The pedaller and the planet

Scenes from a world tour, by Claude Marthaler

Small country, big planet. Since childhood in Switzerland I have dreamed of riding around the world. To see it with my own eyes, and at a human pace. From Geneva, my home town, you can fly almost everywhere. But I wanted to be close to my journey, close enough to be able to taste it. And that meant going by bike.

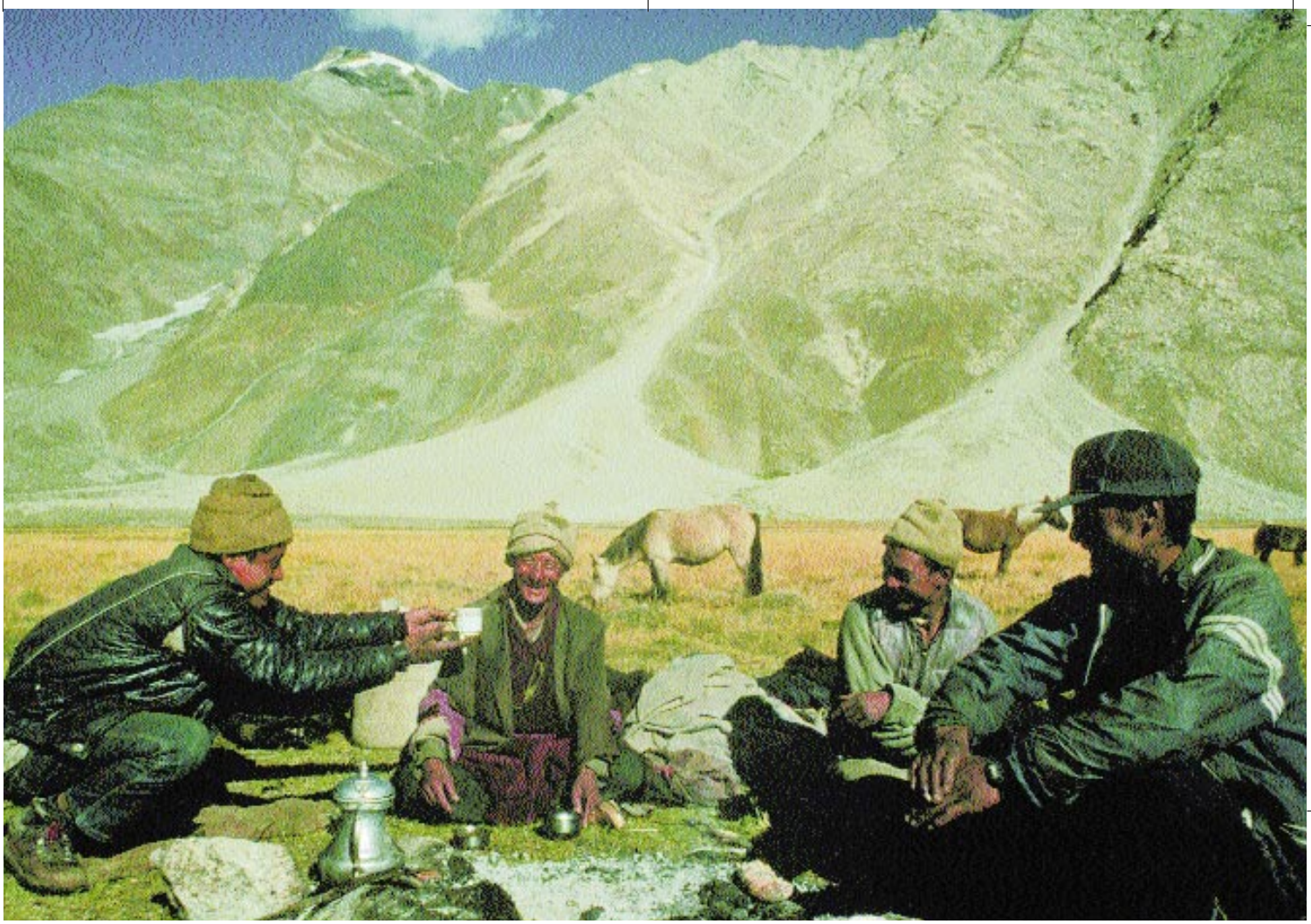
My friendly, slow and silent mode of transportation attracts all kinds of people along the road; Indian peasant farmers and Chinese party cadres, itinerant workers and pin-striped execs, bleary alcoholics and weary, but wired, travelling mystics. They take me into their homes, and schools, and places of worship. After a long day on a big planet, they know what I need: a hot meal, a dry bed, and people who make me smile. Cycling keeps me connected, and it does the same for you too, wherever you are.

