

“Alastair’s journey stands out as amazing”

SIR RANULPH FIENNES

MOODS OF

FUTURE JOYS

around the world by bike

PART ONE

FROM ENGLAND TO SOUTH AFRICA

ALASTAIR
HUMPHREYS

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FOREWORD

Sir Ranulph Fiennes, OBE

Alastair Humphreys' expedition was out of the ordinary.

In today's world of dashing up Everest in less than a day, sailing round the world in 10 weeks, and best-selling books about three-month motorbike rides, Alastair's journey stands out as amazing. It was probably the first great adventure of the new Millennium.

This journey was an old-fashioned expedition: long, lonely, low-budget and spontaneous. It was a life on the road rather than a whirlwind break from home.

An expedition lasting four years requires tremendous persistence, flexibility and self-discipline. To cycle, mostly alone, so many thousands of miles down the lonely roads of some of the world's wildest regions demands great strength and toughness – mental as well as physical.

When Alastair's carefully prepared plans to ride through Central Asia to Australia collapsed, he would have been forgiven had he shrugged his shoulders at the tough luck, given up and returned home to have a go at something else. But to change his route so drastically, to turn spontaneously and ride instead through the Middle East and Africa showed enormous determination, lateral thinking and a love for life and for adventure.

He aimed high, minimised his risks as best he could, and then leapt in with enthusiasm, trusting to the general good nature of mankind to help him through. The reward was an impressive circumnavigation of the planet crossing five continents that a journey! Alastair certainly did not take easy options on his journey (a winter in Siberia, a summer in the desert of Turkmenistan are examples) and this of course made success all the sweeter.

Alastair set himself a ferocious challenge, an old-fashioned quest, and got on his bike to see how hard he could push himself, what he could endure, how far he could go. He must be proud of pulling it off, against the odds and against the doubts of so many.

I am sure Alastair learned a great deal, about the world, about himself, during the often lonely weeks and months and years of hard work. This expedition demonstrated that all things are possible if you work hard enough to achieve them. I would like to congratulate Alastair on his impressive accomplishment and wish him the very best of luck with his future exploits.



Sir Ranulph Fiennes

Explorer

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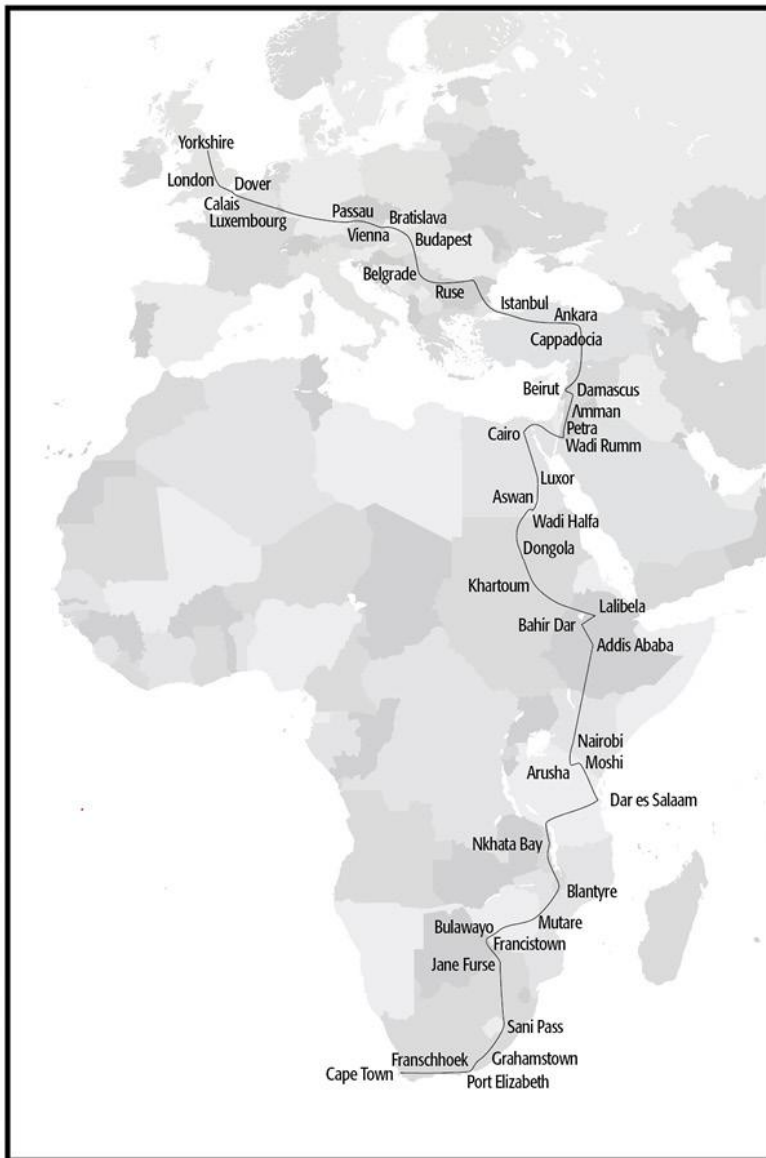
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THE ROAD AHEAD

