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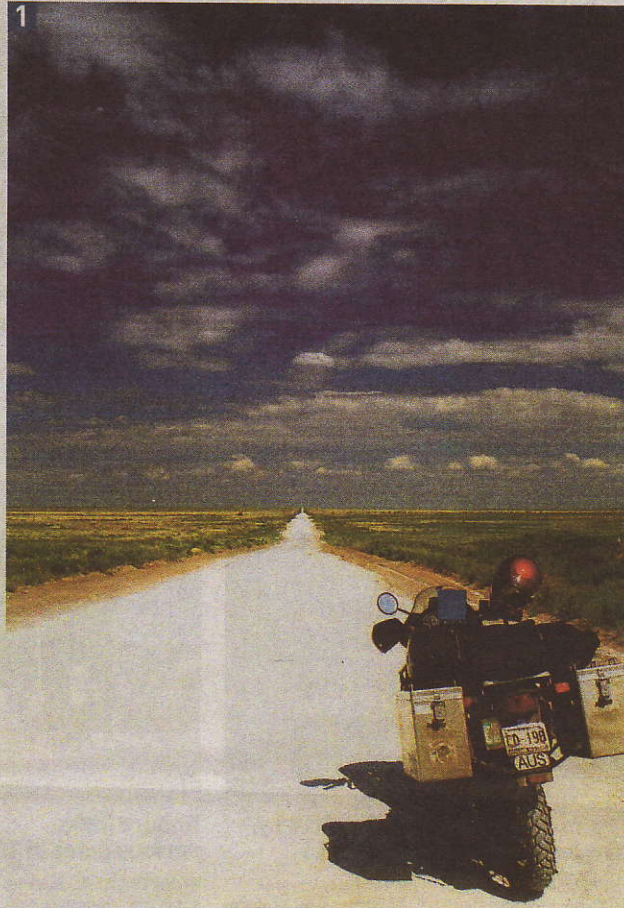
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ESCAPE



Riding in the world's

Michael McDonald had dreamt for years of doing what he considered to be the ultimate ride, London to Vladivostok. Here he talks about his epic journey into the unknown

It would be a ride into blazing deserts, soaring mountains and cities bejeweled with magnificent, centuries-old architecture dotted along the ancient Silk Road – and I was finally going to do it myself.

While working in South America as a tour leader I had convinced three other riders to join me on "the last Stans" ride – across Scandinavia, to Russia, through 'the Stans' and then on to Mongolia before heading for Vladivostok, Russia's largest port city on the Pacific coast, and only a few miles north of North Korea. Chris Tooth, Scott Luttrell and Patrook Ploegstra all came with me. 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 of Friedrich's Ataxia. We decided to turn the ride into a fund-raiser for the Friedrich's Ataxia Network.

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 again, then riding into 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. The bikes of choice were Honda Transalp 650s. The bikes were fitted with 35-litre tanks and panniers, plus crash bars and bash plates. Aside from these additions they were stock.

The first few days were a

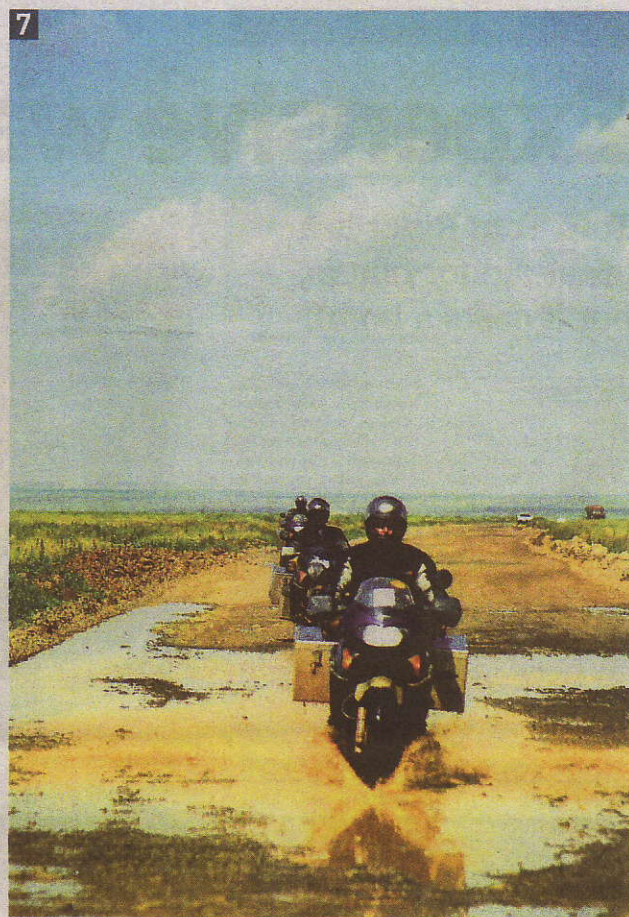
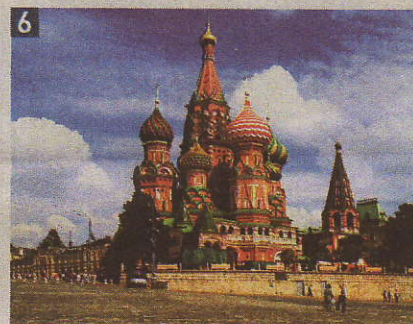
'Within a few hours two of the bikes had broken down'

