



The Off-Road To Adventure

How Ya Gonna Keep Him Down On The Farm, After He's Seen . . . Katmandu?

by Owen Mulholland

At first impression, Craig Moffet sounds like a lot of bicycle mystics left behind by the receding tide of the 1960s. A self-proclaimed child of that Aquarian Age, Craig charts his horoscope and talks of the bicycle as "a way to relate people to the planet."

But Craig Moffet is much more. He is one of the true adventurers each age produces, one of those who redefine the limits of the possible. And he does it on two wheels.

While others have been content to stay home and pass the tofu, Craig and his partner Brad Grunewald have taken their bikes to the glaciers of Mt. Cook, across the Simpson Desert of Australia, into the "Golden Triangle" of Thailand, through India and Sri Lanka and, most remarkable of all, to the roof of the world, to the high passes of the Himalayas.

The adventure began six generations ago, on a farm just north of Modesto, Illinois. Having moved west from Kentucky and put down roots, the Moffets began to wander. One escaped a Confederate prison to live with the Indians, another went west with the '49ers, another joined the Oklahoma land rush, and others (including Craig's father) looked at farming in Guatemala. Still, they held on to the family farm—they are the only family in their township who did. Paradoxically, the Moffets' tenacious grip on one piece of the earth may explain their urge to wander over the rest of it. Says Craig, "Knowing I have something to come back to is probably what lets me go so far away."





Himalayan High

Craig's route from the family farm in Illinois to the peaks of the Himalayas passed through Boulder, Colorado. The change was a quantum leap. For one thing, Craig had always been a worker, not a dreamer. By age six he had had regular jobs to do around the farm; by age 13 he was filing his own income tax return. For another thing, most folks back home agreed on where the main highways of life went. Soil was the touchstone, and if you worked it hard but properly it would reward you with a modest abundance. Who could ask for more? Certainly not Craig, until he arrived in one of the most "happening" places in the U.S.

There he discovered that many of the things that made his life on the farm good also made it limited. Face-to-face with the snowy crests of the Continental Divide and the spiritual revelations of Boulder gurus, Craig could only say, "Wow!".

Yet familiar as he became with astrology, astral projection, pyramid power and the like, he never forgot where he came from. In three years he turned a \$60,000 profit on a \$12,000 investment in a health food store. This was not entirely the work of a crafty capitalist. Craig had always been ecologically aware, and when he came to understand the advantages of whole grains and the disadvantages of the chemicals ingested by most cattle, he switched to an exclusively vegetarian regimen. He read volumes on diets and soon was able to explain in detail the appropriate uses of the many products in his store.

Seen from Boulder, the Himalayas are the next logical step: twice as high as the Rockies, with no fear of eating refined foods, a holy man on every corner and the headwaters of the sacred Ganges. This is where the old age is the New Age. Craig and his partner Brad Grunewald set off for Nepal with New Age bikes: "Stumpjumper" mountain bikes provided at cost by Mike Sinyard of Specialized. If the guys got even half as far as they hoped, the publicity would be worth it, Sinyard figured.

Sagarmatha—the name even sounds more romantic than Everest. Westerners named the world's tallest mountain after the first man to measure it. The Nepalese

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called it "Goddess of the Universe". The difference says much.

Brad and Craig weren't so insensitive as to rush directly to "her". So instead they set off from Katmandu to Pokhara on virtually the only real high level road in the country. Pokhara lies in a valley so low that oranges grow in March. Yet it is tucked in right under Machapuchare, a mountain often compared to the Matterhorn because of its similar silhouette. So idyllic is the setting that Tolkien spent 20 years here writing his famous books.

Returning to Katmandu they headed northeast toward the Everest region along trails made famous by so many expeditions. In Jiri they were given an award by the locals for bringing the first "vehicles" into that area.

Their next excursion took them down, down, down into the low lying valley of Chitwan National Park. For three days they rode between twenty foot-high walls of elephant grass. "Tiger prints were everywhere. You better believe we always kept an eye on the nearest tree", Craig admits. "Three people had been mauled recently. It was one of the crazier things we ever did."

More meandering through India and Sri Lanka followed before returning to Nepal at the right time of year for the long awaited assault on Everest, the spring of 1983.

Neither was in the best condition. The sudden change in altitude and intestinal bugs kept their energy levels low, yet so good was their basic fitness that grinding out the daily mileages improved their strength. Still, it was quite a push. Above 14,000 feet they could ride only 30 percent of the time on the precipice-hugging niches that served as trails. Fresh snow made them even more fun. Rope bridges that swayed with every step posed a special problem for toting bikes. Definitely never a dull moment.

