In the vertiginous mountains of Bhutan, where happiness is akin to holiness, bicycling has become much more than a national pastime. It’s a spiritual journey.

In Bhutan, there is a king who rides a bicycle up and down the mountains. Like many stories you will hear in this tiny Himalayan nation, it sounds like a fairy tale. In fact, it’s hard news. Jigme Singye Wangchuck, Bhutan’s fourth Druk Gyalpo, or Dragon King, is an avid cyclist who can often be found pedaling the steep foothills that ring the capital city, Thimphu. All Bhutanese know about the king’s passion for cycling, to which he has increasingly devoted his spare time since December 2006, when he relinquished the crown to his eldest son. In Thimphu, many tell tales of close encounters, or near-misses — the time they pulled over their car to chat with the bicycling monarch, the time they spotted him, or someone who looked quite like him, on an early-morning ride. If you spend any time in Thimphu, you may soon find yourself scanning its mist-mantled slopes. That guy on the mountain bike, darting out of the fog bank on the road up near the giant Buddha statue: Is that His Majesty?

The fourth king is the most beloved figure in modern Bhutanese history, with a biography that has the flavor of myth. He became Bhutan’s head of state in 1972 when he was just 16 years old, following the death of his father, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. (He formally ascended to the throne two years later, at age 18.) It was a heady historical moment. Bhutan had opened to the outside world just two decades earlier, in

BY JODY ROSEN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON ROBERTS

SOUL CYCLE
A rider in the Tour of the Dragon, a 166.5-mile, one-day bike race through the mountains of Bhutan, alongside the Druk Wangyal Lhakhang temple on the crest of the Dochula pass, which offers 360-degree views of the surrounding Himalayas.
The Tour of the Dragon is not quite the Tour de France. It is a charmingly homely affair. Just 46 riders, mostly amateurs. This year, the prince spent much of the race on his own, bicycling alongside participants and offering pep talks.

1952, abolishing slavery and undertaking the arduous task of revoking its medieval infrastructure, politics and culture to late-20th-century life. For millennia, Bhutan had been isolated—a land of devout Buddhism and pristine natural beauty, cradled by the Himalayas, which served as a bulwark against both military aggressors and modernity. Now, the burden of modernization fell on the shoulders of the teenage king. Under his leadership, electricity and modern medical care reached Bhutan’s remotest areas; development initiatives to the agendas of governments across the globe. But the bicycling movement in Bhutan is unique: a craze for the ultimate populist transportation machine that has been harnessed down from the palace to the grass roots. “There is a reason we in Bhutan like to cycle,” said Tshering Tobgay, the prime minister. “His Majesty the fourth king has been a cyclist, and after his abdication, he cycles a lot more. People love to see him cycle. And because he cycles, everybody in Bhutan wants to cycle, too.”

E VERY YEAR for the past five, Bhutan has held what amounts to a national bicycle holiday—a celebration of the peculiar pleasures, and exigencies, of bicycling in the country. The Tour of the Dragon is a 166.5-mile road race that stretches from Bumthang, in central Bhutan, to Thimphu, about 65 miles from the country’s western border. It is a spectacular journey, following a route through unspoiled forests and fields, over rolling river valleys and past mountainous farms, inverting just a few tiny villages along the way. The ride is almost comically strenuous. Cyclists must tackle four 10-percent grade climbs and rugged mud-and-rock-mitted roadways that challenge the sturdiest tires and suspension systems. Bhutan’s discovery of the bicycle is, on the one hand, on- trend. We are in the midst of a new bicycle boom, which is putting millions of new cyclists on the road and bringing cycling-premption initiatives to the agendas of governments across the globe. The bicycling movement in Bhutan is unique: a craze for the ultimate populist transportation machine that has been harnessed down from the palace to the grass roots. “There is a reason we in Bhutan like to cycle,” said Tshering Tobgay, the prime minister. “His Majesty the fourth king has been a cyclist, and after his abdication, he cycles a lot more. People love to see him cycle. And because he cycles, everybody in Bhutan wants to cycle, too.”

