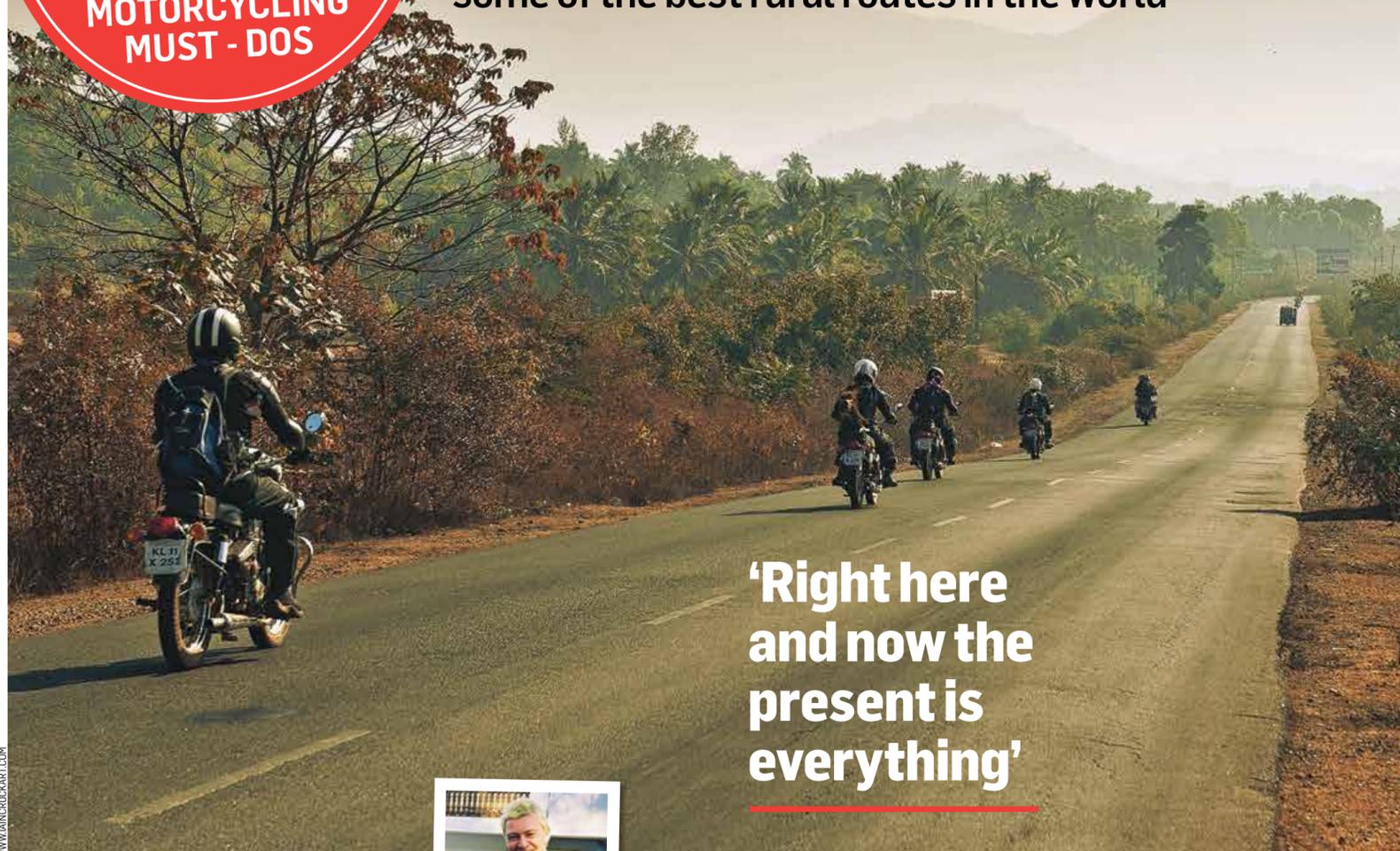


THE BUCKET LIST
MOTORCYCLING MUST - DOS

Discover southern India

Enjoy an all-out assault on your senses, and some of the best rural routes in the world



