

A close-up, low-angle shot of a bicycle tire tread, showing the intricate patterns and sipes designed for grip. The tire is mounted on a silver-colored rim, and several spokes are visible in the background. The text 'PEDAL POWER' is overlaid in large, bold, red capital letters. A thin orange horizontal line is positioned at the top of the page.

# PEDAL POWER



Corporate India is coming out to play and moving out of boardrooms to the cooler climes of mountains or in the vast outdoors.

**Arun Katiyar** reports on the cycling boom and India's longest bicycle ride, the 900 km BSA Tour of Nilgiris that is much sought after by professionals and business executives.

**O**VER the last decade or so, India Inc has begun to take to the outdoors in a big way. Top business executives are increasingly going on hiking, trekking and camping expeditions, and several have even started taking to scuba-diving, parasailing, skiing and white water rafting.

Now, it appears to be the turn of cycling, an outdoor sport that combines the twin benefits of good health and an environment-friendly alternative to motorised transport. There is growing interest in cycling from corporate India, considering the increasing importance of being sensitive to the environment and supporting sustainable technologies.

In fact, Indians now have access to some of the world's best brands of

## TAKING CORPORATE INDIA FOR A (HEALTHY) RIDE

**Ravi Ranjan**, a Bengaluru-based techie with five registered patents to his name, is an avid cyclist, who dreamt up the Tour of Nilgiris with friend **Rajesh Nair** in the US. In an interview, he offers insights into why corporate India is willing to try out a new challenge – doing 900 km on a bicycle through the Nilgiris:

### How did the idea of something as ambitious as a 900-plus km ride through the Nilgiris come about?

Eight of us wanted to go out for a holiday in 2008. All of us, including Rajesh Nair, a photographer friend in the US, wanted to go on a cycling tour. So we created a reasonably challenging route through the Nilgiris, since we all lived in Bengaluru, and decided to go. When others heard of the tour on a blog, we had inquiries flooding us. So we decided to include as many people as we could in our plan. When we left last December on the first Tour of Nilgiris, we had 56 participants.

### Who were the participants in TFN 08? And what is the profile of those on the ride this year?

The amazing thing was the diversity of participants on TFN 08. We had riders from the adventure wing of the Indian Air Force; a barefoot grape farmer from Sangli; we had riders from Red Rooster, India's professional racing team; the



Ravi Ranjan

manager of the 2007 cycling team that went to Thailand and so on.

It was a mix of exceptional riders and ordinary folk. Most of the riders this year on the BSA Tour of Nilgiris are people who heard of the tour last year but could not make it. These include senior people from companies such as Accenture,

Castrol and Microsoft, entrepreneurs, researchers and marketing directors, business analysts with banks, financial derivatives traders and even a franchisee of the largest book store chain. It's a very business-oriented profile that is on the BSA Tour of Nilgiris.

### What is the key to the success of the BSA Tour of Nilgiris?

Many Indians are ready to embrace the outdoors. And they want to do it with a vengeance. Cycling is seen as an eco-friendly, healthy lifestyle alternative that puts you back in touch with reality as you get out of the comfort of the city on long weekend rides. It takes you outdoors and forces you to breathe in the realities of the environment and connect with it. And an organised tour that has good accommodation, several safety features, expert medical assistance, great weather and a dream route through wildlife sanctuaries and dense forests is bound to be a winner.





## TAKING THE HIGH ROAD

The BSA Tour of Nilgiris is a fully-supported ride. It has an ambulance (from the Sita Bhateja Speciality Hospital, Bengaluru), which is an ICU on wheels and travels with the tour; sweeper vehicles to pick up those who cannot complete the ride on any given day; bicycle mechanics; and a support team in SUVs and motor-bikes that ensure the smooth running of the expedition.