disaster. Instead of riding off to the sound of popping champagne corks and a waving crowd, we left our start point of Debenham, Suffolk, half a 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. We kept running out of fuel even though we still had up to ten litres on board. We missed our Bergen ferry by two days. Getting to Vladivostok seemed like a bad joke, let alone our intention.

Undaunted, we got the bikes fixed and eventually made the crossing. The thrill and overwhelming anticipation of what lay ahead struck us as we 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, the fjord lands were stunning. The

days were spent hugging dramatic deepwater fjords that were surrounded by snowcapped peaks and evenings were spent enjoying a beer at a simple, situated at a ridiculously scenic spot. Our original plan had going to the top of Nordkapp, however weather had slowed progress to a crawl. I decided to drop Nordkapp and ride the Lofoten Islands instead. As we neared the Lofoten the clouds broke and we were greeted by some of the most spectacular scenery of us had ever seen. The ensuing 30 minute ride the greatest ride I had experienced. Every corner was a scenic overload every vista took our breath away.



most spectacular landscapes

1. The Kazakh Steppe – desolate, silent and expansive, its rough dirt tracks stretch on to a seemingly endless horizon
2. In Kyrgyzstan, a state sandwiched between Kazakhstan and China, the party travelled through the Tien Shan mountains
3. Journey's end at Vladivostok – after over 15,000 miles and four long months
4. In Kazakhstan, dwellers of the traditional tents (yurts) offered our travellers hospitality and salted mare's milk
5. A rainbow at sunset by Song-Kol, a lake in the middle of a pristine Kyrgyzstan wilderness
6. On their journey east through Russia, the trip took in Red Square and the glorious St Basil's Cathedral
7. Riding the Road of Death in Kazakhstan

Tiny red roofed huts stood by the shoreline, racks of cod dried in the midnight sun. Storms raged, briefly, above the towering mountains that stood all around and rainbows formed, dipping into the Atlantic.

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 Moscow. Riding into Red Square was one of those magical moments as we parked our bikes in the shadows of St Basil's. We continued on to Suzdal, an old Russian village seemingly caught in a time warp. The golden Cupolas of the many churches glinted in the afternoon sun while the old crumbling Kremlin stood like a sentinel over the tranquil village.

Crossing into Kazakhstan, the roads immediately disap-

peared, 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 silence and overwhelming loneliness are moments that will stay with us forever.

The bikes were perform-

'They insisted we join them for some salted mare's milk'

ing well, despite our best efforts to wreck them with numerous low speed falls.

The reception we received in the Kazakh cities was nothing short of amazing. Locals seemed to be overcome with joy that we had gone to the effort to visit. People lined the footpaths cheering and clapping, the drivers blasted their horns with even the police joining in, escorting us with sirens

waiting and lights flashing, it truly was incredible. 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 oasis cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. Spending days in these cities was like stepping back into history as we watched the setting sun draw another day to a close over the Silk Road.

Within one day we had left the heat of the deserts and climbed 3500mt 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 curiosity. However, 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 tyres for the dirt of Mongolia. Leaving Kyrgyzstan we again rode into Kazakhstan before continuing on to Mongolia, via Russia. Mongolia is 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 tiptoeing across ancient lava fields became daily events and we loved it, hoping it would never end.

End it did though, as we yet again crossed into Russia and on to the Trans Siberian Highway. The road was declared open by Vladimir Putin some years ago, yet it is anything but. Nine hundred 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 was turning the colours of autumn and we rode through a kaleidoscope

of colours as far as the eye could see. It was spectacular. 15,500 miles after leaving England we rode elated into 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...

The four Transalps did an incredible job, we suffered two cracked radiators, one leaking rear shock and a seized carburetor and we raised \$9000 for Friedrichs Ataxia Network.

HOW TO GET THERE

YOU CAN DO IT TOO

Since riding this epic journey, Michael has set up Compass Expeditions, a touring company that offers the London to Vladivostok trip as one of its packages. For more information, visit www.compassexpeditions.com

