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# Meditating on Mountain Bikes

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## Meditating on Mountain Bikes



Sam Bowen

Spring 2015

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### *Acknowledgements*

Dear thanks to Mads Mathiasen, for pursuing passion to manifest his own utopian lifestyle, who inspired me to rethink my future.

Thanks to Tashi Bista, for performing with uncanny grace in crisis situations.

And to Jagan Biswarka, for his welcoming attitude and good conversation.

## Introduction

For a long time, Nepal has been an exotic destination for adventurers and spiritual wanderers. Geographically, there are no comparisons.

“The country is vertical,” said Jagan Biswarka as he pointed across Phewa Lake to the snow-capped mountains. “You can see the 8000 meter from 800 meter. This will be one of the best playgrounds in the world. Nowhere in Nepal. Nowhere in the *world*.”

Mads Mathiasen, a Danish expatriate agrees. “I think very few people realizes how big a contrast there is in Nepal from seventy-one meters above sea level – the lowest place in Nepal – to eight-thousand eight-hundred and fifty meters above sea level – the top of the world on Everest. You have every climate zone imaginable, from sub-tropical to fully active.”

The mountain bike community’s worldwide following has always been characterized as niche and passionate. And in Nepal, this is no exception. “Fifteen years ago I could name you every rider in Nepal,” said Mads. “But today it’s... everywhere.”

“Mountain Biking is starting to pick up pace,” observed Tashi Bista, an Upper Mustang resident. “More and more tourism – hopefully involving local people increasing.”

“Ten years ago there was nothing. This is only the beginning.” Said Tangi Rebours, a French expat and professional mountain biker.

“Before, the bicycle was just a means of transportation. Now it has become multi-dimension. Recreation, environment, health, and adventure tourism.” Explained Jagan Biswarka, “I think in ten years we will be booming. Definitely.”



### *Adventure and Exploration*

My interviewees normally cited two recent documentaries. *Where the Trail Ends* and *Strength in Numbers*, funded by antagonistic media companies (Anthill Films and Red Bull Media House) both released in 2012. After years of many amateur efforts, these two mountain biking docs stand apart from the lot – high budget, supreme quality riders and filmographers. They are both formatted into segments by location. Historically, British Columbia has been the mecca for mountain bikers and trail builders, so, as expected, each have an extensive segment in British Columbia. And surprisingly, a segment each in Nepal. These films introduced me to Nepal, and consequently planted the seed for my plans to visit – it is a perfect example of an impassioned community producing valuable cultural export for Nepal. And this is much needed, as tourism is Nepal’s largest industry.<sup>1</sup>

Mads Mathiasen, consultant and researcher for both films, told me that after he was spotted in the first film, *Strength in Numbers*, the opposing film dropped his interview from inclusion in the second film. When Mads first mentioned he was featured in the film, I exclaimed “I knew that was your voice!” then mimicked his voice-over line from the film: “we’ll ‘ave a pretty good scene in a few years.”

A Danish expatriate, Mads initially came to Nepal over twenty years ago and reportedly fell in love with the country’s geography and culture. He explained how the area had changed, sitting in a restaurant in Lazimpat, he pointed out the window, “you used to be able to walk through a meadow to Thamel.” It seems unbelievable now, how fast this area has changed. These days he resides in the green Shivapuri hills over the Kathmandu valley with his wife, a stunning Australian expat. He’s now among the small handful of go-to riding authorities in Nepal.

In a recent article titled “A Different Spin,” *ActionAsia* journalist Alex Treadway embedded with Mathiasen on a scouting expedition into the Tsum valley. “A restricted area until 2008, only a handful of trekkers a year venture this far off the beaten track.” Treadway writes, “Pioneering biker Mads Mathiasen...would be the first person ever to ride a mountain bike there.” During the trip, Mads and Alex would stay with a local Tibetan village during the Losar celebration, laugh with them and drink the local drink. The article encapsulates the majesty of exploration, stunning sights, treacherous passes, exposure to the elements of weather, wildlife, and the local customs. All the grandiose parts of exploration without the ethical downfalls like deforestation; it is exploration in its pure form, for the sake of itself. Scouting new locations is part of his occupation, and when I first contacted him Mads had just return from “a recce in Bardia.”

