

# Keep the motor running

Once a clunky reminder of India's colonial past, the Royal Enfield motorcycle is taking on the world.

**Jason Koutsoukis** reports.

**T**here is a famous black and white photograph from 1956 showing India's then prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru in a white Gandhi-cap inspecting a new Royal Enfield motorcycle.

Standing around him are some proud Madras Motors executives, whose workers had successfully assembled the Enfield Bullet 350 from a kit shipped over from England.

It's impossible to know what Nehru was thinking, but from the look on his face one suspects it's a mixture of regard for the acme of British motorcycle design, and hope for the future of Indian industry.

Like Nehru himself, educated by the British at Harrow then jailed by the British in India, who romanced the wife of the last viceroy as he drove India towards independence, the Enfield was something of a dichotomy. Taking from the British, but also pushing them away.

The Enfield had always been a utility bike, serving British troops in World War I and II, and later the Royal Mail. Nehru had a similar thought, putting the Enfield to work in the Indian army.

In the early 1960s, Madras Motors began making the bikes from scratch under licence, building up a small but loyal following among Indian commuters who admired the bike's sturdy construction and classic British design.

When Royal Enfield went broke in England in 1967, production limped along in India until the early 1990s when the marque was bought by Indian tractor manufacturer Eicher Motors. By the end of the decade, Eicher had also lost patience and was looking to offload it.

"But then I had a word with my dad," says Siddhartha Lal, then still in his 20s, who was about to succeed his father as chief executive of Eicher. "I said 'look, let me try and run it for a bit'."

Lal tinkered with the brand, improving the look of the dealerships, building up a following for what he terms the "motorcycling experience" by leading treks across remote Himalayan passes and the Great Indian Desert.

Sales grew modestly enough to keep Lal's hobby alive, but what really gave Enfield a boost was the international revival of the so-called "cafe racer" motorcycle culture.

"The cafe racer culture is a phe-

nomenon, not just in Australia, but around the world," says motorcycle adventurer Rennie Scaysbrook, editor of Australia's *Free Wheeling* magazine, who spent 10 days last year riding an Enfield across the mountains of Nepal.

The term "cafe racer" comes from the leather-clad British "rockers" of the late 1950s who would gather at places like The Ace Cafe in north-east London and The Busy Bee cafe in Watford, before racing around the country trying to top speeds of 100 miles an hour (160km/h).

After the riders started adapting the machines to suit their individual needs, the bikes themselves became known as cafe racers, and the first learner-legal, factory-made cafe-racer bike was the Continental GT released by Royal Enfield in 1965.

Sensing that the cafe-racer revival might catch on in India, Lal planned a complete overhaul of Enfield's design and engineering.

"When you got down to it, the con-

struction was just very old, it was a 1950s construction model and some of those manufacturing processes belonged in the 1950s and reminded you why the British motorcycle industry actually died in the first place."

In 2010, Enfield launched a new single-engine platform that retained the classic look of the old bike but had all the technology of a modern motorcycle. It was an instant success.

For the first time in 50 years, Enfield couldn't keep up with demand, going from selling 50,000 bikes in 2009, to 180,000 last year.

This year the company is on track to sell about 300,000 motorcycles. With access to cheap labour and a new plant on the Bay of Bengal near Chennai, the company makes more profit per bike than any other motor vehicle manufacturer in world.

Not bad for what used to be a clunky reminder of India's colonial past.

"You know the great thing about the

Britishers is that they have a good sense of humour," says Lal. "They quite like the fact that British motorcycling, which died in Britain, is now being revived."

Whether the English really find it so hilarious, we'll never know for sure, but the Indians certainly seem to be enjoying their triumph.

"It's a bit like India winning the Test match at Lord's this year for the first time in 30 years," says Shambhu Kumar, a 30-year-old sales executive with the Indian phone giant Airtel. "We've beaten them on their own turf. The Enfield makes me proud to be Indian."

Kumar, a father of two, is standing in Enfield's flagship showroom at the Saket Mall in south Delhi, a classic motorcycle enthusiast's dream come true.

Not just the retro look of the shiny new bikes with names like Thunderbird, Continental GT, Bullet Electra and Desert Storm, but all the apparel that comes with them.

Branded leathers, boots, shoes, helmets and other clothing items and accessories. The waiting list for a new bike is now about four to six months.

"I've been saving the money to buy one for the last two years and today is the day, says Kumar. "I'm finally buying a Bullet 350."

Another customer about to put some money down was Rajwee Singh, a 27-year-old astrologer from the Punjab, who had travelled all the way to Delhi to select his new motorbike in person.

"I've wanted an Enfield since I was six years old," says Singh. "I've always been crazy about them. My uncles all had one, they used to have competitions to see how many people you could fit on one bike, like five or seven people."

So convincing is the Enfield look that even many Indian consumers think the bike is imported from the United Kingdom.

"We get a lot of people who walk into the showroom off the street who are attracted by what they see through the window, but who don't know a lot about motorcycles, and most of those people assume that it's from England," says one of the Delhi sales assistants.

Because India is the biggest motorcycle market in the world, Enfield hasn't really started to push exports, but sales in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia are growing.

