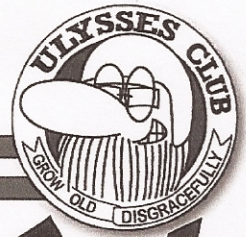


September 2012

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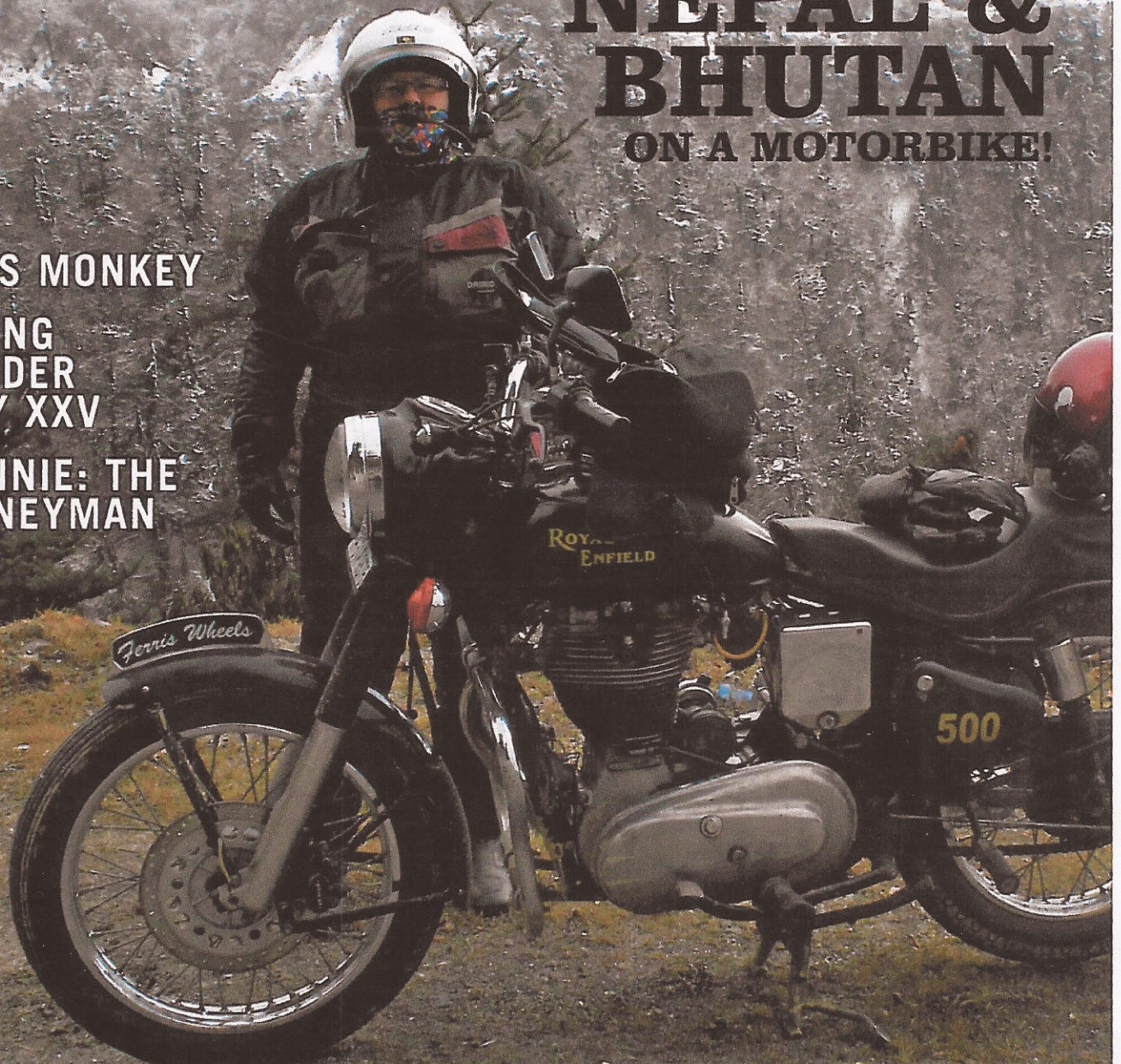
NEW ZEALAND

NEPAL & BHUTAN ON A MOTORBIKE!