Talking with him, I had an idea to go bike-packing through the Gorkha region. He recommended a full-suspension bike, for the trails are very rocky and technical, but agreed this was a region with huge untapped potential. In

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tourism.gov.np/uploaded/TourrismStat2012.pdf>

retrospect, it is a very good thing I did not follow through on my plan as I'd have been alone in the epicenter of the 7.8 strike.

Prominent mountain bike journalist Ryan "Squirrel" Labar, who joined the Anthill Films team for the shoot of *Strength in Numbers* reported on the appeal of Nepal's geography for mountain bikers in an article for BikeMag.com,<sup>2</sup> "in recent years [Nepali riders] have learned that they are blessed with a bounty of what core mountain bikers desire: flowing singletrack. Nepal is covered in singletrack because most people in the country get around on foot. Most Nepalese cannot afford vehicles, and there are few roads because the government cannot afford to build and maintain them." It is a blessing and a curse. Nepal cannot afford roads, so there is great riding. But the grandiose potential (developing bike parks, expensive bike gear, and trail-building equipment) cannot be easily attained for the same reason.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bikemag.com/videos/strength-in-numbers-andrew-shandro-and-rene-wildhaber-in-nepal/>

### *A Brief History*

Mountain biking isn't that old an activity itself, let alone mountain biking in Nepal. In the 1890s, the African American Buffalo Soldier regiment rode from Montana to Missouri, a nineteen hundred mile trip, to test out the potential for off-road modified bicycles for military use. "In 34 days of riding, 20 soldiers averaged 56 miles per day. Their average speed registered 6.3 mph."<sup>3</sup> Lt. Moss, at the conclusion, is reported to have said, "The practical result of the trip shows that an Army Bicycle Corps can travel twice as fast as cavalry or infantry under any conditions, and at one third the cost and effort."

The practicality of the bicycle, once called "man's noblest invention" by William Saroyan, has still not been utilized to its potential. I imagine a logically probable future of human living conditions, a post-industry "post-apocalypse" landscape, without access to gasoline, where the bicycle will rule. Specifically, the mountain bike.

Anyway, mountain biking did not come into production or vernacular until the 1970s-80s. Simultaneous off-road tinkering with the road bike occurred in England and California. But Tom Ritchey and Gary Fischer are most frequently credited with bringing the sport to the forefront with their company MountainBikes. In the early 1980s, the first two mass-produced mountain bikes were sold, the Univega Alpina Pro and the Specialized Stumpjumper<sup>4</sup> (a bike that has continued to morph with the times, is still in production, and sits in my garage!).



<sup>5</sup> *Specialized Stumpjumper*

An article by Peter Stewart, *Wheels on the Hills...The First 10 Years*, discusses the MTB beginnings in Nepal:

"It was in the fading months of the winter of 1988 that Himalayan Mountain Bike (Tours & Expeditions) now widely known as HMB, pioneered the business of mountain biking in Nepal and the Himalayas. A sporty and possibly visionary woman, in Francis Higgins along with the technical help of Greg Vann (who passed away in April of 2011 of cancer)... who saw what was capturing the interest of so many in America (races launched down Mt Tamalpais, State Park, Marin County, as the first organized 'mountain

<sup>3</sup> <http://tubulocity.com/?p=64>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bikeradar.com/news/article/interview-specialized-founder-mike-sinyard-28233/>

<sup>5</sup> [http://license.citruslime.com/cs/blogs/bktr/history\\_of\\_cycling\\_header\\_thumb\\_65A0D635.jpg](http://license.citruslime.com/cs/blogs/bktr/history_of_cycling_header_thumb_65A0D635.jpg)



biking' and the new American outdoor pastime) which would most likely suit the mountainous terrain of Nepal... note that Mt Tamalpais tops out at 784m (2571ft) whilst a ride down from Nagarkot starts at 2175m (7135ft). History has proven Francis correct."

The article continues, explaining the late-Greg Vann teamed up with "the first Nepalese mountain biking guide" Sonam Gurung. Gurung is a prominent name, something of a George Washington for Nepal's MTB community. Every single interviewee knew Sonam, and his mention accompanies a grin. He seems the undisputed figurehead, a pioneer for his sport.

I had just begun my research and had a long list of interviews to conduct. From preliminary research, I'd seen there were a meager handful of shops that had been operating long enough to speak knowledgeably about how biking had grown in Nepal through the decades. One of these bike shops, "Dawn Till Dusk" was a primary target and a fundamentally vital interview if this project were to hold any serious character. Thus, I went there first. Unsure of my question list, and jittery from caffeine, I show up, locate the owner (an imposing figure) and ask for a few minutes for an interview...if you want...if you have time. "Come back tomorrow!" he barks. I say okay and spin around and happily retreat.