TFN 09 has a route that can be a challenge for any cyclist and offers a chance to take in the bio-diversity of the Blue Mountains in south India. A quick look at the route and the challenge (December 15–December 23, 2009):

- Day one: TFN 09: Pre-tour briefing in Bengaluru
- Day two: Bengaluru–Mysore: 136.79 km. Total climb: 494 m; total descent: 628 m
- Day three: Mysore–Hassan: 118.80

km. Total climb: 844 m; total descent: 643 m

- Day four: Hassan–Madikeri: 111.22 km. Total climb: 1,187 m; total descent: 950 m
- Day five: Madkeri–Irupu: 79.77 km. Total climb: 734 m; total descent: 991 m
- Day six: Irupu–Rest Day
- Day seven: Irupu–Sultanbathery: 69.56 km. Total climb: 973 m; total descent: 964 m
- Day eight: Sultanbathery–Ooty: 90.60 km. Total climb: 2,228 m; total descent: 888 m
- Day nine: Ooty–Mysore: 124.58 km. Total climb: 637 m; total descent: 2,162 m

**Note:** The total day-wise distance covered is 731 km. The remaining 170 km are local rides that are announced directly to participants at each destination, making the total distance 901 km.



bicycles: from super premium 'performance' bicycle brands like Bianchi and Cannondale that have been brought to the country by TI Cycles of India, part of the US\$ 2 billion Murugappa Group, to other high-performance brands such as Trek, Merida and Rockrider. These bicycles are priced anywhere between US\$ 400 and US\$ 5,000.

Leisure cycling is fast emerging as an alternative to the more popular golf. In fact, the similarities between golf and cycling are unmistakable: both are about the outdoors, and require a considerable amount of skill and a reasonable investment in gear and equipment. The difference, however, is that while golf is played in bucolic surroundings and requires club memberships, cycling is about sweating it out and can be done just about anywhere.

In a span of over three years, India can become one of our most important export markets, mainly due to the large youth population.

**Richard Stroem,**  
director, international sales, Bianchi

TI Cycles, which sells around three million regular bicycles every year, is clearly the leader in the high-performance segment with an estimated investment of US\$ 2.15 million in building the market. The company opened its first high-end bicycle store in Bengaluru in March 2009.

According to L Ramkumar, managing director, TI Cycles, the new range is targetted at fitness and health-conscious users, wanting to ride bicycles for leisure, fun and recreation. The market size of these super-premium bicycles in India is 7,000 units a year, growing at over 25 per cent, according to the company.

Says Richard Stroem, director, international sales, Bianchi, the Italian bike major: "In a span of over three years, we believe that India can become one of our most important export markets, mainly due to

## BIKE TO WORK

BIKE to work is a concept that is catching up gradually in corporate India, especially in IT campuses that are cropping up around the country. Many of these sprawling campuses are on the outskirts of cities such as Delhi, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Chennai and Pune, and a large number of executives – including many senior-level – live within a range of about 10 km. Cycling to work is not just a healthier option, but also a cleaner and greener one.

Interestingly, quite a number of these executives in the IT sector have worked in the US and Europe, especially in states and cities where cycling is emerging as a popular mode of commuting to work. When they relocate to India, they bring their bicycles and start pedalling to office, just as they did in San Francisco or Amsterdam.

International bicycle brands have noticed this trend and are setting up shop in India, even as domestic majors

are manufacturing high-end cycles to cater to this growing niche market. India produces about 12 million bicycles every year, but a majority sells for less than US\$ 100. The entry of international brands such as Cannondale, Bianchi, Merida, Trek and Raleigh has transformed the high-end of the market.

Most of these bicycles sell for between US\$ 500 and US\$ 5,000, are relatively high-speed and have fancy accessories. Both international and domestic brands are setting up showrooms to sell these high-end bikes, organising cycling expeditions on weekends and setting up cycling communities on the Web.

Ashwath Kapur, India director of Taiwan-headquartered Merida Industry Company, says the firm sells over 2,000 high-end bikes every month in India and sales are growing at 20 per cent every year.

Shivinder Singh, managing director

Firefox, a leisure bike-maker, which started operations in Greater Noida in 2005 – and is the sole distributor of US-based Trek bicycles in India – expects to launch 15 new models by March 2010. The company, which has 50 'bike stations' across India, plans to set up 20 additional outlets over the next few months.

Hero Cycles, Ludhiana, the world's largest producer of bicycles – with over 5 million bikes produced annually – recently launched half-a-dozen premium bicycles priced up to US\$ 750. Pankaj Munjal, managing director, expects a 30 per cent increase in the sale of high-end recreational cycles, as against a 3.5 per cent growth rate for traditional cycles.

With a growing number of software parks, knowledge parks, IT cities and other sprawling commercial-cum-residential enclaves coming up all over India, demand for these premium bikes is likely to see an upward trend.





## FROM COPENHAGEN TO DUBAI, CYCLING'S THE BUZZWORD

COPENHAGEN, the capital of Denmark, which hosted the 15th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 15) from December 7 to 18, is undoubtedly the 'cycling capital' of the world.

