



Clockwise from top left: In the mountains near Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia. Relwa Khurd bridge, India. Ban Tau Boua Pha, Laos. Mekong River, Laos. Rural bridge in Laos. Signpost between Chinchave and Umbrane in India. Hotel for the night off Highway 10, near At Tawdhiyah, Saudi Arabia



As I cycled towards Wilfred Thesiger's 'Empty Quarter', the desert revealed no outward marks, just blanks in time as well as space. Thesiger said that once one entered the desert "no man can live this life and emerge unchanged. The imprint of the desert, however faint, will have within him the yearning to return."

Saudi Arabia, inflamed by day, was bleak and cold by night as I slept in the sand. The wind always came with sunrise, now pushing me (still battery-less) like a ship lost at sea. Saudi's gleaming cities were very different from its villages, which seemed to me like construction sites built on sandpits next to a quarries. And they were different on a human level. Every day, when I was in a village shop checking out my groceries, a person behind me would insist on paying for whatever I needed.

Weeks passed. Then, on the hard shoulder of a motorway, I arrived in Dubai. I crated up my bicycle and flew with it to Mumbai in India, where my new batteries were waiting.

INTO THE HIMALAYA

Having collected my batteries from customs, I headed to Delhi. India has always seemed to me less like a developing nation than a highly developed one in a state of some decay. Palaces, skyscrapers and hovels rub shoulders. Riding north on hidden-away farm tracks, I passed villages of peasant farmers painstakingly

building their own homes from breeze blocks and cement.

From Delhi I cycled to Nepal, making for the Kali Gandaki Gorge. Annapurna, a 26,545ft peak, towers over the landscape and makes this valley the deepest in the world. Transecting the high mountains, a truck track cuts across the roof of Nepal to Tibet, linking trade as it has for centuries. I sat drinking tea in the Hotel Eagles Nest in the Western Himalayas while my bicycle's battery charged. Beyond the window, deep shadows lay in a valley that was crisscrossed with small glaciers and snow. The river was a torrent far below.

I'd entered Nepal at the western border post of Bhimdatta, and buzzed along the main highway, where there was more calm. North of Pokhara in the mountains, the road narrowed and at 12,000ft the paved surface took on the topography of a stream bed. It was cut out of a cliff face, with a 500ft sheer drop. From opposite directions, trucks bore down on each other, mirrors drawn in, drivers holding their breath. I would stand with my back to the cliff, pressing tightly into a crack, not daring to move until they'd passed.

After 10 hours of cycling through the mountains, at night in the traffic or alone in the evening rain, my tired brain played tricks. Sometimes I felt elation, then despair. I was moved, then scared. Ernest Hemingway wrote: "The first and final thing you have to do in this

Feeding the Li-ions

The fitter you are, the less power you use and the further you go. Take a spare battery. Charge every time you have a coffee and treat yourself to scones and jam. It's twin-pin plugs mostly wherever you go. Be warned: batteries are expensive to ship but (as now proved) with a bit of paperwork it's not too difficult. Don't buy poor-quality batteries.