All that you are experiencing now,
will become moods of future joys,
so bless it all.

– Ben Okri

Days are long on the road. Pack up and pedal into the dawn. Ride until sunset. It's easy to kill time but you can kill distance only by riding. Roads roll on forever, linking and connecting and reaching so far ahead that to think about the end is to think of something that feels impossible. So settle for today, for earning the small distance that the day's long hours will allow you. Roads drenched with rain, stinging hail, pulsing heat, slick ice, buffeted by winds on loose gravel, deep sand, tangled rocks, thick snow. Roads of smooth tarmac down mountainsides on sunny days with warm tailwinds and scenes of impossible beauty. Roads furious with traffic through grim slums, bland scrub, concrete jungles, polluted industrial wastelands. Monotony in motion. Roads too hard and too long that break you, expose you, scorn you, and would laugh at you if they cared. Roads too hard and too long that you pick yourself up from, have a word with yourself, and make it to an end you once doubted. Roads you have never ridden to places you have never seen and people you have never met. Days end. A different sunset, a different resting point, a different perspective. A little less road waits for you tomorrow. A little more road lies behind you.

Choose your road. Ride it well.

For my vast support team of strangers, who became friends.

If you're not hurting you're not riding hard enough.

If you're not hungry you've eaten too much.

If you're not cold you're carrying too many clothes.

If you know you will succeed it's too easy.

BEGINNING

Dreams in the dusty recesses of my mind.

TE Lawrence

My journey begins. The bags are packed, my head is shaved (a 'new beginning' type thing) and I can think of no convincing excuse to back out. I am trapped on a runaway train that I set in motion myself but now am powerless to stop. I don't want to do this. I wake up feeling physically sick with fear. I can't do this. I roll out of my bed for the last time, open my curtains for the last time and look at my beautiful view of the Yorkshire Dales for the last time. I realise that if I take stock of all these 'last times' then I will be in floods of tears before I even make it downstairs (for the last time). I have to do this. I focus my efforts on smiling for the sake of my parents. Everything seems surreal. Is this really happening to me? I don't have to do this, do I? I stuff a tin-foiled pack of sandwiches into my panniers as if I was heading out on a jolly day trip, awkwardly wheel my heavy, cumbersome bike out of the garage, wait while Dad asks the neighbour to take a final family photo, hug everyone goodbye, and I am off. As easy as that. I have crossed my first border: from dreaming of a big journey to being somebody who is on that journey.

The start is inauspicious. After 50 metres my mother yells at me for forgetting my helmet and I have to trudge back to the garage for it. I then realise that, despite the months of research into mountain roads of the Andes

and Sudanese border crossings, I have no idea which road to take out of my village. So I guess. I guess wrong. And my father shouts, and points me right.

