

# BicycleTraveler

International Magazine on Cycle Touring





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Photo: PAUL JEURISSEN [www.bicyclingaroundtheworld.nl](http://www.bicyclingaroundtheworld.nl)



## From the editor

Are you on the lookout for new bicycle travel destinations and websites? Then check out this list from experienced touring cyclists. They gave us the inside scoop on their favourite places to ride. Via the list links you can also visit the cyclist's websites and read about their trips. [Visit best destinations and website list.](#)

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### DISCLAIMER

The articles published reflect the opinions of their respective authors and are not necessarily those of the editor.

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# The **RED** centre

By: NICK THOMSON



I popped my head outside of the tent and saw the constellation of Orion slowly disappearing behind the increasingly blue sky. There's no need to know what time it actually is. I've come to know that when the sky is like this I had one more hour before the sun peaks over the horizon and the mercury climbs. The stars out here are something else: with the nearest town hundreds of miles away, every night the sky turns into a light show of hundreds of lights and shooting stars burning into the atmosphere, all in front of the most vivid Milky way I've ever seen. With so much to see, and with the help of the StarWalk app, I'd been slowly learning to recognise some of the constellations and when they'd appear. Orion had become my new snooze button.

I think I had spent more time looking at the stars because for so long, for the last six weeks of cycling through the outback, I had been cycling through what you could arguably call nothing. There are no 'sights' to speak of, and rarely even a hill to break past the flat horizon. With less to see, my senses elevated and I began to notice more: the slightest change what hardy shrub was growing, the shape of the termite mounds, or the colour of the earth. I'd begin to notice the slightest incline and realise that, although I was probably only ten meters higher than a couple of minutes earlier, the view I got from that tiny increase in elevation meant this was the best vantage point for miles around. I eventually learnt that the empty outback is beautiful, in its own way. It never displays some extravagant vista that makes you reach for your camera; it has a subtle beauty that changes throughout the day, beginning and ending with the best it has to offer in the golden light of the low sun. There's certainly a lot of nothing out here, but when you're noticing more the tiniest of changes can keep you occupied. Nothing, in other words, never gets boring.

But I had now reached the Red Centre and here not only did the road take me West, which gave me my first tailwind in weeks, it also took me past things. Leaving Alice Springs I rolled

onto the Red Centre Way and into the West McDonnell Ranges. Now I was pedalling amongst mountains and took the opportunity to turn off the road to explore on foot the gorges and water holes that form the wealth of natural beauty this area boasts. Amongst all these things, I was able to climb on top of the sheer cliff faces of King's Canyon; I saw the white trunks of gumtrees clinging onto the rocks at Ormiston George; and I dipped my toe in the waters of Ellery Creek Big Hole (that's mid-winter temperatures had a good attempt of reminding me of the British seaside). The list of big red rocks is extensive and sometimes overwhelming to someone who had been used to seeking out the beauty in not much at all. It's like shining a torch in the eye of someone who's just spent a week down a mine shaft. In contrast to my time in Tajikistan, where after a while you become somewhat desensitised to the epicness of the scenery, I couldn't cope with all that surrounded me.

Throughout the Red Centre of Australia I didn't do much except ride and stare and gawp, and all this gawping at big red rocks finally culminated at Uluru.

Taken under the wing of a lovely French couple with a camper van, we went to the sunrise viewing platform and watched the colours of the rock slowly change behind the selfie sticks and to the noise of idling engines of tour busses; we drove to Kata Tjuta and got lost amongst the narrow valleys and thought 'yes, this really is the underrated of the two'; and throughout all of this we spent most of our time in the National Park talking about food. Admittedly, we failed to see or feel beyond the surface of these rocks. Impressive as they were to look at; I certainly didn't feel the magic of the place many go on about, whether that was due to the crowds or the fact that the rational side of my brain subjugated the spiritual side a long time ago.

Unmoved, I left the park to find a spot to camp out of town in order to avoid forking over the \$40 they charge for the privilege of camping at the resort. After pedalling down a dirt road and after pushing my bike over a few sand

dunes, swearing like a local in the afternoon sun, I came to this:

On my last night and morning I sat here alone with this view to myself. The sunset and sunrise were not as vivid here, but sitting here alone and without any noise, except the occasional squawks of passing Galahs, more than compensated for the obscured view. To unzip your tent and wake up to the bright red heart of Australia was something else. This was one of those moments when the camera in your mind's

eye clicks and this image will be what you visualise whenever you think of the Red Centre. After camping here in the solitude I had enjoyed every night for the past six weeks, I understood the magic of this place. **BT**

*Due to a quarter-life crisis, Nick Thomson decided to quit his job, quit London and go for an indefinite bike ride around the world. <https://cyclingelsewhere.com>*





# The Road to Riyadh

By: FRANÇOIS LONCKE





It's been a long day on the saddle. My arms and legs are stretched out, lying flat on the slope of a sand dune. My head is leaning to the right against the hard surface. Although not ideal, this position is the best I've found to release muscular tensions in my neck. My eyes are now closed, and I'm breathing in, breathing out. At this very moment, there is nothing else I'd rather do. As daytime is coming to an end, so does the pressure to cycle. Today's mission is accomplished, which means I can now rest assured. At least for five to ten minutes. Give it fifteen. This, after all, is my reward. This is the best time of the day.

"Can you believe? We are cycling across Saudi Arabia..."

The voice pulls me out of my healing nap. As I'm turning my head over to answer the call, reluctantly I must say, I can see Gilles stepping down the dune. Each time his feet make contact, he crushes heaps of sand surging down the slope. Watching the sandfalls, remarkably enough, raises my own bodily awareness. In fact, my sandy right ear is suddenly feeling itchy.

"I know, it's incredible.", is my answer, while I'm wiping the sand off my dry skin using the moisture of my headscarf.

The pale yellow colours around us, I notice, have turned gold as a reflection of the fireball's shifting shades. I probably need to stand up and pitch my tent now, as night time is looming. In fact, it wouldn't take long anymore until the rolling landscape gets swallowed into darkness. Still, nights are starry in the deserts, and therefore, relatively bright. If light was even necessary, after all, the few trucks illuminating the road compensate for the dark side of the moon.

That was the typical evening during our epic breakthrough in the KSA – The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

**OUR BREAKTHROUGH??** Yes, as a reminder, Gilles and I joined forces on this battlefield. Together, side by side, or more accurately wheel behind wheel, we took the challenge to conquer Saudi Arabia's terrifying deserts – and, in the process, join the very exclusive group of non-Muslim bicycle tourers to venture freely within the borders of the much-feared Saudis.

Mind you, there was no room for doubts on our bike assault at the land border.

Understandably, Gilles and I don't know fear, let alone failure, for they are the burdens of others. Our fame formula, for that matter, hits like a slogan: "Stick out your chest, boldness at its best." Inevitably, our territorial greed would result in a glittering historical achievement : a small step for the cyclist, a big one for cyclistkind. Rationally, it would take us just a handful of days until our four bicycle tires would crush the agonizing roads of Riyadh's "Champs Elysées". Steamroller style. A few weeks later, we would have our own marble statue freshly unveiled in Riyadh. It goes without saying that we would attract pilgrims from all over the world. Who knows, our

flawless admirers would eventually outnumber those converging to Mecca, and perhaps give them a more meaningful reason to visit Saudi Arabia? Truly, we would become heroes.

Or, martyrs?? See, because history will always be written by the victors, this battle report could be detailed beyond the boundaries of superlatives.

**GETTING BACK** to real facts: Yes, we reached Riyadh by bicycle. As a matter of fact, our lives in the capital proved to be a real success story! However, the ugly truth is that the fancy cars of the Champs Elysée put our





bicycles ridiculously silent. On top of that, not a single memorial was erected to immortalize our substantial but ephemeral glory. Pride swallowed – Good, I probably needed that.

Honestly, crossing At Batha land border had nothing glorious except the outcome. Had you been cycling between us, reaching the border almost reluctantly, you would have been entangled in an invisible electric wire. Seriously. Above our heads, a heavy cloud was looming, threatening to strike us with lightening any minute. We could sense the electrons frantically spinning around our wheels.

**“HOW DID YOU GET THE VISA?”** is a question I’ve been accustomed to recently. It’s indeed an incredible achievement. Three months later, I’m still looking back on it with amazement. In fact, I remember studying the Saudi visa procedure back in Tajikistan a long time ago, and the conditions seemed pretty damn harsh. In spite of that, you’ll be shocked to read that it turned out to be SUPER EASY!\*

Don’t get carried away though. I can’t help you get it. Only time can.

Last December, Saudi Arabia hosted the first E-prix race in Ad Diriyah. On this special occasion, tickets and event visas were sold online. Simply by entering basic personal data, the new platform Sharek would study your eligibility to buy a ticket and visa. The 30-day visa cost me \$60, the race 100\$, and an additional 10\$ were due for a compulsory insurance. A dozen of mouse clicks later, the visa is sent to you by email!

\*(Important : note that it was “super easy” based on my personal data. Basically “man” and “Christian”.)

Actually, my thought on this is that the event was not advertised properly. In the travelling community, I didn’t meet anybody who had heard about this unique opportunity. Personally, I had read about it very coincidentally by chatting with a fellow cyclist currently based in Saudi Arabia.

So, did you miss your unique chance to visit

Saudi Arabia? Dry your tears straight away because I am bringing you very good news : this E-Prix was the first in a 10-year partnership between ABB FIA Formula E and the General Sports Authority of Saudi Arabia (GSA) and the Saudi Arabian Motor Federation (SAMF). In other words, you can try your luck for the next race later this year!

“If you had a valid visa, Francis, what was the fuss at the border all about?” The thing is, we both had our e-visa but no guarantee we would be allowed to cycle without police escorts, let alone simply cycle. Prior to that, very few foreign cyclists had managed to cycle the desert roads of the black gold country. Moreover, our e-visas stated that we should enter Saudi Arabia using airways...

It’s early December, and the few people talking to us on the straight roads of the Emirates are unanimous; it’s the appropriate season to cycle. In Gulf cities, you know it’s winter time when people finally trust themselves leaving shopping malls to go for a walk! To us, cyclists of the unthinkable, winter time remains a challenging climate to produce outdoor physical efforts. Days are hot and dry, our nights on the other hand had been mild and surprisingly wet. It had never rained, but we had found our tents systematically moist in the morning.

**THE MORNING** we headed to the border post was no exception. While the rising sun was drying our snail homes, we found the shade of the nearby mosque handy to swallow our daily oatmeal breakfast. Handy, but actually very chilly. Never mind. As a result of my booming sun ray absorption lately, I’ve learned to capitalize on any chance to relieve my skin cells from the almighty fire ball. All the more so as I’m prone to skin diseases. I’ve been lucky throughout my life not to suffer major illnesses, but my parents had made dermatologists rich over the years.

This is the reason why I usually cycle wearing

long shirt sleeves (as I’m writing and checking my pictures, I’m horrified to realise that I cycled to Riyadh short-sleeved. I can only assume my shirt had exceeded the limits of stinkability. Still inexcusable). On the other hand, or foot, I find it extremely unpleasant to sweat in long trousers. This explains why I have always cycled through Muslim conservative countries in shorts despite the slight risk of being frowned upon. While I

***“It’s December, and the locals are unanimous: it’s the best season to cycle. In Gulf cities, you know it’s winter when people leave shopping malls to go outside for a walk!”***

was addressed by a few critics in Iran, riding in shorts (as a man) in the KSA did not seem to bother anyone. Getting closer to the national border, however, I cared to make good impression and swapped my shorts for loose trousers instead.

Now that the theatrical stage is set, I can finally spice it up with some dramatic plots!

By paying the usual 10-dollar exit fee, Gilles and I successfully got stamped out of the UAE by the female official. My breath was still on hold, but at least we had made an encouraging step forward. One step forward, indeed, followed by what felt like two steps back as I unfolded my KSA e-visa in my pocket. What I thought was my visa turned out to be... just a blank page. Or, using a language register matching the nervousity building up in my body, more like a “god-damn white naked empty useless shitty sheet of paper”. Instinctively, I walked back to the only desk I may have possibly left at. My worries rose to a climax as the officials denied having it. Damn. I was very confident about the fact I had given them my visa paper and they had given me that blank page back. I checked my pockets and bags relentlessly, but couldn’t find it. Undoubtedly, these officials must have taken it. An hour passed during which Gilles was desperate





to have it reprinted at one of the (unhelpful) official bureaus. In the meantime, I rewinded my memories and made a mess in my panniers. How stupid and careless does one have to be to lose such a priceless visa at such a sensitive border? Seriously?? At the very least, the cold sweat helped cooling my body down! Nice, because that cloud of nervousity above my head wasn't comforting me with any shade.

