

Biking through magical Bhutan

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Bhutan is famed for its pursuit of happiness. Now, some avid Indian cyclists are discovering the joys of pedaling up and down its breathtaking slopes. Surrounded by a stunning countryside made greener by the monsoon rain, riding on tarmac lined by fluttering prayer flags and dotted with Buddhist stupas and monks in wine-red robes, the 14 riders are on a memorable week-long journey through the magical Himalayan kingdom.

Organized by The Times of India, in association with Yatra.com, the cycling trail in Bhutan is the first in season 2 of Times Passion Trails, which helps people 'live what they love'. Guiding them on this tour through the 'Land of the Thunder Dragon' (it's called Druk Yul in the native tongue) is biking guru Rajesh Kalra.

Two days down, the participants have conquered the scenic Haa valley on their mountain bikes. "I couldn't have imagined myself doing a relentless uphill climb of 35km in a downpour," says Disha Shrivastava, 36. The steep descent was as adventurous, if not as trying, for the mother of two. The terrain and weather is a pleasant change for the social worker from Mumbai, who usually cycles from her home in Powai to Marine Drive amid



heavy traffic and pollution. "My eldest son saw the ad and coaxed me to apply for the trail. It's helping me discover a new thing about myself every day," she says.

Learning the nuances of mountain biking on high altitudes and in tough weather conditions is what brought Gurgaon resident Raj Kamal Chauhan all the way to Bhutan. The 40-year-old regional head of an MNC was very disappointed about missing out on the Manali-Leh biking expedition in season 1 and made sure he caught the flight to Paro this time. "The usual vacation is laid back but the itinerary here is planned to make sure we get the most out of this beautiful land," says Chauhan.

The trail has been planned in a way that every rider gets to ride at a comfortable pace. "Only when you're riding a bike do you go at a pace where you can enjoy the landscape," says Kalra, the trail architect, as the participants gorge on some chai and pakoda after a day of cycling in the rain to reach Chelela Pass at an altitude of 3,800 metres. The trail has brought together 14 people from various parts of the country and walks of life to a land that is known for its high happiness index. "People here are unhurried, warm and very pleasant," says Kalra.

Up next is a day's ride to Thimphu, also the longest stretch at 110 km. The participants are pumped. "The first day's trek and brief ride helped me warm up for these challenges," says Kavita Shah, 31, who participated in a triathlon and cycled about 16 km every day in Secunderabad to prepare himself for Bhutan. Shah has a fascination for the unconventional and isn't into the usual sight-seeing and shopping holidays.

For Shrivastava, this is an introspective journey. "Being a mother and housekeeper, this trip is about detaching myself entirely and taking it one turn at a time."

In a land that can teach the world a thing or two about spiritual wellbeing, that's a lesson well learnt.

