



India by Tuk-Tuk

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces

On three wheels, three Kiwis in their thirties raised over three thousand dollars for two charities travelling four thousand kilometres through India in a tuk-tuk named Betty Swollocks. Their name is Team Kupe.

"I'd always wanted to go to India, but I always wanted a reason instead of just doing the clichéd hippy thing," says Andy McLean. When I ask how they decided upon their route it became clear just how seriously Andy took his job as the team's risk assessment manager. "Oh, we didn't really talk about it until we got there and bought our first map," he says. "We aimed for Goa but it would've taken too long so we concentrated on a mainly inland route. We were lucky. The worst that happened was a couple of flat tyres. Some rickshaws collided with buses or caught fire. One team hit a cow."

The Rickshaw Run is an annual rally-type event organised by The Adventurists. There is an entrance fee and competitors must also raise at least \$2,000 for good causes. Half the money is distributed locally, the other half to charities of choice. Team Kupe opted for UNICEF as they work both in India and New Zealand.

Andy's two team-mates were Steve Brown and Hamish Dobbie (founder of YOLKR, featured in April's Verve). "Our route was unique," says Andy. "For the first four days we didn't see a white person, which was fun. In each town we were like

celebrities, people crowded round us wherever we stopped."

So you experienced the full-force of Indian hospitality?

"Absolutely. Many of the restaurants don't see white guys so they'd walk round searching for cutlery. We were quite happy to eat with our hands – especially after they'd find an old spoon at the back of a shelf, wipe it on a grubby cloth and hand it over to us!"

The police were not always so obliging. The team were pulled over three times, twice for photos and once to be shaken-down for a bribe: "We asked for a receipt and the cop started freaking out. We paid 350 rupees in the end, which is about ten bucks."

Common ground was always found through cricket. When Jesse Ryder's name was dropped the three guys were amazed to hear youngsters, who could barely speak English, point to their heads and say 'coma'. "We gave a cricket ball to a kid whose parents' village hotel we stayed in," says Andy. "The ball was made in India, but purchased New Zealand and they're like gold-dust out there. It was humbling that something so simple could give that kind of pleasure."

One of Andy's ever-lasting memories will be of breathtaking early-morning drives: "India doesn't start cranking until nine or ten so before then you have the roads to

Above:
Team Kupe; Hamish, Andy and Steve (L to R) and their Rickshaw sponsored by MedSailors

yourselves and can watch the world get up. In the south especially, when you're driving alongside beautiful rivers and rainforests as the sun rises, it's quite a sight."

They encountered local wildlife including monkeys, snakes, cows and wild dogs. "I was the only one who'd had the rabies injection," says Andy, "so the other two said if we came across any rabid canines, it was up to me to tackle them. I wasn't too keen on doing that."

Their tuk-tuk could handle a steady speed of 45 km/h, though did manage 78 "going downhill with us all leaning forward." But there was no rush, no prize for first place and the three wanted to make the most of their month in India. Others were more competitive but the roads were treacherous enough in daylight so Andy and the team opted not to night drive ("mountain passes in the dark are never a good idea"). One Danish team drove for 36 hours straight.

"You see people living in abject poverty yet they're still happy with life," says Andy. "It makes you realise how lucky we are and makes you appreciate New Zealand even more."

Would he do it again?

"Yes, it's such a great way to travel and see the country, but I'd take a different route" he says, then pauses and smiles. "But I wouldn't recommend it to everyone."