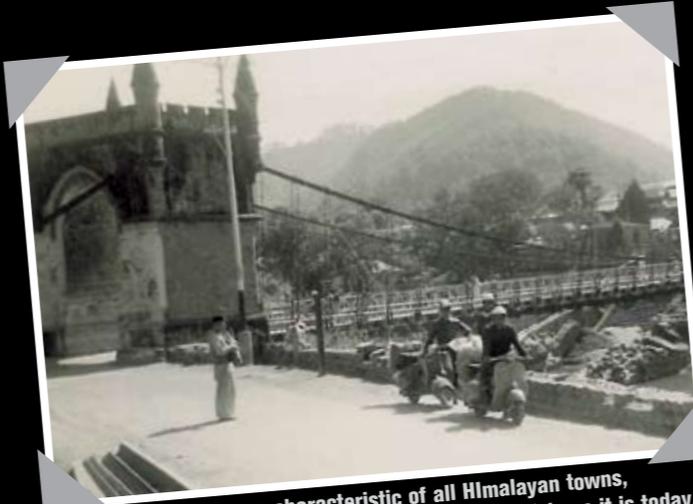




The intrepid Vespa-borne scooterists at Manali. Sheri Wadia (behind the camera), (l-r) Behram Govewalla, Dinyar Elavia, and Bomi Amaria.



Hanging Rope Bridge, a characteristic of all Himalayan towns, at Mandi, a sleepy town then not teeming with tourists as it is today.



Oh for those days when time stood still and all a traveller could be worried about was whether bird droppings would spoil his nap.



Taking a break on the Kulu-Manali Road. There is a proper tarred road now where buses ply. The splendid view, however, remains unchanged.



On the Banihal-Shrinagar highway. Despite being loaded to the maximum, the Vespa scooters never let down their spirited riders.



Tucking into morning tea and breakfast at the Tourists Hotel, Gulmarg. In the '60s a sumptuous meal would set you back by Rs 5 at the most!



At Khilanmarg, Gulmarg. Where roads were non-existent, the two-stroke Vespas were given up for the real thing – four-legged horsepower.



Changing a 'flat' tyre in a diversion on the Kulu-Manali-Shimla Road. This was the sole puncture suffered over 6000km of varied terrain.



Bomi Amaria takes a break 38 years ago. At 65 now, Bomi's passion for the Vespa remains as strong as ever in the form of an LML Vespa.



Paradise lost. Idyllic Kashmir in the '60s was beauty unsurpassed with houseboats, shikaras, walnuts and tourists with not a care in the world.

Summer of '62

SCOOTERING IN THE '60s It was the Vespa holiday of their lives — four friends on two Vespas set off from Bombay to Kashmir, 38 years ago. Rishad Mehta does a past forward.

All I seek (is) the heaven above, and the road below me... sings Robert Louis Stevenson's *Vagabond*. Add two Vespas between the heaven and the road and the vagabond(s) could very well be Bomi Amaria, Behram Govewalla, Sheri Wadia and Dinyar Elavia. For most people, a vacation usually commences once they reach their holiday destination.

The time taken getting there is impatiently spent either reading, lolling on a train's tiered bunk or playing cards. Some play India's national television game that certifies all and sundry as singers as long as the last and first accents of the consequent songs match, even remotely. Back in the '60s, Amaria and his friends — strapping young men in their mid-20s — decided to do away with trains as an option for their holidays

and pack in some adventure with the solid co-operation of an voluptuous Italian model. Nineteen hundred and sixty was a happening year. The Soviets shot down the American U2 aircraft spying on the USSR and Francis Gary Powers, the pilot, was soon pushing a wheelbarrow in the Siberian salt mines. Down south, Mossad agents nabbed Obersturmbannfuhrer Adolf Eichmann of the SS in Buenos Aires, and in India the

Bombay Presidency bifurcated into the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat and the poor 'Amdavadis' in Bombay now had to travel all the way to another state to feel at home. It was also the year during which the Vespa 150 was introduced in India (see box). Amaria and his friends succumbed to this seductive Italian in the August of the same year when they bought their Vespas for Rs 2600 — the price of a ticket on

A PHENOMENON CALLED VESPA

When the last gun fell silent in Europe heralding the end of the Second World War, two Italian brothers, Enrico and Armando Piaggio decided to pick up the pieces of their company that used to manufacture railway cars, trolley buses, airplanes and aircraft motors before the war came to Italy.

