



the bicycle diaries

alastair
humphreys

round the world by bike
4 years and 46000 miles
on the road

Europe and the Middle East

On The Road (18 September 2001)

Finishing my breakfast, waving goodbye, pedaling up the hill round the corner and out of sight for 3 years was very odd indeed. My first cry helped. My round the planet bike ride had begun.

After Day 1 I was exhausted and the face-punch of reality had kicked in. There was no glamour at all and this was going to be very hard work, in every way imaginable. By London I was very, very depressed and felt an almost unbearable reluctance to leave England. But I had the horrible feeling that I had no option, that I was trapped. By Dover the sheer scale of what I had got myself into was absolutely terrifying me. The delayed, rain-sodden ferry and 7am lager-swillers made the *au revoir* to England somewhat less than satisfactory.

In France I was wet, lonely and cried a lot. But finally the sun came out, I settled into a relaxed pace, took up sketching and coffee drinking with reckless abandon and things began to look up. A rainy morning merited a lie-in: a huge duvet sleeping bag, pistachio nuts for breakfast and the sports pages from the newspaper (albeit last Saturday's). And I claim this to be tough!

In sunshine I rode through quiet cornfields on aimless country roads: the killing fields of World War 1. Soldiers are admirably remembered in immaculate cemeteries. One highlighted the madness perfectly: row upon row upon row of Allied soldiers' graves, lying in the same cemetery alongside similar numbers of Germans.

Mum had given me a handful of Belgian coins before I left home. So I embarked on a 16 mile detour to Belgium, mouth watering at the prospect of burgers and gluttony. The first shop across the border sorted out the out-of-date, obsolete coins, handed me a can of Coke and 3 small chocolate bars and packed me off back towards France.

Luxemburg was nice. And small. I met Chris there, a fellow cyclist and we pedaled East together. The company is great, his demon speed uphill is not. A garage owner became my new hero when he gave us free rein on his cappuccino machine and sent us on our way with a new map, a bottle of beer and a very large sausage.

One rainy morning someone vaguely mentioned to me something about a plane crashing into New York's Twin Towers [September 11th 2001]. What incredible happenings I am unaware of in my weird little world, yet this may have huge repercussions later on my journey. Time will tell.

The beautiful Romantische Strasse stood out in the rain; the village of Rottingen boasted no fewer than 27 different sundials. If only they had some sunshine! And now, replete from the astonishing hospitality of Biggy and Guy T (a former pupil of my school) I turn towards a gentle meander down the Danube towards Turkey, Iran and Pakistan. The calm before the storm.

Budapest (27 September 2001)

Thanks for all the very amusing emails. They are greatly appreciated. Here's a very quick summary of my progress, followed by a longer piece about cycling down the Danube and my viewpoint of the terrorist situation from how I have seen it out on the road.

Regensburg to Budapest

Down the Danube to Budapest was perfect cycling. I honestly cannot imagine a more perfect stretch on my entire journey. The only downside was scores of fellow cyclists- middle-aged Germans in purple shellsuits and indecent lycra. Hardly conducive to me thinking of myself as a tough adventurer!

Chris and I arrived in Vienna Sunday morning. Everything was closed and the rain was wild. Unable to buy food we headed straight back out of town. Is my mental picture of Vienna as a deserted, wet, grey collection of motorway flyovers a unique one? Our hunger drove us through hideous rain across the border into Slovakia. We camped under a motorway bridge. Soldiers with AK-47s caught us but took pity in the pouring rain. We dried out and enjoyed Slovakia and Bratislava. A cross-country shortcut then saw us pop up on a dam guarded by armed police. They seemed rather surprised to have been 'left-flanked' by two English cyclists but eventually pointed us in the right direction.

And so into Hungary and Budapest. Massive plates of food, probably some spectacular sights too. Earnest calculations as to whether I can make the England cricket Test match in India on December 10th... But, before that, my journey is now seriously jeopardised by the terrorist situation. There are several options for me to consider; through Iran and Pakistan, north through Russia or turn right for Africa... Something will turn up.

The Danube from Passau to Vienna

There are 6 things you dream of on a cycling holiday: flat, smooth tarmac, beautiful scenery, easy

navigation, delicious food, a welcoming bed and an enticing final destination. The Danube River has it all. Flowing thousands of miles through Europe down to the Black Sea, the Danube is one of the World's majestic rivers, dividing nations, uniting them by trade and creating a perfect cycle route at the same time. It is a heady mix of history, landscape, wildlife and delicious beer and wine.

The Danube is not just for long-distance loonies. It is for everyone. Today alone I rode past families, young couples, septaguanarians and even a lady with a pair of crutches on the back of her bike, all enjoying the traffic-free cycle paths. Every junction is perfectly signposted, whether the path is winding through head-high cornfields, beside the river, through whitewashed, red-roofed villages, vineyards, orchards or deep in spectacular forested gorges past imposing castles.

The journey is a cruise -20, 40, 60 miles a day- any distance is realistic. It is entirely up to you. Flat tarmac solely for bicycles and warm autumnal days mean the miles flow easily. It is impossible to imagine a set-up more suited for cycling. Beer gardens lie beside the trail, tempting you with morning tea, lunchtime beers and meals and afternoon cakes and coffee. All this and the glorious Danube sliding by may well seriously limit the number of miles cycled each day! For those whose appetite outstretches their wallet (like me), village stores and supermarkets guarantee regular breaks for enormous cheese and ham baguettes on the river banks. Every two or three miles is a small village, each with several guesthouses welcoming weary cyclists with Austrian hospitality and fine food. Frequent campsites cater for those on a tighter budget.

From Passau (near the German-Austrian border) to Vienna is 200 miles, an ideal distance for a relaxing week away, or why not spend a few days in Vienna as a memorable climax to your journey? As I continue my round the world journey, this stage will really take some beating.

The Terrorist Crisis: my viewpoint out on the road

I am looking at a World seemingly on the brink of war. And, since September 11th, I feel that I am not really part of that world. I am cycling around the planet, heading from England towards Asia and beyond. The terrorist attacks on America have highlighted to me what an unusual position I am in. Whilst on my bicycle I have no access to newspapers, radio, television and rarely even to any people who do (my

Hungarian is nonexistent). I knew almost nothing of the situation for five days after the Twin Towers destroyed. And yet at the same time I feel integrally tied up in the whole situation as my journey heads inescapably towards Iran and Pakistan. The result of all this is that my viewpoint is short on hard facts but also unclouded by hype, hysteria and Western media opinion. I am also deeply conscious of the potential implications for my journey as I ride towards the focus of the world's gaze.

Knowing now the full scale of the catastrophe, I find it astonishing that for days I knew virtually nothing of what had happened. A half-understood exchange in German was all I had to go on as I imagined what could have happened. Was it true? Who did it? How did they do it? Why did they do it? Even "what happened?" I just did not know.

Eventually I sat awestruck and horrorstruck in front of CNN. I was amazed at how much we take instant coverage of the entire world for granted. How could I not have known about this?! I wasn't exactly in the middle of nowhere: I was cycling through Germany, but sleeping rough in the forests, the language barrier and a week of incessant rain meant virtually zero human contact. CNN gave me facts but it only gave one stance- *America's New War*, it screamed. Why not *America's Tragedy*? I wonder how Muslim TV stations are covering it?

And then I had another ten days of silence, popping up now for an update in Budapest. English headlines on tourists' newspapers scream 'War'. And so now I am hunting for information, opinions, viewpoints. What will happen next? And what are the implications for my journey? My intended route passes through Iran and Pakistan. Is this still realistic, or even feasible, or even appropriate? Should I try and head north through Russia instead? Will the whole area become a war zone? How will I be treated by ordinary Muslim people: as an ordinary (ish) bloke on a bicycle or as a 'westerner'- a representative of Blair and Bush? So many questions, so few concrete answers.

Even two weeks after the planes crashed every paper, publication and programme is still saturated with the story. I had never realized before just how removed I am from external influences when travelling on my bicycle. I know the essentials: terrorist attacks, Bin Laden, Afghanistan, Western response... but I feel I have had two weeks' isolation from the world, running scenarios through my head, trying to think of the reasons, the consequences, the solutions, the rights and the wrongs. A giant, tangled spider diagram in my head, but at least it's my own spider diagram. The horrors of September 11th have highlighted to me the sheer enormity of the power of global media in all its guises. Yes, it provides rapid,

detailed information, but it also forms people's opinions for them and I am not sure that is always a good thing...

Budapest to Istanbul (14 October 2001)

After another 15 solid days of pedalling up to 9 hours a day, I have finally made it from England to Istanbul. 2800 miles (4500km), 6 weeks, 1 continent crossed, but a long, long way to go! The end of the beginning perhaps?

After Budapest I battled (unsuccessfully) astonishing numbers of mosquitoes across Hungary's Great Plain. Into Serbia, riding for Belgrade. In Novi Sad a temporary bridge spanned the Danube, the original destroyed by NATO bombs just 2 years ago. But Belgrade was buzzing: vibrant, friendly, expanding, bouncing back with verve from the last shocking decade. It was a really refreshing city. Belgrade also boasted the most beautiful girls in the world (probably) and the best street stall sausage sandwiches (definitely)!

I returned to the Danube once more. By now it feels like a good friend. Fields bursting with crops then into a stunning gorge; forest, limestone cliffs, blazing sunshine and the imperious river. I ended the day drinking homemade (read hideous) schnapps with a farmer. The morning began with coffee and sunrise on the cliff top before swooping down across the river into Romania.

My back wheel collapsed. I hitched back to a town to try and find a replacement. All I could find was a very cheap, very tacky wheel rim: it was time to learn how to build a wheel. It took late night candle burning and the next morning too; working in a vineyard with a bored shepherd as technical adviser I eventually built my first wheel, albeit a slightly egg-shaped wheel.

Romania was in wedding and funeral season. Both involve street processions and music so it was hard to decide whether a sombre, sympathetic nod or a cheer and a jaunty ring of my bell was more appropriate as I rode by each one.

Crossing into Bulgaria at Ruse I waved adieu to the Danube and headed for the hills. In Bulgaria nodding your head means 'No' and shaking it means 'Yes'. This is almost impossible to get to grips with! By Turkey the wind had risen to a gale. Pedalling hard downhill at 9mph is not good for the soul.

And so I arrived in Istanbul, the end of Europe, the Gateway to Asia, like a true romantic young wannabe adventurer- hammering down the motorway in pitch darkness towards the amazing hospitality

of Caroline and Gurkan Kopuzlar. But ahead of me now my whole journey is in jeopardy; Iran and Pakistan are looking increasingly unsettled. Do I head north for Kazakhstan or turn South towards Africa?! So, for now, it's one continent down, many still to go, and absolutely no idea where to turn towards next.

Istanbul with a Vengeance (20 October 2001)

Listen! When you finish this article don't just fold your paper and get off at your usual stop. Go home, get your passport and cash card, head for the airport and fly to Istanbul. This is Istanbul from scratch where ignorance is bliss. No schedules, no preconceptions, no guidebooks, no maps, no speaka the language- no problem! This is the incredible Istanbul I have stumbled into.

I won't woo you with historical tit-bits, fancy place names or lists of 'must-sees', purely because I don't know any. Besides, it's more fun to find them for yourself. Before I arrived I knew that Istanbul was the gateway to Asia. From my University nights I remembered that Turkey was the spiritual home of the kebab. That was about it. After just a few days here I have seen and heard and felt and smelt so much more now.

At dawn all 12 million of us in this glorious sprawl are greeted by the exotic, haunting call to prayer from the minarets of countless sky-lined mosques. As Istanbul awakes I join the mayhem, burying into the scrum at random. Memories fly at me like a photo album scattered over the floor. I find stalls packed tight together, humanity filling the gaps and huge barrows of hazelnuts or pistachio nuts maneuvering impossibly through it all. Every way I turn are streets selling everything you could possibly imagine, one product per street: bath taps, rugs, dodgy pirated music cassettes, leatherwork in quick succession. Sacks of spices and herbs lure me. I have no idea what they all are but the colours and aromas and textures are intoxicating. Precarious pyramids of pomegranates for freshly squeezed juice. I see old men sagely and ceremoniously sip from glasses of amber-like tea. Sausage stalls, giant blocks of cheese, fish plucked fresh from the Golden Horn of the Bosphorus.

As I burst dishevelled from the madness a vast mosque gazes down at me. In a shaded park benches provide quiet respite from the noble strife of the madding crowds in the bazaars. And six slender minarets spear skyward from the mosque above a cascade of majestic domes and cupolas. Wandering disorientated and enchanted I graze constantly on snacks from street stalls, lured by scents, colours and persuasive sales talk. Sweet cups of tea, stuffed vine leaves, walnut pastries, sesame rolls and of course kebabs: several vendors stand on every street, red coals fanned beneath a sizzling grill of lamb. Walking later beside the Bosphorus looking towards the far shore and Asia I feel an almost magnetic pull towards the

Wonders that lie beyond.

Shouting shop merchants, watchful shoeshine men, blaring taxi drivers: a bubbling cauldron of sensations and life being lived with energy. Which is more than I have as I sit beside the water in the warm autumnal sun. I have no idea where I have been or what exactly I have seen, but discovering Istanbul for myself and without prescription is proving to be a real thrill.

“Turn Right for Africa!” (29 October 2001)

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I- I took the one less travelled by,

And that has made all the difference”

- Robert Frost

Four years of dreaming, a year of serious planning and a whirlwind final few weeks of visas, equipment, administration, websites and bureaucracy: departing to cycle around the world was mayhem. But once I had set off things quickly settled down: cycling, sleeping, eating, studying my maps. I was pedalling towards Australia. I was ready for the savage -30C Iranian winter, I was confident about cycling during the Muslim period of Ramadan. I was looking forward to the madding crowds of India. All the unique charms and wonders and frustrations of Asia lay before me and I was as ready as I could ever be.

And then on September 11th the world went crazy. The shockwaves of the horror have spread, and continue to spread, over the entire globe. Suddenly my nationality became a serious issue thanks to some terrorists and a Prime Minister I didn't even vote for. Doors were slammed shut all around me. My dream to cycle around the World was fading away fast. And so as I rode across Europe I spent hours every day wrestling with the options available to me. My biggest concern was 'breaking the chain': if I flew or took a bus for even the tiniest fragment of my route then in my mind everything after would be futile. I would not have cycled around the World, I would be shadowed by that regret all my life and so I might as well just go home right now. Over-flying the trouble zone to India was therefore not an option: it would have been the easy way out and 'the easy way out' is not compatible with riding around the planet. Cycling north through Kazakhstan would ensure that the chain continued unbroken, but the mind-boggling bureaucracy of the region was too much to deal with off the cuff and on the road.

Continuing as before through Iran and Pakistan was still my preferred route. Eventually though it sank in that I owe a debt of sensible-ness to certain people in my life and reluctantly began to look for another plan.

In Istanbul I spent long, lonely nights drinking black coffee and see-sawing between the fear of failure

and the excitement of real adventure. The maxims I try to live my life by are adventure, challenge and high comedy. It began to look like I had no alternative. It was time for a complete reversal of my route. All of my carefully laid plans went out the window. All my organisation and planning, thinking, dreaming and mental preparation was of no use now. I had never even glanced at the possibility of doing what I was now about to do. This was exactly the sort of mess I love getting myself into, but the sheer scale of it unnerved me.

I found myself walking out of the Syrian Consulate in Istanbul, passport and (extremely expensive) visa in hand. And then in a wave of terror it really hit me: I was going to cycle to Cape Town. I was turning right for Africa.

Never before have I had to take such a drastic choice of path. Africa is a vast continent, a land of unforgettable music and beauty and soul. It is also a land of mistrust, baffling bureaucracy and hatred. Thousands of miles of burning sunsets, border crossings, hardships and magic now lie between me and the Cape of Good Hope.

Horrible imaginings of what awaits me and the fear of the unknown, combined with an aching excitement keep me awake at night now. It is slowly sinking in that I am no longer cycling to Asia. I am heading, alone and completely unprepared, for Africa. In terms of outrageously ludicrous changes of plan, this one really will take some beating on my journey! Who knows what may have been if I had not taken this path. But, on the other hand, who knows what adventures and challenges lie in wait for me now as I turn right for Africa.

Turkey (24 November 2001)

When a guest in someone's home, how do you know when you have probably stayed too long? My hair had grown visibly and a baby had learned to both walk and talk.... It was time to leave Istanbul. Caroline and Gurkan: you are heroes!

Arno the Frenchman, a University friend, had been to visit. We slept rough in sewage pipes and abandoned mansions, drank tea (*chai*) with old men and wallowed in deep Turkish baths. I was rested and ready for Africa. I crossed the Bosphorus, waving *au revoir* to Istanbul's wonderful skyline and to Europe. If all goes to plan the next crossing of that water will complete a circumnavigation and prompt a spectacular level of celebration (from me at least).

The call to prayer rose up the forested mountainside from the village mosques. Echoing and sliding around the autumnal cliffs, the singing was a beautiful sound. But the magical silence that followed was comically broken by a Public Service Announcement from one of the mosques: "bing, bong, BING, BONG, would Mr. Ahmet please report to reception" (or something like that!).

We stopped to eat in Beypazari. Before I knew it Mr. Youssef had invited us to his home for the night and I was whipping his sons at basketball. Cross-legged we feasted around a low table. A great evening, except for the agony of folding my legs beneath me as we ate. There were perfectly good chairs all around... The next day we misjudged distances and spent the night trapped in suburbia (a horror that happens for life to many people), camping in Ankara beneath high-rise tower blocks. Four youths high on solvents pestered us late at night, for money, for alcohol, for cigarettes and, saddest of all, for the glue from my puncture repair kit. Plastic bags puffed full and empty in your face by frantic 15 year olds looking for escape is a deeply depressing experience. The prospect of their return later was not conducive to restful sleep either.

A dilemma: if you drop your bike computer down a filthy Turkish squat toilet, what do you do? Chris reached in and went fishing! I haven't laughed so much in ages. We paused to help a tortoise cross the road before finding a beautiful wilderness campsite. As we drank hot tea and watched the sun sink a wild pony came to say hello before galloping away across the empty plain.

Cappadocia is one of the most stunning natural sights in the World. It ridicules my vocabulary. It makes a mockery of photography. You need to wander with your own eyes up its surreal canyons, lured ever forwards even though you know the way out is behind you. The rocks are mesmerizing. Endless chimneys, haystacks, mushrooms, waves, pyramids, gorges and cave icings. Whites and creams and pinks and greens and reds as far as you can see. A silence so deep that a childish mind may find the echoing of farts hilarious. But that is only half of Cappadocia, for in all these outrageous rocks are thousands of human homes. Everywhere you climb are the fascinating caves of troglodyte populations. Persecuted Christians hid here too; beautiful cave paintings and rock hewn altars a testimony to their undimmed faith. And to smugly walk up the red carpet at the entrance to the smart hotel we were kindly being hosted at by Omer just topped it all off perfectly!

Omer's breakfasts were vast and, fuelled like performance athletes on several kilos of deep fried egg bread, we rode like demons: 5 hours without stopping once is an absurdly long time in the saddle. Chris and I parted company: he to fly to India, me to ride to Syria, and I had deadlines to keep. I was on a mission to get to Beirut as fast as possible. The physical endurance challenge of cycling is a major part of the fascination for me, and I had one on my hands now.

Ahmet, a shotgun armed night-watchman of an orange grove fed me like a king and let me sleep in the back of a wheel-less wagon on the top of a hill in a thorn field. Adrian, a cyclist with 1800 hats in his collection warned, "sorry to p*ss on your oil painting, but there are some big bastard hills ahead." He was right. I pedaled 8 hours a day up and down irritating passes, heading as fast as I could towards Syria and the next phase. But even the hills of Turkey aren't too bad compared to the privilege of pedaling at dawn through tiny mountain communities, tranquil and awakening, sharing my tea with shepherds beside my tent and the unquestioning hospitality of the Turks that puts to shame our mistrusting selfishness in Western Europe. Even the outrageous headwinds of Turkey fade against the view from the ferry up the Bosphorus of Istanbul at dusk, happy and replete from a bellyful of 25p kebabs. Turkey is wonderful. Now for the Middle East.

Lebanon (24 November 2001)

What do you know of Lebanon and Beirut? Let's be honest: you've probably only read this far because you thought the title was 'Lesbians'. What I knew (or thought I knew) was a place ripped apart by fighting, tanks and rubble in the streets, concrete shells of buildings Emmental-ed with bullet holes. Fanatics draped with AK-47s. And if you should be foolish enough to enter the country... well you are sure to be taken hostage like Terry Waite and John McCarthy. More like Front Page than Travel Page. A travel page should be telling you about places like this:

A tiny nation combining natural beauty with some of the juiciest history in the world. The best food in the Middle East. A buzzing, invigorated capital city. Skiing, sunshine and the ocean... Welcome to Lebanon.

The history of Lebanon is jaw-dropping. Byblos is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world (over 5000 years old). A beautifully preserved Roman street runs alongside relaxed cafés and restaurants in the heart of Beirut. In a central square are 2000-year-old Roman baths, the clever under-floor heating system clear to see. The baths were built, in turn, on the site of Phoenician baths 4000 years old. Today they are smack-bang in the middle of Beirut city centre.

And then there is Baalbek, a site for which the superlative must have been invented. Its construction was a startlingly ambitious political statement made by the Romans at the heart of the vital Fertile Crescent between the Nile and the Euphrates. The largest Roman temple ever constructed, far bigger than anything in Rome or Athens. The temple of Bacchus is the best preserved temple on the planet. The mightiest building block ever cut lies nearby. Measuring 20x5x4 metres it weighs 1500 tonnes. The vast monoliths of Stonehenge are a mere 50 tonnes. 40,000 people would have been needed to shift the 'Rock of Fertility'.

The Lebanese are proud people. They are proud of their hospitality and proud of their food and rightly so. Pepe's 'Fishing Club' restaurant in Byblos is legendary, a frequent haunt of the likes of Brigitte Bardot, Frank Sinatra and Marlon Brando in the 1960's. Hundreds of photographs testify to its glamorous clientele. In restaurants you are bombarded with endless plates of *mezze* (starters): *hummus*, *tabouleh* and *fatoush* salads, spinach and cheese pastries, flat hot bread and the fabulous *baba ghanouche*, a smoky

blend of aubergines, tahini, lemon and olive oil. And then they bring the main courses! Ouch. A cornucopia of decadently sweet pastries and cakes to finish with. The wines of Lebanon are a hidden jewel. The vines of Chateau Kefraya, Chateau Musar and Ksara are beginning now to be praised internationally, for Lebanon has an ideal climate: both Mediterranean sunshine and 3000 metre mountains gathering snow and keeping the land fertile.

How about this for a day in a holiday? A morning's skiing at Faraya or The Cedars, the afternoon at one of the most exquisite and important ancient sites in the world, sunset in a café watching the sun slide into the ocean before strolling around beautiful and friendly downtown Beirut as you select the restaurant of your choice from the myriad of high quality options available. And then, when your friends boast of Rome's history or Greek sunshine or skiing in Austria or Parisian cuisine, allow yourself a little smug smile at having found all that rolled into one special little country. Welcome to the horrors of Lebanon!

From Syria to Amman, Jordan (10 December 2001)

“We are not demanders of War and Terror, but we will defend ourselves against War and Terror”

read the sign at the frontier. It was lunchtime and the road was hectic with children laughing and shouting their way home from school. Their school uniform was a dark green military uniform complete with shoulder epaulettes. The British Consulate in Istanbul had ‘strongly advised’ me not to enter the country. Welcome to Syria.

I met my first scary Syrians, a family of orange pickers who housed me, fed me, thrashed me at chess and waved me on my way the next morning laden with about 40 oranges. Welcome to Syria. I spent the next evening in the company of Monsieur Diemoz, an octogenarian Frenchman who worked as the concierge at an old people’s home. Roquefort for breakfast fuelled me into Beirut where I watched possibly the worst ever (and hence funniest) performance of Macbeth. My journey is getting surreal.

Post-war Beirut now boasts a stunningly renovated downtown area, classy restaurants and coffee bars, open-top BMW’s, mobile phones and fat cigars. My muddy shoes, ripped trousers and non-coiffured hair did not seem very appropriate. It is true that large areas of the city are still laced with bullet holes and hardship, but the city and its people are looking forward to better times now. I stayed with Raymond, a Sierra Leone-born restaurateur who had been forced by war to flee the country overnight. Now in the land of his fathers he has turned his hand to teaching Physics. I stayed too with Sandy and Art. In his mid-50’s Art had pedaled across the USA without a single day off, putting me to shame! He could afford gallons of chocolate milk though and I put his success down to that. And him thrashing me at table tennis? I was just being a polite guest...

Bursting from almost incessant eating and Middle Eastern hospitality I was ready to tackle the biggest mountains of my journey so far as I turned inland.

Baalbek is an archaeological phenomenon for which the superlative could have been invented. The biggest Roman temple in the world, the best preserved Roman temple in the world and, my favourite, the biggest building block ever cut. It measures 20m x 5m x 4m, weighs 1500 tonnes and would need 40,000 men to shift it! The stones at Stonehenge are a mere 50 tonnes. The place is stunning and I had it all to

myself. My jubilation at pitching my tent at the foot of a temple was tempered by discovering I had left my sleeping bag and mat in Beirut. Idiot! The temperature hovered around zero, I didn't sleep much and dawn was a very real relief.

It is Ramadan, the Muslims' month of fasting during daylight. As I entered Damascus a student I met on the street invited me home for *iftar*, the evening breaking of the fast and a HUGE feast. The food was delightful, the father's high volume anti-Semitic ranting a little less so. Cycling through Damascus at 4pm amongst several million hungry Muslims driving home at high speed is my new Number 1, most dangerous cycling experience.

I nearly quit. Being alone means that there is nobody to tell you to stop being ridiculous when you are feeling down. The sheer scale of what I was attempting, the feeling of being trapped like a hamster in a wheel, the loneliness and the anonymity hit me in a wave of terror. I plumbed new depths of sadness. Only my stupid pride stopped me heading for the airport. But then I discovered Damascus, dark winding souks, atmosphere and surprises around every tight corner. Kebabs better even than Istanbul convinced me that I could not possibly go home yet. So I pedalled on and gradually began to cheer up. But I do not wish to endure (nor will I be able to) too many times like I went through in Damascus.

Bosra is a Roman theatre in Southern Syria capable of seating 15,000 people. It is almost as pristine today as when it was built 2000 years ago. The place oozes atmosphere and the acoustics are unbelievable. And again I had the place to myself. I sang Happy Birthday to myself on the stage to a vast audience of zero. Amazingly 2 Belgian cyclists showed up. We brewed tea on the stage and spent the night in the theatre (imagine trying to do that in Rome). My high-volume rendition of Jerusalem beneath a full moon was spectacular.

We pedalled together to Amman. Jordan is my 15th country and I now have 6500km under my wheels. It is time to recuperate for a while, to do battle with the Sudanese embassy and to enjoy the unexpected pleasure of a huge Christmas dinner courtesy of my new host: headmaster Phillip.

Arabian kindness and hospitality has been universal, trusting and humbling. The cuisine is fabulous. The history is jaw dropping. I know I can safely leave my bike unattended in the street. The only bad thing has been one day of torrential rain as I left Syria. That must have been the reason why the British

Consulate warned me so strongly against travel here...

My Life really is a Roller coaster (10 December 2001)

Surely this cannot go on. I left home to cycle around the world. I was expecting a physical grilling, to be frozen and burnt, tired and sick, lonely and afraid. But the reality is so different. The cycling is, relatively, not a problem. I can handle it. But my emotions are driving me crazy: it's a bloody roller coaster! I am having unforgettable experiences, meeting fascinating people, seeing extraordinary things. But the depths of sadness I keep plummeting to are frightening. And it is not just once or twice this has happened to me; it hits every few days. There is no way I can continue for long in this frame of mind.

I miss those I love at home. I miss the 'comfort-zone' living of Starbucks, armchairs, 9-to-5, music, friends, routine, familiarity. I feel terrified at what I have got myself into. How did I have the audacity to think I could possibly pedal through Africa alone, how could I have committed myself to three years of this madness, of being the odd one out, of knowing no-one or nowhere, a world where nobody knows your name? I feel I have bitten off more than I can chew and surely this cannot go on.

It all came to a head in Damascus. I had reached the end of the road. It was too much. It was too hard. I was too alone. I was in too deep. I had failed. I was the nearest I have ever been to quitting. I was so close to heading for the airport and escape. It was over.

But I am trapped between a rock and something painfully hard. Frying pan or fire? An impossible situation. For there is no way I can go home either. The very comfort-zone I crave now is exactly what led me to all this in the first place. I cannot go back to that. And on top of all that is my stupid pride. I have told so many people of my grand schemes that I cannot possibly show my face in England before Christmas!

So I stayed. I didn't quit. I pedalled on down the road. I cheered up. I've made it now to Jordan, country number 15 and 6500km under my wheels. But the journey is just beginning, there are countless adventures ahead and a fair few horrors too. I must gather my rain-clouds while I can, for these dark depths of sadness make the high points even purer. It's not a bike ride, it's a roller coaster. I just don't want too many freefalls like in Damascus.

Amman to Cairo (14 January 2002)

“Now I’m stronger than yesterday”

- Britney Spears

Hard Times in Amman! An invite to the British Ball at the Sheraton Hotel and a disappointed British Ambassador: my Christmas party schedule was simply too full to fit in his kind invitation to dinner. Merry Making and Calorie Cramming all round. I found time to play backgammon and smoke a hubbly-bubbly waterpipe with a wise old Jordanian. He spoke of backgammon as a philosophy of life: it is black and white, you have no choice over what is dealt for you, or over what people do to you, but you play your own pieces as you wish and you can make the most of what you are dealt. My dice came up trumps: my Sudan visa arrived! My excitement was measured though: now I have no reason to wimp out. I have the visa; I’m going to have to tackle Sudan. There is no excuse now.

Two University friends, Arno and Simon, were going to join me for their Christmas holiday. One’s preparations were unconventional and decidedly ill-advised. I am delighted to make public his personal pain and shame: *“Al: I am in pain. Please don’t tell anyone! Someone advised me to shave my bum to make cycling less painful. But now I am sitting on hundreds of tiny, deadly needles of stubble. Please advise...”*

Even without a newspaper to read, the lowest point on Earth was fun. We bobbed and floated and giggled in the salty soup of the Dead Sea, donned fluffy white dressing gowns and gloated in the generous, luxurious hospitality of the 5-star Dead Sea Spa Resort. Freshly shampoo’d and blow-dried the three rugged adventurers left to camp by the seashore. Across the tranquil waters lay the less than tranquil West Bank. So when soldiers found our campsite in the night they were naturally less than happy and moved us on to rest elsewhere. We peered through their night-vision goggles at the grainy-green far bank. Were the equally paranoid soldiers over there squinting back at us...?

Dana is the most beautiful place between London and Cairo. Christmas morning above the gorge at Dana outshone even Petra, the famous rose-red city half as old as time. Santa hats, tinsel and very loud

Carol singing as we pedalled along the crisp, fresh King's Highway. Never let the lyrics or tune get in the way of high volume Christmas roaring! Local Muslims shared our high spirits. "Merry Christmas!", "Happy New Year!", even "Happy Birthday!" they cried.

Petra provokes ambition and far-sightedness. It mocks the triviality of our "I want it now" lifestyles. It gave me renewed strength: I can make it to Cape Town.

Where better to read TE Lawrence's 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom' (he really was a dangerous 'dreamer of the day' as I wish to be...) than in Wadi Rumm. The vastness of Wadi Rumm reminds you of your own insignificance; its timelessness highlights your own fleeting time flowing frighteningly fast. Lying on the desert floor the black silence is so absolute that you can literally hear yourself blink. Its enormous majesty of course provoked very childish naked running and aeroplane impressions.

We met an Irish conceptual artist. He was over here on business. With a disposable camera he was to take 24 photos of 24 different Arabs writing Arabic on 24 postcards of London and mailing them to another artist in Britain. The art? Sending a postcard of a place you have never been, to a country you have never seen, to a man you have never met, in a language he will not understand. "Ingenious", I lied. To avoid a troublesome Israeli stamp in my passport I was forced to take a ferry across the bay to Egypt. And so the unbroken tyre tracks, over 7000km long, stretching back to Calais and a very different me have finally been broken. The 'Slow Boat' carried out its job brief magnificently, being so slow that we disembarked in a chaotic Egypt a splendid eight hours late. And then I was alone again. Simon and Arno have put me back on the rails; I have rediscovered laughter. Hopefully in return the difficulties of the road have shown them that you only know your strength once you start to take the strain.

An easy ferry ride to Hurghada beckoned. It would save me 10 days of tough, unnecessary riding around the Gulf of Suez. But if I'm going to do this I'm going to do it right, so I pedalled for days across the Sinai Peninsula to Cairo directly back towards England. Not good for the soul. My water bottles froze solid, my tent blew down, hailstones (hailstones?! This is meant to be a desert!!) bit my face. I fought as hard as I could into the teeth of a gale. I screamed at the skies and shouted at everything I saw. Which wasn't much as I was in a desert. The Middle East has been so lusciously kind to me that she wasn't letting me leave without reminding me of something important, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger" which also happens to be the motto of Stella, Egypt's beer.

Across the Suez Canal. To the banks of the Nile. The haughty, hazy outline of the pyramids. I have arrived in Africa. Hailstorms and headwinds, silent majesty and beauty, the ambition and perseverance of ancient peoples, Santa hats and bad singing: the perfect tonic to give me strength.

Christmas Away (25th December)

“We three Kings of Orient are,
One in a taxi, one in a car,
One on a scooter, beeping his hoo-ooo-ter,
Smoking a fat cigar”

One of us was on a shiny blue bicycle, another on an old rattler borrowed at short notice from a friend and I am still muddling along on the bike (Rita) that has carried me all the way from England. I have a little bell on my bicycle and we had a few unpleasant drags on our Christmas cigar before discarding it in disgust. We weren't quite kings, but we felt pretty regal today.

It is Christmas Day: my first ever Christmas away from home. We were riding the Biblical King's Highway, pedalling towards the 'lost' kingdom of Petra, towards the 'rose-red city half as old as time'. It was not going to be an ordinary Christmas Day. Christmas morning saw us on the bicycles by 7.30am, bikes suitably tacky in tinsel and Santa hats warding off the early desert chill. Deep-fried falafel sandwiches make a fine festive breakfast for 10p. It's Christmas so we had three each: hang the expense!

We belted Carols as we rode, not letting lyrics or tune get in the way of good old-fashioned, high volume roaring. Local Muslims amused by our good cheer cried out “Merry Christmas!” or “Happy New Year!” even “Happy Birthday!” Near enough: it is the season of goodwill after all.

Corned beef and tomato puree sandwiches made a sumptuous Christmas Lunch: at least we three hungry cyclists were genuinely appreciative of all we ate today. In the afternoon we sought shade in the company of a Bedouin family, hot sweet tea in small, delicate glasses reviving the senses and forging friendships. My mistletoe decked Santa hat looked daft but caused hilarity atop an old Bedouin man's flowing red and white headdress.

We arrived in Petra before sunset, hot and tired and ready to share our mini Christmas Pudding. It was a Christmas Day without a full belly, without Eastenders, without Grandpa's snoring. It was a Christmas without fine food yet with real gratitude for what I ate. It was a Christmas far from friends yet I was in a country of genuine unconditional friendship and hospitality. A Christmas buzzing on the glory of this

high mountain road so near to where Christmas began. It was my first Christmas away from England.

Africa

Egypt: Cairo to Aswan (1 February 2002)

“If you were to die right now, how would you feel about your life?”

- Fight Club

Motorway fly-overs brush second floor bedroom windows, the living compete with the dead for real estate amongst the city's cemeteries and a fine view of the Pyramids is to be had from the tacky interior of Kentucky Fried Chicken. Cairo.

After the crush it made a change to hurtle south along the quiet Red Sea road, a hefty tailwind blasting me 190km one day. Most of the coast has been vomited into a half-built hell of unfinished hotels, the windowless hulks gazing out blankly like fish on a slab. So El Gouna was a real surprise, a tastefully built fantasy oasis amongst the tat. It certainly wasn't Egypt but it wasn't really anywhere else either. It was the final break to psych myself for the Sudan, a break of beer, food, fun and no-one wheedling for *baksheesh*. And an even purer escape: scuba-diving amongst tentacles of sunlight, swathes of colour and a heady blanket of silence. Finally after 5 months of fascinating (but frightening) introspection I feel ready to start looking outwards once more, to feel and experience and live the road through Africa.

Even more hospitality is offered; hotels galore and even a stay at a Sheraton! Fluffy white dressing gowns and complimentary slippers certainly help reality fade for a while!

8434.4km on a rattling bike cobbled back together with string and a teaspoon, 5 months and 3 days of slog, sweat and lots of tears all come to nought: the police order me to take a ride on a convoy from the coast to Luxor. I tried every single strategy but it was impossible to cycle on. So the magic of my journey fragmented as my bike and I grovelled down in the vegetable peelings in the back of a lorry. But I cannot pretend that whizzing an effortless 160km whilst reading TE Lawrence was not fun.

Perhaps to atone for my previous capitulation I decided to try and 'run' the next roadblock. I waved and smiled at the policemen's shouts of "STOP!", played dumb and pedalled like hell! But a 60kg bicycle is not an ideal getaway vehicle and a commandeered taxi laden with flustered policemen soon overtook me. They were VERY unamused.

The Nile valley is as green as Elland Road was in August, the sky as blue as a late summer's cricket match. Swallows dipped the waters (I wondered whether any of them will be visiting my village in Yorkshire this summer?). Fertile, fascinating, exotic and very fast driving: Egypt was in danger of winning back my affections. Luxor soon put that to rights though- the Nile sunset making a pretty backdrop to a thumping headache of...

“Hello, my friend! Where you from? Stop one minute, can I ask you a question? Just look! No hassle! You wanna taxiride-feluccaride-horseride-motorboatride-drugsride? You wanna buy waterpipe-tshirt-galabayah-spices-carpets-genuinecarvings-hashish? Very cheap price! Maybe tomorrow? No hassle!

Hey, my friend, why you ignoring me?”

I chew sugar cane in Aswan, tearing off the hard, green bark like a panda then crunching the deliciously sweet liquid centre, sucking out its life before spitting out mouthfuls of the woody pith. A long way from “two sugars please.” I’m waiting for the weekly ferry to Sudan. Over the past months the Sudan has never strayed far from my waking or sleeping thoughts. (There is only one other thing that has featured so prominently in my thoughts, and she is an infinitely happier and more beautiful thought than riding alone through the desert.) The next month is make or break. Make it to Khartoum and I can make it through Africa. Make it through Africa and I can make it through anything...

Aswan, Egypt to Khartoum, Sudan (1 March 2002)

“Never forget where you’ve come here from”

- Take That

Deciding to cycle round the world was a decision prompted by heady notions of adventure, challenge and self-discovery. Five months on the road had quickly rotted those glossy illusions. Those sickly-sweet ‘qualities’ that litter and light up job application letters had decayed to the sordid bones and leering skull of reality: the only thing keeping me going now was stubbornness, fear of failure and sheer bloody mindedness. No doubt though if I make it to Cape Town the show-boating glamour traits will re-appear once again to grab the glory.

The Ferry from Egypt to Sudan should leave at 3pm. At 4pm the doorway, gangplanks and jetty were still all packed solid with sacks waiting to be loaded. Absolute chaos. Heavy sacks were dumped on top of boxes of soft fruit, rainbows of stacked plastic chairs jumbled amongst bags of already spilling sugar. Someone had happily raided an industrial sized box of chocolate wafers. The irate captain liberally sprinkled the workers with clouts round the head as they heaved and shouted and pointed at the never-shrinking mountain of cargo on the dock. Somehow I had heaved my bike through the scrum and had seized possession of a small strip of bare deck. It was to be my home for the next 24 hours (plus however long we were delayed whilst the weekly debate of how best to convey a sack through a door raged on) and I was ready to defend it bravely from encroaching piles of cargo and the really fat bloke (who MUST have been the one raiding the chocolate wafers!). If I should die, think only this of me....

The sun set. Eventually the tumult and the shouting died; the captain and his ship could depart. 9.30pm. Below deck conditions degenerated fast. Amongst the old suitcases and cardboard boxes tied with string were squashed hot families, sprawled comatose, shrieking, playing dominos (out here a VERY noisy sport, often verging on full contact), sleeping, eating, stretching or scratching. Food was served in the canteen by the dirtiest man I have ever seen, his squalid clothing glistening with grease, fag ash sprinkling from his mouth into the food like an Italian chef lovingly seasoning with oregano, his vast belly a testimony to never having to eat his own vile cooking. A cheap tin tray was banged down on the

counter and the dirty man scooped onto it a handful of grey chopped tomatoes, a handful of grey boiled beans, a grey egg and half a (surprisingly orange) orange. I returned to deck to escape the heat and noise and stench because the canteen was by the toilet, already unrecognizable by that title. A more swilling, reeking, badly aimed swamp of human excrement and excess I have never seen. But on deck the night sky was beautiful.

I met some other cyclists! Owy, Paul, Ruth and Toby are cycling through Africa to the Earth Summit in Johannesburg (www.cycletothesummit.org.uk). They left the UK 3 months after me and have already caught me up. Their sponsored bicycles, laptop computer, video camera and solar panel make me look very amateur. However their complete inability to decide how to make custard reassured me of their mortality!

Arriving in Wadi Halfa was one of the most exciting events on this journey. Never in my life have I been to such a boring little town, but I was in the Sudan at last! Before I could begin to cycle I had to register with the police and obtain a permit to travel in the country. This involved being waved vaguely in the direction of many different identical offices in search of elusive stamps, signatures, counter stamps, confirmatory signatures, payments, stapling, bewildered expressions and shiny purple dossiers. Several hours later the trail of offices appeared to dry up: it seemed as if I was free to go.

Befuddled and exhausted I climb a small hill to watch the sun set. The blue waters of man-made Lake Nasser seem to invade this end-of-the-world, needle-in-a-haystack, middle-of-nowhere place, bringing a ferry and a weekly splash of activity into the silence of the desert. Wadi Halfa is an odd place to have on a list of 'highlights': a few clusters of square single-storey dwellings, sand coloured and bleak as all the world appears to be from up here. It is a town featureless like snowfall. No paths or roads, no trees, no colours, no contours. I wonder which route I will take across the desert but I can see no clues or tracks. But in the warm light I realise that Wadi Halfa is a highlight for the very fact that it is the most remote place I have ever been to. I pause to remember and to thank in my mind all the people and places who have combined over the years to have got me as far as this, to this small hill in this torpid backwater at the northern tip of the largest country in Africa.

My backside is bruised, my spine compressed by several inches and my neck is whip lashing

dangerously but I am delighted: the corrugated 'road' out of Wadi Halfa is far better than I had feared. When the rattling becomes overbearing I venture off into the sand, following my nose in search of hard ground. I hit soft sand, my legs spin like a Dervish, the tyres slip and slide and I slew uncontrollably through deep powder. Direction of travel becomes entirely random. When the sand is too deep I push the heavy bike through the drifting sand. Laden with 3 days supply of food and water this is not as easy as it sounds. Even pushing is often impossible and then I have to pull the load instead. Hard work.

I lie on my back in the sand, crusted with dirt and salty sweat. A hot wind wipes across the land cracking my lips into a smile. Barefoot in the desert of Sudan. At night the oppressive heat dissolves and the stars seem even more exotic through the tickling folds of my mosquito net draping down over me from my bicycle.

Sometimes I fear that I claim things to be tough when perhaps it is just me being a wimp. So I was able to derive some grim satisfaction from my bike frame snapping. I wiggled the jagged steel tubing masochistically like a wobbly tooth and then started walking. Fortunately it was only about 20km before I came across a kind bed maker who welded the metal together (I chose not to watch as he gleefully and crudely fried poor Rita), refused payment, fed me and sent me off with a large bag of cookies (he was also the local baker). A snapped frame in the desert classifies as 'not good news.' There is no way the bike will survive to Cape Town: I just prayed it would get me as far as Khartoum, otherwise I was in for a long walk.

I wake on the riverbank at sunrise on Valentine's Day. As is traditional the postman did not arrive bearing gifts from secret admirers. Even 6000 miles from home some things do not change. I buy tea, the price established with our grubby fingers in the sugar bowl. The price agreed, I seal the deal by digging my spoon into the bowl and scooping out sugar to sweeten my drink.

For Alice in Wonderland the rule was "jam tomorrow and jam yesterday, but never jam today." But my diet is even more depressing than hers. Bread and jam every single day then pasta and a stock cube for dinner. I crave fresh food (not to mention pies, ice cream, burgers and music). My culinary highlight is a new box of stock cubes or a new flavour of jam. Roll on Khartoum.

After days and days of quiet arriving in Dongola is unsettling, from nothing into crowds of men

flowing past in white robes and turbans, visions of noisy ghosts. A very black young woman is swathed in blue, ceremonial scars framing her piercing white eyes. She looks at me and through me, her haughty dignity and poise mocking me to lower my eyes and break the gaze that seems to bore deep into my mind and my past. A teenage girl prepares tea, henna tattooed hands gracefully working through billowing robes of green and gold. Deftly she fills delicate thimble shaped glasses, the chestnut coloured tea misting the tops of the glasses as tiny jewels of condensation run back down into the dark sweet tea. On every corner in every village pose characters from National Geographic photo-shoots. Beauty, grace, wisdom, dignity: all the characters are here, laconically leaning in the jaunty painted doorways of Northern Sudan.

A squad of six trainee soldiers marches in the desert, perfectly out of step and uniformed in a hotchpotch of shorts, tattered T-shirts and flip-flops. They are a shambles. Sergeant Major style I bellow “Eyyyes Right!” and throw them my crispest salute much to their amusement.

The bicycles of Sudan put mine to shame with their spectacular tacky decorations: frames striped with coloured tape and a cornucopia of aeriels, bells, laser beam noise machines, wing mirrors (at least 4), large mud flaps (mud? Sudan?) with flourishes of dangly stuff and jangling Pepsi caps, frilly things in the wheels, tassles on the seats and often a huge chrome headlamp too (Broken). They are normally ridden by small boys who can barely even straddle the crossbar let alone sit on the saddle.

Edward Gibbon wrote that he was “never less alone than when completely alone.” He had clearly never hauled a bike through miles of shimmering virgin sand, alone as far as the horizon in every direction, in search of an elusive road. The blood roared through my head and stars danced in my eyeballs. Even my singing could not disguise the brutal silence. I felt very alone. It was a long drag.

As ever the final stretch of the stage degenerated into silliness, riding all day and then right through the night as well, desperate to reach Khartoum and civilisation and to avoid another midday in the desert glare. Beneath shooting stars the night air was cool and fresh. I arrived in Khartoum early, as the yolk-like sun began sliding up once more into the frying pan sky of Sudan. I’ve made it!

Three weeks without showering or changing my clothes has left my clothes festering and torn to shreds. I am thoroughly sick of mouldy bread and jam. I am desperate to hear music once more. My bike has snapped. But even as my kind host tactfully pointed me towards the shower I could look past all the struggles to see and feel the relief of success, the warmth and grace of a charming people, the privilege of

silent sunrises over the Nile and the satisfaction of lying on my back in the hot sand, sun baked and filthy,
a cracked smile on my grubby face in the hot, gritty desert wind. I have made it to Khartoum.

Sudan continued: Khartoum to Ethiopia (April 2002)

It is hot; my head pounds and my thermometer has a fit, races off the top of the scale (50°C) and refuses to come back down. As I cycle my face is fixed in a grimace (a combination of pain, heat, misery and genetic ugliness). Exposed to the air my teeth become painfully hot. The ground is too hot to sit on, my handlebars almost too hot to hold, the water in my drinking bottle better suited for brewing tea than quenching thirst. But I must go on: I have a rendezvous with a friend in some dilapidated Ethiopian town. It is a race against time. I pause for food at sunset at a truckers' stop. Perhaps it was the heat but the conversation seemed rather surreal: "what tribe are you from?" "erm... Yorkshire, I guess", then a complicated discussion about why farmers in England do not use camels.

Oh dear, the tears are back. I am pushing hard to meet my friend Rob on time; on the road an hour before first light, riding right through the midday inferno (mad dogs etc?) and on well into the night. There are too many hours available for wandering thoughts... The road is so hard, so long, so quiet and the sky is too big and empty for just one person. But this latest episode of histrionics and soul searching runs deeper than last time. I really am in trouble this time. I began this whole ridiculous affair because I wanted a challenge that I would fail unless I really, really worked hard at it. But now I know that I can cycle over mountains or across deserts. I know that I can cope alone in strange countries and situations. I know that I *can* do it. The problem now is that I no longer know whether I *want* to keep doing it. I am bored. I find myself thinking "not another massive mountain to sweat and curse my way over. Not another 1000 km of road before my next ice-cream."

So I weep my way through a few hundred kilometres of emptiness. At least it passes the time. And keeps my eyeballs cool. It is the nearest I have yet come to quitting. Being alone exaggerates all emotions and I feel desperate to share my struggle with somebody, anybody. But there is nobody: I feel very alone. Being alone is infinitely harder than riding with a companion. Thankfully a tiny shard of stubbornness keeps me riding and after a few days my elaborate plans of 1) swerving in front of a truck or 2) heading for the nearest England-bound aeroplane (slightly preferable to option number 1) fade.

Tough guys tattoo LOVE and HATE across their knuckles. It is too hot for such deep emotions now so

I emblazon my cycling mitts with a dangling carrot to keep me pushing towards Ethiopia: COLD BEER. I drag my heels in Gallabat: the far side of the village is Ethiopia and I am reluctant to leave Sudan. My passport is stamped in a thatched mud hut, I don't have to clear customs (the man is asleep and it would be a shame to wake him) and the border policeman takes me for a final breakfast. Sudan has amazed me. Arriving awestruck and nervous my head had been laden with preconceptions. Now I have crossed Africa's largest nation and have learned so much.

Sudan has huge problems, amongst them an absurdly bad government, a horrific civil war, hunger, drought and terrible poverty. However, Sudan has still been my favourite country on this journey. Despite being poor the Sudanese people that I met were genuinely happy and they have dignity and self-respect. They are the kindest, most cheerful, most hospitable and welcoming people that I have ever met. The Sudan needs the West to open its eyes to the horrors of the conflict, to rid itself of unhelpful preconceptions caused by ignorance. It needs our awareness.

The work of *Hope and Homes for Children* in Sudan

“The world is a beautiful place
to be born into
if you don’t mind some people
dying
all the time
or maybe only starving
some of the time
which isn’t half so bad
if it isn’t you.”
- Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Giggling and shielding faces behind freshly scrubbed hands six small boys stand in a group and sing a song. The boys are a family, hence the embarrassment of performance, the clean faces, enforced best behaviour and uncomfortable Sunday clothes. But these irritations are trivial in their lives because they have a family now. Their singing is to welcome me on a visit to their home.

A year ago each of these children was alone. Their lives up until then had been horrifying. They were either surviving as best they could on the cruel streets or else they had been rounded up and dumped in government camps. The camps are for children orphaned by the endless war in the south of Sudan, their parents just another of the two million people who have disappeared or been killed in the brutal conflict. Alone in the World the children have received scant education, inadequate food and shelter and little love or personal attention for most of their short lives.

Hope and Homes for Children works in Sudan to take children from the government refugee camps and to place them in homes within the ordinary Khartoum community. They then live in a simple but comfortable home, attend a local school (plus receiving extra assistance to help them catch up with other children of their age) and visit youth groups where they learn useful trades (building, car mechanics etc.) in order that they will be more employable when they are older. The home I visited had six orphans, now

happily living together as brothers in the care of a permanent mother and father. Everything possible is done to try and provide the children with as normal an upbringing as possible. It is nothing fancy or extravagant, it is just a childhood.

An important aspect is that the children are relying on each other and on their new parents. They are not just feeling dependent on cash from rich, white England. They are helping themselves. That is an extremely important point.

Children do not need much from life: education, food, shelter, love and laughter. It does not even cost very much which means that we all have the potential to make a difference if we only choose to do so. The singing brothers shook my hand as I left and as I looked into the eyes of each of them I felt an amazing gratitude to them. The gaze of those small boys showed me so much about courage, hardship, guts, overcoming adversity and deep appreciation for renewed hope and laughter. May the wind be always at your back, boys. You deserve it.

Northern Ethiopia to Addis Ababa (April 200)

“Everybody must get stoned”

- Bob Dylan

Say Ethiopia to me and I would have thought of Bob Geldof and speedy runners. After two weeks in the country those thoughts are still prominent. Cycling through Ethiopia involves a crowd of up to 40 children running alongside you for a couple of kilometres after every village. At the same time they keep up a relentless shout of “YOU! YOU! YOU! YOU! YOU!” and “MONEY! MONEY! MONEY! GIVE ME MONEY!” Decades of foreign aid (epitomised by Geldof’s impressive efforts) have produced a knee-jerk reaction in this nation: if you are white you are rich, therefore give me money. As I pass by they express their disappointment by hurling stones at me.

I am no longer a person, I am a mobile cash point. Something has gone seriously wrong somewhere. The change from Sudan is drastic. It is not only cultural and behavioural, the dress of the people changes too. From flowing white *galabeyahs* and colourful draped robes to ragged mohican-haired children with necklaces of old keys, nuts, bolts, shells and whatever else they have found lying around. The men wear very skimpy shorts and tattered t-shirts, usually beneath a blanket gracefully wrapped over the shoulders. With a shortage of public transport the roads are busy with people walking. Women walk shaded beneath umbrellas; a strange sight. Men usually carry a stout staff across their shoulders as they walk. Barefoot people and donkeys vastly outnumber fume-spewing rattling vehicles. This is by far the poorest nation I have ever visited.

Poverty and the issue of money hang constantly in the atmosphere. Larger towns are busy with beggars suffering every variety of physical disability, skin ailment, disfigurement, disease and blindness imaginable. Most could easily be helped with basic medical treatment. There is a never-ending circle of people around me pleading for money. There are a lot of issues I am struggling to get my head round here. It is very, very difficult.

A man finds it very hard to believe that there are homeless people and beggars in England. However he absolutely refuses to believe me when I tell him that many of them are white. Impossible, he declares.

Apart from the 'give-me money' consequences of foreign aid, the worst impact seems to have been on the dress sense of the population. In each village are large numbers of people sporting dreadful 'Titanic' T-shirts emblazoned with Leonardo di Caprio and his irritating "please punch here" smile. As I greet people the tradition seems to be to bow your head at the same time. My cheery greeting to a chap on a bicycle almost ends in disaster as (rattling fast and brake-less down a steep rocky track) he bows low and almost nose-ploughs into the gravel. I resolve to be more selective with my salutations in future.

The roads are awful, the mountains are huge, and the kids are almost unbearable. I am sick of this lonely, hard, exhausting, boring life. I almost cannot go on. I sit in the dirt, head in hands just wishing that the 80 staring faces (I counted them) would please, please give me a metre of space or a second of peace. Please go away. The crowd stands and stares. I feel very alone.

I spend the night with a kind teacher. His English is excellent and he tells me of his work. He teaches Grades 1 to 4, has 150 students in each class with no textbooks or blackboard. The students in each class range in age between 8 and 30 years old. Many walk 20km to school every day. It makes me wonder what on earth I thought was hard about my PGCE teacher-training course last year! Oh yes, and the government has not paid his \$90 monthly salary for the past 3 months either.

The long, hard slog pays off and I make it to Gondar in time to meet my friend, Rob. It has been a hellish seven days, but Gondar is high in the mountains, cool and green. I am ill for the first time on the journey, lying in my bed-bug ridden bed, vomiting into a small plastic bowl and crossing my legs and fingers: for some unknown reason the stinking pit referred to as a 'toilet' is locked until dawn. I hope I can wait that long, the plastic bowl is already worryingly full...

Rob arrives, fresh faced from England and in search of two weeks of adventure. He has brought a new bike for me to replace the trashed Rita, bags of sweets and a splendid pair of Union Jack shorts! It is great to see him again: it was he who introduced me to many of the ridiculous concepts of Wildman behaviour that are helping to make this journey so ludicrous. Being with Rob is a holiday for me: I even allow myself a Pepsi every few days; I eat tuna for the third time since New Year. I could get used to a lifestyle of such decadence. In search of a quiet evening beer we enter the innocuous sounding 'Bingo Club Bar'. A quick about turn at the sight of a collection of bored looking prostitutes sitting around in this unusually named brothel. The old bingo call of 'Two Fat Ladies' could have very serious consequences here...

In Ethiopia it is still 1994 (I'd better leave soon or I'll have to do my A-Levels again next year) and their calendar is very different from ours. In a rare moment of clarity Rob realises that the song was right: they really didn't know that it was Christmas time at all. Their Christmas is in January.

I am in raptures as we cycle: Ethiopia is GREEN! There are trees and grass and all the colours and smells and sounds that go with the novelty of vegetation. Lush pastures and herds of cattle. It has been a long ride through the desert lands to get here. Behind the obnoxious, rude, greedy, stone-throwing children is a beautiful, lush nation. There is no need to go hungry here. Management and education could make huge differences. Abandoned tanks litter the roadside, testimony to a hasty military advance on Addis Ababa during the recent civil war.

Lalibela is Ethiopia's most remarkable sight. However it is extremely remote and notoriously difficult to reach. Samuel Johnson wrote of the Giant's Causeway "worth seeing, but not worth going to see." I was concerned the same would be true for Lalibela. But whether carved by angels or by men, it is hard to imagine the devotion required to hew eleven entire churches out of solid rock and we decided we must make the journey. The churches are still in use today and are a heady blend of passionate chanting and humming, ringing bells, sweet clouds of incense and fervent praying by crowds of devout white-robed worshippers. The atmosphere, combined with the exciting mountain journey on the roofs of an assortment of different vehicles means that Lalibela was certainly worth seeing and worth going to see as well.

Travel bores are a dull breed, but please forgive me this next sentence on the relative pleasures of different rock-hewn spectacles: I simply could not resist it.... For natural scenic splendour give me Cappadocia in Turkey, for sheer perfection of construction it has to be Petra in Jordan and if you are after spiritual atmosphere then Ethiopia's Lalibela comes out top. Sorry.

We tackle the Blue Nile gorge: 1400 metres deep. The road is too bad and too steep to cycle up so we push the heavy bikes uphill for almost six hours. We had set ourselves a ludicrous challenge of getting from Bahir Dah to Addis Ababa in just four days so nightfall sees us still plodding uphill in the dark. A few hours sleep by the roadside and we are back on the road by 5am, slogging upwards in the moonlight. It is like being trapped in one of those horrifying Escher drawings, trudging eternally uphill. But the end

arrives eventually, a landmark point for me: I have outrun the Blue Nile river now, all the way from Cairo.

We camp after dark as it is the only way to avoid a ring of staring people surrounding you all evening. Suddenly headlights manoeuvre to illuminate our tent... I hear the unpleasant sound of a Kalashnikov rifle being cocked... Silhouetted figures cross the field towards us... Rob urges me to “play the dumb foreigner... “quick, start chopping some onions! Offer them an avocado!” Fortunately the curious visitors are friendly enough, think we are both very weird and leave us alone to enjoy our dinner and a spectacular, eerie electrical storm.

Finally we reach Addis Ababa. We celebrate in a great bar where you have to order beers two at a time! The ride through the north of Ethiopia has been spectacular, irritating, exhausting, beautiful and confusing. I have been forced to challenge many of my opinions about poverty, begging, the role of foreign aid, the purpose and justification of my journey, the influence of local culture on the behaviour of individuals and my attitudes towards other people. Ethiopia has asked a lot of questions of me and provided very few answers. It has been one of the toughest legs of my journey so far, but absolutely fascinating. I have a lot of things to get my head round as I pedal on towards Kenya and the Southern Hemisphere.

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to Nairobi, Kenya (late April 2002)

Lieutenant George: “Pip, pip, tally ho and Bernard’s your Uncle!”

Captain Blackadder: “In English we say ‘Good Morning’“

The Sheraton in Addis Ababa is possibly Africa’s finest hotel. Toilets I would happily live in, water fountains synchronised to light and music (‘Rule Britannia’ played as I strolled by), free peanuts and cocktail-sipping, high-flying business women who couldn’t get enough of my (possibly slightly exaggerated) tales of heroic adventure. Over the fence poor people queue for dirty water at a single water pump. Madness?

I bumped into the cycling team I had ridden with for a while in the Sudan and decided to ride with them again as we headed south through Ethiopia. The first stage of Kenya is notoriously dangerous bandit country: there was no chance I would be allowed to ride alone, but I hoped that with five of us we may be allowed to cycle it. Besides, riding with company is good fun, the pace is relaxed, the hassle from kids is much easier to tolerate, and security is not an issue. In fact everything is much easier and much, much more fun. Any group of cyclists who have beers at lunchtime have to be worth tagging along with!

Beneath the dawn mists roll endless hills, forested and untouched far to the horizon. It is hard to cover enough miles: too much time is needed to stop and eat fruit from roadside vendors. Mangoes, bananas, guavas, pineapples, avocados, sugar cane and watermelon are all for sale at regular intervals. An enterprising Ethiopian could do a good trade with a roadside Indigestion tablets stall.

