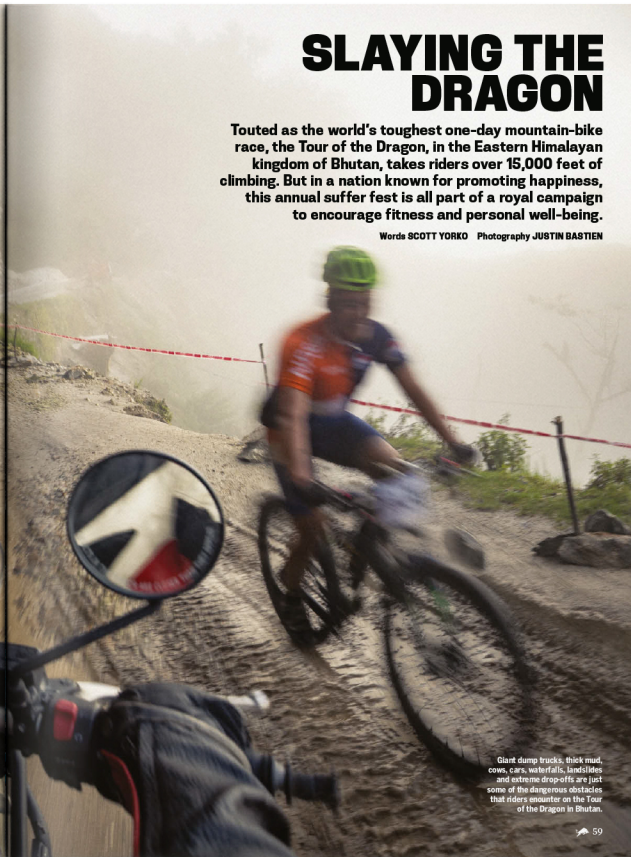




SLAYING THE DRAGON

Touted as the world's toughest one-day mountain-bike race, the Tour of the Dragon, in the Eastern Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, takes riders over 15,000 feet of climbing. But in a nation known for promoting happiness, this annual suffer fest is all part of a royal campaign to encourage fitness and personal well-being.

Words SCOTT YORKO Photography JUSTIN BASTIEN



Clint dump trucks, thick mud, cows, cars, waterfalls, landfills and extreme drop-offs are just some of the dangerous obstacles that riders encounter on the Tour of the Dragon in Bhutan.



It's 2 a.m. on a clammy, pitch-black morning in early September, and the air smells like cow dung. Under the glare of a spotlight, the Bhutanese road safety crew is dancing what looks like the Macarena. Their gentle movements mimic a slow-tempo karate while the soft sounds of an Asian flute flutter in the background. Most of the residents of Bumthang, Bhutan (pop. 6,000), are here watching the ceremony (or ransacking the porridge stand) and waiting for the race to begin.

Over at the starting line, 48 mountain bikers are lining up on an oil-splattered road as rear lights flash red across their faces. In the front row, no one—including six soldiers from the Royal Bhutan Army—is over 5'7". They look weightless, like jockeys poised to whip out of the gates. I suddenly feel the need to ditch my extra snack bars to shed a few ounces. Some riders make casual jokes, while my bladder swells with a nervous urge to pee for the third time in 20 minutes. Before I mount my bike for at least the next 12 hours, I try to relax by taking deep breaths, but my gut keeps seizing with tension. Just before the gun goes off, a race official in an orange jumpsuit taps a microphone and makes a quick announcement: "The weather is not good. The roads are slippery. Please don't use our medical team."

BANG! Off we pedal into the darkness.

Left: A rare smile during the race. Below: The weather in Bhutan can change at a moment's notice, switching from freezing cold downpours to warm sunshine that clears the sky for beautiful views.



"The roads are slippery," a TOD race official announces. "Please don't use our medical team."

The story's intrepid writer, Scott York, plows through one of the many obstacles found on the road between Bumthang and the capital city of Thimphu.



"It takes every ounce of everything you have to keep it together," Einhorn warns.

I had traveled to the Kingdom of Bhutan to attempt the Tour of the Dragon (TOD), a 167-mile bike race on a sketchy, serpentine road that crosses four mountain passes—three of which stand more than 10,000 feet high—all in one long, sadistic day with more than 15,000 feet of climbing. By comparison, the hardest stages of the 2018 Tour de France covered 13,500 feet of climbing in a day, and that was with ultralight race bikes on paved roads. With its apocalyptic conditions, the TOD is billed as "the toughest one-day mountain bike race in the world," and there's no way anyone can ride this course on skinny road-bike tires.