Soon after, in the most embarrassing fashion, I finally got a hold on my visa! I found it folded in the pocket of my shorts that I had just traded for my trousers! See, that's how you lose a visa. As I rushed inside the printing shop to announce the good news to Gilles, I bumped into him, walking out with three new copies in hand. "Don't say anything", he said half-annoyed, half-jokingly. Gilles, knew the whole time my absent-mindedness was the only one to blame in this case.

**AT THE BORDER,** I worked hard on myself to tame my temptation to take pictures. Photographing sensitive areas and places is, indeed, a strong weakness of mine. And I've got history in the field. For instance, I was caught red-handed by Chinese police officers in Xinjiang busy checking my passeport (after which they followed me everywhere) ; I got caught photographing a natural gas factory and US-hatred demonstrations in Iran; and because I'm writing from the future, the army in Khartoum arrested me for photographing a government building and military vehicles, in times of deep, bloody, political unrests. I seem never to learn from my mistakes. BUT, Saudi Arabia was not one of these times. The context was too serious to be taken lightly. Plus, the border post had nothing spectacular besides the fact it was huge. Not to mention that any immature behaviour could also put Gilles into trouble.

The moment of truth had arrived. At the first of many border posts, the official denied us immediate entry with our bicycles. We were asked to wait against a wall until a chief would

evaluate the situation. The man arrived ten minutes later, and gave us a hesitant green light : "As far as I am concerned, you can go through to the next border post. I can't guarantee you will be allowed with your bicycles further on."

We got our promising Saudi entry stamp, and moved on to the main station. We left our bicycles outside and sat inside to deal with a higher-ranked official. We shared paperwork, discussed our motives, after which he sent us to the office of the real decision-maker. The big boss. Crossing the border feels like playing super Mario and challenging Bowser in the final room. Once inside, we got treated with tea/coffee and the most delicious dates ever and. Once again, we argued that we wanted to cycle to Riyadh, and acted confident about our abilities to cover 100km per day. Eventually, Gilles and I got blessed by a super bright green light...YES!!!

The most shocking thing about this very unpredictable border crossing? Our bags never got checked. In fact, the "bag checkers" seemed so busy checking the few passing-by cars and motorbikes that they left our bicycles untouched. Yet, one of them gave me a good laugh. When I told him I was from Belgium, he seemed happy to name a famous Belgian football player : "Oh, Modric!!". Pressurized legitimately by Gilles who thought wise to leave the border station as long as we could, I just laughed and cheered with a vibrant "Yeah, good player, hey!". Modric is Croatian.

Usually in December, Saint Nicholas brings me chocolates. This year, he got me an entry card to a country famously known for its difficult access. And this time, I'm sure my parents had nothing to do with it!! **BT**

*François writes; it is with pedals that I choose to engulf myself in the mountains and deserts since this slow and contemplative way of traveling offers a feeling of unparalleled freedom. [www.instagram.com/francis\\_bike\\_on](http://www.instagram.com/francis_bike_on) and <https://francisbikeon.wordpress.com>.*





*All Javeir needs is a place to set up his*

# TENT

Photos: JAVIER BICICLETING

Bolivia







Chile





Argentina





Togo



*Javier Bicileting has been cycling around the world and documenting it with his camera since 2010. Follow his travels at [www.bicileting.com](http://www.bicileting.com) and [www.instagram.com/bicileting](https://www.instagram.com/bicileting). He also publishes a yearly photo calendar which he sells via his website.*





# The Places in Between

By: NICK THOMSON





**F**or those of you who boast a healthy amount of scepticism, it won't come as a shock to you when I say my web-site articles at best are a highlight reel, covering the times when the urge to reach for the camera happened so frequently it hampered any forward progress along the road. Going through my blog posts may suggest that life on the road is one big adventure through an uninterrupted succession of epic mountains or enigmatically beautiful deserts.

I wish it were so.

The reality of life on the road is that there are long stretches of just riding a bike in order to get further along a map across unremarkable terrain. These are The Places in Between, the places between those that make you jealous and make it on to my website. Life in The Places in Between breaks down to a strict routine of purified riding in order to just get somewhere, to a distant place that promises an experience worth writing about or a town to offer a bit of R&R.

**LONG DISTANCES** are another feature of The Places in Between.

Quite frankly, the entire stretch between Salta in the arid north of Argentina and the beginning of the famous (and wet) Carreterra Austral in the south of Chile was one big Place in Between. Life boiled down to one of south-erly progress. Strictly speaking, there's nothing to write home about this time but that's exactly why I thought I'd give it a try in order to give you an insight into an average day on the road. An average, unremarkable day of a long distance bike traveller.

I wake with the rising sun, or to the morning chorus of barking dogs and cockerels. After a few failed attempts to snooze, I reach up to my right shoulder and unscrew the valve of my sleeping pad. It deflates; I'm committed to the day. I unzip my tent, fill my pot with water and light my stove. As the water heats up I pack up my sleeping gear in the same order I did yesterday and the day before that, and start preparing breakfast.

It's always porridge and coffee. I keep

porridge interesting by the things I add to it, whatever I can find locally. Recently it's been with bananas, walnuts, and cinnamon. If I know the day will be tough, I might throw in a few spoons of peanut butter (aka: rocket fuel), to the mix, if I can get it.

I sit outside my tent and eat breakfast. If I'm in the desert, I'll be content to just watch the gradual change of the colours of the land around me; if not, I'm thankful for a phone that's memory is mostly taken up by podcasts. The tent comes down and bags are packed almost without the slightest level of active concentration. Everything has its place and I could probably do it blindfolded. Gone are the days when I lose things when leaving a campsite, but I still do a walkover of where I've camped, for any stray tent pegs or rubbish (i.e. the empty tin of Tuna from last night's dinner). Remember, kids: Leave No Trace.

I get on the bike, push down on one pedal and then the other. The result of this little movement of my legs is a journey that has taken me across 4 continents; not a bad return on such a minor investment. With a belly full of porridge, my brain buzzing on coffee, and the whole place illuminated beautifully in the early light, this is the golden hour. I don't need headphones for this part. This is my favourite part of the day, and it still is after 3 years of that small, simple action of pedalling.

**I LET MY MIND** wander, simply letting thoughts come and go as they please, not trying to control them. This is how cycling is so meditative, especially in empty places with little traffic. As time has passed, daydreams have done a 180 turn and, just how I'd daydream about the adventures of life on the road while stuck in some office, I now daydream of normalcy, of work, of commuting. With thoughts like that, it's definitely time to wrap up this trip soon.

Ninety minutes of riding have passed without a glance at the computer to see how far I've gone. Time for a snack, a 10-minute break, and to reach for the headphones. If the riding is

relatively easy, I'll listen to a relatively podcast or a non-fiction audiobook (the lowbrow stuff is reserved for before bedtime), otherwise music – aural motivation – is necessary. The day passes on, scenery changes until I realise I'm very hungry.

**LUNCHTIME TAKES** up an hour to properly rest and refuel, preferably away from the road and sheltered from the elements. Getting back on the bike is always a struggle; music is always necessary and speeds are sluggish. The rest of the day passes in a blur.

When it's an hour or so before sunset, it's time to think about finding a campsite. I keep my eyes open for potential spots: rivers, small tracks leading away from the road, and forests are all markers of a potential spot. Technology has made things easier and with apps like iOverlander, it is often great to ride with a known wild camping spot to aim for and great to know what's available there (i.e. water). If I'm doing things the old fashioned way, how I did it back in the olden days of 2015 and until I arrived in Australia, I'll fill my 4-litre water bladder at the last opportunity before I start the search. That sorts me for dinner, breakfast, and water for the first half of tomorrow.

My tent goes up by muscle memory alone, no concentration needed, and dinner is just as automatic. If food is widely available, it's pasta and fresh tomato sauce: the cyclists' staple. In deserts or remote areas, meals leave much to be desired. Food here is reduced to nutritional groups: carbohydrate and Protein in some form that usually involves the usual suspects that have a good calorie-to-wright ratio. When I go home, I don't want to see tinned tuna for a long time.

Abandoned buildings often are great spots to spend the night.

After dinner has been inhaled and everything washed up, it's the traditional time to write in the journal. Posterity would appreciate detailed accounts of every day, and at the beginning of this trip, a day may maybe extend to three pages. But now that notebook has

become dead weight. A week might just about take up a single sheet. There's only so much you can write about doing the same thing every day. Like the camera, I only write in it when I'm inspired but even then after all this time, mountains, deserts, and camping under a view of the stars miles from civilisation have become normalised. I read. I read a lot and still appreciate the time life on the road gives you to read all those books you've meant to without any distractions because there are few alternatives if you don't buy a SIM card. The desire to keep reading loses the battle against the encroaching wave of tiredness extraordinarily early, perhaps at 8pm if it's dark, and I put a headphone in one ear and listen to some podcast I'll never remember, because I fall asleep in less than 10 minutes and stay asleep until the sun rises, dogs bark, or cockerels begin another day.

**I DO THE SAME** every day, right down to the tiniest, idiosyncratic thing like the order I pack and unpack my stuff and where it goes in the limited space of my one-man tent. But this compulsive list of activities – my vehemently guarded routine – is important as it builds the one constant in an otherwise consistent state of flux. As I move, people and languages come and go; riding buddies part ways down different roads; scenery, ecosystems, climates, and exchange rates inevitably change. Everything is fleeting except for my routine and my tent. Whenever I return to my tent after a few nights in a city, I lay down and look up at a familiar ceiling that has been my home for 3 years and can't help break a smile. It's the kind of smile you'd make when you close the front door behind you after a long trip (or perhaps when some houseguests leave) and make a sigh of relief.

Home sweet home. **BT**

*Due to a quarter-life crisis, Nick Thomson decided to quit his job, quit London and go for an indefinite bike ride around the world. <https://cyclingelsewhere.com>*





# Stories from my TransAmerica Bike Trip

## As told by my Credit Card Statement

By: ANNALISA VAN DEN BERGH

My friend Mark who I met on the TransAm was telling me the other day how almost a year later, he's still processing the impact the journey has had on him. But the most detailed documentation of his trip, he said, was without a doubt his credit card statement.

I decided to pore over mine to see what memories it brought back. A ton, as it turns out.

05/17/17 CHECKCARD 0515 CONTES BIKE SHOP NEWPOR NEWPORT NEWS VA -359.77

Taylor and I ride our freshly-tuned bikes out of the parking lot, nervously giggling at the insane thing we are about to do.

05/30/17 CHECKCARD 0527 MARATHON PETRO ROSEDALE VA 24 -2.10

I meet Piney, a cattle rancher, as I drink my morning coffee outside a gas station. I answer the usual questions—Where are you coming from? Where are you going? Why? How much does that thing weigh?

Amazed by my story, he pulls up beside me a few miles down the road and gives me \$50 and a tenderloin biscuit.

05/30/17 CHECKCARD 0527 SUBWAY 00577478 ELKHORN CITY KY -1.70

The point at which my Footlong habit begins.

05/31/17 CHECKCARD 0530 DAIRY QUEEN #12835 MC KEE KY -2.96

The point at which my dipped cone habit begins.

05/31/17 SAVE-A-LOT #24 05/31 PURCHASE SAVE-A-LOT #244 BERE A KY -15.51

We stock up on groceries for a feast with the gang and witness “Scavenger” live up to his trail name by stacking three slices of pizza on top of each other.

06/06/17 CHECKCARD 0605 LITTLE DAVES FOUR CORNE MC DANIELS KY -9.39

Erik and I duck out of the rain into a cozy diner and make ourselves at home. We hang our soggy bike shorts to dry, charge our devices, drink bottomless coffee, and later avoid confronting the fact that it has actually cleared up outside.

06/07/17 CHECKCARD 0606 MARATHON PETRO UTICA KY -3.69

We set up camp in the garage of the Utica Fire Station, grab a gas station dinner, and eat it on the floor with Emily.

06/12/17 CHECKCARD 0609 DAIRY QUEEN #11242 CARBONDALE IL -4.64

We sit on the curb of one of America’s very first Dairy Queens with our trail parents. As we lick our ice cream cones and slurp our Blizzards, Erik takes a spin around the block in new friend Lindy’s MG Midget.

06/14/17 CHECKCARD 0612 MISSOURI STATE PARKS/US 516-767-2431 -7.02

A dreamlike swimming hole saves us from Missouri’s miserable sweltering hills.