BRASS MONKEY

ROLLING
THUNDER
RALLY XXV

SWANNIE: THE
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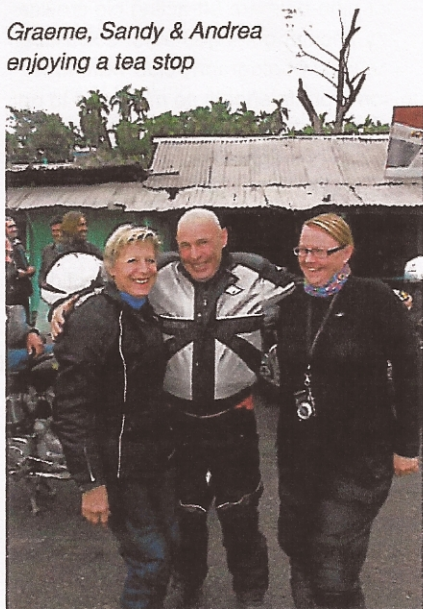
THOUGHTS OF NEPAL & BHUTAN

By Andrea Thompson Ulysses Rotorua #5500 / Sandy Van Praagh – Rotorua Ulysses / Graeme van Praagh # (3828) Rotorua Ulysses

FROM A ROTORUA GIRL

Stuart & I once again decided to pack our helmets, gloves, boots and bags and head off on another great motorcycle adventure. This time we picked a tour of Nepal & Bhutan, a trip offered by Ferris Wheels Motorcycle Safaris entitled "Shining Shangri-La". Sounds fantastic we

*Graeme, Sandy & Andrea
enjoying a tea stop*



Group photo at Punaka Dzong, Bhutan



have always wanted to go to Bhutan.

We head off in mid-December and first stop is Singapore. The idea was to relax out before the riding starts and celebrate my 50th birthday. We have afternoon tea at Raffles Tiffin Room and then move to the Long Bar to try and drown my sorrows. Just joking the drinks are a bit too expensive at the Long Bar. (I am not joking about the sorrow bit). Next stop New Delhi.

We are expecting to meet our friends Graeme & Sandy Van Praagh at the departure lounge in Singapore but they don't show. Where are they? Did we scare them off with our tales of riding in the Himalayas? No it's not so bad, just a delayed plane which means they won't arrive in Delhi for a few days. What a shame as they miss a day trip to Agra on the Indian Railway. This is not only a great trip because you visit the Taj Mahal, Red Fort and other great sites, you also get to see some of the people of India, be it working in the fields, driving crazily, trying to sell you something or just squatting for their morning constitutional.

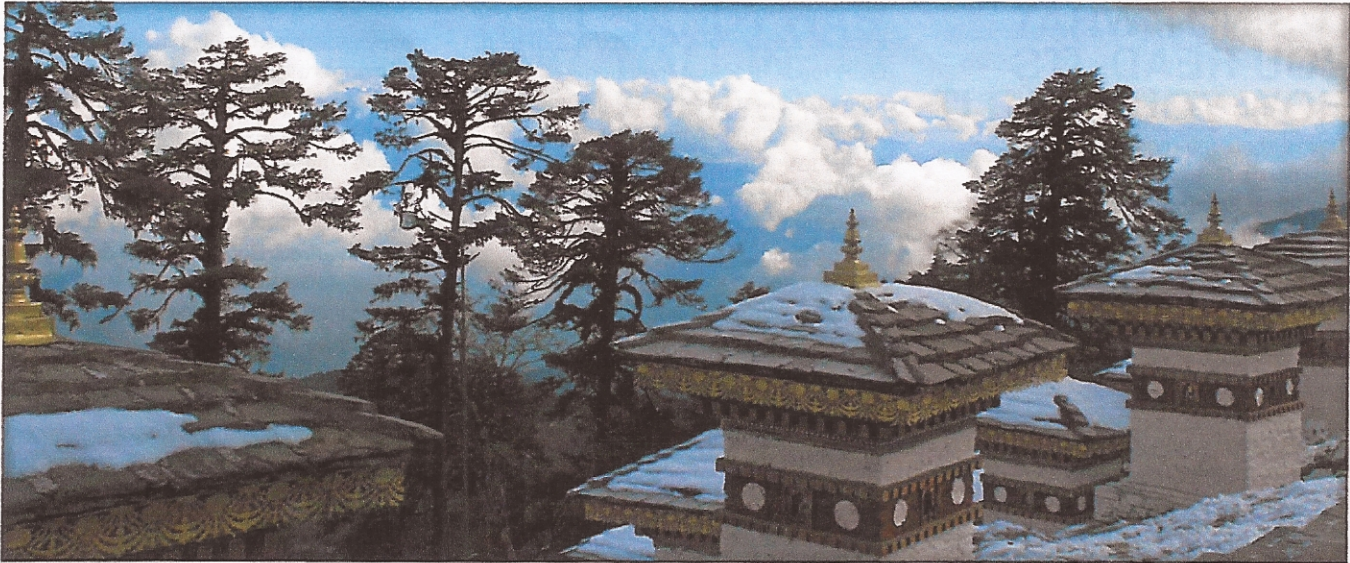
Once they arrived in Delhi we join up with the rest of the group who are undertaking the trip. There are 17 bikes and 20 of us all up including 5 women,