Bogged down by post-war regulations on manufacturing they proposed the idea of a "quick and easy means of transportation" and employing thousands for its manufacture. This idea — the first sketch of which was scoffed as a contraption few would buy — gave birth to the first two-wheeler called the Vespa. The name turned out to be perfect for the swift and darting little vehicle that looked like a wasp (Vespa in Italian) compared to the cumbersome two-wheelers of the forties.

The first engine for the Vespa was a masterpiece of simplified design and was sketched by senior engineer d'Ascanio. Its uniqueness lay in its simplicity. Comprising a single cylinder, the two-stroke engine was powered by a mixture of petrol and oil and required no elaborate lubrication system. The 20kg engine pumped out 4.5bhp and was made of aluminium casting. It was mounted over the rear wheel, driving it directly and eliminating the need for a chain and entailed a smoother ride. With his design and thoughts put down on paper, d'Ascanio began rooting through rubble piles for materials. He found wheelbarrow tyres, old motorcycle handlebars and scrap metal and six weeks later he created the first Vespa. The year was 1946.

This low-cost utilitarian product for the masses took Europe by storm in the following years and soon became a living legend. A legend riding on over 15 million Vespas produced and sold throughout the world, which have served not only to motorise entire countries, but also to unite people of diverse languages and cultures. The word Vespa soon grew to be

a concept, the mention of which transported the mind to thoughts of free time, beautiful weather and the pleasure of riding with the sun on your face and wind in your hair.

The scene from William Wyler's *Roman Holiday* showcasing the histrionics of Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn on a Vespa around the Colosseum is a part of that concept. This immortal scene transformed the young man riding the Vespa into a modern-day Prince Charming, the exciting local who takes the female tourist exploring. The Vespa became a symbol of freedom, movement and romance, it was its simplicity and accessibility that allowed



Charlton Heston and Stephen Boyd Vespa around on sets of the epic movie *Ben-Hur* in the late '50s.

Hepburn's Princess Anne character to live life as a commoner, and its chic style that allowed her to retain her regality in doing so.

Starting out with the 98cc Vespa 98, the engine evolved to the 125cc unit in '48. The 1948 Vespa 125 got a rear suspension and a modified front suspension. The first Vespa 150 was made in 1954 and had an oversquare engine (56.5mm bore x 49.8mm stroke), the headlight was mounted on the handlebar rather than the front mudguard like the previous models.

The 1959 Vespa 150 that arrived on Indian shores in 1960 had the pleasant task of

measuring up to the reputation that preceded it, a task that it lived up to without a single falter. The scooter was powered by a two-stroke 150cc, 57mm square engine that breathed through a Dell'Orto SI 20/17 carburettor. The unit developed 5.5bhp at 5000rpm — adequate for a top speed of 85kph — and considered itself lubricated if one added 20ml of oil for every litre of petrol. The engine drove eight-inch wheels through a three-speed gearbox and was mounted on the sheet metal-pressed chassis over the rear wheel. The engine also drove the magneto that supplied the electrical juice for the lights and horn. This was the first Vespa 150 to have the control cables hidden inside the handlebars.

Indians took to the Vespa in the manner our grandparents took to filmstars Madhubala and Nargis then. The ones who got their Vespas during the first year were lucky as the huge demand evolved into year-long waiting periods. This little scooter enhanced travelling to become a pleasurable instant kick-and-go phenomenon, its peppy two-stroke engine offering an escape from the cumbersome, expensive and service-needy four-stroke motorcycles available then.

The Vespa, with its sturdy build and negligible service requirement, went everywhere, hardly ever broke down and gained popularity across the subcontinent.

In the '60s Bajaj Auto obtained the license to assemble (and eventually produce) the Vespa in India, a move that turned its fortunes around to make it the largest two-wheeler manufacturer in the world. The concept that has been built around the 'Hamara Bajaj' ad campaign is based on the fact that a Bajaj scooter has touched the life of almost every Indian. These two words symbolise the legacy handed down by the 1959 Vespa 150 that won over the heart of many an Indian when it first landed here a generation ago and set a nation scootering.

the Mumbai-Delhi Rajdhani Express four decades later.

Hence started an affair and she cast the same spell on them as she'd on the masses in Europe. The Vespa ('little wasp' in Italian) was style and freedom epitomised to a level that made you want to get astride and ride.

In 1962 the four friends set off from Bombay (now renamed Mumbai) to Kashmir, ostensibly to see north India but it was the ride that would entail days of carefree scootering across the plains and through the high mountain passes that was the primary reason for the adventure. With new tyres fitted and extra yokes and cables stocked, they took the Bombay-Agra highway on the two Vespas.