'Right here and now the present is everything'



BY JUSTIN HAYZELDEN
MCN contributor Justin first rode in India in 2003 and has been back a dozen times

Early morning mist hangs heavy in the air as I wipe dew from the saddle of my trusty Royal Enfield, switch on the ignition and flip out the kickstarter. It's already become second nature to crack the throttle as I swing my leg through the lever's arc, then give the twistgrip a tickle as the lazy, long-stroke single thuds into life. Around me a dozen or so riders are going through the same ritual, creating a sensational symphony of old-school cool as we prepare to explore one of the world's most incredible countries together.

This is my third day in India and the first that I've started to feel a part of the place. Having arrived from a damp and miserable British February I was completely unprepared for the full-frontal sensory explosion that hit me as I stepped through the terminal doors in Goa. Urban India is life turned up to 11 and it can be one hell of a slap in the face.

The heat gets you first. It may be winter here too, but the mercury can easily nudge towards a brain-boiling 40°C on the plains. Then there's the hustle and bustle of the city, as cars, buses, pushbikes and trucks, not to mention the ubiquitous auto rickshaws (underpowered and overladen three-wheelers with the uncanny ability to U-turn on a sixpence when you least expect), bump and grind from somewhere else to who knows where. Urgent horns, buzzing two-strokes and rumbling diesel engines provide a cacophonous soundtrack, as your nose fills with the eye-watering

aroma of hot oil, burnt clutches and choking exhaust fumes. It's deafening and disorientating, but before long it's also in the distance. India is a country of contrasts, boasting vast plains and rugged mountains, dense jungle, arid deserts, and some of the best rural riding routes to be found anywhere in the world.

By the time we roll out onto the road the sun has drawn up whatever moisture was hampering visibility and revealed the twisty tarmac snake that we'll be following to our first chai stop. The journey so far has led us into the hills of Karnataka where it can be a bit

chilly first thing, so I'm trying to keep out of the shade cast by the dense forest as much as possible to soak up some rays. The road surface is surprisingly good (although as experience has already proved, that could end at any moment) and the Bullet is running like a dream. With western manufacturers now producing in India there are alternatives (KTM 390 or BMW G310 anyone?), but the Enfield is still best way to travel. Forget about the ancient Redditch-derived 350, the latest 500s have the gear lever on the correct side, proper disc brakes and electric start. There are few bikes so at home on Indian roads.

The morning's ride is verging on the sublime, as I chase the vanishing point though bend after glorious bend before grinding my footpeg through the apex of a hairpin and firing the Bullet into the next sensational section. Traffic is light, which means Zen moments... that feeling of being at one with the bike and the road seem to go on forever. India is a very spiritual country and maybe that enlightenment can be inhaled along with the pervasive scent of jasmine, camphor and sandalwood, or maybe it's just

making the most of riding a slower bike than I'm used to - either way it feels satisfyingly effortless. A lunch stop on the plains gives me a chance to dive into southern Indian cuisine once more. Rice and curry on a banana leaf is the order of the day, with a couple of vada (deep fired potato fritters with garlic and chilli) on the side. Good food is not hard to find, just follow the smell and make for the place busiest with locals. With full bellies we enjoy a change of pace for the rest of the day, cruising meandering roads through a remote wildlife sanctuary, that climb steadily into verdant hills to reveal one of the world's greatest manmade wonders, Kerala's stunning tea plantations.