Copenhagen has over 300 km of dedicated cycle tracks, each 2m wide. About 35 per cent of commuters – including civil servants and top executives – cycle to work and even students pedal push while going to school. The local authorities have set a target of raising this to 50 per cent by 2015 and 60 per cent by 2020.

Surprisingly, despite the harsh winter months, 70 per cent of cyclists continue using this mode of transport, according to the Municipal Government of Copenhagen. The government has set a target of reducing parking lots by 3 per cent every year, to encourage commuters to pedal to work.

Other cities around the world are also encouraging commuters to take to the ordinary bike. Cycling has always

been popular in European cities such as Amsterdam, but it is now gaining a strong following even in megapolises such as London and New York, where separate cycle-ways have been established.

About two years ago, the local authorities in Sydney adopted a 'cycle strategy and action plan 2007-17', aiming to increase cycling by 500 per cent and providing infrastructure to make it an attractive mode of commute for citizens.

The city authorities plan to increase the cycling network to 200 km, with 55 km of separated cycle lanes and 145 km of cycle-ways, dedicated lanes and shared zones.

Cycling is gaining currency even in the oil-rich Gulf region. The Dubai Roads and Transport Authority (RTA) plans to build more than 900 km of cycling tracks in the city over the next 10 years; about a sixth of this would be built on a priority basis and work on laying tracks in the first phase has already begun.

The authority, which recently developed the Dubai Metro, also plans to set up 2,000 cycle parking stands in the central business district. Eventually, there are plans to expand these to 6,000.

Leading Indian health and beauty firm, VLCC, which has a presence in the UAE as well, organised a 'cycle-o-thon' in Dubai in December as part of an anti-obesity drive.

Cities in India are also encouraging this new global trend. Says Bhaskar Rao, transport commissioner, Bengaluru: "Commuting by bicycle and bus are the best solutions to ease traffic congestion on city roads. We want school children to ride their bicycles to school. It's good for their health and will save the environment from pollution caused by emission of greenhouse gases."

Authorities in Pune, once the cycling capital of India, also plan to encourage commuters to pedal to work. Dedicated cycling lanes are being planned along major thoroughfares.



the large youth population, which shows an increasing trend to stay fit."

But like any other adventure sport, cyclists need challenges to test themselves and their bicycles to bring in an element of thrill and to sustain interest in the sport. Leading the way and enabling cyclists all over the country to push their limits is a cycling tour called the BSA Tour of Nilgiris (TFN) ([www.bsatourofnilgiris.com](http://www.bsatourofnilgiris.com)). The 900 km-long tour, the longest supported bicycle expedition in India, has been described as the "journey of a lifetime" by its organisers, the RideACycle Foundation, a Bengaluru-based not-for-profit advocacy group that promotes the concept of 'sustainable transport and socially responsible bicycling opportunities.'

Comments Dr Harsh Shah, 48, an orthopedic surgeon from Ahmedabad, specialising in knee and hip replacement surgery, who is one of the 70 riders in the December 2009 tour: "I have been cycling for nearly seven years now and the longest trip has been 550 km in four days. I am now trying to push my limits with the BSA TFN."

The reasons why people should ride a bicycle is its fun, it makes you fit and you contribute to a better environment.

**Abhishek Sareen,**  
manager, performance bikes, TI Cycles

Says Jitin Munjal, 37, general manager, Castrol India Ltd, "When I heard about TFN 08 late last year, I was kicking myself for not getting to know of it sooner." This is a common refrain amongst participants on the tour. "There was no way I would

miss it this year. I started riding more regularly, and now this tour is a test of endurance – can I do 100-plus km several days at a stretch?," adds Munjal.

Indeed, for corporate India 'stretch' is no more just about pushing the limits to achieve better performance and higher sales figures. It's also about taking that chance to prove that you can, going that extra mile and 'stretching' yourself to extreme limits of physical endurance.

Says Abhishek Sareen, manager, performance bikes, TI Cycles: "But the most important reasons why people should ride a bicycle is that its fun, it makes you fit and you contribute to a better environment."

In today's business environment, being in the outdoors, exposed to the elements and to nature can indeed reshape personalities and build leadership qualities. A 900-km cycling journey with 70 like-minded people in a span of eight days can hone inter-personal skills to make better managers. As the cyclists so fondly say, "It's not about the bicycle, it's about yourself." 🌈