On the top of a mountain we meet a man with a *kirar*, a homemade instrument somewhere between a guitar and a harp. Inspired by his impromptu performance I laid on a Best-of-British bum-wiggling dance routine (in my Union Jack shorts). I was disappointed (but not surprised) by the howls of derogatory laughter from an on-looking group of women.

Many small boys ride bicycles far too big for them. They have to sit painfully astride the crossbar to pedal, as they cannot yet reach the saddle. I wonder whether this is a devious government strategy for future population control...?

In many remote villages in southern Ethiopia we receive no hassle at all, the locals are busy with their lives and, after a wave and a smile, are content to leave us to our lives. Suddenly in one village scores of children chase me, shouting a whole Christmas list of demands (*Give me money! Give me pen! Give me sweets! Give me bicycle!* (the last chap was very optimistic!)) and trying to pull things off my bike. I tried to suggest to them that in English the usual greeting is “Good Morning”. Call me old-fashioned. And it was only in this village that I noticed a large sign saying, ‘Village supported by so-and-so charity.’

The rainy season arrives in style, an oppressive build-up of humidity spectacularly smashed by thrashing rain whipping the road. Loving it, I race along bare-chested singing at the top of my voice. Judging by the hilarity provoked in villages I rode through I began to deduce that this is not considered normal behaviour in Ethiopia. After the rain I spend a few hours in anguish caused by prickly heat sunburn. The last time I suffered this particularly unpleasant affliction was a few years ago when I wrote ‘Leeds United’ on my belly in sunblock and then proceeded to fry myself in the garden for several hours.

Ahead of me lay Kenya. It is traditional when recounting tales of foreign lands to marvel at how wonderful the native people are. But I had just about had enough of staring crowds, stones being hurled and extraordinary amounts of begging. I was ready for Kenya. Ethiopia was fascinating, it was extremely beautiful and it was challenging in every way. For those reasons I loved Ethiopia, and those are the memories I will savour. The other memories will stay with me too, memories that ask me lots of questions and give me a good deal to think about.

In northern Kenya lies (allegedly) ‘the most dangerous road in Africa’. (Alleged) hordes of Somali bandits plus a well-guarded police checkpoint mean that I am forced back onto motorised transport yet again. We managed to hitch a lift along the (allegedly) dangerous stretch in a tourist Overland truck. It was a fun couple of days: I saw tears, laughter, romance and even a cracking punch-up! The only thing that I didn’t see was Kenya. I was relieved to get back on the bike again.

Many local people dress magnificently in red robes, carrying spears and wearing more necklaces than BA Barracus. It is tragic and deeply upsetting that many of these people are starting to switch to European dress. I say that not as a nostalgic lament for an irretrievable past. I am just upset that most of

them choose to wear Manchester United shirts.

Kenya is a green and very pleasant land. Civilisation at last: road signs, rubbish bins and, above all, SAUSAGES! For I was sick of *njera*: the ubiquitous Ethiopian food that looks (and tastes) like the facial mask of a disfigured alien in a low-budget Sci-Fi show. This sour, acne scarred pancake is devoured with every meal in Ethiopia. I cross the equator. After 12,000 km, 8 months and 19 countries this is a very exciting and important landmark. In the absence of champagne I mark the occasion by dropping and smashing my camera. A sausage sandwich soon cheers me up again.

On my way to Nairobi I visit an Allied War Cemetery (1939-1945). It is as immaculately tended as the memorials in France. The true meaning of 'World War' becomes clear to me here amongst the humid coffee plantations. Even thousands of miles from Europe the madness still hit hard.

Riding on my own

“I am the one and only”

- Chesney Hawkes

Cycling with four other people has been so different to riding alone. Not better, not worse, just different.

In many ways I found the south of Ethiopia to be like a holiday. With a group of five people there is no security risk and no problems with leaving your bike whilst you shop or eat or go to the toilet. You have practical support with breakages and repair, enormous moral support in the face of 200 staring people, relief from monotony as you talk away the long, dull cycling hours, company in the evenings, fun, laughter and evening beers.

But cycling en masse deprives you of the days of silence, the intensity of experience, the unavoidable (and ultimately unmissable) interactions with locals and the fears and tears and frustrations of being alone in the heart of Africa. The character building, as my Dad would say!

In conclusion: if you want to have fun then travel in a group. If you're not after that, stick by yourself.

One sad man and his football team

“we're gonna stay with you for ever;
at least until the world stops going round”

- Leeds United anthem

It has been a long season. I remember well the first home match for Leeds United way back in August. A fantastic afternoon of released anticipation, excitement and high hopes for the campaign ahead.

But after that I remember nothing. Because now I am south of the equator in Kenya. I left home after that first home match (the timing is not a coincidence) to cycle around the world. I have missed all the highs and lows and real lows of the last 9 months at Leeds United, only occasionally catching up with the

news on the Internet.

Yet despite missing the action Leeds have still been prominent in my life this year. Pedalling through Africa I never know (nor need to know) what day it is, except on Saturdays. Saturday is the only day of the week I remember (this is useful as Saturday is now the day I take my weekly malaria pill). On Saturdays I fill the long, hard hours in the saddle wondering how Leeds are getting on, wondering who is in the team today (I hope Smithy's playing...), wondering about injuries, suspensions and league positions etc.

These Saturday daydreams focus my world, whisk me away from Africa for a while and help spur me on down the endless road. So thank you Leeds: I'm half a world away now, but Saturday is still the beautiful day.

Nairobi (8th May 2002)

“Let us have wine and women, mirth and laughter,
Sermons and soda-water the day after.”

- I can't

remember who

wrote this

(perhaps Ralph

Waldo Emerson?)

Planning adventures is much more fun than actually undertaking them: sitting hunched over a map, dunking homemade cookies in mugs of steaming tea, lost in a happy, heroic daydream. I wanted to cycle through the Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire). Generally speaking, countries with ‘Democratic’ in their title are not very. I needed hard facts on the advisability of such a venture. The Kenyan phone system is pretty haphazard, but after several pleasant (yet not particularly helpful) misdirected calls to a lady in a bookshop I finally got through to the DRC embassy. They thought that I was mad and basically said, “do not go.” Now I really wanted to go! So I spent an afternoon phoning brave people with hands-on, personal experience of the conditions in the country. Eventually a hard-as-nails, 8-foot-6, muscle-bound South African guy said, “it may possibly be a bit iffy there.” For a South African to utter such wimpish wailings of fear and danger convinced me: if DRC is “a bit iffy” for him, then I’m off to Tanzania instead!

But before that I am due some loafing time. Nairobi is a perfect place to unwind after the delights of Ethiopia. I keep meeting people who came for two weeks and are still here decades later. “Round the World by Bike- temporarily postponed until retirement...?” Let me give you an idea of why people do not leave in a hurry:

The sounds of sizzling bacon and popping champagne corks: breakfast on a silent escarpment high above the Great Rift Valley. (Talking of the famous 'Cradle of Mankind', haven't we done a good job evolving? Champagne and bacon sandwiches are undoubtedly the result of inspired evolution. Pat yourselves on the back, humans!)

A good man (I won't tarnish his reputation as a respectable young businessman by naming and shaming him) took me for a night on the town, a long trail of increasingly disreputable haunts leading eventually, and inevitably, to the casino. Miraculously we broke even and stumbled into the night gorged to a state of amiable contentment on free drinks and toasted sandwiches.

Then a series of lunches / cups of tea / camel treks / excesses of wine and colonial club dinners with a string of fascinating people: artists, a guy who flew a tiny plane to New Zealand, soldiers, a man organising a relay race around the world, actors, a camel expert, writers, a lady who crossed the Sudan on a camel, colonial lion-hunter types and a charming chap who almost punched my lights out for beating him at pool. People here do not exist; they live.

A group of amusing and mad women decided they should find me a girl. After much entertaining gossip about the relative charms, availabilities and dimensions of Nairobi's youth they settled on one name. Hence I was whisked off on an immediate and painfully contrived shopping expedition to purchase (urgently) a milk jug from her shop. And so followed the world's first ever attempt at matchmaking in the midst of a pottery shop. Memorable, hilarious and spectacularly unsuccessful. This girl was beautiful. The type so beautiful that the only way to woo them is through a Swiss bank account. Bicycles, T-shirts (grubby) and flip-flops are a non-starter. It was probably just as well: I found out later that her boyfriend (who owns a jet and a ranch) has a tendency to beat the crap out of anyone who so much as buys a milk jug from his girl. Somebody recently went to his father to complain about his boorish behaviour. Father promptly punched the visitor. Charming family. Kenyan living....

I'll be back on the bike soon; but not too soon!

Letting go

“I know I have to go away”

- Cat Stevens

I will never know whether I made the right decision to go away and leave her. But I made that decision and now it is finally over. In some ways it was over the day I said to her, “I have to go away.” Maybe it was over with the final aching kiss, cycling up the hill, tear-blurred, away from home and my previous life. But now it is definitely over.

I have cried my way to Kenya, agonising over whether I made the right choice for us, broken hearted and learning to understand my love for her, as I had never truly done before. I missed Sarah and longed to phone, yet knew that the sound of her voice would have pushed me straight to the nearest airport. I have woken in the desert night, pitch black, cool and silent convinced that I had heard her voice or felt her beside me. But there was never anybody there.

Not a day has gone by when I have not questioned what I am doing. In some ways it has been the worst eight months of my life. It has certainly been the saddest and the loneliest. But we both knew I had to go away; I had to do this.

Sarah has never failed to encourage me: to point me onwards in my journey and in my life. It is time for me to stop living and dreaming in the past. I am going to start looking to the future as a good and exciting place. She is doing just that and has finally managed to teach me the same thing. It is time to look forward. It is time to let go.

Music... (26 May 2002. Moshi, Tanzania)

“Thank you for the Music”

- ABBA

I didn't bring any music on this trip. The choice of silence was a deliberate decision. It was a challenge that I set myself. Travelling with music gives you such an option for escape, escape from pain, loneliness, boredom, Africa: anything you want. So I decided to see whether I could manage on my own. But I have failed the challenge of silence: I need music to keep me going.

I have lots of different music in my head and it comes to me in a whole range of situations. Exhausted, determined, racing against the setting of the sun I bellow U2's 'Pride', Eagle Eyed Cherry, Guns 'n' Roses. "Don't let go, you've got the music in you." It's music with memories, memories of situations and frames of mind, memories to draw on for strength.

Sometimes I am lonely, or mellowed by the enormity of a sky or the length of a horizon-reaching road. I think of home, friends, better times: Greenday's 'Good Riddance/Time of your Life' ("So take these photographs and still frames in your mind... there's something unpredictable but in the end it's right, I hope you had the time of your life"), Simon and Garfunkel ("And every stranger's face I see reminds me that I long to be Homeward Bound"), Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, Dido ("I want to thank you for giving me the best days of my life"), Counting Crows ("She's looking at you.... I don't think so, she's looking at me!"), Cosby, Stills and Nash's 'Pre-Road Downs', David Gray ("Friday night and I'm going nowhere: all the lights are changing green to red"), and Cat Stevens ("How can I try to explain.... I know I have to go away").

Then there is jubilation: at being the only person in the whole world, cycling carefree down a deserted road at sunrise. U2 ("It's a Beautiful Day, don't let it get away"), The Doors, James, Willie Nelson ("I can't wait to be on the road again"), Leeds United's 'Marching on Together' and David Gray ("Saturday and I'm running wild, all the lights are changing red to green").

After nine months of silence, shattered only by my tone-deaf, eardrum-splintering, lyrically-challenged warbling, I have failed my challenge. Now a good friend, Al Horrocks, is baling me out and

sending me a MiniDisc player. It is an exciting new beginning. What music should I take along with me? Music to inspire, to relax, to prompt daydreams, to renew motivation, to provoke manic lung-bursting mountain climbs, to whisk me away from Africa, to bury me deep into Africa's soul, to remind me that life really is bloody fantastic! The soundtrack to this journey would make a good story in itself...

Now, here's a challenge for you; something for you to think about... what music would YOU take on a journey around the world? I would be really curious to know.

and Football... (26 May 2002. Moshi, Tanzania)

“Some people say football is a matter of life and death”

- Bill Shankly

The next month of my life (and yours no doubt too) will be governed by a pressing need for a proximity to a television set. Cycling through Africa whilst experiencing the World Cup, Africa style, promises to be a panic-filled series of hunts for a functioning TV. My only stipulation to life for the next month is a television; in roadside cafés or police stations or seedy bars or Gentleman's Clubs or in the middle of the bush. It really doesn't matter. Who can guess what or who I will encounter on my African footballing odyssey.

It is less than a week until the World's greatest jamboree kicks off. You would never know that here in Tanzania though: no pound-a-pint beer promos, adverts for wide screen TV's or re-runs of 1966... in short none of the tacky, cling-on paraphernalia that I love so much about Major Sporting Events back home. If I hadn't been counting down the days until June 2nd 2002 since 1998 I could easily be entirely unaware that the World Cup is upon us. Africa seems to be oblivious to the whole thing: will this be the same once the show is actually on the road?

I have been cycling for 9 months. My final day in England was September 1st 2001. I hardly need explain the significance of that date, but I'm going to do it anyway: England's extraordinary 5-1 spanking of Germany ensured that I boarded the ferry at Dover jubilant yet rather fuzzy in the head!

This will be an unusual World Cup for me. Nobody here cares how England or Germany or Argentina fare. Astonishingly, the state of Beckham's foot is not deemed a Matter of National Importance. I have no TV experts to carry out detailed analysis of the players for me which I can shamelessly claim as my own sharp insights. No bonding with random (and usually dull) strangers in pubs, no 16 page pull-outs, exclusive interviews, special offers or needing to skive off work. As I write this, on the lip of the Great Rift Valley, I can see elephants and giraffe grazing below me. No skinheads, no V-signs, no flag waving or TV viewing schedules. Nothing. It's just Me, My World Cup and Africa.

Nairobi to Dar Es Salaam (6th June 2002)

“The trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you are still a rat.”

- Lily Tomlin

I struggled to leave Kenya: tracking elephants through the bush on foot and flying in a tiny 4-seater plane alongside Mount Kenya with the pilot fast asleep at the controls is certainly more fun than cycling. But I did eventually drag myself away from Nairobi and pointed my nose once more in the direction of Cape Town.

Two people who really understand my ride gave me presents. Sophie, a fantastic artist who is also writing a book titled “My Husband and Fifty Camels” gave me a Moleskine diary to elevate me into the hallowed company of writers such as Bruce Chatwin and Ernest Hemingway. Rob, a soldier for many years, presented me with a spoon. Not just any spoon, mind you: this was his ‘racing spoon’, favoured during his SAS days because its shape allows you to shovel very large mouthfuls of food into your mouth at very high speeds! Perfect for me. To the unenlightened a ‘racing spoon’ could easily be confused with the kind of ordinary plastic soup spoon easily purloined from any Chinese restaurant in Hereford...

Along the road out of Nairobi salesmen touted for business, without much apparent success. At least the man selling second hand toilets had something to sit on whilst waiting for customers.

I find myself hating vehicles and all who dwell therein. Tourist Landcruisers and ever increasing numbers of Overland trucks roar past me in air-conditioned heaven at 100mph. They do not stop, they do not wave, most do not even see me: it’s almost as if they do not care about poor little me. Hot, tired and painfully slow: a bit of self-pity and irrational hating helps to pass the time.

Many Maasai men ride bicycles, red robes flowing, staff or spear clutched in one hand, bell ringing in greeting with the other hand. One invites me to his village to spend the night. The village, far from the road and protected by a dense, impenetrable wall of thorns, fascinated me. A 6 foot 2 Maasai girl looks after me and shows me round the village [Harry Flashman eat your heart out!]. Awesome men saunter around, tall and dignified in their robes, elaborate hair plaited and dyed red, huge holes in their earlobes, splendid jewellery and glistening spears. They wonder how I get my hair to be straight and yellow. I ask

how on earth they get such massive holes in their ears. Amusement and intrigue on both sides. If the Maasai people had a 'Discovery Channel', I would be on it.

In Arusha, Tanzania (which is, incidentally, exactly half way between Cairo and Cape Town) I stayed with Jo and Ben. Jo had to cycle into school in a giant bird costume one morning. I was fascinated to watch the reaction of local Africans to a huge bird cycling through their town: no one even batted an eyelid. It confirmed my theory that most Africans really do think that foreigners are completely weird. Nothing we do surprises them any more.

Kilimanjaro, the continent's highest mountain, shone serenely above the clouds, towering proudly like a gold medal winner on the podium. One day I will climb her, but not this time. Tanzania has decided to focus exclusively on a classier variety of tourist with the result that Tanzania's highlights are inaccessible to me. Climbing Kili would cost more money than I have spent in riding half the length of Africa. Zanzibar, the Ngorogoro crater and the Serengeti are similarly unattainable.

Buses roar past, luridly painted and emblazoned with slogans ('Born 2 Die', 'Yo Boyz', 'I looove Me'). Some of the choices of portrait on the backs of the buses intrigue me: Bill Clinton, Saddam Hussein, Kofi Annan, the Queen, and Alex Ferguson clutching the Chancellor of the Exchequer's red briefcase...

On the road to Dar Es Salaam I fall ill. I ride on weakly, pausing often to hide from the sun and sleep in the shade of giant termite mounds, the warm red earth a soft and welcome bed. I don't have the energy to put my tent up and cannot face staying in a village. I lie down in a maize field and sleep beside my bike. I wake at dawn with that happy feeling of knowing that you are no longer sick. I lie still in the field, waking slowly, my face damp with cool dew, and watch the bright African stars begin to pale into a gentle orange sunrise.

Me, my World Cup and Africa - The First Weekend...

“Sport is something that does not matter, but is performed as if it did. In that contradiction lies its beauty”

- Simon Barnes

The stuff of nightmares. The World Cup kicks off in 4 hours and I am 6 hours ride from the nearest television. Panic begins to rise in my chest. It is childish, sad and pathetic but I cannot bear to be missing out on the biggest party in the world. What if something amazing happens in the match...? How would I be able to look my son in the eye if I missed it...? I knew that if I took a lift I would regret it. But I knew that missing the match would be even worse. So I flagged down a car and took a voluntary ride for the first time ever. I cheated. Did I make the right choice? MAN, DID YOU SEE THAT SENEGAL GOAL?!

Five minutes after kick off and I'm cycling, panic rising once more, up and down streets trying to find a television. “Television? Football?” I ask the Swahili speaking locals. Fortunately everyone understands those two words of English. I spot a little blackboard with ‘France-Senegal’ scrawled on it. Relieved, I push my bike through into a dodgy little backroom bar and flop, sweat-soaked, onto a chair. Welcome to The Greatest Show on Earth.

I survey my surroundings. 12 people sitting in silence on faded pink plastic chairs. A small television in the corner obscured by dazzling sunlight. Here in Tanzania it's not about choosing a venue to watch the match in, it's about finding a venue!

When Senegal score we all leap from our seats as did, simultaneously, almost everyone in the entire world. I guess it disproves the old Butterfly/Earthquake theory. Then somebody passes me a mobile phone, “beware, you are going to be beaten and robbed at the end of the match. Stay behind for 10 minutes after the game to be safe...” warns the anonymous mystery caller. As if the opening of the World Cup is not excitement enough! So five minutes before the final whistle I make a swift exit and pedal like mad. A backroom of a backstreet drinking den in downtown Dar Es Salaam with all your worldly

possessions is no place to be receiving anonymous warning phone calls.

The next morning is the Cameroon-Ireland match. Just before kick-off and I'm still hunting for a bar and a television. I am cycling around the waterfront mansions of ambassadors and diplomats, the azzuri blue ocean gentle beside the road. Paradise is no place to watch football. The bar I find is livelier than yesterday. It is 8.30am and the beers are flowing, the tables glistening with grease from the hunks of goat gristle being chewed enthusiastically all round. Around the bar the morning newspaper headlines are jubilant. Someone translates one for me, "Goooooal! Senegal Brave, France like a Tomato."

Yesterday I was African. Today I am Irish and people grin at me as Cameroon score and the African party continues. Outside street-boys jump in delight, watching the match through holes in the wall.

After the Nigeria-Argentina match my thoughts turn to England-Sweden. Four years of waiting are finally over. My surroundings are very different to the last few matches. I am amongst a rabble of English people in the plush Sheraton Hotel. The beer is flowing fast (much of it free thanks to British Airways), '3 Lions' is blasting over the speakers. Face paints, flags and passion. Remember that the original meaning of 'passion' was 'suffering' - very appropriate for us English!

And that is the big difference between English and African football fans. We are desperate for England, and England alone, to do well. We do not care much about the quality of the football, it is just the end result that we care about. Africans want to see good football, they want all African teams to do well (you would never see an African with a chip on his shoulder about a neighbouring country's team) and, above all, they want to have fun when they watch the World Cup. Therein lies the difference.

Dar Es Salaam to Blantyre, Malawi (July 2002)

“I love going to new countries and trying out the McDonald’s”

- Mandy Moore

An Englishman’s lot is a depressingly predictable one. The land of dashed hopes and glorious failures. My departure from Dar Es Salaam was delayed for two days by the euphoric post-Argentina match revelry and consequent recovery. Now I sit alone in a deserted hostel in Malawi, too disappointed and regretful (i.e. English) to watch the World Cup final with everyone else after our capitulation to Brazil.

But it’s not all doom and gloom. The road from Tanzania to Malawi has been unusually relaxed and light-hearted. The Southern Highlands were a joy; giant baobab trees shading small clusters of tiny homes, the road winding precariously upwards towards a forested horizon. In shaded glades beneath the trees ladies walk tall with heavy bundles on their heads, small dirty children stand and stare and men languidly loaf around in contorted postures of intense relaxation. Sleeping in wheelbarrows is a much favoured technique.

It feels good to be free. I am lucky to be free, to lie in the roadside dust and watch huge clouds overhead metamorphosing just for me, the sky a blueprint for eternity, to watch ants sharing my leftover breadcrumbs, to listen to the wind in the yellowing grass and to feel the breeze cool on my sweat.

A huge snake lies decapitated on the road. I lie my bike beside it for scale and take several steps back to fit the whole beast into my camera’s viewfinder. I’m very glad it’s dead! With clear mimes a Maasai man warns me of all the different dangerous animals that I am likely to encounter during my 50km ride through the Mikumi National Park. To reassure him I mime back that I will cycle very fast. His reply is that lions are very, *very* fast.

I left wilderness behind when I left the Sudan. In sub-Saharan Africa the population is growing at such an absurd and ill-fated rate that farmland, huts and children are everywhere. Glorious wilderness campsites have long gone. This made finding a remote hideaway beside the Ruaha river all the more special. (I could have wandered around naked should the inclination have struck me; though a sunburned-bottom would be a little uncomfortable on the bicycle.) I swam and then lit a fire: a pinprick of light to

ward off the awesome blackness of the night. My supper -a small can of tuna, two slices of bread, half a banana and a spoonful of peanut butter- honestly tasted better than any restaurant's fare. My philosophical fireside contemplation involved considering starting to eat dog food as a money-saving scheme.

The next morning I ate breakfast with a magnificent Maasai, his spear lying across our feet. Because his tea was too hot he slurped it lustily from his saucer in an uncanny imitation of my mad Latin teacher at school. From the seat of a bicycle the World feels painfully large and yet the more of it I see the more I am amazed at its smallness.

Two of my less cerebral pastimes are coming on well, mindless distractions from the long, long road. The first is an enthusiastic distribution of the 'thumbs-up' gesture to everyone I pass. Much loved by Tanzanians, the 'thumbs-up' was last performed by me in England circa 1985 before I learned of more entertaining signals and body parts to flash at lorry drivers out of the back window of the school bus. The other pastime, target spitting, received a huge boost as I struck (and grounded!) a flying locust with David Beckham precision whilst pedalling along.

A girl aged about 14 walks alongside me with a huge pile of sugarcane resting effortlessly on her head. Taking the pile from her I manage to stagger a few paces before collapsing in exhaustion and pain whilst she falls about with laughter. People in these highlands often say to me that they would like to invite me to their homes but that they do not have any food that a white man would be able to eat. Yet a meal of *ugali* (a maize or cassava mashed-potato-type stodge) and beans, their daily staple, is a treat for me. So I find their perception of 'the white man' partly amusing in its mis-guidedness, but also upsetting and worrying that there is such an 'us and them' attitude. Black and white: it's as clear as that out here.

My back wheel is disintegrating fast. I'm a very long way from a suitable replacement but I'm not concerned because I'm carrying the right tool for the job. I feel good about my organisation. I heave and heave on the spanner but nothing happens until, *crack!* The damn tool breaks! Now it *is* a serious problem. How can I be expected to finish this expedition if my tools are not up to the task. After wasting half a day, taking an unwelcome detour to a town and spending a month's living costs (\$35) on an infuriatingly bad replacement wheel I am extremely angry. As if things aren't hard enough without

shoddy tools. Pathetic, ridiculous, I ranted to myself. I climbed a huge mountain pass towards the Malawi border and the daylight was fading and I still had a long way to go. I raged up that mountain, an hour long 'suffer-fest', lactic acid frying my legs; come on Humphreys, taste the pain! I was so angry. Then 'ping!': the light bulb above my head lit up in a rare flash of inspiration: I had been turning the spanner the wrong way. No wonder the tool did not work! What a prat I am.

Far down below me I saw Lake Malawi. It signalled time to leave Tz. Tanzania was fun; a gentle, pleasant and amusing country and people, a country that calls roundabouts "keepy-a-lefty's". Malawi also started well, or so I thought. For the first time in the history of international border crossings I managed to rip off one of the dodgy black market money dealers. I felt I had out-Heroded Herod! Ha! Delighted with my cunning and ingenuity I replayed my inspired mathematical calculations over once more inside my head..... oh oh, wait a minute: they actually got me! I had got my ratios the wrong way round. What a prat I am.

Progress has been haphazard recently: either loitering around a television waiting for a football match to start or pedalling like fury to make it to a TV in time for a big game. The prospect of missing the England-Brazil game provided me with quite a challenge: 150km days, riding deep into the dark nights, lying beside my bike for a few hours sleep in the rocky bush then up at 4am and here we go again, riding into the dawn. (How many sunrises was I ever conscious to relish when I was back home, I wonder, briefly?) If England failed to beat Brazil, it certainly was not going to be because of a lack of commitment by me.

After 10 months I finally hit the backpacker trail. Menus of pizzas, milkshakes and, of course, banana pancakes surely merited a celebration. But I celebrated only with yet more jam sandwiches beside the lake; cycling round the world demands the odd culinary compromise. Gary and Katherine generously provided free accommodation in Nkhata Bay though at the wonderful Mayoka Village lodge. Beautiful views, great music, parties, atmosphere and BBQ's. The place was like Alcatraz it was full of people trying, but failing, to leave. They would wake each morning with a new feeble excuse designed to prolong their stay.

A combination of factors, including a corrupt government selling the nation's emergency food stockpiles, means that Malawi is now trapped in a spiralling famine. I visited a feeding programme established by an English couple whose funding wisely bypasses all the usual greedy, corrupt, government channels. Consequently the programme, Medic Malawi, is a great success, providing food and medical assistance to wide-eyed staring babies and their young mothers wondering how they can ever escape from the nightmare. As Evelyn Waugh wrote: "most of the time I spent thinking about how awful the next day would be."

I also visited a village school. Gesturing over at lessons being taught beneath trees, sans classrooms, sans materials, sans everything, the headmaster smiled and told me, "Our problems are self-explanatory!" But instead of depressing me, I left the 'school' uplifted. Everyone was so enthusiastic about what they did have and very positive about their future.

I am now in Blantyre, bound for Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The next stage should be a good one as I have some company now. Arno has flown out from England to ride with me for a few weeks and, despite being French, he should provide some good comedy and much-needed company. I like to think of myself as a very interesting person, but 10 months of my own company is a little too much even for me!

Blantyre, Malawi to Francistown, Botswana (7th August 2002)

“The essential in daring is to know how far too far one can go”

- Jean Cocteau

I descended for the final time into the Great Rift Valley, 40km of swooping downhill to the hot, mosquito-infested lowlands. For the first time ever I surprise and disappoint myself by being too squeamish to take advantage of an extremely cheap and dinner-party-conversation-enhancing foodstuff: boiled mice on sticks. What a wimp. My increasingly wooly appearance has led to me being occasionally greeted as ‘madam’. So I had a shave and now the confusion seems to have passed.

The infrequently frequented southern Malawi/Mozambique border post was in a sorry state: once smart, efficient buildings are now falling down and abandoned. The clichéd, scruffy, unpleasant looking ‘officer’ invented a fictitious ‘fee’ that Arno and I must pay. Smiling politely, we refused to pay. Scowling, he ordered us to pay. Smiling politely, we refused to pay. A game that could have continued for quite some time... We won eventually as he angrily stamped our passports and gestured us to leave.

The road was just a single lane of soft warm sand meandering through small villages of reed huts, ladies pounding maize, sturdy baobab trees and immaculately swept earth in mosaics of rainbow sweeps. Each village pump is a colourful and noisy blossom of skirts and plastic containers and shrieks of hilarity and gossip. A small barber shop offered the unusual option of ‘Bin Laden style’ haircuts. Cycling through these scenes I thought of Ryszard Kapuscinski realising that this was “a world I do not know and perhaps will never understand.”

After the mad crowds of Malawi, Mozambique was relatively empty. It was very easy to find remote campsites, yet the ugly lurking threat of undiscovered landmines was always in my mind. The evenings were full of stewing humidity and the torturous chorus of mosquitos (almost as painful as a Primary School Christmas concert recorder recital).

Out in the bush an entire village descends on the local pond for a huge orgy of fishing. In the carnival atmosphere scores of women wade through the shallow waters, slamming conical woven baskets into the

mud then rummaging a hand around inside to grab anything slimy and wriggly trapped within. It was a happy, chaotic carnage. The men, as usual, were doing very little; the odd lazy lunge with large, manly looking harpoons being their sole contribution to the annual communal fish harvest.

South of the Zambezi River the featureless road through miles of thick bush is very dull. We see how far we dare cycle with our eyes shut. We debate 'the perfect pizza' and I award Arno one point and a ring of my bell for each topping Arno selects that I approve of. We cross onto a new fold of the map which always boosts my spirits: only two folds to Cape Town now!

For so long I have looked forward to arriving in Southern Africa. The hard stuff is behind me now (promised George Best). But then in No-Mans Land my bike breaks again: a bent frame and gears, a buckled wheel and snapped spokes so I have to walk into Zimbabwe. I don't mind though and I stride alone up a mountain pass through lush forest glowing in the golden late afternoon sun, listening to very loud Verdi on my headphones. Just over that hill lies Zimbabwe, the beginning of the end of the beginning.

Zimbabwe is a country with food in the supermarkets, infrastructure, good roads and an aura of efficiency. She is a rare African success story. The sun shines, people in cars smile and wave, the land is beautiful, prices are fixed no matter what your skin colour, the opportunities for tourism are vast. It's as good as a TV show. But that's not how you picture Zimbabwe right now, is it? On the outside Zimbabwe still looks shiny and healthy. But I fear that it is not for long. The terrible slide into complete anarchy, racism, corruption, starvation and collapse seems to be horribly inevitable. You can buy ice cream but not maize flour or bread.

I have not been in the country long but already I feel very sad. The white farmers I met agreed that land distribution amongst the people is necessary, but that being thrown illegally from your rightful family home to make way for one of the president's cronies is not exactly redistributing 'amongst the people'. This racist, criminal campaign of Mugabe's is causing a vicious famine because food is no longer being produced locally. International food aid is being abused as only people who support the government are receiving food. Swathes of game animals are being shot for quick profit by the machine guns of the Army.

We rode through a beautiful farm whose school (most farms take very good care of their workers and

families) had the motto “no substitute for hard work.” The War Veterans who have illegally taken over the estate should take note of that. For once I am able to explain the reason for a nation’s woes in a single example: Mrs. Mugabe allegedly holds the record for the most money spent during a visit to Harrods.

Zimbabwe has many *koppies*, huge round boulders jumbled on top of each other into improbable, eye-catching formations. As the first stars pierce the ebbing evening light we climb one, the warmth of the day radiating from the rocks like the memory of a fresh dream as we look at magical, ancient Bushman rock paintings.

Camping one evening in the bush we are seen by the farmer who owns the land. Rather than launching into the Afrikaans version of “ooh, aar, git orf my land!” he went home and returned with sausages and milk for us! It was a great night: a large fire, meat but no vegetables, sleeping in my clothes, not brushing my teeth and eating sweets in bed. Mothers across the globe will be tutting their disapproval.

Having Arno for company has lent this stage a rather more intellectual air than I am used to: firing our catapults at cows arses, maturely sharing our food (“no- YOU cut, I want to choose this time...”) and pondering how girls manage to smell so clean and lovely. Two small drainage pipes passing beneath the road provided the setting for a cramped crawling race and much subterranean giggling. It is fun to laugh again.

A year on the road (August 26th 2002)

The Guardian Newspaper in England is the first National paper to have supported my journey. I wrote this piece for them about my first year on the road. Many thanks to the Guardian for their support and to all of you who have helped get me through this first epic year...

A year ago today I was at home in Yorkshire toying nervously with my breakfast, a neat packed lunch made by Dad (“to see you on your way”) beside me, with the awful realisation slowly dawning on me that this time I really had bitten off more than I could chew. Today I am in Botswana, sitting in the shade of a tree, mop-haired, barefoot and tearing hungrily at a papaya, the juices pouring down my face and onto my filthy, torn shirt and trousers. And in between? I cycled. 11,000 miles and 24 countries lie between now and then.

Newly graduated from university, I set off to cycle solo around the world to raise funds for *Hope and Homes for Children*: a three-year project that involves cycling the length of the planet’s three major landmasses, crossing five continents and more than 50 countries. While my friends were being paid vast salaries at glamorous-sounding London companies, I turned away from the conventional life, and from my girlfriend.

Many times over this last year I have wondered: what have I done? It has been a tough year. Day after day of cycling, in which I have seen and learned more than I imagined possible, faced more challenges than I dreamed of, and cried more than most babies. I’ve cycled across deserts and mountain ranges and up the length of the world’s longest river. I’ve slept in five-star hotels, Bedouin tents, road workers camps, Maasai villages and a sewage pipe, not to mention countless nights in my tent beneath the stars, watching the constellations slowly change as I cycled into the southern hemisphere.

The cycling itself has often been a blend of fatigue, boredom and disgruntlement: slogging across hundreds of dull kilometres, interspersed with occasional lactic acid spasms of painful misery on the hard stretches, such as the climbs up from the Dead Sea or the Blue Nile gorge in Ethiopia. The bike is pretty irritating, too: naturally I have had vast numbers of punctures along the way. I have also gone through four sets of tyres, three wheels and two bicycles (I snapped one in the desert in Sudan). My back wheel,

now in the process of falling apart, is egg-shaped, making for rather uncomfortable cycling, plus I can now only change gear by manually moving the chain with a toothbrush (not, incidentally, the same one I use on my teeth).

Being on my own in crazy, obscure places has led to memorable meetings and adventures, but it also viciously intensifies feelings of loneliness, boredom or fear: there is no one around to tell me to stop being ridiculous. The downward spirals are hard to brake, but I have only twice come close to quitting. The first time was during two days I spent in tears in Damascus, too close to home to let go, but with too far still to go for me even to contemplate returning. The second was when I was sitting, exhausted, bedraggled and ill (and once again in tears), on a dirt track in Ethiopia, surrounded by a crowd of obnoxious, begging, jeering youths. Fuck this, I thought. But I didn't. I kept riding. I knew that if I quit, I would be disappointed with myself for ever.

My encounters with people have been fascinating. During the aftermath of September 11 I was in Eastern Europe, torn between an ingrained mistrust of the east together with a newer displeasure at their treatment by the west: the destruction from British and American bombing campaigns was still very much apparent in Yugoslavia. In the Middle East I needed to be a diplomat as well as a pedal pusher. "Who do you support, Bush or Bin Laden?" was a regular opening to conversations. The Middle East was bereft of visitors, with the Western world fearing for its safety in Islamic countries, yet I have never felt safer or been better looked after than during my months there.

The Sudan was a different kind of challenge: 45-degree heat and weeks of hauling 60kg of bike, food and water through deep desert sand. Yet it was easy compared to my time in Ethiopia where I was hit by the ugly fallout from the outpourings of western guilt which manifested itself in the form of cash handouts during the famines of the 1980s. This beautiful, fascinating country has captivated, upset and confused me like no other on the journey. Continual pushy demands for money, a horde of 200 people staring and laughing at me as I rested in villages, crowds of brats chasing me out of villages, shouting and trying to pull bread from my panniers, hurling stones at me when I did not hand over my money. Ethiopia has left me extremely confused about how Africa can best be helped.

Riding through Zimbabwe during Mugabe's sinister land 'redistribution' programme, I met and enjoyed the company of many white farmers. Their consensus seemed to be that the land should indeed be redistributed among the people, but not via a process of kicking families out of their homes to make

room for the president's cronies. It was tremendously sad to ride through this beautiful African success story, knowing that the country's days are numbered as it slides deeper into chaos, corruption and total collapse.

The size of my post-cycling appetite is staggering, yet I have still managed to come through 2002 on a daily budget of just \$1 per day. My equipment sponsors have been extremely supportive, although unless I can find a financial sponsor I must resign myself to another two years' subsistence on a diet of banana sandwiches if I am to succeed in cycling around the world. Looking at my map of Africa is something I enjoy very much these days. So much is now behind me, and Cape Town feels to be just over the horizon. From Cape Town I hope to hitch a ride on a sailing boat to South America from where I will begin all over again, heading north towards Alaska. But for now I just have my sights set on Cape Town and the end of Africa. After a year on the road I feel that at last I am at the beginning of the end of the beginning.

I've made it to South Africa! (1st September 2002)

“Africa’s large problems are largely large Africans”

- PJ O'Rourke

There can be few pleasures greater than driving at sunset across the surreal emptiness of a Botswanan saltpan. As far as the eye can see in every direction is nothing, nothing but blushing sand to the curving horizon. Even more fun, however, is belting golf balls from the roof of the Land Rover, blasting them recklessly high and wide into the great oblivion.

It was a welcome break from the road. Beneath shooting stars' silent endeavours we slept close to the steady warmth and eerie flickering of our campfire, comforted by the light yet aware that it made the vast darkness all around even more impenetrable. At first light I sneak quietly away from the glowing embers, careful not to wake Ziggy and Arno so that I can greedily hoard the sunrise all to myself. I sit hunched on the cool grey sand eagerly awaiting the sun which, ever the showman, seems to delay his arrival on stage for as long as possible. A roaring Humphreys sneeze rips through the aura of mystical silence. Time for some breakfast.

Back on the road and alone once again I award Botswana the title of 'Most Boring Country I Have Ever Cycled Through'. Still, I don't suppose Botswana wins many awards for anything so she should be grateful for the recognition. Nothing but flat, unchanging bush for hundreds and hundreds of kilometres. The flat terrain had its advantages for my bike no longer has any brakes at all and I am only able to change gear using a toothbrush.

Nothing but a ranting headwind for company. That's like calling a migraine 'company'. Day after day the sky sat deep and heavy with rolling fat, grey harbingers of inclemency (clouds). What should have been a gentle four day triumphal procession into South Africa turned into a ghastly five day beasting thanks to the wind. There was a nice symmetry to this ordeal (which consoled me not one bit): my arrival in Africa all those miles ago in Egypt was in identically miserable circumstances to my approach to the final country of the continent.

But if you can hold on for long enough you'll get there in the end. And so eventually I found myself

crossing the Limpopo River into South Africa. It was a great (and greasy grey-green) moment! It has been six years since I left South Africa at the end of my Gap year and it felt very, very good to be back. For almost a year I had been looking forward to this moment and the anticlimax was inevitable: no cheering crowds of hysterical blondes to welcome me, no gentle sunlit freeway all the way down to Cape Town. It was just bloody windy. On top of that I had no money for the next three days and only two loaves of dry bread to eat. Does that make my salvaging of two abandoned gravel-covered marshmallows from the roadside any more excusable? I fear not.

The Afrikaaner stronghold of Potgietersrus reminded me once again of what an odd country this is. Large men in long socks and Under-13's sized rugby shorts with pistols. Amusing haircuts and large moustaches. Thriving First World alongside struggling Third World. The weird, weird, juxtaposition of genuine warmth, hospitality, kindness, Christianity and yet an invariable propensity for beginning sentences with "I'm not a racist but...." My ride through South Africa will be a fascinating yet upsetting one.

I was heading for Jane Furse, the small town where I had taught for a year between school and University. I looked around eagerly, wondering what I would remember, looking forward to recognising people and places for the first time in a whole year, looking forward to not having to ask directions. Jane Furse lies in the heart of Lebowa, one of the scrubby, barren Homelands where black people were dumped to make even more room for the white population in the fertile parts of the country. Life in Lebowa is hard, very hard, even in these post-Apartheid days. You rarely see a white face in Lebowa. And even though I was more at home here than anywhere in the rest of Africa I was more afraid to bush-camp here than ever before. The blacks in South Africa have been abused so grotesquely that I felt I could scarcely hold a grudge against anyone who decided to kill me and steal all my stuff. I hid very well that first night. Yet, like nearly everywhere else in Africa, I encountered nothing but laughter and warmth riding through the Homeland.

Arriving at my old school was wonderful; to meet old friends once more and wander around memory lane. It was also intriguing for me to see how my perceptions have changed from being an 18 year old single-handedly saving the world to a cynical old 25 year old who has almost cycled the length of Africa. Only a couple of thousand kilometres to go now! Cape Town awaits...!

Jane Furse to East London, South Africa

(September 30th 2002)

The Earth Summit was not really the ideal time for me to be in Jo'Burg searching for news-starved journalists willing to devote some column space to my bike ride and *Hope and Homes for Children*. But it was an interesting experience and a fun city; beautiful, smart, successful people making me feel self-consciously out of place and mate-less as I wandered alone around the gleaming Sandton Square in my flip-flops and tired clothes. The City of Gold was quite a contrast to my old school out in the Homeland. From Audis and Mercs to an over grazed, over populated dustbowl. Chickens, goats and idle cows in the road. Too many liquor stores, and not enough work for too many people. I looked up a few friends from my old football team -the mighty Jane Furse Highlanders- and eventually summoned up the resolve to embark on the final 2500km to Cape Town.

I rode through the Afrikaaner heartland of neat farms and small, dusty towns. I began to learn that South African whites do not necessarily have it easy. These farmers were tough guys, working extremely hard to keep themselves afloat and casting anxious glances in the direction of Zimbabwe.

I don't know whether it is white paranoia, genuine danger or a bit of both, but I have been bombarded with earnest warnings about theft, murder, cruelty and the need for a police escort through this country. So I begin camping at farms or staying with village chiefs each night. As sunset approaches I turn off the road into a village of thatched, round turquoise huts. The inevitable crowd of shy, staring, giggling children then escort me to the chief's home where I explain myself and ask the chief if he can find me somewhere safe to pitch my tent. The chiefs I have met have invariably been jovial, wise and welcoming and I enjoy listening to the family discussing me in Xhosa, one of the most poetic sounding of African languages scattered with extraordinary, evocative clicking sounds. These are warm, educational, entertaining evenings and yet these are the very villages I am being warned to avoid.

I ride through the Free State, a province of massive skies, creaking old irrigation windmills, roll after roll of pale hills and occasional farms snuggled inside clusters of dark green trees. I ask a man leaving his home for directions. As he departs he calls into the house. His wife emerges with a vast plate of ice cream cake and returns inside. I leave the licked clean plate by the gate and a note with my only two words of

Afrikaans: “*Dankie! Lekker!*” (“Thanks! Excellent!”).

A huge orange bushfire sweeps across the horizon, urged on by a feisty wind. I am almost caught out by its speed and have to ride away. As I turn away from taking photos of this spectacular sight I spot a farmer and his family in a wild panic, rushing their livestock towards safety. I felt so ashamed by my voyeurism and so was deeply relieved as the fire missed their home.

It was the biggest day on my Sporting Calendar but I was in a dead end town. The town’s bars were propping up big Boers in tight shorts with duck-tail hairdos, large moustaches and pistols slamming brandy and cokes. And that was just the women. They were all in town to watch a rugby match on TV. I went from pub to pub meekly asking if there was any chance of putting the English football on the telly. Imagine this: you are in Glasgow. Scotland are leading England 1-0 in the World Cup final (I did say ‘imagine’) and you ask “excuse me, chaps, would you mind awfully if I change the channel to watch a spot of cricket...” So I rode on out of town and not until the next morning did the newspapers tell me ‘Leeds United 1- Man Utd 0’. Oh boy, did I fly up the hills that day!

It is sometimes difficult to judge when it is time to take a break from your wanderings, call time on the adventures and put your feet up for a while. The alarming realization that I am verging on needing a ponytail in my hair is a certain sign that that time has arrived. I turn down offers of accommodation from three luxury hotels in order to make a detour to my final challenge: riding over the highest road in Africa. Foolhardy? I agree. But as Eddy Merckx said, “there are no laws that govern the will.” Sometimes the heart has its reasons that the head knows nothing of. Lesotho is a land of open spaces and vast, silent mountains. The hills never stop and the gradients are anything up to 35%, so steep that even pushing the bike frequently rendered me into a red, sweaty, collapsed bundle beside the road. If anything the descents were worse: lethally steep hairpin bends which resulted in a hole wearing through the sole of my left shoe! The climbs were so absurdly painful that there was no point in getting upset or hoping for flat stretches. So I just resigned myself to enjoying myself amid some of my favourite African landscapes. Hour after hour of extraordinary mountain passes. The only interruption to the ‘Ode to Joy’ was my rasping, ragged breathing and the sounds of my own encouragement, “come on, Al, come on, Al.... just a little farther, Al, just a little farther...” Every pedal stroke improved the view but diminished how much I cared for it.

The people of Lesotho were friendly yet bemused as I rode by. Shepherds swathed in blankets to fight

the cold, Wellington boots and comical conical straw hats. At 3000m above sea level the nights are cold. So I was relieved not to have to use my tent: an electricity station, a mountain shepherd's rough stone shelter and the back-room of a particularly dodgy, unappealing *shebeen* (drinking den) made fine alternatives.

Climbing to the highest road in Africa, the Tlaeeng Pass, epitomised why I undertook this journey; the search for a challenge, a slow sunset silhouetting all before me and fold after fold of wild, empty mountains. It was nearly dark, it was very cold, I was hungry and racing along alone with absolutely no idea where I would sleep, where I would find something to eat or who I would meet next. If this year needs a defining snapshot, that would be it.

I decided to push on up to the famous Sani Pass, the Lesotho border post balanced right on the edge of the Drakensberg escarpment high above South Africa. On a track of shattered rock past eerie outlines of fires from scattered shepherds' huts and manic barking from their huge hounds I pushed hard beneath a cold full moon up to the pass. Annoyed by my idiocy yet thrilled to have made it, I looked down through a misty, numb exhaustion to the faint lights of South Africa and knew that after beating the highest road in Africa it should all be downhill from here.

This month's recommended reading:

'My Traitor's Heart' - Rian Malan ·

'The Bang Bang Club' - Joao Silva and Greg Marinovich

I arrive in Cape Town: the End of Africa (20th October 2002)

“This is fulfilling your dream. Never forget that and smile every time you remember that.”

- written in a letter to me by Sarah, 2001

“You don’t know unless you try”

- phrase frequently used in the book ‘Bravo Two Zero’

“What we do in life echoes in eternity”

- Gladiator

How can I begin to get my head round it all? I have now ridden a bicycle from my front door in England to Cape Town in South Africa [422 days, 20300km, 27 countries]. What an odd thing to have done. This last leg has been a nostalgia tour, a trip down all the memory lanes of Europe, the Middle East and Africa as I plodded my way to the Cape. Thinking back- faces, places, feelings. Wasn’t so-and-so beautiful?! How crazy was that place?! How happy was I then?! How on earth did I keep going after so-and-so?! Half forgetting the wandering and the pain, half remembering days gone by. And on and on until here I am, Pierre Jourdan champagne bottle in hand feeling stunned and muted to be sat beneath the famous Table Mountain, and perplexed by just how ordinary I feel on this day I have strived towards for so long.

This final stage has not all been about old memories; I have been forging new ones too. From the lush cliffs of the Wild Coast I watched dolphins powerfully surfing the green swell below. Out alone in the silver waves at the first hint of dawn I wondered if my own personal surfing ineptitude may in some way be linked to my Union Jack shorts and total absence of suntan. In a hopeless Transkei shanty town I watched a gang of leering young men make throat-slitting gestures at me as I fumbled to repair a puncture beside the road. “Come on tyre: stay up, stay up”, I prayed. “You too sun: stay up! Stay up!” as the warm light slunk lower and the shadows lengthened, reaching towards dark night time anarchy.

Grahamstown was unlike anything I had seen on this extraordinary continent, a small English market town complete even with squally puddles and trees jostled by mad, random wind. Amongst all the churches and Olde Shoppes is Rhodes University, a reminder for me of my life in ages past: optional academia, highbrow male entertainment such as putting traffic cones on your head and beautiful girls diligently sitting at computers all around you. I was escorted out of town with ten boys from St. Andrew's Prep School riding energetically out in front and three Rhodes students forming a much more sedate rearguard.

Leeuwenbosch Country House looked after me regally, an evening of great characters, hilarious anecdotes and a fabulous old cellar pub. On the wall was an antique poacher's shotgun. It looked just like an ordinary country gent's walking stick yet it was also a shotgun! Now that would have given all those stone throwing brats in Ethiopia a shock... At Shamwari I finally encountered lions, huge, arrogant and considerably closer up than I might have planned.

Is there anything worse than being in a city where nobody knows your name? In Port Elizabeth I read my newspaper and watched TV in a bar jammed with partying, laughing people. Time for an early night. For any armchair surfer and fan of the film 'Endless Summer' a trip to the legendary Jeffrey's Bay is a must. From there I knocked off a 170km day for old times' sake, taking time to pause on Bloukrans Bridge. Crouching low and with exaggerated slowness and care I peered reluctantly over the edge and down, down, down a ludicrous 216 metres: the view of the World's Highest Bungee Jump. Knees shaking I rode on in search of a nice restorative cup of tea instead.

The renowned Garden Route was next. It was certainly pleasant but, at the risk of inciting the ire of many, to my mind it is over-rated. Still, the coach loads of blue-rinsed European old folks were having fun. By the time the blue-rinsers have enjoyed their cream tea and are back on the coach for Cape Town they will all be asleep and missing out on really beautiful scenery. The hulking Langeberg mountains loom large like a rugby back row over bright farmland.

A great South African delicacy is *biltong*, tough strips of sun dried raw meat that looks even worse than it sounds. But I love the stuff and was doing battle with it when a busload of camera wielding old dears drove by. Were they gawping aghast at the sight of me and my bike sprawled comfortably in the gutter or the repulsive looking thing I was gleefully tearing at?

Harold Pinter said that "the more acute the experience, the less articulate the expression." One of my

main motivations through all the tough times has been the thought of how I would feel the moment I eventually rounded that last corner or crested that last hill and for the first time gazed on Table Mountain and the end of Africa. In the circumstances I think that I did pretty well with a “Bugger me!”

I reached the summit of a mountain pass (will they ever end?) and there below me lay Franschhoek. This is just silly, I thought: mountains as stunning as this, immaculately vineyards combed along the lower slopes, a village so pristine, crisp dazzling Cape Dutch wineries, aromas from fantastically out-of-my-league restaurants, a perfect blue sky and only two days to go till I reach Cape Town! What on earth have I been whining (not wining) for all year?

Not long to go now: the final puncture, the final shady tree, the final banana sandwich. Cape Point! The End of Africa! A car park belching tourists from ranks of coaches. Japanese groups queuing to take photographs and a strict rotation policy at all the viewpoints. I haven't spoken to Sarah since leaving home but I have been dreaming all that time about phoning her first to tell her that I had done it, only to find that the damn phone wouldn't do International Calls. This was turning into a nightmare of disappointments. I have wondered for so long whether I need to carry on after Africa. This afternoon gave me the answer. I don't quite know what I have been searching for on this journey but I certainly knew that I wouldn't find it here. This 'celebration party' needed rescuing. So I hid at the Cape of Good Hope and waited for the tumult and the shouting to die and the full moon to rise. A feisty wind, the Southern Cross bright in the lightless sky, dappled clouds scurrying across the moon and shining waves rolling home from Antarctica. On a sand dune beneath a sheltered bush I snuggled into my sleeping bag feeling a lot better now that I had the end of the road all to myself.

All that remained was a gentle 90km saunter into Cape Town amongst lycra-clad Sunday cruisers, a breathtaking coastal ride on a perfect smiling morning. There was one more climb, a big boy that seemed to reach halfway up Table Mountain. Nearing the summit I jumped on the pedals and hammered to the top for a final reminder of screaming legs and rasping lungs. There below me lay Cape Town!

Having omitted to pack a cavalry sabre in my panniers I had to resort to scything open my champagne with my Leatherman penknife. A crisp 'pop' and time to celebrate. It is all over. For now. You never know unless you try, and maybe that is the best answer I have to the perennial question of 'why?'

Questions from a Bike Ride: some answers from my sofa.

(15th November 2002)

“It was bad but it was real”

- Enrique

Everyone I meet asks me the same questions. So here are a few reflections from deep amongst the empty tea cups, toast crumbs and general air of lethargic joy that surround me at the moment....

I had sold the idea to myself so well. The whole package seemed perfect so I grabbed at it and refused to let go. Despite a fantastic group of friends, a flattering job offer, a comfy seat on the gentle conveyor belt of conformity and a girlfriend who, by most accounts, was way out of my league I decided that this was an opportunity I could not ignore.

Cycling round the World seemed ideal for me as it would allow me to escape from the looming threat of a normal job. The prospect of decades in an unloved job was always enough to work me into a sweat-beaded lather of frustration and terror. I just couldn't see the sense in plodding all week towards the lone bright light of a Friday night out on a gloomy town. It has taken me time to appreciate that everyone has different dreams and goals and that to venture to judge your own way superior to another's is both arrogant and plain wrong. But I needed to leave England and this seemed the perfect way to do it.

My head was full of luminous visions of Himalayan peaks, Alaskan forests, coconut palms and cheesy sunsets. Every day would be an adventure. Everybody I met would greet me, smiling. Smiling, I would wave back and so would begin wonderful cultural interactions and learning opportunities not available to me queuing for the bus back home. I would be utterly free, with time to potter around the globe living a life of adventure, fun and just enough challenges to keep me high on my patronising pedestal. For years I have wanted to be a travel writer. This would be the perfect apprenticeship for me. If I was unable to write a good book after cycling around the world then I would never be able to do it. In short, the benefits and end products of cycling around the world were so appealing that I couldn't wait to get out on the road.

The reality, as anyone who has been following my progress will know, has been rather different. Once on the bike I realised in a wave of terror the grim hopelessness of what I had got myself into. It was too big, too hard. I was too alone. I could never make it. But I could never quit either. I was trapped. The smiling citizens of the world didn't seem to notice me as I rode through their lives. Most were not even smiling. On my first day one smiling citizen called me a w@*#\$r!

If I had known before I left all that I know now there is no way that I would have had the guts to start. Looking back I cannot believe that I managed to keep pushing on. But much has already been written on this site about those times. Suffice to say that it didn't take me long to realise that I wasn't quite as tough as I had liked to imagine!

Echoing the sentiments of one of the most irritating songs of all time, I have had a few regrets, but too few to dwell on. Do I regret what I've done? No. I will never regret the experiences I have had so far. I will regret it though if I throw it all away too lightly. I regret how long it took me to let go of my past life and to start looking forwards once more. I regret the lack of media and fundraising impact that my journey has had thus far and I will be working hard to improve that. I regret that I don't always live for today and find myself wishing away my life ("I can't wait to reach Cape Town" etc.). I never regret spending too long in a place but occasionally regret rushing on. But I often think that there is not too much to regret when you have the freedom of every single sunset and dawn, to ride a cool road at sunrise when nobody on the whole planet knows where you are.

Ironically, leaving my past life has made me truly appreciate it (was it the lyrical genius of Janet Jackson who crooned, "you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone"?). I was lucky- I had friends with amazing lust for life and attitudes that have taught me so much. I can look back and really appreciate the people in my life now. Absurd adventures, challenges and so much fun. I look forward to resuming it one day.

Being alone has given me so much time, too much perhaps, to reflect on these things. Doing this alone was, I still believe, the right decision. It's stress free, it adds to the challenges and leaves you with no excuses if you fail. It opens many doors. But it is tough, it is more dangerous and there is nobody to pick you up when you're down and struggling to keep life in perspective.

The question that everyone, without exception, asks is the biggest question of all: "WHY are you

doing this?!” Here are a few thoughts....

I didn't know if I could succeed at this (still don't) and that holds quite an appeal. You never know unless you try. Why not do it? Ffyoona Campbell [walked round the world. (And yes, she cheated, but I can't bear how many people criticise her. None of us come close to being able to understand her guts and effort)] wrote “I don't know if I can do this. Then again I don't know that I can't.” A friend of mine says that I am banging my head against a brick wall purely for the pleasure of stopping.

George Mallory [perhaps the first man to climb Everest] did it “because it's there.” Robert Swann's [polar expeditions] motivation was that “it's a good way to impress girls at parties.” (In my experience the effort to reward ratio of that theory is horribly unappealing!) Ranulph Fiennes [my inspiration] claims it is just a “way of paying the bills.” These are not answers, they are evasions.

Here's what Lance Armstrong [cancer survivor and four-time winner of The Tour] has to say: “I had learned what it means to ride the Tour de France. It's not about the bike. It's a metaphor for life, not only the longest race in the World but also the most exalting and heartbreaking and potentially tragic. It poses every conceivable element to the rider, and more.... unspeakably bad luck, unthinkable beauty, yawning senselessness and above all a great, deep self-questioning. During our lives we're faced with so many different elements as well, we experience so many setbacks and fight such a hand-to-hand battle with failure, head down in the rain, just trying to stay upright and to have a little hope. The Tour is not just a bike race, not at all. It is a test. It tests you physically, it tests you mentally and it even tests you morally.”

TE Lawrence [of Arabia] wrote that “all men dream but not equally.... the dreamers of the day are dangerous men for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible.” I am chasing a dream. I want to ‘go always a little farther’. Wally Herbert [Arctic explorer] is quoted as saying “and what of those who ask [why]? It is as well for them that there are others who feel the answer and never need to ask.” In a BBC documentary an emotional Ellen MacArthur [RTW yachtswoman] spoke of “....realising a dreambest experience of lifepushed harder than evermore despair than everno-one else will understandparts of me I never knew existedThings that will stay with me foreververy special feeling.” Oh, to find a wife like her!

Am I glad I've ridden through Africa? Yes. Would I do it again? No. There is a theory that giving 100% of yourself to something is dangerous because if you fail you have no excuse save your own inadequacy. Being alone and giving 100% means that whether I succeed or fail depends solely on me-

there can be no excuses or safety nets. I'll probably be dead within 60 years and that terrifies me: there is so much to do in so little time. I fear having regrets.

It seems that the answer to the question 'why' is intangible; it's just a feeling of something that you have to do. One of my favourite activities (or inactivities) in life is to slob on a sofa, feet up and watching football on the telly. But it always feels like such a terrifying waste of precious minutes. Perhaps then my reason for why I am doing all this is that I'm just trying to earn the right to sit on my sofa!

More Questions

There are lots of other questions that I get asked all the time. Here's a few quick answers:

FAVOURITE SONG? Greenday's "Good Riddance / Time of your Life" ("another turning point, a fork stuck in the road... there's something unpredictable but in the end it's right, I hope you had the time of your life").

FAVOURITE BOOK? Lance Armstrong's "It's not about the bike: my journey back to life." Quite simply one of the best books I have ever read. Even if you have zero interest in Lance, cycling or the Tour de France, you must read this book.

FAVOURITE POEM? Ben Okri's "To an English Friend in Africa."

FAVOURITE FOOD? The breaking of the day's fast during the Islamic month of Ramadan meant spectacular *iftar* feasts in Syria and Jordan. Or my final mini-Xmas pud in a rainstorm in Ethiopia in April.

WORST FOOD? Boiled mice on sticks (Malawi). I am ashamed to say that I wimped out of eating these!

FAVOURITE VIEW? Christmas morning at Dana in Jordan or the top of Kloofnek Road, Cape Town- absolutely the last hill in Africa!

FAVOURITE CITY? Istanbul.

FAVOURITE COUNTRY? A tough call! Jordan, Sudan, Lesotho, South Africa....

LEAST FAVOURITE COUNTRY? I loved Ethiopia, but it was tough.

MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRLS? Beirut. (Sorry, Cape Town! Blame the residents of 42 Orient Road....).

FUNNIEST MOMENT? Watching Macbeth in Beirut, Lebanon.

SCARIEST MOMENT? Being told on a phone in Tanzania that I was shortly going to be beaten and robbed.

