

# Riding and Writing Round the World

Sir Ranulph Fiennes described it as "The first great adventure of the new millennium". Following a four-year bike ride across five continents and 60 countries, **Alastair Humphreys** wrote a book about the first leg of his journey. In this excerpt for Backpacker Magazine, he describes how it all started.

**"The longest journey starts with a single step" - Lao Tse.**

It was an exciting time of life, finishing University and the world all before me. It was time to choose my road. So I chose to leave everything that I knew and loved. I chose to leave my friends and family and girlfriend and country. I let go of everything that makes a life normal, secure and conventionally happy. I was excited by life and I didn't think that I would find it where I was. I knew that leaving would be hard, but, like Candide, "I should like to know which is worse, to be raped a hundred times by Negro pirates, to have a buttock cut off, to run the gauntlet among the Bulgarians, to be whipped and flogged in an auto-da-fé, to be dissected, to row in a galley, in short to endure all the miseries through which we have passed, or to remain here doing nothing?"

It is a greedy, ungrateful risk to give up all that makes you happy in the hope that you can find better. You risk not finding it. You risk finding it and then never being satisfied again, yearning always for



On the open road

more. But uncertain travel held an appeal for me, an intoxicating release from conventional bonds, a chance for self-testing and self-discovery, and the rushing joy of being alive that I rarely felt at home.

I chose to leave everything behind: the wasted opportunities, the shiny things I had spent money on, the ironing board and the expectations of conventional living: the race to get a bigger house, bigger car, bigger gravestone. I would have no home, no appointments, no deadlines, no career, no beautiful possessions, no weekend hobbies, no mortgage, no bills, no commute. I would have everything I wanted.

I wanted to raise my arms and stare in wonder over waves of hazy Blue

Mountains. I wanted to wake in my sleeping bag in the desert as the sun rose between my toes. To shiver in a frost rimed tent is to truly appreciate the next warm duvet. A parched desert teaches deep gratitude for running water. Clarion calls to be alive and to treasure life. On the road you learn to appreciate a simplification of life. There is no need to upgrade your phone, no porcelain ornaments, no need to look

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The Lone Rider - cycling at sunset in Sudan



Forget champagne on ice - how about champagne on a bike?!

good to impress, no boring small talk.

At University I spent most of my time dreaming of, saving for and reading about adventure. It was only in my final year that I started to develop any concrete plans. I became too busy planning my ride to do much studying. Maps and globes filled my small bed sit. The possibilities were endless and this led to countless hours of happy, unproductive daydreaming. My travels were little more than a dream in the dusty recesses of my mind. But the moment I began expounding my plans over reassuringly expensive pints of Stella Artois in the pub I was trapped: word got out, and gradually the idle dream became hectic reality.

The months before departure were exciting. I absorbed book after book about great journeys. I wondered whether I



Alastair with Masai men



At the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa



A sandy self portrait



could do anything similar. There was only one way I would ever know. I pored over maps and searched the internet for information. I spent ages trying to compile a sensible kit list. And I didn't really have enough money, but that surely could not be an excuse not to go.

I decided to ride the length of the three great landmasses on Earth: Eurasia, the Americas and Africa, joining them together to complete a circumnavigation. I guessed that it would take me about three years. I decided to support the charity 'Hope and Homes for Children' through my journey. I cobbled together a website and began hunting for sponsorship. So much needed to be done. By the time I actually began riding the toughest stage would already be over.

I thrived on people's astonishment when they heard of my plans. Never mind that I had not yet ridden a single mile: people were impressed. But potential sponsors did not feel that I was a risk

Which way is north?



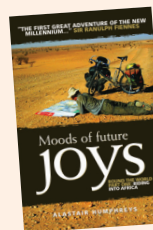
worth backing. One company responded to me with disbelief, "Do you think we just got off the banana boat?! What a ridiculous idea. Go get a job if you want a bike." But I was determined: I wanted something so hard that I would surely fail unless I poured every drop of my being into it. My head alternated between being up in the clouds and up my own backside.

Saying *adieu* to my girlfriend was brutal. I had spent the four happiest years of my life with Sarah but compromise never seemed possible for either of us. But I had never in my life been as lonely as when I watched her drive away for the last time.

And so my journey begins. The bags are packed and I can think of no convincing excuse to back out. I don't want to do this. I wake up feeling sick with fear. I can't do this. I roll out of my bed for the last time and open my curtains for the last time. I realise that if I take stock of all these 'last times' then I will be in floods of tears before I even make it downstairs (for the last time). I have to do this. Is this really happening to me? I don't have to do this, do I? I stuff a sandwich into my

panniers as if I was heading out on a day trip, awkwardly wheel my cumbersome bike out of the garage, wait for Dad to ask the neighbour to take a final photo of the family, hug everyone goodbye and then I am off. As easy as that. I have crossed my first border: from being a person dreaming of his big journey to somebody who is on his journey.

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For more information on Alastair or to buy his book, **Moods of Future Joys**, visit: [www.alastairhumphreys.com](http://www.alastairhumphreys.com).

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## Trip details

Alastair's trip took four years. He travelled from the UK to Istanbul to Cairo to South Africa to Patagonia to Alaska and finally to Siberia, before returning to England. He cycled all the way, with the exception of ocean crossings, which were made by boat. His total budget was UK Stg. £7000.



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