with unlimited menus, showers that work, bars with Nepali bands rocking out to Pearl Jam and Pink Floyd - the pleasures are endless. However, for a short time the more you must concentrate. No longer can you ride in a straight line, and your eyes must be constantly on the road for potholes, swerving motorbikes and lorries trying to overtake on hairpin bends.

For the last part of this journey you are riding through heavily forested hills. The roads are nearly always washed out here in the monsoon season, and you will spot the heavy machinery kept by the road, used to rebuild the tracks. Like the one lost as the result of a massive rain-flooded landslide in August 2014 which 150 lives, and was and immense it created a lake which was later drained by dynamite blasting – reconstruction work is still, very much, ongoing.

So your journey ends where it began; back in the wonderful country of Nepal. Something about Nepal makes you want to keep returning here. There is so much to do and so many adventures to be had. The current slogan of the Nepal Tourist Board is, "Once is not enough". I've been coming here for years and still love returning, so I guess they are very truthful with their statement.



Blessing for a safe journey



Finishing in the wonderful city of Kathmandu