WEIRDEST SLEEP? Sewage pipe in Turkey, Maasai kraal in Tanzania or perhaps even the sumptuous Sheraton on the Red Sea.

FAVOURITE QUOTE? From Fight Club: "If you were to die right now, how would you feel about your life."

South America

Cape Town to Rio de Janeiro (11th February 2003)

“Another turning point, a fork stuck in the road,
Time grabs you by the hand, directs you where to go,
It’s sometimes unpredictable but in the end it’s right,
I hope you had the time of your life.”

- Greenday

Strange that South America should begin beneath Cape Town’s Table Mountain. Yet as I stood on the foredeck of the yacht, watching my waving friends slowly shrink from sight, it felt less like an ending than the start of a new chapter. I was aboard ‘Maiden’, bound for Rio de Janeiro amidst the glamour and excitement of the ‘Cape to Rio’ yacht race. Table Bay was teeming with racing yachts and well-wishers, a dramatic horizon of spears of masts and curves of white sail. Jet-skis and powerboats, canoes and press boats, gin palaces and bathtubs filled the few gaps. Helicopters swooped low above the fleet. The shoreline was lined with people and high on Signal Hill scores of binoculars flashed.

As the spectator boats gradually turned for home the racing fleet was left alone to contemplate 4000 miles of ocean. As my first night at sea approached and Maiden pushed on through the waves I felt a basic thrill to be travelling again, to be on the move just for the sheer hell of it. This is how I used to feel: I’ve got my mojo back! I turned away from the fading Table Mountain and Africa towards the sunset and South America. Every new beginning comes from some other new beginning’s end.

To my immodest glee a newspaper in Cape Town had labelled me an ‘intrepid young British adventurer.’ But on that first night at sea I was brought brutally back down to size as I hung over the side of the boat retching my guts out. Lasagne (“how on earth did I manage to fit so much inside myself?” I marvelled) reappeared with gusto, my eyes streamed and the damnable prospect of three weeks of this awfulness added to my misery. In my cycling clothes and shoes I was soaking wet and cold. Pride comes before a hurl.

Once recovered I joined in the steady routine of racing across the Atlantic. ‘Maiden’ forged a name for herself when Tracy Edwards skippered her in the 1989-90 Whitbread Round the World Race with the

first ever all-female crew. Today 'Maiden' is run as a business, taking crew for ocean races, Caribbean cruises and so on. She is a 58 foot (17m) aluminium monohull yacht. At the very front of the boat is the foredeck where all the juicy action happens during sail changes, a maelstrom of flailing ropes, armfuls of billowing sail and drunken footed rolling and pitching. The deck is criss-crossed with ropes of every colour running taut to 15 different winches. There are two huge steering wheels and a panel of glowing green GPS instruments. At night the two compasses glow orange like shining crystal balls. Pressure valves allow the adjustment of mysterious sounding things like the 'babystay' and the 'vang'. Everything started as a foreign language to me but somebody would always translate: "Pull the bloody red rope, Al!"

Below decks is a tiny toilet (tip: brace your head against the roof when pulling up your shorts to avoid an embarrassing catapulting out into the corridor), a kitchen smaller than a broom cupboard, the navigation station of charts, screens, switches, weather faxes and radios. All 15 of us squash into a stinking, sweaty area large enough only for 12 tiny bunks. There is not enough headroom to stand: comfort is a low priority on racing yachts. The emergency engine, water maker and sail locker take up the rest of the space.

The crew was split into two watches for the rotating routine of duties. Midnight to 0400 ("the biscuit watch" when a packet of biscuits was eagerly shared), 0400 to 0800, 0800 to 1400, 1400 to 2000 and 2000 to 2359 was how the days broke down. When off duty people try to sleep in the airless, sweaty bunks. Helming duties rotated and occasional frenzies of activity were needed when gybing or changing sails, but generally there was not a lot to do except admire the view, read, crave beer (and cigarettes... and salad... and ice cream... and *chicas*...), talk rubbish and try to hide from the sun.

When waking the other watch (who incidentally did not appreciate being woken by guitar, shouting, singing or hunting horn) they were handed a cup of tea before climbing bleary eyed up on deck. We would then jump into their empty bunks for a welcome four hours sleep.

Mealtimes were the highlight of the day, especially as Joel's cooking was an absurd mid-ocean extravaganza. Roast lamb, pan-fried freshly caught dorado, *ceviche* and home made ice cream thousands of miles from land! The 'Cape to Rio' was an arduous endurance race for our highly tuned racing machine crew spread-eagled around deck and feasting.

24 days is a long time. Think how many people you talk to, miles you drive and phone calls you make in 24 normal days. Weeks in the office, weekends at home. Ever changing horizons. Hours of television,

reams of newspapers. For us it was a disc of blue water, 58ft of boat and 14 other people who were complete strangers on day 1. Yet I was not bored (except, briefly, after week 1 when I realised with disappointment that crashing waves and shrieking gales were not going to feature). Once away from the African coast we were barefoot, in T-shirts and shorts 24 hours a day. The days blazed beneath a pale blue sky and above an incredibly clear blue ocean streaked deep down with shafts of white light.

Sunsets brought relief from the furnace, leaving the world to darkness, us and the comforting glow of the GPS and compass. We began the race with a fat cream moon in a golden halo. Small clouds of black and silver shone as we cruised down the yellow carpet of moonlight. The helmsman heaves on the wheel as we surf down the heavy, fast black waves. It is eternal motion, racing ever onwards towards Rio. As the weeks passed the moon waned, filling the utterly black sky with so many stars and shooting stars that they spill over into the ocean, showers of amazing phosphorescent sparks streaming in our wake, a wake of white water stretching back to Africa and the end of two thin tyre tracks.

Behind the boat morning catches us, the sea a purple mauve as the sky begins to turn orange and then blue. Only the strong stars survive. Eventually even Venus fades. Dawn reinvigorates you after the long night and thoughts turn towards breakfast, waking the next watch and then bed.

Small events break up the hours and days. A torn sail or Alberto being winched up the mast to make repairs. John's 40th birthday party (and the only bottle of beer on board), Pete being smacked in the head by a passing flying fish in the dead of night and then exacting his revenge by frying the 14 we had on deck for breakfast.

We fell becalmed for several days. I felt so small, so alone, so utterly at the mercy of the wind. It was an impressive experience. I realised then just how vast the Atlantic is. Dorados swam around the boat and refused to nibble our lines. We covered ourselves in shampoo and leaped overboard, with 6km of water below us and thousands of miles to shore. We tried everything to regain favour with the wind gods - singing, wind dances, sacrifices to Neptune (toothpaste, a lone sock, a spoonful of my supper), eating lentils and, bizarrely, scratching the mast. Eventually one of them must have worked as the wind returned.

Crossing the Greenwich Meridian was a big moment for me: the next time I cross it I will be back in London. Only 360 degrees still to go. I'm on my way home at last. The waves thump, sluice and fizz on the hull as I lie in my bunk. Come on wind, take me homewards.

We crossed the finish line in the dead of night, beneath the outline of Sugarloaf mountain and the vast Christ the Redeemer statue gleaming white and appearing to hang in the sky. We had crossed the Atlantic and I have a new continent to cycle across. I am looking forward to South America.

Poor Cape Town! I loved Cape Town but Rio really puts her in the shade. It is the most beautiful city setting I have ever seen. Add samba and football, dental floss bikinis and a permanent party mood and you have Rio. Rio walks with a bum wiggle, talks football, eats, drinks and never ever sleeps. I love it!

Of course I had to visit the Maracana -the largest stadium in the world- to revel in the music, energy, noise and utter craziness of Brazilian football. I am afraid that Elland Road, Leeds will never seem the same again... Now, having been brutally parted from 17 months of hair, I can look forward to 100 hours on the bus to Ushuaia (the Southernmost town in the world) where, at last, I will get back on the bike again, bound for Alaska.

THANKS: to all of the guys (mostly from the 'Jokers sports club') who made the effort to phone me for a chat in Cape Town. I appreciate it.

BOOKS: latest recommendations: The Kon Tiki expedition (Thor Heyerdal), and an astonishing true book called '1421' (Gavin Menzies).

Rio de Janeiro to Ushuaia (February 19th 2003)

After an agonising bus ride of 5 days and 10 hours from Rio to Ushuaia, the most southerly town on the planet, I have developed a new respect for the endurance capacity of backpackers! It is time to get back on the bike...

Ushuaia to Los Torres del Paine (9th March 2003)

“How many roads must a man walk down?

The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind.”

- Bob Dylan

How do you persuade yourself to leave a nice warm bed to begin cycling when 17,848km of road lies between you and Alaska? This was the question rolling around my head as I lay in a nice warm bed in Ushuaia (pronounced: “us”-”WHY”-”a”) with 17,848km of cycling lying between me and Alaska. ‘Ruta 3’ began in a deserted carpark on a damp sea shore, an inauspicious beginning for the long road North. But I was thrilled to be there, to be in Patagonia at last. For years names such as Ushuaia, Cape Horn, Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia have held some kind of magic for me. They are names that bring a smile to my face, quicken the pulse and prompt thoughts of crazy adventures and e-mails to friends such as Eric Newby’s famous telegraph, “Can you travel Nuristan June?” A painting above our fireplace at home shows the yacht ‘Gipsy Moth’ battling her way round ‘The Horn’. I have looked at that painting thousands of times and now, at last, here I am. Patagonia feels, even today, like the end of the world and the tantalising challenge she lays down has lured explorers and adventurers for centuries.

So, I am on the road once more. There had been little to hold me in Ushuaia. *El Fin del Mundo* is a colourful hotchpotch of pink and blue and green and orange corrugated metal buildings beneath black snow-covered peaks on the shore of the calm, grey Beagle Canal. Tourism flourishes there but not, I imagine, due to the city tour, of which highlights included Mr. Pastoriza’s old house, “a man who worked

in a sardine canning company. The project failed because the sardines never appeared.” Or Mr. Solomon’s General Goods store that “became very famous because of the variety of its products and closed in 1970.”

I rode through temperate dripping forests, tatty and lichen covered, deep and mysterious like ‘The Lord of the Rings’. Green rivers with curves of perfect camping flowed into quiet lakes. Patagonia, like Mr. Kipling, makes exceedingly good lakes. I soon left behind the mountains of Southern Tierra del Fuego and moved into the classic Patagonian *pampa*; flat, soggy moorland under an enormous sky. The distances in Patagonia are virtually unimaginable to anyone raised in the efficient compactness of Europe. Occasionally there is a solitary *estancia* (farm), red roofed and white walled. Stopping to refill my water bottles I am often treated to a great bowl of mutton soup bubbling constantly on the old kitchen stove in the well-worn farmhouses and a drink of *maté* (grass flavoured tea basically!). At one Estancia a father, son and grandson on dappled brown horses come galloping home together for lunch, three generations of *gaucho* (cowboy) hungry after a hard morning’s ride tending the cattle and sheep.

With the flat *pampa* comes the notorious Patagonian wind, so fierce in my face that for two days I was unable to cycle and had to walk with the bike. On one day I could not even walk into the wind and lay huddled under a bush for several hours waiting for the wind to ease enough for me to be able to stand up. On days like these Alaska feels a long way away. The assault of the wind feels so personal; it is like a playground bully who delights in not leaving you in peace. It pushes you around, roars in your ears, messes with your stuff, pulls your tent apart, and seems only to delight in any tantrums it provokes. Trees are scarce round here and what few there are are bereft of branches on the windward side with the trunk and all the branches growing horizontally down wind, fixed into an extravagant kind of blow-dry’n’gel style. The cycling has been brutal and as winter approaches it is unlikely to improve. Sweet music to all of you who, from your office, cursed my gentle wanderings through sunny Africa, I am sure!

But I am not totally alone in this wind. With me is ‘Clare’, the cute girl from a shampoo bottle label stuck onto my bike by a Canadian guy who figured I needed a bit of female company. I also have a sticker of Ché Guevara, not for his revolutionary ideas for students’ T-shirts world wide, but rather for his early expertise in the art of Wildman travel (read his book “The Motorcycle Diaries”). Finally there is ‘Buster’, a dangly fluffy monkey with an idiotic grin undiminished even by the headwind suggesting that he has suitably few brain cells to enjoy this ride North. I, on the other hand, may be a bear of very little

brain, but headwinds do bother me.

Tierra del Fuego is shared between Argentina and Chile. I left Argentina with its many road signs reminding that “Las Malvinas son Argentinas” (The Falklands are Argentina’s) and entered Chile. Most vehicles in Chile are either pick-up trucks or A-Team style vans and many pull over to offer me rides. But, like an idiot, I decline and just keep on riding (or walking or lying under a bush). There is too far to go to take the easy option.

I passed several minefields. Not only did these help persuade me not to camp just yet and to ride on a little farther, they also provoked much laughter as I recited episodes of Blackadder in World War 1 to myself (see below).

In Africa I promised myself that I would never ever complain again about being cold. Currently I begin cycling at dawn before the wind becomes too strong. So I murmur “How delightful” to myself as I surface from my warm sleeping bag into a dark dawn of numb hands and feet and two wooly hats. Surely frying in the Sudan wasn’t that bad..?

Los Torres del Paine are one of the sights of the journey so far. Three vast needles of pale orange rock rising vertically hundreds of metres from a turgid green lake. Skirls of grey cloud fuss around the summits. Past the bluest lakes I have seen I camp above a glacier, awed by its bulk and charmed by the beautiful clarity of the blue fissures, crevasses and icebergs. A faint white sun tries, but fails, to warm me. At least for once there is no wind. Impressive stuff, but there is a long, long way still to go.

Excerpt from Blackadder. If you are not familiar with this, please do yourself a favour and track down the video! Purists: please forgive me if I am not quite word perfect!

Scene: a secret mission in no-man’s land, WW1.

Captain Blackadder: “Where are we, Lieutenant?”

Lieutenant George: “Looking at the map we appear to be in a large field of mushrooms”

CB: “This is a military map. It is unlikely to list interesting fauna and fungi. What do the symbols mean?”

LG: “It says ‘mine’. So whoever made the map must own the mushrooms as well”

CB: “Or we are in a minefield?”

LG: “Ahh... Sir? What do we do if we step on a mine?”

CB: “Standard practice, Lieutenant, is to leap 200 feet in the air and scatter yourself over a very large area...”

The Carretera Austral, Chile (11th April 2003)

“The next time your life flashes before your eyes, make sure you have something worth watching”

“Cleanliness is next to Godliness”

A new record! A record that I hope will remain unchallenged for a long time to come. I have just gone 24 days without a shower, comfortably shattering my previous personal best of 21 days! The last few weeks have been a spectacular wilderness experience and the best riding of the journey so far. Being filthy enough to turn heads (and a few stomachs, I imagine) was a small price to pay.

Argentina's Perito Moreno glacier is merely a tiny finger at the distant end of one of the many arms of the enormous *Hielo Sur*, the largest ice-field outside Antarctica and Greenland. Nevertheless a 60 metre high wall (18 stories) of contorted blue ice stretching for several kilometers across a lake is a fine old sight. Weakened by the warmth of the afternoon sun the wall constantly crumbles. I watched a chunk of ice far bigger than a house topple silently in slow motion then crash into the lake in a thunder of rumbling echoes and huge waves of water.

A disintegrating back wheel is disconcerting on the emptiness of a Patagonian dirt track. Ramon, a portly road worker, saw me fretting and invited me into the workers' camp, philosophizing and counseling that “all you need in life is patience or money.” Historically short of both I comforted myself instead on a portion of barbecued lamb (*asado*) large enough for a Sunday roast dinner for a family of six back home. Two boiled potatoes were the only token nod towards healthy vegetable type stuff.

A combination of cheap African tat and cheap Brazilian tat was perhaps unlikely ever to be a great success and soon my wheel collapsed totally. The first time that I built a wheel I was aided by a shepherd in a field back in Romania. This time I was hunched in my tent in El Chalten amidst a savagely dismembered confusion of spokes, cogs and rim and a steaming thermos of coffee. Outside, the wind screamed and walls of rain smashed against the canvas. Many, many hours later I emerged, triumphantly brandishing my new, surprisingly round, wheel. The sun came out, the spectacular 3500 metre Cerro Fitzroy (Mount Fitzroy) graced me with its majestic presence over the village and I pedalled on towards

Chile.

I had heard rumours of an adventurous, alternative border crossing to Chile. But finding information on the route proved to be virtually impossible. Even the police, after much noisy telephoning and gesticulation, could only advise me that “there is no road and there are only two boats a month: perhaps around the 5th and the 20th”. Thanks very much.

Towards Lago del Desierto the first flames of autumn shades were alight amongst the green trees overhanging racing turquoise rivers stuffed with rainbow trout. Across the lake lay the Argentinian border and some seriously relaxed formalities. I have crossed into 30 countries now, but this was the first time a customs officer has been toasting his slippered feet beside a wood fire and given me a cup of tea. The Syrians could learn a thing or two from these chaps. A guard walked with me to point out the narrow muddy footpath heading into the bushes towards Chile. “Just follow the horse shit,” he reassured me, “and you shouldn’t get lost!”

The 7km track turned out to be a glorious 5 hour beasting through a forest along paths too narrow, steep and muddy to push the bike. At times I had to shuttle the bags and then the bike, slogging back and forth through the forest. Deep mud, cold rivers, scattered rocks and tree roots slowed things down too. Eventually I crested the low pass and saw below me Chile. It was an exhilarating day. The solitary Chilean customs post stamped me into Chile. As I was the only person who passed North in the entire month I suppose that I constituted a stressful day at the office for them. I continued down to the lakeshore to set up camp above the jetty in a small cove and wait for the boat. The lake shone in the evening sun and small icebergs were scattered on the surface. All around were bare rock mountains, dusted in the mornings with snow and topped with permanent thick snow or glacial ice. Apart from the border guards, where was the next house, road, streetlight, person? I hoped that the boat would arrive sometime...

Two days later the supply boat did arrive and we departed in a cold, dark dawn rainstorm. “Your country is at war,” I was told upon boarding the boat. It has been an odd experience to be so removed from the World over the last few weeks that I did not even know that several of my best friends were now fighting a war in Iraq. Were I not on this bike ride it could well have been me there too. As a Brit in Patagonia I am perceived here as the personification of the war itself. “You are at war” is said as in ‘you’ personally rather than ‘you’, your country. The people of Patagonia, like most of the World, are extremely cynical about Bush’s war-mongering motives and they are politely scornful that I (Britain)

have followed along with Bush.

On this journey I have found that Britain has a very good image around the World and the people I meet generally perceive Britain to be a 'good place'. But Blair's fawning obedience to Bush has done huge damage to our international reputation. Recently, for the first time (apart from whenever cricket or Eddie the Eagle is mentioned), I have been extremely embarrassed to be British. Despite that, I am 100% supportive of my mates in the Gulf. I know that they are utterly professional and competent and that they will help ensure that at least the British role in the war will be conducted efficiently, justly and capably. The Iraqis that I have met on this trip have all been wonderful, welcoming people and if this war brings about a swift, successful regime change for them then let Bush have his oil and his ego and Blair his patronizing little pat on the back and brief moment in the sun.

Anyway...

The boat, a chugging yellow and blue jolly thing, was crewed by four Chileans with big crooked noses, large ears and sprouts of unruly hair escaping from beneath rakish blue berets. A few hours later we arrived in Villa O'Higgins, a small village of corrugated metal buildings, and the cargo (2 shivering dogs, 3 nonchalant sheep, a bagful of indignant chickens, my bike and me) disembarked. I sat on a bench eating week old bread and watched a woman in her pyjamas and dressing gown chopping wood with an axe. The only other sounds were some clucking chickens and a far-off chainsaw: perhaps someone fed up of being watched as they chopped wood to boil their morning cup of tea.

Villa O'Higgins, despite sounding like a ghastly faux-Irish pub in Ibiza, is the very Southern-most point of the Carretera Austral (Southern Highway). One advantage of tin-pot governments and crack-pot dictators is that they like to build symbolic roads. The Carretera Austral (CA) was General Pinochet's little pet project, a plan to unite the far South of Chile with the rest of the country. Never mind that the far South consists of a mere handful of tiny villages amongst landscapes so wild that the cost of building the road was astronomical, costing lives as well as fat piles of cash. The road is often little more than a single track dirt road, horribly corrugated and so quiet that I rarely bothered to move from the middle of the road to eat my lunch.

The CA is one of the World's 'Great Roads' for cycling (along with roads such as the Karakoram Highway and the Friendship Highway) and I had wanted to ride it for years. I was not disappointed. In

fact the CA proved to be the greatest ride of the entire journey so far. But, whilst empty wilderness makes for perfect riding, it does not hold as much interest for the reader. Suffice to say then that, until further notice, assume a sagging dessert trolley laden with an endless selection of mountains, ancient forests, clear lakes, waterfalls, glaciers, uncannily bright blue rivers, log cabins with a constant thin plume of blue smoke drifting from the chimney and lush green alpine pastures. Iridescent dragonflies and hefty bees enjoyed the warmth of late summer. The road runs sometimes alongside bouncing streams in cool, sunless gorges and sometimes soars over passes and along cliffs. There are only two types of cliff in the World: those you can fall off and survive and those you can't. The latter are considerably more alluring and are plentiful along the CA.

The weather was a Curate's Egg for me. Bitter nights with ice in the tent, sharp dawns where cushions of cold cloud sit late in the valleys, blazing sunshine and soaring condors, rainy nights of wet sleeping bags and slow warm sunsets. The road was indecisive too. Soft sand or infuriating rocks, jarring corrugations and even a luxurious 200km stretch of paved road. On many days the smoothest sections were the cattle-grids.

As always I slept wild at night, beside rivers, on hilltops, once in a quarry (though constant rockfalls through the night were alarming) and once, in an area of absolutely impenetrable bush and giant rhubarb, I slept uninvited on someone's front lawn. Fortunately the owners did not come home that night.

Along the entire CA I never needed to use a tap as crystal clean streams bubbled everywhere. Camping beside rivers was torture though: as my revolting pasta plus stock cube feast boiled on the stove smug lazy trout rose for flies barely three metres from my plate.

One calm evening an armadillo strutted hastily past my tent. Apparently armadillo casserole is very good. However, I did invent one culinary revelation near the mountains of the Cerro Castillo National Park. I have named it 'Pasta Castillo'...

PASTA CASTILLO

(only available on smooth, egg-proof roads)

Serves 1. Ingredients: 300g pasta 1 stock cube 3 eggs

Method:

Boil pasta and stock cube

Crack eggs into pan. Do not stir. Cover until cooked

Serve with bread, preferably fresh, although old and stale is not uncommon in these parts. ¡*Buen provecho!* Enjoy!

After the glorious CA I was left with just a quick 300km dash to Bariloche (miles not smiles) for a good session of eating and that much needed shower!

Bariloche to Santiago, Chile (16th May 2003)

Look, if you had one shot, one opportunity,
To seize everything you ever wanted,
One moment,
Would you capture it or just let it slip?
- EMINEM

In admiration of Walter Sisulu (who was buried this week)

Stephen Hawking worried that each equation he included in 'A Brief History of Time' would halve its readership. Similarly risking your boredom I have a couple of numbers for you: I recently passed the 15,000 mile mark and I have reached a latitude of 33 degrees South which means that I am, at last, once again further North than Cape Town.

The drink of the South was *maté*, a hot infusion of what looked, and tasted, suspiciously like grass cuttings. *Maté* is drunk from a calabash through a silver straw. It is a drink to share, a social event, an excuse to idle time and to talk for hours. Whilst the locations and people changed each time, the *maté* and the conversation never did. In Argentina the dialogue would be passionate: a country that has had, almost literally, more presidents in the past year than I have had hot showers cannot be boring. Besides which there is Diego Maradona, revered and adored by all, an endless source of conversation, slandered and blasphemed vociferously by me ('*Tramposo*' [cheat] was one of my first-learned Spanish words). But in rural Chile it is different: "What do you think of the Argentineans?" ("Not much" is the reply they want) or "What did you know of Chile before you came here?" (errrr... Pinochet, the footballers Salas and Zamorano and nice wine are about all I can ever muster). Chileans seem to have a bit of a complex about their status in the World. Until the recent economic crisis Argentines tended to look down their noses at their Chilean neighbours and I get the impression that Chileans would like the world to take a bit more notice of them. I reassure them that the South of their country is wonderful (true, plus most Chileans have never ventured that far) and that Chilean *manjar* is better than Argentina's (untrue, but appeasing).

[*Manjar* is condensed milk boiled until it turns to caramel. It is much loved here and, spread on bread, has become my new staple foodstuff.] I am enjoying Chile, the people are very friendly and life is good yet I don't think that it will ever get under my skin and into my soul like the Middle East or Sudan or South Africa.

But I was reminded of the danger of generalising a country as I spoke with a beautiful girl in a grey town alongside Ruta 5. Ruta 5 is the spinal cord of Chile; a grubby, throbbing motorway that hurries people between the extremes of North, Middle and South. The beautiful girl had been backpacking in Europe and regretted to inform me that she disliked Britain. 'Dirty, grey, expensive and unfriendly' were amongst her reasons. Edinburgh and Oxford, the Highlands and Cornwall all now bear this unfortunate epitaph after a few days spent in a London winter. It is a major downside of my chosen method of travel that I too am only ever passing through. I am constantly amongst strangers and never really get to know a place thoroughly. It is like an extended wine-tasting tour without the pleasures and pitfalls of ever submerging your head and drinking one entire barrel.

The next couple of thousand kilometres blurred together in my mind. This is a little unfair as there were days of perfect volcanoes, conical and white, majestic and aloof, breathing a thin curl of smoke with James Dean nonchalance and an insinuation of waiting menace. There were forests of monkey-puzzle trees, spiky and dark whose pale fruit in its soft red case tasted like hot chestnuts on icy Prince's Street in an Edinburgh winter. There were miles of empty coastline with pelotons of pelicans gliding in formation inches above the noisy Pacific waves. But I have over 20,000km more noisy Pacific waves to watch so I did not linger long. There were enough days of dirt road to remind myself that I was in an adventure yet not so many as to remind me of how much I could be earning sat on my bum in an office in London looking forward to lunch and idling on the Internet. There were small low *caletas* (fishing villages) with yellow wooden rowing boats pulled skew onto the black sand beaches. Once I needed to cross an estuary but a combination of laziness, tight-fistedness and shyness meant I did not ask for a ride across. Instead I rode upstream for hours to cross the river at the first bridge, thereby ending that day more kilometres away from Santiago (and England) than I had begun it. I was pretty unimpressed with myself that night.

But there were also hundreds of interminable kilometres of pine and eucalyptus plantations. I crossed the first river in Chile whose water was too polluted to drink. Grimy towns near Temuco of nothing but liquor stores flogging cheap pisco and gloomy wooden shops spacing their wares carefully to try and fill

the shelves. Old Mapuche Indian men stand still and remembering, wearing random free baseball caps from petrol stations or battery fitting centres. The air is quiet. It is a heavy air of people existing, not living. The sky is dark and rain begins to fall. It rains all day. Constitution was a weary town huddled around a belching paper mill. A kind family took me on a proud tour of their town, but it was late and too dark to see much. It was like the old postcard "Constitution by Night." I think I saw the best of it this way. I was missing Patagonia.

One evening I knocked on a door to ask for water. Several hours later I was alone and half-drunk, sitting on a soft sofa listening to an Ella Fitzgerald CD. The man who answered the door had replied to my request with "wouldn't you rather have beer than water?" He ushered me inside, consumed a good deal more beer than I, poured out his life's woes to me, ate ½ a Viagra pill ("I'm not so old that I need a whole one yet!") and headed out to meet his young girlfriend, half his age. I felt flattered that he would not allow me to meet her in case my youth and legendary dashing good looks swept her off her feet! So I fell asleep on the sofa instead. I never did get my water.

In Concepcion I gave a talk at St. John's School where one young class felt sorry for me not having had a birthday party for the last two years. So, on my last day in town '5a' threw a surprise party for me, complete with hotdogs, cake, lurid fizzy drinks and enough chocolate to see me half way to Bolivia. What is more, that morning Leeds United rescued a farcical season by beating Arsenal. What a great day!

On a quiet stretch of road a car stopped beside me and the driver warned me that it was far too dangerous to be out in this area at night. "Thieves?" I asked. "No," was his reply. "Pumas?" Again, "No." It turned out that the grave danger was that there was 'nothing' ahead. No people, no houses, no thieves, no pumas and no psychos. Nothing but beaches and forests. Assured of a very safe night I thanked the man for his concern and rode on. It made me think about the fact that 99% of the world spends every night inside a building and a comfort of enclosed familiarity and security. In that light I could understand how 'nothing' could then be seen to be a frightening concept. But I felt lucky to not know where I would camp, to live my days by the hours of the sun and to sit watching the lonely sea and the sky, listening to the flung spray and the sea-gulls crying.

Perhaps it was inevitable that the ride could not continue forever in the same glorious vein as the Carreterra Austral. But as things descended to normality after the splendours of the South, so too I have come down with a bit of a bump. I have begun to realise that Alaska is still a fair way off and the

exhilaration of my own company is wearing a little thin. For many months now I have been so busy with clearly definable challenges: sailing the Atlantic, outrunning the creeping Patagonian winter and reaching the city of Concepcion where my first welcome in South America awaited. But as I left Concepcion I had nothing much to aim for anymore except thousands more miles and hundreds more days. Of course, once those miles and hours lose their emptiness and fill with memories they will improve drastically. It is just the anonymity of the anticipation that is unsettling.

As I felt glum so too did Rita, my bike. Spokes have been snapping, punctures popping, brakes breaking, gears grinding and a splitting tyre that I repaired by rummaging around a village dump and using the Achilles of an old rubber boot as an effective, if bumpy, repair. I must sort it all out here in Santiago for once I leave the hard work begins again: a long duel with the Andes and the *altiplano* awaits. But, apart from the tedium of my own company, I am looking forward to the challenge.

Santiago to Salta (30th June 2003)

“Life is different for men with vocations. They have more to lose.”

- Graham Greene

“La gente tiene que entender que Maradona no es una máquina de dar felicidad”

- Diego Maradona

“Yes, they’re sharing a drink they call loneliness, but it’s better than drinkin’ alone”

- Billy Joel

He travels fastest who travels alone.

- Rudyard Kipling

I have always said that if I was to wake one morning and realise that the journey had become a meaningless routine then I would stop and go home. To continue just for the sake of getting right round the world, to impress people, to confound doubters or not to disappoint supporters are not reasons I want to be keeping me going. That day arrived.

I know that you think I am lucky. That all my Mondays are like your Sundays. Everyday I wake up to a new view and the days are beautiful and different. I sleep where I want to in solitude and silence. I recognise the stars. I know whether the moon is waxing or waning and what time it will rise tonight. I see the seasons slowly change. But, as Pascal said, it is not good to be too free. Shakespeare too appreciated that if all the year were playing holidays, to sport would be as tedious as to work. This probably sounds absurd, but what I was yearning for was unreasonable deadlines, a jammed diary, a rush to try and squeeze in a quick game of squash after work, and the companionship of a cold, muddy football team. The crux of deciding that the time had come to concede defeat was that I was totally bored. Sharing the road with somebody would probably sort me out- even Eleanor Rigby has more fun than me these days! It seems that all I have is adventure and no lifetime. And I have, after far too long, finally begun to realise

that what other people make of me quitting is not important.

But before taking such a drastic step I decided to pause in Mendoza for a day or two, to be absolutely certain that I was making the decision I wanted to make. Mendoza is a beautiful city famous for fine wines and beautiful girls. I stayed ten days.

I must not have portrayed too bad a picture of life on the bike though because Fabien, a French backpacker, decided to buy a bicycle and accompany me to Salta. I readily agreed and decided to keep riding for a while longer. Over the next fortnight I re-learned that, at times, any company is better than no company, but that a good travel companion is, like a good heart, these days hard to find. It was interesting to watch Fabien on his debut ride- it gave me an idea of how I have changed imperceptibly but greatly over the last two years. Nobody I know can endure for long my excessively awful (but cheap!) lifestyle of banana sandwiches, taste-free pasta and no hotels and showers, but for a Frenchman it was simply unthinkable! He loaded his bags with home-made jams and salamis and quickly decided that I was very strange. I think that he enjoyed the ride and the challenge but one evening as he lay exhausted, dirty and hungry in his tent, Fabien looked out at me and said, with feeling, "if I had known that it would be this hard I would never have started." "Me too," I replied, "me too."

Alone once again I need to search for new challenges, new foci, new objectives within the broad framework of the original project in order to keep myself motivated, to fight the boredom and apathy. I came so close to quitting that I know that to keep myself motivated is going to be extremely difficult. I want to increase the fund-raising aspects of the expedition and to improve the publicity of the ride.

Back to the road: riding out of Santiago I saw fresh snow on the Andes beneath a cold blue sky. The sun poured gold onto the snow. A jetplane glinted above me. I could have been on that plane... I pushed the thought from my mind: Look! a ragged line of workers are bent over in that field, shaking earth from fat orange carrots and tying the green bushy tops into bunches. Behind me the sky is a sad orange-brown haze: Santiago's shroud of smog, a depressingly obvious reminder of how cars are killing our world.

The mountain pass over to Argentina was muffled under two metres of soft snow. "Fierce gradient-next 55km" warned the road-sign as the road furled upwards like a black ribbon in the wind, winding ever higher. I spent the night with the Chilean army in their lonely mountain post. We watched MTV and Chilean Big Brother and ate buttered toast whilst outside the cold night swallowed the silent mountains.

The soldiers found it amusing that the English rugby team, comfortably the mightiest in the world at the moment [come on Aussies- try to argue that one!], have a very non-macho red rose as their emblem.

The road careers skyward through 45 brutal hairpin bends just minutes after I woke up. In the freezing dawn my breath is great gasping balloons of warm mist and I pour sweat despite wearing only a T-shirt. I ignore a series of very clear signs indicating that bicycles are forbidden and pedal on into the long road tunnel between Chile and Argentina. Almost immediately speakers in the tunnel start yelling at me and frightening echoes bounce around the darkness. I pedal faster, but the hooting sirens and flashing orange lights chasing me down tell me that someone in orange overalls and a helmet is about to get very angry. He starts yelling at me for my idiocy. I smile a lot and apologise that I “no speaka el Spanish.” I am escorted in silence and the pick-up to the bright daylight and snowy freshness at the end of the tunnel and the start of Argentina. Aconcagua, the highest mountain in the Americas, is a fine sight. I think back to Kilimanjaro in East Africa and look forward to seeing Everest sometime in the future.

The north of Argentina is amazingly varied. Walt Disney valleys in pastel shades with patchwork fields and cosy homes pluming woodsmoke; windhewn red sandstone gorges where the sun arrives late but bright and cacti stand like watching sentinels on the skyline; a fierce sandstorm filled my eyes and ears with sand and seared my nostrils. Snakes of orange sand writhed across the road and dust swirled in the sky; barren empty valley floors where the villages marked on my map proved to be little more than figments of some caffeine-charged cartographer’s fertile imagination at his drawing board in London. This was potentially serious as we had counted on refilling our water in these villages. Fortunately, offerings of bottles of water at roadside shrines kept us going! I hope that the donors would not begrudge us them.

Noel Coward found the potency of cheap music extraordinary. Approaching Mendoza when I had decided to quit I pulled into a service station to refill my water bottles. Blasting out over the forecourt from massive speakers was The New Radicals “You get what you give”, a song that will always remind me of the last day of riding the length of Britain from Land’s End to John O’Groats. We had done the ride in just nine days and the final day was a brute, with a freezing Scottish winter wind mocking our attempts to fight it. But when the five of us finally hauled ourselves into John O’Groats we felt a real triumph. Far better than the transient pleasure of giving up... And a few weeks after Mendoza I was sitting alone at

sunset on a mountain pass. Listening to David Gray's "Babylon" I looked ahead to where the sun sat pale and low in white flat clouds above the jagged mountains. The road glided down to yet another empty valley and I could see for about 50km up the wild, quiet plain in the direction the road would take me tomorrow. There was nothing constricting me, no traffic lights changing green to red holding me back. I thought of everything I have left behind and everything that lies ahead and I remembered that beginning this journey was the best decision I have ever made.

Argentina is a fantastic country, one of my favourites. The diversity is vast, both in the land and the people. The language is easy to learn (I have just started to read my first Spanish book, the autobiography of Maradona), England beat them at football last year, steak is cheaper than pasta, and being a blond gringo has advantages too. From here I head for the hills, towards San Pedro de Atacama (Chile) and the Salar de Uyuni (Bolivia). 4500 metre passes, 10 days of riding, walking and pushing from one village to the next, -15C nights and a sketch map on a piece of writing paper as my most reliable navigational aid. A little different to the hedonism of Mendoza and Salta, but preferable, for now, to that early flight home.

“A Gringo trail along the road more travelled”

(3rd August 2003)

Si no lo sientes, no lo entiendes (If you don't feel it, you don't understand it)

- motto of “The Strongest”, La Paz's champion football team

O passi graviores revocant animos et haec olim meminisse juvabit

(Ye who have suffered great trials gather courage, perhaps one day it will be pleasant to remember them)

-WHO?

“It's fricking freezing in here, Mr. Wigglesworth”

- Dr. Evil

Tim Henman at Wimbledon required my annual futilely optimistic support (albeit from afar) and this left me with little time to try and reach La Paz in time to meet my friend Rob. A painful beating awaited yet I knew that it would be a spectacular stage, riding up into the Andes to San Pedro de Atacama in Chile before crossing Bolivia's Salar de Uyuni and the altiplano.

I rode out of Salta at dawn past jubilant, bleary Boca Junior fans stumbling happily homeward after celebrating the previous night's triumph over Santos in Brazil. The miles zipped away as I enjoyed the last flat paved road for some time. I spent a night in Purmamarca, a cosy adobe village clustered around a shady plaza and a peaceful white chapel. 2000 metres above sea level Purmamarca is wrapped amongst

bare mountains of seven vivid shades of purple, red and green. Tomorrow night I would be cold and exhausted at over 4000m on the road to Chile. I knew that it would hurt and nerves and excitement turned inside me as I lay in my tent enjoying being warm for the last time.

The wind was relentless as I launched into the unending sandy hairpin bends, snaking up through canyons and cacti and sharp pinnacles of eroded red rock. Because of the wind I had to walk the entire pass and it took more than a day to reach the summit. And after the summit I kept walking for six days, rarely managing more than 20 miles a day as I hauled the bike through soft sand and the wind battered me. The days and nights were bitterly cold and I heaved for breath in the thin air. And to think that I was supposedly back in the Tropics once more! I carried food for 5 days and 18 litres of water in the bleakest land I have ever seen.

Two months ago a German died up there from the cold and the altitude. During the day I would uncharitably curse what I decided looked like the 'largest carpark on earth' but as I calmed down in the evenings within the small pocket of stillness inside my tent that flapped and thundered constantly in the gale I could appreciate the austere beauty of the grey gravel plains reaching for ever towards pale yellow mountains. Dumb llamas and pretty vicuñas grazed on the hovering, shimmering horizons. But even Charles Darwin, that most enthusiastic of diarists, confessed to growing tired of the adjectives 'barren' and 'sterile' in the Atacama desert. Even inside the tiny escape of my tent the wind managed to fling sand around. All day I wore a bandana over my nose and mouth and in the evenings my pan would fill with sand as I cooked. (A tip for eating sandy food: when chewing keep your teeth slightly apart. That way you notice the crunchy sand less).

The Argentinian border guards revived me as I arrived exhausted and demoralised, giving me a bed for the night and hot soup beside the fire. The customs officer even presented me with a confiscated bottle of Paraguayan liquor to take with me into Chile. I pushed on, mindful of my deadline for La Paz yet having to pause regularly to fight for breath. A consolation was to sleep among the lonely hills in a good old drainage pipe once more (begun on my first wildman adventure in Spain, sleeping in drainage pipes has held a strange appeal for me ever since! Good comedy and good sleeping.), looking out onto a dark blue lake crusted with ice and salt and stark orange-red hills slowly releasing a cold full moon into the silent starry sky.

A tourist jeep stopped and told me that in no more than 15km I would reach the 4600m summit and

that it would all be downhill from there. Yippee! 45km later (45km!!) I crested the last of many dispiriting false summits, shouting with anger at the tour group and completely exhausted after one of the toughest, most beautiful weeks of my journey. I was cold, knackered and angry. But with 50km of downhill to San Pedro de Atacama the world lay all before me. Down past Laguna Verde and Volcano Licancabur I flew, whooping with jubilation. I was hurtling into a mighty golden sunset and all my exhaustion was forgotten. It was over, I had arrived!

But San Pedro was a disappointment for me. After the hundreds of hours of solitude it was a shock to arrive in a town of Gringos and restaurants and 'Hihg Sped Internat' (sic) computers in low adobe huts. The restaurants and hostels were all out of my budget so I retired to a dusty campsite to make pancakes and pick the skin from my wind-fried nose. There were two types of people in San Pedro, tourists and people selling stuff to tourists. It was interesting to notice how the locals dressed as much as possible in sweatshirts, jeans and baseball caps, whilst the sartorially conscious gringo prided himself on llama wool socks and gloves, perhaps a woolly llama jumper, and certainly the traditional woolly hat of the Andes, complete with ear flaps and llama motifs. Interesting also how much beer and pizza can be consumed when you happen to bump into two school-friends you have not seen in 8 years! It was a very pleasant surprise to meet Rob Fergus and Hugh Griffiths ambling around San Pedro after a couple of weeks of mountaineering.

Radio San Pedro -the only station available on the radio- was magnificent, dedicated to the likes of 'Glory of Love', 'Danger Zone' and 'The Eye of the Tiger'. I also spent an evening at the circus. A troupe of people left England in 1997 in an old green double decker bus and have been touring the world putting on shows as they go to fund their travels!

It has taken me 5 months to reach country number 31 and I was glad to be returning to Bolivia, especially as I planned to ride across the Salar de Uyuni. The Salar is a dried-up ancient sea, a vast plain of dazzling white salt. The salt is hard and flat, a mosaic of pentagons that crunch like crisp snow when you ride over them. It is a unique landscape with no roads or villages for at least a hundred kilometres, just whiteness stretching out to touch the dark blue sky. You navigate by compass or by heading for one of the volcanoes so far away across the Salar.

Continuing the fine traditions of Queen Street, Edinburgh and the Radcliffe Camera, Oxford, I decided that some naked cycling was in order as I whizzed across the emptiness. In shoes, woolly gloves (it was

freezing) and sunglasses I flew by some tourist jeeps, delighting in their astonishment and amusement. The plan backfired, as these things are wont to do, when one of the people I flashed past was a teacher at the school in Lima where I was due to give a talk next week! I wonder whether they will even allow me through the door now?

There is total silence on the Salar. The world feels a long way away. There are a lot of tour jeeps crawling “like ants over a giant’s eiderdown” but I was reassured more than anything by how minimal man’s impact has been on this environment. The sheer scale of the untouched-ness was uplifting. It was a glum thought that in a couple of days I would have to return to roads and people and the drabness of reality. Many people had warned me about the plunging night-time temperatures of -20C on the Salar, but camping in that surreal world was something I had to experience. Besides, once people tell you that something is impossible it suddenly becomes very appealing! With 6 shirts, 2 fleeces, a down jacket, 3 hats, 3 pairs of socks, 2 silk sleeping bags, 2 sleeping bags and the bottle of revolting yet warming Paraguayan liquor I made it through the night. A shower of frozen condensation fell onto my face as I unzipped the tent at first light, but to be alone on the Salar at sunrise made it all worthwhile. Just me and a white emptiness stretching forever towards the shimmering horizon and the pale yellow sun. I jumped around, whooping and dancing like an idiot to warm myself up. Perhaps that liquor was stronger than I thought. Salar de Uyuni: definitely a world highlight.

The sturdy Bolivian women wear an extraordinary costume. Layers of frilly skirts hang like an umbrella to their knees above thick woolly stockings. Over layers of cardigans they carry on their back a brightly striped blanket containing a bundle of possessions and a baby. Thick black pigtailed reach down to their waist. And then, the pièce de resistance, an extraordinary accessory whose origins I can barely imagine. Possibly the least flattering invention since the moustache: a tiny bowler hat, much too small for the head, balances precariously on top and looks, quite frankly, daft.

Bowler hats aside, the change from Argentina and Chile to Bolivia is vast: facially, culturally, financially and educationally. For example, a lady, aged about 30, told me that she had 7 living children and that 8 others had already died. Malnutrition, poor health and little education is still normality for most humans of the 21st Century. A young Aymara Indian girl wondered whether with aeroplanes you put the animals on the roof as is customary with some Bolivian buses. A man asked me to point towards England and I extended my arm North-West. He appreciated that my home was further than Potosi (about 200km

away) but was incredulous when I told him that my country would be about 100 hours by bus and 4 weeks by boat from where we stood. I no longer tell people I have ridden from Tierra del Fuego, rather I pick a town a few days ride and the boundary of people's conception away. That is sufficiently unbelievable for people here.

I was left with a straight dash across the *altiplano* to try and reach La Paz before Rob flew in from London. The scarce villages were grey, dusty clusters of adobe huts and the stores sold little more than stale crackers, lurid fizzy drinks and rusting cans of sardines. Bowler-hatted ladies ambled behind shuffling flocks of dirty sheep and llamas with red ribbons tied in their wool. The road was terrible so for a few days I followed the railway line towards Oruro instead, cycling cross-country across the tough, coarse fuzz of yellow grass that is the altiplano. The altiplano is high, yellow and plain (like airline custard) and I dreamed of asphalt and some more varied scenery. I chewed coca leaves to pass the time. The days blurred but the kilometres passed.

The appearance of Mount Illimani (6400m) on the horizon showed me that I was nearing La Paz. Arriving in La Paz you are treated to one of the world's great cityscapes. Beneath a wall of black mountains a huge bowl suddenly opens, a canyon filled from rim to rim with cheap red brick box houses and black, staring windows. Illimani towers above everything, four magnificent white peaks. The road swoops and curves for 13km down deep into the bowl and the city centre of La Paz. It is a fun city with narrow steep streets and cramped markets where bowler-hatted ladies sell everything from fresh fruit juices to sun-dried llama foetuses. Stalls sell hot, tasty salteñas (pies) or lamb heart kebabs or icecreams and I grazed constantly as I explored.

The highlight of La Paz though is the shower in the 14th floor apartment that I am staying in. The shower has a massive window giving you a spectacular view of the city and Illimani (and the city of you) as you scrub your back and sing loudly. The best shower of the past two years! Plus the delicious smell coming from the kitchen right now suggests that my host Anthony is frying up my first bacon butties in an unacceptably long time! It has been a tough but spectacular few weeks, but I have company now and the ride to Lima should be fun. With HP sauce on the bacon things are going pretty well right now.

THANK YOU for all the e-mails I received after my last report when I was considering heading for home. To give you an idea of my debate, here are a few of the comments I received:

“Don’t you dare give up! What on earth am I, and the other several thousand cyclists around the world who read your site, supposed to fantasise about from behind our desks to relieve the tedium of our sad little lives if you quit?”

“Don’t tell me you are going home before you go to Australia?”

“It is obvious from your site that one of the reasons you chose to do the ride was to rebel from the conveyer belt that rolls so many promising, bright eyed and bushy tailed young graduates to London... But I’m now a couple of years of work down the line, and think you will come to see that the quality of your life is not to do with the path you choose as much as with the way in which you execute your decisions.”

“You probably feel very adventurous, the young English explorer out there, and when you come home to the hero’s welcome you deserve, you’ll feel this even more. But ... your greatest achievement will not turn out to be the cycle ride. It will be stopping the cycle ride. Along the lines of Steve Waugh’s words, “We have lost this series and people now say we’re not the greatest side to have played the game. But I do not believe humans can aspire to being perfect. Greatness is being able to respond to this loss in the correct manner.””

“You have a great opportunity. Use it while you can.”

La Paz to Lima (18th August 2003)

Scenery is fine, but human nature is finer.

- John Keats

No matter how much money you've got, you can't seem to get any Rice Krispies.

- Luther Blissett (ex-English footballer) on the hardships of life overseas

This whole escapade began over six years in a dull lecture at Edinburgh University. Clearly sensing my less than devoted concentration Rob leaned forwards and passed me a note. To my great lack of surprise the note was not about advanced mathematics. Rob too, it seemed, was not particularly enthralled by proceedings as I read his Eric Newby-esque note, "Do you fancy riding from Pakistan to China in July?" The rest is history...

Now Rob had come to join me for a few weeks once again, and we were going to ride together from La Paz to Lima. So, Rob was in La Paz. Unfortunately, thanks to an airline mix-up, his bike and all his stuff were still in Venezuela... But Rob and bike were somehow emotionally reunited and we hit the road. La Paz is the highest capital city in the world (3600m) and to leave the city you have to first climb the winding 13km road to over 4000m. Not yet acclimatized, Rob was in considerable discomfort from the altitude and fell fast asleep in the tent while I was cooking. I ate double portions and embarked on the sizzling literary masterpiece that is David Batty's autobiography. White mountains filled the near horizon. The sun set and the temperature plummeted. Tomorrow we would reach Lake Titicaca.

We were woken at the first frost of dawn by a pair of policemen in terrorist style balaclavas and flak jackets. All we could see was their brown eyes and gold teeth as we emerged sleepily from the tiny tent. We were an unusual beginning to their day and, reassured that we were not criminals, they enjoyed watching my small stove slowly turn ice into coffee. We shook hands and Rob and I rode off towards the lake.

There are two Copacabanas in the world. One is a beautiful beach with bikini girls playing football beneath sun-kissed mountains. The other is a chilly village with an extravagant, gaudy gilded church with

hungry beggars outside. We were at the second one. Never mind. Alleged miracles in Copacabana have led to it becoming a pilgrimage site for drivers to have their minibus-taxis blessed. The vehicle is covered in garish paper decorations, a priest splashes holy water over it (water which, incidentally was for sale at a higher price than mineral water), firecrackers are let off, the wholly merry shebang is toasted liberally with a few bottles of beer and then the drivers roar off, convinced of their invincibility, to drive ever faster on ever balder tyres and beep their horns ever-louder at the gringos on their bicycles. I have rarely been less convinced by a religious venue.

Lake Titicaca is famous as the highest navigable lake in the world (3800m). Her beautiful turquoise waters were, unsurprisingly, sacred to ancient people living in these arid highlands. Inca farming terraces stripe the steep yellow shores and further away the huge white peaks of the Andes reach for the sky. The sky was a deep, deep blue and the clouds as fluffy as can be. It made for a beautiful scene, a fine ride and a foolishly cold swim. The Bolivian Navy potters around the lake, a quaint and poignant hark-bark to the days when Bolivia had a coastline before Chile nicked it all. Swathes of reeds lay in fan shapes on the shore to dry in the sun. The ancient reed boats of Titicaca were made famous by the expeditions of Thor Heyerdahl. Today, though rare, you can still see sturdy old men poling these buoyant boats of tightly tied bundles through the shallows.

Juliaca (Peru) was a busy town of blessed beeping taxis and swarms of bicycle taxis: modified machines with a couple of seats in the front and colourful decorations all over. Like most things Latin the bicycle-taxi drivers are very macho, racing daringly amongst the traffic. One that I overtook obviously thought he was *el grande queso* (the big cheese) of the streets judging by the bold slogan painted on the side, "OH HOW YOU SUFFER AS I PASS YOU!"

When Rob and I ride together we always find ourselves covering absurd distances. Encouraged by a story of some natural hot springs where we could spend the night we rode over a mountain pass into the night. I pointed out to Rob the Southern Cross constellation as he had not been in the southern hemisphere for years. A thin smile of a moon sank gently as we climbed up to 4300m. In the dark I saw a man chopping wood with a hefty axe. It was too dark to tell whether he was still in possession of all his toes. It was freezing cold and silent except for confused barking dogs as we slogged up the pass. Occasional curious torch beams picked us out from scattered unlit mud huts. At night present fears are less than horrible imaginings and the yappy little mutts are easily supposed a bear!

Hurting down the other side of the pass towards lurid red bush fires and hoping there were no potholes in the road (a daft hope in the developing world), I came within inches of being puréed by a truck and we were both freezing. The promised thermal baths appeared just in time for a glorious nocturnal wallow before we crawled, tired and unusually clean into our sleeping bags.

The misty dawn saw us zipping down a valley between high yellow, terraced hills. Trout rivers raced us and the first green trees for weeks were a welcome sight. We crossed the Urubamba river, a tributary of the Amazon, and shortly after reached Cusco. Cusco is the gringo hub of South America and the base for visiting the famous ruins at Machu Picchu. Sipping a beer in the Irish pub is the traditional behaviour of most visitors to Cusco. Sitting on a balcony in the bustling Plaza looking over a hillside of warm red tiled roofs and the gaily fluttering rainbow flag of the Incas (which is, a little confusingly, the same as the gay flag) was a very pleasant activity that required several afternoons devotion.

The ride from Cusco down to the coast was absurd. An innocuous looking distance on the map plus our being at over 3000m led us to believe it would be a nice cruise down to the beach. Having already traveled that road twice before (hitch-hiking and bus a few years ago) I should have known better. But the reality of motorized travel is that, unless you are driving (and in many countries even if you are driving) you pay very little attention to the road and so I had but dim recollections of the odd big hill here and

there along the way. By bicycle the road turned out to be a fiend. Beautiful but fiendish. We whooped down descents of 30, 40, even 50 kilometres then hauled ourselves back up the other sides of the valleys. At 4000m the world was bleak and silent, llamas looked at us without interest and the nights were freezing. In the grey sleepy dawn the soft whoomph and dancing yellow flame of the petrol stove brought light and warmth (and coffee) back to our world. Down at 1800m streams chattered and villagers called out to us as we passed. In one village the gathered crowd asked me if I wanted to buy a small child. I said that I would be delighted to as in my country we enjoyed eating small children. The crowd laughed and two small children burst into tears. Green parrots shrieked and swifts carved the air. In the valleys the days were hot and the nights warm.

We relished any opportunities for engaging in the noble art of 'truck surfing' or grabbing hold of an overtaking truck and being dragged up the mountain behind it. It has the advantages of being entertaining as well as dangerous and it requires courage and initiative. We loved it. Being dragged by one arm behind a smoky, noisy truck up 1000m of steep Andean hairpin bends whilst dodging potholes and oncoming traffic at uncomfortably high speeds is not as easy as it sounds. And for anyone who thinks that it sounds like cheating they should try it- the searing agony in your arm makes cycling seem like the easy option. However, it is more exciting and faster than cycling. With the aid of some good truck surfs and over 120km of downhill I notched up a new trip record of 220km in one day, arriving in Nazca well after dark for a well-earned beer. (Nazca is famous for the ancient 'Nazca Lines', mysterious outlines of huge animals scratched into the stony desert that can be seen only from the air.) The ride down into Nazca was a surreal highlight. By the bright light of a full moon we raced down 80km of constant downhill. The land was utterly empty, with mountain after mountain rolling down ahead of us, monochrome in the moonscape as we swooped and curved round the contours, the air growing ever warmer as we dropped from over 4000m to just 600m above sea level. Side by side on the edge of the sand, we rode in the light of the moon, the moon, we rode by the light of the moon.

As I slowly move north across the planet I see the moon changing. In the north of the world you see the man in the moon. In the deep south there is a rabbit instead. I have been watching the rabbit gradually change back into the man in the moon and the Southern Cross sink ever closer to the horizon. By the northern hemisphere it will have disappeared.

Rob is good company- he is comically scared by chasing dogs, frequently disappearing into the

distance at high speed in an attempt to shake off his four-legged pursuer, yelling and squirting water at it. And upon seeing a brass band procession one day he let rip with a joyful cheer. At that very moment the coffin appeared round the corner, borne solemnly on the shoulders of mourners. High in the Andes he was fearful as we camped beside a river about the possible appearance of the lesser-spotted (never spotted?) Andean crocodile. His moustache was even sillier than mine, resembling a gay-looking Ned Flanders from the Simpsons. (Mine made me look like a very weedy Asterix by the way). And you should have seen him squeal on the night when a tiny mouse was running around our camp! He assures me that his revenge for my writing this will be all sorts of scandalous revelations if I eventually get a book published...

Continuing my percipient anthropological observations on the important things of life I acquired a taste for Inca Kola, the bright yellow fizzy drink that is everywhere in Peru (I have even heard it referred to as Peruvian champagne). The interesting thing about Inca Kola, apart from its extraordinary hue, is that there are only two countries in the world where Coca-Cola is not the top-selling drink: Peru and Scotland. And Inca Kola and Scotland's Irn Bru taste identical. Irn Bru is a weird orange to Inca Kola's alien yellow but the surreal bubble-gumminess is the same. Odd, huh?

There are any number of advantages to riding with company. An inevitable and early rebellion by my companion against the monotony of banana sandwiches and a consequent diet of Pepsi and chocolate being a major plus. Another aspect of travelling with company is how much it dilutes the experience. For me, in short bursts, this is a wonderful break. From total immersion I now found myself only half in Peru for the other half of me was anywhere else in the world, jabbering in English about England and what I have been missing on TV and whether McDonalds have brought out any new flavours of ice-cream recently. If I was too tired to ask for directions Rob could do it. If I couldn't be bothered to answer the same questions that everyone asks all the time I could let Rob do it.

The PanAmerican Highway runs along the coast to Lima through a grey depressing desert, past vast sand dunes and uninteresting towns. Occasional oases relieve the suicidal air a little with bright colours and fragrant crops but there was little incentive to delay and we quickly ate up the kilometers into Lima and a surprisingly hospitable welcome from the school despite last month's incident on the salt flats...! (And, with my conscience getting the better of me, perhaps it may have actually been me, not Rob, who was a teeny-little bit scared by that mouse...)

CONGRATULATIONS to Idi Amin for finally doing something decent with his life and dying.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS:

“The Kon-Tiki expedition” - Thor Heyerdahl. One of the greatest, most exuberant adventures ever as a group of blokes cross the Pacific on a raft.

“Touching the Void” - Jo Simpson. Ouch! This mountaineering book touches pain and despair and determination that you will hope you never ever encounter. Incredible.

“Eastern Approaches” - Fitzroy Maclean. Nothing to do with Peru, but fascinating travels, adventures and war-time antics written with humour and deprecation.

“Road Fever” - Tim Cahill. If you are impatient at my progress try this: Cahill drives the length of the Americas in just 24 days. It will take me 1½ years...

This was a long report and I apologise. Perhaps you are hungry now... I really enjoyed this Peruvian soup, both for it's flavour and it's size...

Sopa Criolla

1 handful chunks of beef on bone

1 handful chopped tomatoes

1 handful chopped potato

1 chopped onion

Salt & Pepper

noodles

Garlic

coriander and oregano

2 eggs

Hot peppers

Fry beef, tomato, garlic and onion. Salt and pepper. Boil thin noodles (as many as you want) and

potatoes. Add herbs. Combine noodles and meat sauce. Use the water from the noodles to make the soup. Bring to a boil. Turn off the heat and break in eggs without stirring. Add hot pepper if you like it spicy.

Two Years on the Road... (1st September 2003)

The Guardian is the only major newspaper to have taken an interest in my ride so far. The link below takes you to a summary of my first two years. Many thanks to the Guardian, for whom I wrote this piece:

A year ago today I was in Botswana, sitting in the shade of a tree, mop-haired, barefoot and tearing hungrily at a papaya, the juices pouring down my face and onto my filthy clothes. Today I am in a rich suburb of Lima where men drive Mercedes and their wives try to look 21.

I left England two years ago to attempt to cycle around the planet, raising funds for the charity *Hope and Homes for Children*. 29,000km and 32 countries later and I now have the end of South America in my sights.

The first year I rode across Europe, through the Middle East and down Africa towards Cape Town. I began the second year by crossing the Limpopo River into South Africa. I don't know whether it was white paranoia, genuine danger or a bit of both, but I was bombarded with warnings about my safety in South Africa. So, instead of my usual wild camps I began camping at farms or staying with the chiefs in small villages. These were warm, educational, entertaining evenings and yet they were the very people I was warned to avoid.

Lesotho was a land of open spaces and vast, silent mountains. The hills never stopped and the gradients were so steep that even pushing the bike frequently rendered me a red, sweaty bundle beside the road. If anything the descents were worse: steep hairpin bends which resulted in a hole wearing through the sole of my left shoe (my brakes having long since broken).

Climbing in Lesotho to the highest road in Africa epitomised why I undertook this whole journey - the search for a challenge, a slow sunset silhouetting all before me, and fold after fold of wild, empty mountains. I began this journey because England was too easy. I wanted to attempt something that I did not necessarily know that I was capable of. If this year needs a defining snapshot, that climb would be it.

Having omitted to pack a cavalry sabre in my panniers I had to resort to scything open my Pierre Jourdan champagne with my Leatherman penknife. A crisp "pop" and time to celebrate. I had now ridden a bicycle from my front door in England to Cape Town in South Africa. Feeling stunned and muted to be

sat beneath the famous Table Mountain, and perplexed by just how ordinary I feel on this day I have strived towards for so long. Thinking back - faces, places, feelings. Half forgetting the wandering and the pain, half remembering days gone by.

