



'I was looking for an experience that nothing could take away from me'

To hell and gone... on a bike

Brit Al Humphreys has been everywhere and got all the T-shirts. Read, weep and imagine the saddle sores

> Brit, Al Humphreys, spent 1 555 days cycling around the world, alone. He covered 74 030 kilometres, 60 countries and 5 continents. A quote from his website reads, 'I wanted to do something that I would certainly fail unless I poured everything into it – I wanted something difficult.' He got it.

Did you feel your life was somehow too easy that you needed to set yourself such an extreme challenge?

I was 24 and just finishing University – it was time to choose my path. I decided to let go of everything that makes a life normal, secure and conventionally happy – the expectations of convention, the ironing board, the wasted opportunities and the shiny things I'd spent money on. I was looking for an experience that nothing, not old age or financial ruin, could take away from me. It was a chance for self-testing and self-discovery. To shiver in a frost-rimmed tent is to truly appreciate the next warm duvet.

Was there a situation you really couldn't see yourself getting out of?

In Russia in -40-degrees, racing against time to get out before our visas expired (I was cycling with a friend on that stretch). We needed to cover 85km a day for the next 50 if we were to make it, and after having ridden so far for so long it was not in our natures to quit so it became as much a mental challenge as a physical one. Determined to succeed, we knew what had to be done – we just had to do it.

Were you ever robbed?

Only once, in Siberia – three drunk Russians. We kept pretending not to understand until they got the gun out. We handed over our spare wallet with \$20 and a few expired credit cards. The robbers then

kindly helped us with directions to the next town.

How was the experience of riding alone?

It was the best of times and the worst of times. The kindness I received because I was alone was incredible but the boredom and loneliness was hard. With nobody to give a damn about you I now realise the importance of self-respect for the happiness you feel within yourself – you stand or fall by your own efforts and shortcomings. It made me appreciate the simple life more with no boring small talk, no need to upgrade my phone, have porcelain ornaments or look good to impress.

What was the reality of your bike ride round the world versus any preconceptions?

It began as a quest for adventure and to escape mediocrity – it was both those things. As for escaping routine, in many ways life on the road was routine but in a different way. It's the hardest thing I've ever done – physically, emotionally and morally – but it's been a real thrill to become so fit.

To be able to ride 100 miles a day over demanding terrain to wake the next day and do it again, and again, is a

feeling I'm grateful for – we greatly underestimate our bodies. I hope not to relapse into the sedentary life where we drive everywhere, eat crap food and where even children do virtually no exercise.

When cycling in solitary places with no humans or traffic, what noises could you hear?

Siberia would squeak and groan with shifting ice and cracking branches. Spooky, but it was wonderful to get away from the endless noise of modern life, to hear birds and listen to them. At night the silence in the deserts was so strong I could hear blood coursing through my skull, even myself blinking. It makes you so aware of yourself, thrillingly alive.

Name the dodgiest places you spent the night?

A Russian gold mine, an unused sewage pipe in Chile, and a brothel in Tanzania – my door barricaded shut with my bed. Very scary.

Where were the most unfriendly people?

In Ethiopia – they were rude, they threw stones at me and would beg aggressively.

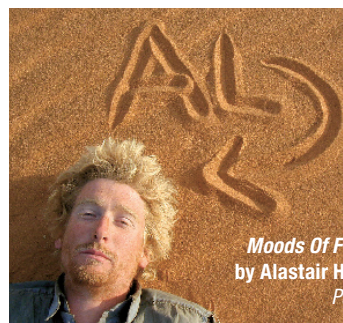
The world is...

... not a bad place. It's full of good people, beautiful places and fascinating civilisations. TV loves to show us all the bad stuff. My pet hates about the world now are: cars and suicidal drivers, environmental destruction, intolerance through ignorance, over-eating and under-exercising by the privileged rich and the solvable poverty and suffering of

so many people. □

For the full interview go to www.gq.co.za

Check out Al's website www.roundtheworldbybike.com



Moods Of Future Joys
by Alastair Humphreys
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