

## **The Tour of the Dragon** **by Karma Singye Dorji**

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The Tour of the Dragon is a perfect name for a ride that goes up and down the spine of a kingdom that is mostly hidden in the clouds.

From above, we probably looked like ants crawling along the coiled mythical dragon's back. Billed as "The World's Toughest Mountain Bike Race" it truly is a beast. The route climbs muscular mountains covered with pine, fir and, eventually, hardy alpine scrub before plunging into deep valleys and gorges cut by roaring rivers flanked by forests so thick and teeming that the trees look like dense heads of broccoli.

After a steep and vertiginous climb that starts from the central Bhutanese hamlet of Jakar, at two hours past midnight, to the Yotong la pass at 11,272 ft, riders have to descend to the subtropics of Trongsa before climbing back up again to the high pass of Pele la at 11,230 ft before dropping another 7,000 ft through the whiplashing, deeply forested landscape of the Black Mountain Range to fight through the v-shaped wind tunnel of Wangdue valley where, with 200 kms of pedaling behind them, demonic gusts whipping in from the south threaten to push riders off the bike, slowing forward momentum and, occasionally, even pushing them back.

Finally, a 26-mile, 6,000ft, unrelenting climb to the 10,300-foot-high Dochu la—the challenge that breaks many a rider's will—brings one to the downhill sprint into the Himalayan capital of Thimphu where the race ends at the clock tower at the city's busy central square.

All said, the rider must accumulate a total vertical elevation gain totaling more than half the distance from sea-level to the top of Mount Everest, over a lateral distance of about 166 miles or 268 kms.

Before you do it, "The Dragon" is a frightening prospect—with deep mud, landslides and, sometimes, marooned boulders in the middle of the "road"—but the sheer distance, the steep inclines, and the grueling climbs are what eventually gets you. Some 42 hours earlier, driving cross country to the race start, through a hot mess of mud, the caramel sludge of wet earth and slipping boulders, sliding mountains and rivulets of water running down the slopes on either side of the road, I think I must be stark raving mad to even attempt this epic ride in such challenging conditions.

On race day, I am making relatively good pace when, around 3:20 a.m. in the morning, the chain on my bike explodes 10 miles below the first pass, in the dark, and I push-walk my bike for close to two hours as rider after rider passes, until pale light tinges the sky and the wonderful Bhutanese race mechanics—courtesy of the excellent support team from the Bhutan Olympic Committee—finds me a few paces below Yotong la, replaces my blown chain with great efficiency, and sends me gratefully on my way.

That first exhilarating downhill from Bumthang into Trongsa quickly turns cold and dangerous as the slick (and often thick) mud makes it challenging to keep my balance. My arms and shoulders begin to ache and the initial excitement of the race over, the dragon begins to show its teeth. And yet, as my body begins to tire, my mind opens to the light of the dawn creeping over the shadowy heft of the massive mountains and ridges I have known all my life. I notice the cerulean blue gaps of clear sky between the dense cumulus clouds that give me hope as the morning wears on. The live orchestra of the bio-diversity brimming forests we are riding through, the tremendous thundering waterfalls cascading to the sides

of the road keeps me on an elevated beat. Occasionally, an oversize iridescent butterfly goes flapping delicately by. At one point I see a tribe of large rhesus monkeys on a scar above the road, gazing sadly down at me as if pitying my great human folly.

I see the strong humble men and women whose love and loyalty are the true backbone of the Bhutanese nation, on their way to their fields, leading their cows to graze, and stopping and smiling to encourage me on. I am buoyed greatly by the cheers of the beautiful Bhutanese schoolchildren, many of whom have waited since the early hours in the cold and dark to encourage and wave at riders with traditional good luck khadhar scarves. They chant, variously, "Best of luck!" "You can do it!" and my personal favorite: "Do your best!"

I pass my mother's village in Trongsa with our emerald rice fields spreading down the slopes toward the mighty Mangde river, and send a silent prayer toward the cheerful red-daubed roof and walls of my ancestral family temple. I pass the turnoff to my grandfather's home valley of Gangtey-Phobjikha and think of his tall, dignified frame with his sash and sword conferred by his king. I think of my grandfather as a young man in this high-altitude paradise of gently rolling hills, it's bucolic homesteads dotting the flanks of the mountain slopes and the green open marsh at its heart, home to rare wintering black-necked cranes, it's magnificent 13th century monastery adorned by its shining gold cupola. I see the road spinning and looping endlessly in front of me and remember myself as a boy of nine or 10, facing backwards in my father's open Jeep, watching the alternating strips of black tarmac and brown dirt drawing squiggles across the immense landscape, daydreaming of things I had not yet seen or done.

Now, at the midpoint of my life, as I roll into the finish line I find myself fortunate enough to have friends new and old who hug and embrace and congratulate me. I turn my bike in, find a seat, and call the woman who is the love of my life, the who did not sleep a wink all night on the other side of the world on account of this crazy ride, the person who has given me the greatest gifts of my life: true love, and two of the most beautiful, perfect sons a father could ask for.

In the final reckoning of the race, I did not rank and neither did I expect to. But I rode it from start to finish as I had hoped I would and, in my own estimation at least, I find I have already won everything worth winning: The unconditional love of the woman who lets me do these life-affirming things, trust in my own abilities to allow this wonderful and unforgettable experience into my life, and the many deep and nourishing ties of friendship and family I have gained on both sides of the world in this, my most tremendous Bhutanese life!!!

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*About the Author:*

*Karma Singye Dorji leads curated journeys for Bhutan Himalaya Expeditions (bhutanhimalaya.com) and is the author of Dreaming of Prayer Flags: Stories & Images from Bhutan. An avid cyclist, he participated in the 2018 edition of the Tour of the Dragon and is training to participate in the 2019 edition also.*