Strange that South America should begin beneath Cape Town's Table Mountain. Yet, as I stood on the foredeck of the yacht, watching my waving friends slowly shrink from sight, it felt less like an ending than the start of a new chapter. I was bound for Rio de Janeiro amidst the glamour and excitement of the Cape-to-Rio yacht race. Table Bay was teeming with racing yachts and well-wishers, a dramatic horizon of spears of masts and curves of white sail. Helicopters swooped low above the fleet. The shoreline was lined with people and scores of binoculars flashed. I turned away from Africa towards the sunset and South America.

To my undisguised glee a newspaper article in Cape Town had labelled me an "intrepid young British adventurer". But, on that first night at sea, I was brought brutally back down to size as I hung over the side of the boat retching my guts out. The days blazed beneath a pale blue sky and above an incredibly clear ocean. Sunsets brought relief from the furnace, leaving the world to darkness, us and the comforting glow of the GPS and compass. Small clouds of black and silver shone as we cruised down the yellow carpet of moonlight. The helmsman heaved on the wheel as we surfed down the heavy, fast black waves. It was eternal motion, racing ever onwards towards South America. As the weeks passed the moon waned, filling the utterly black sky with so many stars that they spilled over into the ocean, showers of phosphorescent sparks streaming in our wake.

Crossing the Greenwich Meridian was a big moment for me - the next time I cross it I will be back in London! Only 360 degrees still to go. I was on my way home at last. The waves thumped, sluiced and fizzed on the hull as I lay in my bunk. Come on wind, take me home! We crossed the finish line in the dead of night, beneath the outline of Sugarloaf Mountain and the vast Christ the Redeemer statue gleaming white and appearing to hang in the dark sky. I now had myself a new continent to cycle across.

South America began in a deserted carpark on a damp sea shore, an inauspicious beginning for the long road north. But I was thrilled to be there, to be in Patagonia at last. For years names such as Ushuaia, Cape Horn, Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia have lured me. Patagonia feels, even today, like the end of the world, and the tantalising challenge she lays down has lured explorers for centuries.

The distances in Patagonia are virtually unimaginable to anyone raised in the efficient compactness of

Europe. With the flat pampa comes the notorious Patagonian wind, so fierce that for two days I was unable to cycle and had to walk. One day I could not even walk into the wind and lay huddled under a bush, waiting for it to ease enough to allow me to stand up. On days like these Alaska feels a long way away.

An Argentinian border guard walked with me to point out the narrow muddy footpath heading into the bushes towards Chile. "Just follow the horse shit," he reassured me, "and you shouldn't go wrong!" The solitary Chilean customs post stamped me into Chile. As I was the only person who passed north in the entire month I suppose that I constituted a stressful day at the office for them. I continued down to the lake shore to set up camp above the jetty in a small cove and wait for the boat.

Southern Chile was a spectacular wilderness, with the best riding of the journey so far. One day I rode through a forest along paths too narrow, steep and muddy to push the bike. At times I had to shuttle the bags and then the bike. Axle-deep mud, knee-deep cold rivers and scattered rocks slowed things down, too. I set a new personal record when I went 24 days without taking a shower. But being filthy enough to turn heads (and a few stomachs, I imagine) was a small price to pay to experience those landscapes.

"Your country is at war," I was told. It has been an odd experience to be so far removed from the world that I did not even know that several of my friends were now fighting a war. As a Brit in Patagonia I was perceived as the personification of the war itself. "You are at war" was said as in "you" personally rather than "you", your country.

I have crossed back and forth over the Andes too many times. Riding back to Argentina once more, the mountain pass was muffled under two metres of soft snow. "Fierce gradient - next 55km" warned the sign as the road furled upwards like a black ribbon in the wind.

In the north of Argentina were Walt Disney valleys in pastel shades with patchwork fields and cosy homes. Later I came across wind-hewn red sandstone gorges where the sun arrives late but bright and cacti stand like sentinels on the skyline. A fierce sandstorm filled my eyes and ears with sand and seared my nostrils. Snakes of orange sand writhed across the road and dust swirled in the sky; barren valley floors where the villages marked on my map proved to be little more than figments of some cartographer's fertile imagination.

The wind was relentless as I launched into the hairpin bends of yet another Andean crossing, snaking up through canyons and cacti to the heights of the Atacama desert. Because of the wind I had to walk for

six days, rarely managing more than 20 miles a day. Dumb llamas and pretty vicuñas grazed on the shimmering horizons. The days and nights were bitterly cold and I heaved for breath in the thin air. And I was supposedly back in the Tropics once more! I carried food enough for five days and 18 litres of water. I camped beside a lake crusted with ice and salt and stark orange-red hills slowly releasing a cold full moon into the silent sky.

The Salar de Uyuni is a dried-up ancient sea, a vast plain of dazzling white salt. The salt is hard and flat, a mosaic of pentagons that crunch like crisp snow when you ride over them. It is a unique landscape with no roads or villages for 100km, just whiteness stretching out to touch the sky. It was a glum thought that in a couple of days I would have to return to roads and people and the drabness of reality. I decided that some naked cycling was in order as I whizzed across the emptiness. In shoes, woolly gloves (it was freezing) and sunglasses I flew by some tourist jeeps, delighting in their astonishment and amusement.

Many people had warned me about the plunging night-time temperatures of -20C on the Salar, but camping in that surreal world was something I had to experience. Besides, once people tell you that something is impossible it suddenly becomes very appealing. With six shirts, two fleeces, a down jacket, three hats, three pairs of socks, two silk sleeping bags, two sleeping bags and a bottle of revolting yet warming Paraguayan liquor I made it through the night.

Lake Titicaca is famous as the highest navigable lake in the world (3,800m). Her beautiful turquoise waters were sacred to ancient people. Inca farming terraces stripe the steep yellow shores and further away the huge white peaks of the Andes reach for the sky. It made for a delightful scene, a beautiful ride and a foolishly cold swim.

As I slowly move north across the planet I see the moon changing. In the north, you see the man in the moon. In the deep south there is a rabbit instead. I have been watching the rabbit gradually change into the man in the moon and the Southern Cross sink ever closer to the horizon. This second year has been so different to the first yet some things remain the same - endless beautiful places and good, kind welcoming people.

Here are some more thoughts as I launch into year 3...

I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch where thro'
Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
- Tennyson "Ulysses"

Two things have become apparent to me during the first two years of my attempt to cycle around the planet. Firstly, in many ways, the world seems very small- gossip from home on the email, the same music in every bar in the world, David Beckham's haircuts discussed globally. Secondly, from the seat of a bicycle, the world seems very large. Three more years of riding until I arrive where I started (and know the place for the first time?) is a daunting prospect indeed. Yet the further I ride the more I feel at home in our world; places begin to feel more normal and the similarities easily outweigh the differences, whether it be Vienna, Beirut, Khartoum, Nairobi or Lima.

I left England rejoicing in England's 5-1 drubbing of Germany and set my sights towards Australia. But the September 11th attacks and the USA's retaliation made my planned route through Afghanistan and Pakistan suddenly seem rather less appealing. So in Istanbul I turned right instead and headed for Cape Town. The aftermath of September 11th made for exciting riding through the Middle East. Three weeks hauling my bike through the 450C desert Sudan sands felt like a holiday compared with the stone throwing children of Ethiopia and its post-Live Aid culture of expectant, demanding begging. Maasai men (the biggest posers I have ever met) looked enviously at my straight yellow hair whilst I wondered at the vast holes in their earlobes. A dollar-a-day budget saw me living on banana sandwiches; dull fare but I still declined the offers of boiled mice on sticks in Malawi. Landmines in Mozambique made heading into the bush to go to the loo less than relaxing, whilst in Zimbabwe mad Mugabe's land redistribution policy (to himself mostly) left me fearing that I was watching the beginning of an irrecoverable decline in that most beautiful of African success stories. And I thought that it would never happen, but one day Table Mountain eased over the horizon, the champagne cooled in my pannier and eventually Africa was

behind me.

I hitched a lift on a 17 metre racing yacht, the renowned 'Maiden', and joined in the "Cape to Rio" race over to South America. 24 days at sea saw more time devoted to eating *ceviche* than to sail trimming. Offered 50 pounds for the pleasure of wielding the scissors I succumbed to my first haircut in 18 months and allowed the sailor- well-oiled with *caipirinha*- to scalp me before I did battle with the notorious howling winds of Patagonia. From the southernmost city on earth, Ushuaia, I have been crawling northwards, through the glorious south of Chile, Argentina's winelands and the world's driest desert. I broke my previous record as I managed 24 days without a shower. 4600 metre passes and -20C nights helped pass the time as did some entertaining, yet very cold, naked cycling across Bolivia's Salar de Uyuni, one of several claimants to the title of "World's Largest Salt Lake." A recent second haircut was prompted by a desire to look as un-druggy as possible as I head towards the uncertainties of Colombia. After that awaits the USA where I hope my English accent and Royal blood will help me. The odd white lie never hurt anyone, did it? A quick dash across Australia and Asia and I'll be back in Trafalgar Square before you know it, or rather in three years time.

I entered the project with my eyes wide shut, dreaming of adventure and exotic, far-off lands and blazing sunsets. I had subscribed to National Geographic, read Bill Bryson and watched Michael Palin on the telly. So I knew a thing or two about travel destinations. What I had omitted to consider, however, was the 8000km between Trafalgar Square and the Pyramids, the 12,000km between the Pyramids and Table Mountain or the 8000km between Ushuaia and Machu Picchu. On a scale such as this the highlights shrink to the size of bright stars in a vast night sky. It is the journey itself that has to be the reward. All that lies between the destinations is the true journey. The destinations are important merely to make the journey necessary and give it some purpose. This is the biggest single difference between cycling and backpacking where the sights listed in the Lonely Planet can start to become little more than just a tick-sheet. I have ridden through deserts and mountain ranges and mad Arabian *mêlées* and fiestas and African funeral parades. Strange and extravagant sights and sounds (that break the monotony) and unfathomable animated conversations on the street corners and market stalls and cafés of the world are the fascination. Yet I am just looking into someone else's normality at the vast ordinariness of all the people of the world. Everywhere I ride through is only someone else's normal Thursday afternoon. Indeed the reverse effect is also true, whereby I, an ordinary English guy on a bicycle, becomes an exotic,

extraordinary spectacle to the people and places I am seeing, merely by being two years out of my own natural environment.

The challenges of the first year on the road were the feelings of isolation, of never belonging, of always moving on. The battles have been against loneliness and boredom rather than against corrupt officials with large moustaches, gun-toting child soldiers or large mountains. This second year I have grown accustomed to my choice of lifestyle. After two years I feel that I could belong anywhere; every break in every city leaves me thinking, "I could live here, perhaps I should stop and settle down here." There is so much normality in the world that you really can feel at home wherever you choose to feel at home. It has been a warm, welcome discovery to find that I can find something in common with almost everyone in the world.

Generalizing a little, a great view is a great view, a sunset still a sunset whether it be over a Roman temple or African village, the Pacific or the Atlantic, Aconcagua or Kilimanjaro. I think therefore that the challenge of my third year on the road, the ride up to Alaska, will be to try to keep my sense of wonder and my wanderlust. The challenge has lost some of its appeal now that I realize that it is actually possible. I need now to generate other ways to motivate myself, other metaphorical dangling carrots. Perhaps a real carrot would work? I don't really like carrots though. I am sure that, somehow, I will keep myself moving on. I look at maps of the world through different eyes these days, calculating in my head the time it would take to cycle between cities or countries or continents. It is all feasible. The world is not so big, even when seen from the saddle of a bicycle.

Top 10's of the first 2 Years...

COUNTRY

1. South Africa 2. Sudan 3. Jordan 4. Argentina 5. Turkey 6. Kenya 7. Lebanon 8. Zimbabwe 9. Chile 10. Lesotho

CITY

1. Cape Town 2. Rio de Janeiro 3. Istanbul 4. Budapest 5. Beirut 6. Belgrade 7. Salta 8. Amman 9. Cairo 10. La Paz

FOOD

1. Islamic Iftars (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan) 2. Braais (South African barbecues) 3. Asados (Argentinian barbecues) 4. Cape to Rio race (Atlantic Ocean. It is no wonder we didn't win the race- we spent the whole trip eating. Thanks, Joel!) 5. Njera (unique Ethiopian food. Usually revolting, but the good stuff can be really good) 6. Saltenas (Bolivian Cornish pasties) 7. Kebabs (sorry, Turkey and England: the best ones are in Damascus) 8. Sausage sandwiches (Belgrade)

BUILDINGS

1. Petra (Jordan) 2. Abu Simbel (Egypt) 3. Baalbek (Lebanon) 4. Lalibela (Ethiopia) 5. Pyramids (Egypt) 6. Machu Picchu (Peru) 7. Valley of the Kings (Egypt)

NATURAL BEAUTY

1. Carreterra Austral (Chile) 2. Wadi Rum (Jordan) 3. Table Mountain (South Africa) 4. Dana (Jordan) 5. Salar de Uyuni (Bolivia) 6. Patagonia (Chile and Argentina) 7. Victoria Falls (Zimbabwe) 8. Tlaeeng Pass (Lesotho) 9. Perito Moreno glacier (Argentina) 10. Fitzroy (Argentina) 11. Torres del Paine (Chile) 12. Cappadoccia (Turkey) 13. Coffee Bay (South Africa) 14. Nile in the Sudan desert (Sudan) 15. Blue Nile Falls (Ethiopia) 16. Lake Titicaca (Bolivia and Peru) 17. Lake Malawi (Malawi)

BAD ROADS

1. Sudan 2. Ethiopia 3. Southern Chile 4. Lesotho 5. Northern Chile/Argentina 6. Bolivia

MEMORABLE DATES (where were you when...) 1. England 5- Germany 1: my last day in England, Sevenoaks, Kent 2. September 11th 2001: cycling through Germany on my way to Afghanistan. 3. Beckhams's penalty against Argentina: in the Sheraton Hotel, Dar Es Salaam, where British Airways

were foolishly offering free beer for any English people present. The place was packed! 4. Declaring War on Iraq: blissfully unaware in Southern Chile 5. Christmases: cycling in Jordan and relaxing in Cape Town 6. Queen Mother's death: on my way to Lalibela, Ethiopia 7. Queen's Jubilee: Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania

And, because it's not all hard work...

MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRLS

1. Mendoza 2. Rio de Janeiro 3. Cape Town 4. Beirut 5. Belgrade

WORST HANGOVERS

1. Cape Town 2. Nkhata Bay, Malawi 3. Mendoza 4. Rio de Janeiro (sleeping on a moving yacht doesn't help) 5. Nairobi 6. Amman 7. Salta

Lima to Cajamarca (14th September 2003)

“Hell is alone”

- TS Eliot ”

Hell is other people”

- Jean-Paul Sartre

On George Bush: “Of course, Jesus and Evil Knieval don’t consort too well in one psyche”

- the New York Review of Books

Remembering Wilfred Thesiger, one of my greatest inspirations, who passed away recently.

Two years ago this all began and yet still I feel nervous and vulnerable every time I wake at the end of a break and realise that I have to get back on the bike, back on the road, back on my own. I rode into year three and the faint grey drizzle of grid-locked Lima’s Monday morning rush hour. But compared to how I felt two years ago it was a positively joyous occasion. After the reckless extravagant hedonism of my three weeks with Rob (a Coke a week! Sometimes even more!) it was depressing to return to my ascetic normality. To return to the Panamerican Highway was even worse. George Orwell cheerfully described the future as “a heavy boot stamping on a human face- forever.” The Panamerican Highway hauling north from Lima is perhaps not quite that bad but it certainly depressed the hell out of me. It must be even worse for the chickens reared in huge canvas tents alongside the road in the gloomy desert, force-fed on fish meal to fatten them fast enough to keep up with Peru’s insatiable appetite for chicken. Those vast production lines almost depressed me into a relinquishing of carnivory. Two days of grey nothingness left too much time for thinking and it was a relief to turn towards the fierce gradients of the mountains once again, to sit on a warm rock beneath a blue sky watching the shadows change on the hills as the sun set and a quiet breeze brought the sounds of the nearby village up to my hidden campsite in a small canyon. I was following a river valley up towards Huaraz, through small villages of green sugar cane and

bright chilies like colourful carpets spread out to dry in the sun. I passed two children trying to enjoy one pair of roller skates, each limping along on one skate. In Barranca a man tried to sell me a suit cover. He seemed surprised that, as an Englishman, my panniers did not contain my tuxedo. I think he had been watching too many James Bond films.

For two days I rode upwards, my hatred of the flat ease of the Panamerican waning with each hairpin bend. Above the green villages and tiny cultivated fields was a bleak and desolate beauty- high, cold and silent. Ahead appeared the Huascaran mountain range, the highest peaks in the Tropics. Their white heights caught the dawn long before it reached me down at a mere 4000 metres above sea-level. I tried to enjoy a quiet roadside breakfast looking at the mountains, but an old woman was busy abusing me (and even putting a curse on me) for not giving her any money. She assured me that I was very rich and that every gringo gave her money. She was so angry at me that I couldn't help but smile and that only made her madder.

People come to Huaraz to climb. I did the next best thing. I sat in Café California, drank coffee and read books about climbing. For months I have been umm-ing and aah-ing about whether or not it is worth the risk to try and ride through Colombia. Then twice in the same day I came across these famous words of Goethe and that decided it: I am going to Colombia.

“Until there is commitment, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: That the moment one definitely commits oneself then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues forth from the decision, raising in one's favour all manner of unforeseen incidents, meetings and material assistance which no man could have dreamed would come his way. Whatever you do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now.”

The mountains around Huaraz are the most beautiful I have seen and the ride down the valley parallel to the range was a joy. I planned a cunning shortcut through the mountains to Cajamarca, a plan to keep me away from that awful Panamerican Highway. When every local told me that my planned route did not

exist it confirmed what really I already knew: from painful experience of my father's 'shortcuts' on family outings I knew that shortcuts are rarely short. Instead of 4 days ride on paved roads and a climb up to 2750m, I ended up riding and walking for a week along dirt tracks and climbing up to 4700m!

The dusty track was hacked into the side of a cliff, high above a fast, dirty river where men panned for gold. I asked one man, a poor man dressed in rags, whether there was much gold in the river. "*Mucho!*" he cried, enthusiastically. I admired his optimism. For anyone who knows Peru an indication of how little this track was used was that for two days I did not see a single place selling fizzy drinks or a single building boldly painted with the name of a potential village mayor and an urging to vote for him or her ("Work not words!", "Clean hands and truth!", "Drinking water and televisions!" they promised).

There was little flat ground and so I spent a few nights sleeping carefully on cliff edges. The nights were warm and I did not need my tent. Waking in the night I could estimate the time by the position of the moon. At dawn, as Venus slowly faded, I would brew coffee, snuggled in my sleeping bag and admiring the spectacular downward view. They would not have been good nights for sleep-walkers.

One evening I was laying out my sleeping bag on a very narrow and high footpath when an old lady in a magnificent hat came round the corner carrying a large bundle of twigs on her back. "Are you going to sleep here?" she asked. "Yes, lovely view isn't it?" I replied, enthusiastically. She continued on her way, unsurprised. Everywhere I have been on this trip the local people have been unfailingly unfazed by the eternal weird behaviours of gringos.

The fertile imagination of my cartographer in London continued unabated, rendering my map pretty and colourful but rather less than useful as a navigation tool. I had to rely on the animated discussions of villagers as to which way I should take. The general consensus was usually that it was impossible by bicycle. Much of their advice was based on little more than imaginations that my map-maker would have envied. Distances in Peru are given in hours not kilometres and it is an art to interpret them. Firstly, you must appreciate that more often than not the given answer is completely made up and is probably best ignored. Secondly, you must evaluate the probable state of the vehicle in which your helper is likely to have travelled in order to come up with your own estimate of the distance. I have at home a book from the Royal Geographical Society of 1892 full of handy hints for travellers. One piece of advice runs along the lines of "In Equatoria distances are given in hours not miles. By judging the stoutness of the fellow's legs one can reach one's own conclusions...." It seems that little has changed.

The shortcut was brutally tough and I pushed the bike uphill for two entire days. The track then dropped right back down to the river I had climbed up from and then proceeded to climb for two more days. It was tiring stuff. But the rewards were ample, finding in Pallasca my favourite place in Peru: a hilltop village of red-tiled adobe houses and villagers eager to host a rare gringo. Travel writing of the genre “they had never seen a gringo before” is tedious, but it is undoubtedly true that the further away you are from the Lonely Planet-clutching swarms of Israelis the more fun you will have. I listened to the old folk tell me tales of their lives, watched Baywatch on TV and, clustered around a crackling radio, cheered on Peru against Paraguay in a World Cup qualifying match. After the match (which to everyone’s surprise and delight Peru actually won) the plaza was full of children playing football with an old plastic bottle, their ponchos flapping in the crisp night air.

An important update on the state of the ladies hats: we have moved from the rakish ridiculousness of the altiplano’s bowler hat through straw boaters decorated with plastic flowers and now onto enormous Stetsons, unisex and approaching diameters of two feet. They are magnificent, though umbrella sales are thought to be struggling in the area.

I began the trek over the mountains towards Huamachuco. People said that it was too far, too high, not possible. What I like to do when planning something is to draw a line down a piece of paper. One half is for “Why this is not possible.” The other half is for “How to achieve this.” Then I scribble out the “Why this is not possible” side and think no more about it. I explained this to the villagers I was talking with but I think that they just thought that I was weird. One lady urged me not to go: “It is so very dangerous: there is absolutely nothing except silence! Oh the silence, it is horrible!” There were tales of terrorist lairs and robbers, but I had heard imaginative warnings like that so often that I did not pay much attention and set off pushing the bike up towards the pass. I was struggling with the altitude, pausing to catch my breath every hundred metres or so. The track weaved around contours amongst the barren crags and dropped down into valleys and climbed over crests. The way was so rocky that I even had to walk the bike downhill occasionally. It was an empty and beautiful world, like a giant version of the Scottish Highlands, the beckoning silence pierced only occasionally by a bird’s harsh shriek, feeble against the immensity of it all.

Hours later a bus (coming from a different village) screeched to a halt in front of me and everyone leaped out and began tugging at me, yelling at me that I must turn around and return the way I had come

immediately. 15 minutes ago the bus had been held up at gunpoint and everybody was freaking out. The driver was beeping his horn and revving his engine: he didn't fancy hanging about. Everyone jumped back on board and, with a cloud of dust, the bus disappeared leaving me alone in the silence and very scared. I have often spoken confidently of how if something bad is going to happen it is going to happen and so there is no point worrying about it. But now I was very scared. And I made a decision which even at the time I knew was daft but now sitting here seems positively stupid. Rather than retrace my hard-earned steps I chose to carry on regardless. The lady in the village had felt the nothingness of these mountains to be hellish, yet now I wanted nothing more than not to see another soul. I rode on, terrified, stopping to climb ridges to scout out each valley before I entered it. I camped secretly and without lights and moved on before dawn. For the next 36 hours I saw not one vehicle and could not decide if that was a good sign or not. I saw only three people and took care to hide from them all. Yet, despite my precautions I was still rattling along very slowly, in broad daylight, carrying a substantial value of possessions, along the only track in the area. Targets do not get much softer than that! It was a nerve-racking, unpleasant experience. However, with immense relief, I reached Huamachuco safely. Where the bad guys had gone I had no idea and did not really care.

However, I did learn one valuable lesson from my decision to persevere down that road, and that was that the integrity of this journey (i.e. riding every inch of the way possible) really does not mean as much to me as I thought that it did. I am not, as I had often thought in the dusty recesses of my mind, willing to risk life and limb for the sake of this bike ride. Bugger that: call me what you like, but if guys with guns are in the vicinity again then rest assured that I shall not be!

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS: "The Incredible Voyage"- Tristan Jones. The author decides to sail his boat on the world's lowest and highest pieces of water... and everything in between. Barking mad.

"The Long Walk" - Slavomir Rawicz. In 1941 Rawicz escaped from a Siberian labour camp and trekked to freedom... to India! Extraordinary [Note: reports in 2006 suggested that, sadly, this may not actually be a true story. Another astounding escape story is 'As Far as my Feet will Carry me' by JM Bauer]

"Visions of a Nomad" - Wilfred Thesiger. In these photos Thesiger captures so many of the memories I have of my ride through Africa so much better than I ever could.

Cajamarca, Peru to Quito (10th October 2003)

- * More than 13 million children in sub-Saharan Africa have lost a parent because of AIDS.
- * 22% of British adults are obese.
- * In sub-Saharan Africa, 6000 people a day die because of AIDS.
- * One less trip to the cinema per year by people from the world's wealthy nations could pay for a healthcare system for all of Africa.
- * The assets of the world's richest 358 people equals those of the poorest 2,300,000,000...
- * In the last UK census 390,000 people stated their religion as "Jedi Knight"

"Maybe all you know about South America is how to eat an avocado pear" - Thomas Cook advert, 1953

Tips from the 1953 South American Handbook:

"Travellers should make a special point of never sitting in damp clothes, even for five minutes."

"The most suitable clothing is either 2 or 3 lightweight suits of the 'Palm Beach' type or, better still, half a dozen suits of white duck."

"At altitude be sure to walk slowly, and on flat feet."

"Curiosity will conquer fear even more than bravery will" - James Stephens

"What is stronger- fear or hope?" - Lance Armstrong

"Life's not like a box of chocolates. It's more like a jar of chillies. What you do today may end up burning your ass tomorrow."

From Cajamarca I dropped back down to sea-level once more, to hot skies and men wearing shorts and flip-flops. One evening I slept beside a haystack, the straw soft and prickly beneath me. A lady from the village looked dubiously at my camping stove, departed, and returned soon after walking with the exaggerated careful step of somebody carrying a large bowl of soup and a plate of rice. Waitress service and a comfy bed of straw: I will remember that village.

But the next 1000km were utterly forgettable. The kilometres melted away as I pondered their worth; how important really is the need to ride every possible inch? Is it more important than that wasted week of my life? What did I gain from that lost time? The thoughts revolved as the wheels span and Peru passed by until one day I reached Cuenca and was glad to have those kilometres behind me and to have achieved them on the bike. I remembered little, but it is the little things that you remember; the things that you do not notice from a bus: the undertaker who sold coffins and Coca-Cola in the same shop; the cafés with the melancholy Jesus prints and the out-of-date calendars of improbably-breasted beauties clutching cold beers; filling my water bottles at a bakery-cum-bus depot-cum-cock fighting arena; burning my tongue because boiling water is so much hotter at sea-level than it is up in the Andes.

The land reminded me of Africa, of dust-hazed heat and scrubby bush, water being drawn from wells to quench the thirst of hump-backed, contoured cattle. A man may shout “gringo!” rather than “mzungu!” as I pass by here but the cheap nylon soccer-style shirt and the baseball cap are the same. Like in Africa flip-flops dangle from his feet as he rides his donkey, towing a creaking water-cart on wobbly wheels. Like in Africa minibus taxis with glitzy stickers and dubious brakes race by, over-loaded and over-fast, over the other side of the road with the conductor leaning out of the window and whistling whilst the driver overtakes something, hooting and hoping for the best as the road rounds a corner.

In Africa it was an art form to spot somebody who was likely to speak English and hence be able to assist you. And all over the world it is advisable to choose well when selecting a person to ask for directions. These judgements have to me made only from the person’s appearance as you have never yet spoken to them. The next stage of assessing a person’s character comes once you have actually spoken to them. A useful pointer that the person I am talking to is a jerk is when their English vocabulary is limited to the regular use of the word “fuck” or if they ask incessantly about the price of my bike (my standard response: “it was a gift”, or the surreal: “about 20 kilogrammes” which usually provides enough confusion to allow a quick change of topic).

Ecuador’s only fault is to come near the end of a long run of Andean countries. If I was riding from north to south and just beginning my South American travels in Ecuador then perhaps I would love the country, but right now I want something a bit more different, a change of scene, a new chapter. The terrain doesn’t help much: the exasperation of non-stop long-ish uphill and downhill with not a moment’s flat respite overwhelms any appreciation for the landscape. The Caribbean tranquillity of

Cartagena increasingly fills my thoughts. The rainy season has finally caught me up so that the impressive cones of volcanoes such as Cotopaxi were hidden in grey cloud. Ever-gloomier reports from Colombia are swallowing me in my own brooding storm clouds. Additionally, Ecuador uses the dollar as its currency meaning that it is probably the most expensive South American country I have visited. But the people are generally friendly in Ecuador, with the notable exceptions of the man who leaned out of the window of a passing truck and punched me in the head, and the man who looked me up and down before declaring “with a body like that you will never make it round the world!”

The town of Catamayo seemed to specialize in coconut ice-lollies. I enjoyed one then rode on. About an hour into the steep and extremely hot climb out of town I noticed, sweating and suffering, that the road was dotted all around with lolly sticks as passengers finished their lollies and, this being South America, threw the sticks out of the windows. One hard hour of riding equals a few minutes of ice lolly in a car. Not for the first time I thought of the speed and ease of motorized travel.

Given my own imaginatively mangled interpretations of the Spanish language, it is a little unfair for me to enjoy people’s terrible English so much (there is after all that famous Spanish proverb about “el pot y la kettle”), but here are a couple of recent gems from restaurant flyers given to me in the streets of Loja: “The pleasure to savour the best meat to the grill and their traditional roasted Uruguayan” “He/she offers:... strong plates... cured meat of head... rice with pottage and meat hoe... tortilla to the French with mushrooms... chicken to the coca line... sandwich and mounted of beacon” Which all helps to remind me of my old adage when selecting an eating venue: “If it has a menu in English- definitely too expensive; if it has a menu- probably too expensive; if you can recognise what you are eating- perhaps too expensive.”

I left Loja at dawn and took the old dirt road out of town towards Cuenca. Brisk broom-sweeps outside homes bloomed clouds of dust into the air. Pockets of cloud wafted upwards out of the valley. The morning began its business. Dawn in the Developing World is always such a bustle that I sometimes wonder why it is still so poor. A green valley, a small quick river, clusters of trees, black and white cows, a veil of dew over the grass and even clouds of steam when you exhaled. Just like home: only three more years to go!

I stayed in Cuenca with Seb, an Ecuadorian friend of a friend. He had just returned from a year in England and I arrived in time for his ‘Welcome Home’ party. It felt odd to watch him telling of exotic,

far-off lands (“and in England they have this special sauce that they put on everything. They call it ‘gravy’...”)) and to see how good it was to be back amongst friends and family. We went to watch the local football team, Deportivo Cuenca, in a terrible, lazy match. But the stadium was nice, the fans were quiet and relaxed and I drank a beer and enjoyed the views of the cathedral and surrounding mountains. Leaving his house to ride to Quito I had a near-disaster as his dog escaped and ran off to the park. Terrified about losing my host’s dog I gave chase, running round and round the park (to the amusement of the early morning joggers) until eventually I got the little bugger back home!

Gringolandia, an area of Quito, rivals even Cusco for feeling utterly unlike South America. Germans in zip-off trousers and sandals, Brits clutching guide books, Israeli crowds shouting loudly about high prices, Scandinavians booking Spanish classes, Americans in over-priced restaurants (Italian, Indian, Thai, Israeli, Afghan or Mongolian), Frenchmen nursing hangovers, Dutch discussing discount Galapagos Tours and a few Indian women with several babies and no money sitting on the pavement begging from us all. The Old Town of Quito is beautiful, and on Sunday when it is closed to traffic it is wonderfully peaceful. Large plazas, fine old colonial buildings, ambling families eating ice creams, small shoeshine-boys looking for business and smug couples lounging intertwined together on park benches. At some mysterious signal showers of pigeons scatter from the rooftops, their shadows racing across the plaza as they swoop and curve and somehow agree on a new resting spot. Then peace once more. On a small hill above the city is a large metallic statue of the Virgin, prominent and impressive (and no doubt keeping a safe watch over us all) yet standing in that very slightly crouched posture of somebody who is busting for a pee. I watched the funniest clown that I have ever seen as he followed people and mimicked their every move. How cruelly embarrassing it is to be reflected (I noticed he was working on Mirror Street) and exposed so ruthlessly. Hilarious for the onlookers yet I took great care to keep out of his way.

One evening I gave an enjoyable presentation at the South American Explorers Club (www.samexplo.org) in Quito but apart from that I have done very little but be bombarded with ever-gloomier and depressing and frightening tales about Colombia. And, worst of all, the Rugby World Cup is not on TV out here either. Unbelievable! Good luck, boys...

I HAVE MADE a bet with a New Zealander that if England wins the Rugby World Cup he will donate \$50 to *Hope and Homes for Children*. If New Zealand wins, however, I have to carry a brick on

my bike for a week... Are there any hopelessly optimistic Aussies, Bokke, French or even Welshmen
keen to take me up on this bet too?!

Why I have decided to cycle through Colombia (15th November 2003)

I wrote this back in Ecuador, but did not put it onto the site just in case I didn't make it through...!

The recent spate of kidnappings has brought Colombia back onto the front pages of the world's press. Unrest, organised crime, kidnappings, drugs and civil war have haunted Colombia for decades so this is hardly new news. But I am currently two years into an attempt to cycle around the planet, raising funds and awareness for the charity "*Hope and Homes for Children*" and getting through Colombia has preoccupied me more than most countries during my planning. I had hoped to quietly get through Colombia before my ever-nervous mother even managed to find it on her world map. That seems unlikely now. I am currently in Ecuador, bound for Alaska, and Colombia awaits. But the recent story of the spectacular escape from his kidnappers by a young Briton has forced me to re-assess (for the umpteenth time) the wisdom of attempting to cycle alone through Colombia. The escape story is undeniably spectacular and the ending a happy one, but, as I am sure he realises, it could so easily have ended with a bullet in the head. As one World War II pilot observed, "that fine line between bravery and stupidity is endlessly debated- the difference really doesn't matter."

Yet, despite the apparent madness of Colombia today, I have decided to continue with my ride northwards and I want to try to explain why. A small part of my choosing to cross Colombia is not wanting to break the chain of my journey (I have ridden 20,000 miles through 33 countries and so am reluctant to take a bus now). However, I already cheated in Tanzania: shamelessly hitching a lift for 100km to get to a television in time for a World Cup football match is hardly the stuff of chisel-jawed, rugged adventurers. I have also conceded that the Darien Gap [the tiny stretch of road-less jungle swarming with guerrillas between Colombia and Panama] will probably prove too dangerous for me to cross and I will probably just try to sail around it. So the seamless continuity of the ride cannot justify my decision.

Similarly I make no pretence that the decision is made out of bravery: last month I narrowly missed an armed hold-up in the mountains of Peru and have no intention of repeating the experience. My new motto

is “wherever there be danger... I be not.” Robert Young Pelton, the author of the macho book “The World’s Most Dangerous Places” (like the “Worst-Case Scenario Handbooks” it makes entertaining toilet reading but little more) recently wandered into the Darien Gap and got himself kidnapped, seemingly as a very daft publicity stunt to show how very unusually brave and heroic he was. That does not particularly appeal to me.

People know that the press loves to hype stories, yet still people take all that they see and read at face value. In the aftermath of the September 11th attacks my route took me through the Middle East. I received so many warning emails from people about the dangers of those Arabic countries. Yet I have never felt safer than when riding through Beirut and “axle-of-evil” Syria. Sudan has been at war for decades yet the Sudanese people were the most hospitable I have ever met. Mad Bob Mugabe declared that by ‘Heroes Day’ in August 2002 all whites would be removed from their land. I was in Zimbabwe in August 2002. It was a sad, sad ride but I never felt endangered, despite being the whitest white person in the land. And now the pessimistic emails are pouring in once more, well-meaning and appreciated, but mostly from people who have never been to Colombia. Emails from people within the country suggest a rather less Doomsday scenario. I want to see the truth for myself and to reach my own conclusions.

Cycling through a country is an incredibly vulnerable way to travel. Alone, in the middle of nowhere, with a very slow getaway machine you are a juicy target. But I believe that it is this very vulnerability that has helped to get me so far and so safely. The people I meet on the road are incredulous; they may even think that perhaps I am a little mad; but without fail they enjoy the story and do what they can to help me. I am not perceived as a rich, privileged tourist (In Africa only people too poor to take a bus would travel by bicycle) and so I am not treated as one. I believe that, on my bike, I am safer than in a snazzy LandCruiser or a comfy tour bus. However, my vulnerability does mean that if anybody does decide to do anything bad to me then there is very little I can do about it. I hesitated to write this article because I acknowledge that there certainly is a risk attached to riding through Colombia at the moment. The risk is probably small, but the consequences of losing the gamble are potentially unpleasant. Despite rationalizing with myself I am scared (as well as excited and intrigued) about the next few weeks and if I do run into trouble then these words are going to look pretty foolish. But present fears are less than horrible imaginings and I will be relieved once I have actually crossed the border into Colombia and can just get on with it.

My main confidence in choosing to ride through Colombia comes from my experience that there are an incredible number of good people in the world. But good people do not make very interesting headlines and consequently everybody focuses on the minute number of people wishing to do you harm. When I travel through places where tourists do not normally tread I have always been looked after immaculately. Most people are proud of their country or their town and they want foreign people to see them in the best possible light, especially when suffering from an image crisis as severe as Colombia's. I know that Colombia is a beautiful country, I have heard that the people are the friendliest, most relaxed in South America and I am looking forward to reaching Cartagena, one of the continent's most magnificent cities. Cartagena and the gentle waters of the Caribbean will signal for me the end of another continent and the beginning of another celebration, Colombia-style.

Before then I sincerely hope that those currently held hostage in Colombia are released soon and I am looking forward to discovering a new country for myself. Besides, surely any nation that produced Shakira cannot be all bad, can it?

Colombia (15th November 2003)

“Present fears are less than horrible imaginings”- William Shakespeare (Macbeth)

“Nothing is particularly hard if you divide it into small steps”- Henry Ford

“Donde estan tus amigos, esta tu tierra”- Poker Beer, Colombia

“And I hope when I get old I don’t sit around thinking about it

But I probably will

Yeah, just sitting back trying to recapture

A little of the glory. Well time slips away

And leaves you with nothing mister but

Boring stories of glory days”- Bruce Springsteen

“Breathe, breathe in the air!

Don’t be afraid to care

Look around and choose your own ground

For long you live and high you fly

And smiles you’ll give and tears you’ll cry

And all you touch and all you see

Is all your life will ever be.”- Pink Floyd

I dithered and delayed and fretted in Quito for two weeks. You cannot properly ride the length of the Americas without riding through Colombia, yet everybody was telling me that I was insane to even attempt it. My experience of other “dangerous” countries was that they usually turned out to be just fine. But Colombia was unlike anything I had encountered before. Everyone had their own juicy story to scare me with, of kidnappings and extortion and murders and guerrillas and lawlessness. I usually ignore

people preaching doom and gloom but in Quito I was talking with people who actually knew Colombia. Colombians urged me not to cycle through their land, Brits who had lived in Colombia told me that they would only fly between cities, a Dutch chap told of his own kidnapping, the BBC's man in Colombia told me it was simply not worth it and a risk analysis company specialising in Colombian Security said that I would be stupid not to fly straight to Cartagena. I left Quito feeling more despondent and reluctant than at almost any time since this ride began. The end of South America looked so near and yet so impossible.

In my heart I knew that the risks were small and the rewards much greater, but because so many people had given me so many warnings I knew that if anything unpleasant did happen to me I would feel such a prat for ignoring them all. I also felt that to attempt to ride through Colombia was just too self-indulgent and too selfish towards those who would rather I did not get kidnapped by guerrillas.

Absent-mindedly I crossed the equator once more (I have now ridden in every quarter of the globe) but I had not a drop of enthusiasm left in me- I was too confused about what to do in Colombia. I was also scared. It was proving to be the hardest decision I have had to make. I knew that if I did not ride all that was possible to ride I would certainly regret it for life. I also knew that I would probably regret my stubbornness whilst hungry guerrillas boiled me down into gringo soup.

I crossed the border into Colombia. As you would expect when crossing from safe, stable, touristy Ecuador into a country whose 40 year conflict has left 40% of the country guerrilla controlled, churning out 80% of the world's cocaine and 25% of the world's fake US dollars, where 3 people are murdered an hour and 3000 kidnapped a year (a World Record) the atmosphere changed instantly. I have never crossed a border with such a drastic change. And the change made up my mind: I was going to cycle Colombia. Because from the ultra-reserved, quiet Indian people of Ecuador where forcing a smile or a 'good morning' out of somebody was an achievement I suddenly found myself amongst friendly, fun, energetic people who told me how beautiful their country was and how well I would be treated. The doom and gloom of the last few weeks in Ecuador evaporated immediately. I fell in love with Colombia; I rode across the country; I had an incredible time and now I can only think smugly of what all those tourists back in Ecuador are missing. I did not ignore the warnings, and I appreciated people's well-intentioned concerns, but I am angry at myself for temporarily forgetting my good experiences in other troubled lands. Never again will I not go to a country simply because others tell me it is not safe to do so: you have to see it for yourself and decide by yourself.

Without a doubt Colombia has been my favourite country in South America, a country that I would enjoy to live in one day. Peekay's maxim in 'The Power of One' was "first with the head, then with the heart" and that summarises perfectly my decisions over the past month. Besides, the girls in Colombia are, without a trace of doubt, the most beautiful that I have ever met. I love this place!

But my safe crossing of Colombia does not mean that it is a safe country. Far from it. TV news tells daily of displaced peoples, kidnaps, murders, captures, drugs busts and raids. The roads heave with soldiers from the Contra-Guerrilla units, swathed in belts of bullets and wielding Israeli weapons. In some parts helicopters work slowly overhead, patrolling the land and I have never been stopped and searched so often. Soldiers teased me, laughing that I was scared of the FARC (the largest guerrilla group). Damn right I was scared, with a bicycle as a getaway vehicle and bereft of machine guns! I never camped in Colombia (the only country where I have taken that precaution) and I was sure to be off the roads by late afternoon. I rode one afternoon with a workman heading home and on one stretch of the road he would only talk in whispers as we were apparently in a real guerrilla hotspot. Charred tarmac showed the sites of burned out cars. One weekend elections were held, security was massive, no alcohol was on sale for days beforehand and I was not allowed to cycle- the military insisted I rode on a bus to a safe town. I ate lunch in a cafe with a man my age who had just done 3 years in jail in Miami for smuggling drugs ("good food, lots of TV, nice uniforms, lots of ping pong, but it got a bit boring after 3 years..."). Recently he carried two bags containing US\$500,000 in fake banknotes (he offered me \$100 as a present) to the States but he assured me he has now given up that pastime as his mother was getting a bit stressed!

Three places in particular stand out from my ride through Colombia. Popayan was an oasis of cool white calm in a guerrilla heartland; a University town of immaculately preserved streets of blinding white colonial mansions. Like most of Colombia it was completely bereft of tourists. In Manizales I was delayed by almost a week. This was partly because of the cool mountain nights, the fresh mornings when clumps of cloud smouldered on damp hills and the roads steamed after frenzied downpours, the fuzzy lines of coffee plantations- dark, shining, verdant green- that wrapped over even the steepest of hillsides, the banana trees that dripped from the rain and the racing, confused rivers that tumbled down the valleys pregnant with the sweet, earthy smell of tropical rain. But my procrastination there was mainly due to an unfeasibly large post-Halloween hangover and the chance to play some golf. It was a beautiful course; a majestic full rainbow leaped from the water hazard on the 3rd hole and came to rest right by Brian's ball

far off in a distant, impenetrable coffee plantation. In the interests of symmetry I struck my ball nicely to the other end of the rainbow.

The third and crowning highlight of Colombia is Cartagena: a perfect place to celebrate finishing a continent. When I was at school we learned about the heroics of Francis Drake. Yet here they call our man a pirate... Drake (and others) caused such havoc here and nicked so much loot from the Spaniards (which they in turn had relieved the local Indians of) that mighty defences were built, walls that took centuries to construct and which today still encircle the old town. The old town is immaculately preserved, unique in South America, and the most beautiful streets I have seen since leaving the Middle East two years ago. The streets are narrow and the colonial buildings are painted in bright jaunty colours. There is an austere white convent, imposing old churches and lots of expressive statues. Baskets of flowers hang from balconies and the small plazas bask in the warm Caribbean sun. Fruit juice sellers serve huge glasses of incredible cocktails and in the early mornings I can usually be found perched on one of their stools, watching the world, thinking back over the past thousands of miles and wondering what lies ahead.

I am leaving South America on Sunday, sailing on a yacht bound for Panama and Central America. Every journey establishes its own momentum and the offer of passage on the yacht was too good to turn down even though it leaves me only a few days to celebrate my arrival and try to prepare myself for the next phase.

The mighty swells of the Andes had subsided to choppy waves in Colombia, steep and brutal hills but nothing compared with the beatings of the past months. These too had petered down, smaller and smaller through flat hot plains and Macondo-like villages of playing kids, damp-eyed old people watching the world and the rhythms of swinging hammocks and music. Until one day there was nothing more left ahead of me. Nothing but the gentle lapping of the Caribbean Ocean upon the ancient walls of Cartagena. I sat in the warm sunlight thinking back over all the times I have lived and all the times to be. South America lay behind me. Another continent in the bag. It is becoming ever more enjoyable to look at a world map these days.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS: I am trying to prepare myself before I enter the wacky world of the good ol' US of A. Preparations began by reading a book called 'Fast Food Nation', about what really

goes into your Maccy D's burger..... All I can say is "gee..."

An excellent book about the backpacker hordes of South America is the aptly named "Gringo Trail" by Mark Mann.

North America

The Panama Canal, Central America (10 January 2004)

“Years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So, throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails.

Explore. Dream. Discover.” - Mark Twain

If you want to xxxx the Aussies, use a Jonny

Sitting at anchor in Zihuatanejo (Mexico) in the gentle cool of early morning sunlight I am watching pelicans and frigate birds cruise the skies. The bay- almost a full circle- is lined with palm trees, beaches and not-too-tasteless hotels. About 30 other yachts are spaced over the bay and rocking gently. Scrubby hills stretch up past the bay looking inviting. It’s a good thing that they look inviting for that is where I am headed tomorrow: back on the road, back on the bike, back to the hills.

Between Colombia and Panama there lies 80km of jungle, sprawling from coast to coast with not one road running through it: the notorious Darien Gap. I had to hitch a ride on a yacht to skirt round “The Gap.” A few years ago I cycled the length of Central America with a very good friend [Dave has now sadly passed on: to the ‘sweet lazy life’ of fat cash, Toni’n’Guy hair salons, shiny suits and “a dash more lemonade in my half pint of shandy please” wimpishness rather than accept my invitation to cycle round the world]. So when I was offered the chance to continue sailing on the yacht up to Mexico (and then continue cycling from where I left off last time) with very little sacrifice on my behalf except for doing the cooking, translating Spanish, sitting around a lot while broken stuff got fixed, shuffling bureaucratic paperwork, being lumbered with the graveyard watch (midnight to 4am) every night and reading atrocious novels (“...his eyes were cold flint as the hot lead flew. But only he could save the world now. And maybe, just maybe, the beautiful woman he loved”) I readily accepted. It seemed preferable to riding a stretch I had ridden once before.

Leaving Colombia (with a tear in the eye) we hoisted the sails, I heaved my guts out over-board, and we set course for Panama’s San Blas Islands. The San Blas are a true tropical cliché- tiny islands no higher than a palm tree ringed by sand and circled in coral reefs. By night phosphorescence dances from

your fingers as you swim and saucers of moonlight spill over the calm waters. We anchored for a few days to repair some stuff: the true definition of yacht cruising is “working on your boat in exotic locations.” Something is always broken and yacht owners must feel like pelicans: whichever way they look there is always an enormous bill in front of them.

The local Cuna Indian ladies wear beautiful outfits- beneath pudding bowl fringes and rouged cheeks they wear a tight gold ring in their nose (like a bull), bead bangles tight up their forearms and calves and beautiful sarongs. The kids wore eclectic shorts and shirts. To my delight, one little boy (Eric) was sporting a Leeds United shirt (fake -obviously-, circa 1997). He posed for a photo with me, smiling at my obvious excitement. The ladies would regularly paddle out to the yacht in their dugout canoes to try and sell their famous tapestries (molasses). The highlight of traveling by bicycle is that you do not create an immediate impression of your vast relative wealth. But when you arrive by yacht it is impossible to conceal or deny! Unfortunately, the obvious gulf then becomes too great for the bridging of normal relationships. And so, after a day or two the friendly smiling Indians realised that rather than selling us molasses or coconuts or fish it was far easier to just come and ask us for free stuff. I found becoming little more than a mobile cash point (rather than a fellow human) sad yet understandable. Come back, Rita, all is forgiven!

One’s man paradise is another’s purgatory. Wearing my homemade England Rugby shirt my mind was as far from the snorkeling and fresh lobster as I was from a TV or radio. What a torture to be in paradise during the Rugby World Cup final! Not for another week did I hear the glorious result (see below). So at least four people now owe some cash to Hope and Homes and I am spared having to carry a brick on the bike.

Panama is famous for her canal. (In fact, were it not for the canal then the nation itself would not exist and it would still be part of Colombia. But that’s another story and just another small chapter in the interesting history of the USA). A palindrome sums up the country- “a man, a plan, a canal: Panama!” I spent my birthday sat in the immigration offices and then several days waiting our turn to transit the canal. I was looking forward to the prospect of seeing one of mankind’s most impressive accomplishments first hand. The world of shipping converges at this oceanic cross-roads and ships of every size and shape were patiently waiting out in the bay. The wait and the expense are small in comparison to the alternative of sailing all the way around South America and the perilous (and alluring)

Cape Horn.

The day my father transited the Panama Canal was the day JFK was shot. I rather hoped history might repeat itself as we entered the canal. Our little 37foot boat crept up behind the impressive towering butt of a massive freight ship as the enormous, riveted metal gates of the first lock eased closed behind us and I waved farewell to the Atlantic Ocean. Three impressive locks later and we motored out into man-made Lake Gatun, 85 feet above sea-level. Scores of tiny islands (formerly known as hill-tops) dot the lake and it was odd to see large ships emerging slowly from behind a forested hillside. The transit took all day, ending with 3 downward locks and the lock doors edging open to release us into the Pacific Ocean. Impressive.

After a tedious week of bureaucracy and repairs in Panama City we eventually set sail for Mexico. I learned to use a sextant (how amazing to be able to pinpoint your position on earth by looking at the sun!) and relished being on the move 24 hours a day. As Thom Gunn wrote in the poem 'On the Move' - "At worse, one is in motion; and at best, reaching no absolute, in which to rest, One is always nearer by not keeping still." I am edging ever closer to home.

With only three people on board I was on watch alone each night from midnight to 4am. I enjoyed the responsibility, the glowing green radar screen, the cycle of the moon and re-acquainting myself with the stars of the Northern hemisphere. My favourite Southern cross is still just visible above the horizon but not for much longer. One night the GPS ticked past 90 degrees West: I am a quarter of the way round the world now.

The ocean is full of life- rays leaping and splashing, glowing phosphorescence at night, swirling bait balls of tiny fish herded together by larger ones, birds trying (with admirable perseverance and little common sense) to land atop the wildly swaying mast. Gormless turtles asleep on the surface until, woken confused by our approach, they paw at the surface and try their best to dive quickly. A neat gliding formation of the Mexican air force (pelicans) welcomed us into Mexican waters in front of an enormous pink sunset. Whales breached occasionally and, best of all, dolphins would race in our bow wave, leaping high out of the water, spinning and flipping spectacularly. And then one morning we pulled into a small bay to refill our water tanks and were told that Saddam Hussein had been captured. What a crazy world there is out there!

The Gulf of Tehuantepec is notorious for gales and storms. We hugged the coast tightly, moving like

guilty kids who are sure that trouble is about to catch up with them. It hit us in the night. The whetted wind shrieked and ropes cracked and we dropped all the sails. The foredeck lights were casting wild shadows from the thrashing American and Mexican flags flying from the mast as I clawed my way up to the bow to help pack a sail with the boat heeling and the salt spray stinging, holding on very tight and feeling very alive. The storm peaked at 56 knots of wind. The grey waves spat cold spray across the marble-streaked waters. When I was helming, soaked by the waves we were crashing into, I was singing at the top of my voice the Foo Fighters song “it’s times like these you learn to live again.” Unfortunately I only knew that one line but it was a spectacular Christmas Eve.

And now it is time to ride again, first of all to Mexico City to complete the chain from my past ride and then up towards the USA. 2002 began anxiously for me, with Africa lying frightening and unknown in front of me. 2003 started nervously with an ocean crossing and the enormity of South America ahead of me. But 2004 looks pretty relaxed: a few weeks up Mexico, then a mere 8000km of North America which I am really looking forward to.

I hope that you had a wonderful Christmas and best wishes for 2004. I apologise to all my fans who have emailed me eagerly wondering why there has been so long between updates: you are both very kind.

A RUGBY JOKE: When I emailed this to a few friends I was berated by one for being “way behind on the office email circuit.” To which I thought, “Thank God for that”....

Martin Johnson, Lawrence Dallaglio and Johnny Wilkinson are standing before God at the throne of Heaven. God looks at them and says, “before granting you a place at my side, I must first ask you what you believe in.” Addressing Johnson first he asks, “What do you believe?” Johnson looks God in the eye and states passionately, “I believe Rugby to be the food of life. Nothing else brings such unbridled joy to so many people from the grim North to the bright lights of Twickenham. I have devoted my life to bring such joy to people who stood on the terraces supporting their club.” God looks up and offers Johnson the seat to his left. He then turns to Dallaglio, “and you, Lawrence, what do you believe?” Dallaglio stands tall and proud, “I believe courage, honour and passion are the fundamentals to life and I’ve spent my whole playing career providing a living embodiment of these traits.” God, moved by the passion of the speech, offers Dallaglio the seat to his right. Finally, he turns to Wilkinson, “and you, Johnny, what do you believe?” “I believe...” says Wilkinson, “.that you’re sitting in my seat.”

My American Dream (27th January 2004)

“To suffer fifty weeks a year for the sake of a two-week vacation... my own apartment, a car, and plenty of women, and still, goddamit, I’m lonely.” So runs the Death of a Salesman- the allegory of the Great American Dream that we all had to read at school. Now, after spending the last two years in developing parts of the world, I am just a few weeks away from entering the United States of America. The USA is currently the most influential nation on earth and as I draw ever closer I find myself becoming ever more curious about what I will find there. I have never been to America, though in many ways I feel familiar with it- that big HOLLYWOOD sign on the hill, the Golden Gate Bridge, fat cops eating doughnuts, Ricki Lake. Now I am excited to really “know the place for the first time.” From the 2-Dimensional world of the television and popular culture to the 3-D reality of that most unreal world. I am intrigued.

What on earth is the good ol’ US of A really like? What are the people really like? Are they like their leader, George W “you’re either with us or you’re against us” Bush? Perhaps like Michael Jackson? Or the audience of the Jerry Springer Show? Something I have enjoyed during my ride is the dissolving of the preconceptions that invariably exist about every country. And, more than for any other country, everybody in the whole world has a polarised opinion and a mound of preconceptions about the USA. There is nobody I have met in the world who does not have an opinion on the United States, ranging between green envy and sneering scorn, blind hatred and unquestioning imitation. I have been surprised on my travels at just how strong the anti-US feeling is around the world (the Mexican band Molotov’s song ‘Frijolero’ being an entertaining example), equalled only perhaps by the number of people who have asked me to help them get a visa for the US. I understand the resentment- is it mere coincidence that the country is called, in big capital letters, ‘US’? Yet I have always been a fan of the States- their self-earned success; the hard working mentality; Baywatch. So I am looking forward to letting America speak for herself. I wanted to write this before I crossed the border as I know that, without a shadow of a doubt, my opinions are certain to change for better or for worse over the next 6 months.

My gluttonous, slothful, greedy side (3 out of 7 deadly sins- not bad!) is excited by the next few months- big burgers, good roads, shiny bike shops- and I feel as though I am now on holiday for a while.

But will it be fun or will the Material World be too easy and boring? Whilst in many ways the US is very much like the fortunate life I have been brought up with (where it is 'normal' to have some degree of cash to spend, running water etc) I keep catching myself thinking like an outsider. I am comfortable now with the frustrations and inconveniences of life in the Developing World. Whilst I know that I can never belong here (just read the scathing early pages of Jamaica Kincaid's book "A Small Place" on how tourists are really perceived- ouch!), I do feel at ease. As I ride along I am mesmerised by what, in contrast to much of Africa and Latin America, is the unimaginable wealth that lies ahead of me. I catch myself marvelling that there will be a whole aisle in the supermarkets devoted to breakfast cereal and another one just for pet food. I think of the African man who asked a friend of mine in amazement whether it was true that in "your country you really give food to the birds?"

I have been confused for a long time as to why most countries are poor and some are rich. I have seen an awful lot of poverty since leaving Western Europe. The USA is such a young country, yet she has risen so fast from barbarism to decadence (you know the rest of the quotation, I am sure). Perhaps then America will help shed some light for me on this depressing conundrum. At the same time I am interested in different perspectives of hardship and poverty. If you feel poor and unhappy is there any point in differentiating the feeling along a 'scale of poverty'- do a rural Mexican family saving money for a new tin roof for their mud hut and a Californian family unable to afford a much-needed car experience different feelings of struggle? Does it even matter? I don't know.

So leaving behind Latin America and crossing the border is going to be intriguing. I just hope that they let me in- my dirty hands do not make for good finger-printing, my passport is scarred with 'axis-of-evil'-type countries and Willy Loman's Dream was not quite for a battered bicycle and a few sun-faded bags to represent your entire worldly wealth. All will become clearer in just the next few weeks. I can almost smell the burgers already....

Here are some of the things I am looking forward to in the USA...

- * Riding across the Golden Gate bridge
- * Finding a boat to hitch a ride across the Pacific
- * Being anonymous- there have not been many blonde white people since I left Western Europe: it will be great not to be stared at all the time

- * That big HOLLYWOOD sign

- * Encountering a burger too big even for my appetite

- * Learning to stay awake through an American Football game (in the only place on the planet that is a soccer vacuum I am going to have to find a new subject to discuss with taxi drivers. Perhaps though, as a Leeds fan, a soccer vacuum is no bad thing at the moment...)

- * blonde girls

- * Trying to see the appeal in baseball

- * 'Shooting some hoops'

- * Trying to hide from the election hype

- * Meeting somebody who voted for George Bush

- * Meeting some Rednecks

- * Seeing a moose

- * And a grizzly bear

- * Working out the appropriate response to "Yo, what's up man?"

Mexico City to the USA (19th February 2004)

“50% of it was for the cancer community... 25% of it was for myself and the team and my family... and the other 25% was for the people who never believed.” - Lance Armstrong on his motivation after the Tour de France 1999

“Si quieres sentir la emocion, tiene que tomar el riesgo.” “If you want to feel the emotion, you have to take the risk.” - Blue Crush

Second helpings are what happiness is all about. - Winnie the Pooh

“Espero que un dia los estados unidos se vuelvan a ser un parte de America, nada mas, nada menos.” - Octavio Paz

The first impression of Mexico City is of its utter vastness. The seething wildebeest migration of the Serengeti resembles a few chums gathered for a quiet game of bridge when compared to the concrete sprawl of one of mankind's largest gatherings. 23 million people have squeezed themselves into a shallow valley like a giant version of those “how many people can we fit into a telephone box” challenges. Two hour long commutes, grid-locked traffic and arm-waving, horn-honking Latino impatience. A shroud of smog, an impending water crisis on a colossal scale and the astonishing sight of large buildings literally sinking, slowly but surely, meter by meter, into the earth. Mexico City is a fine example of how effectively we are succeeding in destroying the Earth (‘Endangered Mexico’ by Joel Simon is a good book on this theme).

Yet I enjoyed Mexico City. With so many people living their lives at typical Latino high volume there is tremendous energy to the city and inexhaustible variety. With so many bars and barrios, lifestyles and stories you can never truly know Mexico City. The enormous central Zocalo (plaza) is a rare focus point in the out-of-control growth and evolution of the uncontrollable beast that is Mexico City. In the center of the world's second largest plaza* flies a Mexican flag, as large as a football field, undulating slowly in the hazy sky. The Mexicans are inordinately proud of their national flag, as well as anything traditionally and uniquely Mexican (Mariachi bands, the food, Tequila, drunk men with huge moustaches and sombreros falling from their donkeys onto very prickly cacti). Surrounding the flag are hundreds of

meters of open space; a rare treat in the city and a welcome respite for your senses. On one side of the Zocalo is the National Palace where Diego Rivera's superb murals depict the history of Mexico (see the movie 'Frida'). Rivera's Social Realism is harshly clear, with evil looking conquistadors and benevolent Aztecs; fat, fornicating Catholic clergy and corrupt politicians. On another side of the Zocalo is the cathedral, a mighty beast crammed with the lavish gold and the icons of miracles and martyrdom that characterize Latin American Catholicism. The whole structure has visibly sunk several feet below ground level and walking inside is like being at sea with a rolling floor and unhorizontal horizons. The religion that the Spanish conquistadors imposed upon Mexico is epitomized by the cathedral, built on top of the very heart of the Aztec sacred city of Tenochtitlan. But now, in a bitter twist of ironic symbolism, as the cathedral sinks slowly the ancient pyramids that were buried are actually rising out of the earth beside the cathedral once again.