I return the next day, smiling friendly. Not repaying the smile, nor acknowledging my hello, he swings his arm for me to come inside and I get a better look at him. He has a large chest that juts out in a weird muscly figure. He looks late-fifties but is undoubtedly older, with Tibetan letters tattooed up his arm and a thick mustache, he wears a dusty baseball cap and his T-shirt tucked into high-set shorts. His store is small, but the walls are covered with gear and tools, and decorative trinkets from many years. Sonam Gurung's store was opened in 1991. Tourists, "mostly Europe, come from all over." He displays a set of books that document his trips into the mountains and his comrades, dating back to the shop's beginning, "Everyone comes to see me." Sonam is strong, loud, very confident, and although his English is not exceptionally clear I don't dare ask him to elaborate his stern responses, for his half-crazed gaze, he looks he might as likely knock me flat at any moment. Sonam explains that mountain biking is very important for Nepal. "It's a poor country. Very small. Too much pollution. Hope everyone will use bikes because it's better."

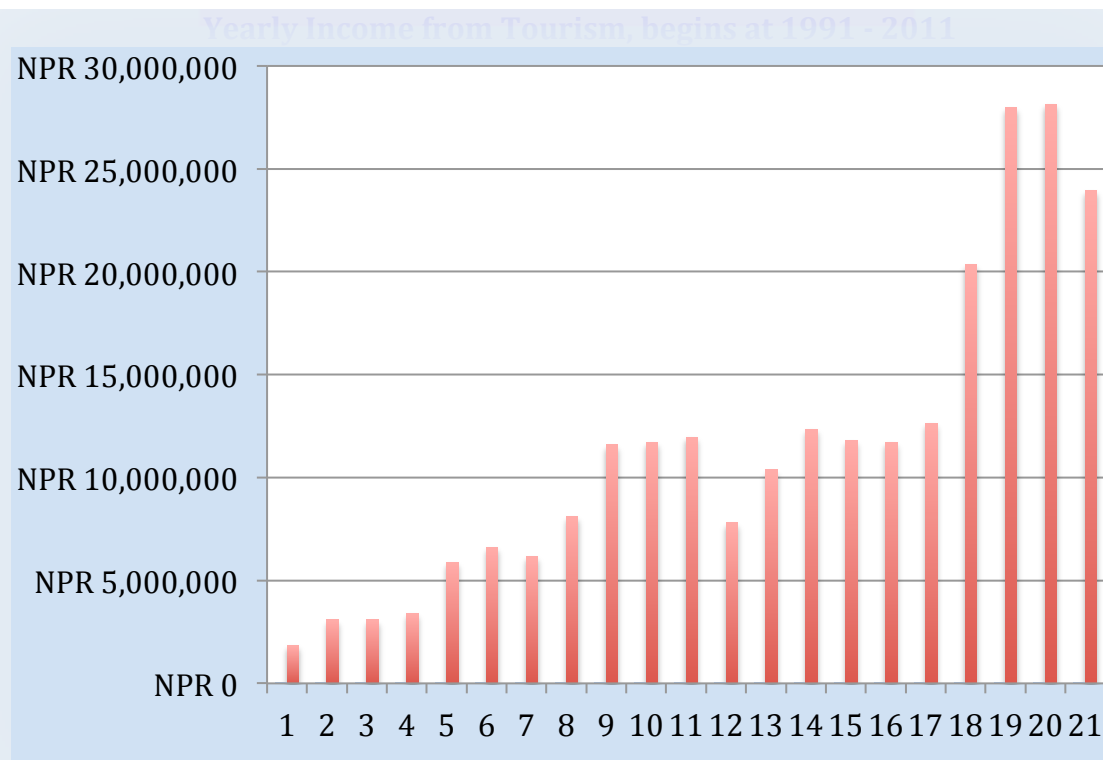
His favorite trail is Annapurna (gives an impression of Sonam's character), the YAKRO company's "4016 meters Annapurna challenge," which he participates in every year, from which he returned only two days prior. In the *Wheels on the Hills* article, Stewart confirms my fascination with Sonam Gurung, "with the combined talent and athletic ability of an ex-Buddhist monk and kick boxer he fitted the position well...credited with being the first Nepali to cycle/carry to Everest Base Camp." Sonam also won Nepal's first mountain bike race, which, according to the article, meant a "cash prize of 500 rupees." Stewart compares this prize to that of the three-day Himalayan Mountain Bike Championship in 2002, "which rewarded the winners with international flights, mobile phones and upwards of NRS. 30,000."

