



The view from the summit of Tharang I. (Richie Mockler)

**Summary:** First ascent of Tharang I (6066m AD+) Mark Thomas, Steve Birch and Richie Mockler, 25 September 2012. The 'British Route' takes the west ridge from the west col.

On 28 September, Mark, Claire, Paul and Simon also made the FA of 'Tharang Fang' or 'Vishal Dant' (5490m) via the east ridge from camp 1.

First ascent of Jasminka (5401m), a peak to the NE of Tharang Fang, by Mark Thomas (solo) via SW ridge, 2 October. Thomas left base camp at 5 am and topped out at 12 noon. He describes the route as a beautiful climb on granite, PD+, III for the most part with a long pitch of AD, IV on the 'very airy' summit block, 1700m of ascent.



**Acknowledgements:** Thanks to Navim for his amazing cooking and warm smile. Thanks also to the high altitude porters: Hiro, Govind and Mangle and, of course, to Gajendra, the best liaison officer we could have wished for.

Summit team: Steve Birch, Richie Mockler, Mark Thomas. (Richie Mockler)

PIOTR SZAWARSKI

## Across Tibet With a Broken Neck



Rob Creagh by Yamdruk Lake. (Piotr Szawarski)

*Climbing is all about gambling. It's not about sure things. It's about challenging the impossible. – Chris Bonington*

The road spiralled down through the scrunched up geological Swiss roll. The enormity of the landscape, barren and beautiful at the same time, was difficult to encompass and to accept. Colours, shades and textures folded into a canvas beyond comprehension. Small villages clung to the sides of mountains where in honesty only yetis and trolls should reside. Somewhere at the bottom of the valley, if you believed there was a bottom, were small fields of millet and a flock of sheep, guarded by a lonely shepherd armed with a sling.

A forbidden alternative road towards the border, pointed out by our leader, faded into the cloud. It seemed like a hell of a road, but today excitement had faded.



A landscape out of myth. (Piotr Szawarski)

The bus trundled on, one tyre on the verge of blowing. Over nauseating high passes it took us down from the plateau towards Nylam, carving our way into a tectonic layer-cake. Nylam was an ugly little town, but a destination nonetheless. Tired but vaguely happy, the majority of our team sat numbly in uncomfortable seats. I kept gazing at the geological wonders, trying to appreciate a landscape straight out of myth. I was glad the mission was over. We had succeeded. Eyes filled with ruins of forts from untold legends, I tried to recall my previous visit here. Curiously, I couldn't.

\*\*\*

I'd been overdue an expedition, but surely this would be a disaster? A cynical friend observed that disasters still make for good talks, but that was not what I had in mind when I signed up. Alternatively, it would be historical! Three ambitious tetraplegics from New Zealand were going to test human physiology to the extreme. You can't go any higher on a tricycle than Everest Base Camp, but that's high, more than high enough when your ventilatory capacity is reduced. It's hard to imagine how or why three wheelchair-bound people with broken necks would head to the base of this colossal mountain. Most in the community of medics thought it was folly, and so did I when I got the initial email. You've gotta be kidding me, I thought. This is mad. Then on reflection, remembering the recent London Paralympics, it occurred to me that while they do not know what they are in for, they will certainly go for it! I had the qualifications, I had the experience, I had the doubts. A forbidden land awaited. I wrote emails to experts,



The Big Cycle Expedition in Lhasa. (Piotr Szawarski)

set up meetings and listened to eminent opinions. Most people I spoke to were gently encouraging, but some were concerned. Are you sure it's not a suicide mission? What about oxygen? Eventually I packed my bags. My ticket arrived.

Tetraplegia is a medical term for the neurological consequences of a spinal cord injury following what is colloquially known as a broken neck. The degree of disability and dependence depends on the level of injury. The term implies that all four limbs are paralysed. That may be the case, but the more accurate description would be that all four limbs are affected. Individuals with tetraplegia universally lose all muscle power and all sensation below the neck, and their upper limbs may be partially or completely affected. In case of the three tetraplegics braving the ride to Everest BC muscle function was preserved in shoulder and biceps muscles. They could not grip and only one of them had function in the wrist. But the lack of limb function is but one of the problems to consider! A tetraplegic's blood pressure can be all over the place at times, threatening a stroke or a blackout, their bodies are unable to regulate temperature so heat illness or hypothermia is always just round the corner, and they need assistance with bathing. Travellers' diarrhoea spells disaster and the urinary catheters invite infection. Hard bedding brings pressure sores and the lack of oxygen... well, when we set out we were not sure, but respiratory reserve is diminished and a mere chest infection could be a herald of doom.