Finally, I round the corner, my home is gone and it all hits me. The mounting pressure and months of denial all explode inside me, and I burst into tears. I have just left from my front door to try to cycle around the planet. I have left behind everyone that I love. If I was a brave man I would turn around right now. Go home. Go home, and admit that it was all too frightening. Instead I keep pedalling.

What on earth are you doing, Al? You bloody idiot.

This is one of the worst moments of my life.

SHORT ON BOLDNESS

Whatever you do, or dream you can, begin it.

Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

In order to ease myself in gently, and to say some more goodbyes, I stayed with friends along the way through England to Dover. By the end of the first day the face-punch of reality had kicked in. I was knackered. This was going to be difficult in every way. I spent the first night at my friend Richard's house in Cheshire after a less-than-gentle 85-mile debut day. I could barely eat, because of the nervous turmoil in my belly. After dinner I leant back in my chair, listened to one of his father's corny jokes, rubbed the unfamiliar texture of my shaved head, and felt like I was on a runaway train, unstoppable and out of control, yet I did not feel strong enough to hang on.

The next hundred miles to the home of a friend in Worcestershire was better, although it was hardly the gentle warm-up I hoped for. The last couple of months had been a blur of organisation and farewell parties, and no time for exercise. A group of friends gathered for a barbecue. Duncan managed to inflict himself with food poisoning and as I said goodbye to his prostrate form, I wished that it had been me. After one of his Mum's legendary fried breakfasts I was back in the saddle and the end of England was drawing nearer.

A sedate couple on racing bicycles asked me where I was heading on my fully loaded mountain bike. I couldn't bring myself to say 'Australia' as I had no faith that I was going to make it that far. I felt a fraud. I said 'Oxford,' and they were impressed. I wanted to go home. August sunshine danced through the trees and bees hummed their busy way. Families drove past, enjoying the warm day together. Huddles of friendly cows peered at me over the taut fences.

I wound my way through the traffic-jammed London labyrinth to Ziggy's home. My friend Ziggy was also leaving England in a few days to teach in the Botswanan bush for three years. He was having a large farewell party. I had chosen not to have a fanfare departure: perhaps I was thinking of a likely ignominious early return. With my loaded bike, which I had christened Rita, propped in the garden, people raved about my trip, but for once their incredulity struck home. Needing some space I climbed onto the roof of the house and looked over the orange haze of night-time London. Noisy laughter rose from the garden below, with the usual chatter about work, TV, gossip and a little drunken philosophising. I tried to remind myself that this comfortable swaddling was what I wanted to get away from.

I left Ziggy's house to a roar of thunder. Heavy grey clouds choked London and uncaring cars carved waves of rainwater over me. I cried my way out of London to Sevenoaks, a feeble 30 miles, before taking refuge with Arno, another friend from Oxford and the most English of all Frenchmen. I phoned Sarah from a chipped red

phone box and desperately wanted to see her. But I knew now how much I really loved her, and that I would quit if I saw her again.

I delayed for a day, enjoying watching England destroy Germany 5-1 in a qualifying match for the 2002 World Cup. Morale began to rise a little; how could it not after that game? Once I left Arno's I had no excuse to linger more. It was time to get going. Leaving England was a huge psychological barrier that I was very reluctant to cross, although I hoped that once I did it things would begin to appear rosier. On my last morning in England I made a conscious effort to keep my head up, to drink in details. If things went to plan I would not see her again for a very long time though I would surely think of home every day. The smallest, most mundane aspects of England would all seem fresh and new, yet welcomingly familiar when next I saw them.