Sonam reiterated MTB's increasing popularity, with locals who like to go riding before work. At the Boudha Bike Shop, part-owner Bibek Lam also claims many locals are showing up to for their riding club's early morning outings. But, as Bibek explained there is much work to be done in spreading the word, "need to promote mountain biking in Nepal, because locals think it's so expensive and others [foreigners] don't know how good it is here."



## Tourism

Cycle tracks will abound in Utopia. ~ *H.G. Wells*



As mentioned before, tourism is the country's largest industry. According to OpenNepal.net, tourism in 2000 was "463,646." In 2013: "797,616." Adventure tourism in particular typically accounts for somewhere between ten to twenty percent of the annual total foreign visitors.<sup>6</sup> An article in the Nepali Times, *Adventure Tourism: A billion dollar industry?*, projects the high hopes of Nepalis in this trade, hoping to reach 500,000 adventure specific visitors by 2024, and also by this year to increase adventure tourism to account for 23% of all visitors. Megh Ale, founder of Borderlands, stresses, "we need a clear vision and strategy for our country and the tourism industry if we are to take advantage of the growing demand for adventure tourism." As to questions of whether or not Nepal can sustain these high projections, President of Nepal Mountaineering Association, Ang Tserign Sherpa argues, "[the tourism industry] can respond to the needs of the market. For example, in 1970 there was only one teashop in Namche capable of serving just ten people. Now there are 600 hotels, lodges and resorts in the same area."

I asked the same question to every shop owner: "what portion of your customer base is tourist, versus locals?" The results were surprising. All shop owners in Kathmandu answered unanimously that tourists are only a small

<sup>6</sup> <http://nepalitimes.com/page/adventure-tourism-nepal-billion-dollar-industry>

percentage of their business. For example, Kathmandu Bike Station owner Prayash Tamang said his customers are almost entirely locals.

The exception is Pokhara Mountain Bike. About his customers, owner Jagan Biswakarma said “nowadays it’s like fifty-fifty, maybe a little more tourists.” But he explained this is recent, and uncommon for bike shops, and due only to his location on the main strip of Lakeside Pokhara, a tourist hothouse. Pokhara Mountain Bike opened eleven years ago, Jagan says, and it was the first bike shop in Pokhara that stocked mountain bikes. “Everybody comes through Kathmandu. But I would say we were the ones who initiated mountain biking in Annapurna region, Upper Mustang, and Lower Mustang.”

“At that time [when they opened their shop] we were hardly surviving, you know? And only very few tourists, like only adventure people come, trekkers and hikers and few for mountain biking. After the peace in 2008 much more people are coming.”

“When Pokhara Mountain Bike began in 2003 they had only three bikes, said 42-year old Santaram B.K., mechanic and guide for Jagan’s Pokhara Mountain Bike. “Then, we got five more,” he continued. Today, they have two shops in Pokhara, with state-of-the-art bikes, and conduct elaborate trips into the high mountains in Mustang. Santaram explained their initial growth was principally from the support of a French expat, Tangi Rebours, who not only aided with funding, but also has been prominently featuring Nepal’s MTB potential in interviews such as freerider.mag, and Nepali talk show TTV. He also spends his time working with various European directors to produce a slew of short documentaries, released freely online to promote Nepal’s scene. Rebours is mentioned in a travel writer’s article for FyTwelve, released on PinkBike.com (the go-to online MTB forum). The photojournalist describes Tangi, “an All-Mountain wizard responsible for spreading the good word of mountain biking across Nepal’s interiors,” with Tangi’s guidance, they explored Upper Mustang. He describes Nepal’s trails, “The natural features on the trails here are tons of fun to roll on. Steep faces, tight switchbacks, narrow walk ways; good start for the trip for sure.”<sup>7</sup>

Andrew Shandro and Rene Wildhaber, sponsored pro mountain bikers who starred in the *Strength in Numbers* doc, explained the scale of biking in Nepal’s high mountains, Wildhaber: “When you’re on 4000 meters and you look up to this 8000 meters mountains – it’s incredible. In Switzerland, I’m on top of a mountain and there’s nothing else.” Shandro: “Being rewarded with this descent that just continues for like thousands of vertical feet.”