I hate tourist-brochure-speak and so refuse to say that Mexico is A Land Of Contrasts. But as I rode into Mexico City I passed enormous rubbish dumps where people were living a grim life as scavengers, with shelters built out of trash and their existence depending upon what they could salvage from all that the rest of society had discarded. And then that weekend I was at a party in a Penthouse suite designed with an ostentatious extravagance difficult to find in Europe. The library of the apartment was crammed from floor to ceiling with books, all of which had been bought brand new and never read. On a plinth was a life-sized bronze bust of the girl who owned the pad in a classic pose with her hair flowing in an imaginary breeze and two very silly little dogs clutched to her chest.

Over the past year I have noticed amongst the wealthy of Latin America that they tend to accept the status quo of their society. The discrepancy of wealth and lifestyles between the rich and the poor in Latin America is greater than I have seen anywhere else in the world, but I met few people who seemed troubled by this or who wondered what they could do about it. In Africa I became uneasy about the impact foreign aid was having on society. In Latin America I began to question how much Europe and the US should involve themselves when there is such potential within their own society to help themselves. Martin Luther King, Jr said that by passively accepting something, you are as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. Accepting something without protesting against it is really cooperating with it. All that is needed for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.

It was hard to leave Mexico City after two weeks of normality: making friends and party nights taste

extra sweet these days. The fact that I had been spoiled rotten made it harder too: I slept in pajamas for the first time since the age of about twelve and when Sofia, my host, had to go away for a few days she left me with a list of girls' telephone numbers, each of whom had been briefed to entertain me over the weekend! One guy I met even asked if he could buy the list from me. Leaving Guadalajara was difficult too. There I was reminded of what an adventure life as a family is. The challenges, risks, hardships and rewards of marriage and of raising children left me feeling that, in comparison, my own adventure is trivial, shallow and selfish.

The only country in the Americas where I have had to apply for a visa to enter is the United States (a painful world record \$100 fee too). British passport holders are allowed a visa-free visit of 90 days to the USA, but unlike any other country I have visited, that period is non-extendable and non-renewable. In this era of "you're either with us or you're against us" the attitude seems to be that "even if you're with us, you still might be against us." On top of that, if you try to phone the American Embassy in Mexico for some information you have to pay a special extra fee for the privilege of making that phone call. It was not good PR for the United States. Labi Siffre sang that "the higher you build your barriers, the taller I become." The paranoid siege mentality that does wonders for the President's re-election prospects only serves to further global resentment and anti-US sentiment, paradoxically making the situation worse.

But my feelings over the visa mellowed when I arrived at the Mexican Consulate and saw a queue more than a hundred meters long stretching round the block. More than a thousand miles south of the US border large road signs began pointing the way towards Nogales and Tijuana and the road north was a constant stream of crowded buses and pick-up trucks loaded with possessions and headed for the border. You can see it as a dream ticket, an escape route or as a pressure valve for the Mexican economy, but however you want to interpret the vast numbers of people trying to leave Mexico, you have to understand the position the USA is in. If they opened the borders fully then several billion people would immediately want to enter the country from all over the world. And I mean several billion people literally. Porfirio Diaz, one of Mexico's most prominent Presidents once said "Poor Mexico! So far from God, so close to the United States." Yet, despite a hefty dose of unfair treatment over the years from their big brash neighbor, Mexico benefits tremendously from the USA. For example, Mexico's number one income, greater even than oil or tourism, is the money sent back home by Mexicans working in the USA. The USA can also provide a stern reminder to Mexico of what she could become with hard work and

organization, without corruption, with efficient taxation and without Catholicism (simply far too many babies in Mexico!).

When I left Ushuaia exactly one year ago I had two targets for myself regarding learning Spanish: to write on my website in Spanish and to give a presentation in Spanish. The first failed dismally. But before leaving Mexico I gave a television interview in Spanish and I gave a talk at a youth prison for drug addicts who had committed crimes. It wasn't exactly poetic, but I was happy to have reached that level. Learning Spanish added so much to my experience of Latin America. It is a fun language, described by Bob Dylan as "... the loving tongue, soft as music, light as spray." I am now about to begin trying to learn Mandarin Chinese: I fear it may be a little more tricky! If I learned my Swahili through watching *The Lion King*, then my Chinese is limited to "Chop Suey and Special Fried Rice, please."

I enjoyed riding through the villages of Mexico. The dusty dim stores that sell the same things the world over- dusty packs of pasta, cans of sardines spotted with rust, colorful warm fizzy drinks and stale biscuits. In the plazas old men sit still in the white sunlight, their faces carved with shadows beneath wide-brimmed sombreros. Curious old ladies stare at me unblinking. Preconceptions are generally made to be broken, but I was delighted to see that, in the best tradition of Speedy Gonzalez, rural Mexican men really do wear very large sombreros and say "andale! andale!" a lot.

I had planned to detour via the Copper Canyon, a spectacle few Mexicans seemed to have visited, yet reputed to be grander than the Grand Canyon itself. However, that detour would have meant me missing seeing a friend in Los Angeles. For two and a half years I have stayed exclusively with strangers. It is a wonderful learning experience, but the prospect of staying with someone with 'zero degrees of separation' from me proved more enticing than some spectacular scenery so I stayed on the quick coastal road instead. I am really looking forward to having the door answered by somebody who recognizes me, and being able to say "Do you remember that time when we....." (To which, knowing Foges, she will probably reply "no, because I was very, very drunk at the time")

An alien riding north through Mexico would feel that the world was fizzling out as the cacti multiply and towns become fewer. What a shock the alien would receive upon reaching Nogales and crossing the border into the USA! "How ever did this all happen?" it would ask. The nights in the Sonora desert of northern Mexico were beautiful; toasting tortillas on small campfires amongst the tall cacti with the moon growing larger at every camp. But it was cold and, though I was lugging six books around with me, I had

only a few t-shirts to wear. So the nights were long and sunrise always a relief. One evening I sat by the fire dismantling a seized pedal. I had no idea how to fix it so I simply removed all the ball bearings and then put the rest of it back together. Now it works fine! But surely those ball bearings had some sort of purpose? I pondered this, and the impressive versatility of my Leatherman tool: stripping pedals one minute, grinding pepper corns for my soup the next.

On February 15th 2004 I wrote this in my diary: "...It's early and the sun still slants sideways through the sky. Nogales, Mexico. The border with the United States of America. It's cold and ice rattles in my water bottles. Smoke from a thousand wood stoves blankets blue over the town. Stars of white sunlight burst from a thousand corrugated iron roofs on the shacks of the rough settlements on the hillsides. It's Sunday morning so all is quiet. It's quiet but dogs bark and the inevitable Developing World rooster crows. Piles of rubbish spill down slopes, lying where it was dumped by the people in the shacks. Smoke smolders from a few half-hearted attempts to burn the rubbish. Thin dogs slink amongst the mess. My toes are cold but my back is warm and I'm making excuses to linger. In just a few more minutes Latin America will be behind me and I am reluctant to let go."

Some aspects of life in Latin America are certainly annoying: nothing ever, ever happens even vaguely on time (Ecuador has begun a National Punctuality Campaign (honestly). The President turned up several hours late for the inauguration), people at times talk more than they listen, the acceptance of poverty and corruption. But the tightness and importance of families, the love of life, the culture and landscapes, the huge meals and the parties and the warmth of the people more than compensate. When the time comes for me to stop wandering and to get a proper job, I am fairly sure that it is to Latin America I will turn. As the recently elected Governor of California once said, "I'll be back."

I rode on to the border. The American customs officer studied my passport, looked up at me and said "Sir, would you mind coming into the office, please?" in a tone that suggested neither 'Sir' nor 'please'. In his office he asked me "Sir, could you tell me please why you have a visa for Iran in your passport? ... and Sudan? Syria? Lebanon? Pakistan? etc. etc." As he spoke I had a brainwave business idea; all these countries are incredible places, with such depths of history and culture, beauty, food and wonderful inhabitants. They are superb countries, so what do you reckon to "Axis-of-Evil Holidays plc."?

But it was not a big deal and fifteen minutes later my passport was stamped and I was in. Burgers and blond girls here I come...!

*- Red Square, Moscow in case you were wondering

AFTER KINDLY sponsoring me my bicycle, Specialized (www.specialized.com) have decided that they no longer wish to continue supporting my project. The USA was the one place where I could have guaranteed them regular TV, radio and other media coverage so I was a little surprised by the decision. Basically though, I now need to find a bike company or a chain of bike shops who would be willing to help re-fit 25000 miles worth of trashed bike in return for some regular and eye-catching media coverage. Any ideas would be much appreciated...

THANKS FOR all the feedback from my American Dream article: I received all sorts of advice on where the best burgers are (In-and-Out), the biggest milkshakes (an extraordinary 2.1 liters at Dairy Queen) and I even got an email from a George Bush voter.

I AM DELIGHTED to say that Tom Fremantle's latest slightly insane expedition (by canoe to Timbuktu) will also be in aid of *Hope and Homes for Children*. Tom is the author of two books; Johnny Ginger's Last Ride (UK to Oz by bike) and The Moonshine Mule (Mexico to US with a mule).... Check out his website- www.mini-mule.co.uk

BREAD WAS expensive in Mexico so I lived on bananas and tortillas instead. My latest recipe is for Banana Tacos...

Bury a banana in its skin in the glowing embers of a fire for about 10 minutes.

Toast tortillas on top of the embers.

Put hot mushy banana on tortilla, add sugar and fold in half.

Place folded tacos on embers until crispy.

Delicious! (And only 65cents a kilo!)

A SUPERB TEXT MESSAGE from a friend of mine, Will Richmond, in Iraq with the Army: "am sat on top of Saddam's palace smoking a fag and having a mug of tea."

The Books of my Choice (19th February 2004)

When I give interviews I tend to reply to the question of “what inspired you” with whatever book first pops into my head. So I decided to write them down, the books that really got me into all this. The list is not a list of my favorite travel books (no Bryson, Theroux or Newby on this list). It’s just the sheer, unadulterated adventure, wanderlust and courage that leaves you thinking “wow! I wonder if I could do that?” And you’ll never know unless you try...

Living Dangerously- Sir Ranulph Fiennes (my number one inspirational lifestyle. Ex-SAS and labeled “the World’s Greatest living Explorer”)

Mind Over Matter- Sir Ranulph Fiennes (a lesson in determination and the appeal of pointless suffering)

South - Ernest Shackleton (determination and leadership on an awesome level)

The Long Walk - can’t remember who wrote it. (The guy escaped from a Siberian gulag and walked to freedom in India. Wow.)

On Foot through Africa- Ffiona Campbell (and I thought it was hard by bicycle)

The Kon Tiki Expedition - Thor Heyerdahl (sailing across the Pacific on a balsa wood raft because people told him it was not possible)

Danzinger’s Travels- Nick Danzinger (great adventures around Afghanistan and Central Asia, showing that visas and paperwork are not always necessary)

Mallory and Irvine - perhaps the first couple to climb Everest (and Irvine went to the same school as me)

Sailing Alone around the World- Joshua Slocum (the first single-handed circumnavigation. He makes it sound easy!)

High Endeavours- Miles Clark (one of the first travel books I read, about the amazing Smeeton family)

It’s not about the Bike- Lance Armstrong (so you think you are having a bad day / working hard / setting yourself challenging targets...? Think again!)

The Life of my Choice- Wilfred Thesiger (a true old-school English explorer. He was one of the main

reasons I applied to Oxford and joined (briefly) the Boxing Club there. Eton, Oxford, boxing blue, SAS and some incredible journeys, notably in The Empty Quarter)

A Perfect Stranger- Patrick Kavanagh (the physical side of my project has proved to be trivial compared with the other aspects. If you can acknowledge and begin to be honest about your weaknesses then they are no longer weaknesses)

As I walked out one Midsummer's Morning- Laurie Lee (my perfect travel book. Exquisitely written, and an adventure for the very best reason people undertake adventures: just for the hell of it.) With my writing I aspire towards a blend of Laurie Lee, Bill Bryson and Ranulph Fiennes. It's quite a challenge!

Touching the Void - Jo Simpson (We can, if we have to, summon extraordinary supplies of determination and situations don't get much grimmer than this)

The Seven Pillars of Wisdom- TE Lawrence (If adventure = risk + purpose, then this is adventure. The fabled 'Lawrence of Arabia' was another acquaintance of David Stirling, the founder of the SAS. Favorite quote: "All men dream, but not equally. Those who dream at night in the dusty recesses of the mind wake in the morning to find that it was vanity. But beware the dreamers of the day; for they are dangerous men who may act their dreams with open eyes, to make it possible)

Through Jaguar's Eyes- Benedict Allen (Benedict managed to go straight from University into this superb adventure and to begin a career in travel. It gave me hope that perhaps I can try and achieve the same)

Eastern Approaches- Fitzroy Maclean (As soon as people start to tell you something is not possible you must begin to think instead that a good adventure lies around the corner. Wanderings in Asia, a spell in the SAS and great adventures in the early days of Tito's Yugoslavia. Apparently the real-life inspiration for the James Bond character)

The Worst Journey in the World- Cherry Apsley Gerrard (When a book with a title like this, and a harrowing tale of Antarctic endurance makes you squirm with envy you begin to think that perhaps it is not quite time for a normal day-job)

A Life less Ordinary

An independent article by Sam Kornell (Santa Barbara, Ca)

“There’s nothing I like more than sitting on the sofa, drinking a beer, and watching TV,” says Alastair Humphreys, who is currently four continents, 43 countries, and 26,000 miles into an unsupported, round-the-world bicycling trip. Two and a half years ago Humphreys was, at 24, a recent Oxford graduate with a fine job, a girlfriend, and a home in Yorkshire near Elland Road stadium, home of his beloved Leeds United football team. Life, it seemed, was in order. In fact, it was too much in order. “I had a great life in England, a very comfortable life... I think what I had to escape from was the fact that it was too easy.”

So, to the inspiration of wanderlusts everywhere, Humphreys decided to embark on one of the most ambitious couch-sitting, beer-drinking, TV-watching justification projects ever conceived: A four-year bicycle trip around the world with no motorized transportation, on a budget of one dollar a day. Now rolling through California, he’s been mostly successful, economically speaking; in South America his budget ballooned to two dollars a day. Humphreys’ route, which has snaked through Europe and the Middle East, and traversed the length and breadth of both Africa and South America, has thus far cost him three bicycles, countless tires, and untold bottles of sunscreen. It has taken him from the “madding crowds” of Istanbul to the flat brush of Botswana, to which he awards the title “Most Boring Country I Have Ever Cycled Through.” It has brought him Egyptian stars to sleep under and Bolivian dawns to wake to, and allowed for lounging on the sparkling beaches of Rio De Janeiro (second on his list for most beautiful girls). And from conversations with Sudanese truckers (“What tribe are you from?” “Erm... Yorkshire I guess”) to culinary experiences (he was “too squeamish” to try a Malawian specialty-boiled mouse on a stick) Humphreys’ pre-trip hope for “cultural interactions not available to me queuing for the bus back home” has been realized. Though he says that nothing can prepare a person for a journey like this, it is not Humphreys’ first significant trip into the world. He has in years past cycled through Pakistan and China, from Mexico to Panama, and across South America, from Buenos Aires to Lima. He’s also backpacked through Spain on less than five Euro a day and taught English in a South African village for a year at the age of 18. “The maxims I try to live my life by are adventure, challenge, and high comedy,” says Humphreys. To stay in touch, Humphreys keeps a travelogue at ww.roundtheworldbybike.com.

Describing his reaction to Jordan's famous Wadi Rumm, he wrote: Lying on the desert floor, the black silence is so absolute that you can literally hear yourself blink. Its enormous majesty of course provoked very childish naked running and aeroplane impressions. In his time "pottering around the globe," Humphreys has faced myriad hardships, setbacks, and dilemmas. Though he says the physical difficulty of the trip has been far outstripped by its mental and emotional counterparts, he has had to endure trials- from frigid, weeklong storms in Patagonia to 35 percent gradient climbs in Lesotho's mountains-hardly marked by levity. In Sudan, he writes of slogging through the desert, his sweat staining the sand: It is hot; my head pounds and my thermometer has a fit, races off the top of the scale (125 F) and refuses to come back down. As I cycle my face is fixed in a grimace (a combination of pain, heat, misery, and genetic ugliness). Exposed to the air my teeth become painfully hot. The ground is too hot to sit on, my handlebars almost too hot to hold, and the water in my drinking bottle better suited for brewing tea than quenching thirst. Humphreys had originally planned to cycle through Iran and Pakistan on his way from Europe to Asia. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, however, he decided such a route would be unsafe. So he made an abrupt about-face. Africa, whose vast, empty expanses and extreme poverty he had planned to save for the end of the trip, when experience and a foreseeable end point could buoy him, would now, after Europe, be the first continent he'd cross. His prediction that it would be hard was quickly realized. In Syria, he wrote: How did I have the audacity to think I could possibly pedal through Africa alone? I feel I have bitten off more than I can chew and surely this cannot go on. In Ethiopia, surrounded by children hoping for cash handouts, he almost quits-The roads are awful, the mountains are huge, and the kids are almost unbearable. I am sick of this lonely, hard, exhausting life. I almost cannot go on. I sit in the dirt, head in hands just wishing that the 80 staring faces (I counted them) would please, please give me a metre of space or a second of peace. Please go away. Beneath my sunglasses the tears flow. The crowd stands and stares. I feel very alone. "One of the downsides," he says, "of doing this on my own is there's no one that can really understand it. It's a bit of a shame really." He does not, however, regret the days of solitude his trip has conferred him. "Cycling with others deprives you of the days of silence, the intensity of experience, the unavoidable interactions with locals and the fears and tears and frustrations of being alone," he writes. "It makes the low points lower, but the high points all the more pure." Currently on his way up the California coast, Humphreys plans to ride up the western coast of the U.S. on his way to Alaska. From Alaska he will take a boat to Asia, putting him on the last continent

before Europe and home. At an average of 70 to 90 miles a day on good roads, Humphreys says he plans to be cycling for another year-and-a-half. What does Humphreys regret? “I regret that I don’t always live for today and find myself wishing away my life. I never regret spending too long in a place but occasionally regret rushing on. But I often think that there is not too much to regret when you have the freedom of every single sunset and dawn, to ride a cool road at sunrise when nobody on the whole planet knows where you are.”

Phoenix to Los Angeles (March 2004)

“What is the feeling when you’re driving away from people, and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing? It’s the too huge world vaulting us, and it’s good-bye. But we lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies.” -Jack Kerouac

“From persons who know the difference between ‘will’ and ‘shall’ but don’t know the difference between a Manhattan and a Martini- kind fates, deliver us.” -H.L. Mencken

“Take your life in your own hands and see what happens? A terrible thing: no one to blame.” -Erica Jong

“My parents have always been there for me, ever since I was about 7.” -David Beckham

****Remembering John Charles, a Leeds legend and a hero to my Dad****

The words “LARGE AND IN CHARGE” scrolled in bold lights across the billboard close to the border. A fitting slogan as I entered the United States? Perhaps, but it was only an advert for McDonald’s.

After the separate worlds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America I am definitely in a New World now. A few miles from the border I pulled into a rest area to refill my water bottles. Clean smelling toilets, no litter and nobody saying hello are certainly not what I am used to. On the road I found myself converting miles back into kilometers in my head (yet I do the opposite everywhere else in the world) and bemoaning how much longer a mile feels than a kilometer. With kilometers your speed sounds higher and the distances tick by. Counting down miles feels much harder work.

In Tucson I went to a supermarket, to gawp in glee at the heaving shelves, the individually wrapped tomatoes and the astonishing variety of breakfast cereal. And nobody stared at me. Paul Theroux wrote that “one of the pleasures of travel is being anonymous.” A white person on a bicycle in many parts of the world would have to disagree with him. But here I was definitely anonymous at last. I felt self-conscious talking in English; everybody could overhear us and understand our banal discussion about how much broccoli we would need for supper.

Suburbia sprawls forever in America with miles of identical shopping malls. Fast food restaurant chains are everywhere and the smell of burgers fills the air for mile after mile. (For four days I ate nothing except energy bars I had been given. One is nice, two are OK. Breakfast, lunch and dinner for four days? Nauseating.) Phoenix was the first city in the world where, after a week or so, I still had absolutely no idea where we were at any time. It felt like being in an Escher drawing, with endless, inescapable malls and bright neon lights of brand logos. Arriving back at the house always came as a surprise.

Cycling in the US is quite boring- in most places in the world people work the fields or sit outside their homes or work on the carcasses of old vehicles. There is always something to look at, always someone to greet, always playing children to wave at. Street vendors and windscreen-cleaning boys liven up the city streets. But here nearly everybody is in a car, and those few not in cars will not catch your eye in case you then decide to blow them away with a big gun. Finding your way is harder here than in other places because people waiting for the traffic lights to change will not look at you and are scared when you talk to them. I have had people refuse to look at me, quickly wind up their windows and even gun their engines to dart away from me. I soon learned that when approaching people to ask for directions it is best to stop ten yards away and hail them loudly from afar in my best Prince Charles English accent. Otherwise they hurry past, pretending you are not there, that they are too busy and that you are just a dirty scary person who is best avoided.

In most of the world I am riding a heavily-laden bicycle and therefore I am very rich. In the USA I am riding a heavily-laden bicycle and therefore I am very poor. The irony is that once people realize that I am not going to kill them and do in fact really only want directions, then they are invariably friendly, helpful and welcoming. People say “enjoy our country” with a strong pride not found often enough in England (compare the Fourth of July celebrations to St. George’s Day if you doubt that).

The consumer is king here, and if the consumer is in a car (as he always is), then he is King with a capital ‘K’. There are Drive-Thru pharmacies, cash points and hardware stores. Orange juices come with a range of pulp textures, filtered water has selected minerals added for a pure, fresh taste. The choices are simply extraordinary and way beyond my capabilities.

In a sandwich shop I found myself actually growing nervous as our turn to order approached. Bread options, cheese options, sauce options, packaging options, super-sizing options... So many personal

questions bore deep into your soul. In Starbucks I ordered a latte. (That in itself would be a glamorous call where I come from: from the gritty Yorkshire north where coffee is made from coal and people produce children simply to provide a cheap alternative to turkey at Christmas). The girl I was with looked at me puzzled, “You mean just an ordinary latte? You can have flavors, temperature choices, froth choices.....” There are five different kinds of milk to choose from. All up you can have a cup of coffee a mind-boggling 19,000 different ways at Starbucks! Now if that is not a sign of success and a comfortable life then I don’t know what is.

Beneath the excitement and the relief of being here which has not yet begun to diminish, I have to confess a slight disappointment too. I realize now with a hint of embarrassment that a small part of me was hoping for the border crossing to be a Berlin-esque wall, with snarling guards and dogs and clamoring crowds of poor people being held back from crossing over to the bright shining glory of the USA. In fact the border was just like all the others, with scuffed lino floors and grubby faxes taped to walls outlining petty bureaucratic irrelevancies sent from on high that nobody will ever read. That the official who dealt with me was grumpy was probably just because he was having to work the Sunday morning shift.

A small part of me was, I realize sheepishly, also looking forward to small snorts of derision at the war-hungry, ethno-centric, gun-lovin’ masses. And whilst I have been delighted to spot a few wannabe white gangsters cruising suburbia on lowered alloy wheels with black rap blasting and baseball caps worn sideways, it really is not too different from the Home Counties of England. I have only just arrived in California and so hopes are still high of novelty-boobed, excessively blond airheads (and that’s just the guys) as I ride north through Malibu and Beverly Hills, but the people I have met in the last few weeks have been disappointingly normal and intelligent. I did see a ‘God Bless America Barber Shop’ and a huge sign shouting “DON’T YOU BUY NO UGLY SMALL TRUCK” but my impression of America so far has been of efficiency, ease of living, quiet cleanliness and very polite people.

I went to visit the Grand Canyon, that most famous of big holes. I knew we were on the right road because a huge McDonald’s sign told us that we were. Snow was falling in heavy flakes through the thick foggy sky. I had hoped to see the highest mountain in Arizona, Humphreys Peak, near Flagstaff but it was hidden in the slushy clouds. I remember ‘discovering’ Humphreys Peak in my atlas during a boring geography lesson at school years ago. Atlases were always a good distraction, as was looking up rude

words in the dictionary (....fart...fiddle...fornicate...) during the tedious Hard Times of English lessons.

We arrived at the canyon to find that it had played an impressive disappearing act in the fog. I longed to be eight again just to be able to howl “But you promised we were going to see the Grand Canyon!”

After a couple of hours though the fog began to open in gasps, showing tempting, tantalizing glimpses down into a billion years of history. The sheer depths of the canyon and the eternal number of shapes and shades were mesmerizing. Hurling snowballs into the void and watching them fall, fall, fall, fall was perfect behavior for all closet eight year olds.

I was fortunate to spend a weekend with Tom Whittaker and his family. Tom, an ex-pat Brit, is the first disabled person to have climbed Everest. It was a fun weekend, horse-riding, sledging and drinking Guinness. I have never before met anyone who has climbed Everest and my over-riding thought from the weekend was of us all lounging on the sofas, Guinness in one hand, whisky in the other, and me thinking “He seems so normal, yet what extraordinary levels of anti-apathy [is that a word?] and dream-chasing energy he must have to have joined that exclusive merry band of achievers.” And all with one foot, giving him license to tell lame jokes too.

A group of extremely generous and motivated people in Phoenix clubbed together and bought me a new bike. It was an extraordinarily kind act and as I purr down the roads of the world I will forever remember them. But my new bike is absurdly nice: the \$400 rust-bucket with the Peruvian paint-job that was Rita II has been emotionlessly ditched and now I am cruising. But any aspirations I may have had towards English Wildman status are now sadly shot to pieces as I feel like a fraudulent pretty boy on this new machine, with bomb-proof wheels and Himalaya-ridiculing gears. Hair appointments at Toni’n’Guy salons surely await. Before, when times were hard, I could always blame the bike. Now I have no excuses. But I was disappointed to discover that, even on a very shiny bicycle, 100 miles still hurts. The big decision now is what name to give her...

I rode one hundred miles a day from Phoenix to Los Angeles, excited at the prospect of staying with an old friend. Fogie was one of the first girls I got to know at school and I remember being amazed and extremely grateful when we first met that she laughed at my jokes. From rural Worcestershire to driving a soft-top (albeit a very hairdresser’s-style soft-top car) along the beach boulevards of California her image has certainly gone downhill in the past few years, but it was nothing that spending some time with a two-T-shirted hobo and his bicycle would not remedy.

The ride to LA was not especially memorable and I could not even summon the motivation to detour to go and see the original London Bridge, bought by America and now sunning herself in the Arizona desert sunshine. I was too set on racing west towards California, towards the rich extravagant sunsets and the land of golden promise. If I have been looking forward to my ride through the USA for a long time, I was particularly excited about California. Camping at night in the desert was like being in Jordan or northern Argentina: yellow sunsets in a smoky sky and the heavy white moon above burning-red rock hills; white dunes of sand curved around spiky tufts of yellow grass. But what set here apart was the nose-to-tail drone of non-stop traffic throughout the night. This is a country on the move and the torrents of trucks are a symbol of a country producing, consuming, buying and selling.

The desert gradually petered out as I crossed eastern California. The grass grew greener, the cars sleeker, the houses larger and the palm trees stood tall and proud. The snow-covered mountains shone. Cycling into LA without riding on a freeway is almost impossible. I tried so hard to avoid them, but America is so car-centric that at times there was nothing for it but to brave the seething traffic. Inevitably getting caught by the police a couple of times I was saved by playing very dumb (“I didn’t realize that it would be dangerous to cycle in six racing lanes of cell-phone talking, coffee-drinking traffic hell, Sir”) and the best plums-in-mouth ridiculous English accent that I could muster. But just when I was verging on a serious sense of humor failure I came across a cycle path, thirty blissful miles of traffic-free pavement whisking me straight through the city to the beach. The path was wider and better maintained than many highways of the world. It was a delight. Plus I could get a very immature thrill by overtaking spandex-clad men on their dainty little racing bikes, giving them a cheery “afternoon, chaps!” as I zipped by on my beast of burden. Childish, but a fun reward for 25,000 miles of training. My final act as I neared the Pacific Ocean and the glamour of LA was to ask three very blond and very pretty roller-bladers ‘for directions’. As I slowed to a stop beside them I forgot that my new bike has those fancy clip-in pedals. In a cartoon waving of arms I wobbled then collapsed, bike and all, in a crashing pile at their feet. I am not sure whether they were impressed. California, here I am!

A website well worth seeing: www.rwanda2004.co.uk

THANK YOU to A-1 Bikes for their generous and expert assembly of my sexy new bike. Quality equipment, quality service, quality people. Thank you.

THANK YOU so so much to the kind individuals and to the Phoenix Consortium who rallied together to buy my new bike. To rise above apathy is something I admire greatly, and your faith and support really means a lot to me. It is people such as yourselves who are going to get me round the world. Cassandra, Dennis, Helen, Jordan, Lisa, Russ, Nate and the Phoenix Consortium: Thank You.

Recommendations for America: Whilst I am in the US I am trying to discover what the place is really like (as opposed to the impression portrayed by the International Ambassadors of Jerry Springer, the Governator and Michael Jackson!). So far I recommend:

Fast Food Nation - a fascinating and revolting book on the fast food phenomenon full of great pub-conversation trivia (“did you know that 30% of all cows in America are McD’s bound....?” “Really! I didn’t think they even used beef in the food there...” etc)

Atlas Shrugged (Ayn Rand) - a fictional book from the 1950’s, but this voice-piece for her own philosophy of Objective Realism seemed very appropriate to be reading here. My disdain for apathy and people unwilling to be risk-takers may be one reason I enjoyed this book, but her assertion that man has a moral duty to be the best that he can possibly be, with productive achievement as his noblest activity and reason as his only absolute seemed apt in this most achieving and successful of nations.

Bowling for Columbine - a darkly amusing and shocking documentary film, loosely based on the gun massacre at Columbine High School, that doesn’t preach ‘answers’ but asks a lot of provocative questions about guns, racism, fear-mongering, the poor in the US, the power of the media and music and the feelings of self-worth and self-esteem in young people. You may remember Michael Moore’s speech at last year’s Oscars?

A majestic day that was celebrated loudly over here (by me) was Alan Smith stealing a point from Man Utd, doing wonders for us and helping kill off their season! Schadenfreude? Us? But Leeds have got one hell of a fight on their hands still... come on, lads! I have my home-made lucky Number 17 shirt- what more can I do..?

The best restaurant in Phoenix? Or at least one that is free of neon lights, super-sizing, two-for-one-combos and trade-marked slogans.... The walls are scrawled with signatures, there are only about 5 items on the menu, they are the same every day (but you can always have pie for dessert) and all cost \$8.80. I heartily recommend ‘Mrs. White’s Golden Rule Café’ near the baseball stadium in the centre of Phoenix. They also let me autograph their wall and paid for our lunch! Thank you! Do unto others as you would

have them do unto you....

California to Oregon (18th April, 2004)

“They’ve got cars big as bars, they’ve got rivers of gold...” - The Pogues [there are more cars than legal drivers in the US]

“It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live” - Albus Dumbledore

“A life has to move or it stagnates” - Beryl Markham

“The world is round, and the place which may seem like the end may also be only the beginning”- Ivy Baker Priest.

Rodeo Drive is the shopping zenith of Los Angeles extravagance, wealth and consumerism (Gucci, Cartier, Tiffany, Bijan et al). I wondered, wandering in amazement, how would it feel to be so massively rich and able to indulge in every spending whim? But then I realized that it must feel exactly as I feel, for in most countries people gaze at me in fascination, at my unattainable wealth, at my opportunities and my freedom. And are the enormous, leafy mansions of Bel Air and Santa Monica Boulevard a glorious example of what the world can achieve, or are they an indecent extravagance in a tragically skewed world? I did not enjoy Los Angeles and it is the only city in the world that I have left earlier than I planned. It is a soulless sprawl, a frogspawn of cities, a lonely place. There is no center, no defining area where you can sit and feel “this is Los Angeles” and therefore it is utterly inaccessible to the fleeting visitor. It is the edge of the world and all of western civilization.

After the structural and personal anonymity of Southern California, Santa Barbara was a beautiful, refreshing welcome into the different world that is Northern California. California reminds me a great deal of South Africa, the coastline is very similar to the Wild Coast, there are vineyards and sunshine and San Francisco and Cape Town are both surrounded by water and countryside. California also seemed a sunnier, quieter, prettier version of England. It is like England on those too-few precious summer days of perfection, when England is heaven and heaven is England with the sweet reek of flowers and trees, a dazzlingly fresh blue sky and immaculate green hills. The days so wonderful that 60 million people doggedly endure the rest of the British year. But in California this is normal. Famous Highway 1 hugs the coast, a winding, clinging cliff-edge road through glowing fields of flowers. Spectacular, hilly and the

same infuriating headwind that has riled me on and off since Patagonia. Huge elephant seals lounge territorially like German tourists on the beach. Jagged black rocks guard the shoreline and heavy green waves smash white against them in exaggerated slow motion.

There was a massive outpouring of Irish-ness for St. Patrick's Day. It is certainly a bigger event here in America than it is in Ireland. Enormous volumes of Guinness, rivers dyed green, a celebration of heritage. Even MTV proudly celebrated the occasion- with a stirring, skirling, nostalgic bagpipe rendition of.... 'Flower of Scotland'.

Unfortunately there is not space here to tell you about all the amazing things that you can buy here in the US. I will just use the 'Buggy Bag' as an example: "did you know [the ad exclaims breathlessly], that shopping carts can have up to as many germs as a toilet?! Buy 'Buggy Bag' for plush, quilted 100% seated area coverage." Wonderful. And, of course, completely useless. And just one more: "The Tie Teacher: revolutionizes learning how to tie a tie. Do you always run out of time getting ready for work every day? Then you need the Tie Teacher. Only \$19.95! Ideal for Business Men." I could go on and on and on and I deeply regret that all this cycling prevents me from spending many more intriguing hours watching the shopping channels.

The Golden Gate Bridge is an icon of my journey, like Hagia Sophia, Petra, the Pyramids, Table Mountain, Machu Picchu... Partly, I confess, it is a Lonely Planet tick-sheet mentality, but really these places are a measure for me of how far I have come and a reminder of just how far I still have to go in life. Like all human icons and heroes, the bridge was much smaller in real life than I had imagined it. Next landmark: the Arctic Circle.

So I had arrived in shining white San Francisco. Unoriginal perhaps, but where better to read 'On The Road'; that encapsulation of wanderlust and the excitement of moving, the hope for great times in new places, the potential of new journeys, the people you meet who define and personalize places, times and experiences and a raw excitement for San Francisco. And, boy, here I was at last! Wheee! Little Italy full of Italians and Chinatown full of Chinese and riding my darned bike up Hyde Street (which nearly killed my lungs and legs for Chrissakes!), that crazy steep street you always see in the car chase movies with those wild old trams and the tram-tracks burning silver-white in the sunshine and then down Lombard Street- which they say is the windiest of streets in the whole world, and I do believe them- eight crazy hairpin turns in just one block because the hills of 'Frisco are steeper than you can even imagine. And

San Fran is sure full of interesting people, the ones who are mad to live and I felt so ordinary and unusual like I never have done for a couple years now. Homeless guys in Nikes with two shopping carts full of stuff (Two carts! California sure must be doing something right if even these poorest and saddest of guys have gotten more stuff than I do), old Chinese folk in the parks doing Tai-Chi and thinking about the past, and mesmeric dreadlocked girls looking and smiling real pretty. In a cheap Indian restaurant a waiter hollered “Tres naan bread!” and that’s three different languages in just three words which must be a kind of record but it sort of tells you what San Francisco is like.

In this city of surprises I was ambling through the slick, quiet financial district of narrow streets and mighty gleaming glass towers when I bumped into the family I had stayed with back in Guadalajara, Mexico. It was fabulous to see them again, and Carlie, my favorite two-year-old, gave me a good excuse to go back and watch the amusing sea-lions on the ghastly Pier 39 again. Who said goodbye is for ever?

I lay in bed and decided that this must be the best view since Anthony’s shower in La Paz, Bolivia. The light from Alcatraz raced rhythmically across the ceiling and seared into my brain, “You’ve come so far; you can’t quit now. You’ve come so far, you can’t quit now. You’ve come so far...” San Francisco had everything that I could possibly want: coffee and the bright bay, beer and oysters, football and sunshine...etc. It was hard to leave. The best city in the world? Probably.

The Redwood forests of Northern California were spell-binding and literally awesome. Thousands of years of majestic silence amongst the tallest trees on earth. Stoic, beautiful, hypnotic, mighty, futile. In the silent forests time felt like it had stood still. Yet some of these trees were alive when Jesus was crucified. It added another powerful perspective to Easter Sunday, especially as a church I passed that day had a note pinned to the door “Sorry- no Service this Easter.”

That only a handful of the irreplaceable original forests remain is sad indeed. Two things really struck me: firstly how anyone could be so short-sighted as to want to cut down the few remaining trees but secondly how impressively far-sighted were the original people who thought “hey, we need to preserve these” when the forests were still widespread. I don’t think I would have thought of that.

Despite the majesty and splendor of the Redwood Forests there is still a need for kitsch. Horrible RV parks that make Butlins sound appealing and yukky gift shops. But the ‘Drive-Thru Tree’ was fantastic- the tackiest tourism since viewing the Pyramids of Egypt from inside Kentucky Fried Chicken. It is startling that something as spectacular as a 2000 year old, 300 foot tall tree is not sufficient fascination in

itself and so has a huge hole chain-sawed through it so that you can drive your car through it. Such depths of entertainment delight me immensely. It was even a disappointment that they let me ride through the tree for free on my bike. For utter satisfaction I would like to have been swizzled out of a few bucks as well.

I left fabulous California and entered Oregon. I know- I didn't know much about Oregon either. But now I know more- there is lots of rain and lots of trees. Unfair perhaps, but drenching days and long nights in a wet tent and sleeping bag do little to encourage curious-minded travel. The last week has been travel at it's purest, crudest and most pointless- simply moving for motion's sake. Not looking or seeing or learning, just feeling the miles edging along beneath the wheels, taking me ever further from the beginning and ever closer to home.

THANKYOU to McDonald's, Newport, Oregon. Thoroughly wet and miserable my resolve and principles dissolved and I went to McD's for the very reason many avoid it- for an obscene calorie-fest. The manager very kindly gave me a free meal; a generous donation of an impressive 2420 calories.

COME ON LEEDS- do not go gentle into that dark night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

My Letter from America (21st May 2004)

“We’ve been through it all together, And we’ve had our ups and downs” - Marching On Together

I look back on my ride through the most prominent nation on earth and find it impossible to summarize neatly. I am very conscious that I have seen only a tiny sliver of the country and that my experience of the west coast tells me almost nothing about life in Texas or New York or Kentucky. However, with the language here being, for the most part, more understandable to me than Swahili or Arabic I have been talking and learning more than in many other places I have been. The United States is so diverse, so confused and so confusing that no two conversations or people are the same. I have met creationists and evolutionists, Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals, racists and mixed-race families, idealists and defeatists, atheists and Christians, gay marriage supporters and spittle-flying homophobes, Dubya voters and Dubya haters, anti-abortion and pro-electric chair, pro-choice and anti-electric chair, enormous wind-farms and enormous RV’s, triathletes and couch potatoes, beautiful National Parks and massive cities, drive-thru banks and epic trans-continental bike routes, anything-goes liberalism and old-fashioned bigotry, intrepid world travelers and folks who have barely left their state. I met millionaires and passed an Indian reservation as poor as the Third World. I never felt comfortable enough to knock on strangers’ doors to ask for a place to camp but one family gave me their house for a week while they were out of town. America is the most overtly religious country I have been in since the Islamic world yet arguments rage about the word ‘God’ being on the dollar bills. It is the most patriotic country I have been to, with the ‘stars’n’bars’ flying everywhere yet many are despondent about the state of the union. Bumper stickers tell many tales, from American flags and slogans like ‘United we Stand: the Power of Pride’ and ‘These Colors Don’t Run’ to ‘No War for Oil’, ‘if you can read this you’re not the President’ and ‘if you can read this you’re too damned close so back off bitch’. I rode through a tree and the enormity of LA. I never got to go to a baseball game nor to play any sports, but I have watched a lot of TV. I have spoken English and Spanish. I have eaten Indian, Mexican, Korean, Ethiopian, Chinese, Thai, Italian, Japanese and Israeli. I have eaten enormous amounts of food and drunk bucketfuls of coffee (but even I could not manage the extraordinary 64 oz (2 liter) cupfuls of soda that petrol stations sell). No

wonder I need a dentist for the first time in years.

America is fabulously rich, hard-working, beautiful and friendly. It is also a lot of the things that anger people around the globe: consumerism gone crazy (the size of Walmart and Costco superstores has to be seen to be believed), a disregard for the environment (most noticeable in the incredibly cheap gasoline and the massive vehicles everybody drives), and an unawareness of, and lack of interest in, the rest of the world (“if you want to make the world disappear” they say, “read an American newspaper”). America has certainly made mistakes, but then ‘the man who makes no mistakes does not usually make anything.’ This is an intriguing, vast country and, in the words of one of it’s most prominent politicians, (no, not the “Africa is a nation.../ I don’t speak Mexican...” fellow) “I’ll be back.” I have enjoyed my few months here, and have been reassured to find that many of the preconceptions about the USA are not true. I only hope that the rest of the World can begin to learn this before the present global atmosphere of divisive, fomenting hatred really explodes. I thought for a time that I should not mix politics and bike riding, but then last week I, like MLK, had a dream. In my dream I finally got to meet The President of the United States face to face. As I was introduced to Bush I was too much of a wimp to tell him all that I had planned to say, and instead I groveled and fawned and woke up furious at myself. So I decided I should at least say what I believe to the people of America: If you disagree with me please write back and tell me why. Don’t just get mad: a privilege of living in a democracy is to have an opinion. Thomas Jefferson said that dissent was the highest form of patriotism. And surely any opinion and thought is better than apathy and indifference. This is not my country so perhaps it is really none of my business. But the United States of America is the most powerful nation on Earth. It’s actions and ideologies affect all of us on the planet. Therefore because your country affects us all, I think we should at least be allowed an opinion, if not an outright right to vote in your elections! I have always been relatively happy with the USA being the current big cheese of the world. However my experience over the last 1000 days in 43 countries and 4 continents has been that the positive impact of the USA is diminishing fast. The world is disillusioned at best and murderous at worst about the role that the United States is playing today. This is not just regarding the war in Iraq- it stretches from before that and much wider than that, although I think that the Al-Qaeda PR department could never have dreamed up a better recruitment campaign than the current Iraq saga. In my opinion the biggest problem the world faces today is George W. Bush. I honestly believe that George W. Bush is a bigger threat to the world than Osama bin Laden. Bush has

polarized the world and fuelled the fires of our differences. America is certainly a good country, filled with good people. But it is currently portraying itself as an arrogant, ignorant bully who will stop at nothing to achieve it's goals, with complete disregard for different beliefs, nations or international organizations. Hatred, tension, resistance, resentment and bitterness are escalating all over the planet. This is so contrary to the hopes and viewpoints of so many ordinary Americans (over 50% in the last election). But take a moment to think about your perception of Arabs- do you (like I once did) find yourself thinking of AK-toting, flag-burning loonies? Now, try and imagine how the rest of the world perceives you from what little they know... George W. Bush is your voice to the world and from my personal observations that scares the hell out of me. I had dinner last weekend with an 81-year-old man who has proudly voted Republican in every single election of his long life. But this November he is going to vote for John Kerry. Kerry is perhaps no JFK, nor even a Clinton (bumper sticker: 'nobody died when Clinton lied'), but at least he does not appear hell bent on arrogant, ignorant world domination. The American President has an enormous impact on all of us foreign folks and so I think that we should all have the right to vote. If everybody on Earth was given a vote, who do you think would win the election in November? But, seeing as we can't vote I will settle for the result if every single one of you votes, and every single one of your votes is counted fairly. This is the Land of the Brave, the Home of the Free... and I want the rest of the world to realize that before things become even more insane.

Riding through Canada (July 1, 2004. Canada Day)

“We must not be too busy dreaming to forget to live”- Albus Dumbledore

“For I have always lived violently, drunk hugely, eaten too much or not at all, slept around the clock or missed two nights of sleeping, worked too hard and too long in glory, or slobbered for a time in utter laziness. I’ve lifted, pulled, chopped, climbed, made love with joy and taken my hangovers as a consequence, not as a punishment.” - John Steinbeck

If the criteria for a ‘great’ city include- as I believe they should- mountains, ocean, parks, ethnic and cultural diversity and cricket pitches, then Vancouver is up there with the best. We rode out (or ‘oot’ as the natives say) past the green gem of Stanley Park, past the polished glass clean and quiet of the downtown, past sea-planes and cruise ships and yachts, and over the Lions Gate bridge and we pointed our noses north towards Alaska. The end of the Americas creeps ever closer.

‘We’ is me and David Elliott, my friend from school and university who vowed after we cycled through Central America in 1998 that if ever he was seen on a bike again then I had his permission to shoot him. He had had enough. But that is the beauty of miserable experiences: the rose-tinted glasses of time and, in his case, the shackles of a city desk, are sure to eventually persuade you that maybe it wasn’t so hard after all and- given enough time, work and soft living- that actually you would like to do the same miserable thing all over again! He has been victim to a few subtle jibes on these pages and so now has managed to blag three months off work to ride with me from Vancouver to Prudhoe Bay, Alaska.

After much procrastination two books have forced me to choose a name for my new bike. My list of ‘Potential Wives’ now includes Beryl Markham and Beryl Smeeton. Both are dead, which tends to complicate marriage plans, but at least I have a bike name now. Dave has named his bike ‘Buck’ after the dog in ‘Call of the Wild’ that was taken from a comfy city life and trained and hardened into a tough, northern working beast. We concluded the ceremony with a sprinkling of beer and got back on the road again.

As always, having company is a joy. We left town looking grizzly in huge fake tatoos (me- rose-

entwined dagger, he- busty mermaid), began a three month beard growing contest, and signed ourselves up on www.hotornot.com to settle the dispute for good. Dave is not one to fall for my lifestyle of masochistic, puritanical ascetism. So I readily succumbed to a more lavish diet. I knew that it would not take long to gently twist his mentality to one of days filled with massive miles, so for the first few days on the road I eased off and relaxed and waited for his sinews to stiffen, for fitness to return and for him to forget about the 'sweet, lazy life' for a while. For a time I can enjoy the ease and comfort. McTouring I call it.

But we rode every day for three tough weeks from Vancouver to Whitehorse through massive landscapes of lakes, rivers and trees. Even Google cannot tell me how many trees there are in Canada. I tried to calculate it myself, but got confused around a zillion. As I write this the Yukon sky is orange-grey and the sun a feeble disc, hidden in the smoke from forest fires feasting on half a million football fields worth of forest. The sheer enormity and emptiness of Canada thrills me. The Yukon alone is twice the size of Great Britain, yet its 30,000 inhabitants are less than you would find in Elland Road Stadium, Leeds on a rainy Saturday afternoon.

The 'Sea to Sky' Highway sounded painful but wasn't, though a stonking 9 mile climb the next day certainly hurt. The road has been gently hilly, but the heatwave has been fierce: 37C makes for brutal riding and many streams and lakes brought blessed relief. Dancing meltwater streams, shining in the sun bubble and chortle their busy way. To leap in naked and come up laughing hard and throw back your head to howl in shocked delight at the burning cold is to feel like you will be young and alive for ever. Back on the silent bikes the horrible sweating would soon start again though.

Better even than the rivers and the long, light days is the wildlife of Canada. We have seen moose, deer and beaver dams, bald eagles, fox and coyote, and shy, impressive black bears. A mother and her two cubs grazed amongst dandelion clocks as we stood transfixed and delighted. We persevere with our fishing although our set-ups of line, hook and chewing gum paper lures have not yet tempted those shining bars of silver.

The undisputed worst part of Canada are the mosquitoes. Camping we stew in full waterproofs, gloves and head net, yet still clouds of evil hum round your head like dentist drills, teasing and torturing sharp as 'sailors knives'. Waking in the morning your first sight is of a patient crowd of them sitting waiting on the tent. As my legs burn and I can taste my lungs and the hot sweat stings my eyes on a painful, slow hill

climb, the mosquitoes are so uncaring as to still feast on me then; surely the worst possible addition to an already unpleasant scenario. A rotting, putrid moose lay decaying by the road, heaving with maggots. Yet we both agreed that we would rather lick that moose than stand naked as mosquito food at dusk. Dave has been reading a book on Buddhism and for one impressive evening he did wonders for his karma by not killing a single mosquito. By the next day however, full-on slaughter had resumed. It is awful. And locals delight in telling you that “this is nothing! Wait till you get up North...” Meanwhile the birds sing softly and the mountains shine on unperturbed. I leave you to imagine the delights of going to the toilet in the woods here in mosquito hell.

A little lower than the mosquitoes on the irritation register are the RVs. I have written in amazement before about these enormous monsters that tow big jeeps behind them. On the Cassiar and Alaska Highways it is hard to feel remote and adventurous when every beauty spot has an RV Park (“Cable TV! Gift Shop!”). Small towns exclaim their attractions: “World famous DoNuts!”, “World renowned giant igloo!”, “World’s largest fishing rod!”, “World’s largest wooden carved Mounted Policeman!” (I have honestly seen all these). Wherever you look are the shiny white, loud, lumbering, super-sized rear ends of RVs. Robert Service would certainly not approve.

One of the stickers on my bike says “Live like you’ll die tomorrow.” Dave regularly says that if he were to die tomorrow then today would certainly not be spent on the bike. I had to agree that hot beaches and fast women certainly make more sense.

We managed to find a TV in time for each of England’s matches in Euro 2004. Oh, the agony of being an England fan- 38 years of hurt now. Unfortunately I doubt that I will get to watch much of this year’s Tour de France. Lance is gunning for an unprecedented sixth victory and I wish I could urge him on. An inspiration for all the oft-stated reasons, I also admire him for the loyalty and gratitude he has shown to those who helped put him where he is today. It is a far cry from certain much less talented football players with no concept of pride, loyalty or gratitude who will, for a few quid and a sniff of glory, eagerly betray those who have lifted them up to where they are today.

Canadians are very friendly people, but I have to agree with the Americans that they do talk funny, ay! It is a pleasure to be surrounded by people who are like a cheerful, prosperous and educated version of home. To be north of my home for the first time on this journey, to enjoy a northern solstice and to be in the Yukon is exciting. ‘Yukon’ is one of those glorious sounding places- like ‘Patagonia’ or ‘Mongolia’-

that reek of adventure and big skies: 'the freshness, the freedom, the farness'. We have crossed the Yukon River which 'like threaded quicksilver, gleams to the eye' and now, as the RVers often paint on the back of their convoys, it is 'Alaska or Bust!'

MY LAST ARTICLE produced a glut of replies, both of applause and rage. Thanks for all of them. If the ratio stays the same in November I will be delighted: even the Floridans could not miscount that! Here are a few points that came up a lot:

- I am not anti-American or pro-Arabic. I loved the USA, and I loved the Middle East.

Like Steinbeck "I find out of long experience that I admire all nations and hate all governments"

Like Socrates "I am not an Athenian or a Greek but a citizen of the World" and, unlike Samuel Johnson, I am willing to love all mankind, including an American!

America is a fantastic place, and what I wrote was, in my opinion, a way to strive for global acceptance and understanding which would benefit EVERYBODY.

- I did not really mean that all the world SHOULD get a vote in the US elections. I just believe it to be an interesting hypothetical exercise.

- Christians, I believe, should ask themselves 'WWJD'

- Saddam was a nasty guy. But, with the WMDs and al-Qaeda links now known to be at best a mistake, at worst a lie, the justification for the war that Saddam was a bad chap is absurd. Look at the genocide in Sudan, the starvation in Zimbabwe... Conditions in many countries are far, far worse than in Saddam's Iraq. - Like Laurie Lee, what I fear in the world is "ignorance, racism, nationalism and intolerance"

- Check out www.costofwar.com

- I apologise for punctuation errors. They wont happen again in these page's.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS: Voltaire's Candide Killing Pablo- Mark Bowden. (Read after going to Colombia rather than before!) HW Tilman's books Travels with Charley- John Steinbeck the poems of Robert Service for a taste of the Yukon and virility! High Endeavours; the life and adventures of Miles and Beryl Smeeton- Miles Clark West with the Night- Beryl Markham

I APOLOGISE to Seattle for the disastrous slideshow I held there. If it is any consolation, I have done

several hundred presentations now, and yours was unique!

THANK YOU to Portland for an awesome turnout (and hangover)

AND IF YOU WANT to know what Canada is really about..... here it is from the mouth of Joe- a man on a beer ad:

Hey. I'm not a lumberjack, or a fur trader... and I don't live in an igloo or eat blubber, or own a dogsled... and I don't know Jimmy, Sally or Suzy from Canada, although I'm certain they're really, really nice.

I have a Prime Minister, not a President. I speak English and French, NOT American. and I pronounce it 'ABOUT', NOT 'A BOOT'.

I can proudly sew my country's flag on my backpack. I believe in peace keeping, NOT policing. DIVERSITY, NOT assimilation, AND THAT THE BEAVER IS A TRULY PROUD AND NOBLE ANIMAL. A TOQUE IS A HAT, A CHESTERFIELD IS A COUCH, AND IT IS PRONOUNCED 'ZED' NOT 'ZEE', 'ZED'!

CANADA IS THE SECOND LARGEST LANDMASS! THE FIRST NATION OF HOCKEY! AND THE BEST PART OF NORTH AMERICA!

MY NAME IS JOE! AND I AM CANADIAN!

By Canoe down the Yukon River (17th July 2004)

Pas d'elle yeux Rhone que nous - traditional Quebecois saying

All men dream: but ... the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act out their dream
with open eyes, to make it possible. - TE Lawrence

Follow your Bliss. - Joseph Campbell

One of the worst fire seasons in history hung over the Yukon like a pall. The Top of the World Highway was closed due to smoke. But up here roads are new things, new-fangled things, and long before any road reached the North the rivers were the roads. We wondered then whether perhaps it may be possible for us to canoe down the river to Dawson and get back on the bikes again there. Neither of us knew anything about canoeing so we began asking the locals. Like locals throughout the world, they were never short of opinions:

“The river’s too high”

“The river’s too cold”

“You don’t have a map”

“You’ll sink if you load your bikes onto a canoe”

“The smoke is too dangerous”

“Five Finger rapids will get you”

“The bears will get you”

“The fires will get you.”

The monicker for a long-term resident of the Yukon is a ‘sourdough’, a term used with great respect. We, clearly, were not sourdoughs- we were a pair of naive Englishmen and we therefore had no chance. Red rag to a bull? We immediately began the search for a canoe. If my philosophy on life is ‘pragmatic idealism’, my philosophy on adventure is becoming ‘pragmatic recklessness’. As Mallory said, “The greatest danger in life is not to take the adventure.”

Fortified by bison burgers, moose tacos and bear sausages and be-grizzled with several weeks of beard we piled up our canoe ridiculously high (it looked ominously like a pyre) with bikes, bags and two weeks supply of food, strapped a moose skull on top as totem and mascot, bade farewell to the road and pushed off towards Dawson, 500 miles away.

We were accompanied for the first couple of days by friends in another canoe, who were clearly worried about our ineptitude. Sara, a South American Explorer and a sourdough, and Peter, another sourdough, set about sharing their wisdom with us and we were grateful for it. On the first day Peter fell out of his canoe into the river. The canoe was up on the riverbank at the time. With teachers like these, what could possibly go wrong? We waved them goodbye and continued alone, eager to start building up our pecs and biceps to impress the ladies of Dawson

We soon realised that canoeing is considerably more fun than cycling: you cannot get lost (I relished not having to look at a map for two weeks, and we talked of the East African tribe the Wetherf'karwis), you can effortlessly transport mountains of gear (witness our precarious pyre) and so can eat much nicer food than on the bike and you are not at the mercy of the questionable driving skills of RVs. You can wash up your pans with water rather than with bread or sand. Best of all though is that even when you are resting, or eating, or peeing, or generally idle you are still being carried effortlessly towards your destination.

Lake Lebarge was the first hurdle- 50km of lake with no current to help ease the miles along. The lake was made famous, at least up here, by Robert Service's poem 'The Cremation of Sam McGee' ("There are strange things done in the midnight sun... but the queerest they ever did see, was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge I cremated Sam McGee"). Strong headwinds and choppy waves turned the lake into an extra long battle, and we had to abandon one afternoon for fear of swamping and sinking. To lose one's entire worldly possessions several days walk from the nearest road would not be a good thing. By evening all would be peaceful once more and we skimmed stones on the calm lake down the royally golden road of late sunlight, throwing up silver crowns with each splash.

After the lake we enjoyed the changing faces of the river all the more. At times, jade green and steady with strange boils of water rising and slowly swirling. At times, a sliding mirror. At times-my favourite- shallow and jolly and you could look down and watch the pebbles rush past, colourful time capsules, colossally yet casually old.

We pitted our wits against the fish once more, assured that even Englishmen could not fail to catch fish here. We failed. This was a blow as Dave, foolishly designated to buy all the food for the trip, had bought little except an enormous consignment of very cheap garlic sausage. Suspiciously pink at first, it greyed unpleasantly with age, smelled extraordinary, and tasted worse. We ate it morning, noon, or night and woe betide the unfortunate soul occupying the downwind seat of the canoe the next day. It was, if nothing else, a reliable bear deterrent.

Shining acrobatic dragonflies would hover briefly above us: there it is! Gone. Fish splashed mockingly. Beavers swam the river, heads stretched forward earnestly, until they detected us then-slap!- with a loud beat of the tail on the water they were submerged and safe. Moose swam strongly or stood dumb and staring from the bank, water dribbling from their mouth. Squirrels chattered their displeasure at being disturbed. Woodpeckers sounded as though they were banging their heads against a brick wall, or at least a hard tree. Bald eagles circled, screeching their haunting cry into the silent sky or sat imperious on tree tops and watched us with utter indifference.

At times ash fell like faint snow from some fierce, far-off fire. Lightning strikes, fires and re-growth are what the respected eco-botanist Elton John refers to as “The Circle of Life.” All the land is at different stages of growth: blackened hillsides stripped to bare trunks like porcupine quills, or a bright blush of the pink Fireweed flower that is always the first thing to grow after fire, a sign of hope like when you first notice that a bad haircut is beginning to grow out. Then comes bushes, then poplars, and then, at last, the spruce trees return.

In an unpleasant afternoon of rain and wind and granite grey water reminiscent of a Great British Summer Beach Holiday lightning flashed and we had a brief yet amusing discussion about whether a canoe was a good place to be or a bad place to be during a lightning storm. But then we came upon the Five Finger Rapids. These rapids had long since been decided by the pessimists as our disaster-in-waiting and so we had long been looking forward to them. Past the point of no return the adrenalin surged and we paddled like wild men. I have to admit that my steering was immaculate and Dave’s paddling rather feeble, but all was going well, the rapids were almost behind us, and I really thought that we were going to make it. The rapids are described by Tim Harvey (www.vancouvertomoscow.com) as “chains of reared-up and crashing waves... a vortex that swirled like a black hole in the river...” and our escaping unscathed would certainly have been an undeserved fluke. But our boat was just too heavily laden and at

each wave we shipped more and more water until, with a little sigh of apology, the canoe rolled and flipped and dumped us into the cold river. Grinning and shouting we began trying to push the inverted canoe towards shore, but the river was fast and the canoe incredibly heavy. If she shipped much more water we feared she would sink. We whizzed downstream, trying and failing to get ourselves to shore. I guess we drifted a couple of miles and after about fifteen minutes in the water we were getting a little chilly. The situation was just about on the cusp of turning from amusing into serious when we managed to haul ourselves into an eddy and get to shore. As the adrenalin subsided the cold took over and I have never known such uncontrollable shivering. Luckily the stuff I had stored in my Ark dry-bags was still dry (www.ark.co.za) so we could put on dry clothes, but the other dry bags we had been provided with were useless, soaking all our food, my camera gear, documents and money. But we had, sort of, survived the notorious Five Fingers and we were jubilant. We had been very lucky. We paraphrased Lance Armstrong as our explanation for this foolish stunt of reckless, testosteronic bravado, “50% was for the adventure, and 50% was for those who never believed.”

During the final week the river became ever wider, scattered always with a maze of islands. We went with the flow, but navigation was hard as we paddled through the thick smoke from wild fires that blotted out the sun and reduced visibility to just a few metres. We were alone in a weird sub-world of just us, the canoe, and a complete enveloping greyness. (And the garlic sausage). It was not therefore not particularly scenic, and after a few days of not being able to see anything we were more than happy to reach Dawson- a successful end to an entertaining break from the bikes.

