

## India's Royal Enfield going global with retro-cool bikes



Royal Enfield is beginning an aggressive campaign to export new motorcycles, like this Continental GT, outside its native India. (Royal Enfield)

By **CHARLES FLEMING**

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**T**he entrepreneur slipped on his aviator sunglasses, threw a leg over a gleaming new motorcycle, and roared into the North San Diego County sunset.

At the end of a long day in the saddle, Siddhartha Lal showed no signs of tiring. Wearing riding jeans and a leather motorcycle jacket, he looked like he stepped out of 1960s London.

The son of the Indian motorworks mogul Vikram Lal, Lal, 40, is CEO and managing director of Eicher Motors Ltd., one of India's largest commercial vehicle producers, and head of the legendary motorcycle company Royal Enfield.

Brown-eyed, bearded and soft-spoken, Lal had come to Southern California to promote the release of his company's new Continental GT, a nostalgia-inducing motorcycle he hoped would spark sales and global interest in the 113-year-old company.

Until recently, the only Royal Enfields on American highways were participating in vintage bike runs or headed to museums.

Over the last couple of years, though, as the company has developed a more robust American dealer network, new ones are showing up at motorcycle destinations like Newcomb's Ranch on the Angeles Crest Highway or The Rock Store on Mulholland.

Lal is a passionate rider, and said his company is committed to "pure motorcycling," and dismissed the idea that the historic marque is trying to cash in on the current appeal of retro-cool two-wheelers.

“Our bikes are not conceived with a retro bend in mind,” he said, standing in front of posters for the new GT. “We are an old-school company.”

The company has been extremely successful in India, where the roads are busy with mid-sized Royal Enfield Bullets, which Lal boasts is the “oldest continuously-produced motorcycle in the world.”

Beloved by owners who call themselves “Bulleteers” — local collector Jay Leno owns two older bikes — the model has been in production since 1932, and manufactured in India since 1956. The bikes bearing the once-mighty Royal Enfield brand, which got its start as an arms manufacturer, are still marketed with the slogan, “Built Like a Gun.”

Lal appreciates the historical irony of Royal Enfields in India outlasting Royal Enfields in England. The bikes only began to be built on the subcontinent because the factory in England couldn't fill orders placed by the Indian government after it gained its independence. Now, all Enfields are made in India.

“It's just a quirk,” Lal said. “The Indian police needed motorcycles. That's the only reason they were built here.”

Lal, who lives in New Delhi with his wife and two children, had his first motorcycle experience on a Bullet. He stole it from his father.

“I used to nick it, to ride to school,” he said.

Born and raised in India, Lal completed his education in England, taking advanced degrees in mechanical and automotive engineering.

His family's company had already taken an interest in the failing Royal Enfield, and acquired full control of it in 1994.

By then, Lal's father was retiring, and the Eicher management wanted to sell the under-performing motorcycle division. Lal rallied to keep it in the family, and became CEO at age 26.

It took him several years to get Royal Enfield back into shape — 10 years, he said, just to become a force in its home market.

In 2010, the company was making about 2,000 motorcycles a month. Now production has increased to 10 times that, with the factory currently running at the rate of 24,000 units a month.

Lal said Royal Enfield has back orders of 100,000 bikes, and expects to sell as many as 280,000 this year in India alone — plus whatever he can manage to sell to riders outside his home market.

Last year, the company sold 178,121 motorcycles, only 5,000 of those outside India, Lal said. But Royal Enfield has sold almost 170,000 motorcycles this year alone, and expects a higher number of sales from the U.S. and Europe.

The company now manufactures 11 models, and exports to a network of 300 dealers in 42 countries worldwide.

Lal is relying on those dealers outside India to push the Continental GT, which is both new and a throwback: Royal Enfield introduced a 250cc GT model in 1965.

The current model is an air-cooled, single-cylinder café racer. Its 535cc engine drives a five speed transmission. At 410 pounds, the GT is slim and stylish, a modern motorcycle fitted with an old-fashioned headlamp, English-style “megaphone” muffler and an elegant gas tank that looks like something off a 1960s Norton.

It's retro in other ways, too. Just like the big English bikes on which it is modeled, the GT features a fair amount of vibration. And it can't compete with many modern bikes on horsepower, braking or suspension.

Royal Enfield's former rival, Triumph, has done well by incorporating classic details into its contemporary lines of Bonneville, Thruxton and Scrambler motorcycles, just as Harley-Davidson has capitalized on old-school cool.

But those companies turn out motorcycles that cost considerably more than a GT, which retails for \$5,995, or the even more affordable Classic 500, with an MSRP of \$5,499.

"Motorcycles have become extraordinarily fast, extraordinarily heavy and extraordinarily expensive," Lal said. "But motorcycling must be accessible. The bikes must be easy to ride, easy to modify and to maintain. If you drop the bike, you should be able to pick it up — and keep riding."

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