Jagan, Pokhara Mountain Bike owner, had a good deal to say about bike-specific tourism. He explained that there was a big shift after 2012. The two MTB documentaries had an effective impact on the amount of excursions requested for visitors. Jagan expressed his hopes for the future of Pokhara’s scene, that he has plans in the works to build a bike park.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.pinkbike.com/news/FyTwelve-Nepal-video-2012.html>

In comparison, tourism is only a small part of the equation. All aside from Jagan Biswarka's Pokhara shop have a customer base of predominantly locals. Jagan hypothesizes "people are more health conscious now." For many middle-aged Nepalis, mountain biking is a means of exercise. Keegan McKensey's homestay pala, Rabsay la, with whom I went biking in Kathmandu, expressed his desire to start mountain biking regularly for fitness. He added he now has the free time to do so because he just sold his restaurant. He's not alone. Kathmandu's growing middle class<sup>8</sup> allows business opportunities for companies providing leisure activities.

"It used to be a niche of weirdoes," said Mads Mathiasen, a Danish expat, "I used to know every Nepali mountain biker. And in only five to ten years everything has changed." Perhaps the new local interest in mountain biking is related to the rising wealth of Kathmandu residents. Mathiasen, when asked who benefits from the MTB boom he conveyed that "ninety-nine percent" of riders at the races are Nepali, and on any given Saturday the morning riding clubs are "probably ninety percent locals." According to an article in the *Kathmandu Post* from April 2014, "The current fiscal year will see the highest economic growth in six years." Mads, being a resident of Nepal for nearly twenty years, shared his observations thusly, "Kathmandu [size] has doubled, tripled probably, in the past ten or fifteen years." He explained this is both due to industry as well as the 2008 conflict, forcing Nepalis to relocate for the stability of Kathmandu. "Now," Mads said, "the population growth has stabilized." A *Kathmandu Post* article<sup>9</sup> relayed the population growth from 2001 to 2011 as gone from 1,081,845 to 1,740,977. Not quite tripled in population, though this data is limited to 2011.

Throughout my research I was consistently shocked by how tightly knit the MTB community is – interviews from Kathmandu to Pokhara, I would be asked, "who have you spoken to already?" And we'd joke and talk shit about the other shop owners and racers. Each person I interviewed was acquainted with the others. By the end of my process, the shop owners knew I was coming. "You're that kid [going around asking all of us questions]." It is true enough a *community*, and the members of which share an impassioned respect for one another. An additional constant of the interviews: shop-owners were eager to share once I appeared at their shop stoop. I was even offered tea on several occasions. Stepping inside their shops was always easy-going, and I was never pressured to purchase their merchandise even once (a break from the mad touristy surroundings where the shops are located).

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/nepals-growing-middle-class-takes-to-the-malls-2227187.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.ekantipur.com/the-kathmandu-post/2011/09/27/top-story/census-2011-countrys-population-26.6m/226749.html>

### *Karma Cycles*

- “Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving.”  
 – Albert Einstein, a letter to his son Eduard. 1930.  
 “I thought of that while riding my bicycle.”  
 – Albert Einstein, in reference to the theory of relativity.

Anil Chitraker, a charming Nepali public speaker, in both of his two meetings with our SIT study abroad group, quoted a reference from *Kung Fu Panda*: “The panda,” he begins, “concerned, goes to the turtle for guidance. The wise turtle consoles the panda ‘the past is history, tomorrow is a mystery, but Now...is a gift.’” Anil draws a mandala on the whiteboard with two goats on either side facing inward. He explains it is the wheel of dharma. “Those who are concerned with the future have anxiety. Those with minds in the past: depression. Only when my mind is in the present can I be at peace.”

A walk around Kathmandu today, one sees many tourists. The visitors are divided into a few, humorous, immediately recognizable *yinji* caricatures – there are the pudgy tourists with their sun hats and long-snout cameras, and oblivious attitude. And then the dread-locked hippies in rags whom hajj to Nepal for spirituality. The third category is the large chested outdoorsmen, not an inkling of cultural interest, a twinkle of madness in their eyes, who come for the mountains. We all have our own strategies, consciously or not, for achieving peace in the state of Anil’s “Now.” Some use meditation. Others, like mountain bikers or mountaineers, employ adrenaline instead. Blasting down the ridge of a Himalayan peak, kicking up a wake of stones and dust, fingers clenched tight to the bars, squinted gaze fixed ahead, there is no damning oneself on the past, nor anxieties about the future. For the mountain biker firing down the trail whose speed has crossed over the edge of control, in these moments, the mind is at peace. And that is what draws people to Nepal.