"It takes every ounce of everything you have to keep it together," warned Joel Einhorn, the founder of Hanah, an herbal supplement company that sources ancient herbs from Bhutan. Einhorn was the only American to cross the finish line in last year's race, where he dodged multiple landslides and hundreds of cows, monkeys and raging diesel trucks while deep, coarse mud wore two sets of his brake pads down to the metal.

When Einhorn invited me to join him in the 2018 race, I had to look up Bhutan on a map. Nestled above the far northeast corner of India, Bhutan has a northern border with Tibet that runs along a treacherous seam of the Eastern Himalayan mountain range, which has historically protected the Switzerland-sized country from outside influence and allowed it to remain one of the only nations in the world never to be colonized by an outside power. Until very recently, this geographic and political isolation delayed Bhutan's progress toward modernization. Many Bhutanese still live off the land; the first paved road wasn't completed until 1962 and the government didn't open its borders to foreign visitors until 1974. There are still no traffic lights in the entire country.

The designated route for the Tour of the Dragon, which takes us from Bumthang to the capital city of Thimphu, can be treacherous. "The road," as it is most commonly referred to, experiences daily landslides that have to be cleared three to four times per week. During the summer, a three-month monsoon season erodes the earth so much that truck-sized boulders routinely tumble down onto the road. Tour buses can get stranded for days, while mangled guardrails hang above chunks of dislodged pavement and crumbling bluffs.

And yet, the road is still an engineering marvel that miraculously wraps across the faces of steep mountainsides in a delicate ribbon of dirt and asphalt. Thanks to plenty of dynamic, some parts of the road cut through slabs of craggy, white rock. There are virtually no flat sections, but there are



Alongside the road, cheerful monks pick apples for an afternoon snack.

hundreds of roadside stupas, memorial crosses, shrines, hydro-powered prayer wheels and warning signs with messages like "Please Don't Be Unpredictable." Despite the terror of simply driving it—let alone cycling it in the dark while it rains—the road and the race are tremendous points of pride for the Bhutanese people.

But in the last decade, Bhutan has gained more attention for promoting its philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) as an official index of prosperity and quality of life, rather than Gross Domestic Product. First coined by the fourth Druk Gyalpo ("Dragon King"), Jigme Singye Wangchuck, in 1972, the term GNH was written into Article 9 of its 2008 Constitution, shortly after the king dissolved Bhutan's absolute monarchy, formed a parliamentary democracy and voluntarily abdicated the throne to his eldest son, His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the fifth king. After the passing of the crown to the next generation, GNH has become a screening tool for policy proposals and potential trade partnerships, based on four guiding pillars: good governance, sustainable socioeconomic development, environmental conservation and the

"How can a nation be happy if the people don't play sports?" asks HRH Prince Jigyel.

Bhutanese students dressed in traditional gho line the road to wish the riders good luck, chanting "Do your best! Do your best!"



The royal family's love of cycling has caused Bhutan's citizens to follow suit.

promotion and preservation of culture. These principles are at the forefront of the country's political and social initiatives to maximize the success of its citizens. Put simply, Bhutan is prioritizing the pursuit of happiness.

At the age of 63, the former king remains a devout cyclist who can regularly be seen riding his full-suspension, carbon-fiber mountain bike through the hills. "He's a hardcore rider," says his mechanic, Kinga Wangchuck. "He never gives up."

It has long been his belief that a love of cycling and an active lifestyle coincide with the values of GNH. Although the current king also loves cycling, it is really his half-brother, His Royal Highness Prince Jigyel Ugyen Wangchuck, who has inherited their father's fanaticism. A lifelong athlete—who regularly trains with his security entourage and participates in local basketball tournaments—Prince Jigyel believes it was only natural for him to get into mountain biking in a nation where the Eastern Himalayas is his playground. "Cycling is a very important sport to promote national happiness and well-being," the prince states over email. "My goal has always been to create a world-class cycling event in Bhutan."

In 2010, the prince founded the Tour of the Dragon. The first year was essentially a test run. Of the 23 participants, only nine completed the race, including the prince, but they proved it could be done. Since then, the TOD has become a yearly competition that attracts a variety of athletes and a smattering of Westerners. In 2015 it spawned a shorter, 37-mile race called Dragon's Fury, which is open to adults and junior competitors ages 14 to 18. "The TOD is a perfect marriage of promoting healthy living through cycling," he writes.