06/16/17 CHECKCARD 0614 CASEYS GEN STORE 1369 HARTVILLE MO -2.09

I ride to a gas station at 5 am for my routine breakfast sandwich through tornado-like winds that nearly push me off my bike. I meet Mark, Erik, and Taylor there and we take cover in a steel car wash—probably not the smartest place to be during a thunderstorm. Facing each other, Taylor and I simultaneously scream as we both see horizontal lightening over each other’s shoulders.

06/20/17 USPS PO 194059 06/20 HESSTON KS -6.65

We eat first, second, and third breakfast before finally hitting the road. As we ride out of town, we see a road bike with bikepacking bags parked by a convenience store which can only mean one thing—TransAm racer! We meet Jon Lester who would come in second in the Trans Am Bike Race, an insane competition that follows our 4,300-mile route in the opposite direction. In between chocolate milk sips, he eats a pack of mini doughnuts and tells us how he wiped out in the rain and eventually had to take cover in someone’s barn.

06/26/17 DOLLAR-GE N 30 06/25 #000031054 PURCHASE DOLLAR-GE N 302 F LEOTI KS -19.18

Someone calls me a hoarder on wheels and I ship a few pounds of my load home.

07/10/17 CHECKCARD 0708 SUBWAY 00212985 KREMMLING CO -8.60

Taylor and I are treated to powerful tailwinds that push us 25 MPH without even pedaling. So as not to waste our good fortune, we stack our bikes by the Dollar General and sprint in and out in record time.



I take a break from some nasty side winds at a cafe in northern Colorado and meet David, a sweet veteran who's racing the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route. He convinces me to further pare down my load and buys me a second cup of coffee. We take our conversation to the Subway across the street and eventually reluctantly get back on our respective trails.

Later on Instagram, in response to a post of mine about striving to find the finances to keep biking, he would write—

“When we crossed bicycle paths in Colorado, you on the TransAm and me on the Great Divide Route, I was homeless. Not just a little homeless, very homeless. As a disabled and homeless vet my consideration was not did I have the finances to do it, rather, was I going to let no finances stop me? I left Banff with \$86 and completed the world's longest mountain bike route. I have a home now, and I have finances and I pray to God those things will not be the very stumbling blocks that stop me from doing what I could do again!”

He's currently riding the Divide again.

07/11/17	CHECKCARD 0710 VALLEY FOODS SARATOGA WY 24	-11.16
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I walk into a supermarket plastered wall-to-wall with every single form of taxidermy you could ever imagine.

07/21/17	CHECKCARD 0719 THE SHACK TWIN BRIDGES MT	-11.99
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Steve asks the waiter what the cheapest and most calorically dense item on the menu is. The answer? Chimichangas. We feed our appetites, do laundry, and ride our bikes down a dirt road to the town's tiny airport where I fulfill my life dream of doing a handstand on a tarmac.

08/21/17	CHECKCARD 0818 WSFERRIES-COUPVILLE SEATTLE WA	-3.80
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I sob uncontrollable tears of joy on the front deck of a Seattle-bound ferry. Seattle was the place I began my first bike trip across America as a teenager so coming full circle was quite the out-of-body experience.

07/05/17	CHECKCARD 0703 AMERICAN AIR00121366527 FORT WORTH TX	-298.30
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I take a mandatory carpet shoe selfie at Portland International Airport and board the NYC-bound six-hour flight that zooms past what took me almost three months to cycle. Crying, I gaze through the airplane window at the best decision I've ever made. **BT**

*Annalisa has pedaled twice across the U.S.A. and has also founded WFB (Work from Bike.) It's a blog and visual storytelling studio on wheels specializing in editorial illustration, visual journalism and social media post design.*

<https://workfrombike.com>



Image from the Road: **FRANCE**

By: SÉBASTIEN LANGLAIS <https://tsagaventure.com>















# Long live the bicycle

Text & photo: ROB ARMSTRONG



So that was that. Trip over. Now a few words to try and convince any readers that we don't just spend all our time swearing at insects and polluting the kitchens of hospitable locals with the smells of over-worn socks. Another day another dollar. That phrase echoes through my mind. I haven't earned a dollar in months, but the rewards of a trip like this aren't financial.

In the beginning it's all excitement, fear and pain. In the middle it's laughter, confidence and honing of the skills: the bike mechanics for example. And as the trip progresses there's less fear and excitement and more comfort and weariness, indifference to the transience, seeing things very objectively.

Sweden was brutal. Harder than anything to come. Even the Pamirs: going over 4300m passes having not seen tarmac in days, sand and rough stones sapping your energy. In winter the cold is a persistent enemy. It never gives up. But those first hard weeks made everything else sweeter. Always, you could look back and say 'well at least it's not...'. It's strange now to think I started the trip with apprehension; it now feels as though I've been doing this forever.

While we've been away friends will have built things in their lives: relationships, careers. Things tangible and worthwhile. I have no qualification or work experience to tout from this long bike ride. No tangible result. And yet it will no doubt change the rest of my life, I feel I've learnt more during this trip than in three years of university lectures. Maybe I just didn't pay enough attention in said lectures but experiences on this trip haven't been skin deep. They have been direct. The trip is one long problem-solving exercise. When you're in the snow and you need a solution to erect your (very shit) tent, you're driven by the most primal instincts.

And when you live with these instincts for six months practical resourcefulness is paramount. I have been less in touch with nature and more concerned about where I will sleep among it; less harbouring a spirit of 'inner-peace' and more keen to exterminate the mosquitoes in my tent. If there's been any change in my outlook it's been that my attitude is one of ruthless practicality.

Having said that we have seen so much kindness that it can't help but rub off. You see the world is largely a place of decency amid

survival. Not the hostile mass out there reported in the news. And this kindness fuels you on the trip, it ferments great morale in the difficult moments. In every country I've been to I've been predominantly more likely to be handed a cheerful drink than put in harms way.

There is also something very humbling about travelling by bike. Wherever you are in the world, a bicycle is a very affordable possession, it brings people together, making most local travel possible where it had not been. People relate to a bike, there is no pretence in it, the design is purely functional. This means that as you roll in to town people feel they can talk to you, feel you are one of them. Especially in Central Asia where tourism is scarce, relying heavily on cyclists, the people on the street often know you have travelled a great distance under your own steam. And as many people in the world feel they also have a load to bear under their own steam, you are perceived as a character of interest and openness, no more or less than anyone else.

If anyone has the inclination to do a trip like this, I couldn't recommend it more. It's life at the raw end, whole days pass where I've felt utter

hatred towards my bike, to the point of kicking it whilst riding; other days all is harmony and you're answerable to no one, you have complete choice over where you sleep. Many mornings waking not knowing where I was. Many evenings passed wondering if I would be found in my tent.

I got used to change. I have become indifferent to travel. I miss work. But the bike is your work. The tent is your home. These routines are where your utmost comfort lies. They're everything to you. There is no greater feeling than finally zipping up the tent in its wild setting with sweat caked on to your skin from a day in the saddle.

I don't know how to finish this story. But I'm assured by my mother that an idea will come to me while I clean the windowsills, the most recent on the list of jobs since I got home. **BT**

*Rob writes; I wanted something which would get my hands dirty and provide an opportunity to learn every day. So I embarked from Stockholm with a bike and a tent and headed for China. <https://allthewayfromstockholm.com>.*



# Against the Wind

By: DAVID BRANKLEY



**THE WIND IS BLOWING.** It's been blowing for days. It blows at night too. I'm happy for a well designed tent that sheds the wind and holds its shape come what may. It's during the riding part of the day that it's a problem. While riding I'm either fighting it or being carried along with a giant smile on my face. I prefer that to fighting it. It's not a fair fight. I can eek out a pyrrhic victory of sorts, but the wind never suffers from our occasional bashes while I'm left sore, exhausted, and reeling.

Did I mention that I'm on a bicycle tour? I'm riding from Denver to Telluride. I know that shouldn't include parts of Arizona or New Mexico, Utah, or Nevada, but it's spring and it's off season, so it's my time to tour. I'm going to make the most of it.

Five months ago I crossed by here on my way to the East Coast. I did a lot of smiling then, as most of the way I had helpful winds to push me along. Now that I'm on the return leg I'm having little luck. On the first full day of riding I passed from Evergreen to Kenosha pass. It was uphill and the wind was either straight into my face or worse and picking up strength throughout the day. The worst winds come at you from every direction but behind, Northwest one moment, then Northeast before you can react. It's the blasting wind that is just off centre that drives you crazy and wears your body down as you try to keep your little piece of the road and continue moving forward. The wind has other ideas as it tears away at your ability to steer while just turning a full peddle stroke becomes in itself a Herculean task.

At the end of the day I was hammered. I managed to squeeze my bike through the gate of a winding forest road on a steep mountain-side and set my tent up on the first switch-back that concealed me from the highway below and offered at least a little wind protection. I could barely stand without feeling very weak and dizzy. Was I sick, I wondered? Was I coming down with something? Or was I just getting very old, very suddenly? Maybe I'd pushed this thing too far and expected too much from myself? Maybe it's time I hang up my cleated shoes, or whatever it is cyclists hang up once they've reached the end of the road. No, I wasn't falling ill, or becoming suddenly old, I

was just too fresh to the ride to be taking on so much. I'd been cycling through hellish conditions. In another week I'd be able to storm any mountain pass or overcome any wind, but not yet. I'd have to be broken in first. I'd have to be burnt and blasted, chilled, and strained. There's no other way to prepare for the harsh conditions of riding than experience the harsh conditions of riding. It doesn't really get better; it just gets easier to take. Let me change that. It always gets better, and someday it will get better still. Why else would you ever cycle? You have to at least believe it's true. You have to experience the good side now and then too. Once in a while you must be surprised with how good it can get, otherwise you'd trade your wheels in for something easier, in other words, anything else.

It's day six now and I'm in Walsenburg Colorado. As I said, the wind is still blowing. Today it's from the Southwest at about 20 knots. That's been the prevailing direction and speed since Evergreen. Sitting here in the library writing this column seems preferable to trying to take a bite out of that wind yet again. This morning I had it with me. This afternoon I'm headed into its path. A wind like this, with so much strength and personality and duration deserves a name of its own. I can't keep calling it "the wind". If I'm going to curse it, or bless it, I need to give it a name. The song from *Paint Your Wagon* called the wind Mariah. Maybe that will work. I'm looking for something less dramatic like Steve or Sally.

Can you tell I'm stalling for time? Can you see that I'm just saying anything that pops into my head to avoid going out there again and facing Steve in all his awesome power. My weather app says not to expect anything better ever. Steve is with us and he's not going anywhere. I'll just have to live with Steve. **BT**

*David Brankley is a painter based in Telluride, Colorado. He writes, "before settling here I travelled the world by bicycle for three decades and settling is still a strange sensation. Maybe that's why each winter I take to my wheels and wander about."*  
<http://davidbrankley.blogspot.nl>



# TRANSCAUCASIA

*The Langlais-Cristini family pedal through Armenia and Georgia.*



*A beautiful day on the road.*

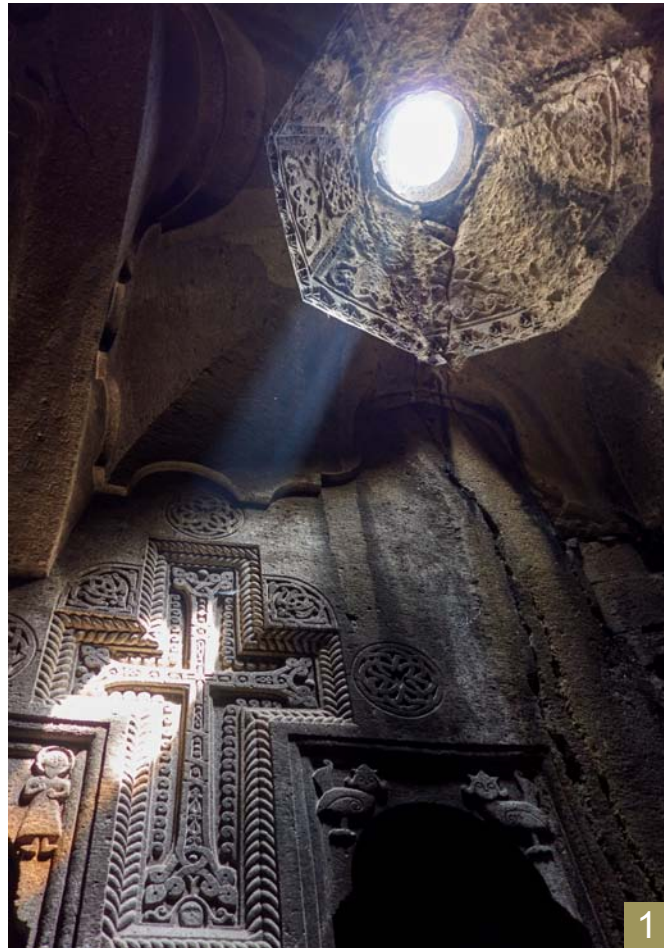




*Pedaling through the Mestia Valley. 1*  
*Fooling around. 2*  
*Camping near the Trchkan waterfall. 3*  
*Fresh corn on the cob for sale. 4*







1



2



4



3

- 1 A chapel in the Monastery of Geghardt.
- 2 Inside the Gelati Monastery.
- 3 Playing around in Geghardt.
- 4 The Noravank Monastery.