Other riders see it differently. Like French rider Tangi Rebours, for example, who adores the uphill stretches. In a video of him riding through the Langtang region, he said, “for me, going up is a kind of meditation. Going down you get a rush. But every time I go up [into the mountains] I feel I better myself.” His voice-over is accompanied shots of monasteries and by the chanting and chimes of monastery bells.<sup>10</sup>

And Rebours is not alone. In fact, many western riders remark on biking in Nepal with a curiously wise case for their sport, with spiritual undertones. Like Mads, who responded to my visible alarm concerning his story of riding *up* to Lomanthang. Mads clarified, “I’m a bit of a masochist.”

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<sup>10</sup> <https://vimeo.com/42510604>

### *Competition, and Meeting the Champ*

In a video interview with TTV Talk, presenter Aman Pratap Adhikary asked Tangi Rebours, “First of all: Why mountain biking and why Nepal?” Rebours responded simply, “I think it’s the best playground in the world for mountain biking.”

Rebours continues: “I am not really enthusiastic about racing but I will like to see the development of Enduro racing in Nepal and India. I see more a future for Nepal and India in Enduro race rather than pure XC or DH race. We really have the right spot and the potential to organize some big Enduro races here.”

*XC* means cross-country racing, riders typically in skin suits and hardtail bikes (front suspension only, for lightness among other reasons). *DH* is Downhill racing, where riders wear full-face helmets (similar in style to motocross) and have much bulkier bikes. The downhill rigs are characterized by wide bars, huge suspension forks over the front extending from the wheel all the way up to the handlebars (a dual-crown fork), and with sneaker-sized rear shocks that enable the rear end to fold up toward the seat-post on big impacts. *Enduro* is a new category that sort of combines the two, and consequently the serious riders use bikes that are a mix between XC and DH bikes – medium suspension, medium weight. The famous “Megavalanche” held in the French Alps is a good example of an Enduro event, and a spectacular sight. The Megavalanche qualifier has heats of 250 riders all racing down a snowy rocky slope simultaneously.

Competition events are an effective way for promoting the sport. It’s also fun for the local community, brings reporters and spotlights the country. Competitive rider Mangal Krishna Lama, in a shortform documentary covering the 2012 Nepal National Championships (for cross country, or “XC”) says “In these six years [since he began mountain biking] I have seen a lot of changes. When I started racing there were only twenty or thirty riders. But now there are over one hundred racers at the local and national level.”

Nepal now hosts numerous mountain bike competitions. Probably the most famous of which, is the ambitious “Yak Attack.” Tyler McMahon describes the event (in which he was also a participant) in a Nepali Times article.<sup>11</sup> “A 400+ km trail, 15,000 m climb, snow, ice, and crossing the highest accessible mountain pass in the world all in 11 days? Torq Yak Attack. Ranked by Mountain Bike UK Magazine as one of the five toughest mountain bike races in the world.” The route goes around the Annapurna circuit. The harsh conditions and sheer length of the race divide this event from all others. McMahon describes a day of this event, “a 4 am start that had all of us carrying our bikes in the snow up to the top of Thorong La Pass. It was cold, dark, and icy as we made our way to 5,416 m. On the last stretch we were lashed by harsh winds that literally stopped racers in their tracks...10 minutes of frozen pain, lying on the snow after a crash.”

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<sup>11</sup> <http://nepalitimes.com/news.php?id=19122#.VVjdSM6XSfQ>

Historically, Nepali riders have had the leg-up in the Yak Attack, as they are already acclimatized to the mountains compared to a foreign rider who would need longer to adjust. However, this hometown advantage swings around when pro Nepali riders like Ajay Pandit Chhetri visit other countries, like South Africa for instance, to race.

Then there is Sonam Gurung's (Dawn Till Dusk owner) race, the YakRu Annapurna Challenge – overall an eight-day race that was scheduled this year from April 22<sup>nd</sup> to May 3<sup>rd</sup>. In the DH category, there is the Hattiban Downhill,<sup>12</sup> which held the fifth national downhill championship this year at the Hattiban Resort an hour south of Kathmandu. The route requires a shuttle to the top.