Heading into the mountains with a disability is not unheard of. Arthur



Yamdruk Lake, Tibet. (Piotr Szawarski)

Tarnowski, confined to a wheelchair by polio, writes about his remarkable travels across Asia, including a Himalayan ascent to 12,200 feet with him in a wheelchair strapped to a back of a pony<sup>1</sup>. Although he refers to living conditions in India: *'Unconsciously we place ourselves in their shoes. If conditions are crushing we assume their spirit will be crushed...'* one can not help but think about tetraplegia and the disability it confers. More recently, a similar ride to ours had been accomplished in a spectacular fashion by Paul Prichard ([www.trikesrw.com](http://www.trikesrw.com)), although his disability is different.

The Big Cycle expedition was conceived by Catriona Williams, the founder of New Zealand based CatWalk Spinal Cord Injury Trust, Catriona herself being tetraplegic following an equestrian accident. While the idea was born in New Zealand and that is where all the tetraplegic riders came from, the team included members from Australia and the UK. Those assembled included Sam Williams, Catriona's husband who would not leave her side and Anita Pomare her carer, Rob Creagh and Amy Shaw (carer), and Neil Cudby and carer Nicki Everton. In no particular order, others included Stephanie Williams, Kris Male, Penny Barnett, Michael Weston, Stuart Loughton, Scott Malcolm and Jack Hale. Ann Young, an experienced trek and biking expedition leader was drafted in to provide expertise in matters Nepali and Tibetan!

The epic adventure began in Kathmandu. Our team of cycle guides from a small but efficient outfit called Dawn Till Dusk, wanting to assess the team and in particular to see how the tetraplegics roll, organized a couple of rides. On the first ride to Bhaktapur, we found ourselves dodging the traffic and ripped power cables amidst cataclysmic monsoon downpours and with drains overflowing under our wheels. The guys found it exhilarating. I was understandably concerned that someone might go submarine and subterranean at the same time, but everyone survived! Then on a ride to Nagarkot, the 'tetras', as we called them, demonstrated their resilience and the power of their bikes.

Indeed the bikes they rode were technological wonders, with sensor-managed, battery-driven augmentation and multiple gears, but all were different. To begin with we did not appreciate the potential issues, but all had subtly different technology, different battery packs, different motors and different tyre sizes. This was to become an issue later in the Forbidden Land, with anxieties over burnt spare batteries and ripped tyres, where replacement was difficult if not impossible to secure. Those provided a constant headache for Sanjeev, our mechanic. But then while some things are priceless, for others, there is always duct tape.

Many things can be said about the group, but the Kiwis proved to be an enthusiastic bunch – driven, well-motivated, well-funded and just a touch



The famous pink cord. (Piotr Szawarski)

crazy! Folk from the other end of the world. Of course there were some tensions, but focus on the goal was maintained. While fragile logistics was looked after by an increasingly exasperated trek leader and cycling was supervised by bewildered, but very professional Nepali cycle guides, it was Cat, whose brainchild this trip was, who was the spiritual leader of the group. Soon, on her suped-up bike, she became *de facto* physical leader of the group too, as her tetraplegia would only become apparent when she was not cycling. It soon became apparent that she was addicted to cycling!

In fact the only one of us able to keep up with and support her was a cycling khan, former Nepali cross-country champion for four straight years, Mangal. Like a wind across the plateau, Cat would surge to the front and then on, beyond the horizon. To cycle or not to cycle was not the question. She was going to do it.

Soon it was time to head to Lhasa and get the trip underway. There were logistical hiccups, of course: visas, the equipment stuck at the border for lack of paperwork, hotel eating arrangements – rooftop terrace dining was not exactly wheelchair friendly, and we needed generators to re-charge the batteries. Even the flight to Lhasa was riddled with problems, with the pilot refusing to take off with three tetraplegics on board. A letter of support from New Zealand's Prime Minister came in handy to deal with that situation and to avert an international incident.