The sun broke through the scattered cloud cover around noon and a little while later, the first rider showed up in Thimphu: a short, slight man, perched on a mountain bike that was spattered with mud. His bright-hued Lycra shirt and shorts were emblazoned with the word “Nepal.” It was Ajay Pandit Chhetri, the five-time Nepalese national racing champion, who was riding in the Tour of the Dragon for the first time. He broke the finish-line tape 20 hours, 45 minutes and 49 seconds after the race’s 2 a.m. start time, beating by 17 minutes the previous record, set in 2012 by a Bhutanese cyclist, Sonam. This year, Sonam struggled to finish in the third place, behind Chhetri and another Nepalese racer, Rajkumar Shrestha.

The Tour of the Dragon is not quite the Tour de France. It is a charmingly homely affair. Just 46 riders, mostly amateurs, took part in this year’s event; only 22 made it to the finish, most of them struggling in hours after the winner. One of the most vigorous riders was an unofficial participant, a man often referred to in Bhutan by the nickname “H.R.H.”: His Royal Highness Prince Jigme Ugyen Wangchuck, age 30, the crown prince and heir presumptive to the Bhutanese throne. Like his elder brother, the current king, he has taken after his father when it comes to bicycles. The prince is the president of the Bhutan Olympic Committee, and the Tour of the Dragon is his brainchild. This year, the prince spent much of the race cheering up and down the slopes to
The majority of the Bhutanese live off the land, practicing subsistence agriculture. Schoolchildren, even in the deepest countryside, are taught English. Bhutan only got television in 1999. And yet nearly all its roads and buildings are constructed by migrant laborers from India and Nepal. Homosexuality is illegal and gender equality is a work in progress.

ride alongside participants, offering pep talks, tracing and retracing his path along the torturous mountain passes. Eventually, he jumped off his bike and got in a chauffeured car, speeding ahead of the pack so he could greet the winner in Thimphu.

That evening, the race-finisters assembled in a tent facing the big stage in Clock Tower Square before a crowd of a few thousand that gathered to watch the awards. Eventually, the Tour of the Dragon riders made their way to the dais, where they were congratulated by the crown prince and by Tobgay, the prime minister, a cyclist himself who has raced in three Tours of the Dragon. When the ceremony was over, I caught up with Chheerti, the race winner, and asked him if he planned to ride again next year. His answer was impressively winsome-in-romo. “I’m not sure,” he said. “I’m just so happy that I was able to come to Bhutan this year.”

T O A R K A B H U T A N E S E about happiness is akin to asking a Frenchman about wine or a Brazilian about soccer: It is the expected question, the question he is perhaps a bit wary of answering — yet he will gamely respond, unfailing not just a right reply, but an admirably subtle disquisition. Gross National Happiness, or G.N.H., is the big talking point when it comes to Bhutan. It is also a source of intense debate, a fluid concept which, many Bhutanese contend, is often misunderstood, especially by the outside world.

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“The key point to understand about G.N.H.” said Kinley Dorji, the head of Bhutanís Ministry of Information and Communication. “Happiness is a place. It is permanent contentment — with what you have. That lies within the senses. It is permanent contentment — with what you have. That lies within you.”

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he was hooked. The Olympic Committee Dragon, Tshering gave out after 112 miles — but
cycle up a mountain. On that first Tour of the
never ridden a bicycle with gears or tried to
Tshering agreed to take part. He knew how to
my childhood age,” he told me, “I was always
In 2010, when Tshering was 23, a friend told him
that the Bhutan Olympic Committee was
him that the Bhutan Olympic Committee was
Punakha; Sonam
a nighttime view
Clockwise from
HAPPY FEET
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We are used to hearing such talk from
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The notion that mountainous Bhutan can be
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landscape steadily being mutated by car culture and
urban sprawl. Thimphu’s population has more
than doubled in a generation. (The figure today
is about 100,000, and growing rapidly.)
Everywhere you look, there are automobiles
clogging up newly constructed roads and
buildings rising behind bamboo scaffolding on
land which, just a few years ago, was one vast rice
paddy, staked only by peasant farmers and
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Yet it is tempting to find a larger metaphor — for happiness, both personal and gross
national — in the prime minister’s assessment of Bhutan’s cycling topography. “If it’s all flat,
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