There is also an event called the Palpa Urban Downhill race. Urban downhills are a new spectacle where race organizers will tape off a track down a vertical city zone, down stairways and thin alleys, and often build big wooden jumps that attract huge crowds. These events have been taking place in poorer cities in South America and Southeast Asia. The Palpa Urban DH, organized by Switchback Nepal, “included a short forest section that opened up into the winding narrow alleys of the town of Tansen.”<sup>13</sup> The race was reportedly a huge success, “supported by more than 200 local volunteers and saw an enthusiastic turnout of over 8000 spectators. The event was a successful beginning to what many mountain bike enthusiasts believe is a bright and exciting future for mountain biking in Nepal, establishing Nepal as a major international mountain bike destination in the world.”

### **Meeting the Champ**

I'd seen and heard of Ajay Pandit Chhetri constantly in my preliminary research – magazine covers, article features, and the subject of numerous online videos. In my list of possible interviews I had him listed as a high hopeful watermark. A *Nepali Times* article<sup>14</sup> (written by Tyler McMahon), runs down Chhetri's accomplishments, “a well-travelled four-time National Champion, four-time Yak Attack winner, and victor of several races in the UK.”

During an interview with a young mechanic at Himalayan Single Track, a state-of-the-art bike shop in Thamel, the interviewee Arun Karki (a racer himself, placing third last year), said, “Oh, do you want to meet the national champion?” Then he motioned for me to follow, “C'mon.”

“Uh,” I said, caught off guard, “Yes.” I knew precisely whom he was talking of. Arun led me down the sunbaked street to a dinky restaurant called Darjeeling Delicacies. And there he was, the champ was surrounded by a group of friends in serious discussion. Arun interrupted and explained in Nepali who I was while I stood behind twiddling my fingers, horribly embarrassed.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.mtbproject.com/trail/4728135>

<sup>13</sup> <https://vimeo.com/108691262>

<sup>14</sup> <http://nepalitimes.com/article/Nepali-Times-Buzz/Nepal-mountain-bike-champs,1234>



Chhetri wore a green cashmere sweater and sat back in an easy chair, his rodent-like teeth perking out, and his eyes were bored. He's a young slim dude with jet-black hair spiked up like a squirrel. McMahon describes him, "At 25, weighing less than 50 kg and barely 5 ft tall, Chhetri doesn't even look like a cyclist, yet...Ajay brings home trophies after trophies." Chhetri spoke in a high-pitched raspy voice.

After I was through with my inquiry, careful to be brief, I thanked him with all my heart and bowed my way out of the room. Walking away with a smirk, feeling some blessed luck had befallen me, I realized I'd sort of wasted a great opportunity by not asking him much at all. Still though, I was honored meet him. Before I left I told him I was bound for Pokhara the following morning. Chhetri told me to make sure I ride the Peace Pagoda trail while I was there.

### **The Peace Pagoda**

Prior to Chhetri's recommendation, I'd heard the same thing many times from Arun Karki (Himalayan Single Track), Prayash Tamang (KTM Bike Station), the famous pioneer Sonam Gurung (Dawn Till Dusk), Mads too, and frankly everyone I asked about Pokhara's scene.

There is a popular YouTube video of a famous fifteen-year-old Nepali downhill Chris Keeling (winner of Nepal's 2014 Downhill Championship, winner of the Palpa Urban DH, and placed third in the world-famous Mega Avalanche spectacle in France against 1400 other riders!) descending the stairwell from the watch tower atop the hills and streaming down the ridge over Phewa Lake, past the Pagoda.

By this point, winding through jungle roads to Pokhara, the Pagoda single track has achieved a sort of mystical rank in my eager mind. I arrived and Jagan Biswarka set me up with a downhill bike (long shocks), an impressively skilled guide named Santaram B.K., and we strapped the bikes to a taxi roof that drove us up to the top and collected us at the bottom, for three runs. (I have edited together a video of that day of riding as a visual aid – see the footnote link)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-kIjzPQw\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-kIjzPQw_o) (alternatively, type "Peace Pagoda trail Mountain bike Sam Bowen" into Youtube bar)

### *Gazing Down Trail – Future Projections*

Some personal observations from participating in a mountain bike rental transaction: The mechanics don't seem to be held to the same standard as mechanics in America. For example, the suspension on the bike I rented was not tuned properly (not even close, in fact).