We had scorpions at the first camp site, exploding thermos flasks, some cracked bones and more traveller's diarrhoea than we bargained for. There were 40 medical incidents recorded, but thankfully nothing that was a threat to life. However, as with the Romans in Europe, the Chinese have

stamped their mark upon Tibet by building roads, so at least riding was reasonably smooth.

In spite of adversities, broken necks and malfunctioning bodies, the three tetraplegics reached Everest Base Camp (North Side) on the 5th of July 2013. One of the tetra's bikes nearly disintegrated in the process, and the owner was towed the last few miles by another tetra – using a pink bathrobe cord (how on Earth did that end up on the equipment list?). They acclimatized well and coped with the drudgery of monsoon camping with great fortitude. Most importantly they coped with high altitude well, against my worries. Credit is due to the team who enabled this journey, to the carers and the cycle guides and the other members who helped with manual handling, repairs and a multitude of other small things.

The expedition was a success. It demonstrated that it is feasible for a tetraplegic to reach an altitude of 5200m and acclimatize. It highlighted a number of problems worth considering by anyone planning to repeat such a venture. Having three tetraplegics on the trip proved to be hard work for the support team and the cycle guides. Trying to mend three different models of bike along the way was not easy either. The team found Tibetan expedition cuisine difficult to enjoy and while able-bodied individuals could wash it down with Lhasa beer and laugh it off, the prospect of weight loss in the tetraplegics, threatening the integrity of the skin, remained a constant concern. The resilience of the carers not accustomed to travel in Asia and to the altitude was tested to the extreme as in addition to providing care while camping in the monsoon conditions they were cycling as well. In the future a greater ratio of carers, support team to tetraplegics would make the journey easier. Attention to detail needs to match the unpredictability of travels along Asian back roads. Burned battery, broken motor or indeed damaged sensor on the tetra's bike do prejudice their ability to perform. But, as the saying goes – 'where there is a will, there is a way'.

\*\*\*

We did not cycle, but swam away from Nylam. Drenching rain and mist enveloped us as we descended into the chasm of the Bhote Kosi canyon. It was a cold and wet ride to the dirty frontier town of Zhangmo. It seemed like an endless spiral, a coiled snake of a road, punctuated by waterfalls that almost merged into the pouring rain. Eventually trucks, potholes and children filled the narrow road. We were swallowed by the border and its attendant formalities, checks, stamps, forms, payments, visas and so on.

A couple of days later, back in Kathmandu, I strolled through Durbar Square, getting lost and finding myself in a small temple courtyard. The ride, the battle, the conquest were over and peace reigned around that small temple. It is written that Buddha once said: 'it is better to conquer yourself than to win a thousand battles. Then victory is yours. It cannot be taken from you, not by angels or by demons, heaven or hell.'

Our battle to reach the foot of the greatest of mountains was also, perhaps, a battle with ourselves. Each one of us won, in some personal way, a victory that is ours to keep.



Neil Cudby, Catriona Williams and Rob Creagh at Everest base camp, 5200m.  
(Piotr Szawarski)

**Summary:** Big Cycle Expedition, 14 June – 11 July 2013. The tetraplegics plus support team cycling from Lhasa to Kathmandu, via ten passes and Everest Base Camp. The Big Cycle team also used the opportunity to raise money for research into spinal cord injury, to bring about better outcomes for those who may suffer this terrible injury in the future.

The team: Catriona Williams (tetraplegic rider and Leader), Ann Young (logistics), Rob Creagh (tetraplegic rider), Neil Cudby (tetraplegic rider), Amy Shaw, Nicki Everton, Anita Pomare (Carers), Piotr Szawarski (Medical Officer), Sam Williams, Stephanie Williams, Kris Male, Penny Barnett, Michael Weston, Stuart Laughton, Scott Malcolm and Jack Hale (supporting riders). Anil Gurung (Cycling Guides Leader), Mangal Lama (cycling guide), Sanjeev Chhetri (cycling guide / mechanic) and Nima Sherpa (logistics support).

#### Acknowledgements

Thanks to our generous sponsors: DHL Global Forwarding, Trelawney Stud, Coolmore, Inglis, House of Travel, Cathay Pacific, Ben Falloon, Caroline Abbiss, Tessa Davenport, ElectricBikes.co.nz, Metalform Dannevirke, Keith Taylor Charitable Trust.

#### References

1. Arthur Tarnowski, *The Unbeaten Track*, Harvill Press, London 1971.