Adélie, our acrobat in Azhdahak, Armenia.





**Above:** Everybody sleeps in the one tent.

**Left:** Pedaling a muddy track in Georgia.





**Above:** *The Langlais-Cristini family.*

**Right:** *Svaneti, Georgia*

*The family consists of Ariane Cristini and Sébastien Langlais plus their children Gaspard, Adélie and Titouan. On their blog <https://tsagaventure.com> they write about their big bike rides through the mountainous regions around the world.*





# Cambodia

By: LIZ DARLEY

**T**oday was a perfect cycling day. A day where, by the end, biting red welts were scoring the beat of each revolution, where tears of desperate exertion and impossibility were shed before 7am, and where utter exhaustion (bordering on heat stroke) whipped its triumphant conclusion into a mild delirium. It was a perfect blend of the seemingly impossible and potentially improbable.

Andoung Tuek is a dusty dull one street town hanging on the edge of the Preak Piphot river. It's few shacks; homes, eateries and ramshackled supply stores, peel unevenly out from the town centre piece; a gawking white bridge that straddles the river.

The town's one guest house was a particularly grubby affair. Unwashed sheets, unswept floors and unhygienic bathrooms are neither a novelty nor a significant cause for complaint; suffice to say that this was certainly a particularly ripe example of the genre. And as the moist evening air clung to us in stagnant desperation, we retired unwillingly to our concrete box. The one whirling fan valiantly stripping a degree or two off the air, tempering it to the just-about-bearable. Until 11pm, when the electricity cut off, and we were left, two smears of sweat slowly dissolving into the stale mattress. The stodgy weight of the rancid night air rendered us hardly able to breath, let alone move, let alone sleep.

At 5.45am, heads muffled with exhaustion, stale sweat itching the length and breadth of our skin we pushed our bikes out onto the main road, the cool morning breeze bringing some modicum of relief. 6am – too early for food stalls to be open for breakfast so we quickly threw down a packet of biscuits each and set off.

The first 8 kms out of Andoung Tuek were flat and uneventful. Miles of red sandy soil blurred

into uninhabited scrubland to either side of the road. The heat in the air was unusually oppressive for that time in the morning, and ominous thick clouds were hanging low in the sky.

By the 9 km mark we were already drenched with sweat; the salt running pin pricks into our eyes and rimming our lips as we started the ascent into the Cardamon mountains. 6.45am and we were slowly grinding our weary, warn bikes up a road gradient that demanded the lowest of low gears and a physical exertion more robust than the sticky inert air, one limp packet of biscuits, and utter exhaustion, allowed for. Slowly, slowly we inched our bikes forward, propelled only by determination and necessity. And as Catherine fell further and further behind tears of desperation began mingling with the streams of sweat that ran persistent tiny slaloms down her face. Yet by 7.15am, one slightly sooner than the other, we both successfully crested the hill and in silent urgency, with wobbly legs and with shaking hands we devoured 2 litres of water. Only then did we allow ourselves to exhale grins of relief, and wonder at our success. Only then did we allow ourselves to see the beauty that surrounded us.

**THE BOTUM SUKOR** national park forest rose thick and steep to either side, the stout air quivering with the sounds of the jungle; chirps, cracks, rustles, and whoops, somersaulting through the air at once in unison and in jagged aberration. All along the tree-line wispy tentacles of mist gently spiralled up to touch the thick grey clouds that were crowding the air. The grey metallic light and the layer upon layer of gigantic cloud mountains made for an intoxicatingly dramatic vista. Which (along with exhaustion and dehydration) made our heads positively spin a jig.

At 7.30am the dark clouds split their mighty watery loads upon us and we were duly soaked; the glory of it! RAIN!! Cold and cold and wonderfully cold! It made the entire rest of the day significantly more bearable, though the extra weight of our now sodden clothes was a tad wearisome, it was a small price to pay in exchange for COLD!

**THEN, AT 9AM** disaster struck! Well... nearly. As I (Liz) was pushing hard into a particularly aggressive slope my front gear cable slackened but refused to shift to the lowest cog (this is somewhat of a handicap when trying to cycle up a steep hill). Fearing a snapped gear cable I continued as best I could and at the top, pulled off the hill, to where Catherine was already waiting for me. We ineptly poked around for some minutes and concluded that the cable hadn't actually snapped but the front gear was defiantly stuck good and firm in second; no going up, no going down, and that there was absolutely nothing we could do about it. So, with the bulk

of the day left to go, and no flattening out on the horizon I braced myself for a good couple of hours of burning thighs and cramping calves.

And so the pattern of the day was set; the road ran a constant up down up down up down for the entire 80kms with some inclines holding more bite than others. Yet the awesome beauty and isolation of the landscape made gawping fools of us at the crest of many a rise. And though the sun soon resumed its oppressive dominance the rain seemed to have left a decent cooling breeze to see us though.

At 12.30am we duly arrived at Ta Tai exhausted, once again drenched in sweat, and with chaffing issues it might be best not to talk about, after having ridden one of (potentially) the best cycling days of our entire trip! **BT**

*Liz Darley and Catherine Howett pedaled from England to Thailand to help raise money and awareness for HIV / AIDS. You can read more entertaining stories from their journey at: <https://onelittlewheel.com>*

Photo: CATHERINE HOWETT







## One quick word about...

By: MARCO LIGUORI

Mosquitos. Everywhere in the world, summer is synonymous of these little vampires. So it's difficult to go a whole day without talking about them.

I'm writing because I've heard that August 20th is International Mosquito Day. Actually, I've been thinking about writing this post for 3 months now. You see, when we left Tallin the weather became warm and the Baltics is full of rivers and lakes. This made a "mosquito Invasion" possible.

I'm not exaggerating. I've lived near the Mediterranean coast and even spent a summer in Scotland. But this was different; millions, billions, gazillions of mosquitoes everywhere! Every time we'd cross paths with other cyclists, that's all we'd talk about. It was crazy.

So why am I writing this? Well, I'm tired of hearing about stupid wars. I think humans have become way too good at conquering, raiding, invading and killing each other. We've been doing it forever and it doesn't seem to be getting any better now does it? You know how in Sci-fi films humans come together as one in order to fight a common foe? Well, I think that might be the answer; let's all unite and eradicate mosquitoes from our planet for good!!!

Now, every time I bring this up this idea, I hear; "Wow Marco. Mosquitos play an important role. Apart from being despised by everyone and everything they are also a vital link in several food chains!" Well, whatever eats them (spiders, frogs and fireflies among others) they're are not doing a good job!

Before you start hating my idea let me remind you that apart from being a super-annoying creature (why must they always fly near your ear just as you are falling asleep?), it's also the deadliest thing on our planet killing way more people than sharks and bungee jumping.

This could work. It would definitely keep us busy for a few years. It would also give us the chance to work out several other problems along the way. It might even give French people a different conversation topic other than the last World Cup.

Win-win for everyone, apart from mosquitos. I'm looking for leaders in every country. Please send your motivation letter by private message. **BT**

*Aurelie and Marco are cycling from Helsinki to Singapore for charity. They started their adventure in April 2018 and will finish...whenever. [www.instagram.com/421adventure](https://www.instagram.com/421adventure) and <https://421adventure.wordpress.com>.*



# My mother's coming to stay

By: LEO WOODLAND

**A**LL GOOD JOURNEYS have a reason. Some are to find salvation beyond the horizon. Others are of self-discovery. Still others are to escape. This was to escape. In particular, to escape my mother-in-law.

Well, that's an exaggeration. We get on well enough. But it's my wife she comes to see and if Steph has company while I'm away, so much the better. Plus in any case she said: "My mother's coming to stay... Why don't you go off cycling somewhere?"

No two phrases have ever been better joined.

Now it happens that on a clear day I can see Spain from here. Or at any rate I can see the mountains that rise up and form the Spanish border. I can't actually see Spain because that's on the other slope, going downwards, on the other side of the mountain. Spain, to me, is the Dark Side of the Moon. You know it's there but you never see it.

Well, the idea was to ride to Madrid, because it was there and I'd never been. Having reached Madrid, I'd catch a train back home again. And I got as far as finding a route with the help of a Rough Guide bought second-hand on the internet and maps which Steph found the same way. In practice, things didn't turn out that way and the trip turned into a mixture of spaghetti western countryside, bull-running, mountain-top camping and a tornado.

Now, as well as a range of mountains between here and Spain, there's an area called the Gers. It is bubble-wrap country. It is the sort of place that an ant dropped on to a sheet of bubble-wrap would recognise: all hills and no valleys. It is relentless. All day you go up and down and never gain altitude. At the end you find you've climbed more than a kilometre

in 100 kms and that is hard going under the sun with camping gear. And without being any higher at the end than you were at the start.

The woman at the restaurant at lunch looked at me trembling and sweating from the effort, then looked at my bike. Putting two and two together in a nation which has produced more than its share of philosophers, she said: "Going cycling?"

I agreed that I was.

"Going far?"

I couldn't help but agree with that too, although at that moment I had a horrible fear I wouldn't be going as far as I hoped.

"To Madrid," I explained.

She stood there with two plates of somebody else's lunch in her hands and said: "That's a long way."

I agreed that it was. After that the conversation sort of petered out.

What I did in fact was 98km, from home to Gabaret, just before Barbotan-les-Thermes. I had this idea that this was going to be a Rugged Trip of Pioneering Adventure, that I would throw up my tent in devil-may-care insouciance in any square patch of grass that caught my eye. It didn't take long to decide that devil-may-care was going to take second place to hot water to wash off the grime.

**"ON YOUR BIKE, ARE YOU?"** said my neighbour at the municipal camp site as I rolled up on my bike.

This was starting to get familiar. I agreed that I was on my bike.

"We're not," she said.

In the morning, she and her rounded, cardigan-wearing husband were asleep in their caravan. Or I assume they were asleep. If they were having wild sex, they were doing

it without rocking the caravan. Anyway, I don't like the idea that anyone who sees you on your bike and asks if you're on your bike ever has wild sex. Apart from the injustice, there is too much risk of producing still further idiots.

Every morning at camp sites, I have a routine. If I am not desperate for a pee, I fill a pan and put it on the stove for coffee. Then I go off and come back feeling better about the world, notice that the water hasn't yet boiled and get on with packing my kit. In doing that, I forget that I put the water on. When I go to look, it surprises me that it has been boiling eight times longer than it needs to and that half of it has steamed away. For a moment I reflect on the unkindness of the world and then I get out a coffee filter and I place it in a natty cone of imitation leather and I pour the coffee into the filter and then the water on to the whole lot.

Being turned to superheated level, the coffee is now too hot to drink. I use condensed milk rather than real milk, because it's easier to carry although harder to get, so that does nothing to cool it down. I then go off and do more packing. By the time I remember the coffee, it has grown colder than I want but I have

to drink it anyway and, as punishment, I then make more with what remains in the pan. It is a pointless, self-imposed but well-worn ritual.

**I AM WELL ORGANISED** in getting going in the morning. Others are faster but many are slower. I am at my fastest putting up my tent and packing up again in the morning when I am next to people struggling with enormous tents that have taken eight people to haul out the back of their car. I have a childish satisfaction in unstrapping my tent at the moment they begin struggling with theirs and getting my tent up before they've even got theirs on to the ground.