People often like to list the countries they have been to, saying, for example, "I did Tibet last year." They might see themselves as kings and queens of the road, but sooner or later the road reveals the traveller's ignorance, bringing him or her to a completely unexpected 'destination'. Emotions weigh more than your heaviest gears, and you discover that the only check-points that matter are the ones within your mind and soul.

Tibet

On the inhospitable Tibetan plateau, between twelve and fifteen thousand feet, I met amazing groups of pilgrims who covered hundreds of miles by sliding along on their stomachs. Feet in bits of old car tyres, hands protected by planks of wood, lying on leather aprons, these Tibetans dredged their way along the road, chanting.

One man in particular will always stick in my mind as the epitome of spiritualised travel. I was cycling alone in the clutches of yet another sandstorm,



dragging myself along at maybe five miles an hour. I suddenly became aware of a lame figure ahead of me. This small, stooped silhouette was moving even slowlier than myself. As I drew near I dropped my bike and ran towards him. Without thinking we grabbed one another and hugged with a strange mutual intensity.

Chen Yin Chao was a Chinese Buddhist. He carried almost nothing with him: a gallon of water, some food. As he lit himself a cigarette I observed his incredibly long fingernails. My gaze continued downward where it halted abruptly on his running shoes. He was born with his feet facing backwards, rotated 180°. Despite this, he had walked more than 25,000 miles, one turn of the Earth's belly. I offered this miracle man a cup of tea, but the cold sandstorm forced us back to our feet and onwards with our respective journeys. I continued in search of shelter from the ferocious mixture of land and sky that was raging about me. Soon a small commune of roadmen appeared. Prayer flags were flapping in the empty courtyard. I tried the first door. A group of Tibetans brought me inside and served up steaming salt-butter tea. As I slowly warmed up, I tried to explain that a man was coming on foot from very far. From time to time, we would go outside to scan the swirling horizon. After three hours, someone spotted what seemed to be a human figure. I pulled on some extra clothes and sprinted out to Chen Yin Chao. He looked completely exhausted as I helped him back to the commune. Once settled in front of the fire, he passed around an old newspaper clipping about the start of his journey. He intended to continue his spiritual journey for another five years. After some time he requested a bucket of warm water for his tired feet. With the removal of his shoes, the Tibetans grew suddenly silent, a deep respect resounding within the walls of the commune. Chen Yin Chao had the shining presence of a Yogi. A unique moment in our lives.

On another occasion I come to a monastery atop a steep hill, a scaled-down Potala Palace. A group of monks motion to me "Come on ... Come on". A few come down to help me push up my bike. I pass through a stone passage and find myself in a monastic compound dark enough to please the devil himself. A huge cauldron sits atop a mud firepit that uses halves of trees for fuel. Water is boiling over, waiting to be ladled. This kitchen makes all things and all thoughts seem bigger. So much smoke and steam.

The monks seat me at a wooden table and feed me rice. They keep serving me salt and butter tea until my bladder is ready to burst. Their eyes, beneath heads of stubble hair, observe me closely, as the firelight reflects on their friendly faces. Three cats wind themselves around their tails and bed down near the fire.

Some monks finger Tibetan rosaries with one hand while counting donation money with the other. I excuse myself to go and release the tea. Standing over a wooden toilet seat, I see the river 200 metres below, reflecting the moon. The atmosphere of deep silence would shatter from a single word.

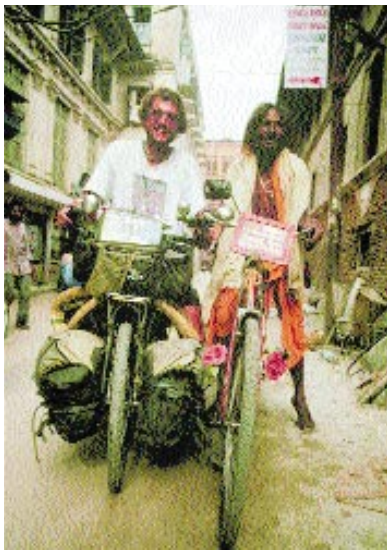
Next morning, the smiling monks wake me after their prayers. Into my hands they press a great bag of tsampa, a roasted barley-flour. They include a plastic bag with enough yak butter to grease my shoes and bicycle chain until I reach Japan. A monk uses an axe to chop a huge piece of smoked meat on a tree stump and hands it to me. I take a stack of photos of the Dalai Lama from my saddle bags. After so many miles, they stick together from too many rain-soaked rides. It doesn't seem to matter to the head Lama. He accepts them reverently from me and bundles them gently with a holy scarf.