2 on bikes & 3 pillions. At first glance a nice group of people and by the end of the trip my thoughts had not changed. I even decide that some of them were very nice indeed. Once again we Kiwis are outnumbered by the Aussies but at least we have Graeme and Sandy to boost us along. The All Blacks have won the Rugby World Cup so that's a handy thing to hit the Aussie's with if needed (thanks Richie).

So well-armed we head off into the unknown, once again on the trusty Royal Enfield Bullet. This is the perfect bike for the kind or terrain we will encounter. Our ride of 21 days travels through India (Nani Tal), Nepal (Bardia National Park, Lumbini, Pokhara, Kathmandu, Hetauda, Biratnagar), India (Siliguri, Darjeeling), Bhutan (Phuentsoling, Paro, Thimpu, Punakha, Jakar, Mongar, Trashigang, Samdrup Jongkhar), India (Guwahati), and then we all take a flight back to New Delhi.

Along the way we experience so many wonderful things, a dawn elephant ride (sorry no tigers spotted), feeding an eagle called Bob while tandem paragliding, Christmas Day in Kathmandu, Stuart's 60th birthday complete with a birthday cake, "Happy Birthday Mr Stuart", (I feel much better about being 50 now), tea drinking in Darjeeling, New Year's Eve in

Dochu La, Bhutan (Dochu Pass 3,150 metres)



Darjeeling, a 2 hour climb up to the Tigers Nest Monastery (ops took me 3hrs), a 2 hour climb back down from the Tigers Nest Monastery (no comment but was downhill), zoo visits, Dzong visits, yak sightings, an early morning flight over the Himalayas (it was so clear that morning I could see the NZ flag still waving on the top of Everest).

As per our previous adventure in India the road conditions are various, asphalt, mud and rock. This time for a bit more excitement we have some ice and snow thrown in. Yes snow! We travelled over Thrumsing La pass at 3780m in Bhutan, and it was winter, so therefore snow and ice. It was cold. Two layers of thermals cold, double socks cold, double gloves cold.

Apart from the snow there was of course the mind blowing traffic. Traffic is not limited to vehicles only. If it can move then it will be on the road somewhere. I think advantage of taking a pillion is an extra set of eyes on the road.

Oh that reminds me I am sorry to say that one of our group came off on some ice and broke his leg. Poor guy ended up having an operation in Kathmandu before being flown home to Sydney. I understand his medical treatment was good so no problem there. It was a real shame that he only got about a third of the trip under his belt. We did catch up with him recently in Sydney and he is fully recovered so no long term damage done.

Out of the 17 bikes on tour only 3 did not have an "off" so that shows what the road conditions were like and also a great deal of the blame can be attributed to diesel spills on the roads from the Tata trucks. I

am happy to say we did not come off but I am aware it could happen to us any time so I am not going to push my luck.

Now what else can I tell you, it's so hard to keep up with the story when I know you are all so riveted to the page, the pressure is huge. Road rules maybe? Well they have not changed since we were last in the Himalayan region. I can just sum this up without going into too much detail. There are none, oh and you can just make them up if you want too as you go no problem.

Now, I can hear you all say, how did Graeme and Sandy get on in all this new territory. Well they were excellent. They normally ride a trike so the transition was a bit harder as not only does an Enfield have 2 wheels (Note: a trike has 3 wheels) it also has all its bits back the front, or something. (Ask Stuart for details, I am after all just a pillion). I think if I tell you we are all still friends then you know they did have a great time. Actually every time I have seen Graeme recently he is wearing his Enfield baseball cap and a big smile. Stuart and I loved having them along on the trip as they are great fun but independent as well. And a big wow goes to them both as I think they were the only ones on the trip not to get Delhi Belly. Sandy tells me this is something to do with living at Lake Tarawera and drinking water with duck poo in it. Thanks Sandy I will take that under advisement.