Today, the prince, 34, also heads the Bhutan Olympic Committee in his ongoing effort to encourage fitness across the country. "How can a nation be happy if people don't play sports?" he asks. There's no denying that the royal family's love of cycling has caused Bhutan's citizens to follow suit. Bike shops and youth cycling clubs are popping up across the country, and more and more villages are becoming linked through trail networks. Even those without access to bicycles have the fever: More than 1,000 volunteers take their posts along the TOD course well before sunrise and remain throughout the day to support riders in any way they can—be it manning aid stations or sweeping gravel off the turns. These helpers range from bald monks in orange robes and older women with wide smiles to schoolchildren who hold up signs of encouragement, offer assistance and hand out water and candy bars.

Early on in the race, I'm pedaling hard just behind a small lead group and ahead of the main peloton. I'm keeping pace with a German private equity investor named Heinz who has two blinding lights mounted to his helmet and handlebar. Together we dodge potholes, camouflaged spectators, tumbling boulders the size of bike wheels and roaming cows. (Two days earlier, on a warm-up ride, one such cow bucked a Frenchman off his bike. Both cow and man were fine, just rattled.)

Locals are camped out with small fires on the roadside, waiting to cheer for riders as they pass. One well-intentioned spectator is trying to heave buckets of water at riders' drive chains to raise mud from their gears, but appears to be dousing their lower bodies instead or missing entirely. It's still dark as we close in on the 11,252-foot saddle of Yotang La, the first major mountain pass, at 4:09 a.m. Starting the day with a 3,000-foot climb was a jolt to the system, but my initial adrenaline is subsiding. Three hundred yards from the top, HRH Prince Jigyel comes riding the opposite way wearing a gho, a traditional white robe, while flanked by his bodyguard. "Good job, guys," he says in a soft, deep voice. "Keep it up."

With an encouraging boost from the prince, we crest the summit to a crowd of cheering volunteers and spectators standing beneath a canopy of strung prayer flags. At the top, it's 42°F, so I stop to throw on a windbreaker for the 26-mile, 4,000-foot-plus descent to the Trongs Viewpoint. Heinz takes off without me. I'm soon riding alone on a horrendous stretch of road, nicknamed "Nyala Duem" after a local demoness, that's in the process of being torn up and excavated for future pavement. The mud is so thick in some sections that it feels as if someone's fixed a bungee cord to my seat post, and I have to pedal hard to move downhill without sinking deeper into the sludge. I lose count of more than 30 excavators parked just off to the side, waiting to clear the next surprise landslide.

At 4:30 a.m., I look like I've been sneezed on by an elephant. At that moment, a big chunk of dirt flips up into my right eye. I'm trying to blot the grit out from under my eyelid, but it's a desperate struggle to see where I'm going in the dark as I round tight corners at high speed. This is a terrible time for the battery on my front light to die, which is exactly what happens. Suddenly, I'm flying downhill along the edge of a sheer cliff that drops off thousands of feet below with no guardrail—in complete darkness. Without the glare of a light, my left eye quickly adjusts to see the blanket of clouds hovering way below me. "If you go off one of those cliffs, no one will ever find you," a local rider told me the day before. It no longer seems like an exaggeration.



Riders frequently pass stupas, moundlike Buddhist shrines that often contain religious relics and serve as places of meditation.

Not wanting to stop, I try to navigate by moonlight, but the thick shroud of cypress trees overhead forms a tunnel of shadows. I have another hour before the sun will even start to rise in the Trongs Valley, so I slow to a near halt and then hear what sounds like a war cry. A handsome Bhutanese man named Chodra comes barreling down the road with his arms off the handlebar, pumping them in a runner's sprint to keep warm. I hop on his tail and his bright light illuminates the way for both of us until the sun casts a warm glow on the valley and our backs. Only 120 miles and two more mountain passes to go.

Still way out front are four of the Royal Bhutan Army soldiers, cranking hard on their bicycles

(provided by the prince) and setting a breakneck pace for anyone hoping to crack the top five. One of those soldiers is 28-year-old Tsering Dendup. Although he has only been riding a bike for one year, he sometimes trains on his bike for 24 hours straight. Other times, he breaks it up into eight-hour sessions over three consecutive days. Like his fellow servicemen participating in the TOD, Dendup is short and shy, but his high cheekbones peak when he smiles and declares his love of cycling. "I do it for physical fitness," he told me before the race, "but I also feel like I'm serving my country by cycling."