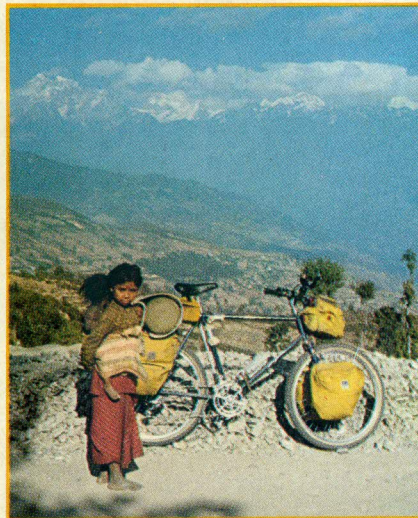
Up the ever bleaker valley Craig and Brad rode until at last the "universal goddess" revealed herself. It's a moment all mountain lovers dream of. The snow-plumed summit, the yellow band, daughters *Nuptse* and *Lhotse* close by; it's a view known to everyone even casually interested in the Himalayas, yet still fresh when finally beheld in person. And on mountain bikes, too. Vindication indeed for the new breed, if any were needed.

Whatever modest satisfaction they took in having at last arrived where

they'd promised they'd someday be, an ABC film crew on location to shoot an Everest assault was at least as impressed. They put Brad and Craig up in the Everest View Hotel at \$180 a day. The view from the veranda was priceless. With Everest and *Ama Dablam* floating in moonlit clouds Brad and Craig knew all their efforts were justified.

From here Brad had to return to work in Hong Kong, but Craig had just enough money for one more tour. He chose Kashmir Ladakh and Hunza where India and Pakistan meet in the western Himalaya.

The foothills (up to 10,000 feet or so!) used to be the vacation playground of the fortunate during the days of the British raj. One of the exclusive golf clubs, for



It's as remote as it looks. To some areas of Nepal, Moffet and Grunewald brought not only the first bikes anyone had ever seen, but the first vehicles of any kind.

instance, permitted memberships only to those who were fortunate enough to own a golf bag made of the skin of an elephant penis.

Between golf courses lay (and lie) miles of tea plantations dimpled with lakes that reflect the white-crested backdrop of the Karakorum, home to four peaks over the 8000-meter line.

This was the setting for Craig's toughest ride. With entry into Tibet forbidden, he took to the trails to avoid an out-and-back tour. In the higher elevations, just yak paths over the snow. The first pass was actually cut through the snow leaving 50 foot walls on either side.

The next, however, *Shingo-La* (16,500 feet) was on top of 100 feet of the white stuff. The day he crossed it he had begun

at first light, 5 a.m., but long before he reached the summit at 2 p.m. the route had softened in the sun and he fell through regularly. The shady north side rewarded him with a firm 4,000 foot boogie down into the Zaskar Valley.

This is a remote land, still rarely visited by foreigners. Buddhist monasteries and temples flourish, untouched by the eradication of their Tibetan brethren across the border. Like most of the inhabitants, Craig ate *sampa* for breakfast, lunch and dinner. It's a form of dried barley resembling sawdust. Great for snacks too.

One evening when his supplies were low he found several young ladies milking *dozoos* (it's a cross between a yak and a water buffalo). The ladies were glad to share their meager rations with him, but not until he had earned them. For two hours he gave them bike rides, then for another two hours he danced with them. At 13,000 feet after a hard day's ride with little food such activities aren't so easy.

After a hearty meal of *sampa* and curds he was looking forward to a sound sleep in their hut but they made it clear he had to sleep outside in the wind tunnel of a valley. Only later did Craig hear the local story of a mythic blue-eyed, blond, whitefaced god who visited a group of milkmaids and left in the morning with his hosts all pregnant.

Craig awoke in the morning to the sound of butter churning, a sound that took him back to home. Craig is there now, helping to bring in the harvest, but it's just a pit stop. The world beckons and his bike is getting fidgety.

This time, Tibet is the goal. Twice, Brad and Craig had got to the Tibetan border and no further, but now they have official permission to enter.

"The Tibetan Buddhist people are truly special, I believe," says Craig. "They run their lives in constant thanks. Gentleness and kindness permeate their character. I haven't met any traveler who's been there who hasn't felt the same." So once again, paradise for Craig is somewhere down the road, over the border, across the pass.

Meanwhile, Craig is promoting his new enterprise, Himalayan Mountain Bike Adventure. Questions about the stage of development of his plans elicit a look of surprise. "Well, it says in the brochure, 'Share the experience' " he says with a look of real innocence and an air of "That should explain everything." And indeed, maybe it does. ■