With luggage stacked behind the pillion and in the empty space between the seat and the front panel, they managed to cruise at 60kph, an optimum speed where both man and machine were at ease with each other. The thrill of speeding — that they indulged in with their BMWs, BSAs and Triumphs back home in Bombay — was never an intention.

Delhi was a three-day ride away, during which they rode through Mhow, Shivpuri, Gwalior, the dreaded dacoit-infested Chambal Valley and Agra, soaking in the greenery of the verdant Indian plains. Overnight halts were usually at 'dak' bungalows with obliging caretakers who'd treat them like royalty for Rs 3, and prepare a meal for five!

With Delhi and the plains behind them and the north wind blowing in their faces, the four Vespa-ites took the road to Pathankhot and hit the mountain trail. The narrow roads with their steep inclines gave the Vespa the opportunity to prove that she wasn't just a good-looker, but within her stylish, curvy body lay a rugged heart — her engine. The hardy Vespas took all the narrow inclines in their stride and enabled the riders to soak in the magnificent views the Himalayan roads afforded without an ounce of worry about them quitting. A fondly remembered

"Life in the '60s meant carefree riding on a Vespa that cost Rs 2600, petrol was 75 paise a litre, and for Rs 3 you got treated like royalty!"

incident is on Pathankhot-Banihal road, when an Indian Army sergeant scoffed at the idea of the two "mopeds with swollen sides" attempting the difficult climb in their loaded state. But the little engine propelled them without a stutter or stall and made the sarge eat his words when he arrived two hours later.

Wherever there were roads, the two Vespas went without a hitch. Only at Khilanmarg, in Gulmarg, which lacked motorable roads then, was it necessary to dismount and continue on horseback. Amaria, who has travelled all over the world, maintains that he's yet to see a place whose beauty surpasses that of Kashmir. Forty years ago and till the mid-'80s, Kashmir was the tourist destination in India to visit with beautiful lakes, orchards laden with fruit, plenty of snow, and houseboats where a two-day stay cost only Rs 50.

Riding the scooters with only the pristine beauty of nature for company was a much headier experience than being bus-borne tourists. Petrol was never a problem — priced at 75 paise a litre, it was usually available in plenty; if ever there was a shortage the army men would oblige, free of cost. In places which had yet to receive electricity, the fuel would be pumped up manually from underground tanks into bulbous glass containers, marked in gallons, and then filled into the scooters.

From Kashmir the intrepid riders took the road to Mandi, Kullu, Manali and Simla, quaint little towns which were sparsely populated during the '60s. The riders were welcomed by the locals during all their halts; many of those pleasant memories have been preserved on Kodak.

The solitary puncture experienced was thanks to

a thorn on the Mandi-Simla road. The route taken often passed through dense forests and often the riders had to brake to let a Himalayan fox dart across their path or admire a handsome stag standing in the middle of the road.

The entire trip cost the four friends around Rs 500 each and took a month in which they covered around 6000km. Travelling by train would have been cheaper, but the holiday on Vespas made them richer. It was the ride that enhances the memories of that pleasurable trip four decades ago; the pleasure derived from riding your Vespa without any time constraints and regarding it with respect as you posed alongside for a photograph thousands of kilometres away from home.

The small volume of traffic and the slow speed at which it all moved contributed greatly to safety on the road. You could always stay at a dak bungalow or a PWD (Public Works Department) resthouse, which greatly reduced costs for overnight halts, something not possible today. Also, life moved at a slower pace then in an unwired world, when the Vespa — which is now hailed as a design classic — grew to become more than just a vehicle. It defined a way of life where you took time off from your daily routine and went exploring the world on your scooter and considered it time well spent.

For Amaria and his friends, the Vespa, coupled with loads of spirit and a sense of adventure, became an ideal vehicle to fulfil their wanderlust. Their Bombay to Kashmir adventure is a stark contrast to what we experience today, when speed, stress and cut-throat competition is something people have allowed to rule their lives.



Hand-operated petrol pump at Pahalgam, Kashmir. Helmets worn by the riders were similar to miners' headgear, minus the lamp.



Past perfect — Chinar trees form a stately avenue on the Srinagar-Tangmarg road. Wonder if the same scene exists today?



Inside Gwalior Fort. The Agra-Gwalior stretch was never attempted after sunset for fear of dacoits in the dreaded Chambal Valley.



Posing in front of the Taj Mahal, Agra. The seventh wonder of the world was at the time still untouched by toxic fumes as it is today.