Additionally, these bike clubs are almost unanimously in need of funding. Jagan Biswarka's dream of a bike park in Pokhara is ambitious. A park would undoubtedly be successful, and dramatically aid the scene for local youth riders. However, mechanic and guide Santaram offered his suspicion about the feasibility of a park. "There isn't enough money to rent the land," as Pokhara is very expensive. The quandary is that in order for the bike park to have any use, it must be located in a populated touristy zone, in other words: in the most expensive land site. The dilemma reflects Nepal's MTB scene as a whole; the reason for the singletrack flowing across the country is the financial inability to build roads. The same financial limitations prevent the riders' dreams of bike parks, chair-lift access downhill, etc.

Observing the trail-riding personally from the saddle, while Pokhara's landscape is undeniably impeccable, it's clear the singletrack is not designed with the same craft as the bouncy, greasy, well-ridden trails of bike parks in the States. But, it could be. The dirt is soft enough. I could see it, with a foreign funded project with a hired trail designer from British Columbia, Pokhara valley really could be the "playground" that Tangi Rebours calls it. The economic factor is the limiting factor.

Some are less ecstatic than others about the future of the MTB scene. Mads Mathiasen, in our interview, expressed his doubts that Nepal could ever be a huge mountain bike hotbed for tourists, "the trails are excellent. But Nepal is just too far away. There's too much good stuff everywhere else." But Mads maintains hope in the local scene, as he stated in *Strength in Numbers*: "In relatively few years, say five or six, the numbers have probably gone up ten-fold in terms of riders in Nepal. And if we can keep that going then there will be a pretty good scene in a few years."

Jagan Biswarka also sees the future potential of the scene in the youth. "Our youth is going [abroad] because they don't think we have opportunity here. If we can train our youth here to become guides or mechanics it will help stop some of the youth from leaving and help economically grow the country." Jagan's Pokhara Mountain Bike has a youth cycling club, free of charge.

The champ Ajay Pandit Chhetri has his eyes on the 2016 Olympics in Brazil. Though others, like McMahan, note that realistically these riders need substantial financial support in order to continue to fight for Nepal's name on a global scale. Where the future looks brightest is in the younger generation, who see mountain biking more akin to an extreme sport rather than a means for exercise or transport. Rajesh Magar, for example, is a downhill and freeride biker who is prolific enough on social media that he has extraordinary potential for sponsorships.

Tangi Rebours agrees, “The scene in Nepal is growing day by day, more and more young riders are coming. Each local rider is the best ambassador for the sport as he will encourage his friends and family to practice, the number will extend, and then the level of riding will increase too.”<sup>16</sup>

The new generation of bikers, continuing to adapt and innovate, will be the way this scene progresses. Social media, like Chris Keeling’s popular Peace Pagoda video, is the goal. Riders like Rajesh Magar, armed with an action video camera, doing tours of the best trails accessible – like “Scar” in Shivapuri, and Hattiban DH track, and E’s Nest Bike Park in Dhobighat. These sites are not documented online, which is effectively thwarting the scene’s growth. E’s Nest Bike Park has been running the country’s only pump-track training center. It is a complex ring of jumps similar to BMX. These areas provide a productive outlet for the youth, who will push one another to achieve high skill levels.

Nepal’s true majesty for the sport, its differentiator, is in the high mountain regions like Mustang and Annapurna – places with descents that stretch on for thousands of vertical feet. In this category, there is no comparison. And, while it lasts, there is no more tremendous a cultural experience for western bikers than to ride through Tibetan regions. Nepal needs avenues to making money for their citizens, and until they discover an inlet outside of tourism, mountain biking is a comparatively harmless manner of income.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.freeridermag.in/tangi-rebours-rider-interview/>

**Interviews**

**Boudha Bike Shop – Bibek Lam (4/12)**

**Dawn Till Dusk – Sonam Gurung (4/12)**

**Lazimpath Restaurant – Mads Mathiasen (4/16)**

**Kathmandu Bike Station – Prayash Tamang (4/19)**

**Himalayan Single Track – Arun Karki (4/21)**

**Darjeeling Delicacies – Ajay Pandit Chhetri (4/21)**

**Pokhara Mountain Bike – Jagan Biswarka (4/24)**

**Pokhara Mountain Bike – Santaram B.K. (4/25)**