At Gabaret that morning I had the extra satisfaction of finding that I was up so early that the site office wasn't open. I had saved four euros and the question was how to spend them in the wildest manner possible. **BT**

*I'm Léo - or Leo if you don't have dinky accents on your keyboard. I live in south-west France and have been cycle touring for yonks. [www.cycleblaze.com/profile/leoinfrance](http://www.cycleblaze.com/profile/leoinfrance)*



Photo: TONY FERNANDEZ [www.flickr.com/photos/133753799@N04](http://www.flickr.com/photos/133753799@N04)











# MOOSE ENCOUNTER

By: KATY BILLINGTON

We're about a mile from camp, when something catches my eye. I slam on the brakes and scrutinise the shrubby wetlands. There is definitely something there, hiding behind the sagebrush. Something dark, still and moose-sized. My adrenaline rises as I reach for the handlebar bag, only to remember that my husband is carrying the binoculars. He's cycled on, no doubt eager for our instant potato soup dinner and a warm beer.

He stops about four hundred yards ahead and waits. Because I know he'd kick himself if he missed this, I shout his name and wave my arms. He doesn't respond. The moose remains where its standing, probably too terrified to move. I get out my camera. It doesn't work; without a zoom the moose is but a blur. Admitting defeat, I clip in and cycle to catch up.

"Why the delay?" he asks. "The campsite is just up there."

"I'm pretty sure I saw a moose," I answer.

He hesitates, wanting to believe it but not wanting to backtrack either. "Are you sure? I didn't see anything. Where was it?" he says.

"Just back there," I quickly tell him. "Have you got the binoculars? I'm going back to get a better look." We both turn around and retrace our tyre marks. I scan the wetlands again, but can't see anything.

"Damn!" I think. It must have run away. But just then, I catch sight of it again. "There. You see?" I point wildly at a dark shape.

"Where? That tiny black thing behind the bush?" he asks.

"Yes, it's moved," I insist.

He raises the binoculars and peers through them. "It can't have moved. It's a tree stump," he replies exasperated.

Disbelievingly, I grab the binoculars to see for myself. He's right. It's just an old stump. I hang my head, disheartened at another sham animal sighting. We start retracing our tracks for the second time, just wanting to reach camp now. The sun is starting to dip and our bellies are starting to rumble. Suddenly, my husband stops and swings his head around to the right.

"Did you hear that crashing noise?" he asks, reaching for the binoculars.

"No," I reply nervously. In our experience, crashing noises are usually followed by a two hundred and fifty pound bear.

On our right stands a dark forest. We stare at it, looking for any sign of life. Nothing. We walk the bikes back a little and suddenly, there she is. Standing at the edge of the tree line, watching us cautiously; a cow moose. Beautiful, velvety and gracefully still. She is alone. Perhaps it is her high shoulders and long face, or perhaps it is the framing of the dark firs, but there is an air of the majestic about her. I imagine her swimming powerfully through water, kicking her long legs to reach aquatic plants and weeds. I am in awe. We continue to watch one another for a long time. "Thank goodness for that tree stump," I think. **BT**

*Katy and her husband, Charlie, cycled part of the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route. You can read the journal they kept during the trip here: <https://sleepeatride.wordpress.com>.*

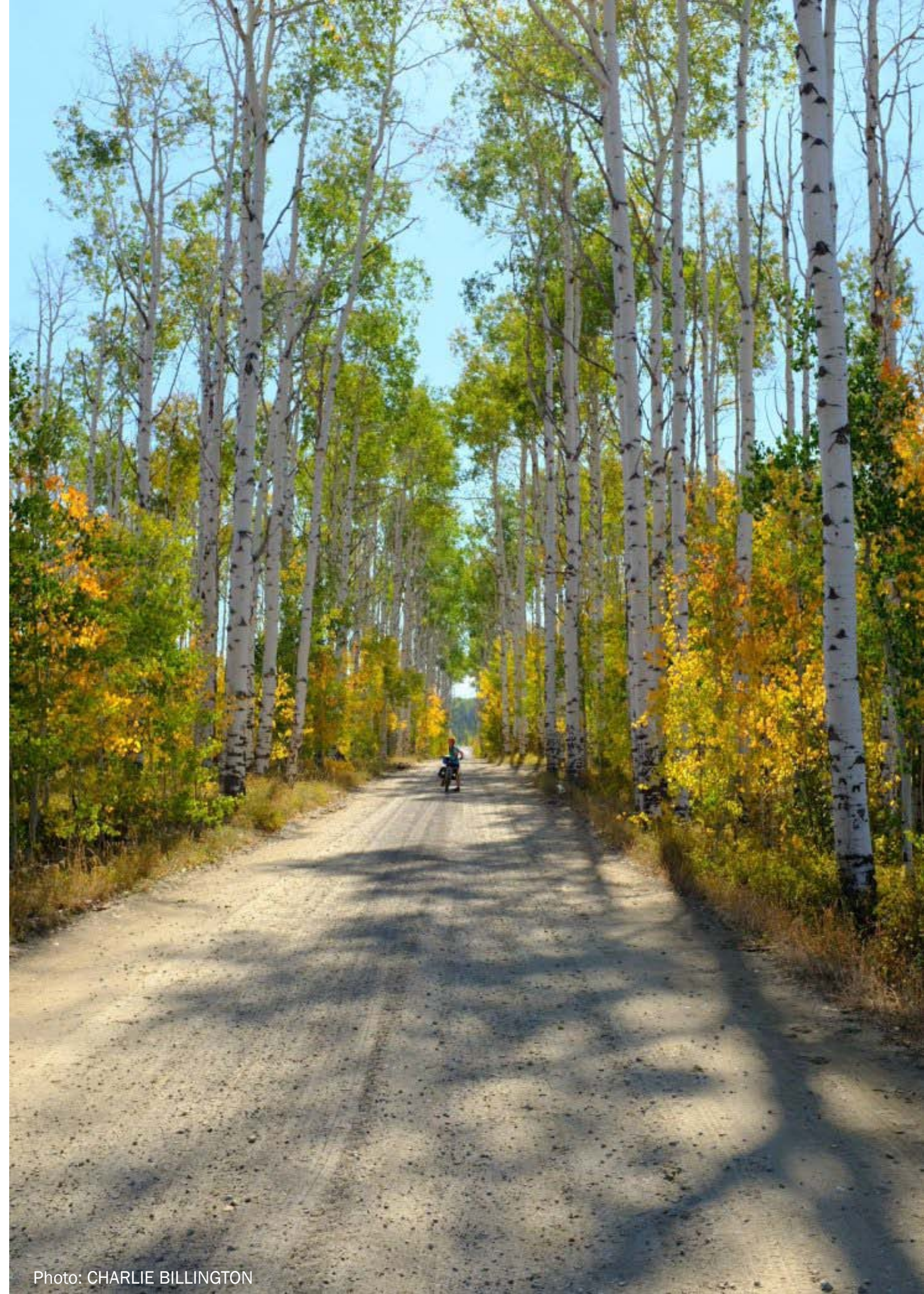


Photo: CHARLIE BILLINGTON



# Annapurna Circuit

By: ANDREW MURPHY







It was a strange feeling sitting by the roadside, revelling at last in the joy of privacy. There was no commotion, no crowds and no gawking; just me, my bicycle and my bowl of porridge. I'd crossed the border from India to Nepal and it felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Don't get me wrong, I love India and its 1.2 billion people, but I also love personal space and anonymity. I was now happily rolling along the Mahendra Highway on my way to Kathmandu.

The coming month was one that I had been looking forward to for quite some time. India had me weary and I was in need of some TLC in the form of soothing and sedative Australian English.

"Yeah nah, mate. She'll be right. We'll just be a couple of Terry's and wing it and be home and hosed in no time", said Dicko. Dicko had flown out from Australia with the intention of cycling the Annapurna Circuit. With each sentence spoken I started to relax and not worry about the fact that we would be cycling up to a height greater than the Mt. Everest Base Camp.

#### **WE HADN'T DONE MUCH PLANNING.**

I'd cycled at altitude before and had the necessary clothing, mentality, and equipment to be comfortable above 5,000m. Dicko on the other hand didn't have a bicycle, any windproof gear and packed more camera lenses than pairs of jocks. We rationalised this as a minor detail as we had more important logistics to figure out-like which bars to drink at. For all its drawbacks; pollution, dust, hawkers, noise, Kathmandu is one of the best capital cities I've visited. The eclectic mix of people provided the greatest attraction itself. There were the trekkers decked out in North Face apparel, the hippies wearing no shoes, the tour groups, the weirdos – and my personal favourite – the people who come to Nepal/India to "find themselves". I'm not sure what group we were placed in, but hopefully it was none of the above.

A week later we found ourselves in Pokhara still without the slightest clue on what we were

doing. On the penultimate day, we frantically organised trekking permits, a bicycle for Dicko and finally got a map for the Annapurna Circuit. The following day involved a four hour bus ride to Besisahar (the trail head). Surprisingly, the bus wasn't dangerously overcrowded and I'd been seated next to two beautiful Nepalese girls. Just before leaving, the twelve seater bus had 23 people and the conductor managed to squeeze a boy between the girls and myself.

On the first day we pedaled out of town wide-eyed and filled with anticipation. I'm sure Dicko was a bit nervous, as he had just flown from South Australia- a state where the highest mountain is 1,432m (the height of Kathmandu) and was now surrounded by some truly intimidating scenery. I was a little nervous as my biggest responsibility until now was keeping my jocks clean and showering regularly. Even that had been a struggle. I was now responsible for another human being cycling up to Thorung La (5,416m) with insufficient gear and more than a hint of unpreparedness. Within the first kilometre Reece's rear pannier fell off and we sat by the road making repairs. Only 4,000 plus vertical metres to go....

**THE ANNAPURNA CIRCUIT** is one of the most trekked trails in Nepal, with an influx of 120,000 plus tourists throughout the year. The attraction isn't just the views, it's also the lack of technical climbing, abundance of teahouses and constant Wi-Fi. With frequent visitors, the notorious aspects of tourism were always bound to be prevalent. We were constantly bombarded with demands for "Pen" and "Chocolate" from little children. One even threw a rock at Dicko, much to my amusement. In one instance, six children walking from the opposite direction linked arms and made a barricade in an attempt to stop us. I showed a great deal of compassion and barrelled straight through them.

After the first day on the bike we took rest in a seven house village where the room cost 100 Rupees (\$1.20). The house resembled some sort of animal farm, with goats walking through



the kitchen, a cockroach under my pillow and a cat that snuck out from under the floorboards to meow right next to my ear. The first night's dinner would see us eating the Nepalese staple of dhal baht; a combination of rice, dhal, vegetable curry and potatoes. Not only is dhal baht all you can eat, it also a precursor for some of the most lethal farts known to mankind. As all good friends would do, I rode in front of Dicko and dropped stink bombs all day, reaffirming that I am the most immature 26 year old in the world.

As we climbed higher and higher, the mountain views becoming clearer, we were able to draw motivation from the soaring peaks and forget about our tired bodies. The conditions of the trail/road made it nearly impossible to cycle and we would often resort to pushing our bikes. Unfortunately, soaring prices were also becoming more noticeable. With such difficulty in getting supplies to villages, food becomes the major profit earner for teahouse owners. It wasn't uncommon for us to get a free room as long as we ate dinner from the kitchen.

**WE ARRIVED IN MANANG** and were well overdue for a few rest days. Sitting at an elevation of 3,500m, the village was perfect for acclimatisation. After seeing countless helicopters ferry sick trekkers from the top, we wanted to take the necessary precautions to avoid the quick lift down. I also didn't have travel insurance. The first day involved a hike up to 4,000m to see a glacier. After losing the trail on the way there, we eventually got close enough to hear the ice cracking. Unsurprisingly, we also got lost on the way back, following a goat trail that led us into some pretty dangerous situations. At some stages we were walking on a perilous trail that took us through some prime landslide territory. On one instance I had to lie on my back and shuffle across an area where there was no path but a 40m steep drop. It was the scariest and dumbest thing I've done on the trip so far. The next day involved hiking to 4,900m to see a frozen lake. Our navigation skills once again bared

no fruit, as we got lost and couldn't find the lake.

From Manang we cycled/pushed into the barren landscapes where vegetation struggled to grow. With the rise in altitude we had to pay more attention to the symptoms of altitude sickness and be completely honest with each other. This was no time to mask our feelings and try to be tough. In environs like this you need the utmost respect for nature and her reckless abandon. Just two years ago a vicious, unpredicted snowstorm killed over 40 tourists attempting to cross the pass that we were heading for. This was no time to muck around.

We kept pushing forward, taking our time and savouring the impressive views. I started to feel a little dizzy on occasions, but I put this down to tiredness and some vertigo from pushing the bike along narrow cliff trails. After being on the move for 10 hours and ascending over 1,000m we arrived at Thorung Pedi – the last stop before the pass. The teahouse had a different aura, as people disposed of their nervous energy by finding any way to keep their mind off the next day. By the evening, snow started to fall and the temperature plummeted. We retreated to our room and had an uncomfortable sleep due to the altitude.