When people tell you that something is not possible, it is always possible to turn that into a positive challenge and an adventure to be attacked full on with enthusiasm and optimism. Dawson was the hub of the frantic Klondike gold rush of 1898, and long before we ever came along the river has been a road for people chasing their dreams with wide open eyes. It was fascinating to share in their exciting history for a little while.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS:

‘The Fruit Palace’- Charles Nicholl. The best description I have read of the Colombia I loved. Since his time the crazy life of Colombia has become much crazier, but the good side has stayed just the same.

‘The Ends of the Earth’- Robert Kaplan. The kind of travel book I wish I could write, by a man

travelling with his eyes as wide open as I wish mine could be. One of the very best travel books I have read recently.

MANY THANKS to Eric of Cascade Designs in Seattle and Coast Mountain Sports in Whitehorse for swiftly sorting me out with a new Therm-a-Rest. The new designs are fantastic- thicker yet lighter than ever.

THANK YOU so much to Lorraine, for the first wedding invitation I have received via my website! Good luck on July 31, and I am sorry that I can't be there: I could use a shower and a party.

Time of these Times

- the Yukon River-

Away from the road, away from the crowd,
No need for a clock, no need for a chat,
Away from the world in the heart of the Wild
The river my road, no need for a map.
The skies may change; the colours change,
The waters change; the colours change,
Lightning cracks; fires crackle,
The landscapes change but
Nothing Ever Changes.
Glossed by shallow ripples
pebbles stand still beneath,
Red and brown and grey and black and jade and white
Unperturbed by fleeting change,
Time capsules of history testament
to the colossal columns of Time.

Silence stands sentinel to Time,
A tangible presence watches
the endless river
ridiculing our thoughts of distance or time.
But to see the river in winter
is truly to see silence.
A motionless world, unbearably pure,
So cold, so hard, so still.

To know summer you must know winter,
As to enjoy the soft life you must first have felt ice
steel across your throat.

It is the winter that shows you the summer- the motion, the colour, the life.

But this river is not wild,
nor is she tamed by winter.

For this river is a road
with tales to tell and songs to sing.
Quiet trade and trappers and footprints
for year upon year upon year,
'til gold was found and hell let loose
and the river flowed with men.

But after scores of years and shattered dreams more
Now it's me who is following on.

There's still hints of their past, signs of them all,
The history still breathes, the stories will live on,
But the river will run on and on and on.

There is hope for the world and hope for us all
when a place such as this makes man's impact feel small.

A circle eternal- The seasons revolve,

The waters roll on,
The fires bring new life
to feed future flames.

The river, the silence are wed for all time

And each smooth worn pebble will outlive us all.

Times like these I hope to return to:

When I am not here does the river keep moving?

When I do not hear do the waters keep talking?

Away from the road, away from the crowd,

No need for a clock, no need for a chat,

Away from the world in the heart of the Wild

The river my road, no need for a map.

- Anon

The End of the Americas (12th August 2004)

Ushuaia. 17th February 2003, 56 degrees South

Prudhoe Bay. 12th August 2004, 70 degrees North

The Journey is the Reward - Chinese proverb

“What we do in life is the foundation of our humanity. ... in standing up for those old ideals of service and sacrifice, we stand apart from others. We are a band of brothers who do not seek fame but quiet solitude in doing a difficult job well. ... Life has taught me that courage is not a gift, merely the brutal application of willpower; be strong. ... Much [has been] done and [there is] much yet to do: failure is not likely- it is quite simply not an option” - A British general’s valedictory speech to British troops completing a 6-month tour in Iraq.

* DEDICATED TO THE VICTIMS OF THE LUNACY IN SUDAN, IGNORED BY THE TRUMPET-BLOWING ‘LIBERATING’ NATIONS *

Dawson was a crazy old town and ‘The Pit’ a wonderful bar. Open daily at 9am, it is the seemingly permanent home of several cheerful stumbling drunkards, and every afternoon at Happy Hour ‘Barnacle Bill’, a scary looking man with a fine ear, can be found hammering at the piano. I chatted with ‘Caveman Bob’ who has lived in a cave for many years and cannot remember his last haircut.

Dave and I set out on the last big haul, beginning by riding the ‘Top of the World Highway’. This scenic yet hilly mudbath passes through the town of Chicken (population 25), named-so they say- because the original settlers could not spell ‘Ptarmigan’, and on into Alaska. I was delighted to reach Alaska and be back in the USA. I had been expecting to misquote LP Hartley and write that ‘Alaska is a foreign country: they do things differently there’, but it actually feels to me very much like the rest of the USA- welcoming, friendly and hospitable. (Even way up here they still have wonderful American conveniences such as butter in a spray bottle to save the effort of spreading.)

The end of the Americas lay so close now- just 500 more miles up the ‘magnificent desolation’ of the

Dalton Highway. As the Americas had begun, so now were they ending: over a dusty gravel road to a ragged corrugated iron community. Our bikes were heavy with ten days' supply of food but we were fortunate to be able to camp by clear creeks each night, including the interestingly named 'No Name Creek'. Our nightly swims became ever colder as we crept northwards into the Arctic.

Trucks hurtled past, laden with supplies for the oilfield at Prudhoe Bay. The Dalton Highway is nothing but a Haul Road for the oilfield and for the oil pipeline that runs 800 miles across the state. The trucks fired stones from their tyres and churned dust as the road climbed and dropped endlessly over viciously sweaty hills. A petty official in love with his rulebook made us ride 1.7 miles in his truck because of dangerous roadworks. To my knowledge, the only person who has ever been run over by a steamroller was the guy in Austin Powers.

As we entered the Arctic Circle [the line north of which the sun does not set on June 21] I became ever more melancholy and reluctant to rush. The end was so close. For 18 months, ever since I left the southernmost town in the world, Prudhoe Bay had been my goal. Over the last few months it had been exciting to think of 'Prudhoe Bay' because it had at last become realistically attainable. "Not far now!" I often thought. But once I reached Prudhoe Bay it would no longer be a goal; it would only be a milepost behind me. I would be back at a beginning once again, with yet another terrifyingly far ride ahead of me. I did not want to have to summon the strength to be back at a beginning once again. It was so much more pleasant to be approaching the end. It is certainly true that 'to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive'. As I approached this journey's end I had to remind myself that 'the end is a goal, not a catastrophe'.

Pale mountains closed in- the craggy majesty of the Brooks Range and a truly remote wilderness. Slowly the trees had petered out until we were too far north for trees to survive. There was nothing left but scrubby tundra. The Atigun Pass is the final mountain crossing in the Americas. I had attacked the final climb in Africa as hard as I could, raging at the final obstacle. But things are different now- my journey and myself. I rode slowly now up this pass, stopping often to look back, looking down over the bronze tundra in the late evening light, remembering back with gratitude over all those places and times and people that had made the Americas so hard for me to leave now. If the end of Africa was an unexpected and exultant victory over a fierce opponent, the end of the Americas was becoming a sad drawn-out goodbye to a friend.

Mountain sheep scrambled high on the scree slopes above us, caribou and muskox grazed and a shaggy blond grizzly bear trotted across the road in front of us. Streams danced and the road and the pipeline strode on. The mountains flattened to nothing; nothing but a flat plain of soggy green, empty and silent and virtually untouched for unimaginable swathes of distance in every direction. Sunsets slide strangely and slowly across the sky this far north, very different to the swift straight up and down of Equatoria. The flat horizon blushed a crimson midnight sunset beneath a still blue sky and shortly afterwards the sun rose again.

Dave and I had done it; we had reached the end of the road together. As I stopped outside the Prudhoe Bay Post Office- the end of the road and just 1200miles from the North Pole- It was with a feeling of sadness yet gentle satisfaction. But I still could not escape the thought that this endpoint was nothing more than a new beginning, with a hemisphere of the world and all of Asia still standing between me and home.

Besides, the ultimate winner was pedantic bureaucracy. From the Post Office to the Arctic Ocean lies 10 miles of private road owned by an oil company. Despite having survived 30,000 miles of lunatic Third World drivers, a few deserts and mountain descents and anarchic states, the rulebook still deemed that this 10 miles of quiet, flat gravel road was too dangerous for me to be permitted to cycle. And so 18 months of hard work ended with me sitting on a tour bus of old people on the short drive to the Arctic Ocean where a quick swim meant that that the Americas really were over at last.

Sitting now in front of a dauntingly large map of Asia and trying to find a ship across the Pacific whilst also filling in forms to apply for visas for Russia and investigating the logistics of riding at temperatures of -40, I am struggling with the question of “what was the bloody point of those last 18 months, Al?” The best answer I can find is from the final page of ‘The Worst Journey in the World’, a book about a winter Antarctic expedition to collect penguin’s eggs, and one of my favourite books: ”..... And I tell you, if you have the desire for knowledge and the power to give it physical expression, go out and explore. If you are a brave man, you will do nothing: if you are fearful you may do much, for none but cowards have need to prove their bravery. Some will tell you that you are mad, and nearly all will say ‘what is the use?’ For we are a nation of shopkeepers and no shopkeeper will look at research which does not promise him a financial return within a year. And so you will sledge nearly alone, but those with whom you sledge will not be shopkeepers; that is worth a good deal. If you march your Winter Journeys

you will have your reward, so long as all you want is a penguin's egg.”

Thank you to Leah, for generously putting together this website and maintaining it for the past 3 years: I really appreciate it.

Thank you to all the strangers who have become friends over the past 18 months and without whom I would never have got this far “...I remember ev'ry face Of ev'ry man who put me here” - Bob Dylan

Thank you to the ladies at Prudhoe Bay Post Office and General Store. They were so incensed at somebody having stolen David's camera there that they amazingly managed to track it down and have it flown back down to Fairbanks! Osama take notice- this is the real USA.

Thank you to those attending a recent dinner party in Phoenix, Arizona for apparently voting me cooler than Ewan McGregor despite his own recent adventure! (www.longwayround.com)

As Siberia and the Himalayas loom large I would really appreciate a new infusion of MiniDiscs from any budding DJ's out there! (I would love books, poems, interviews etc, to try and rescue my ever-shrinking brain...)

There's no place like home... (25th August 2004)

Written for the Yorkshire Post.

As I rode away from home through the Yorkshire Dales on a perfect August day I wondered to myself what on earth was I doing? Why was I leaving this shining green gem to try and cycle round the planet when I would surely have to ride a long, long way to find anywhere as beautiful as this again?

I quickly realized that day, with a tight knot of fear in my stomach, that there was no way I could cycle round the world. In daydreams and on maps and in jovial pubs it had all sounded fun, but suddenly now I found myself actually on the road and hopelessly out of my depth. It was a terrifying realization. I was drowning in paradise before I was even out of sight of my home.

That was three years ago today. Today I am in Alaska, searching for a ship to take me to Siberia, with 30,000 miles, 44 countries and 4 continents now crossed with my tyre tracks. From Siberia I will ride back home to Yorkshire and the end of my road. I am astonished to have made it this far, but with only 18 months ahead of me I am beginning at last to believe that I may actually succeed now. My journey is raising support for *Hope and Homes for Children*, a charity helping young victims of war and AIDS in ravaged lands such as the Sudan. They have an established Yorkshire supporters' branch.

I look back on my ride now and see different perspectives to the world. In Europe and North America I was a poor person because I have a bicycle loaded with my bags. In Africa and Latin America I was a rich man because I have a bicycle loaded with my bags. Riding through Bulgaria I discovered that nodding your head means 'no' and shaking it means 'yes'. In the Sudan people were amazed when I told them how cold my country is. Yet here in Alaska I am regarded as a wimp for not having enjoyed a full winter with icicles dangling from my beard.

I remember lying in a sweaty heap on the track one fiercely hot day in the arid mountains of northern Ethiopia. A welcome shadow moved across the sun; a curious old man came to look down at this strange, pink spectacle. "Put me back on my bloody bike" I muttered, not for the first or last time, stealing the words of Yorkshireman and Tour de France rider Tommy Simpson. The smiling Ethiopian understood not one word but invited me to his home for coffee. Coffee in Ethiopia is not a quick cuppa with

Digestives. A coffee invitation in Ethiopia entails grass being spread over the mud floor of the grass hut, a ceremonious roasting of the beans over an open flame, and enough thimble sized shots of coffee to fill an entire afternoon and leave you high as a kite.

In rural Yorkshire you may be lucky if one single bus services your village. In Africa public transport is everywhere, with screeching minibuses racing and shouting for custom through every town and village, cheering and hooting at any struggling white guys who happen to be riding past.

Sailing across the Atlantic, cultures clashed on the boat as we debated each long night watch what song we should play to welcome the sunrise. An enormous, mustachioed, sweaty Canadian (with whom I had the misfortune to be rotating bunks with on the watch system) would holler, "There ain't nothin' but two kinds of music- Country and Western!" A Spaniard would want to serenade the sun with his guitar and a couple of hooligans would vote for Nirvana and 'Come as you are.'

Argentinean cowboys- gauchos- solitary, tough men, would invite me to eat with them: vast hunks of barbecued meat sawn from sides of hanging beef and not a vegetable or fork in sight. And then we would share maté, a green tea drunk from a gourd through a silver straw. They were never impressed by my descriptions of Yorkshire Pudding or Tetley tea bags.

In the Andes of Peru I tried to explain to a family about the Three Peaks challenge back home; three mountains to climb in under twelve hours. They looked from me, to the soaring ranks of 6000 metre monsters high above us, and then back to me again, impressed at my imagined strength to be able to climb three mountains in a single day!

I took to the water again, sailing out of Colombia to Panama. On the remote San Blas Islands we could trade a can of condensed milk for a giant waving lobster. The Indians (including a young boy, Erico, with a fake Leeds United shirt) could not understand our eating the 'cockroach of the sea'.

Britain is very popular in the USA, and people marveled at the age of my house and the crowded smallness of our land. When asked where I live I simply reply "Herriot country." Everybody who has reached middle age loves Herriot, and everybody has their own tale to tell about their ancestors from Britain and the rest of Europe. Such a young country is very conscious still of its roots.

In Canada's Yukon Territory three hunters rested beside their pick-up truck before heading out in search of caribou. As we talked they scorned the famously horrible warm beers of England and passed me a can of Coors Lite. I told them how in Malawi boys sell boiled mice on sticks to passing traffic. Fast

food, Africa style. It sounds revolting, but is it any worse than making a sausage out of coagulated blood and serving it as part of a good English breakfast?

As forest fires covering 5 million acres closed roads throughout the north, I took to a canoe for a change of scene. 400 miles later (equivalent to London to Edinburgh) I reached the next road and was able to continue cycling. Recently I reached the end of the Americas in northern Alaska, culminating with a chilly swim in the Arctic Ocean just 1200 miles from the North Pole.

As I look forward now with trepidation and excitement to Asia- the final continent, the final challenge- I can also enjoy looking back now too. My memories stretch back behind me like my fading dusty tyre tracks, through three incredible years that I never dreamed I would persevere long enough to experience back on that first day way back in Yorkshire. The world is fascinating, filled with exotic sights and sounds. Yet I have come to realize that every extraordinary place is nothing more than somebody else's normality. It is just exciting to see normality through fresh eyes. And that is why, as I imagine the end of my ride and my return to Yorkshire, I still feel that there really is no place like home.

Three Years on the Road (25th August 2001)

I left home three years ago today. The Guardian is still the only British national paper that has mentioned my trip. I am doubly grateful to them as this also is the source of my annual salary- 250 quid. Thank you! This is the latest article:

One year ago I rode out of Lima into the grey desert. Two years ago I was seeking shade in fiery Botswana beneath a baobab tree's spindly limbs. And three years ago was where it all began, waving goodbye to my family at home in Yorkshire. I rode out one midsummer morning with the hopelessly unrealistic dream of cycling round the world. Through my journey I aimed to promote the work of *Hope and Homes for Children*, an organisation committed and passionate in its work with orphans of war and AIDS. To my great surprise I am still going, and I sit today in northern Alaska with four continents now lying in my tyre tracks. The last 12 months started and ended with reckless detours. On an ill-chosen "scenic route" through northern Peru I had pushed the bike uphill along a deserted track for some days when I saw a battered little bus approach; frantic Indians shouting and waving told me that they had just been held up at gunpoint. The driver accelerated away and I was left in silence with the unpleasant prospect of armed bandits up ahead. I stopped at every curve to crawl forwards and scout the land, leaping into ditches at the slightest sound and cycled through a sleepless night. Never have I been so happy to see a main road again. A man in a cafe in Ecuador looked me up and down and declared, "with a body like that you'll never make it." I entered Colombia in a state of terror, wondering about the fine line between bravery and stupidity and deciding that the line does not really matter. Colombia is certainly loco but, feeling very selfish towards my family, I decided that surely the land of Shakira couldn't be all bad. And immediately the people and the lust for life of Colombia entranced me. Beautiful Cartagena was the shining jewel of Colombia, my reward for having taken the risk. As the Pilsener beer labels say in Colombia- "Where your friends are: that's your home." Between Colombia and Panama lies 50 miles of jungle, the notorious Darien Gap. My plan had always been to try and cross it, but this time discretion won the day: I hitched a ride around it on a yacht. We anchored in the San Blas islands to work on the boat for a few days. The Rugby World Cup final was on and there I was stuck on a tropical island with

nothing but palm trees, coral reefs, a yacht, lobster for dinner (again)- and not a TV for hundreds of miles. I suppose paradise is open to interpretation. Sailing through the Panama canal, I learned how to use a sextant in child-like wonder: to be able to pinpoint your exact location on Earth using the sun and a wristwatch is astounding. Christmas Eve and a storm arrived together, hitting us hard in the night. I clawed my way up to the bow to take in sail with the boat heeling hard and the salt spray stinging, holding on very tight and feeling very alive. The storm peaked at 56 knots of wind. It was a memorable Christmas Eve. In mad Mexico City- the urban equivalent of “how many people can you fit in a phone box?”- my host had to leave town for a weekend so she compiled a list of her girl-friends’ phone numbers, each of whom had been briefed to entertain me. Latin American hospitality will take some beating. But I also saw families foraging on rubbish dumps and then attended parties in lavish penthouse suites. The cold nights in the Sonora desert of northern Mexico were beautiful, toasting tortillas on small campfires among tall cacti. I always enjoyed riding through Mexican villages. Dim stores that sell the same few things the third world over- dusty pasta, cans of sardines spotted with rust, colourful warm fizzy drinks and stale biscuits. In the plazas old men sat still in the white sunlight, their faces carved with shadows beneath wide-brimmed sombreros. Curious old ladies stared at me unblinking. Preconceptions are generally made to be broken, but I was delighted to see that, in the best tradition of Speedy Gonzalez, rural Mexican men really do wear very large sombreros and say “Andale! Andale!” a lot. I was sad to be leaving Latin America behind: I would miss the tightness and importance of families, the huge meals and the warmth of the people. But after being the odd one out for so long, I was excited to be returning to speaking English, looking anonymously like most other people, and the general ease of life in the United States. I felt like I was going on holiday. At the border I had to go into a special room to explain why I had visas for lots of axis-of-evil countries in my passport. I was interviewed twice and paid a record \$100 to get into the US. It seems in this era that even if “you’re with us”, you still might be “against us.” But they let me in and as I rode, mesmerised at being back in the first world the words “Large and in charge” scrolled across a massive billboard. A fitting slogan for the US, perhaps, but in fact just an advert for McDonald’s. For me, seeing now with new eyes after two years in the developing world, the US was incredible. I went immediately to a supermarket to gawp in glee at the heaving shelves and the astonishing variety of breakfast cereal. Los Angeles was the zenith of American hedonism and I wondered, how would it feel to be so rich and able to indulge in every spending whim? But then I realised

that in most countries people gaze at me in fascination, at my own unattainable wealth, at my opportunities and my freedom. In most of the world I am a man on a fully loaded bicycle so I am very rich. In the US I was a man on a fully loaded bicycle so I was very poor. I arrived in shining white San Francisco, the epitome of the beat generation's road fever. And, boy, here I was at last too! Wheee! Riding my darned bike up them crazy steep streets you always see in the movies, with those wild old trams and the tracks burning silver-white in the sunshine and mesmeric dreadlocked girls looking and smiling real pretty. There was a massive outpouring of Irish-ness for St Patrick's Day. It is certainly a bigger event in America than it is in Ireland. Enormous volumes of Guinness, rivers dyed green; a celebration of heritage. Even MTV proudly celebrated the occasion- with a stirring, skirling, nostalgic bagpipe rendition of ... Flower of Scotland. I rode north at Easter through the Redwood forests, awesome groves of the tallest trees on the planet, filled with a heady silence fitting for such majestic things- some of whom have stood since Jesus. Yet in the US something as startling as a 2,000-year-old, 300ft tree is not enough and so one of the trees now has a huge hole chain-sawed through it so that you can drive your car through the tree. Such depths of entertainment delight me immensely. My experience of the US was massively positive, finding a friendly, hospitable, religious country with vibes surprisingly not far removed from Arabic countries I know and respect. This is not the country currently being portrayed to the world by its leaders. I headed on into Canada and wilderness beautiful and vast. One of the worst fire seasons in history hung over the Yukon Territory like a pall. The Top of the World Highway was closed due to smoke and I could ride no further. Fortunately a friend joined me for this stretch, so we were able to pile up a 17ft canoe ridiculously high with our bikes, bags and two weeks' supply of food and push off towards the next road, 500 miles away, hoping that we would quickly figure out how to canoe. I relished the new challenge and the ever-changing Yukon River; at times jade green and steady with strange boils of water rising and swirling. At times, a sliding mirror. At times shallow and clear so you could look down and watch the pebbles rush past, colourful time capsules, colossally old. We camped on islands, belted out Robert Service's virile poems, failed to catch salmon and watched moose and bear and imperious bald eagles. But then we came upon the Five Finger Rapids which pessimists had long since declared to be our nemesis. We so nearly made it through on sheer luck and enthusiasm, but the canoe was too heavily laden and at each wave we shipped more and more water until, with a little sigh of apology, the canoe rolled, flipped and dumped us into the cold river. The river was fast and the canoe

incredibly heavy. We feared she would sink. It would not have been ideal to lose my entire worldly possessions several days' hike from the nearest road. We whizzed helplessly downstream. The situation was just about on the cusp of turning from amusing into serious when we managed to haul ourselves into an eddy and get to shore. I have never known such uncontrollable shivering. Everything was soaked but we had, sort of, survived and we were jubilant. We paraphrased Lance Armstrong as our explanation for this foolish stunt of reckless, testosterone bravado, "50% was for the adventure, and 50% was for those who never believed." Afterwards I continued north on the bike to Alaska, the end of my fourth continent and 44th country. Only now am I starting to let myself believe that I may actually be able to finish this journey. After 28,000 miles I now only have to cross to Siberia and ride across Eurasia! I am homeward bound at last.

“Top 10’s” of Year 3... (1st September 2004)

In just a frantic few hours I will be waving farewell to the Americas and to the Western hemisphere as I set sail for Asia. From home-delivery pizza to Siberian winter.

I am indebted to ‘Alaska Mountain Bike Source’ for fixing up my bike free of charge (www.alaskamtnbike.com) and to a very high standard. And I am extremely grateful to CP Ships (www.lykeslines.com), who have agreed to let me hitch a ride across the Pacific Ocean with them. In a bureaucratic world, where it is far easier to say ‘no’ than ‘yes’, I appreciate their contribution to my project, allowing me to continue my chain around the planet without having to resort to air travel, and so indirectly contributing a great deal to *Hope and Homes for Children*.

As I leave behind one continent and turn towards another, I have updated my list of ‘Top 10’s’ for the third year of my ride. Thanks to all of you for your support- financial, moral or facetious! Enjoy the ride...

“The next time your life flashes before your eyes, make sure you have something worth watching”

COUNTRY 1. South Africa 2. Colombia 3. Sudan 4. USA 5. Jordan 6. Argentina 7. Mexico 8. Turkey 9. Kenya 10. Lebanon

CITY 1. Cape Town 2. San Francisco 3. Rio de Janeiro 4. Istanbul 5. Mexico City 6. Cartagena 7. Budapest 8. Beirut 9. Manizales 10. Portland / Vancouver / Seattle

FOOD 1. Islamic Iftars (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan) 2. Braais (South African barbecues) 3. Asados (Argentinian barbecues) 4. Mexican tacos 5. American burritos 6. Njera (unique Ethiopian food. Usually revolting, but the good stuff can be really good) 7. Saltenas (Bolivian Cornish pasties) 8. Kebabs (sorry, Turkey and England: the best ones are in Damascus) 9. Sausage sandwiches (Belgrade) 10. A&W burgers, Canada / In’n’Out burgers, USA

BUILDINGS 1. Petra (Jordan) 2. Abu Simbel (Egypt) 3. Baalbek (Lebanon) 4. Lalibela (Ethiopia) 5. Pyramids (Egypt) 6. Machu Picchu (Peru) 7. Tikal, Guatemala 8. Valley of the Kings (Egypt)

NATURAL BEAUTY 1. Carreterra Austral (Chile) 2. Wadi Rum (Jordan) 3. Table Mountain (South Africa) 4. Dana (Jordan) 5. Salar de Uyuni (Bolivia) 6. Patagonia (Chile and Argentina) 7. Victoria Falls (Zimbabwe) 8. Grand Canyon (USA) 9. Redwood Forests (California) 10. Coast of northern California 11. Huascarán mountains (Peru) 12. the mountains of southern Colombia 13. Arctic Alaska 14. Tlaeeng Pass (Lesotho) 15. Perito Moreno glacier (Argentina) 16. Fitzroy (Argentina) 17. Torres del Paine (Chile) 18. San Blas Islands (Panama) 19. Cappadocia (Turkey) 20. Coffee Bay (South Africa)

BAD ROADS 1. Sudan 2. Ethiopia 3. Northern Peru 3. Southern Chile 4. Lesotho 5. Northern Chile/Argentina 6. Bolivia

And, because it's not all hard work...

MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRLS 1. Colombia 2. Argentina 3. Brazil 3. South Africa 4. Lebanon 5. Yugoslavia 6. USA (a curate's egg) 7. Mexico

WORST HANGOVERS 1. Cape Town (ouch) 2. San Francisco (Maker's Mark left her mark) 3. Manizales (happy Hallo'ween) 4. Cartagena (ouch) 5. Nkhata Bay, Malawi (ouch) 6. Mexico City (muy crudo! Gracias a las hermanas Saracho...) 7. Mendoza (ouch) 8. Rio de Janeiro (sleeping on a moving yacht doesn't help) 9. Dawson City (baking 200 lasagnas the next day was not fun) 10. Nairobi (ouch) 11. Amman (ouch) 12. Vancouver (don't ever drink day-glo blue liquor)

“...For what it's worth, it was worth all the while. It's something unpredictable, but in the end it's

right. I **hope you had the time of your life...**”

Asia

The last long cold leg (17th September 2004)

“We are the Pilgrims, Master: we shall go Always a little farther: it may be Beyond that last blue mountain barred with snow, Across that angry or that glimmering sea” - James Elroy Flecker

“Good luck with the last long cold leg, Alastair”- Ran Fiennes

If you head West long enough you reach the East. 482 years to the day since Sebastian d'Elcano got home I watched the GPS tick over from 179 degrees West to 179 degrees East and confirmed for myself that the Earth really is round. I hope that you enjoyed September 7th 2004. Did the sun shine? How was lunch? I will never know as the International Date Line stole that day from me. Bored ramblings prompted from an endless horizon of empty ocean: I was aboard the Canmar Dynasty, sailing from Alaska to Asia, my fifth and final continent. The Canmar Dynasty is a 187m long freight ship and this ocean crossing was an entirely different experience to my previous boat trips on this journey. I had a bed with sheets, an en suite bathroom, and three meals cooked for me a day. An Indian crew meant the food was superb and I had nothing harder to do than read, watch movies and stare at the blue horizon. I was, of course, bored senseless. But it was a good way of appreciating just how vast the Pacific Ocean really is.

I have been predominantly alone for three years now; an experience that has ranged from the sublime to the suicidal. I have learned much about myself, not least of which being the realization that I am not as interesting a person to spend time with as I thought I was before I left home. One can only compose so many “All-time-greatest Leeds United teams” to pass the time and entertain oneself. And so I decided that some company would be a good thing for the long ride home. Failing to think of any girls who were not only beautiful and inexplicably attracted to me, but also willing to endure unwashed weeks of tent-bound squalor across Siberia, I was forced to lower my standards hugely... and so I have ended up with Rob...

Rob joined me briefly in Ethiopia and in South America, and my first bike trip was with him- the Karakoram Highway from Pakistan to China in 1997. We were also at school and University together.

Ever since we were at school Rob had had the ridiculous dream of cycling from Shanghai to London. Like most glorious dreams it was destined to remain always a dream. I began a devious email campaign, politely pointing out to him that his life was dull. If he didn't do this now, he was never going to do it. I was ably assisted by one of history's great thinkers: "Look, if you had one shot, one opportunity, to seize everything you ever wanted- one moment- would you capture it or just let it slip?" Rob had been teaching in Oxford for the last couple of years, and, like many teachers in Britain, he did not take much persuading to decide to escape. He chose to cycle half way round the world instead.

So now we are two. Things will be very different now. Not better or worse- just different. Some things will become much easier and it will be good to have somebody to share the good and bad times with. I am going to have to learn to compromise once more and there are bound to be times when we would cheerfully strangle the other person. Security may be a bigger issue now, as I believe my trump card for the past three years has been my very vulnerability- smiling wide and playing dumb. Now we will look more like two bumbling tourists ripe for picking. I think also that I am probably going to have to stop picking my toenails while I cook dinner. Now you can read Rob's versions of my tall tales on his own website: www.cyclinghomefromsiberia.com

"Magadan" is a word soaked in "Auschwitz"-like terror from the evil years of Stalin and the Gulags. Today, thankfully, Siberia is a far calmer place and Magadan is now up alongside "Timbuktu", "Ushuaia" and "Ulan-Bator" in the list of place names guaranteed to set an adventurous soul scurrying for the atlas and the airport and the ends of the world. I have always wanted to ride out from Magadan into Siberia but never really thought I could do it. Now I have no choice! Now it is the beginning of the long road home.

Tourist visas for Russia are limited to just 30 days and are not extendable. There is no way we could make it down to Vladivostok in that time: Siberia is bigger than the USA, Alaska and Western Europe combined, and if it were detached from Russia, Siberia would still be by far the largest country on earth. What good fortune then, that I happen to be the Life President of the little-known and recently formed company called "English Wildman Wafflings Ltd" and therefore was able to secure a 90 day Business Visa to "promote our business relationship" with Russia. We were also incredibly fortunate that Rob happened to be the Vice-President of the same company...

We are prepared for chilly winter weather because "Hitler and Napoleon, to name two, discovered that Russia at certain times of the year can be tough on visitors." The next 90 days promise to be daunting

and exciting. But after 6 months in North America this is exactly what I need- 6 months of civilization is definitely too much for any man. I am sure we will often be asking ourselves “What on Earth are we doing here?” But I know exactly what I am doing now: I am going home at last.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS: In Siberia- Colin Thubron. A wise man and a fine writer Adventure Capitalist- Jim Rogers. You can go round the world with a 5 year budget of \$11,000 and a bicycle, or you can be a billionaire in a 4WD yellow Mercedes convertible sports car... Jealous? Me?

SIBERIAN Kit list: BIKE: Blackburn Expedition back rack, Jandd Extreme front rack, 4 large, waterproof panniers (Karrimor and Edinburgh Bicycle), barbag (Edinburgh Bicycle), 2 large dry-bags (Ark), bungees, odometer (and bike!) SPARES: tyre, tubes, puncture kit and pump toolkit, spokes (DT), chain, duct tape, zip ties, string, wire, Leatherman, Cables, Bearings, Grease and oil, Screws and bolts CAMPING: Tent (Coleman), Down sleeping bag (3 season), Thin (1 season) down bag, Sleeping bag liner, Therm-a-rest, Foam sleeping mat, Head torch (Princeton) and batteries (Lithium) COOKING: Stove and spare, Fuel bottles, Pan (1.5L+ per person) and lid, Water bag (10l), Camelbak, Spoon, Mug and bowl, Thermos flasks, CLOTHING: Thin thermals, Thick turtle neck thermals, Trousers (Rohan), Ron Hill trousers, Non-cotton shirt, Different thickness socks (Thorlos), Cycling shoes (Scarpa), Winter footwear overboots (N.E.O.S), Sleeveless fleece vest, Thin fleece jacket, Thick fleece jacket (Windstopper), “Feathered Friends” Down Jacket, Windproof Goretex Karrimor Jacket, Windproof trousers, Thin gloves, Mittens, Windproof outer gloves, ‘Poagies’ (down handwarmers for handlebars), Thin hat, Fur hat, Face mask, Sunglasses, goggles MISCELLANEOUS: Sun cream, Vaseline, Toilet paper, Toothbrush, Camera stuff, Diary, Maps, Book, Introductory letter in Russian, Knife, Hacksaw, Mossie spray, First aid, Foam square to sit on, Passport and paperwork, Credit cards, US dollars

It takes all the riding you can do to stay in the same place

(10th October 2004)

“When I have seen by Time’s fell hand defaced
The rich proud cost of out-worn buried age;
When sometime lofty towers I see down-razed,
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage
... When I have seen such interchange of state,
Or State itself confounded to decay,
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminat-
That Time will come and take my Love away”

- William Shakespeare

“The proper function of man is to live, not merely exist. I shall not waste my days in trying to prolong them. I shall use my time. “

“Nyet...!”

“Nyet! You cannot cycle through Siberia in Winter.”

“Nyet! You cannot register your visa for 90 days.”

“Nyet! The bears are not yet hibernating.”

“Nyet! This is not possible.”

‘Nyet’ means ‘no’ in Russian, and it was the first word I learned. I have since learned the words for ‘cold’, ‘snow’ and ‘very far’. They seem to suffice for most conversations.

Russia is being choked to death by pointless bureaucracy; forms and offices and pieces of paper and officials that look important yet achieve nothing and suffocate progress. I read a sign in an office we were waiting in- “...foreign citizens may travel more freely on the territory of Russia opened for writing by the foreign citizens on condition of informing of going...” Yawn. We snored through tiresome tides of “this form”, “that form”, “pay this”, “sign that”, “now come back in a few days and do it all again.” In

the end they registered us in the region for just 10 days instead of the 90 we had requested. As we politely said “thank you” we decided to try to ignore future opportunities to visit registration offices.

Peeling paint blisters on dreary apartment blocks propped on 4ft stilts because of the difficulties of building on permafrost. Tears of rust streak the walls. Metal doors slam and clang hollow through half-glimpsed unlit, unswept, unloved passageways. Concrete staircases crumble to ski-slopes and middle-aged women look worn out too soon and far from their brief glory days as one of the beautiful young women of Siberia. Huge fading murals show sturdy men straining hearty muscles, grafting nobly for the good of the mighty Soviet Union. Battered cars, imported cheap from Japan, crash through grey puddles and rubbish lies where it was dropped. Yet children play and laugh the same as they do everywhere in the world. And as the days passed I discovered more layers to Magadan- smart streets, a brand new Nike shop, energetic people- hikers and artists and ambitious young people. My pessimism for Magadan melted a little towards optimism.

I will not blithely tell tales of Stalin’s Siberian Gulags in just a few trite sentences. Today a statue, the ‘Mask of Sorrow’, stands on a hill above Magadan to set in stone the memory of millions of murdered human beings. The statue is a huge concrete face, inset with smaller carved crying faces. On the slope below stand all the many symbols of the different religions of the prisoners as well as the hammer and sickle. Behind the main face the sculptor placed a small girl, kneeling with her face hidden in her hands, in tears or disbelief or denial or prayer or is she, perhaps, just another faceless statistic? The ‘Mask of Sorrow’ is a monument, but it also describes the tangible atmosphere of Magadan I felt when I first arrived. I have never been to a place that felt so devoid of life, where the people seemed like shells, like objects on a conveyor belt merely going through the motions of life that a system has completely sucked dry. But was this ‘grey, gritty hopelessness’ all there was to life in Siberia or was it just a mask? I was eager to pour myself into post-Stalin, post-Communism, pre-Anything-Else Russia and see what life was really like. When you meet ordinary people living their ordinary lives you learn much more than you do from looking on from the outside. Finally, and worryingly, I wondered whether the ‘Mask of Sorrow’ was perhaps my own mask. We were about to ride along the ‘Road of Bones’, built by thousands of dying prisoners to access the multitude of brutal Gulag mining camps of Kolyma. But beneath the confused numbness I felt in coming face-to-face with a history I knew very little about, beneath this I knew that I was churning with excitement at the challenges that awaited. Was excitement not appropriate

here? What would all those victims think of me now as I prepared to ride down the road they had built at such cost; riding through their hell, their exile, their graveyards? Am I making all that I can of my fortunate life or am I frittering unappreciated precious time away? Preparing to take on a Siberian winter gives plenty of scope for soul-searching. I thought of the War Cemeteries I had visited in France, the Monument to Peace in Beirut, Spion Kop in South Africa, the Falkland Islands' memorials in Patagonia, the Holocaust memorial in San Francisco. And now this. And soon Hiroshima... "Lord, what fools these mortals be..."

The International Brotherhood of Pessimists (Siberia branch) had a whale of a time shredding our plans. I was given these odds on our chances of making it through Siberia by one gloomy fellow- "25% you'll be fine, 25% you'll scrape through, 25% you'll have to quit, and 25% you'll die." Granted, we were travelling at the hardest time of year- too late for the summer roads, too early for the winter roads along frozen rivers, but thanks for the support, pal!

Narrowly escaping being transformed into someone from a Russian boy-band, I emerged from having a couple of continents worth of hair sheared off my head, and my ears and neck realized with a shock that Siberia in September was already pretty cold. The pessimists had already fast persuaded Rob that he had jumped in right at the deep and very cold end. I tried to balance respect for the hazards with enthusiasm and confidence, believing that once we were actually on the move things would begin to look more feasible. Plus, with Rob being a geography teacher I was comfortable that at least we would not get lost. This was important for my peace of mind. As we prepared for our start-of-continent swim in the sea and a photo by the huge statue of Lenin, Rob turned to me and asked, "Does the sun always set in the West?"

At our first camp we discovered that Siberian trees are too moist for easy fire-lighting and that one of our two stoves (new out of the box) did not work. For the first time I felt a splinter of real fear at what we were attempting. When the world is frozen solid you simply cannot survive unless you can melt ice and snow to drink. Siberia does not treat fools lightly. Even chopping down a big tree with our new (and heroic looking) axe did not restore my cheer that night.

But we fixed the stove and bought some fire-lighters and rode on. In gloves and hat and cold feet I stomped into a small shop where the radio was playing 'Sand in my Shoes' by Dido. It got me dreaming of sunshine and summer holidays: "...I've still got sand in my shoes And I can't shake the thought of

you...”

We rode into a blue sky as autumn colours burned joyfully; a blazing celebration of brief defiance before stone white winter arrived to strangle the land. We relished the glorious golden days until one night winter slid its appallingly cold pale hand over autumn’s soft flank. The first snow fell. The pine needles shivered down leaving a road surrounded by the bony ghosts of trees bracing for the freezing onslaught that was rushing over us fast: squeezing, squeezing the life out of all it touched. Siberia is a beautiful, pure and daunting land. We skidded and slid and fell and bruised a good deal as we struggled with the first snowfall. We were on a very steep learning curve. Some days the skies were grey and pregnant with more snow, others were bright like a new razor- shining; slicing.

“...Two weeks away it feels like the whole world should’ve changed I think I’ll leave it to tomorrow to unpack Tomorrow’s back to work ...”

Cars and lorries stopped to tell us we were crazy, to take our pictures and to ply us with coffee or “something a little stronger” and we began to discover the wonderful generosity of Siberians (as well as their fondness for a little “choot-choot” of vodka!) The collapse of Communism meant that the economies of the small towns were no longer propped up by the state and so became unviable. In the last decade people have left in droves for the big cities- Magadan, Moscow, the Baltic. Now the towns are ghost towns; smashed and empty shells, abandoned to the wind. Silent, empty, eery and sad to wander through... ”...Try to remember that I was happy here Before I knew that I could get on the plane and fly away...”

...to wander through people’s front rooms and smashed hopes and torn apart friendships. I saw a heart and ‘LOVE’ - in English- scratched crudely onto a kitchen wall. Two ravens rolled in the sky and their coarse cries were the only movement in this land of empty towns and dreams, and a system that failed its people.

“...real life where I can’t watch the sunset I don’t have time I don’t have time...”

In the office of a small newspaper Rob, surrounded by paintings of Lenin and Stalin, heroically attempted to give a radio interview in Russian, broke wind loudly, and collapsed into giggles. Life was already feeling cold, but at only -8C locals laughed at us and cried, with Monty Python fervour, “COLD?! This isn’t cold! When I was a lad...” Even Tippex here is approved down to -40C: that is one cold office! Still, cold or not, you would have to be a damn fool, or pair of fools, to run through the snow and

howl and swim in rivers in Siberia in October...

We were about to turn off the road and embark on 1300km of almost deserted track to Yakutsk. We loaded up with high-calorie food for the first 12 days: 60 Snickers bars, 9kg pasta, 3kg oats, 3kg sugar, 4 huge sausages, 12 packs of soup powder, 1kg cheese, 1litre oil, margarine, 12 cans of dubious looking 'meat' and 5 litres of petrol. We were worried that the cans of 'meat' may be horrible. Rob, on cooking duty that night, opened a can and shouted out, "Good news! It looks like dog food!"

But then my rear freewheel body ['wheel' in normal people's English] broke, a problem I have never known before and consequently was not prepared for. Fortunately we were only 24 hours of drunkard-filled buses away from Magadan: a mere stone's throw in Siberia. And so we have now beat an embarrassing retreat back to where we began to sit and wait for a FedEx replacement. When we left Magadan a fortnight ago our host, Father Mike of the Catholic Church, had cautioned us: "There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots." He was amused to see us back so soon.

With this maddening delay 'furious winter's rages' grow colder every day and our visa ticks down. But, having now had a small taste of snow, Siberia, and the wonderful hardy people who live here and laugh and lead normal lives despite the tragic, wasteful bureaucracy and the geographical and economic isolation and difficulties of the region, I am more eager than ever to get back onto what I am sure will be one of the hardest, most exciting and most intriguing stretches of the road so far. "...I've still got sand in my shoes And I can't shake the thought of you..."

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS: 'Gulag- a History' - Anne Applebaum. I realize, having read this book, that whilst I always thought of Hitler and Mao as horrific individuals, I did not quite group Stalin and the Soviet Union in the same brackets. I do now.

'A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich' - Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. a ground-breaking revelation of life as a prisoner in the Gulag by the Nobel Prize-winning author who was himself a Gulag prisoner.

THANK YOU to those people who sent me Mini-Discs recently: much appreciated as always.

THANK YOU to Sergei- perhaps Magadan's sole cyclist- for all your help and hospitality.

Cycling across Siberia (10th December 2004)

-Remembering a little Uzbek-

Life's journey is not to arrive at the grave safely in a well-preserved body, but rather to skid in sideways, totally worn out, shouting: "Holy Shit.. What a ride!"

"Because we don't know when we will die, we get to think of life as an inexhaustible well. Yet everything happens a certain number of times, and a very small number, really. Perhaps four or five times more. Perhaps not even that. How many times will you watch the full moon rise? Perhaps twenty. And yet it all seems limitless." from Brandon Lee's grave, Seattle

Wet snow had fallen blindly on Magadan all night. Gleeful pessimists tried to look glum and made hay at our predicament. Five thousand kilometers of winter and barely ten weeks of ticking visa lay between us and Japan and a rest. On a billboard in town Beckham roared and the Russian slogan declared "Nothing is Impossible I was bloody fed up of pessimists. We did get through in the end, and with a couple of days to spare, but it was a close thing. The last two months has been an unpleasant fog of thousands of kilometers of empty taiga, leafless, lifeless white birch forests, crunching snow roads and squealing stretches of ice where every nerve tightened in readiness for the next skid and crash. We crossed frozen rivers, tentatively. I had imagined frozen rivers would be flat and ice-rink smooth, but in fact they are a chaos of broken and frozen chunks of grey ice- the tangled frustrations of a fevered person's bed sheets- dusted in thorny thistles of pristine white frost. One day, as we heaved the bikes over the frozen, rutted mayhem left by heavy trucks slewing through the summer swamps, I thought that surely this terrain was too bad for any traffic. I was wrong: a tank passed us that day before it detoured through a forest and literally smashed a path through the trees. We followed in its destructive wake as it made a nice change to the swamp.

In our mad race against the visa our days began in freezing black starlight and ended, after up to 15 hours of riding, by frigid moonlight. Even glowing, rolling towers of Northern Lights did not make up for

the lack of sleep. In that heavy-eyed haze the moon became my calendar- "by new moon we should have reached such-and-such a town." Hours and days and weeks jumbled together. And interwoven in that unpleasant long race is a constant memory of horrible cold. -40C is a new record for me. Omyakon is the coldest inhabited region on Earth (record low: -71C). I remember stewing at +45C in the Sudan and promising myself I would always enjoy being cold in the future. That promise did not last long here! Which is worse, excess heat or excess cold? I think the answer is whichever one you are suffering at the time. Heat is a torment; cold a cruel pain. Cold makes everything more difficult (except for the superb bonus of being able to carry ice-cream in your panniers!) Plastic snaps, tyres freeze to rims, metal sticks to flesh, flesh screams or moans an endless painful protest. My bum was bloody cold until somebody made me a reindeer fur saddle cover. Rob, sporting a true geography teacher-style enormous beard grew outstanding ice beards each day. My ice-beards were feebler, but I did sport impressively long icicle bogies most days from my constantly runny nose. In such cold every small task takes an age, an age during which your temperature plummets fast. Camping was tough and dawn brought little relief for the sun is soft this far north so late in the year, rising late and sliding sideways before slipping down once more into another long, unforgiving night. Dancing the Funky Chicken at dawn was my strategy of choice for warming my toes: self-respect and dignity are low on your priority list at-40.

But this climate creates an unconditional kindness amongst the people who live in it. My weirdo masochistic psyche and my lazy alter ego would tussle briefly whenever we spied a ribbon of smoke pluming from a home hidden in the trees, or a village up ahead: should we push on a little farther and camp, or should we dash (a little too eagerly) to knock on the door and escape inside from the cold? Perhaps I am getting old; perhaps I am merely getting wiser, but I was certainly more eager to knock on doors than peg out the tent! In the Soviet-built towns, where huge pipes criss-crossed the town carrying hot water to homes with laughable inefficiency, matchbox cars bounced through icy potholes, and twisted scrap metal and junk looked half-pretty beneath the snow, we would be welcomed into homes- whisked out of the cold- and fed with soup, bread and sausage. Yakutia is a nation within a nation and my fondest memory of Russia. The people resemble Mongols and their language, bizarrely, is related only to Turkish. What wild nomadic wanderings brought them this far I have no idea, but their language would be very easy to understand if you were able to understand a cassette being rewound at high speed. Whereas the Soviet Union tried to make even nature conform to its system (hence the stupid water pipes), the people

of Yakutia live with the land, living in small farming communities with smallholdings of cows and summer vegetables and small cozy cottages. Because of the permafrost there is no plumbing or running water. Water is carved from rivers in paving-slab sized chunks and stored outside the homes in big heaps of giant ice cubes. An early morning dash to a -40C outside loo substituted spectacularly for the fresh wake-up shower I would normally enjoy back home. (How do you go to the toilet at -40? Answer: very quickly). The homes are warmed by wood stoves and as our frozen boots thawed by the stove we were fattened up with milky tea, bread, pancakes and homemade butter, jam and whipped cream.

On the day that I reached my 50,000km milepost (kilometerpost?) I also learned that George Bush had won another four years as the leader of our world. At this significant point I paused to think back over the turbulent, rocky roads of the last few years. I look ahead now hoping for a new beginning and a smoother road. I also pondered this: my generation has known two main enemies- first Russians and now Arabs. After riding 50,000km on 5 continents the two most delightful groups of people I have met are... the Russians and the Arabs...

We stayed with families, cafes, miners, road workers, bridge builders and in a weather station. Can you imagine a merrier scene than two Englishmen and two weathermen sipping tea and chatting about the weather? One of the weathermen, who I thought was on the nightshift, kindly offered me his bed for the night. I woke in the morning to find myself snuggled up with a completely starkers Russian weatherman! I paused briefly to reflect that, as a method of helping you wake up quickly and leap out of bed, this way was pretty good. I then woke up very quickly and leapt out of bed.

Russia has been one of my favourite countries with its extreme climate, extraordinary history and lovely people. But one major downside to the people is serious and endemic. Vodka. I have been horrified and repulsed at the grip vodka has, especially on the males. Fathers, policemen, drivers of heavy lorries- almost everybody urged us on to drink with them into oblivion. One night we met three vodka'd youths. Unfortunately they had a gun. Consequently they now also have our wallet.

Another night we stayed in a small hut beside a roadside cafe. Outside, the night was cold and white: snow and birch trees shining in the full moon. It was beautiful, but we were thankful to be inside and warm. We accepted the kind invitation of Lena, the cafe owner, to share supper with her and her husband and a little Uzbek man who worked with them. It was a fun evening and I learned the Russian for "To be or not to be" (*bate ily nye bate*). I liked the quiet, humble Uzbek man, but I do not know what prompted

me to write a couple of pages about him in my diary as we sat together around the table: "...after all have spoken and he has listened he now speaks quietly to me His face, half in shadow, half glowing from the stove is wrinkled and kind and maybe about 50 He talks of home, of the magical words 'Samarkand' and 'Bukhara' and of the steppes of Kazakhstan and the Pamirs of Afghanistan He has roved half a continent without ego or glory They are too often unnoticed by me, but Russia is full of these 'little men' and what tales they could tell me if only I bothered to listen!... There is no such thing as an 'ordinary person' I don't know why he captivated me, but as I went to bed I realized that I should respect everybody and then the attributes will shine through, rather than only respecting those whose attributes shine through immediately.

A few hours later I was standing bewildered at my helplessness. Everything I have ever done has been with a rather brusque "of course it is possible- you just have to try harder" kind of mentality. But now, whilst I knew that I could not do nothing, I also knew that I could not do anything. The cafe was enveloped in galloping flames; a sky-high manic laughter of unstoppable fire. The little Uzbek was still inside the café trapped by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. I was right on the cusp of being very foolish when, with a hard punch of heat, the gas tanks exploded and the roof collapsed. The little Uzbek was dead and I stood still, alive under a luminous full moon.

I dislike birthdays more with each year that passes. I grow grumpy at how carelessly I have frittered my time and I fret at how little time is left. But as the sun rose the next morning on my 29th year and my 4th birthday on the road I was smiling and thinking of the little Uzbek. Sadly I do not believe in a heaven of candy floss clouds and harps playing lift music so I am without that nice, reassuring comforter. But the Uzbek left a legacy that helped me to smile on my birthday: he reminded me of the thrill of being alive. I gulped down gasps of icy air, freezing on my lips and billowing out in great white clouds. Every day, every moment is precious. I will try to ride the Golden Road to his Samarkand with a smile on my face.

Against the odds, we reached the end of Russia before our visa expired and took a ferry from Vanino to the island of Sakhalin, from where we can hop over to the north of Japan. We also had another reason to visit Sakhalin: a friend, Alexis, has been living here for 18 months working for Shell. In all that time he has not had a single visitor so we decided to drop in whilst we were in the area. Alexis has also just got engaged. On top of all that, I can bet quite confidently that I'm going to have a White Christmas this year. There is plenty to celebrate. Merry Christmas!

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS: War and Peace- Leo Tolstoy. Sounds like the ultimate in excessively long, very dull “classic” books. But I have just waded through all 1.2kg of it and loved it. An epic soap-opera and definitely a book for the beach.

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek- Annie Dillard. She is a bit of a nutcase, but gloriously observant and crammed with a sense of wonder: she would be a fantastic cycling partner.

Do not stand at my grave and weep,

I am not there, I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow.

I am the diamond glint on snow.

I am the sunlight on ripened grain.

I am the gentle autumn rain.

When you wake in the morning hush,

I am the swift, uplifting rush Of quiet birds in circling flight.

I am the soft starlight at night.

Do not stand at my grave and weep.

I am not there, I do not sleep.

Do not stand at my grave and cry.

I am not there, I did not die!

Robbery in Russia

Will I love this massive Country of kindness,

Or will I fear a splinter of crime?

Three featureless and formless lives

Now shadow over so much that glows.

What shapes an impression?

The sweaty reek of ruining vodka

To numb the numbness.

Three faces: nondescript and wasted:
Only the clean black outline of their gun impresses on me now.
How outraged, indignant at those ugly shadows.
Would be all the solid dignity I have met
How unfair it would be for me to forget that.
But, though meager and shallow,
And though I will try,
I cannot ignore a splinter

The Altar of the North

This stove is my altar of the North.
Head bowed,
Palms spread I accept with grateful adoration that warmth that refills my veins.
Sleeping beneath a Siberian night is like a death,
Fascinating and terrifying.
With no beliefs beyond my experience
Must I feel that cold to believe it?
I dread what I covet.
I relish what I hate what I relish
And I snatch too eagerly at a chance to escape.
Escaping fear does not overcome it,
But tonight I am happy to kneel
Before the welcoming altar that reassures,
“Everything will be alright, Stay with me tonight.”
But does it matter, in the end,
Whether you forge yourself steel hard
In the cold reality of indisputable experience
Or kneel
In a warm glow of comfort where you can

Remember the ice hard world as perhaps not quite so cold,

Remember your good intentions

Gold plated at some other time

Before some other crackling stove.

It is good to be alone

In this silent, still winter.

But it is good to discover

Sometimes

That you are not so alone-

A smoke-ribboned chimney,

Footprints in the snow

And to worship

At some Northern stranger's warm stove

The Records from my Travel-worn Satchel (2nd Feb 2005)

Miyagi: Karate come from China, sixteenth century...

Daniel: I thought it came from Buddhist temples and stuff like that.

Miyagi: You too much TV - (Karate Kid)

“The trouble with the Rat Race is that even if you win you are still a rat” - Lily Tomlin

Usually I establish a pretty good idea of what I will write about a country during the first few weeks of riding through it. But now as I sit down to write about Japan I have no idea what to write.

Japan is a land of clichés. Mount Fuji and kimonos and Bullet Trains and neon lights and old temples and sumo and cherry trees and Mount Fuji... woops- we've gone full circle and are you asleep yet? Before I reached Japan I knew nothing about it except for these painfully boring clichés. Google wearily reports 140,000 sites describing “Japan, land of contrasts.” But now I know why writers use them- because it is so hard to summarise anything else as being the “real” Japan.

Japan has thrived partly due to an accepted separation of one's personal views (*'honne'*) from the opinions demanded by your position within the group or society (*'tatemae'*). This helps the intricate cogs of the massive machine that is 'Japan Inc' to run smoothly. I like to think of the kimonos and Mount Fuji as the *'tatemae'* of Japan- the official face of Japan. But I am not even close yet to figuring out the *'honne'*. I have not got any further than a headful of observations. It is such a fascinating country.

Japan is really not very expensive at all, unless you want to buy anything. But by eating nothing except eight packets of instant noodles a day I am keeping my costs low and my blood pressure high. I have been sleeping on the floor of railway stations, waking with the day's first commuters and fetching hot water for my breakfast noodles from one of the infinite number of amazingly convenient convenience stores.

Japan is easy to travel round, despite the cumbersome Chinese writing (kanji) that is beautiful yet unfathomable. I was impressed with myself however for quickly figuring out which toilets were for men and which for women. The symbol for the men's toilet usually is a vertical line (representing the torso)

with what looks like two arms sticking out at the side, two legs in trousers, and a head on top. Ladies toilets are usually depicted by a torso, two arms, two legs in a skirt, and a head on top. I think I will have the language cracked in no time.

Spring arrived on the day I rode down into Tokyo. I rode out of winter's monstrous anger and away from four months of snow and ice. No more shocking sudden skids on black ice and clumsy crashes into piles of slushy snow. The fields had turned GREEN- a lush feast for my eyes after so much whiteness. Blue sky and the sun warm on my face as I sat on a pavement eating my noodles and looking at the perfect far-off cone of Mount Fuji. I enjoyed the moment, and I enjoyed knowing that winter was behind me at last.

I arrived in Tokyo to stay with a school friend, Michitaka Nakao. He left my school when he was 14 to return to Japan and I had not seen him since then when we sat next to one another in German lessons. One of the first questions he asked was "Why are you cycling round the world?" That is a normal enough question, but usually it is asked as, "WHY are you cycling round the world?"

But Mitch asked, "Why are YOU cycling round the world?" The last time he had seen me I was apparently 'a skinny, brainy version of Ron Weasley' [the annoying ginger kid in Harry Potter] hence his surprise at my undertaking. Japan is full of incredibly friendly and polite people, so it was nice to meet a rude Japanese person at last!

We visited a Buddhist temple high on a hill in a deep green cedar forest. Carved trunks of large trees formed the temple walls and small black waterfalls spilled white into deep pools. The soothing noise and calm gardens and the rolling onomatopoeias of shining timeworn gongs all washed over me in the gentle afternoon garden light. Slips of paper predict your fortune and you tie them to the twigs of trees to make them come true. My future was decreed to be mediocre. I don't know why I bothered to tie that one to the tree. After the old temple I am getting worryingly close to having to now write about the contrast of the shining streaking Bullet Trains packed with school kids, immaculately dressed beautiful women and expressionless men squashed silent in their plain dark suits and dreaming of retirement. I will resist!

But the businessman is unmissable in Tokyo- putting in hours at the office that would daunt the keenest of London's high-fliers and that are completely inexplicable to me. To not take your full allowance of annual holiday for fear of letting down your office, to work forever beneath someone incompetent simply because he has sat in the office for more years than you, to be paid for longevity

rather than ingenuity, to leave home before your children wake, to spend the nights in bars with your colleagues each night and to then arrive home after your children are in bed is both normal and expected. Squashed in an amazingly cramped rush hour train with two politely blank Japanese faces buried in my armpits (it is good to be taller than everybody else on those trains) I was able to really appreciate my position and be grateful for my journey.

Perhaps with such a career-oriented nation it is not really a surprise that my visits to all-Japanese schools have not been a success. The students stared at me, thought me very weird, and had very little interest in or comprehension of what I am doing. I have never experienced that in any school I have visited before around the world. However, my biggest surprise in visiting schools was the complete lack of discipline: worse even than in England. Girls preen, boys chat or sleep. Japan is not always true to its stereotypes. I was surprised, but perhaps not as surprised as the class that got yelled at by the weird foreign cycling guy. They were ruder even than the “experimental school” I once visited in the US where teachers were called by their first names, lessons were voluntary, there were no classrooms or rules and the smoke in the staff room smelt different to normal cigarettes...

At FC Tokyo the teams are introduced in English to anglicise the atmosphere and then the crowd stands as one and sings- in passionate footballing earnestness- the club anthem “You’ll never walk alone.” That they have so blatantly stolen their identity from Liverpool FC half way round the world did not bother them one little bit. It was charming and endearing and bizarre.

At the Sumo championships things were certainly more Japanese, if no less bizarre. I quickly changed from finding the whole performance very comical to finding it impressive as well as very comical. Men so fat that they cannot even wipe their own backsides and yet who are at the same time elite athletes certainly make for a spectacle. The whole performance is very ritualised, and is as much of a dignified tradition as a combat sport: the fighters spend an age before their bout strutting round the ring, psyching themselves up, stamping their feet, throwing salt, scowling, rinsing and wiping their mouths. The fight itself is a short explosion of wobbling flesh, huge ‘wedgies’ and surprising speed, power and balance. The crowd yells its approval and, in the event of a major upset such as the defeat of the top-ranked wrestler (‘yokozuna’), may frisbee their cushions into the ring in delirious excitement or disgust. I like Japanese people even more when they relax and get excited.

Everything is ranked in Japan. I know for example that I have seen one of Japan’s “Top 3 Cherry

Trees” (Miharu) and that I was too lazy to go and see one of Asia’s “Top 3 Night-time views of a City” (Hakodate). I saw, but did not hear, one of Japan’s “Top 100 Best Soundscapes” (the church bell in Hakodate). It does make travelling very simple. Next week, for instance, I know exactly where to go to get the “Best View of Mount Fuji” and the streets of Tokyo are indented with tiles telling you when you have reached a good place to take a photo.

Before I write about Japanese food I should say that I do not like fish. That is like someone who hates cheese, wine and garlic saying that French cuisine is terrible, or somebody who hates greasy, bland, grey food decrying British cooking. And I have actually enjoyed most terrestrial foodstuffs served to me here. People who have been in Japan a long time adore the food; I have been here only a few weeks. Bearing all that in mind..... There are several important rules for eating in Japan that have nothing to do with chopstick etiquette. Rule #74 is “Eat first, then ask what it was you have just eaten.” This has served me well with jellyfish tentacles, tongue, rotten beans, raw squid in squid liver sauce, sea urchin and chicken neck cartilage. ‘Cold and chewy’ features regularly as a texture of choice. The Japanese are experts at eating things that never would have occurred to me as being edible. And then I discovered a nice, harmless, and obviously edible thing like beans being used as a pillow filler. I sincerely expect to be served a bowlful of pillow feathers for lunch before I leave Japan. And I will eat them with a straight face, smile and say “*Oishi!*” (“delicious!”).