Nepal: travelling with a holy man

My last day in Kathmandu. One of those bright days, when everything seems possible. My bike, 'the Yak', is a true beast of burden, packed with spare tyres, Nepalese peanut butter, Chinese noodle soups, Tibetan 'tsampa', cereals and probably the last loaf of bread for months. I'm heading for the rough Tibetan plateau towards Lhasa. On the infamous 'Freak Street' I meet Baba Laxmangiri. He is a travelling holy man, a rolling Sadhu. He floats above his Indian Hero. Two plastic roses, and two bare feet. No tools, no camping gear just a bright body and a flowing aura. After a few cups of tea we take the Northern road together. At the first foothill, he turns back, but his blessing stays with me.

India: nothing is truly solid

Sudden winds, curtains of rain: every five miles or so I stop to dislodge the lumps of India that have made a pilgrimage to my mudguards. I peer through the murkiness, looking for landmarks, people, even the road. Water above, water below. Nothing, except the spirit of welcoming friendship that supports me when I am at my heaviest. Even the poorest household offers warm hospitality. Food, shelter, tea.



Xinjiang, China. A crowd in the desert

Thousands of Oughouir people are planting poplar trees, to fight desertification. With an irony that will please eco-warriors everywhere, the land is reclaiming the road. But here, the road is a lifeline, so the whole community is out, labouring under the relentless sun and under the inflexible orders of a Chinese officer. Ten thousand holes, ten thousand saplings and one crazy foreigner. As soon as I'm spotted they down tools (and trees) and swarm to me. As I climb out of the frenzy onto a nearby cart hundreds more are coming – I can scarcely believe this is the desert.

Kashgar, Xinjiang, China

I've been told that continents are like humans: there is a relationship between the generations. If Asia is a grandmother, Europe is a mother and America a daughter.

Keeping in touch

Claude left Geneva on March the 12th, 1994 and is currently somewhere in Mexico. His route has taken him through Hungary, the former Soviet Union, China, Tibet, Japan, and the USA. Throughout his travels, Claude keeps in touch through Internet cafés: his journeys are documented on the Internet at www.redfish.com/Yak and messages can be sent to yak@bcijing.redfish.com

Jules Verne's heroes girdled the earth in 80 days. By 1960, you could reach every part of the world physically in 36 hours. Now, information technology is once again challenging traditional notions of time and space. Internet cafés are springing up around the world like mushrooms after rain. They have become meeting places for travellers, just like the *caravanserais* and *tchaikhanas* (Asian tea houses) of old. The internet-aware traveller is the new traveller, a traveller without roots. Schools, universities, businesses and individuals: all provide internet services often for free.

There are two main services of use to the traveller. Electronic mail is like writing a letter, but avoids the inefficiency (and the censorship) of most of national post services. It is an indispensible tool for a nomad. Hotmail <www.hotmail.com>, Yahoo <www.yahoo.com> and others all offer free e-mail services which you can access through any internet café, although the privacy of the messages you send isn't guaranteed.

The Internet, in the shape of the World Wide Web, is also an infinite source of information, which lets you carry less information with you on the bike as heavy paper. Here in Mexico, the liberation movement for Chiapas (in the south) has its own website, there are plenty of weather forecast and travel information sites, and the traveller can pick up the very latest information about crossing a border.

And you can keep in touch with other travellers. I met Stephen and Alison in a small hotel in Peking in late 1996. We became friends, and they built me a homepage www.redfish.com/Yak on Redfish, their own website. It is a kind of platform for my friends and sponsors, so that they can all follow my journey as it progresses. I send in regular updates and extracts from my diary.

Equipment

Your basic equipment is common sense. I can't really recommend much in the way of specific items, as I tend to just buy what is available. Just choose quality, simplicity and universality. Durability is influenced by factors like road surface, hilliness, total weight, maintenance frequency, weather, proximity of salt water and sand, and your cycling style. It is worth putting these factors up against component availability when you are planning routes. Don't forget that you can also get stuff sent out, especially if you make a deal in advance with a friendly bike store or manufacturer. And choose a country with a reliable postal service and mellow customs regulations.

Unless you are travelling only in developed countries, an MTB is the only choice for strength, stability and comfort. And parts availability is good: both China and India build MTBs. But make sure the frame is chrome-moly steel, so it can be welded anywhere.

Components: I use whatever I can get. I expect to get through one chain and freewheel every 3000 to 5000 miles (5000-8000km), and chainrings maybe after eight thousand (13000km). Tyres tend to burst on the sidewalls long before the tread goes. To extend their life (to maybe 6000 miles, 1000km), I swap the front and rear around. My favourite brand is the Schwalbe Marathon, from Germany. As for wheels, after seven breakages I use Sun 36-spoke tandem rims. My preferred saddle is an old Brooks leather model, but it doesn't much care for heavy rains and tropical humidity. Racks get a hard time. Use only chrome-moly; once you get to interesting places you won't be able to weld aluminium. Mine are made in the USA by Bruce Gordon.

All together, excluding engine, my Yak weighs around 160lb (70kg).