The alarm for 5:00am rang and we were ready to go. The first few hours involved pushing our bikes to high camp at 4,900m. The rising sun hadn't peaked over the mountains yet, and the temperature froze both my hands and water. Breathing became heavy and laborious as we kept ascending. With all my gear on the back of the bicycle, pushing became nearly impossible. Sometimes carrying the bike was easier.

**THE SILENCE** was deafening and it would be impossible to describe the feeling of being completely alone high in the mountains. It's what I search for as you have to earn every single metre. Trying to breathe normally as if I were at sea level was impossible. Breaking down this process was the only way I was going to get to the top.

10 small paces – STOP - 20 big breaths - 10 small paces – STOP - 20 big breaths - 10 small paces – STOP - 20 big breaths.

**BY CONCENTRATING** on breathing, I managed to get to the 5,416m summit without too many problems. Thankfully I saw Dicko there with his camera enjoying and embracing what we had just achieved. It was quite funny to see everyone else in expensive trekking gear with guides and porters and then us. Our bikes and bodies had taken a battering, I was wearing bike shorts and Dicko was wearing jeans and a hoodie. We hung around for a cup of tea until we felt cold and then descended down to the next town. The reward of a downhill soon evaporated as the terrain was too steep and made cycling a dangerous prospect. We

eventually limped back to Jomson a day later and decided to get a bus back to Pokhara.

My initial thoughts of the Annapurna Circuit were those of scepticism. I envisaged expensive teahouses, complaining trekkers and no real chance to experience seclusion. Whilst these scepticisms proved partly true, the choice to cycle was one of the best decisions I've ever made – purely because I got to share the experiences with a mate. I won't be forgetting those ten days for a while. **BT**

*Andrew Murphy writes: I was born into a suburban Australian life. Then nurtured into the generic school, university, career and retirement devor. Finally emancipated to the cadence of a spinning wheel in countries I know little about. [www.thebikeabout.org](http://www.thebikeabout.org)*



















# The road headed WEST

By: LEON MC CARRON

It seemed a terrible shame to meet my end in Iowa; I couldn't imagine anywhere more disappointing to die. If I were a betting man I'd have reckoned on the most dangerous thing in this state being sheer boredom. Corn, beans, corn, beans... a cow... corn, beans... the scenery hadn't changed for weeks and I was slowly dissolving into stimulation-deprived madness. The only other feature even remotely worthy of note was the headwinds, but even these were more nuisance than hazard. My current predicament, then – attempting to escape through cornfields from a gun-toting alcohol-soaked rancher – was not something I expected.

I squeezed the bike through a small gap left by the partially closed garage door and jumped on. Standing on the pedals my feet automatically began to pump rhythmically; by now an action as natural as breathing. Dirt and gravel groaned underneath the tyres and my luggage bumped along behind in counterpoint. I wasn't even midway on this journey across the USA by bicycle, and it seemed terribly unfair that such a (seemingly) harmless invitation to stay with a rancher could have gone so wrong. But wrong it had gone, drastically so – a steady decline in civility had reached its lowest ebb when alcohol and madness were poorly mixed and I had been led to an outhouse full of guns. One was pointed at my head. Seconds after that I'd panicked and pushed the owner of the gun into a shed, closing the heavy lock as he tumbled inside.

I was riding away now as hard as I could, the trailer that trundled along after the bike serving as a constant reminder of just how slow and vulnerable I was. Light had long since faded from the day but the moon picked out features here and there, hinting at a bigger world beyond my narrow vision. To my left and right flat cornfields extended for miles, broken only occasionally by a small clump of trees assembled around each homestead.

Looking over my shoulder, there appeared in the distance behind the inevitable headlights of a large truck, beams bouncing wildly. It was still a way away, but I knew already the details – a grey Dodge Viper; inside a bald man with a goatee driving, peering into the darkness through eyes infused with a crate of Bud Light.

He would be carrying at least one firearm, and until recently he had been lying on the floor of the shed into which I pushed him.

Ahead was the only possible route to freedom yet ironically, ridiculously, this direction promised something perhaps even more dangerous than a drunken rancher with a rifle disorder. Up ahead, stretching from dirt floor to brooding sky was a violently rotating tornado, the best part of half a mile wide. A deathly silence surrounded it. Like the crashing of a huge wave or the collapsing of a skyscraper, the movement seemed to happen in slow motion and I could only tell its true vigour by the way it decimated the landscape. The whole scene was ludicrous, like a Hollywood B-movie.

I thought briefly of how one day I might tell people about this and few would believe me. A group of trees swayed, snapped

and were swallowed like twigs. Next a small lean-to for livestock crumbled, and this too was sucked up in a heap of corrugated iron and bricks. I was sure I saw sheep bleating their way into the abyss. A similar fate (with only slightly less bleating) was promised to me if I kept going, now just a mile away.

This was not what I had expected when I set out to cycle across America. In fact, I had actively hoped to avoid anything even remotely similar to this. I was a kid, barely twenty-three years old, off in search of adventure. Well, here it was, served American style – big, brash, balls-out. As well as being afraid, a large part of me was annoyed – my journey to this point had been full of the most wonderful people I could have hoped to meet, all going out of their way to be kind and hospitable. It seemed unfair that one boozed-up idiot could ruin that.

Despite it all, even despite the intense fear, there was an odd, hard-to-pin-down buzz about the scenario.

In a strange sense, I was feeling more alive than ever. **BT**

*Leon McCarron is a Northern Irish author and filmmaker. He specialises in storytelling via long distance, human-powered journeys. His first book - The Road Headed West, about a bicycle journey across North America was published in July 2014. [www.leonmccarron.com](http://www.leonmccarron.com).*



# One More

Text: JERRY KOPACK

Photos BRIGITTE & IVO JOST





**C**all me. No Tajikistan.” was the brief and direct message I saw when I turned on my phone for the first time in nearly 1 week, a curious note from my brother Bobby back in the US. I had just come down from the mountains to a tiny village and was sitting in the living room of a local home stay. Perplexed by this comment, I shrugged it off and then proceeded to take this rare opportunity of internet to catch up on some news. The first story that I saw was one of 7 cyclists, including 2 from the US and 1 from Switzerland, who were run over and attacked in Tajikistan along the Pamir Highway 2 days prior. Only 3 survived. ISIS was claiming responsibility for the attack. I sat, contemplatively stoic, overcome with emotion. My exuberant high was promptly ripped out of the clouds as my thoughts went deliberately down a rabbit hole. This was the closest that I come to such an act of terror. I was not in the same country, however, last week, we had talked about traveling to Tajikistan, and cycling that very stretch of the country. At the last moment, we decided to head north due to logistical issues and time limitations. The Pamir Highway is well known and traveled among the circuit of long distance bikepackers, offering gargantuan views of the Pamir mountain range, and surreal feelings of being “out there”. The region has been deemed no more unstable or dangerous than the area of Kyrgyzstan that we were currently pedaling through. It should have been like going to Canada.

**PARALYZING FEELINGS** of sadness flooded over me, tempered by confusion, anger, and disbelief. Normally one thinks of “safety in numbers.” They were 7 cyclists. Including my 2 Swiss friends, we were 3. I’m still trying to come to grips with this horrific act and realistically, the truth may never be known. One of the American’s who was killed, loftily mused in his blog

about the kindness that he had experienced from people all over the world, feelings that people are genuinely good and caring – sentiments that have mirrored my own through all of my travels.

I have stopped short of thinking...this could have been me – but in reality, it could have been...or any of my friends and other wanderers who I have met over the past two years – people anxiously, optimistically exploring this fascinating world on two wheels. So, what do we as travelers do when we hear something like this? Do we stop traveling, wandering this beautiful planet that we are all mesmerized by? Will I now, into the foreseeable future, constantly be looking over my shoulder with each approaching







car? What do we do in the face of terror? My mind is swiftly transported to other acts of terror that occurred back in the US, attempting to draw a parallel or find some rationalization. How long did it take parents around the US, after the Sandyhook elementary shooting, to feel a little more comfortable in letting their kids go back to school, knowing they will never be as comfortable again? What about after the Aurora, Colorado movie theater shooting? The nightclub in Miami? My intent is not to equate any of these horrific acts to this one in Tajikistan because they are all unique, but rather my mind is spinning in a million different directions and I'm just trying to make sense of it, as if that's possible at all.

Three days prior, we were slowly clawing

our way through an expansive valley, into a very ominous and imminent storm. We were tired, yet still excited to see what lay over the next mountain pass. The plan was to cross this 12,000 foot pass late that afternoon, but the storm that was mounting had a bulls-eye on our chests and thus had other ideas of our progress. We could see it coming from several miles away so we frantically dug into our bags for gore-tex just as the first sheet of rain came darting in, sideways. I distinctly remembered seeing a dried up drainage culvert about 500 yards back so we took advantage of the ferocious tail wind and retreated back to the only visible haven for several miles. While it provided shelter from the rain, the wind found a way to wrap itself inside

the concrete tunnel that we were all huddled in, slowly freezing us to the core. Brigitte spotted smoke billowing across the road behind a hill. We knew it must be a local home so we made a break for it. The family living there was already hunkered down inside, as I'm sure they have become quite accustomed to these freak storms. We knocked on the door and were immediately rushed inside. The mother, father, and 4 children anxiously pulled out the table in the small concrete house, began boiling water for tea, and laid out bread with fresh raspberry jam and cream. The youngest daughter who was maybe 6, looked over at me as she was playfully wiggling a loose front tooth, and immediately started to giggle, the way only the innocence of

a child could giggle. I was once again at ease. This was not a tourist guest house and this family was not looking to make any money. In fact, I'm not sure if they had ever invited foreigners into their home before. But it didn't matter. They saw three travelers who were cold and wet so they did what I would hope any human would do – opened up the door and invited us in – without any fear. Wind gusts angrily rattled the single pane glass windows as we all gathered on the sofa and watched the Smurf movie, dubbed in Russian, on their 12" television. At one point I'm nearly certain I saw a chicken, or maybe a old lady on a broomstick, go flying by the window outside.

I have been in Kyrgyzstan for approaching 4 weeks. Landing in each new country is always a shock to the senses. In places like Kyrgyzstan, I can't read, can't speak, don't know what the food is like; the culture is different and of course I have to do the math to understand the money. But gradually, I realize that it's just a sliding scale of the same; then I recalibrate, and find my groove. It's all based on the same human currency called kindness – the same that the American in Tajikistan referred to. This kindness that I have experienced in Kyrgyzstan has not been overt like in India and Nepal. I had to go looking for it. However, it is still here, and once I found it, it has shone brightly. This is why we travel. This is why we have come. To experience, to share, to give and receive. To make the world a smaller place, free us from that closet full of fear that is so embedded in us, and say fuck you to those who seek to drive us apart and have us feel anything less.

**ONE MORE** is a sentiment that I have been embracing for the better part of 3 years now. It has to do with the premise that time is finite. Opportunities are limited. It's easy when you know something is your last so you should savor it because...it is your last. It's only when things happen that are unexpected do you say "If only I had one more..." One more has a more optimistic feel than last one, giving us the feeling that perhaps we have some semblance of control. Like most, especially those of us in our now 40's or beyond, I have experienced losses that I have had to look back on with the curious



despondence of, if I only had one more...

If I know that I have but one more mountain pass, one more talk with a friend, dance with a partner, embrace from a loved one – how would I change the way I experience that moment? Would I go slower? Would I talk nicer? Would I be more patient? Would I smile more, laugh more, without reservation? If I accept this truth – that every experience is a gift and opportunities are limited, living in the now of each moment, maybe I can live more deeply and not rely on the mental scarcity of one more but rather embed this into my normal life.

Over the past 2 years, I was traveling more open ended. There was no fixed ending, no hard stop, no flight to catch. I was truly living with the gift of time. There was no concept of last one. However, I have a flight booked out of Bishkek in a few days so the finite concept of time here is very real. Starting out this morning, I was acutely aware that there was but one more mountain pass, one more set of switch backs left in my time in Kyrgyzstan, with these 2 great friends. One more night of camping. One more opportunity to exhilaratingly, yet needlessly bathe in the ice cold rushing snow melt of a river before making one more pasta dinner on my camp stove and climbing into my sleeping bag, one more time with the sound of horses and goats frolicking around my tent – and I planned to relish in each moment.