"Royal Enfield gets you noticed. People come up and talk to you," says Lal. "When you go to the United States, if





you roll up on a Royal Enfield, you will attract a crowd. At first everyone thinks it's vintage. Then you tell them about it and people learn that it's actually a new bike, so that whole story is interesting. Especially for people who like to chat a bit and talk about their motorcycle."

Last year, Enfield sold 184 bikes in Australia. By September 1 this year, they'd already sold 224 bikes.

Franco Trento, who runs the Euro-brit motorcycle dealership in the Melbourne suburb of Greensborough, says he sells one or two Enfields a fortnight.

### So motorcycling as a pastime has matured a little, it's become more inclusive and friendly, and it's lost the greasy-courier image.

Chris Hunter

"The Enfields used not to be very good quality, but they have changed the models and they've put in very good systems of quality control. It's an impressive thing they've done," says Trento.

"They're proving to be popular here, and I think they will only get more popular. It's fuel injected, it looks fantastic, it has a great sound, and as the cafe racer revival continues to gain momentum, they're only going to get more popular," says Trento.

What's behind this cafe racer revival then, especially in places like Australia?

"You could write a thesis on that!" says former Sydney advertising executive Chris Hunter who now publishes Bike Exif, a website devoted to news and information about classic motor-

bikes from his home in New Zealand.

"I think it's several factors combining to create a perfect storm. There's a general movement towards authenticity and freedom I think, especially for people who spend all day sitting at a desk or answering emails. Nothing clears the brain like a bike ride, even if it's just a commute to and from work," says Hunter.

Manufacturers, he believes, have responded to the resurgence of the custom motorbike scene, creating a whole new class of bikes that are easy to ride, easy to modify and very stylish.

"They're not intimidating like the superbikes that dominated the scene in the 1980s and 1990s," says Hunter. "People have also realised there's more to motorcycling than hundreds of horsepower and pulling wheelies. So motorcycling as a pastime has matured a little, it's become more inclusive and friendly, and it's lost the greasy-courier image. It's something that the average guy can relate to once again."

Other factors driving the interest in leisure motorcycling, Hunter argues, is that it offers an escape from the over-regulated rigours of modern life, where people are always contactable, always online, always connected.

"On a motorcycle, it's just you and the machine. No one can touch you or reach you. There's actually an element of Zen in it as well as risk, and people increasingly need that."

Inspired by a photograph of Don Draper, the leading character in the 1960s-era television series *Mad Men*, straddling a vintage motorcycle in a smart suit, in 2012 a group of Australians founded the Distinguished Gentlemen's Ride.

It encourages men and woman to dress up in their monocles, silk vests, crisp shirts and tailored suits once a

**Clockwise from above: Siddhartha Lal; crossing the Himalayas on Royal Enfields; a new Bullet Classic C5; a worker paints a fuel tank. Far left: Winifred Wells with her father. Winifred rode from Perth to Sydney in 1952 on her Royal Enfield 350 Bullet.**

year take a cafe racer or other classic motorbike on the road to raise money for prostate cancer research.

Within two years, the Distinguished Gentlemen's Ride has attracted more than 20,000 followers in 145 cities around the world, raising several million dollars.

There are other regular events held at shops like the Kustom Kommune do-it-yourself workshop in Collingwood in Melbourne, and the Deus cafe in Camperdown in Sydney, where co-founder Dare Jennings, the man who started the Mambo fashion label, also has a pretty good line of clothes for classic motorcycle enthusiasts.

Chris Hunter says Royal Enfield is still a bit of an oddity in Australia, but people are noticing that the marque has upped its game and is attempting a return to mainstream markets outside its home base of India.

"It's an authentic brand, in that it has heritage and the machines haven't changed much over the decades. They are decidedly low-tech. The Continental GT, for example, is styled like a high-performance English cafe racer from the 1960s but has just 29hp. That's less than some Triumphs were putting out in the 1960s, and a little on the low side for the cut-and-thrust of modern traffic," says Hunter.

"But they are fun to ride, even if you have to work the engine and box hard to keep up with things. And of course they look very pretty," he adds, "from a distance!"

Hunter believes rival manufacturers such as Moto Guzzi have done a better job capturing the vintage vibe in a modern package with its V7 range, with other modern classics from manufacturers such as Triumph and Ducati sure to squeeze Enfield's place in the international market.

"Realistically, those bikes are much better than the Royal Enfield," says Hunter.

Not that Enfield chief Siddhartha Lal is feeling deterred.

Only 40 years old and rated one of the most innovative chief executives in India, Lal says he is excited by the international challenges ahead.

"Our objective is to double down and become a global brand," says Lal.

"That's what this country really needs, a lot of global brands emerging from India. We don't have brands really, as such. The biggest companies in India that are global are more back-end, business-to-business brands.

Acknowledging the huge learning curve, Lal maintains that Enfield has some big advantages.

"The most important thing we have right now is scale in the mid-size market. Few, if any, other manufacturers have scale like us, with a population of 1.2 billion people on our doorstep, and that gives us an advantage that's very difficult to replicate," he says.

Sitting in one of New Delhi's trendiest cafes, above one of India's most fashionable and fastest-growing homewares boutiques that happens to be owned by his mother and run by his sister, Lal reflects on the how far he has brought Enfield in the past decade.

"We're now the most profitable automobile brand in the world, I believe. Ten years ago we were the least profitable."

Jason Koutsoukis is South Asia correspondent



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