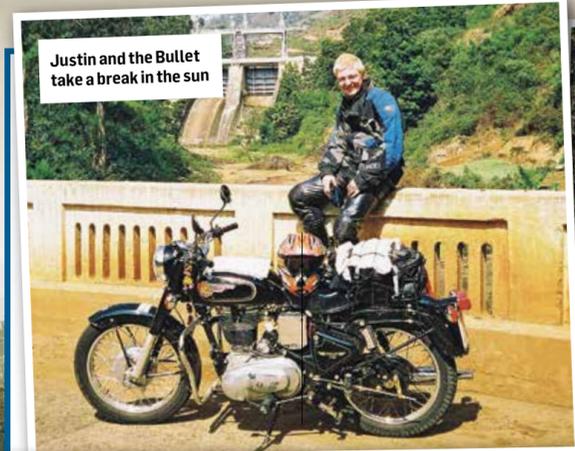
In the evening we gather around a campfire, exchanging individual tales of the day's ride over a few beers until someone produces a guitar and we laugh and sing into the night. It seems so far from the daily grind that's there nothing for it than to get lost in the moment, and that's pretty much what riding in southern India is all about. Tomorrow may well be different, but right here and now the present is everything. **MCN**

YOU DO IT TOO NEXT STEPS

Once Covid-19 travel restrictions ease, the best way to ride southern India, unless you have a few months at your disposal, is to sign up with an organised tour of the region. A good guide with comprehensive backup will help make the most of your adventure and allow you to see the best of the country in the time available, plus you get to ride with a group of like-minded individuals and share an

epic road trip. It takes a lot of the stress and uncertainty out of the trip, too. One such operator is Nomadic Knights, who are permanently based in India and have been running tours for over 10 years. Led by ageless Scotsman Alex Pirie, they are widely regarded as the specialists for the subcontinent. Prices start at £3500 for a 14-day tour. Find out more at: www.nomadicknights.com

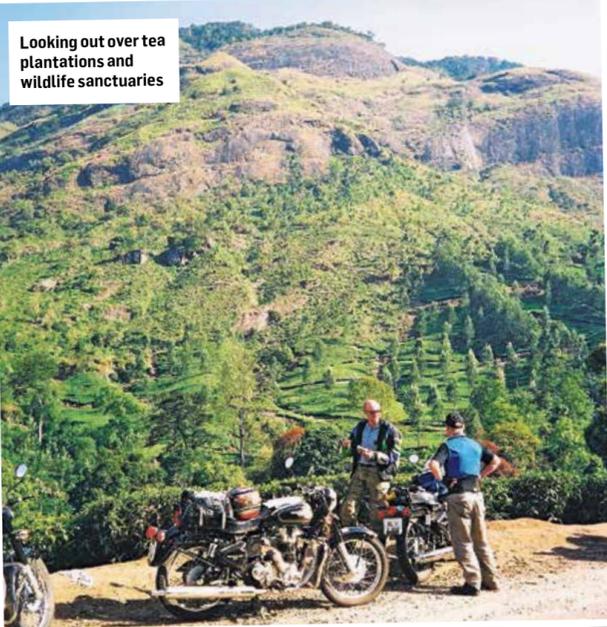
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Justin and the Bullet take a break in the sun



Zebra crossing? No it's elephants...



Looking out over tea plantations and wildlife sanctuaries



Like the Stelvio only tropical



The Enfield is perfect for the ride



Essential mid-ride chai stop



Typical lunch southern Indian style

I DID IT TOO

'It's right up there with the best'



Tony Smith, 55, from Yorkshire. I've done several trips in southern India with Nomadic Knights and the truth is

that a combination of great riding, great support, sunshine, amazing food and brilliant evenings together offer an incredible opportunity to experience a beautiful and intriguing part of this amazing country. From the relative opulence of Goa to the ancient mystique of Hampi, through the never-ending twisties of the Western Ghats and the stunning plantations of Karnataka to the amazing inland waterways of Kerala. This part of India is all about the people. No matter where you are, the friendliness and hospitality of the locals is humbling. The hotels that Nomadic Knights use are excellent too, every night is a bit of a party with banter, jokes and re-takes of the day's ride. I have been very fortunate in having been on loads of motorcycle trips, but southern India is up there with the best of them. Book it up and do it when Covid restrictions allow - you won't regret it.