At a little backstreet fairground I watched an old woman flip balls of fried octopus over and over on the grill at high speed with a pair of long chopsticks and I watched children playing games at different stalls. You could fish with hook and line to catch a live goldfish or an eel or you could try to win a terrapin, a mouse, or a giant beetle (to eat...?).

I walked in the early evening streaming crowds of Tokyo, down a street of Louis Vitton, Gucci and Cartier stores, accompanied by what Douglas Coupland describes in ‘Generation X’ as Tokyo’s street smell of ‘*udon*’ noodle broth and faint sewage. I stared into a bright-lit window at a handbag that cost more money than a couple of trans-continental journeys. Louis Vitton handbags are a dime-a-dozen, ten-a-penny and yet their unoriginality only seems to serve to enhance their popularity. But they are definitely not a dime a dozen. In a canyon of tower blocks rolling neon lights rise all around me. I stand still and rotate slowly in the rushing waters of the hurrying, silent crowds of Shibuya Crossing, with my head tipped back and enjoying the Japanese version of Siberia’s Northern Lights. Tokyo is a seething city but

it is also a very quiet city. It is like watching a concert with the sound off- something seems to be missing.

30 million people streaming around me and above me and under me 24 hours a day, 30 slide shows and interviews in 3 weeks, 7 different host families and a city too fun to waste time sleeping has all been a shock to the system after the wide-horized wilderness months of the Yukon, Alaska and Siberia. As I prepare to leave Tokyo half of me is yearning for China's Taklamakan desert whilst the other half of me has been reminded of the pleasures of a luxurious city life and is daunted to return to the realities of the world. My Japanese visa expires on March 10th, so I have until then to summon the courage to take on the Asian mainland. That, and to try and think of something a little more cohesive to write on my next update. To try and describe a country so Oriental and so Westernised, so modern and so traditional, so conservative and so wacky, so busy and so silent in just a few paragraphs is beyond me. So Three Cheers for the old lady in her kimono on a tiny mobile phone and the bullet train zipping past Fuji on her way to visit an old temple and cherry blossom tree! Japan- a land of contrasts. Google pages- 140,001. *Kampai!*

I am back on my own again now- Rob has taken the more wild option of heading to the Sea of Japan and on towards Australia.

THE TSUNAMI in Asia has shocked the world into a frenzy of generosity. It is wonderful to see such a united display of support for suffering people. Of course I hope that people give generously to help so many people rebuild their shattered lives, but I also want to offer these points for consideration: - Compared to somewhere like Darfur, Sudan, the tsunami has a relatively small death toll. Yet the suffering of Africa goes on ignored by most of us as ever. 250 children are orphaned every single hour by AIDS. That is like having a tsunami every 18 months or so. Deaths of children from unclean drinking water are equivalent to a tsunami every three weeks. - While we all give money now to the tsunami, we must not renege on our contributions to other long-term groups that we support. Their work went on before, is going on now, and will still be going in a future years when the tsunami is long gone. - The British and American governments have been very generous in supporting the tsunami relief work. This is admirable. The money pledged for the tsunami disaster by the United States is the equivalent of one and a half day's spending in Iraq at the moment. The money the UK has given equates to five and a half days of our involvement in the war.

RECOMMENDED WEBSITE- www.makepovertyhistory.org

My journey is a constant education. Here is the latest word I have learned: “Googlewhack”
Somebody emailed me and told me that ‘Rockhopper Hotchpotch’ meant that I was now a
Googlewhack... If you type two words into Google and get back only one single result, then that is a
Googlewhack. Sad, nerdy, worryingly addictive.

MY HAIKU DEBUT:

Russian aurora lights, colours,

Japanese rush-

Where am I happy?

Breath clouds the black night

Suits, white shirts, Japan rushes past,

Standing below lights

Lights reflect black puddles

Bustling traffic splashes-

Japanese Christmas

Star-drenched trees ahead

Susukino Christmas lights,

Drunk suits stumble home

Snow-flecked, wind-ripped sky:

the fishing boat’s hull gleams white

rolling on black waves

- BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS-

For Whom the Bell Tolls- Ernest Hemingway

If you are in need of a bit of self-help, these books were quite nice:

“The 5 people you meet in Heaven”- Mitch Albom

“Tuesdays with Morrie”- Ibid

“The

Alchemist”-

can't

remember the

author.

“An Uncontrollable Smile”

Walking down the platform.

Looking ahead but looking all around

Your face is empty,

Because you don't see me.

Diamonds pour from your blue eyes

And your mouth explodes into an uncontrollable smile:

You see me waiting for you.

You walk a little faster,

But you still have your dignity.

Dignity and an uncontrollable smile.

You walk a little faster.

A skip breaks your step.

Your bag is heavy in your hand (for you are here to stay).

Your heart is surging,

Your diamond eyes,

The uncontrollable smile,

Are all for me.

Dignity is crushed by your heart's surge,

And the skip becomes you running at me,

and I will never forget your diamond eyes

As I wrap you in my arms,

Together again,

Our mouths again

Together,

Two uncontrollable smiles.

[sorry- that was not much about Japan or biking!]

When is it time to go home? (16th February 2005)

A good traveller has no fixed plans and is not intent upon arriving. - Lao Tse

Hell is oneself. Hell is alone. - George Eliot

Hell is other people. - Jean Paul Sartre

“Don't let the sound of your own wheels drive you crazy” - The Eagles

Sometimes, in Siberia, when Rob was far ahead or a long distance behind me I would stop and look at him. It was startling to see and to really watch that small figure creeping so small over a landscape so vast. It makes no impression on the huge scene, it is inconsequential to and detached from the environment, a foreign body unknown to all it encounters. When I saw him in that light it made me see the last three and a half years differently. For the first time I could understand what people always imagine about my vulnerability and loneliness. I looked back on these three and a half years with great surprise that I stuck it out for so long. I also looked at that little lone figure with real melancholy. It is such a private struggle, of solitary triumphs and upsets, obstacles and decisions. I have experienced so much but there is nobody I can really share that with. That is a pity.

I was looking at the photo page of my website the other day, and I realised what a false impression it gives of my ride. My favourite photo of Lance Armstrong is not all the blurs of glorious yellow, or the champagne and crowds and smiles in Paris. My favourite photo shows a man in a black rainsuit, creeping painfully alone up a silent, empty mountain road on a cold, grey training ride. The thousands and thousands of boring, hurting hours are the true story; the hard work that culminates in those dazzling moments in the sun are what makes the rare successes so sweet and all the more worthwhile. But ugly campsites under motorway bridges, potholed busy roads, visa application waiting rooms and dreary urban streets don't really make for pretty pictures.

I realize many of the benefits of this ride, but I am anxious that this ride be a stepping stone in my life,

not the final product. Apsley Cherry Garrard, a survivor from Scott's tragic expedition to the South Pole (and author of the incomparable book "The Worst Journey in the World") returned from extraordinary adventures, challenges and self-examination; meeting with triumph and disaster, forcing heart and nerve and sinew to serve their turn long after they had gone. But he had peaked too soon, and the decades of his life that followed were little more than memorials to the past, "just sitting back trying to recapture a little of the glory."

I have wondered for a long time about how long I should ride for: I would love to ride to Oz, to cross India, to explore Madagascar.... I could ride for ever around this remarkable planet. I wish I could be as free as Bernard Moitessier. [He was winning the first ever non-stop solo round the world yacht race when one day he simply swung over the tiller and sailed off to oceans new, preferring the vagrant gypsy's life 'and the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sails shaking' to all that waited back home for him]. But I also think about what an exasperatingly-clever ex-girlfriend once explained to me as "the law of diminishing returns", where the overall returns will relatively begin to decrease over time. I think I began snoring at about this point in her romantic lecture, but it does apply to my life: how many mountains, sunsets, cultures, difficulties and thrills must I experience to have experienced 'enough'? You only need to taste one drop of sea-water to know the taste of all of the oceans of the world. But if you only taste a few flavours in a Haagen-Dazs shop you know you may have missed the best of all. And so would you rather taste a tiny spoonful of each flavour or choose just one that you can eat and eat and eat your fill?

Looking back down the road at Rob riding slowly towards me, I began to feel that I should stop soon. Life is so short and I want to turn to other things. I want to get some new perspectives, some new views of life. I have too many things I want to do. Rob is bound for Oz. I half-reluctantly decided that I should not head that way and so we have split up. I am heading now for China and the Stans and up and over the mountains and on back to Europe. I hope to be home in about a year.

But even without the differing plans we needed to split up. Four intense, difficult and cold months together took their toll and stress mounted. We ride and live at different paces, we have different philosophies and we have different ideas on how best to relax on our rest days. Sadly then I have failed in my plan to travel for a long time with somebody else: I am too selfish, too focussed, too panicked about the incompatibility of a short lifespan and the infinity of possibilities that this world holds. I am afraid I

was something of a grumpy bugger for too much of our time together. For Rob to have come straight from a teaching life to riding across Siberia in winter is impressive (although many who have experienced teaching life in England may feel that actually he was taking the easy option...). We have become better friends having been through those difficult times together, and I know that his adventures Down Under will be fun and insightful and far more relaxed without me (www.cyclinghomefromsiberia.com). Most important of all, I know that if I was ever to ride Siberia in winter again ('if': such a small word, such a bloomin' big IF!) I would ride it with Rob.

Riding down the Pacific Coast beaches after three jam-packed, concrete and neon weeks in Tokyo I really enjoyed being back on my bike. All of us as children loved zipping around on bikes, but so few people ride as adults. But bikes are fantastic- the wind in your face, fast and smooth down the road. I often forget that. Being cooped up in the city for so long reminded me how fun it is to be outside and riding, so now I want to remind you of it too. Dust off your old bike, pump up the tyres, zoom down to the shops, commute to work. Give your car a day off, stop wasting time waiting for the bus. Cycling is cheap, fast, stress-free, healthy... Remember how fun it used to be?! Do it tomorrow.

Japan II. (12th March 2005)

“Stop dreaming”: People who say that are blaspheming - The Streets

Western Civilisation is the Magna Carta not the Magna Mac - Samuel Huntington

“What do we leave behind when we cross each frontier? Each moment seems split in two; melancholy for what was left behind and the excitement of entering a new land” - Che Guevara (in the Motorcycle Diaries)

Not to do evil, to cultivate good, to purify one's mind- this is the advice of the Buddhas. -
Dhammapada

“Duct tape is like a force: it has a dark side and a light side and it holds the Universe together”

My last update was misinterpreted by many. Yes, I am ready for home, but that is because I am excited for new experiences and new challenges, not because I want to end this one. Quite the opposite! I would love to cycle to Australia one day, I am nervously excited about the 'Stans and I am really looking forward to riding across Asia. I am also growing daily more fond of Japan.

Japan is a work in progress, with construction underway round every corner. There is a dogged determination to complete the uglification and concretification of Japan as fast as possible. Soon it will be the most convenient country on earth to get from A to B, with every hill tunnelled, every river bridged and every road a direct one. The only drawback is that as A and B will be identical, functional ugly sprawls of identical shops and identical overworked people there will be absolutely no point in travelling from one place to the other.

A favourite statistic amongst ex-pats in Japan is that only one river in Japan- the Shimanto- is still undammed. And it is a pretty river; at least the little bits that you can see between the maddeningly pointless masses of new bridges and tunnels.

One thing I do enjoy about the construction works are the little men who are employed to wave random red or white flags, promote safety, direct traffic and generate confusion. Sometimes they wield little red light-sabres and look like a helmeted Yoda. They are everywhere and are basically a slightly ineffective version of the plastic traffic cone that the rest of the world seems to manage with.

A riddle: What is more numerous in Japan: pointless building projects or pointless flag wavers? Answer: in the Rinzai Buddhist tradition of insoluble riddles, the answer is that the most numerous thing in Japan is... the Vending Machines. Shining brightly wherever you look, completely covering shop fronts, lined up in lay-bys, pointlessly standing in locations that you know nobody will ever use, they are fascinating. Normally they sell drinks, pornography or snacks, but I also saw 10kg bags of rice, used knickers and boxes of eggs available. My record spot was a row of 24 machines. Can anybody beat this sighting? Was this one of Japan's "Top 3 Gatherings of Vending Machines"?

In the same way that I had never 'Hugged a Tree' until California's Redwoods, I had never eagerly 'Spotted a Train' either until I saw the Bullet Trains race by. In 'Top Gun' Tom Cruise zooms along cheering on his motorbike beside a fighter jet taking off. That is how I felt pedalling along when a 'Shinkansen' seared by. They are very cool.

In some places in the world travel, distilled to its crudest essence, can become little more than a dash from one toilet near-crisis to the next. What a pleasure then is Japan, with luxury toilets galore. After Siberia heated seats are very heaven, there are noise machines that imitate flushing sounds and so conceal embarrassing noises and a control panel of buttons of mysterious Japanese writing that allow you to entertain yourself with unexpected sprays of warm water and blasts of hot air.

In Japan you can walk safely through parks at night, know you will not be mugged and can feel confident that people will help you if they can or at least that they will not harm you. How sad it is for that feeling to be unique to Japan. Surely that is how everywhere (at least everywhere rich) should be, rather than being an extraordinary exception? It is a positive side to Japan that is hard to over-value. The quiet politeness and charming grace of Japan, combined with food that grows ever more tasty (once you know what weird things to avoid), the safety, the ease of life and the heated toilet seats mean that I have rarely enjoyed myself on this journey as much as I am at the moment. And as I rode south the weather grew warmer, I grew ever more cheerful and the women grew ever more beautiful. (Perhaps that should read: "...the women grew ever more beautiful and I grew ever more cheerful...")

Kyoto's famous temples and shrines echo to the shuffling feet of tour groups and the beeping of cell phone cameras. Souvenir shopping and group photographs define the modern Japanese spiritual experience. But with a little effort you can discover an older style of Buddhism: peaceful temples where monks strive slowly towards enlightenment through calm meditation and a simple ascetic pathway of being the best you can be and causing no harm to others. My mind was as far as ever from empty Nirvana one dawn when I was supposed to be learning about meditation. I fought protesting pains in my knees at the uncomfortable sitting position and sneaked peeks at the monk opposite me, timing the meditation by the pencil-grey line of sweet smoke rising straight and steady from an incense stick. The dawn sun shone wanly on his shaven head, his body was muffled against the cold with thick white scarves and outside birds softly sang the sunlight on the garden. The famous deep-red gateways to Japan's Shinto shrines are nowadays overshadowed by the huge red concrete bridges or by the Golden Arches.

Kyoto, compact and flat, wriggles with cyclists whizzing and weaving down the pavements on identical granny-type shopping bikes. Everybody rides and everybody rides amazingly fast. I raced one morning in the wake of a pair of very tight jeans and tall stilettos. I could barely keep up with her, but it certainly made a pleasant change from trundling slowly across Siberia behind Rob's less-than-attractive backside.

I enjoyed Shikoku Island as a respite after Tokyo. I rode round low wooded hills and rocky coastal bays of clear green water and white fishing skiffs. I met white-clad pilgrims with staffs and straw hats trudging the famous 1500km pilgrimage round 88 temples. Steep hillsides bright with orange trees were dotted with bonneted old women working quietly at the harvest. Hedgerows gashed with fragrant yellow flowers smelled sweet as I rode by- the first flowers I have smelled in the past six months of winter. Iya Valley was my favourite (only?) part of natural Japan: a gorge of tumbling green water, cloud-filled valleys and high hills of trees reaching up above the mists.

Nuclear attacks ended World War 2 and made both Hiroshima and Nagasaki famous. 60 years ago Hiroshima was a busy, lively city spread over a flat 7-fingered delta. Today it is a busy, lively city spread over a flat 7-fingered delta. It is a wonderful example of regeneration, a reminder that bad times pass, and that there is always hope for the future. Hiroshima city is now a powerful and vocal campaigner for nuclear disarmament and for seeking peaceful solutions to international disputes. Nagasaki's history is

older and unique- it was for centuries the only city where foreigners were allowed to live in Japan, and it was the entry point for Christianity. Today Nagasaki is eager to be a beautiful historic city first, and a bombed city only second.

Whilst I felt that the museum in Nagasaki overplayed the 'Victim' card, Hiroshima's museum and Peace Park created a powerful balance: highlighting the horrific suffering that the sparkling young scientific minds had worked so hard towards before they were able to unleash their unique human hell one sunny August morning, but also explaining Japan's role as the aggressor in the war and the effectiveness with which the A-bomb ended the war. I asked myself whether I would have wanted to survive in the inferno of flattened streets and hellish fires that melted roof tiles and bottles, my body hanging with melted flesh and thirst impossible to quench in corpse-filled streams or from the grotesque radioactive black rain that fell in floods from the mushroom cloud. Perhaps it would have been better to have simply disappeared instantaneously into death in the flash at 8.15 that sunny morning with only your shadow seared for ever more by the extraordinary heat into the pavement you were sat on. I would not have been brave enough to choose life.

Close to the museum is a building called the 'A-bomb Dome'. Virtually all of Hiroshima was flattened by the bomb and the ensuing fires, but a few buildings survived. Close to the hypocentre of the blast, this one building has been left in the condition that it was after the bomb fell in order to capture the moment for future generations. Surrounded by shiny new buildings and busy streets this shell of a building stands as a split second of history captured and preserved for us to remember and learn from.

Sadako Sasaki was two years old when the bomb fell. Like so many residents of Hiroshima she developed leukaemia a few years later and fell ever sicker. Her best friend urged her to fold 1000 origami paper cranes, for Japanese legend said that if she did that her wish to become well again may come true. She died after she had folded 644. Just another young victim of war. But her classmates folded the remaining 356 paper cranes and perhaps the most powerful symbol of Hiroshima was born. Today there is a children's monument in the Peace Park, and round it are hung literally millions of colourful paper cranes folded carefully by passionate, idealistic children from all over the world as a cry for peace in the world. Modern Hiroshima glowed beneath a dark night as I stood by that memorial soaked to the skin by the cold rain that ran down my face. All those neatly folded little paper birds made an incredibly powerful symbol as well as being a really good educational way for children to learn about Hiroshima, to

participate in a novel activity, to make their call for peace, and to help build their awareness of other countries around the world. I would really urge schools to visit the Hiroshima International School's '1000 crane club' website that helps schools from all over the globe get their own thousand cranes placed at the Children's Memorial in the Peace Park. (<http://www.hiroshima-is.ac.jp/Hiroshima/crane.htm>). Please let me know if you get involved in this. (www.sadako.com is also an interesting site)

I have visited memorials to victims of war, brutality and discrimination in Europe, Africa, South America, North America and Asia. I am ever more convinced that, unless you yourself are willing to pick up a bayonet and kill somebody with your own hands, that you have no right to condone the youth of your country being sent to war, nor to accept your leaders engaging your country in war lightly or as anything other than a final resort. I was very impressed and moved by the regeneration of Hiroshima and even more by its determination not to allow its lessons to be forgotten.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS: These ones are REALLY good: I suggest you read them in this order-

1. The Clash of Civilisations- Samuel Huntington. A brilliant analysis of the state the world is in, why it is like that, and some interesting projections for the future. A really, really good book.

After that you are well set to read-

2. The Ends of the Earth- Robert Kaplan. He travels round the world wondering where are going to be the key economic and conflict areas in the coming years. Very, very good.

And those two books then make this one interesting- 3. Guns, Germs and Steel- Jared Diamond. Answers a question that has often puzzled me as I travel: why did some parts of the world end up rich and others end up poor? Interesting.

A GOOD FILM- though I am sure you all saw it many months ago... 'The Motorcycle Diaries'- a really beautiful portrayal of a long journey through South America by Che Guevara before he became a T-Shirt model. Makes you want to jump on a bike and ride through South America!

THANKYOU to 'Maersk' for helping me across from Japan to China. Thanks for all your support of my journey and of *Hope and Homes for Children*.

A COUPLE OF WEBSITES: <http://www.commissionforafrica.org> : Britain's plans for its time as leader of the G8. Sounds great. Will anything actually happen? www.bikesnotbombs.org

white pink plum blossom,

grey graves on shining flagstones

dripping after rain.

First Impressions of China (30th March 2005)

“The wonderful things in life are the things you do, not the things you have... and they’re not the things you have done either. When I reached the top of Everest it was boring, as possessing something always is boring. But the actual climbing wasn’t boring, and dreaming about it wasn’t either.” - Reinhold Messner

“One crowded hour of glorious life is worth an age without a name”- Walter Scott

“Sure, there are bad days where it seems like a meaningless treadmill, but the good days outweigh the bad” - Matthew Pinsent

“Fortune favors the prepared”- Mr. Incredible

“Travelling in the company of those we love is home in motion” - Leigh Hunt

The slow boat to China was fast. I looked out to sea and instead saw China right in front of me- 24 hours sooner than I had expected. I hopped around nervously, rolled through Customs and rode out into China.

After the sterility of Japan my senses explode into action: It is cold and windy; The streets are dirty and potholed and the traffic is a whirlpool of hooting chaos; I cannot speak a word of Chinese; Taxis and buses race amongst pedestrians weaving their way across the wide streets. And to think that I used to imagine Japan and China as being pretty similar...

Excitement wells as I ride into the pandemonium. Memories bubble of the mad places in the world, the buzz of travel in unknown lands where every day is novel and every trivial task a hurdle. But at the same time I nervously think how massive and foreign China is. My stomach churns these emotions as I slip unthinkingly from Japan mode (stay in your lane, stop at traffic lights) into the mode that all my favourite countries run on (ignore lanes, ignore traffic lights, ignore everything except your own progress). Perhaps travelling in the developing world is like riding a bike: once learned you don’t forget

how to do it (and can look back nostalgically in your old age at what fun it was). I embrace the madness.

In these first few minutes I make snap comparisons and observations- "poorer than Japan... richer than Russia... driving worse than Mexico..." "grubby old apartment blocks... shiny new skyscrapers... McDonald's... street stalls... dirty gutters... mediocre cars... rubbish bikes... rude drivers... potholes..."

I do a TV interview ("now please tell our viewers how good the Olympics in China will be") and then try to ride out of Qingdao. An hour later I realise I have ridden a huge circle and am back where I began. A day later I discover that I am quite considerably North and West of where I thought I was. I become even more sceptical of the directing skills of the Chinese and begin asking three separate people for directions as opposed to my traditional two. But at least I am in motion- my anxieties have gone and I am relishing the adventures that China holds in store for me.

It is hard to find spots to camp in Eastern China so I occasionally stay in 75 cent 'hotels' where I have to convince the procession of prostitutes who keep barging into my room that I am honestly very tired after cycling all day and would actually prefer to sleep alone and no, you are not terrifyingly ugly- I am just tired... I lock my door to get some peace. I enjoy dawn breakfasts on grubby jumbled brick pavements. After my instant noodle marathon in Japan it is fantastic to eat proper meals for twenty cents once again. Men wash their hands loudly in basins then hurl the water on the ground and spit. Steam rises from hunched heads slurping spicy bowls of tofu soup and fresh-baked discs of flat bread. Bunches of chattering children cycle to school, silhouetted by the low yellow sun that is not yet warm. A youngish man slaps dough balls between his hands. His wife carries a bowl of soup and some bread to my table with a smile. She pauses to pluck a hair from my bowl with her grubby thumb, flicks it onto the ground and then turns to the next table that is shouting for service.

Chinese driving is amongst the worst I have ever seen. It is easy to drive Chinese-style; indeed you could even try it out this evening on your way home from work. Here's how:

1: set out to be as annoying as possible. Bear that in mind at ALL times. Now enjoy some or all of these strategies, either one at a time or simultaneously:

2: meander from lane to lane as your fancy takes you.

3: drive very fast in the slow lane, or very slow in the fast lane.

4: beep your horn at all times, especially when it is completely unnecessary.

5: never use your mirrors.

6: when you have to pull out into traffic, do just that. Pull out into the traffic. Waiting for a gap is for wimps- it is much easier to let the fellow driving at top speed on the highway hoot in panic and swerve wildly out of your way.

7: occasionally drive the wrong way down the carriageway. Get annoyed if people get annoyed at you.

8: when you tire of these games go fetch your flock of sheep and wander with them down the road. Have fun!

We all think that we are the most important thing to have ever happened in the history of the Universe. Coming to China is a good way of deflating that balloon. I am currently surrounded by a billion people to whom I can say “Hello, one, two, three, I don’t understand, Thank you.” 5000km of China still lie ahead of me. Every single minute on the road a truck roars past, cars push impatiently past each other, old tractors rattle by, mopeds whine, bicycles rattle and old men in blue jackets and blue caps labour timelessly on heavily laden tricycles. It feels like an Escher drawing- endlessly repeating for mile after mile and day after day for hundreds and thousands of years in countless settlements by an unfathomable number of individual people, none of whom have the slightest inkling of my existence. China makes you feel small.

Small, but not alone. I am back in a land that finds me infinitely fascinating. I am drawing some of my biggest crowds since Africa. Eating, shopping, asking directions, sitting: whatever I do provokes delight and wide-eyed staring. My greatest audiences come when I sit at a street stall and eat noodles... with chopsticks! My, oh my, what mirth! (“Quick! Quick! Come look at this!”) What fun to watch the weird white man eating with chopsticks (“Look at his big nose!”)! Oh, how we laughed! Occasionally it is nice to not be able to speak a word of the language. Then I can just quietly mind my own business and let the crowds enjoy their stare-a-thon in peace. I have a few flash cards to help me communicate things like “Hello- I am very hungry. I will eat anything big and cheap.” I also have my ‘magic letter’- a letter in Chinese explaining who I am and what I am doing. These get passed round the crowds with great guffaws. The Chinese people so far have been lovely and they are very expressive- signalling their approval of my journey with big grins and thumbs-up signs. I like China: great food, great people, great wall.

The 2008 Olympic Games are a big deal here already. A screen in Tiananmen Square counts down the days, hours and minutes until the whole world's gaze will turn onto China and the results of her latest Great Leap Forward. But our gaze will not really turn onto China because the Olympics are not about peasants and scrawny cows, or barefoot kids playing marbles beside an open sewer, or the polluting factories that haze Beijing's skies. Instead we will gaze at the wonderfully shiny centre of Beijing. It will certainly be a great show. The Olympics will be awesome here, and I hope that they are a catalyst to all sorts of improvements for the country. But don't forget the Truman Show, where the glossiness seen on TV was not the reality.

"Meet me beneath the portrait of Mao in Tiananmen Square," said Alex. What better place to meet a friend from University who I had not seen for years. Riding into Beijing was exciting- I always get a thrill when I arrive by bicycle at iconic places in the world, and Beijing's superb bike lanes made it even more fun. The vast Tiananmen Square is certainly impressive. Fixing a puncture in the Square drew my largest-ever 'Watching Somebody Repair a Puncture' crowd of on-lookers, and I believe I may even have outshone Mao himself for those few glorious minutes. But the many, many policemen in the Square were not happy with the fun, and they broke up the show.

Alex and I played on the same football team at Uni- the bizarrely named Kazakhstan FC. I remember that on the day I joined I asked the team "What is Kazakhstan?" I had never heard of it. Now in a few days I will say goodbye to Alex and get back on the bike, bound for... Kazakhstan.

AN INTERESTING website: www.asointernational.org

DO YOU WANT to know what cycling really feels like? I found this on a random website... "Craig's Beginners Guide to Preparing For a Cycling Trip"

Step 1: Get a spaghetti-strainer and several small sponges. Soak the sponges in salt-water and paste them to the inside of the spaghetti-strainer. Place the strainer on your head. Find a busy road. Stand by the side of the road and do deep knee-bends for 8 hours. This will acclimatize you to a day's ride.

Step 2: Take some sandpaper and rub your rear-end and the insides of your legs for about 20 minutes. Rinse with salt-water. Repeat. Then, sit on a softball for 8 hours. Do this daily.

Step 3: Each day, take two twenty-dollar bills and tear them into small pieces. Place the pieces on a dinner-plate, douse them with lighter fluid and burn them. Inhale the smoke (simulating car-fumes). Rub

the ashes on your face. Then go to the local motel and ask them for a room.

Step 4: Take a 1-quart plastic bottle. Fill it from the utility sink of a local gas-station (where the mechanics wash their hands). Let the bottle sit in the sun for 2 or 3 hours until it's good and tepid. Seal the bottle up (kinda, sorta) and drag it through a ditch or swamp. Walk to a busy road. Place your spaghetti-strainer on your head and drink the swill-water from the bottle while doing deep knee-bends along the side of the road.

Step 5: Get some of those Dutch wooden-shoes. Coat the bottoms with gear-oil. Go to the local supermarket (preferably one with tile floors). Put the oil-coated, wooden shoes on your feet and go shopping.

Step 6: Think of a song from the 1980's that you really hated. Buy the CD and play 20 seconds of that song over and over and over for about 6 hours. Do more deep knee-bends.

Step 7: Hill training: Do your deep knee-bends for about 4 hours with the salt-soaked spaghetti-strainer on your head, while you drink the warm swill-water and listen to the 80's song over and over (I would recommend "I'm a cowboy/On a STEEL horse I ride!" by Bon Jovi). At the end of 4 hours, climb onto the hood of a friend's car and have him drive like a lunatic down the twistiest road in the area while you hang on for dear life.

Step 8: Humiliation training: Wash your car and wipe it down with a chamois-cloth. Make sure you get a healthy amount of residual soap and road-grit embedded in the chamois. Put the chamois on your body like a loin-cloth, then wrap your thighs and middle-section with cellophane. Make sure it's really snug. Paint yourself from the waist down with black latex paint. Cut an onion in half and rub it into your arm-pits. Put on a brightly colored shirt and your Dutch oil-coated wooden shoes and go shopping at a crowded local mall.

Step 9: Foul weather training: Take everything that's important to you, pack it in a Nylon bag and place it in the shower. Get in the shower with it. Run the water from hot to cold. Get out and without drying off, go to the local convenience store. Leave the wet, important stuff on the sidewalk. Go inside and buy \$10 worth of Gatorade and Fig Newtons.

Step 10: Headwinds training: Buy a huge map of the entire country. Spread it in front of you. Have a friend hold a hair-dryer in your face. Stick your feet in toffee and try to pull your knees to your chest while your friend tries to shove you into a ditch or into traffic with his free hand. Every 20 minutes or so,

look at the huge map and marvel at the fact that you have gone nowhere after so much hard work and suffering. Fold the map in front of a window-fan set to “High.”

Departures and Arrival (1st April 2005)

Don't run- the time approaches. . . - Cosby, Stills and Nash

But you cant hide standing under these stars

they know everything, they know where you are...

and they're shining down their light to bring you back again - Guster, Careful

A stream of consciousness ramble a couple of days before beginning the 4000km ride across China: . . . I sit anonymously on the pavement, ignored by the ankles hurrying past. My knees up to my chin, feet tapping to a tune I heard last night but cant quite place now. Butterflies jostle my stomach and I breathe deep. I don't know why I am here again. If I smoked I would do now. I keep coming back to this place but I don't feel any more at ease here than in the place I was before. I should be used to this feeling by now: Departures. I have had so many. They have gotten easier, sure, but I still hate this part. The days of waiting, of preparation, of imagining. This time I am waiting for a visa. Waiting for a week. What's a weeks wait in the big picture? I am a foreigner in a strange town. As usual. A curiosity to all the strangers I meet: a mingling of respect and pity. Nobody to talk with. Nobody to lie on the sofa with. Just waiting. I know I will be fine once I am riding again. I know I will be very happy once I am riding again. I remember the sensations of pure, blissful freedom on the road. But the waiting sucks. People call it relaxation. They poke polite fun at my sloth. I am failing to relax. I hate this fidgeting torpor that comes over me before big rides when I hide indoors pottering over the routine preparations, taking days over tasks I could complete in minutes. A routine nervousness that I think I will never overcome. 4000km till my next rest. Damn, I just want to be in the wilderness. Anywhere but here in this comfortable boredom. Riding, not hiding.

I sort the bike out, rake through my bags, searching for things to throw away to lighten the load. I know there wont be much. I have done this so often. My possessions are faded and bruised- anything that has survived so many of these clear-outs must be useful. I pick up a book and fidget in my seat. I turn on a CD. It annoys me. I put on a DVD, switch it off and put on some loud Mozart. Coffee makes me worse.

I get out of the house and find this sparse spare corner where I can squint into the sun and tap my feet and feel the breeze on my face.

This is not just the usual pre-road downs which remind me so strongly of how much all this has pulled me from my comfort zone. Something else is creeping over me these days as well- the realisation that I might actually complete this ride. I began because I wanted to do something that I would certainly fail if I did not commit every ounce of myself to it. I had been contemptuous of my too-easy life. But now the too-oft-imagined end is becoming almost tangible. No more do I lapse into scheming how to escape from this treadmill with pride intact. No more do I seem to be in an impossibly vast hamster ball. Three years ago today I was in an ancient underground church in Ethiopia. But next April Fools day I will be home. I will not be riding. I have no idea what I will be doing. And tomorrow will be my final April 2 on the road... I am on the last lap of the calendar.

Will I finish with Kelly Holmes bulging eyes of utter disbelieving happiness? No. More and more I begin to feel the first tingles of sadness that this will be over soon. Not too soon, but soon nonetheless. Never will I be so free again. How will the end of the road feel? A damned sight happier than the beginning, certainly, but will it be champagne and cheers? I doubt it. A long look behind me, a sad goodbye? Tears of relief? Perhaps. I will know for sure soon enough. Too soon? I promise myself I will not rush these final glorious months.

I am well aware of the excessive self-pity found on this website, an under-appreciation of my good fortune and an occasional manic yearning to escape from my self-imposed challenge. But we are wise with hindsight and I hope that I will always remember the lessons I have learned- about myself, about what is important to me, about the state of the world in which we live. I swapped the best of times for this journey. And this really is a far, far better thing than I have ever done.

I ride back to the apartment from that patch of pavement- against the walls of the Forbidden City in Tiananmen Square- still nervous about this next departure (that will never change) but also excited and determined to relish my final Spring on the road. . .

I WILL BE OUT of contact for the next 4000km until I reach Urumqi.

Journey to the Centre of the Earth: a foreign devil on the Silk Road (18th May 2005)

“Don’t think about the end.
Don’t think about the beginning.
Think about the sky you’re under
Today.
Because tomorrow doesn’t really count
Until it becomes Today...”

“But I can’t stand to be dead,” she said. “Then don’t let it happen till it happens. Look at things and
listen and feel.” - Ernest Hemingway, ‘The Garden of Eden’

I like Chinese. I like Chinese. There’s nine hundred million of them in the world today. You’d better
learn to like them; that’s what I say... - Monty Python: “I like Chinese”

For FMH- wonderfully mad, but he introduced so many of us to the outdoor world.

And for Amelia- welcome! “World is crazier and more of it than we think...”

Way back in Eastern China I composed paragraphs in my mind of such scathing brilliance that I have
now completely forgotten them. The general gist though was that for a country with thousands of years of
civilisation behind it there is very little evidence of it today amongst the rude, brainless driving, hooting
(“I honk therefore I am”), yelling into cell phones and stomach-churning spitting. But enough about
Egypt... Certainly though if you want to appreciate Japan- visit China. But the further west I went the
more I enjoyed China and my rants steadily faded away.

It was a long ride: I broke the four week barrier for not taking a shower, said virtually nothing except
“hello” and “thank you” and, half stared to death, almost convinced myself that I was the only white
person left on the planet. The World got a new Pope, Britain didn’t get a new PM, Chelsea celebrated

having spent lots of money acquired dubiously from lots of poor Russians and more than a billion Chinese people cared not a jot for much of this.

It felt good for once to be actually making westward progress rather than my more usual meanderings. With so many thousands of kilometres between me and my next shower/toilet/conversation I was able to relax and think of just one day at a time, try to enjoy each day and settle for just arriving when I arrived. It was a perfect opportunity for me to practice living for the present moment - something I am terrible at doing.

I ride out of Beijing's creamy-white polluted sky (Note to Olympic Committee- add to your list of 'Things to do briefly and temporarily before 2008 in order to Impress the World' (that I assume already includes un-blocking evil foreign websites such as the BBC and being nice to minority groups) ."..turn off the horrible polluting factories for a few weeks." Even YOUR legions of newly cloned uber-athletes will need to be able to breathe.), continue through a few blazing days of sunshine (Note to self: buy flip-flops- summer is here!) and then on into snow, blizzards and a freezing Inner Mongolia (Note to self: I am sick of snow).

Crossing the Great Wall's snow-covered earth ramparts brings me into Inner Mongolia and I maraud westwards with the noon sun on my left cheek and ride past the mausoleum of Genghis Khan on a huge, cold wind-whipped plain where the distances and the sky seem all to be forever and motionless. The wind makes for torturous progress and grates my lips to scabs and fills my eyes and nose with sand so that my nose drips blood at night as I sleep. I pay the wind the highest possible compliment, describing it as 'of Patagonian proportions'. Unable to ride into the gale one morning I push the bike for a few hours before surrendering and hiding out the day in my tent sheltered in a drainage channel under the highway. Low tawny hills, dry valleys of streams that are born and die all within this enormous yellow aridity, earth huts roofed with insulating clods of earth, an old lady hobbling on tiny bound feet, and then I cross the Yellow River (which is grey and green) that scours deep through a wide valley and suddenly a brand new city appears ahead of me too new for my map. Cities and factories are being built everywhere I go. I begin to amend my initial cynicism that the Chinese drive towards world domination, popularly agreed upon by all in pub conversations around the world, is not apparent more than 100km from Tiananmen. But there are simply so many people in China and in a football match 500 random Chinese people would certainly beat even Chelsea's eleven... (There's a new lame analogy for you for your next half-drunk hypothesis about

the New World Order).

My gears break- bent metal and a cracked pulley wheel- and I cringe as I bend and re-shape delicate metal with my pliers knowing that if anything snaps now then I am in for a long, long ride in a single gear. To my surprise my repairs work and I breathe a lot easier. Four separate morons point me down the wrong road and I only realise my mistake at the top of a 10km pass. Extremely annoyed I wish that I knew some good Chinese insults. I never ask directions again and stick to steering by the sun which has been around longer even than the Chinese and is a heck of a lot more reliable as a navigator.

I stand at a junction in the road, sorry that I cannot travel both. I look down one as far as I can to where it bends. In the last few days I have been contemplating a change of plan and leaving China for Tibet, India and homewards that way... It would be a fantastic route. But I keep it for another day; knowing how way leads on to way I am sure that I will come back. Two roads diverge on a plain and I choose the one to Central Asia. I wonder if it will make a difference?

I am riding the Dragon's spine, following the Great Wall for days at a time across plains and mountains and 2500km. The further I follow it, the more I am awed by the scale of the project. 2300km from Beijing is the official Endpoint of the Great Wall (and where the \$40 I earned for teaching an English class in Beijing finally ran out) but I am delighted to see the Wall march disdainfully onwards and over the horizon- it isn't finished yet. Sleeping on the Wall and under the full moon is special and I decide that the Great Wall is my favourite man-made object that cannot be seen from space.

Not only am I following the Wall, this is also the fabulous Silk Road whose landscape has not changed in centuries. Once upon a time traders leading long caravans of camels laden with valuables relied on 'caravanserais' where they could rest and re-supply during their long journeys. For today's traveller the caravanserais are just as vital, though they are now called 'petrol stations'. Verily they can replenish thou every need on thy long quest, so long as thou needest only petrol, coke, water, not-very-nice bread-like products or not-very-tasty biscuits. But it is exciting to be so tangibly connected with so much history along this road.

In a scrubby, shimmering expanse of desert a glorious blue mirage taunts me with dreams of hiding my head beneath blissfully cool dancing diamond waters. I gradually realise that it is actually a real lake and with surprised delight I rush into the wonderful knee deep water. For days I have been riding across hot, flat plains of black pebbles that blur into the hazy horizons, over small moonscape hills, and past

high dunes shadowed with curves and crescents.

The deeper I ride into the dry-lands, westwards with the sun, dragging my weary evening shadow behind me, the more I leave China behind as the Central Asian culture, religion, faces, voices and smiling welcomes begin to dominate. Xinxiang province is wonderful- a jumble of races, faces, languages amidst wild, beautiful desert, mountains and grasslands.

The deserts are punctuated with oases where bright green spring crops carpet small, neat irrigated fields beneath black rocky peaks or pink dunes. In the sky a distant stripe of rock and snow hangs high in the blue haze. Whenever I re-enter greenness I am always struck by what a weird colour green is for our planet to be. Each oasis dazzles me with its life and motion, colours, sounds and smells after the sterility of the desert.

Turpan is the second lowest point on Earth (-155m), scorching hot and a lovely grape growing oasis town. At night street vendors barbecue spicy skewers of lamb. With warm naan bread and cold Xinxiang beer these are tasty enough to persuade passing cyclists to stay a day or two longer than planned, especially as it's uphill all the way from here.

I pass through Urumqi, the furthest city in the world from the ocean (here is probably not the best place to pick up Speedos, beach towels or buckets and spades, although there is plenty of sand around...) and ride on to the point that has been decreed to be "The Geographical Centre of Asia" (where the large map notably excludes Japan).

The area west of Urumqi is closed to foreigners so I take what I hope will be a quiet, inconspicuous route through the mountains. Road workers wait for me to climb for a whole day up a mountain pass to 3500m (two Mt. Ventoux's in Tour de France parlance) before telling me that the summit has not yet been snow-ploughed. There is no way I am going to turn around now, so I continue obstinately higher, into thinner air and deeper snow. I cross the pass, jubilant that the road has been cleared after all and begin racing down the other side, only to meet with the snowplough and a massive wall of snow. The workers tell me it will take three days to clear the remaining four kilometres of snow and invite me to stay with them in their work camp. From my bottom bunk that night I enjoy huge clouds of communal cigarette smoke, listen to the very loud dispute over the midnight card game and cringe in the brief pause between the horrible throat clearing noises above me and the great globs of green phlegm that follow down onto the floor by my shoes. Four kilometres of thigh deep snow no longer sounds so daunting and

early the next morning I start wading and wallowing down the mountainside. It takes all day to shuttle my bags and bike down through the drifts to the clear road - an exhausting day to achieve a measly four kilometres, my record lowest daily total. The villagers at the bottom of the pass are suitably incredulous and amused at my bizarre and unexpected arrival, and I believe that this also smoothed my way with the Police who finally caught me but then did not know what to do with me. I played as stupidly, amiably uncooperative as possible until they just gave up and let me go.

I am glad they did let me go because China saved her best till last- vast green pastures grazed by flocks of sheep, Kazakh horsemen, herds of half-wild horses, chewing camels, white yurts, racing blue rivers and snow-shone mountains all around me as I zipped down the valley to Ili, riding as fast as possible past police stations and down towards the Kazakh border. The Orient is behind me; chopsticks are behind me. Central Asia here I come: three cheers for the knife and fork!

HIGHLIGHTS of China: the Great Wall, Tiananmen Square, the food (especially in Xinxiang), Xinxiang, oases, Turpan, Urumqi to Ili.

LOWLIGHTS of China: spitting, moronic driving, gormless staring, bureaucracy, people shouting "hallooo!", snowdrifts.

Hurry Up and Wait (June 23rd 2005)

Decide what you want written on your tombstone. Now go out and make it happen.

“Those who lack courage will always find a philosophy to justify it” - Albert Camus

“Cycling has taught me how to do things well- with heart, with seriousness. And never to tell myself that I’ve arrived.” - Eddy Merckx

Remember me my love: I’m the one you’re dreaming of.

I’m going for a ride, I’ll keep you warm inside.

Gonna roll up the sidewalk,

Gonna tear up the ground.

I’m coming round to meet you

The long way round.

Sooner or later I’ll get me off this track.

Gotta do what it is that I do,

Then I’m coming back

Got the sun in my face,

Sleeping rough on the road.

I’ll tell you all about it

When I get back.

- Stereophonics

“Hurry up and wait” is the unofficial motto of the British Army. Frantic bursts of activity are dotted amongst great swathes of time sat around and waiting until orders arrive: “GET ON THE BUS!!!”... inevitably followed by: “GET OFF THE BUS!.” Travelling is the same. Today my glorious rolling progress across the enormity of China seems like just a happy dream as I sit and waste time waiting for

visas to arrive.

But time wasting is not always time wasted- I have been catching up on the Brazilian soap operas that I really enjoyed in Siberia, dubbed in a monotone by a single Russian man who 'acts' all the characters- both male and female. I have been watching the A-Team too, and sitting in parks marvelling at summer girls in outfits so outrageous they appear to have been sprayed-on. Kazakhstan looks more LA than Allah. I watched Kazakhstan FC being trounced 6-0 by Turkey in a World Cup qualifier. The match was so bad that I was actually quite glad that 1/5th of the pitch was hidden from my view by the hat of the policeman a few rows in front of me: satellite-dish shaped and sized, the magnificent silliness of the hats was my very first impression upon entering Central Asia from China. I rode the rickety, shaking Ferris wheel in the Almaty funfair. It reached above the trees to show off the small city and the snowy mountains behind it. Relieved to be back on Earth again I felt astonished not only that Yuri Gagarin ever made it into space, but more so that he ever got back down again. If the fairground was not very relaxing, the Russian sauna was worse. It was much, much hotter than a normal sauna. The slightest movement wafted scalding air over your skin and was very painful. My hair was too hot to touch (which explains the comical lampshade hats the naked sauna veterans wear). Occasionally a masochist opened what looked like a Soviet torpedo tube and hurled buckets of water into the inferno. Gouts of steam spewed out across the room in angry response. Now even the local hard men scuttled crouching for the exit and relief. To finish the fun you lie down and let a good friend thrash your bare buttocks with a bundle of leafy twigs. They call it 'Character building' in boarding school...

Meanwhile CNN tells of revolutions in Kyrgyzstan, a massacre in Uzbekistan, a pre-election bombing in Iran and a crowd of 20,000 demanding the resignation of the government in Azerbaijan. These events make my onward progress more difficult, but paperclip-shuffling desk jockey bureaucrats are poised to stop it all together. To enter Iran I must have an 'invitation' so I have paid a tour company in Iran to obtain a little piece of paper from a little man sitting in a little office and wearing (I imagine bitterly) dreary, sweat-ringed polyester clothes, a weedy moustache and a see-if-I-care air, thoroughly enjoying his pinprick of power as he takes 6,7...8 weeks to decide whether or not he can be bothered to lower himself from re-arranging his biro collection to actually doing his incredibly pointless job and signing my piece of paper. Forgive my bile, but if I do not get a visa for Iran then my next two options are so much the harder- either to try and ride 1500km across Turkmenistan to the Caspian Sea within the 5 day Transit

Visa which is the best that that paranoid autocracy will give me, or else I ride north for weeks across the empty Kazakh steppe to the dismal city of Aktau and wait there for the fortnightly ferry across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan.

I met an Italian who strolled into the Iranian embassy in Almaty in his shorts and t-shirt. He was thrown out for being inappropriately dressed. He returned (trousered) that afternoon and left just four hours later with his visa. Six weeks ago I paid an extra fee for an invitation to be kindly allowed to apply for the visa. As I am still waiting for the invitation I am beginning to get the hint that perhaps Brits are not flavour of the month in Iran. I wonder why...? After all this frustrating waiting I now feel ready to launch my own personal War on Terrorble embassy pen-pushers. If Homer had been writing today then surely Odysseus's epic ten-year voyage home during which the Gods hurled every possible challenge and obstacle at him would also have included the delights of applying for visas in Central Asia.

Eventually I gave up waiting, forwarded my application on to the Tashkent embassy, and cycled to Kyrgyzstan. Out of Almaty I rode through English greenness, a tangled chaos of hedges and meadows confused with the riotous colours of so many flowers. Ladies wearing colourful headscarves and gleaming gold teeth sold buckets of fragrant strawberries and pyramids of pale plums. Villages were busy with people slowly watching the world go by, with bent 'babushkas' (grandmothers) digging fecund gardens and little children staring from big eyes safe under the watchful eyes of the entire village. Memorials from the Second World War here in the middle of nowhere reinforce just how much of a World war it really was. Summer roses climb all over the walls of the quaint white-washed Soviet cottages with steep sloping roofs that were so often my salvation back in the brutal Siberian winter. Girls filled metal churns with water at the cold gushing pumps spaced along the single street and I would wait my turn to fill my bottles and cool my head under the tap. I saw graffiti, in Russian and English, saying "Beckham is Best!" and "Genghis Khan!" Kazakhstan swirls with cultures- Soviet and traditional nomadic and Western oil wealth- and from it all this young nation is trying slowly to decide what the new 'Kazakhstan' itself wants to be.

I see similar issues here in Kyrgyzstan too. At the border the guard's cap still bore the hammer and sickle badge. A yurt stood about 50 metres beyond the border gate where a young soldier had laboured to enter my details into a brand-new laptop computer system recently donated by America. In Karakol I spent a night in a tourist campsite and for the first time ever I had a price quoted to me in Euros. The

campsite had one of those signposts that point all around the world. 6000km to London it told me...

I walked round a big market, but the cheap plastic rubbish imported from China into markets all around the world is not very interesting. "Same rubbish, different country," I decided. Lake Issyk-Kul was far more impressive: the second largest Alpine lake in the world and just as lovely as Titicaca, her big sister. I stopped in the evening sunshine on an empty beach hidden behind trees, stripped off and swam out into the lake. But I had underestimated two important things. Firstly, the indestructibility of the ubiquitous little Lada cars that still cough and bounce their way around the former Soviet Union, and secondly, the determination of Russians to find an excuse to drink themselves into oblivion. I watched from the water as an ancient Lada bashed its way through bushes and small trees and down onto my private beach. Eight Russians magically unfolded themselves from inside the tiny car; the women ready for a paddle, the men clutching vodka bottles and ready to drink. I, stark naked and swimming, now had a dilemma. I knew that it was not humanly possible to swim around until they went home: Russians have not yet invented the concept of a quiet, quick drink or two. Nor could I wait for them to collapse- they are no Chinese or Japanese lightweights. So I waited until they sat down behind a small bush, and then the whitest bum in heathendom streaked across the beach, quickly put on his trousers and pedalled away. I found myself another beach and the next morning as the dawn arrived, 'fresh and rosy-fingered', I swam again. The surface was so still and blue that the horizons of the water and sky blended seamlessly together. Behind me 5000metre peaks shone in the brand-new morning and I decided that, ten years to the day after finishing my A-Levels [high school], my life was heading in the right direction.

Sweating brown men in amusing lampshade hats swing scythes in knee-deep meadows of thick green grass and yellow and pink flowers. They look like they are practising their 9-irons out of the rough, but this is real life. The chunky white mountains reach into the hot lapis sky. Boys grin greetings and I spend all day grinning back. Girls call 'hello' in English and as I pass I hear little yelps and squeals of astonishment at their own audacity and wit in calling out to me, plus of course amusement at my perennial weirdness.

I arrived in Bishkek- one of the sleepest little capitals I have visited- to be greeted by several hundred soldiers in riot gear: I had missed the latest storming of the Parliament buildings by about 30 minutes. That afternoon I sat in a garden with a group of ex-pats, battle-hardened now in their second mini-revolution, enduring having been sent home from work early and now eating lollipops in the sunshine.

And so I settled down once again to test my patience against the next Iranian embassy....

IN ALMATY I stayed with a photographer whose amazing pictures got me depressed about my own very mundane snapshots. (But at least I am better than him at darts and handling self-inflicted hangovers). He is looking for a publisher now. Visit www.herwigphoto.com . This is what Central Asia really looks like.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS:

Mawson's Will- Lennard Bickel: One of the best Antarctica books.

An Unexpected Light: Travels in Afghanistan - Jason Elliott: That rare thing- a very good travel book.

The Great Game - Peter Hopkirk.

CORRUPTION and incompetent mis-management were the two main complaints to my last email about what needs to be done at the G8 Summit. I agree completely with both. One more thing- rather than a million people just descending on Edinburgh for a day, I hope those people will also continue their caring afterwards in the supermarket by buying Fair Trade goods long-term.

EWAN MCGREGOR recently took a break from saving the Galaxy to ride a motorbike round the world (www.longwayround.com). I have just seen the DVD of the trip and was impressed. It was a nicely honest showing of the highs and lows of being on the road.

A WEBSITE that colours the countries that you have visited on a map of the world. A good way of reminding ourselves how huge the world really is! <http://www.world66.com/myworld66/visitedCountries>

“UNEARNED suffering is redemptive” said MLK. So, good luck, Lance...!

My Golden Road (25th July 2005)

“To learn the age-old lesson day by day: It is not in the bright arrival planned, But in the dreams men dream along the way, They find the Golden Road to Samarkand” - Flashman at the Charge

Years ago at University I was trying to decide what on earth I would do after graduating. I was reading a book about the British Army when four lines of a poem, a regiment's motto, caught my eye and my imagination (see top of 'Asia' page on my website). I realized that, more than the challenges of joining the Army, I wanted to see some of the world and to test myself on the open road. I tracked down the poem, James Elroy Flecker's 'The Golden Journey to Samarkand', and my fascination with Samarkand was born. Now, after so much, I was almost there.

I had been sitting and waiting for my Iranian visa for weeks. Eventually my application was rejected. I was supposed to meet Arnaud, my French friend in Iran. He got his visa and currently is enjoying himself in Iran. It seems that the land of Freedom Fries must be doing something right. I had really been looking forward to Iran: my experiences of Axis of Evil countries have always been so positive. That week I had been so proud of Britain- winning the Olympic bid, the Make Poverty History campaign and the Live8 concerts. But Tehran was evidently not convinced.

With temperatures over 40C I was happy that Kyrgyzstan seemed to be enjoying its National Waterfight Day. Each village that I rode through was shouting and laughing and hurling buckets of water around. I fought as valiantly as I could with my water bottles but I was a very easy, and willing, target for bombardment. I climbed a steep gorge to 3000m and then enjoyed some truly beautiful riding. Green pastures, blue mountains, gold teathed women, white yurts, friendly men in very silly hats, herds of horses and beautiful cold swimming rivers.

Turned away at two border crossings I finally got into Uzbekistan at the third attempt. Uzbekistan made international news recently with the police massacre of several hundred people in Andijan. Their government has a horrible human rights record with boiling of torture victims allegedly a favoured tactic. Still, as they are good buddies in our Coalition of the Willing's War on Terror I felt that I should be OK. I rode through Andijan and the Fergana valley until, at last, I could ride my Golden Road to Samarkand.

The road wasn't very golden: it was hot and ugly and potholed and every single person yelled "AT KUDA?! (WHERE ARE YOU FROM?)" and kamikaze boys chased me on rattling bikes bombarding me with questions. But I was so excited that I polished off the 330km in just a day and a half. And Samarkand certainly did not disappoint.

Above swarms of tiny, buzzing Daewoo taxis soar the ageless domes and minarets of the mosques and madrassas built by Tamerlane and his family. The sky, paled by summer dust, seems feeble against the blue tile work; blues of kingfishers, glaciers, tropical shallows, Patagonian rivers and the deepest oceans. Such beauty, such skill, here at the end of the world. It is a reminder, of course, that Central Asia was once not at the end of the Earth, but at the very centre of it.

THANK YOU to Mercy Corps for their support in Bishkek <http://www.mercycorps.org/home/>

SOME INTERESTING SITES: www.afribike.org <http://www.re-cycle.org>

WELL DONE, Lance: working hard and being hard certainly pay off!

4 years on the road (25 August 2005)

Many thanks to The Guardian for once again helping cover my story and so promote the work of *Hope and Homes for Children*. Here is the story of my fourth year on the road (and also an update of some of my personal 'Top 10s')...

Above Samarkand's swarms of tiny, buzzing Daewoo taxis soar the ageless domes and minarets of the mosques and madrassas built by Tamerlane and his family. For years I have dreamed of riding the "golden road to Samarkand", as in James Elroy Flecker's poem. Here in Turkmenistan the sky, paled by summer dust, seems feeble against that blue tile work and the blues of kingfishers, glaciers, tropical shallows, Patagonian rivers and the deepest oceans. Such beauty, such skill, here at the end of the world. It is a reminder, of course, that central Asia was once not at the end of the Earth, but at the very centre of it. It is now four years since I left England to try and cycle round the world in support of *Hope and Homes for Children*. The September 11 attacks, the euro, a World Cup or two and an Olympics have all taken place while I have been pedalling. But some things do not change- snail-paced central Asian visa procedures being one of them. In the past few months I feel like I have spent more time queuing in dreary embassies than riding my bike. After crossing Europe, Africa, South and North America and half of Asia, my way seemed almost to have been blocked at last. Week after week the Iranians procrastinated until finally they got round to rejecting my application.

Fortunately Turkmenistan eventually granted me a transit visa, a meagre seven days but a lifeline, hopefully, to making it through to Azerbaijan, the Caucasus and the end of my visa worries. Turkey, Europe and home lie tantalisingly close at last. My fourth year on the road is ending with a race against a visa deadline through the baking Karakum desert. It also began with a race against a deadline, but a rather colder race.

I began my ride across Eurasia from Magadan, the entry port for millions of Stalin's prisoners. There was no exit port. I cycled into the Siberian winter along the "Road of Bones", constructed at horrific human cost by the prisoners of the gulags. This section would be a massive challenge and I was glad to have my friend Rob riding with me. Having no proper winter experience, we skidded and slid and fell-

we were on a steep learning curve. We crossed frozen rivers, tentatively. Once, dragging the bikes over a frozen swamp, I thought that, surely, this terrain was too bad for traffic. I was wrong: a tank passed that day.

With 5,000km to cover on a mere 90-day visa we had to begin our days in freezing black starlight and end them, after up to 15 hours of riding, by frigid moonlight. Even the northern lights did not make up for the lack of sleep. We did get through in the end, and with a couple of days to spare, but it was a close thing. Interwoven in that unpleasant long race is a constant memory of the horrible cold. Cold makes everything difficult (except for the bonus of being able to carry ice-cream in your panniers!). Plastic snaps, tyres freeze to rims, metal sticks to flesh, flesh moans a painful protest. My bum was numb until somebody made me a reindeer-fur saddle cover. Beards, eyelashes, sleeping bags crusted with ice. Camping was tough and sunrise brought little relief. I danced the “funky chicken” at dawn to thaw my toes- dignity is low on your priority list at -40°C.

After Russia, Japan was set to be a luxurious and gentle holiday. It did not disappoint. Japan was not even very expensive, unless you wanted to buy anything. But by eating nothing except instant noodles I kept my costs low and my blood pressure high. I slept on the floors of railway stations, waking with the day’s first commuters and fetching hot water for my breakfast noodles from one of the infinite number of amazingly convenient convenience stores. Japan is extraordinarily clean, safe and, above all, convenient.

I walked in the evening through the streaming crowds of Tokyo, down a street of Louis Vuitton, Gucci and Cartier stores. In a canyon of tower blocks rolling neon lights rose all around me. I stood still and rotated slowly in the rushing waters of the hurrying, silent crowds, my head tipped back, enjoying the Japanese version of Siberia’s northern lights. Tokyo was a busy city but it was also very quiet; like watching a concert with the sound off.

Kyoto’s graceful shrines and temples and Shikoku Island were a respite after Tokyo. I rode round low wooded hills and rocky coastal bays of clear green water and white fishing skiffs. I met white-clad pilgrims with staffs and straw hats trudging their famous pilgrimage round 88 temples. Nuclear attacks ended the second world war and made Hiroshima famous. 60 years ago Hiroshima was a busy, lively city spread over a flat seven-fingered delta. Today it is again a busy, lively city. It was a good example of regeneration, a reminder that bad times pass, and that there is always hope for the future. The children’s memorial in the Peace Park, draped with thousands of colourful origami cranes made by children

worldwide, was particularly poignant.

The slow boat to China was fast. I looked out to sea and instead saw China right in front of me- 24 hours sooner than I had expected. I hopped around nervously before riding out into China. After the sterility of Japan my senses exploded into action- it was cold and windy, the streets were dirty and potholed and the traffic was a whirlpool of hooting chaos. And to think that I used to imagine Japan and China as being pretty similar.

We all think that we are the most important things to have ever happened in the history of the universe. Going to China was a good way of deflating that balloon. I was surrounded by a billion people to whom I could say just, "hello, one, two, three, I don't understand and thank you." China made me feel small. It felt good to be making progress westward and homeward, rather than my more usual meanderings. With thousands of kilometres between me and my next shower/toilet/conversation, I was able to relax, try to enjoy each day and settle for just arriving when I arrived. It was a perfect opportunity for me to practise living for the present moment- something I am terrible at doing.

Crossing the Great Wall's snow-covered earth ramparts brought me into Inner Mongolia. I marauded westwards with the noon sun on my left cheek, on past the mausoleum of Genghis Khan, over a huge, cold wind-whipped plain where the distances and the sky seemed to stretch forever, motionless. I crossed the Yellow River (which is grey and green) that scours deep through a wide valley and suddenly a brand new city appeared ahead of me, too new for my map. Cities and factories were being built everywhere I went in China.