It was only 3 o'clock. We could have definitely made more distance up the pass that day, whereby shortening the effort the next day, but why? Instead, we found the last bit of lush green carpet, tucked into the elbow crease of the mountain switch back at the base of the climb, nestled along the omnipresent gushing river. I laid on my back on the cushion of a pillow of green clover and just veered peacefully up at the crystal blue sky, not focused on anything but rather just allowing my gaze to drift wherever. I reminded myself: "This is your one more. Just because you're tired or stressed does not give you permission to rush through this. Slow down. Be here now. You'll miss this when its gone."

I awoke the next morning and played "Here Comes the Sun" by the Beatles outside of the Swiss tent, a song that we have sung aloud together most of the mornings of most of the

months that we have traveled together, a symbolic anthem to start each day. "Here comes the sun..." I sang. Inside their tent, I could hear Ivo and Brigitte chuckling, then responding, "Sun, sun, sun, here it comes..."

**ON THE WAY UP** the pass that morning, I stopped frequently, not because I was winded, but rather because I wanted to drink in each moment; take dozens of mental photographs to keep with me and pull out whenever I needed beauty; and keep me forever optimistic that I

should get the opportunity to do one more trip with my Swiss friends. I climbed slower; descended even slower than I climbed, because I didn't want to miss a single frame. As we dragged our bikes the file 2 miles over a scree field of loose shale, each step potentially initiating a rock slide on the switch back below, we crested the summit of the 12k Kegeti Pass just before noon. Looking behind me, I could see the next storm, ominously chasing us over the saddle. We hastily suited up in gore-tex, bracing for the next lashing...but it never came.

Mother nature winked at us and for about 20 minutes, the clouds somehow got hung up on the peaks allowing the sun to peek out. Instead of frantically scurrying down the other side of the pass, effectively finishing our journey in haste, we were able to have lunch at the summit. Thunder crashed all around, yet no storms fell upon us. In those moments, time stood still and everything was right.

From the summit, it was nearly 60 blissful miles of dirt track, gently descending down 9000 feet, back to Bishkek – a feeling so unreal







– like I was pedaling off the end of the earth. As I looked back in the distance, I could somewhat make out the snowcapped peaks peering over the rolling green hills, euphoria still plastered on my face. I just hope that I get one more chance to ride bikes with these guys again.

**AS A RESULT** of my experiences, quite simply, I've learned that traveling makes you less of an asshole. I'm sure of it. Each country that I see, each person that I meet shows me the world through a new lens. Going to far away places where I don't speak the language, trusting that the people I meet along the way who do not speak my language, will do me no harm. Knowing that the best laid plans sometimes blow up into an infuriating mess but having the patience and resolve to smile, roll with it, and see what beautiful masterpiece evolves from the ashes of the initial perceived disaster. Plans are great, but you cannot control the outcome, so forego these insecure and lofty ambitions of false control. Life is unscripted, and even though you may have a map, the true adventure happens at the intersections of fear and control. So loosen your grip and resign yourself to what might be. Say yes when opportunities arise and step through the doors when they open. Live in the moment and be ready to take advantage if life lobs you one more. **BT**

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*Brigitte and Ivo Jost are bicycle nomads. So far they have spent seven years in the saddle and the journey has become their life. You can follow their trip and photography at [www.bikepackground.com](http://www.bikepackground.com) and [www.instagram.com/bikepackground](https://www.instagram.com/bikepackground).*











# The Crash

By: CHRISTINA VIETINGHOFF

Photo: GEEE KAY [www.flickr.com/photos/georgeka](http://www.flickr.com/photos/georgeka)

I'm riding along to a sultry Norah Jones tune on a rather grey day in the Ecuadorian Andes. The descent from 3000m to sea level has just begun and I feel my spirits lift as I start to gain speed and see where the switchbacks curve below into a patchwork of green. After a month and a half in the Colombian and Ecuadorian rainy seasons, I've earned this descent.

I play in the curves of the turns, taking them wide and only loosely do my fingers graze my breaks.

It's 11:30am and I'm starting to get hungry, I think about switching to another playlist, "Jazzy Biking" isn't exciting enough for the epic descent in front of me.

All of a sudden there is a loud pop as my tire explodes and I find myself sliding on my stomach across the rough pavement, my bike no longer underneath me. I feel nothing and then I feel everything—pain on my stomach, the blood oozing from my elbow, my knee and just above my feet.

Norah Jones sings on, apparently unaware of the changed circumstances.

I slowly raise my head and my neck aches like I imagine an aged turtle with arthritis might feel if someone has stepped on its shell.

Before I've even fully checked in with myself, I panic, looking for my bike.

I see shredded pieces of the metal rim of my front tire peeling off, like one of those sticks

of cheese my friends used to love when we were kids. I was always disgusted by how much they touched that "food" before they put it in their mouths.

I want Norah Jones to stop playing, it's not okay for her to be singing about why she didn't come as I lay sprawled on this road. But my hands are shaking too much to turn the music off.

Instead I crawl to the side of the road.

I realize I'm just past a sharp corner and cars are coming.

Ecuadorian drivers drive without seatbelts, without road rules, without rhythm or reason. They pass on two lane roads around blind corners and flaunt speed limits like the police don't exist or perhaps more accurately, have more pressing problems than traffic violations.

But this also means Ecuadorian drivers are used to reacting suddenly and so before I can process what I'm seeing, three cars have

pulled over. A family with two children are helping me pick up my panniers which have spread helter skelter across the road, with holes ripped through the rubber echoing my road rash. A woman from another car helps me pick up my bike and tire. My bike goes in one car and I go in another, I do what I'm told having tuned out of their rapid Spanish conversation.

I nod and cry in response to the questions I'm peppered with.

My name is Christina. I'm in my 20s. I'm biking alone across the Americas.

These facts are still true, except for the biking part—my bike is definitely not rideable.

Who am I without my bike?

The map of road rash decorating my stomach, my arms, my hands and legs—is burning but what is making me shake like a leaf isn't the pain, it's the abrupt violence of how quickly my reality changed.

Bike touring is so steady. From one day to the next the scenery changes, the ingredients in my nightly stew change (slightly) but *grosso modo* things are weirdly consistent. I ride feeling like a tanker rather than a speedboat, the weight of my gear anchoring me to the present moment.

The families take me to Emergency in a convoy with me and my worldly possessions distributed among the hands of generous strangers. The line at the hospital is deemed too long so friend of a friend who did a few years of medical school is phoned and quickly appears in the parking lot where I am diagnosed as being okay after having my wounds cleaned and bandaged.

But though physically I was eventually okay (as was my bike after I had a new wheel rebuilt), something shifted in me that day when I confronted my fragility so intimately.

Previous misadventures spooked me: being chased on foot and by car by a drugged guy and having my tent found when I was wild camping alone, but it was this crash that haunts me.

I still listen to my jazzy biking playlist. I still let my bike accelerate to exciting speeds in the French Alps where I'm planted more permanently these days. I still bike in the clothing I crashed in, with the Frankenstein stitches I've sewn corresponding neatly to the scars on my body.

But I lost some kind of naivety when I realized the absurd, the random, the freak accident that I always read about can actually happen to me too.

Perhaps that possibility is what makes bike touring so addictive. **BT**

*Christina Vietinghoff is a millennial bike wanderer. Her greatest accomplishment is biking on road tires up a rocky dirt path to 4700m with a 1L box of wine in tow. She writes about her (mis)adventures at [www.bicicletia.com](http://www.bicicletia.com).*





# LIFE AT THE EDGE

Text & photos: ROB ARMSTRONG





**AS ANOTHER MECHANICAL** problem renders your bike temporarily unusable, as the wheel needs truing or the pannier falls off and is left somewhere in your trail: short of breath, you must walk back hoping it hasn't fallen in the river, listening to your own expletives echoed back to you from the valley walls. The road goes from potholed tarmac to a shingle beach; from corrugated gravel to deep sand, it grips your wheels as you try to clock a lethargic 2.5 km/hour. And with each level of diminishing road quality you reluctantly pray for the previous obstacle to progress instead of the current. We are pushing the bikes on the flat, witnessing the inability of the speedometer to register motion, this proof of our sluggish progress a far greater disturbance than any physical pain.

Broken spokes, ripped panniers, days of fifteen punctures, hub cracks and rim dents. We were cycling through the Pamir mountains of Tajikistan, the most remote part of our journey so far. As a group of five we had tenfold more mechanical failures than a combined 22 months cycling through Europe and Central Asia. The

stretch from Langar to Khargush made Paris-Roubaix look like a trip to Disneyland. At points only cycling on the grass to the side of the road made for a faster pace than walking.

Anyway, rant fully expunged. The upshot was that finally bike-death had arrived, and my relic on two wheels had something terminal. The free hub was broken: if I pushed the pedals the wheel would not rotate. Some components were in need of an appreciative toss on to a rubbish heap. It did, however, work intermittently; enough to get me over a 4344m pass and in to Alichur, the only sign of life in three days.

Alichur, a small collection of concrete blocks on the plateau, was seen as the great metropolis hub to our civilisation-starved eyes. Its dank and dim shop a bustling market selling foreign treasures (Snickers and CocaCola); its silent guest house a towering palace, offering warm tea and a fire.

My wheel had been working again for a further day, up until Murghab, the next and only big town in the Pamirs. As we left town it failed once more, and this time it seemed for good. I



left my riding partners and returned to Murghab.

My aim had been Stockholm to China by bike. China was only 91km away from Murghab; a mere few pedal strokes away. My goal for the trip being the Chinese border I was unwilling to take a taxi any of the distance between start and finish and being so close I could walk that distance. After a brief attempt to borrow the mountain bike of a young local boy (hindered by my saying '500' instead of '50' dollars in Russian), I set out on my own bike with a temporary fix hoping it wouldn't break again, packed with enough food to walk the distance if needed. Murghab to the Chinese border and back, and I would have completed my goal.

**THE NEXT TWO DAYS** were to be a mystery. No cycle tourists travelled this route as the border was only open to Tajiks or Chinese, and there were more than a few ill-conceived rumours that the road was of perfect quality. It was not. And what's more the border post was closed for three days, so through traffic would be of no help. What followed was two days rid-

ing through the most remote landscape of my trip. An empty high altitude desert valley was going to lead me to the Chinese border with only a couple of scraps evidence of habitation: a lorry on its side and a lonesome yurt out in the valley floor, each of which I earmarked for potential wind-blocked camping spots on my return.

As I left Murghab the atmosphere changed. There was now nothing. Previously in the Pamirs there had been traffic every now and then to have some link to the town or village nearby, often stopping for some remarkably ordinary conversation. One jeep stopped us during a snowy descent, a white woman leaned out of the window, "Have you seen a metal panel?" she asked, and then drove on.

As I looked back a storm was following me: a wall of charcoal-grey, the wind picking up. But I was in luck, despite my disbelief I could see a building on the horizon. Entering these chai hanas (tea houses) in the distant desertlands you feel an instant affinity with whoever is running them. This brave humanoid living out here



on the barren plateau has just saved you from riding through the storm or the discomfort of erecting your tent behind a big rock to see out the tempest that has been following you. I offer his son some raisins and order a pot of tea.

**WHAT JOY ERUPTS** within me to see other people out here, where I have seen nothing for two hours. An absent map had become an absent landscape. Objects within this sphere can be seen 50km away as there is nothing until the eye meets the mountains on the landscape's edge and being alone out here provoked those raw feelings so rarely felt in a densely populated modern world. For hours I pedalled on, expecting my bike to break, through the silence. I was saving my water for this three day expedition, the time it would take to walk the distance if my bike died and my lips were like crusting lava.

This emptiness was lunar, rocky and sparse, and I thought constantly about the food and water I had and whether it would last me three days. The bike held up though and I made good time. Just prior to the border was a large warehouse, prison-like in appearance and assumed to have nobody inside, so unused did it look. As I huddled down behind a verge and reheated some pasta I was shocked, and once again nourished, to see someone emerge from this building, the first human I had seen in little over four hours. A quick conversation told me he wanted me to sleep at their place, the prison. I gratefully accepted and was off again for the border to return before the next storm came in. I now had somewhere to sleep.

**ANOTHER STRANGE** interaction awaited me at the Tajik side of the border, closed, which fenced a no man's land between China and Tajikistan. Two soldiers waited outside a tiny border post brandishing their weapons behind the barbed fence. This fence stretched over the sand to two opposing bleak horizons. As I approached the border on foot (further bike trouble) the soldiers came out through the fence. Quite frankly they could have only been thinking 'who is this lunatic?' out here in this mountainous desert as a storm approaches walking his bicycle to a border that isn't open and even if it

were wouldn't allow a non-local to pass through it. Needless to say I felt it was worth getting a wave in pretty sharpish and a 'Salaam Alaikum' (peace be with you) out in to the cold air. But I had made it, Stockholm to China by bike.