In addition to their military training, these handpicked soldiers are given ample time to log

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Ergon G53
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A protective material that also provides maximum head ventilation? That's a double whammy for this helmet, equipped with Kerofit, small tubes in a honeycomb structure that compress on impact, absorbing kinetic energy. The patented MIPS liner offers extra protection against concussions, while a sweatband keeps the sweat out of your eyes. \$230; smithoptics.com



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HRH Prince Jigmet Ugyen Wangchuck greets schoolchildren along the ride.

serious bike mileage. "HRH's support to our young soldier cyclists is immensely profound," says Lieutenant Ugyen Dorji, who is also participating in the race this year. "I am confident that his vision was always to take our country's athletes to the outside world and give them opportunities to excel among other nations so that maybe one day they can take part in international events and raise the dragon flag higher." (The national flag features Druk, the Thunder Dragon of Bhutanese mythology.)

But it's not just the soldiers the prince is here to support. Two days before the race—between butter-lamp lighting ceremonies at the ancient Buddhist Jambay Temple and the Burning Lake holy site—the prince asked me if I had been training hard at home in Colorado. I assured him I had and explained that the process had introduced me to many new trails and roads in my own backyard.

"That's the best part about mountain biking," he responded with sharp, royal conviction, a golden-handled sword suspended to his hip. "And it shows us so much of ourselves." He thanked me for coming and then moved on to advising the Thimphu Mountain

Biking Club youth on proper nutrition for the race and emphasizing the importance of Bhutanese riders becoming competitive on the international stage.

One rider intimately familiar with the prince's support is 36-year-old Aaron Bayard, an American living in Thimphu who has voluntarily trained local bike mechanics. In 2016, late-season monsoons left the road in some of the muddiest and most miserable conditions ever for the race. Aaron got to the bottom of the 10,207-foot Dochula Pass with the final 25-mile climb ahead of him when he broke down physically and mentally. "I was walking, I pushing my bike and limping," he told me at a pre-race barbecue outside the Chakhar Lhakhang palace in Bumthang. "I called my wife and told her I was about to quit and get on the bus. Ten minutes later, the prince pulls up in a car, one of his assistants covers my legs with a pain-killing spray and then the prince gets on his bike to ride with me. He kept saying 'All those people up there are cheering for you. You can do this.' Just riding with him, you kind of forget that you're in pain. I made the cutoff time by one minute. He's the reason I finished."

Riders share stories of broken chains, flat tires and peeling their shorts.

Dochula Pass is where most riders quit. The switchbacks are relentless and every tight corner rounded gives way to more turns, with progressively steeper grades and no relief. After an hour-long descent from the 11,206-foot Pele La Pass, I reach the village of Meshina at the base of Dochula, while sloggling through 91-degree heat at 4,625 feet. I glance behind me at several miles of road that snake down lumpy ridges and crooked valleys like a shivered insect. I see no one in pursuit. My body is pouring out so much sweat that the crusted mud is dripping off my skin. I haven't taken in enough calories in bananas and candy bars at the aid stations, and I feel delirious. While my thighs cramp, I start to secrete. My neck is so thrashed that I can't keep my head up. As my lower back muscles coil tighter and tighter with each pedal stroke, I'm afraid they're going to snap like over-tightened guitar strings. I start to scan the blurry roadside for a patch of shade to dismount and stretch, but as I come around a corner, I see 100 schoolchildren in blue robes screaming their heads off, cheering me on as if I've broken out from in a short sprint, waving white khata scarves and chanting "DO YOUR BEST! DO YOUR BEST!" A blast of energy hits me from all directions. There's no way I can stop now.

After a brief afternoon sun shower, I climb into a veil of dark clouds and ask a monk driving by in a little Suzuki how much farther to the top. "Mmm, pretty far," he says before smiling and scooting away. My butt is too sore to remain seated, so I have no choice but to stand up on my pedals as I climb. But minutes after I passed the monk, the final prayer flags adorning the Dochula summit come into view. The descent into Thimphu is littered with sharp curves, and I roll right into busy Saturday traffic. I cross the finish line below the clock tower in Thimphu's center square in 13 hours, 45 minutes and 24 seconds, a respectable 14th place. Of the 48 riders competing, only 26 will make the 6 p.m. cutoff time at Dochula. Almost all the Royal Bhutan Army riders crashed, but they still finished an impressive sixth, fifth, third and second place. The winner? Aaron Bayard, the American who barely finished in 2016, by 50 minutes with a time of 11 hours, 13 minutes and 42 seconds. The locals consider Aaron part of their community and they're psyched for him.

The next day, at a barbecue just downhill from the fourth king's palace, riders share stories of breaking their chains, getting multiple flat tires and peeing in their shorts while riding to save time. The Bhutanese riders are shy, but they eagerly ask the same question: "Will you come back to race next year?"