The deeper I rode into the dry-lands, westwards with the sun, dragging my weary evening shadow behind me, the further I left regular China behind as central Asian cultures began to dominate. In central Asia itself the language, food, shops, Ladas and maddening bureaucracy were strong reminders of the Soviet Union. But even that powerful legacy could not quench the spirit of the grinning Kyrgyz nomads living on wide green mountain pastures, watching their flocks of sheep and horses from their traditional white yurts. Racing green rivers and blue mountains soothed the fiery 45°C heat. Ironically though, the best preparation for hot weather riding was the Siberian winter, which helped to put any hardship into perspective!

Turkmenistan is my final country in central Asia, a baking desert sitting on vast gas reserves and under the control of the bizarre personality cult of its president. Getting in was difficult; if I can get out

then I will have made it into the Caucasus, next door to Europe and to home. Fingers crossed, I should be home for Christmas...

TOP 10s...

COUNTRY 1. South Africa 2. Russia 3. Georgia 4. Colombia 5. Sudan 6. USA 7. Jordan 8. Japan 9. China 10. Kyrgyzstan

CITY 1. Cape Town 2. San Francisco 3. Istanbul 4. Rio de Janeiro 5. Tokyo 6. Mexico City 7. Cartagena 8. Budapest 9. Beirut 10. Tbilisi

FOOD 1. Georgian 2. Chinese 3. Lebanese 4. Braais (South African barbecues) 5. Asados (Argentinian barbecues) 6. Mexican tacos 7. American burritos 8. Njera (unique Ethiopian food. Usually revolting, but the good stuff can be really good) 9. Saltenas (Bolivian Cornish pasties) 10. Kebabs (sorry, Turkey and England: the best ones are in Damascus)

BUILDINGS 1. Petra (Jordan) 2. Great Wall of China 3. Abu Simbel (Egypt) 4. Baalbek (Lebanon) 5. Lalibela (Ethiopia) 6. Pyramids (Egypt) 7. Machu Picchu (Peru) 8. Tikal, Guatemala 9. Samarkand's Registan (Uzbekistan) 10. Valley of the Kings (Egypt)

NATURAL BEAUTY 1. Carreterra Austral (Chile) 2. Wadi Rum (Jordan) 3. Table Mountain (South Africa) 4. Dana (Jordan) 5. Salar de Uyuni (Bolivia) 6. Patagonia (Chile and Argentina) 7. Victoria Falls (Zimbabwe) 8. Kyrgyzstan 9. Grand Canyon (USA) 10. Redwood Forests (California) also... Bryce Canyon (South Africa), Coast of northern California, Huascaran mountains (Peru), the mountains of southern Colombia, Arctic Alaska, Tlaeeng Pass (Lesotho), Perito Moreno glacier (Argentina), Fitzroy (Argentina), Torres del Paine (Chile), San Blas Islands (Panama), Cappadocia (Turkey), Coffee Bay (South Africa)

And, because it's not all hard work...

MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRLS 1. Colombia 2. Argentina 3. Brazil 4. Russia 5. Japan 6. South Africa 7. Lebanon 8. Azerbaijan 9. Yugoslavia 10. USA

Turkmenistan to Istanbul (Sept 5th 2005)

“A man travels the world over in search of what he needs and returns home to find it”- G. Moore

“So if you wanna join me for a while, Just grab your hat, come, travel light- That’s Hobo style.
Maybe tomorrow I’ll want to settle down, Until tomorrow the whole world is my home.” - The Littlest

Hobo

“I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I intended to be.” -

Douglas Adams

After the French package holiday resorts of Samarkand and Bukhara, Turkmenistan was certainly different. A flat, dull desert smudged with only a handful of flat, dull towns, Turkmenistan has little a traveller would wish to linger over. But as is often the case with countries so painfully mediocre, their officials have a misguided notion that they are running the Garden of Eden and treat would-be visitors with suspicious scorn rather than a more appropriate surprised gratitude that somebody actually wants to enter their country rather than just get out. Which is all a long-winded, Turkish coffee-fuelled way of saying that I was only granted a 7 day transit visa with which to cover 1800km of Turkmenistan: an impossible task.

Turkmenistan is hot, even by Central Asian standards (45C), its food is dreary, even by Central Asian standards, and its President is completely bonkers- by anyone’s standards! His smiling, seemingly benevolent portrait is everywhere, and a country with more photos of the president than road signs has surely taken a wrong turn somewhere. President for Life Saparmurat Niyazov’s eccentricities are endless: he has named cities, a month and even a meteorite after himself. He has penned a very odd book of his version of history, religion and the meaning of life which all citizens must study (<http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/ruhnama/ruhnama-eng.html>). Just last week a copy of this holy book, the Ruhnama, was fired up into space for posterity. Statues of him are everywhere but the pick of them is in the capital city, Ashgabat: a 12 metre gold statue that revolves through the day to follow the sun. He is

so absurd that he reminds me of the tale of 'The Emperor's New Clothes'.

Camels, accustomed to cars, would flee in fear from the strange appearance of my bicycle, running away from me down the shimmering desert road like women running in flipflops- ankles kicking out and feet flapping. I was stopped at a ridiculous number of police roadblocks where barely literate young policemen laboriously copied my passport and visa details into dog-eared school exercise books with varying levels of inaccuracy. And so passed the days and kilometres in Turkmenistan.

As I tried to leave the country and board the ferry across the Caspian Sea the Customs police busted me for not having registered my presence in the country with the appropriate completely pointless bureaucracy. Whilst they laughably tried to fine me more than their entire annual salary for this crime I tried to explain to them that this rule actually no longer existed. After 9 very boring hours in various police offices they eventually agreed with me. I was released and very happy to leave Turkmenistan, not least of all because, despite the endless posturing and officious police checks not one of them had noticed that I had actually forged my visa dates to give myself nine days in order to be able to ride the whole way across Turkmenistan.

The Caucasus was a breath of fresh air. Cool breezes blew, the sun calmed down and there were no more police checkpoints. Leaving the ferry in Baku, Azerbaijan was a big culture shock: I was back amongst shops that sold stuff, banks that had money, the first McDonald's since Beijing and all the other trappings that accompany oil wealth. It was Friday night and rich, beautiful people were enjoying the warm evening. I was filthy, stinking and sitting on a pavement fixing my gears. A black Mercedes filled with girls and a smug guy stopped beside me. "Welcome to Baku. Can I help you?" he asked kindly. "Well actually, I was just wondering where I could get hold of a fancy car and a few babes to cruise the streets with on a Friday night..." I should have replied but of course didn't think to do so. How Oscar Wilde, entering the USA in his new blue denims must also have wished he had thought of something wittier to say to the Customs Officer than "I have nothing to declare except my Jeans." In fact I actually did not need help: I was on my way to stay at the Red Roof Guesthouse (www.redroof.az) and complete my return to hedonism with the wonders of perforated toilet paper, a shower, a bed with a sheet and HP sauce and beans on toast for breakfast.

When one door closes you just have to find another one to pass through. If I had been allowed into Iran I would not have visited the Caucasus. I am now very glad that I did. (Although I must note that

having now seen what the people there look like it has rather cast doubts on my long-held assumption that I am Caucasian...). Baku had a beautiful old town, a chaos of tangled alleyways, cafes and carpet shops inside stout city walls. But Georgia was the gem. In fact it was one of the gems of my whole ride. That I did not need a visa to enter the country was a very good start. It was a beautiful country with green fields and forests and craggy mountains on which clung churches and monasteries of stunning age and atmosphere. Tblisi was a gorgeous ramshackle city set on a river. Old streets of winding smooth grey cobbles, quiet alleys and charming ancient churches amongst it all. The aptly named town of Gori was rather odd: it was Stalin's birthplace and he is still their favourite son. A sizeable statue of him enjoys centre stage in the town. It is hard to imagine the Austrians being quite so nostalgic of their own homegrown mass murderer. The Black Sea region felt like the Tropics, with fragrant fruit for sale everywhere and steep hills covered in thick shining vegetation and tea plantations. The resort of Kobuleti was pretty nasty, with crowds of white-bellied Russians strutting their sunburn, shiny shorts, tattoos and gold chains up and down the beach. It did look though like a good place to come if you want to cut out the middle men at russianwives.com. But the greatest delight of Georgia was the food. On taking my first mouthful of Georgian food my eyes literally opened wide with surprise. Numbed by the incredible mediocrity of Central Asian eating I was stunned by food that had taste, texture, spices and, above all, calories! I don't know what kind of sissy food Lance and his leg-shaving buddies eat but they really should be tucking into the cheese pastries ('kachapura') to which I was instantly addicted.

And after Georgia came Turkey. I rode through Turkey in 2001 on my way to Africa and now I was back again. Since I had been away they had chopped several zeros from the currency but not much else had changed. Moustaches were still large and plentiful and kebabs even more so. Whereas last time Turkey had been the beginning of chaos and exoticism, now it felt like the start of the amazingly luxurious and easy West. The ride across Turkey was not much fun. The roads are narrow and busy and the populace seem to have mistaken last week's inaugural Turkish Grand Prix for a demonstration of the Correct and Proper Way to Drive on the Public Roads of Turkey. But the scenery was nice along the Black Sea and the people very friendly (except for the podgy road-rage chap who ran after me in his greasy wife-beater vest brandishing a cyclist-beating rolling pin) and the riding was easy. And so four years to the day since I left home I took the short ferry ride across the Bosphorus from Asia back to Europe. The minarets of the spectacular Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia still speared the sky over

Istanbul as they had on the morning I last took this ferry on my way out of Europe, homesick and very afraid of what lay ahead of me on my journey. But this time it was a much happier ferry ride. This time I had made it round the world by bike. Now I've just got to get back home.

BOOK RECOMMENDATION: The End of Poverty- Jeffrey Sachs

Europe

Welcome to Sarajevo (9th October 2005)

After more than 1500 days on the road I feel the need for a bit of a party. And so I am going to have an 'end of the world' celebration when I get back to England. I hope that you can keep the evening of Friday November 18th free... (London venue to be announced) I am very excited to see friends again, even those of you I haven't heard from in the last four years... Absolutely everybody is welcome: it will be very depressing if I discover that everybody has forgotten who I am in my absence. That may prompt me just to get back on the bike and do it all again, and I REALLY do not want to have to do that! Please do come if you can. Bring your girl/boy-friends, spouses etc and any single cheerleaders you happen to know. Of course the people I would most like to share the end of my ride with are all the friends I have made along the road who helped me through it all. But it is rather a long taxi ride home at the end of the evening to Uzbekistan, so if you live more than a day's bike ride from London then I shall not be offended if you can't make it. I hope to see you soon!

"The more you see, the less you know" -U2

"Is there a time for keeping your distance

A time to turn your eyes away?

Is there a time for keeping your head down

For getting on with your day?" - Miss Sarajevo, U2

"What men do is shaped by what they believe they can do" - JM Roberts

Whilst I have been riding round in circles, everybody else has been busily rushing on with their lives. In Istanbul I stayed again with the same brilliant family I had stayed with four years earlier. In their son Eren's eyes, I had been pedalling half his life: since I had seen him last he had changed from a four year old toddler into a bilingual, artistic 8 year old boy. Their daughter Alara had simply exploded into life: from a bundle of baby into a highly opinionated, extremely loud, charming, fully-functional human being.

And to really confirm that much has changed since I left home, England actually beat Australia at cricket. On one of those precious days in life when everything is perfect I discovered that Turkish satellite TV picks up the Indian cricket channel, watched the final day of the Ashes miracle and then ate sausage, chips and beans for tea.

As I crossed into the European Union in Greece I reflected on why Turkey has persistently been refused membership. After a few relaxing, quiet days riding across Greece I realised the reason: Turkey has not yet learned European restraint with the use of the car horn. (How the Italians got in clearly needs investigating...) With countries getting wealthier as I head steadily homewards I remembered once again that in most of the world I am seen as very rich because I have a laden bicycle. Now, because I own only a laden bike, I am becoming poor again. I camped in olive groves on flinty, ancient soil. The late gold sunshine silvered the leaves of the olive trees and I could hear the lone clanging bell and rhythmical chanting from the Orthodox monastery on the hillside. It sounded fresh to me after listening to the Muslim call to prayer for months. On the coast white villages with red roofs spilled over the hills and down to blue bays where tiny fishing boats moored. Mopeds buzzed through the arches of a magnificent ancient viaduct, yet on my map of Europe Kavala is only designated with the same level of Touristic Interest (a mere thin blue underline) as Hull. Beauty and history are just the norm for so much of South Eastern Europe.

Summer is ebbing fast as I pedal these final few thousand kilometres up towards the charms of a northern European winter. Rather than camp in a torrential rainstorm I decided to sleep the night in one of the concrete anti-tank bunkers that are absolutely everywhere in Albania; the legacy of a paranoid Maoist communist era convinced of imminent invasion. It seemed like a fine idea- a dry night's sleep and an amusing one too. And so it was until the morning when I discovered that my entire body had been feasted on by fleas. My body was covered in hundreds of bites and the itching drove me crazy for a week. Top Tip to all of you heading for Albania for next year's hols: sleep in a hotel. Sleeping was also a problem in Bosnia whose lovely countryside is still largely off-limits due to unknown thousands of landmines. It made finding a place to camp tricky.

In the former Yugoslavia picturesque scenery, delightful towns, mosques, monasteries and churches blend beautifully together in a way that its people could not manage. What has struck me most about the Balkans war was how incredibly recent it was that a good-sized chunk of my own continent was at war.

While I was ambling through my teenage years in England the people here were killing, butchering and bombing each other. To further his expansion plans for Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic successfully reignited religious animosities that had been brewing for centuries (and certainly have not been resolved now). Families, friends, communities suddenly tore each other's lives apart. I found it extraordinary, riding along, that these completely normal people had within them the capacity to murder each other. World history, of course, has shown that it is a capacity that all of us share. Bosnians, Serbs, Croats-speaking the same language, looking the same as each other, married to each other, sharing towns together were suddenly persuaded to turn on each other. Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox: all fellow 'People of the Book', all sharing the same God and all hating and killing each other. It makes a war over oil seem positively sensible. I become more secular with every country I ride through.

The coastline of Montenegro and Croatia was world-class riding. It would be even more fun under sail. Mountains, islands, medieval towns, deep blue bays, Roman mosaics, cave paintings and jet black espressos. Cupped protectively in the massive rough limestone hands of southern Europe's largest fjord, the small town of Kotor shines like a pearl, even on a day of rain. The old town is tucked in the tight fold between the sea and the craggy cliffs. Cold green rivers rush to the sea all around. Graceful old buildings, cobbled streets and churches enclosed by mighty walls. It felt like a blustery, rainy version of Cartagena in Colombia (but without the bikinis, cocaine and fresh fruit juices...). There are so many fantastic places like this along the Adriatic Coast that I was not very disappointed to be very disappointed by Dubrovnik. Dubrovnik is similar to many rich and fashionable women: gorgeous from a distance, rather a let down up close. Byron called the town 'the pearl of the Adriatic'. And I thought "Look at that great gleaming white wall!" but I was only looking at one of the super-sized cruise ships that had disgorged its gorged, wobbling contents to shuffle and cluck and push and elbow each other in the crowded lanes for an hour or two before lunch.

In Bosnia I visited the town of Mostar- a Muslim and Croat town separated and united by a famous, graceful half moon bridge over a deep green river. The medieval bridge, blown up by Croats in the war, has recently been rebuilt and now is a popular symbol of a much-hoped-for reunited future. But amongst the rebuilt buildings on the main road (paid for by myriad international agencies) are many more carcasses of buildings, scarred with bullet holes. The windows gape empty and the roofs are thatched only with sunlight through which trees grow. On the bridge stood a tanned young man in tight Speedos,

chatting up some girls before heroically plunging 20 metres into the river below. On his heart was a tattoo of the historic bridge. Some hours later I returned to the bridge. The bronzed stud was still on the bridge, slightly bronzer now perhaps, with an even larger giggle of groupies around him, but he was most certainly un-wet. He seemed to be quite content to just stand around posing in the sunshine occasionally readjusting his very tight trunks. I rode out of town resolving to purchase some Speedos of my own before arriving in Trafalgar Square.

I got road-raged at again! Having learned in Turkey what happens if you give the finger to moronic drivers [they get VERY angry and chase you with rolling pins], I merely waved angrily at the latest car to almost flatten me with an insanely dangerous overtake. A few minutes later there was a screech of wheels beside me- these chaps had gone to the effort of finding a place to turn around and then returning to rage at me. I was touched. Three very angry men leapt out of the car. The passenger- a classic example of the Little Man- suddenly punched me twice! I was so amazed at the anger on his brainless face that I could not help but chortle at him. At this the driver kicked me in the stomach! I decided not to provoke this incredible, pointless over-reaction any more and walked away until they finished screaming at me and drove away again. How dull to have so little excitement in your life! But on every road I have ridden on every continent it is to a backdrop of graves spaced every few kilometres of people killed in car crashes. And almost without fail it is young men who have killed themselves by driving like prats. Without a doubt cars (driven by men) are the single biggest danger I have encountered in the world. They are so commonplace in our lives that we forget how dangerous they are.

It was a really nice ride from Mostar to Sarajevo, following the jade green river up a canyon into the hills. The road and railway weaved back and forth across each other as we climbed higher through scary tunnels and over bridges. Pretty villages clung to the sides of steep valleys. Less fortunate settlements were only destroyed carcasses with red skull-and-crossbones signs warning of landmines. The foreign presence in Bosnia is very noticeable on this road- military vehicles, diplomatic licence plates, development agencies and an international police force. Conical haystacks stand in newly mown fields. People quietly sit and sell fruit and fish by the road. There is such a weird mix of normality and madness here. Over the mountain pass and I swooped down into the valley of Sarajevo, down the steep hills that made this a fabulous winter Olympic City and then - a mere 8 years later- made equally fabulous strategic sites for the placement of the Serbian guns that besieged, shelled and starved the beautiful city for almost

4 years (I was busy back in England complaining that there was no McDonald's close enough to home) whilst the UN and NATO forces looked on impotently, their hands tied helplessly by diplomatic waffle. The streets of Sarajevo today are still scarred with 'Sarajevo Roses': the splash shaped gougings of exploding shells. I walked over the Latin Bridge where Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated in the summer of 1914 prompting the whole of Europe to indulge in this extraordinary human capacity for lethal madness.

Sometimes there is a glory that lights up a man. It is a welling deep in his body that flames his senses and bubbles through his heart with an energy that aches. At those times he does not wish to live for ever, he knows only complete fulfilment with that moment. I felt it on the high passes of Macedonia and Albania and Bosnia, a sense of everything coming together at last. I am coming to the end of this journey that I never thought I could complete. The riding is sweet, the region fascinating and my future is filled with so many deliciously exciting options and unknowns. And to be able to enjoy such pleasant thoughts whilst riding hard and fast up craggy limestone mountain passes of ten mile switchbacks over and over again in such a fortunate state of good health and fitness that I am barely out of breath when I enjoy the distant views back down to valley floors: the glory pours outward in a torrent. I am so deeply, painfully aware of my good fortune in life at the moment. And it is in this frame of mind that I have been when I had the privilege to visit some of the work of *Hope and Homes for Children* in the Balkans. It has been humbling to see the devoted work of the 'Hope and Homes' staff. Working on small salaries, or on no pay at all, they are pouring such energy and expertise and loving compassion into a regional system of Institutions that is decades behind the West in its approach to orphans, institutionalisation, special needs children and adoption. And the enchanting children in the homes whose lives have been so much harder than my pampered, decadent developed-world mind can ever properly grasp fill me with a sense of awe and of frustrated helplessness. 'Hope and Homes' are doing inspiring work, but so much more could be done for these children if only the funds were available. How can an orphaned child be left in a revolting institution, her chances of leading a happily fulfilled life shrinking with every wasted year simply because the meagre amount of money needed to finance appropriate solutions cannot be found amidst the moneyed hedonism of our society? With the contrasts between my own light-hearted mood and my frustration at my fund-raising shortcomings I pedal on once more. The Alps await: they still stand between me and Paris which I hope to reach in the first week of November.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS: 'Lance Armstrong's War - Daniel Coyle'. Everybody - everybody- should read 'It's not about the Bike' even if they have zero interest in cycling. But this book is for people who want a closer look at the Lance phenomenon; at what he is really like and what the Tour is really all about. It is a book that confirms a suspicion I have had for a while: cycling is hard work.

'East of Eden- John Steinbeck'. One of the best novels I have read. We have a choice in what we make of our lives...

An Independent view (26th October 2005)

Adrienne Scherger, whose family I descended upon as I itched with a thousand flea bites, wrote this about the experience of having a random stranger pass through her family.

Committing to Providence, Creating Your Life

Sometimes, a person will cross your path and make you think about life in a whole new way. Recently I met someone who had that effect on me. Alastair Humphreys is a man with a mission at once totally self-absorbing and totally self-deprecating. His plan (and all indicators are that he'll pull it off) is to ride a bicycle around the world. After four years he nearly done it, there is only a bit of the Balkans and central Europe to get through before he pedals back into England and home.

Alastair stayed with my family for five days. I had never met him before. I heard about his trip through a friend who met him when he cycled through her city. At her suggestion, I contacted him to let him know that if he came through Tirana, he could find a bed and a hot meal at our house. I have to admit that I was slightly worried he'd take me up on the offer. I mean, what kind of person cycles around the world? Was I opening my home to a crazy person? Was I putting my little boys in danger? Would he be self-impressed and scornful of our less-than-adventurous life? Two toddlers and a TV blaring the "Thomas the Tank Engine" theme song from dawn to dusk hardly made us intrepid or interesting. Through my misgivings, there was a part of me, a strong part, which overrode the fearful part. I loved reading travel adventures, and this seemed a good chance to be member of a vast support team for man riding out his dream.

Alastair turned out to be astonishingly normal. Aside from a rash contracted by sleeping in a flea-infested Hoxha-era bunker, and a pair of biking shoes that were indescribably odoriferous, Alastair surprised us by his conventionality. He didn't seem like a bigger-than-life character, he wasn't swashbuckling, or loud talking. He seemed as interested in our lives as we were in his. He joked that one of the reasons for biking around the world was to earn the right to sit on the couch. As if to prove his point, one day he watched eight hours of "24", one terrorist-infested episode after the other. He fit right in

to our lives. I found myself having to actively remember that he'd come to Tirana via England...by bicycle...the long way. It was an epic journey he was on, but his demeanor belied the vast commitment. His normality got me thinking. What made him different? What was it that he had inside him that got him to take that leap of faith that makes a dream a reality? And, more importantly, what was it that kept him pedaling for over four years? How did this normal guy follow through with this staggering devotion to his plan?

In talking with him, or reading his stories on his website, one notices his honesty. He takes little macho pleasure in what he's accomplished, he isn't some sort of latter-day Ulysses, conquering mountains or people or striving to risk his life in the name of adventure. He is disarmingly frank and admits to having been quite scared quite often. And yet, though he's come close to quitting, he hasn't. That commitment is what I found so inspiring.

On Alastair's website he quotes Goethe:

Until there is commitment, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: That the moment one definitely commits oneself then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues forth from the decision, raising in one's favour all manner of unforeseen incidents, meetings and material assistance which no man could have dreamed would come his way. Whatever you do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now.

Alastair took the leap from planning to definitely committing. Only he knows for sure why he chose this particular plan, or how hard it really was to face that commitment during the rainstorms, or freezing temperatures, or unbelievable heat that made his trip the adventure that it is. The point is that he did commit. And in his commitment there is a reminder to the rest of us, a reminder of the things that we dream about and haven't committed to. He shows us, in his easy-going, every-mannish way, that there is more danger in ignoring dreams than there is risk in following them. He looked his fear; he looked the impossibilities in the eye and he sized them up. He, uniquely among people, decided it would be more difficult to ignore his passion than to take all the risks that his trip would entail. He committed to making his dream a reality, and by doing so, he committed to trusting the rest of us--acting through providence--to help him.

In this time where fear seems normal and the horrors of what humans are capable of are ratcheting up almost daily, it's inspiring to meet at least one human in our race who trusts the rest of us with his future. So much of Alastair's journey depends on the people who help him. He rides with almost nothing, little extra food, few clothes, a pair of flip-flops and his holey biking shoes. He is purposely, I think, vulnerable. And, as he writes in on his website, his vulnerability is the very thing that keeps him safe. What faith! What an ability to trust. How many of us have that kind of faith in humanity? As nervous as I was about opening my home and family to him, I wonder if he was nervous about walking into a stranger's home to stay? He has spent four years being at the mercy of the world. While so many of us huddle up in our lives, each day prescribed, each risk weighed against the effort it takes to avoid it, he is out there, in the world, letting the world take him in and move him on, and trusting, every moment, that his boldness will be rewarded.

So often we find ourselves plodding through our days, getting up and going to work, going through the motions of our jobs, finding our way home, and sinking into the routine of our evenings. This is what Alastair had hoped to escape with his ride. In fact, he found that with his adventure there is a certain amount of routine. He points out that Shakespeare wrote about the fact that if all the year was a playing holiday, then to sport would be as tedious as work. So, to paraphrase Lance Armstrong, "It's not about the adventure." We don't all have to have a grandiose plan to travel across Antarctica, or pedal the Sahara. We simply need to remind ourselves to find the adventure in our own lives and to throw ourselves into what we love with abandon, with a sense of wonder, and with a commitment to seeing it all through. We can be bold in our days; we can find the genius and power in ourselves that we all have in untapped reserve. I'm sure that in the course of his travels he's met many people like me, people who look at him and wish they could have just a tiny piece of what he has, people who enviously watch him riding away into an unwritten day and off into an unexplored future. Most of the people who put him up for a few days, will more than likely never see him again. And yet, I feel sure, he's given all of us something by reminding us of what we're all capable of ourselves. This is his lesson for the rest of us: Be bold. Commit totally. Commit to whatever it is you yearn to have, or to have made better, your marriage, your children, your job, those half-forgotten dreams you once wanted to follow. Commit yourself totally and providence will help you. We can leave the peddling to Alastair, who is nearly done with this journey but will undoubtedly embark on another sometime soon. But hopefully he'll rest a little first (and burn those awful

shoes). He's earned the right to sit on the couch for a while, I think.

Adrienne Scherger, Tirana

A List of ‘-ests’

Longest day: 240km, Peru

Shortest day: 4km, a Chinese snowdrift

Highest point: 4900m, Peru and Argentina

Lowest point: -392m, the Dead Sea, Jordan

Longest time away from land: 24 days on the South Atlantic

Furthest point from the ocean: Urumqi, China, the self-appointed ‘Centre of the Asian landmass’

Hottest temperature: 45C, Sudan and Turkmenistan

Coldest temperature: -40C, Russia

Fastest speed: 80kph, Germany

Steepest road: 35%, Lesotho

Longest Uphill: 2 days, Peru and Argentina

Longest Downhill: 80km, Peru

Heaviest bike: gear for -20C, 8 days food, 18l water, Argentina

Heaviest me: a supersize 85kg, USA

Lightest me: 3 months later: a post-Siberian winter 70kg

Most food carried: 10 days, Alaska and Russia

Most punctures in a day: 15, Bolivia

Most vomits in a day’s ride: numerous, Turkey

Longest break from the bike: 2.5 months, Cape Town

Longest ride without a break: 1 month, 4200km, China

Longest time without a shower: 1 month, China

Longest time without a conversation (with another person!): 8 days, Argentina and Chile (except for a truck driver who said “Would you like a lift?” I replied, “No thanks” and he drove off)

Furthest north: 70 degrees, Prudhoe Bay, Alaska

Furthest south: 56 degrees, Ushuaia, Argentina

Furthest east: 179, 59, 59: Pacific Ocean

Furthest west: 179, 59, 59: Pacific Ocean

The Road to Paris (8th November 2005)

Remembering Rosa Parks: an example of what small people can achieve by taking a stand (or, in this case, a seat).

“Nothing compares to the simple pleasure of a bike ride.” - John F. Kennedy

“When I see an adult on a bicycle, I do not despair for the future of the human race.” - H.G. Wells

“The bicycle is just as good company as most husbands and, when it gets old and shabby, a woman can dispose of it and get a new one without shocking the entire community.” - Ann Strong, Minneapolis

Tribune, 1895

It's been a long time coming,

And I can't stop now.

Such a long time running

And I can't stop now...

It's been a long time waiting,

Such a long, long time.

And I can't stop smiling,

No I can't stop now

- Embrace

In 48 hours I will take the ferry to England, and then it will be all over (*Le jour de gloire est arrive!*). I am excited about the end, but nervous about the new life that awaits, and sad that these momentous years and miles are almost done. But a consolation has been that Europe has saved the best for last. The end of all my exploring has been to arrive where I started and know the place for the first time: Europe may be my favourite continent. It has everything: landscapes, history, cities, food, languages, cultures at least the

equal of anywhere on earth, and all squashed nice and tight together so you don't have to pedal for a month to get to the next interesting place. If any European country was dropped in the middle of any other continent it would instantly become a dream travel destination.

Slovenia felt like Western Europe at last. Shopping centres selling mountains o'things and Sunday cyclists and joggers. Having both money and time is one of our greatest privileges in the rich world. The Old Town centre of Ljubljana was quiet, charming and graceful, something it certainly wasn't a few weeks ago when it was invaded by hordes of Scottish football fans who entertained the locals with their amiable booziness and exhibitions of what Scotsmen actually wear under their kilts... Close to Ljubljana rise the fabulous Julian Alps. Caesar did pretty well: to have a mountain range as well as a salad named after him. They are as beautiful as Switzerland but without the Austrian caravanners. On my way to Italy I visited Kobarid, the scene of Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms" description of the World War 1 battles fought in the mountains above the chalk-blue Soca river. 'In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels'.

The awesome Dolomites have very civilised mountain passes. Signs tell you the altitude, how many kilometres to the summit and how many more hairpin bends stand between you and the top. It is about as easy as mountain passes ever get. Massive walls of rock surrounded me as I yelled at my terminally sick bike: 15 punctures in four days, four broken chains, two buckled wheels, a split tyre, a fragile bottom bracket, no back brake, 6 broken spokes in a cracked rim and split hub and only about 10 gears still working out of 27. My gloves have duck tape for palms, and my rain trousers have a duck tape crotch. My panniers are held with string and my shoes stink. My bike is a total contrast to the Sunday afternoon riders of Italy who purr along on carbon fibre dream machines looking every bit the professional in fancy racing outfits. There is a saying in Italy that it is easier to buy a light bike than to lose weight. Clearly me and my bike were a lower class of being as the thoroughbreds rarely stooped to the level of replying to my greetings. Snobbishness like that is a demand to be overtaken...

I was not expecting much of El Duomo, Milan's central Cathedral, having become a bit blase about the endless beauty of Europe's architecture. But I was staggered by the fourth largest church in the world and the visual overload of more than a hundred soaring Gothic spires and walls adorned with 2000 incredible statues. It is one of the most astonishing buildings I have seen. "Poor Samarkand!" I thought.

In Switzerland I paused at the top of the 2000m Simplon Pass, built by Napoleon. The cowbells were ringing, the mountains were pristine, the car park was full of caravans: vintage Switzerland. I knew that this was my last pass in the world. More than ever before I felt sad that the end was nigh. It was all downhill from here. I wondered whether I should just turn around and ride off to Australia. But my bike would never make it that far so I just rolled on down into Geneva.

Geneva. So rich, so clean, so perfect. About as far as it is possible to be from the utter chaos of the Third World. Bright lights in shops lure shoppers with an amazing variety of unnecessary things. I feel the first disorienting waves of reverse culture shock wash at the soft sand foundations of my assurance in the life I have come to know as 'normal'. Magical bookshops crammed with lifetimes of armchair education, provocation and adventure show me the infinite possibilities for our life. How can I make a choice? The perennial question of "what next?" is no longer just a happy excuse for miles of daydreaming. In only a few too-short days time I will have to wake up and say to myself for real, "I am not riding today. What next?" In Geneva the traffic, to my constant surprise, stops for me at pedestrian crossings. 50 seater buses contain no more than 50 people. People wait their turn in the post office. Banks contain money. Lots of it. Street signs tell you where you are and where you want to go. Manhole covers have not been stolen. Nobody honks their horns or shouts. Traffic flows. Nobody raises their prices when they see you are foreign. I have not seen a single donkey in the city. There are traffic lights in the Cathedral bell tower to help tourists ascend and descend efficiently. You can walk the streets at night without fear. The sun is not blotted by pollution. Lest I seem ungrateful I will whisper this quietly, as quietly as the Geneva rush hour: "it is so boring!"

During hard times I often dreamed of cycling in France as some sort of ideal: to sit in street cafes drinking coffee and reading L'Equipe [the daily sports paper]. Within a hundred metres of entering France I was sitting in a cafe making the dream come true. France really is a green and pleasant land, and the view from my tent each morning of dew-drenched green fields and hedges and steaming cows was so similar to my England. I speak French badly but far better than I speak Chinese so it has been a luxury to be able to not only ask for directions, but also even to understand the replies. The notoriously grumpy, unfriendly French citizens have disappointed me by their hospitable welcome: in an attempt to make me feel at home they have spent the last couple of weeks trashing their cities. Unfortunately for their attempts to make me feel welcome they seem not to realise that our own world-famous hooligans tired of such

antics about 15 years ago.

Racing up the N6 through Auxerre and on towards Paris was flat and open country, perfect for a Tour de France timetrial stage. I settled into my own rhythm, rushing along, my nose following the white line ('yuppy style') as my legs span and span me closer to the end. Of course, entering Paris, I rode the Tour de France finishing-straight up the Champs Elysees and round the Arc d'Triomphe. If Geneva was a culture shock, the chaotic traffic round the Arc d'Triomphe was a nostalgic reminder of what cycling in the Third World was like. But cycling in Paris is not too bad- the biggest hazard are the clumps of kamikaze oriental tourists risking life and limb in the middle of insanely busy avenues to get that perfect holiday snap. Riding through sunset into dusk towards where I was staying reminded me vividly of entering Cairo- the river dotted with pleasure boats on my right, its banks busy with pedestrians (including lots of Arabs) and smoky cafes, the Eiffel Tower lit up like the Pyramids and a thrilling reminder of location and an aid to navigation.

With the end so close I am divided between great excitement, nerves and sadness that it is nearly done. My mind races with memories and I have to remind myself that the end of the ride does not mean the end of my life. I have absolutely no idea what I will be doing a month from now, but that really is no excuse not to get on the ferry. "It seems a pity but I do not think I can write more." I just hope my bike holds up for two more days. If not, I suppose that I can even run home from here. England, here I come!

A FINAL BOOK RECOMMENDATION: 'The Penguin History of the World' - JM Roberts. Running from when men were monkeys, right up to present times, this is an amazingly ambitious book. I have become very interested in how all our histories intertwine and effect each other, and this is such a good summary of everything! Necessarily brief on each subject, it does not have time to get bogged down in boring detail like many history books.

Looking back. (30 October 2005)

Wexas Traveller Magazine kindly invited me to write a short piece for them.

“It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step out onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.”- Bilbo Baggins

“Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now.”- Goethe

I would never have learned backgammon at a pavement café in Amman. I would never have drunk ‘*tej*’, Ethiopian mead, from a vase flask in a dim drinking den. I would never have heaved the helm of a yacht to run down the face of an Atlantic wave along the silver path of a full moon. I would never have camped beside the Straits of Magellan or on the banks of the Yukon. I would never have had my beard entombed in Siberian ice, eaten octopus in Tokyo or sat humbled in Samarkand’s Registan. I would never have ridden around the planet if I had not taken the hardest journey of all: stepping out of my front door and beginning the ride.

Over the last four years I have pedaled, mostly alone, 45000 miles across 5 continents. It has been the best of times and the worst of times. The thrill of new experiences was tempered by numbing boredom and loneliness. The challenge of solo travel fought my lazy streak dreaming of sofas and cappuccinos. Third World slums terrified me then surprised me with gestures of welcome; I learned that everyone on earth laughs at something funny. Being totally fit, riding hard but comfortably over 4500m Andean passes with all your worldly possessions in a few small bags, no deadline to make and no persistent phone demanding your attention: the vast freedom of a long adventure and the privilege of time and space to evaluate what is and what is not really important in life are the things I appreciate most from my adventure. I never thought when I began my ride that I would actually succeed. The essence for me was not whether I succeeded in the end. It was that I turned a dusty daydream into a reality and reaped the rewards from taking time out from our hectic 21st Century whirlwind to smell the roses, smell the coffee,

smell the stinking industrial wastelands, smell our amazing world. In our era of email and Chinese takeaways we glibly say that the world is a small place. That is nonsense: the world is enormous; certainly too big for a single lifetime. I am fortunate that I took the chance to see a small part of it. With the journey done and only the memories remaining, I can also appreciate that ‘the end of all our exploring is to arrive where we started, and to know the place for the first time.’

The Docking of the Banana Boat (25 November 2005)

And to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from...

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

- fragments from TS Eliot's 'Little Gidding'

Look, if you had one shot, one opportunity

To seize everything you ever wanted

Would you capture it or just let it slip? - EMINEM

“If you march your Winter Journeys you will have your reward, so long as all you want is a penguin’s
egg”

- Cherry Apsley Garrard ('The Worst Journey in the World')

“the Journey is the reward” - Lao Tze

“Do you really think we just got off the banana boat?” said the latest letter. “Riding a BICYCLE round the WORLD?! If you want a bike why not get a job like everybody else. Nobody is going to fall for such a ridiculous suggestion.” My search for sponsors to support my idea of cycling round the planet was not going well. Five years later it takes a lot of self-restraint not to tell you the name of the prominent British bike company who sent me this reply in response to my suggestion that a company linking its products to a journey across 5 continents would benefit in return. The urge now to turn up on their doorstep with a large bunch of bananas and a grin is strong.

But I will not, partly because nobody really expected me to finish what I had started in reckless pub

conversations and unrealistic daydreams in the dusty recesses of my mind back at University. For the duration of my ride I carried with me a sentence torn from an email I received from a well-wisher at the beginning: "I will be stunned if you complete it," he said. He was not the only one. The biggest doubter was me. From the moment I 'left my front door and stepped into the road' until, more than two years later, I sailed out of Colombia bound for Panama, I knew that my plan was beyond me. I KNEW that I would quit. It was simply a question of 'when'. The gradual realisation then that I was actually going to accomplish my goal has been a constant source of surprise. I thought that it was impossible for me to achieve this. But as Mohammed Ali said, with swagger, "Impossible is just a big word thrown around by small men who find it easier to live in the world they've been given than to explore the power they have to change it. Impossible is not a fact. It's an opinion. Impossible is not a declaration. It's a dare. Impossible is potential. Impossible is temporary. Impossible is nothing." I am stunned that I have completed it.

Now that I am back on 'this sceptred isle set in the silver sea' after a 1500 day sabbatical, I cannot help but think (like Cherry) "was I mad? What was the use...?" Before I began I had several motivations for wanting to attempt to ride round the world. I wonder now whether I accomplished those aims, what unpredicted benefits there were and what were the downsides of a project that has been my sole occupation for so long. What did I learn, and what lessons do I hope to take on from the ride into my future life, whatever that may hold? I decided to begin as a quest for adventure ('yes' - I got that), a desire to see the world (again, 'yes') and to escape mediocrity and England ('yes'). (As Tim says in the TV show 'The Office': "It's like an alarm clock's gone off, and I've just got to get away. I think it was John Lennon who said: "Life is what happens when you're making other plans", and that's how I feel. Although he also said: "I am the Walrus I am the eggman" so I don't know what to believe.") I longed to escape from routine ('yes and no': in many ways my life on the road has been so routine ('new roads: new ruts'). Ironically I also found myself missing the ease of a regular, comforting routine), to find excitement ('yes') and to challenge myself ('yes'). I was inspired to follow faintly in the bold footsteps of great men and women who had gone before me and told mighty tales in epic books. I wanted to see whether I could do anything remotely similar. I wanted to do something that I would certainly fail unless I poured everything I had into it- I wanted something difficult. And I got it: this is the hardest thing I have ever done: physically, emotionally and morally. As Lance Armstrong wrote, "It's not about the bike. It's

a metaphor for life. It poses every conceivable element to the rider and more. During our lives we're faced with so many elements as well, we experience so many setbacks, and fight such a hand-to-hand battle with failure, head down in the rain, just trying to stay upright and have a little hope." I wanted to try and forge for myself a career as a travel writer and speaker, as someone getting paid to travel, to write, to talk about his favourite subject (himself), and to avoid a 9-to-5 torture. Whether or not that will materialise I will discover over the next months as I sit down to test my brain and write the book of the journey. I am pretty disciplined now at making myself cycle all day long; whether I can make myself sit still and type so efficiently I rather doubt! Whether anyone will pay to endure my extreme version of 'death by holiday snaps' I am not sure about either. Ironically in recent months I have even felt that I have at last cured my wanderlust. Perhaps I don't even want to be a travel writer at all after so much travelling! Or perhaps a few months of computer screens and rainy days will have me stretching for the atlas and the panniers once again. I do not know. My imagined careers over the last few years have been so wide as to suggest that really I do not have a clue what I want to do next: being a writer, becoming a McDonalds 'Employee of the Month', the Foreign Office, working in a bookshop, the Foreign Legion, a teacher, charity work, a journalist, an Olympic curler, the Territorial Army and working in a coffee shop have all felt like serious options at various times...

Another motivating factor for the ride was as a way of combining my own personal ambitions and desires with the gnawing feeling inside of me that life in Britain is so staggeringly wealthy, inward-looking, fortunate and easy whereas the vast majority of humanity live lives that, frankly, suck, through little fault of their own. I hoped that my ride could be a good medium for telling people at home about the realities of life as lived by most people on Earth, to serve as a wake-up-and-smell-our-lucky-coffee and to promote the work of *Hope and Homes for Children* who have been doing magnificent work for orphaned and abandoned children for a decade. And in this I certainly succeeded in breaking my own personal little comfort bubble, having being forced to face the struggling masses and now unable to ignore these issues quite as guilt-free as I used to do. Whether or not I have made any impression on anybody else is not really important to me any more. For I no longer think my ways superior to another's and do not venture to judge. I try to see things with fresh and open eyes, to praise when I can and to be silent when I can't. We make our own choices. But I do also love Jesse Jackson's fiery speech "if, in my high moments, I have done some good, offered some service, shed some light, healed some wounds, rekindled some hope,

or stirred someone from apathy and indifference, or in any way along the way helped somebody, then this campaign has not been in vain..”

I over-estimated the physical side of the expedition. Over such long periods of time my body had time to rise to the challenges of whatever fitness levels were required of me. It has been a real thrill to become so fit. To be able to ride 100 miles a day, spending 8 hours in the saddle on a very heavy bike over demanding terrain and to wake the next morning and do it again, and again, and again is a feeling I am very grateful for. We greatly under-estimate our bodies. So many people say to me “I could never ride that far.” For most people that is nonsense. I am no genetic-freak Lance Armstrong superstar, I was never in any good sports teams at school, I realised sadly young that I was never going to play for Leeds United and in Los Angeles I nearly lost an arm wrestle to a 50 year old woman. But now I ride more hours a day than Armstrong (so I can eat as much food as I want and I will not get fat) and I can sing very loudly as I ride easily up Alpine mountain passes. I feel tired but satisfied at day’s end. It feels good. I hope not to relapse into the sedentary life of our rich world where even children do virtually no exercise, we drive everywhere, eat crap food, stay indoors and forget that doing exercise is something that actually makes you feel good, not bad. But if I over-estimated the physical aspect, I also under-estimated the mental challenges. Being away from friends and family has helped me to appreciate their true importance. Leaving my girlfriend, Sarah, made the journey so much more difficult and made me question, on innumerable occasions, what on earth I was doing. Being alone for so long (great adventures or not) made me realise that there is even more to life than seeing spectacular places, being carefree and wild, facing fresh challenges and new experiences. I realised that what I really want to do is to share these things with somebody else. Being alone means you are completely reliant on yourself for motivation. Nobody is checking up on you, nobody praises you if you ride an extra long day, nobody gets mad if you slack off and camp at 6 o’clock, nobody knows (or cares) if you take a bus, nobody raises an eyebrow if you take an easy option, or if you spend frivolously your too-few funds, or if you avoid a challenge that frightens you or if you walk over a mountain pass you could have ridden. Nobody gives a damn. Nobody except you. I realise now the importance of self-respect for how happy you feel within yourself. I realise how tempting it is to take the easy option. On your own you stand or fall by your own efforts or shortcomings. I have harboured horrible thoughts and resentments that disgust me to think back on, but when you are alone you cannot blame these on anyone but yourself. Without the comforting option of being able to

pass the buck you are really forced to face your demons on the bike. Trying to persuade myself not to quit, to keep going, not to take the easy options has been the single hardest aspect of this ride. But it makes the end product sweeter. It doesn't have to be fun to be fun.

I believe that we underestimate our capabilities. Too often we strive for and achieve only that which we believe we can achieve. We should aim so much higher. Aim for the sun- you won't hit it, but you'll get pretty high. We settle for too few accomplishments and we are not satisfied with what we have. That is the wrong way round. We sink too often into pointless retrospective regrets of "would have, could have, should have" about our lives. But like Frank Sinatra I must say "Regrets? I've had a few." I regret wallowing too often in self-pity. I regret how the sheer scale of the solitary ride often overwhelmed me and left me wishing the road away, dreaming of the end. I regret that I was not allowed into Iran (or DR Congo or Angola), but I look forward to visiting there in the future (inshallah). I have been disappointed in my efforts to raise publicity for *Hope and Homes for Children*. I hope that I can improve this over the next months and have set myself the challenge of raising a 'Pound per mile'. But above these small regrets is the reassuring notion that I will never regret that I began this ride. 'I took risks, I knew I took them; things came out for me, and therefore I have no cause for complaint' is what I wish RF Scott could have written.

This journey was a wonderful learning experience for me, not only because I had hours free each day in which to read, read, read. Talking with people of every race, religion, political view and wealth level has also been eye-opening and helped widen my horizons. From having to make countless snap judgements on who to trust or not to trust I saw that first impressions can be misleading, but usually they are not. I have been helped by so many strangers, many of whom have become friends and inspirations and without whom I would never have succeeded. (I never learned the difference between 'who' or 'whom' however). I have become convinced of an essential goodness to the human race (tainted of course with bad parts to everyone, and a tiny news-grabbing minority of evil, desperation and lunacy). Almost everybody in the world has treated me well. Nobody ever refused me water. I was only refused permission to camp twice (both in Europe). Everywhere else in the world I was given at least a safe place to camp, and often a bed, shower, feast and unexpected adventures and friendships. Everybody in the world laughs at funny things. Everybody has hopes and dreams and loves. Don't believe what you see on the TV: the world really is a good place.

Putting the world to rights is one of the great privileges of the solo cyclist with too much time and silence on his hands. So what issues have I highlighted to be solved with a single swipe of my mighty sword when I become master of the universe? 'Travel is fatal to bigotry, prejudice and hatred': I would make everybody ride a bike for 6 months through the country of the people they think they hate and have insoluble differences with. That would cure them. I am frightened by the Public Relations disaster that America is currently engaged in. Every day more and more people are turning to hate the USA, one of my very favourite countries. The arrogance of its regime (and her lapdogs) and the myopia of its supporters puts global stability ever more at risk. It is not a good idea to try and destroy a wasp's nest with a baseball bat. On the other side of this clash, I believe that the massive majority of good Muslims around the world need to take a loud, proud, powerful stand against the evil few who are hijacking their faith to use it as a growing instrument of irrational hatred. Clean water, a basic right and necessity, is becoming ever scarcer because of uncontrolled industrialisation and population increase. We are ignoring our environment to our own peril. If we keep burying our heads in the sand there will eventually be no nice beaches left to head-bury on. We must stop ignoring the issues of pollution, waste disposal, environmental destruction and toxic emissions. Which brings me on to cars- one of my biggest enemies! Never mind the pollution, overcrowding, congestion, road rage, stress, expense and slothfulness linked with cars: I hate them because of the morons (read 'young men') who drive like lunatics leaving swathes of slaughter in their wake. After four years spent at 10mph within inches of racing tonnes of metal, cars scare the hell out of me! Riding a bike is so much cheaper, healthier, greener, more fun and often faster. I wish we would stop tolerating the unfulfilled promises our governments make about doing something to redress the cruel imbalances in the world. Half the children on earth still live in poverty. At the same time I wish the developing world would act more themselves to squash the corruption, incompetence and infighting that hampers so many development efforts. Finally, universal primary education, empowerment of women, health and birth control education, micro-credit for the establishment of small businesses and expansion of public transport networks are also some of my favourite inexpensive sustainable development aims.

What am I looking forward to in the future? Well I have not yet figured out what my New Year's Resolution will be. But I have had so much time to dream of what I would do when I got home again. I certainly daydreamed about this far more than was constructive during my ride. It is nice now to have the chance to put them into practice. Not surprisingly perhaps, I do not drool particularly much about the

English food that I have been missing, though I look forward to ice cream, beans on toast, curry, fish fingers, and Marmite and I shall certainly be spending my first paycheque on an espresso machine. I am looking forward too to having a paycheque! Living on such a tight budget that buying a coke or a chocolate bar was a big deal is wearing and stressful. I am not bothered about having loads of money (which is lucky given my likely careers!), but I do want some money. I dream of long runs in the hills, of fierce and muddy football matches and patrolling the covers on a summer's cricket match. I have really missed team sports for the camaraderie and communal effort. I eagerly await Leeds United's return to where we belong. (I am already in contact with all my Russian friends hoping that we can find a blatant criminal to come and buy us some shallow glory. Get ready all of you who have recently traded your Man U shirts for Chelsea ones...). I am looking forward to "Match of the Day." I look forward to spending time with friends, to no longer be living out of four small, smelly bags and to spend far too much time and money in book shops. I look forward to sleeping in the same place two nights in a row and knowing where to find the glasses in the kitchen. I am really excited to explore and discover London, about which I know far less than many other far-flung cities. I want to spend lazy Sunday mornings drinking fair trade coffee and reading newspapers. Travel does not yet feature in my daydreams. Perhaps this is not surprising. But I do hope to be in Germany next summer for the World Cup. And there is still so, so much of the world that I have not yet tasted. A great deal of what happens next depends on how my book writing and slideshows go- whether I can find a publisher, whether anybody buys the book, whether anybody will invite me to give talks and slideshows. If so, perhaps I can make a career as a writer and keep close to development issues through that. I certainly want to live overseas and would love to work in a second language: most likely Spanish. I want to do an Ironman and various other silly things like that. And, of course, I still need to cycle to the South Pole.

Finally, I have had much time to read and reflect on all those books and adventurers who inspired me and who continue to dazzle. I tried to find common threads to them, defining traits that I could borrow to help me along my own road. Certainly they must be "tough enough to fight, tender enough to cry, human enough to make mistakes, humble enough to admit them, strong enough to absorb the pain, and resilient enough to bounce back and keep on moving." The ideal person for undertaking a great and difficult journey (and sadly I know now that I am far from ideal for this) would be one, I believe, who could leap (or at least climb over) the hurdles laid down by Kipling's "If", whilst bearing in mind also the finest

travel advice I know: the words of Ben Okri's poem 'To an English Friend in Africa'.

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you
But make allowance for their doubting too,
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:
If you can dream--and not make dreams your master,
If you can think--and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:
If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it all on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breath a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"
If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings--nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you;

If all men count with you, but none too much,
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it...

--*Rudyard Kipling*

To an English Friend in Africa

- Ben Okri

Be grateful for the freedom
To see other dreams.
Bless your loneliness as much as you drank
Of your former companionships.
All that you are experiencing now
Will become moods of future joys
So bless it all.
Do not think your ways superior
To another's.
Do not venture to judge,
But see things with fresh and open eyes.
Do not condemn,
But praise what you can,
And when you can't, be silent.

Time is now a gift for you,
A gift of freedom
To think and remember and understand
The ever perplexing past,

And to re-create yourself anew

In order to transform time.

Live while you are alive.

Learn the ways of silence and wisdom.

Learn to act, learn a new speech.

Learn to be what you are in the seed of your spirit.

Learn to free yourself

from all things that have moulded you

And which limit your secret and undiscovered road.

Remember that all things which happen

To you are raw materials,

Endlessly fertile,

Endlessly yielding of thoughts that could change

Your life and go on doing for ever.

Never forget to pray and be thankful

For all the things good or bad on the rich road;

For everything is changeable

So long as you live while you are alive.

Fear not, but be full of light and love.

Fear not, but be alert and receptive.

Fear not, but act decisively when you should.

Fear not, but know when to stop.

Fear not, for you are loved by me.

Fear not, for death is not the real terror,

But life-magically- is.

Be joyful in your silence,

Be strong in your patience,

Do not try to wrestle with the universe,
But be sometimes like water or air,
Sometimes like fire.

Live slowly, think slowly, for time is a mystery.

Never forget that love

Requires that you be

The greatest person you are capable of being,

Self-generating and strong and gentle-

Your own hero and star.

Love demands the best in us,

To always and in time overcome the worst

And lowest in our souls.

Love the world wisely.

It is love alone that is the greatest weapon

And the deepest and hardest secret.

So fear not, my friend.

The darkness is gentler than you think.

Be grateful for the manifold

Dreams of creation

And the many ways of unnumbered peoples.

Be grateful for life as you live it.

And may a wonderful light

Always guide you on the unfolding road.

Thank you to everybody who supported me, and also to those who did not.

Thank you to the friends I left behind who stayed with me down the road.

Thank you to the new friends I made along the road.

I could not have done this without you all.

It would not have been worth doing without you all.

November 2005. England. 46000 miles 60 countries 5 continents 1555 days

Hope and Homes for Children is a registered charity working in 13 countries in Eastern Europe and Africa. Our head office is based in Wiltshire in the UK.



Our Mission is to give hope to the poorest children in the world-those who are orphaned, abandoned or vulnerable- by enabling them to grow up within the love of a family and the security of a home, so that they can fulfill their potential.

Our Vision is A World Where Every Child Feels Loved.

Today, home for more than a million children in Eastern Europe is a bleak state-run institution. These children, abandoned at birth or removed from their families because of a mental or physical disability, are hidden away in facilities that rarely meet even their most basic needs.

At *Hope and Homes for Children* we believe that every child has the right to grow up with the love and care of a family. This is why we are working with governments to not only close state institutions, by moving each individual child into a caring family environment, but also to change outdated attitudes to childcare policy and practice. Closing institutions is just the beginning, not the end, and we are helping governments put in place the alternative care systems that prevent children from entering institutions in the first place.

Children who are alone due to the AIDS pandemic are being given hope. Every 14 seconds AIDS turns a child into an orphan and almost 20 million of these children live in sub-Saharan Africa. We are supporting people with HIV and families who have lost parents through AIDS. Our work keeps families together, and in the case of a parent with HIV, we help to make plans and provision for their children. We are helping to avoid the alternative: children without homes or schools, forced into begging, crime or prostitution in order to survive.

Children orphaned or abandoned through conflict are given a family and a future. In Sierra Leone, Eritrea, Rwanda and Sudan alone, there are estimated to be more than two million children orphaned by conflict. We are caring for children in parts of Eastern Europe and Africa who have been affected by conflict, war or genocide and the social disruption and poverty that result from the hostilities. These children may be living on the streets, in government camps, in local institutions or in impoverished

circumstances in the community.

5% of the profits from this book are being donated to *Hope and Homes for Children*. Should you wish to make a further donation, you can do so at - Alastair's own fundraising page. Your donation will help us to change a child's life. Whatever your contribution, it will be greatly appreciated.

To find out more about *Hope and Homes for Children*, please visit

Thank you.

A note on self-publishing.

When I arrived home after cycling round the world I was excited about the chance to get my book published, earn a nice advance on book number 2, and set off on a new adventure and a career as a writer. Unfortunately it has not quite worked out like that.

None of the big guns wanted to publish my book. There are various reasons for this: There are loads of travel books already, there is no witty novel quest or fridge involved in my book, I am not famous, this is my first book so it is a bit rough and naïve, I have worked so much on the text that I have flogged the life and charm out of it, and-ultimately- I am not as good a writer as I had dreamed of being.

It has been painful for me to accept that I am better at riding than writing, that I am no instant Laurie Lee or Paddy Fermor or Cherry Garrard, that the craft is long to learn, and that having a good story to write is no guarantee of writing a good story.

I had decided to give up on the whole project, concede defeat, and start doing something I am good at instead when I came across the concept of Print on Demand (POD) self-publishing. Self-publishing had always felt to me like vanity publishing and I had no desire to spend a lot of money on piles of cheap-looking books that would sit piled embarrassingly high in storage for years. But the internet has revolutionized self-publishing and POD no longer involves financial risk and thousands of unwanted books. So I decided that, rather than quit, I would publish the book of my ride through Africa myself. I have done this for personal satisfaction and because I hated the thought of quitting. I decided to publish only Africa for now for a few reasons: if the book is terrible then I have not used up all my great material for future use when perhaps I have become a better writer. Also, if it is awful, then I have not wasted even more of my time (and the reader's!) by droning on even further about something that nobody is interested in. And thirdly, if this book for some reason proved to be popular, then I would have the chance to write two books rather than just one!

I think it may be interesting for me to outline the new world of self-publishing that I am so excited by. To publish this book I paid £300 up front on www.pabd.co.uk, downloaded the text as a Word document online, downloaded the front and back cover (made for me kindly by Jim Shannon from www.giraffeads.com and www.odysseyphotography.net) as a JPEG file, chose the price of my book (PABD subtract the price of printing and a percentage commission from the total: the rest is mine) and

clicked 'Go'. My book is then instantly available for sale worldwide on websites such as Amazon. It makes no difference from then on whether I sell 1 copy or 1000000. And that is it. Done. Published.

The process is so simple and so fluid that I really believe it will be the future of publishing. There are no middle-men skimming the profits, nobody forcing you to choose certain covers or edit the text in ways you disagree with. And I can change the text whenever I wish. Email me through my website to say that Chapter 8 is rubbish and I can improve the offending chapter instantly. The concept has so much potential.

There are, however, three main downsides of POD.

1. To get a book into a big bookshop you generally have to pay the bookshop a fortune. If you want the book placed in a good spot in the bookshop you pay them even more (have a look next time you are in a book shop at how they push just a few books: the 3-for-2 tables and the Bestsellers shelf just inside the front door). It is not a world for small-fry. It is a world for famous people, big sellers, and a select few others who are either lucky, brilliant, or probably both. The only marketing this book will receive is that which I can do myself.

2. The POD author has no expert editing help. This is my biggest regret of all, and my book would have been so much better with professional people saying, "this is rubbish, this is good, why not try this..." and so on. For a first time writer that would be invaluable.

3. I wish that this book had lots of photos: they are key to a great travel book. But colour photos were not an option with this company.

But I am glad really to have just got the book finished. It might not look quite as pretty as a 'normal' book. It is not a brilliant book. It is simple, home-made and there may be a few errors. But I think of this book fondly now like my ride itself: at the start nobody was interested; I even doubted myself whether I was doing the right thing. But I muddled on and I got there in the end. Like the ride, this book is not pretty, perfect, or brilliant, but I'm proud of it anyway.

A Carbon Neutral Book.

One of the many things that can be done to address the critical challenge of global climate change, as well as reducing emissions, is to become carbon neutral. Whenever we use fossil fuels, whether by driving, flying, using trucks, heating with oil or gas, or using electricity which has been generated with coal or gas, we cause the release of carbon, which forms carbon dioxide, the Number 1 greenhouse gas. Whenever we use paper that is not recycled, we also contribute to the loss of forests and forest soils, which store immense quantities of carbon, reducing the ability of our planet's ecosystems to store the carbon we are so busy releasing.

What can we do? We can reduce our emissions, and we can render our existing emissions "carbon neutral" by investing in initiatives which will prevent the release of a similar amount of emissions elsewhere, or which support long-term carbon-storing initiatives. The most common method to become carbon neutral involves investing in tree-planting initiatives that will absorb a similar quantity of emissions. The second method involves investing in initiatives which will prevent the release of a similar amount of emissions, such as paying to fit efficient lightbulbs, or supporting the use of wind energy.

The production of paper produces CO₂ from a variety of factors (forest soil loss, trucking, pulping, paper manufacturing, shipping). The trees themselves are considered carbon neutral, since they have already absorbed the CO₂ that will be released as their fibres or the paper made from them break down and release the stored CO₂ back into the atmosphere. The use of recycled paper releases less CO₂, since there is no loss of forest soil, and less fuel is used in logging and trucking. Carbon is also released through the vehicles used to deliver each book.

Therefore 5p from each book sold will be donated, through www.climatecare.org, to offset the carbon emissions involved in printing and shipping this book. My journey was virtually carbon neutral, and I would like my book to be also. This is not an issue we can ignore for much longer.

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Above all I would like to thank the thousands of friends I made along the road. Without you all I would never have made it round. Without you all it would have not been worth making it round. I am indebted to you all. If I have ridden a long way it is only by sitting on the saddles of giants.

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And thanks to you for reading it.

INCLUDE

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AND A

POSTSCRIPT

ABOUT

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