

London TO VLADIVOSTOK

Story & photos by Michael McDonald / Compass Expeditions



The big Russian biker embraced me with a vice-like bear hug before kissing me on the cheek. I felt it only appropriate that I returned in kind. Sinus "the Russian king of bikers" and I were saying farewell and I was truly sad.

For years I had dreamed of doing what I considered to be the ultimate bike ride, from London to Vladivostok. It would be a ride into the unknown, into the storybook historical lands of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. A ride into blazing deserts, soaring mountains and cities bejeweled with magnificent centuries old architecture dotted along the Silk Road.

A ride we called "The Last Stans."





While working in South America as a tour leader I had convinced three other riders to join me on "the last Stans" ride. Within four months of our set departure date we met Cathy McLean, an incredibly brave girl fighting a losing battle with the rare and unusually cruel disease called Friedreich's ataxia. It was hastily decided to turn the trip into a charity ride to support Cathy and other people who suffer from this disease.

Our itinerary had us sailing out of Newcastle and into Bergen, southern Norway, before riding across Sweden, Finland and into Russia. We then planned to ride the "road of death" in Kazakhstan before joining the Silk Road in Uzbekistan. From Uzbekistan we planned to ride into Kyrgyzstan before briefly entering Kazakhstan and Russia. From there we would explore Mongolia. From Mongolia we would enter Russia for the last time and ride the legendary Trans Siberian highway before reaching Vladivostok four months after leaving England.

Our bikes of choice were the Honda Transalp 650 v-twins fitted with 35lt fuel tanks, Touratech panniers, crash bars and aluminum bash plates. Aside from these additions they were stock Transalps.

The first few days were a disaster. Instead of popping champagne bottles and a waving crowd, we left Debenham, England, a half day late. Within a few hours two of the four bikes had broken down, we had become lost, it was cold and we were hungry. Eventually all four bikes broke down. The problem

turned out to be that the vacuum pumps supplied to lift the fuel out of the tanks were not up to the job and we kept running out of fuel even though we still had up to 10lts on board. We missed our Bergen ferry by two days. Getting to Vladivostok seemed like a bad joke, let alone our intention.

Opening picture: Michael McDonald crossing a wooden bridge in Mongolia. At one time it was straight but was shifted by the moving river.

Above: Erdene Zuu Khid, Mongolia's first monastery and former home of Genghis Khan
Below: Four friends spent 4 months traveling 15,500 miles (25,000 km) across central Asia





Taking a break on the Kazakh Steppes. This is the famous Road of Death. It is one of the loneliest roads I had ever ridden. The silence and expansiveness is unbelievable.

Friedreich's Ataxia is an inherited disease that causes progressive damage to the nervous system resulting in symptoms ranging from gait disturbance and speech problems to heart disease.

Generally, ataxia is a symptom of coordination problems such as clumsy or awkward movements and unsteadiness and occurs in many different diseases and conditions. The ataxia of Friedreich's ataxia results from the degeneration of nerve tissue in the spinal cord, in particular sensory neurons essential (through connections with the cerebellum) for directing muscle movement of the arms and legs. The spinal cord becomes thinner and nerve cells lose some of their myelin sheath (the insular covering on some nerve cells that helps conduct nerve impulses).

The thrill and overwhelming anticipation of what lay ahead struck us as we eventually sailed into Bergen. We had left very early in the season and snow still lay on the ground as we rode North through the western Fjords.

Voted as one of the world's most scenic spots in the world, the fjord lands were stunning. The days were spent hugging the dramatic deepwater fjords that were surrounded by snowcapped peaks and the evenings were spent enjoying a beer at simple cabins situated in incredibly scenic spots.

The riding became more difficult as we ventured north. Our progress was being hampered by the constant snow and at times raging blizzards. Hours would be spent in truckstops gulping hot chocolates as we attempted to thaw out.

Our original plan had us going to the top of Norway to Nordkapp, however the weather had slowed our progress to a crawl. It was decided to drop Nordkapp and ride the Lofoton Islands instead.

As we neared the Lofotons the clouds broke and we were greeted by some of the most spectacular scenery any of us had ever seen. The ensuing 30 minute ride was the greatest ride I had ever experienced. Every corner was a scenic overload and every vista literally took our breath away.

Tiny red roofed huts stood by the shoreline while racks of Atlantic cod dried in the midnight sun. Storms raged briefly above the dramatic towering mountains that stood all around and rainbows formed, dipping into the Atlantic. The roads were in excellent condition and there was no traffic. We felt as if we had stumbled onto a biking Shangri-La.

The ride took on a new perspective as we entered Russia. We faced new challenges with the language, alphabet and Russian drivers. There is something about riding in Russia that can't be put into words. It's a unique, thrilling experience, one that wasn't possible only a few years ago.

We rode on to St Petersburg then on to Moscow. Riding into Red square was one of those magical biking moments as we parked our bikes in the shadows of St Basils. We continued on to Suzdal, an old Russian village, seemingly caught in a time warp.

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Red Square in Moscow, with Saint Basils in the background. Riding into Red Square is one of those incredible biking moments that stay with you forever.

The golden Cupolas of the many churches glistened in the afternoon sun while the old crumbling Kremlin stood like a sentinel over the tranquil village.

Crossing into Kazakhstan, the roads immediately disappeared to be replaced by an incredibly rough dirt track that stretched off to the horizon. It was what we had come for, to ride the desolate, silent and expansive Kazakh Steppe. Camping out on the steppe in the stunning silence and overwhelming loneliness are moments that will stay with us forever.