I slept in the building mentioned and was greeted with the local tradition of salty tea with butter melting in it. The inside was homely and the road-workers living there spent hours poring over my map, looking up their home village and seeing how far away the capital city was, somewhere they had never been. The next morning a goat turned up in the sidecar of a motorbike and soon met its maker while a tractor was being repaired. This area of Tajikistan



is home to mostly Kirghiz people and three of them set about repairing the tractor's engine while the men I had stayed with saw to the goat. This was life at the landscape's edge. to a border that isn't open and even if it were wouldn't allow a non-local to pass through it. Needless to say I felt it was worth getting a wave in pretty sharpish and a 'Salaam Alaikum' (peace be with you) out in to the cold air. But I had made it, Stockholm to China by bike.

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*Rob writes; I wanted something which would get my hands dirty and provide an opportunity to learn every day. So I embarked from Stockholm with a bike and a tent and headed for China. <https://allthewayfromstockholm.com>.*



# The Tibetan plateau

*Into the great wide open*

Text: JERRY KOPACK

Photos BRIGITTE & IVO JOST







I have not seen a shower (or running water), a mirror, a hotel, or even a tree in nearly 2 weeks. I have subsisted almost entirely on instant noodles. Whenever I happen to find yogurt, I eat it like it's my job. Last week I found a pineapple and about lost my mind. A rebel without a clue. Fact: I did not have a clue what was I getting into. I just knew that I wanted IN (or is it OUT?). This is the Tibetan plateau. When you're living each moment, in the moment, time just passes by, effortlessly, like the tranquil ripples on a pond. I have no idea even what day it is. There is no place to be other than here, right now. This solitude is meditative. I ride for 6 hours and feel as though I have not gotten anywhere. The scale and vastness of this area is beyond description. Valleys go on for weeks, broken only by the daily 2,000 foot climb over a

pass to cross into the next valley. Rivers, like a surgeon's scalpel, carve out these valleys at an average altitude of more than 13k feet. Nomad tents speckle the hillsides. It seems like only yesterday that I waived good-bye to the exhilarating, yet sinister, snow capped peaks of the Chola mountain range only to be replaced by the lush, rolling green hills of the Plateau.

With nicknames such as "the Roof of the World", "the Third Pole", and "the Asian Water Tower", the Tibetan Plateau stretches approximately 620 miles north to south, 1,600 miles east to west, and is surrounded by the highest peaks in the Himalayas, Karakoram, and Pamir mountain ranges. It is the world's highest and largest plateau, with an area of 970,000 square miles and contains the headwaters of most of the streams in the surrounding regions.

National Geographic asserts that: "All told, some two billion people in more than a dozen countries — nearly a third of the world's population and half of Asia's — depend on rivers fed by the snow and ice of the plateau region."

**WEATHER FORECASTS** here are unreliable at best. Each day I am shadow boxing with the ever changing, fast moving clouds, running from one storm or chasing a sucker hole pocket of sun a few moments later. Just as I am stopping to lather up my skin with sunscreen to protect from the scalding high altitude blaze, I can see another storm rolling in just as it is drying. And beyond that, another sucker hole and more blue skies await. Spring is here, yet the hope for more consistent weather evades me. My Gore-Tex jacket is never fully packed away.

Hardly any of this vast area is mapped. It is a web of dirt paths, mixed in with newly minted tarmac but just because there is tarmac is no affirmation of a continual road. Many times they just end. The best solution has simply been to ask locals. Fortunately I have learned the sign for dead end road is to cup one's hand in a "C" and ram the other hand into the concave area. There is an ever sturdier language barrier here, however the smiles and curiosity are fresher than ever. It is estimated that more than 40% of the population here are nomadic tribes. By the perplexed looks on their faces, it is clear that they have not seen any other westerners, especially on bicycles. We share a laugh but it is a tragedy to not be able to communicate more, to hear their stories and share mine. Sometimes it is a like being in a zoo but I don't know who is





more fascinated by whom.

My lodging has been a potpourri of camping, home stays, and places labeled as guest houses but are more accurately just tiny, dirty rooms with a wooden frame and a piece of foam on top. Last week, in one of those guest houses, the tumultuous rumblings of my next door neighbor's incessant snoring, like a 1978 Camaro with a rusted out muffler, vibrated my bed through the plywood walls. Even with ear plugs and supplemented by utter cycling exhaustion, I spent the better part of the night pounding on the wall, momentarily jarring him awake, allowing me to fall asleep for about 45 minutes, only to repeat the process for the next 7 hours. Fortunately, earlier in the afternoon, I had quelled 1 noise by setting free the guest house owner's audibly wallowing cat who was tethered to a post via a 3 foot rope.

**THE FOLLOWING NIGHT**, we were once again racing a storm. Fortunately we came upon a village, however with only a few houses and 1 restaurant. This is typical of the villages here. We appealed to the restaurant owner to allow us to sleep in the entry way of her building, just moments before the storm arrived. The lashing rain soon gave way to slush bombs pelting the corrugated plastic roof. Yet another night and again racing yet another storm, we found no village, only a monastery. The monks allowed us to sleep in their shed, which we soon found out was used for yak dung storage, neatly bagged and stacked inside.

There is no running water and thus no sanitation. Water is obtained from the ever present stream or sometimes a well in a town. The Chinese are attempting to develop the area, finishing roads, building new structures, and even planting trees. Growing trees here is not natural which is why there are none. To do so, they put a semi mature tree stalk in the ground and hook up an IV bag with a slow drip line to nourish it. I could not make this up and I have no idea if it will work. The true challenge however is the lack of sanitation. Toilets are, best case, an elevated box with a hole in the floor. There was one however that had more of a "community feel" to it. There were 6 spaces, each partially segmented with a 3 ft wall, giving the user the

feeling of privacy but also the option of a social experience if they chose. The worst case thus far was something far...worse. Upon checking into a guest house (again, this term is used lightly and in context with the standards of the region) in a small village, I asked, "Cesuo?" (toilet). "Mei you," he replied, waving his hand, before leading me out the back door and pointing to the river that ran through town. When traveling, I have always tried to follow local customs, norms, and traditions. "If they do it, then so will I," I would rationalize to myself. This however is where I drew the line. There was a concrete wall that framed in the river, and I just could not bring myself to hanging my back end over it the next morning with a dozen of my new closest friends.

**THE TIBETAN PLATEAU** is absolutely the Great Wide Open. Life here is hard. It is basic and raw. But that is the beauty and magic of it. It is like no other place on Earth and is still mostly untouched. The omnipresent smiles and kindness provide a warmth to this cold and barren landscape that make me never want to leave. It is further a lesson in perspective. Just take a step back, recalibrate, and you will see the amazing that happens here. I squint my eyes and for a moment think I'm tucked away in a canyon somewhere at home in Colorado, but really I couldn't be further away. Nine thousand miles, give or take. Nine thousand miles from everything familiar, even though I'm completely at home right now out in these mountains, out in the great wide open. **BT**

*Jerry Kopack is a wanderer who has been given the gift of time. He travels to far away places with only his bike in an effort to live simply and chase new experiences and connections. <https://worldspinsby.wordpress.com>, [www.instagram.com/worldspinsby](https://www.instagram.com/worldspinsby).*

*Brigitte and Ivo Jost are bicycle nomads. So far they have spent seven years in the saddle and the journey has become their life. You can follow their trip and photography at [www.bikepackground.com](http://www.bikepackground.com) and [www.instagram.com/bikepackground](https://www.instagram.com/bikepackground).*





Image from the Road: **TANZANIA**

By: MANDEL CLOTAIRE [www.instagram.com/lepedalistan](https://www.instagram.com/lepedalistan)





Image from the Road: **GUINEA**  
By: JAVIER BICICLETING [www.instagram.com/bicicleting](https://www.instagram.com/bicicleting)





Image from the Road: **PERU**

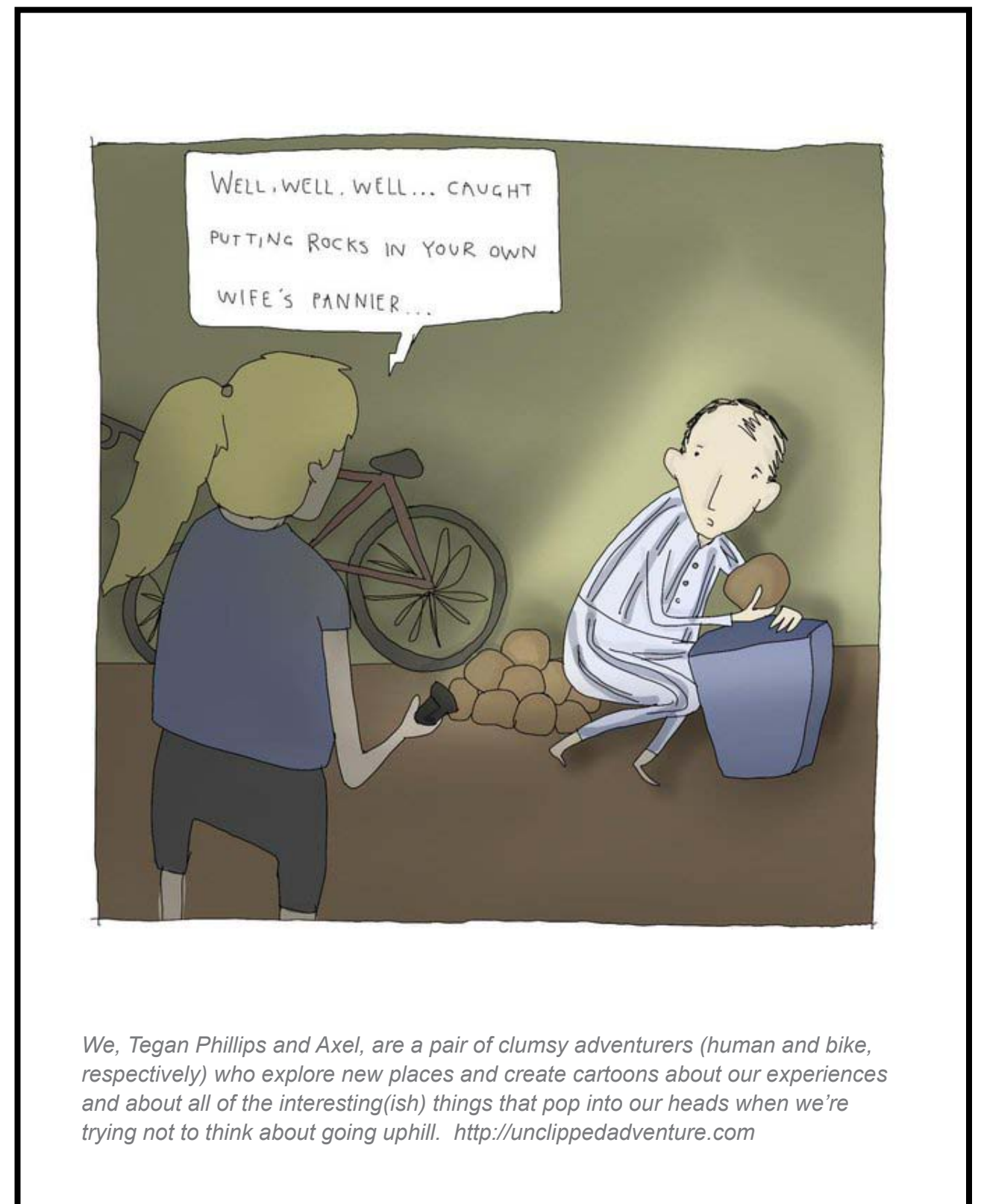
By: HANA BLACK [www.instagram.com/beinghana](https://www.instagram.com/beinghana)





Image from the Road: **INDIA**

By: PAUL JEURISSEN [www.bicyclingaroundtheworld.nl](http://www.bicyclingaroundtheworld.nl)



*We, Tegan Phillips and Axel, are a pair of clumsy adventurers (human and bike, respectively) who explore new places and create cartoons about our experiences and about all of the interesting(ish) things that pop into our heads when we're trying not to think about going uphill. <http://unclippedadventure.com>*



# Parting shot



Bike death is upon us.

Photo: ROB ARMSTRONG <https://allthewayfromstockholm.com>

## BicycleTraveler