My job as pillion is not all fun and games. I can't just sit there on my bum all day enjoying the scenery. No I have to take photos as we ride along, watch for traffic, cows, sheep, yaks etc., keep my



Indian Traffic

eye out for the perfect toilet stop (i.e. big rock or bush), watch out for the chi stops, lunch stops, look for road markers, hotels etc. and keep my eye on the other bikes.

And be at the beck and call of my rider/husband. Exhausting, maybe, but it is all defiantly loads of fun.

So all and all how do I feel about this trip? It was wonderful. Nepal and Bhutan are bustling and yet peaceful. The scenery is magical with the mountains, rivers, snow, forests, terraces and plains. Even the barren landscapes hold some delight. The people are not wealthy but they seem content and welcoming. The countries are spiritual with their Buddha's, stupas, temples, pray wheels, monks and the ever present pray flags fluttering in the winds. The laughter and smiles shared with the other riders, the friendships made for life.

To ride a motorbike though such places is a pleasure and a privilege. I had big expectations for this adventure and I was not disappointed. It was Incredible.

To enjoy the magic of Nepal & Bhutan we travelled with Mike & Denise:

Ferris Wheels Motorcycle Safaris -
www.ferriswheels.com.au

With thoughts of Nepal & Bhutan **Andrea**



IT'S NOT WHAT YOU READ, ITS HOW YOU READ IT

This is about the most astounding experience Graeme & I have ever had.

In 2010, Stu and Andrea, some Ulysses motorcycling buddies said, hey we're going to The Himalayas traversing Nepal and Bhutan on a motorbike, with Mike & Denise Ferris, "Check out their web site www.ferriswheels.com.au and let us know if you are interested".

We looked on line - Ferris Wheels - Shining Shangri la Safari - Adventure motorcycling tour. Oooh we said to each other, adventure and motorcycling and travel through India, Nepal and Bhutan... "WOW" and we booked.

December 2011 came around quickly and soon we were on our adventure.

Everyday had spectacular scenery and fabulous sights.

But my story is about our Flip Side

From the outset, Graeme & I felt we continuously faced challenges with life and death balancing on a thread and each new riding day brought new conditions as horrifically demanding and injury threatening as the previous day...

7 to 10 gruelling riding hours each day.

23 relentless days of being on edge.

Continually expecting the unexpected.

From every possible direction.

For 3 and half thousand

harrowing kilometres.

We started in Delhi, 16 million people and it felt as if they were ALL on the move on OUR roads. Honking their horns, 4 and 5 abreast squeezed across roads marked with 2 lanes and spilling off into the roadside verge which was a mayhem of awnings and camp fires, sacred cows and a constantly moving mass of people and little children.

It felt like we were in the middle of a herd migration and we were zig zagging back & forth across the road - squeezing the motorbike through any gap. It's a hair raising experience negotiating the multifarious hazards of the Indian Road on a motorbike - bedlam, noise, noise, noise, no road rules (that we were aware of). But Graeme soon got the hang of it. I reckon, he just closed his eyes (like I did) and went for the Gap and miraculously with a split second to spare, it widened.

Soon we were in Nepal where the traffic was less hectic, but the new injury threatening hazards were roadworks. Miles and miles and miles long - of rough surfaces, loose rocks, huge potholes and thick mud slurry, scarily trying to flip the bike and toss us under the trucks and busses.

We also had a couple of nightmarish night time events. Rounding a corner onto a wooden bridge, one lane wide, with no sides, the bike wheel got caught and suddenly we were off. Luckily we slid along the bridge and not over the side into the dark abyss.

Another night, Graeme had to maintain our balance on a slewing motorbike as we rode through a river with a soft sand

base, we stayed upright this time. And its always scarier when its pitch black.

A couple of days later, we hit a patch of diesel on a corner, one second we were upright and then we were off along with the next three motorbikes. It was mayhem with 4 motorcycles, 5 people, back packs and tank bags all scattered and sliding along the road. Six bikes went down that day - before lunch !

Aaaah, then we entered peaceful, quiet Bhutan.

Now we can relax - wrong!!

ICE! And invisible black ice too.

There were hours and hours of Switch back roads.

Imagine a road of continuous hair pin bends carved into Himalayan hill sides, one lane wide, some ice, and a side that drops away a thousand metres and suddenly an oncoming truck appears.

We averaged less than 30km per hour in this area. No wonder only 5% of the visitors to Bhutan travel to the eastern side of the country.

Then there was the slippery snow and riding through a mountain passes higher than Mount Cook to get back to India.

When we arrived home, we were shell shocked and shattered. Fortunately auto pilot kicked in and we were able to function and luckily Graeme & I escaped the black eyes, limps and facial grazes that marked out some of our fellow adventurers.