The bikes were performing well despite our best efforts to wreck them with numerous low speed falls and frame smashing tracks.

The reception we received in the Kazakh cities was nothing short of amazing. Lo-

calls seemed to be overcome with joy that we had gone to the effort to visit. People lined the footpaths cheering and clapping while the drivers blasted their horns. Even the police joined in the celebrations, escorting us through town with sirens wailing and lights flashing. The warm welcome we received truly was incredible.

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We entered Uzbekistan and rode into Tashkent. No road is so evocative or as historical as the Silk Road and we rode a lot of it while we crossed the blazing deserts to reach the Silk Road oasis cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. Spending days in these cities was like stepping back into history as we explored the Souks and Medressas and watched as the setting sun drew another day to a close over the Silk Road.

Within one day we had left the heat of the deserts and climbed 3500 meters (11,500 feet) into the cool magnificent mountains that make up Kyrgyzstan. The riding was brilliant as we rode amongst the Central Tien Shan Mountains toward Song Kol. Song Kol is a beautiful lake virtually engulfed by the pristine wilderness. Riding across the open grasslands of the yawning valleys toward some Yurts, situated lakeside, was the ultimate expression of biking freedom.

The Yurt dwelling families greeted us with a mixture of dismay and curiosity. Their welcome was genuine and humbling, however, as they insisted we join them for some food and salted mare's milk.

After a brief taste of how they lived, we rode on to Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek, where we serviced the bikes and fitted a new set of Metzler Sahara tires for the dirt and sand of Mongolia. The Continental TKC-80s had done 8000 miles and still had a few more to go but we felt it necessary to mount new tires before the next part of our trip.

After Bishkek, our days were spent riding and exploring the wonderful alpine valleys that tumbled out of the Central Tien Shan Mountains that border China. After a few days in Kyrgyzstan we again rode into Kazakhstan before continuing on to Russia. No ride across Russia would be complete

No ride across Russia would be complete without a visit to Siberia's jewel in its crown, Lake Baikal.

without a visit to Siberia's jewel in its crown, Lake Baikal. The world's deepest freshwater lake is magnificent, surrounded by pine forests, 100 ft tall cliffs and beautiful islands. The experience was made all that much better

as we were shown around, for three days, by some of the boys from the Irkutsk Motorbike Club.

One such member was Timur. Timur lead us out to the lake on his home made bike. With a 1950 BMW motor fitted inside a Ural frame, a rear

wheel off a Lada and a hand painted fuel tank, the bike was Timur's pride and joy. Of course things like bike registration, indicators and brake lights were considered a silly extravagance.

We rode on to Mongolia and into a land of indescribable beauty, unbroken vistas and utter silence. The riding quickly became the most difficult we had encountered, yet we reveled in it. Navigation proved impossible even with our GPS units as we rode across the vast empty landscape. Scrambling up unmarked passes, falling into freezing rivers and tip toeing across ancient lava fields became daily events and we

Mongolia is the ultimate biker destination, a land of complete riding freedom. Here we simply rode across the immense valley floor.



We thought we were the last people on earth as we camped in the absolute middle of no-where in Mongolia, that is until two guys arrive on this Russian built bike.




loved it, hoping that it would never end.

End it did though as we yet again crossed into Russia and entered the endless Russian forests of the Taiga.

The Trans Siberian Highway was declared open by Vladimir Putin some years ago yet it is anything but. 1100 miles of dirt and mud awaited us. The days were spent riding the world's longest highway through the endless Taiga forests of Eastern Siberia. The forest itself was turning the colours of autumn and we rode through a kaleidoscope of colours as far as the eye could see. It was spectacular.

Fifteen thousand five hundred miles (25,000 km) after leaving England we rode elated in Vladivostok. It was a moment I had dreamt about for years and it was a moment that didn't disappoint, the knot in my stomach tightened and a lump in my throat rose. "We did it" I thought, "We did it". I struggled to keep focus on the Vladivostok traffic; my vision had suddenly become misty.

With one final kiss I waved Sinus goodbye, "you good man Mick" he bellowed, but I couldn't agree, for Sinus epitomized all the incredible people we had met along the ride, the very people that will stay in our memories forever, the people that made the ride what it was, "amazing".

The four Transalps did an incredible job. We suffered two cracked radiators, one leaking rear shock and a seized carburetor (only after the carb ingested so much dust through a cracked air box drain line that it wouldn't run). Not a single drop of oil was used in 62,000 miles, combined, that the four bikes had covered, not bad for four hopelessly overloaded 650s. 

In the end we raised \$20,000 for Friedrich's Ataxia Network. The fundraising struggle continues to this day as does Cathy's struggle to hang on.

Our main concern during the ride was that the moment we reached Vladivostok the interest and therefore, fundraising, would stop, to an extent this has happened.

This ride and the desire to continue the fight against Friedrich's has been the catalyst to the formation of Compass Expeditions, a motorcycle expedition company offering the London to Vladivostok ride as well as an extensive list of expeditions covering South America. Part proceeds of each and every expedition goes to the Friedrich's Ataxia Network charity.

For more about the ride and Friedrich's Ataxia please visit us at www.compassexpeditions.com



Timur on board his home made bike. Timur is a proud member of the Irkutsk Motorcycle Club and we spent days at his families' property at Lake Baikal.

More comfortable than they look this yurt/Ger was our accommodation for 3 nights at the spectacular Khovsgul Nuur in Mongolia.