We went back to the Ferris wheel web site and with clarity enhanced with hindsight,

We read...



Graeme & Sandy Thrumsing La, Bhutan (Thrumsing Pass 3,890 metres)

Ferris Wheels...

Are you living on the edge yet . . . or are you still taking up too much room? **what????**

Shining Shangri-La Safari 2011 ... a tour such as this is potentially a dangerous undertaking; it's inherent in the very nature of the trip. You'll be on an unfamiliar bike, on unfamiliar roads in unfamiliar traffic conditions. **mmmm mmmm ????**

The riding conditions are also arduous - let's not pull any punches here. This is not a trip for the faint-hearted. **aah ha ????**

Tour operator specialising solely in international adventure motorcycling. **adventure motorcycling ????**

And suddenly it all made sense. It wasn't adventure and motorcycling, it was adventure motorcycling, the word adventure is an adjective describing the type of motor cycling. Now, no longer shell shocked and shattered, we feel elated at our accomplishment.

We went far out of our comfort zones and we are delighted with our achievement and we will never forget our marvellous motor-bike adventure, adventure motorcycling in India, Nepal and Bhutan.

But, we were totally unprepared because it's not what you read but how you read it.

Sandy



Top: Andrea with our trusty Enfield
Above: Mud glorious Mud
Below: Stuart Parahawking at Pokhara, Nepal



WELL SANDY HAS SAID IT ALL IN HER ARTICLE?

No, not by a long shot.

Getting to our destination was half the fun, riding a 500cc Royal Enfield Bullet, totally 50's technology and a new encounter around every corner.

Whilst focusing on staying alive after the rigors of India, we entered Nepal - a country wedged between India and Tibet, the watershed of Asia.... remember all those rivers that fill up and flood Bangladesh in the summer ?.

Nepal is landlocked between subtropical jungle and the icy Himalayas and contains eight of the world's highest mountains including Everest.

We went on our adventure ride during December and January because it's the middle of winter and it's their dry season - the best time of year to travel as the skies are bright and a brilliant blue and there is almost zero chance of rain.

Despite the fame of its Buddhist community, Nepal was once the world's only Hindu Kingdom.

We had four days off during our trip. The first, when we entered Nepal was an elephant trek looking for the elusive Bengal Tiger but to no avail.

Another highlight was Parahawking over Pokhara, talk about fear factor - running off a cliff with your life in the hands of an unknown pilot.

This is Para gliding with a trained Vulture which on the command of a whistle lands on your leather gloved arm taking a morsel of buffalo meat then flying off. We hang there hoping the Vulture

doesn't have a brain explosion and land on our parachute or on us for that matter.

We spent Xmas day in Kathmandu, Nepal's Capital - a diverse City, a Tourist trap, a medieval time capsule, an environmental disaster. Anything can be had in Kathmandu.

We flew with Yeti airways, from Kathmandu for a close up view of the Himalayas especially Mt Everest, nearly 9000m high. Wow, the highest point on earth was right there in front of us.

Moving on from Nepal and briefly through West Bengal, India, we had a leisurely ride through tea gardens to Darjeeling following the tracks of the "toy train".

It was in Darjeeling that we celebrated New Years Eve and visited the Himalaya Mountain School where Tensing Norgay is idolised and in the eyes of the locals was the first man to climb Everest. Anyway who knows, as neither Hillary nor Norgay has ever said?

From here we entered Bhutan which was undoubtedly the highlight of my trip. A sparsely populated country with less than a million people and seventy five percent of its terrain is still virgin wilderness with valleys of pristine forest along with snowy passes and icy summits.

This is a country where government policy dictates that gross national happiness is more important than the gross national product. The only country in the World where smoking is banned and if caught you're up for three to five years in jail. Now that must be good for the gross national product.

Instead people chew red beetle nut which is a narcotic. The pavements are marked with red stains from their spit.

The countryside is covered with dramatic dzongs which are a combination of forts, monasteries, government and local council offices.

One of our highlights in Bhutan was the 4 hour return walk to the Tigers Nest monastery. This monastery is perched on a sheer cliff, 3200 meters above sea level.

The Bhutanese people all seemed happy with their lot often all coming out onto the roadside waving and hand slapping as we rode past

Then it was all over, back into India for our last night in Guwahati. The bikes were loaded on to trucks by hand for their six day journey back to Delhi and we flew home.

After an adventure, we will never forget. We felt the fear and we did it anyway.

Graeme