I spent a long night in Dover's ferry port trying to find a comfortable position on a row of plastic seats with a ridge between each person's allocated individual buttock space. Throughout the night a recorded message piped up every couple of minutes, '*Bing, bong, bing, bong*: we would like to politely remind you that the parking zone outside is restricted to 10 minutes only. Thank you. *Bing, bong, bing, bong*: we would like to politely remind you that this is a no-smoking terminal. Thank you. *Bing, bong, bing, bong*: we would like to politely remind you that we have no intention of letting you get any sleep whatsoever on those special uncomfortable seats. Thank you.'

The ferry crossing was grim. The Great British Public were delighted that the bar was open at 7am and were boisterously enjoying shouting about how much lager they were going to drink before reaching Frog-land. I cycled out of the cavernous loading bay of the ferry and I was in France. The journey of a lifetime was underway and all I wanted to do was go home.

But I soon began enjoying being abroad. It is always an exciting sensation. I was due to meet a friend, Chris, in about a week's time in Luxembourg. He was leaving England a few days after me so I would ride slowly until he caught up with me and then we would ride together for a while. I left a graffitied message on a road sign for him saying that I was looking forward to seeing him again. I needed the company. My bike felt heavy, loaded with front and rear panniers and a large dry-bag bungeed on top of the rear rack. I had enough clothes to endure the Iranian winter, camping and cooking gear, spare parts, a spare tyre, tools, a Leatherman and enough books to fill a small library. I was carrying the SAS Survival Handbook (with manly plans that never materialised of catching my own food and navigating by the stars), a Book of Facts (to educate myself), a mini world Atlas (to plot and dream), a Teach Yourself to Draw book (my new project), a mini dictionary of quotations (for inspiration), the latest Harry Potter and the brick-like Penguin History of the World. A little excessive, perhaps, especially considering that I had not brought any underwear to save some weight.

I rode through the killing fields of the First World War around Arras. Half-remembered snatches of poems

came back to me, as I reflected sadly on the mad history of those peaceful green fields.

'He's a cheery old card, grunted Harry to Jack as they marched up to Arras with rifle and pack. But he did for them both with his plan of attack...'

'...the rifle's rapid rattle stutters out its hasty orisons...'

'... the old lie...'

The next day was my best so far. I only cried for a couple of minutes in the morning; things were improving. It was starting to sink in that I was actually doing it. I had actually left home with the pure purpose of making this journey. Nominally I had a goal but in reality I didn't. I would travel until I didn't want to anymore, until I had cured my wanderlust, until I had learned enough for now, suffered enough for now, tested myself enough for now and done all the things that this journey demanded of me, for now. Whether or not I could make it right round the world wasn't as important to me any more as having actually taken the first big step. I had learned already that the journey is the reward, and that the destination is purely for others.

The transition to the Euro was just months away and so my mother had given me all her long-hoarded European coins to spend. I decided on a little detour to Belgium for some retail therapy. It was about 10 kilometres out of my way to the first café across the border. I slapped down my cash on the counter, confident of burgers and coffee. When the smiling girl had removed all the out-of-date coins there was still a respectable little pile of coinage. I asked for as much food as I could buy. She

handed me a can of Coke and three small chocolate bars and scooped my coins into the till. A little disappointed at my booty I turned around and pedalled back to France. Oh well. I sang to the cows, "I'm the king of the world: I've got a can of Coke and three chocolate bars." It was dehydrated chicken noodle soup for dinner but this time with chocolate for dessert. I was learning to be grateful for small rewards.

I had no map as I was still harbouring romantic notions of ambling unfettered across the globe. The novelty of being lost had not yet worn thin. Surprisingly, given our organisational skills, both Chris and I arrived in Luxembourg on the prearranged day. It was good to see him again. Chris was the friend of a friend and we had met the year before when the three of us cycled across South America. Chris looks like a dreadlocked Harry Potter, but beneath his slight frame lies a steel core and a foolish sense of humour. He was going to ride with me to Istanbul.

Summer was fading into autumn. Toes and noses stung in the crisp dawns. I enjoyed the sight of the World's Fattest Moped Rider, cheerfully straddling his tiny machine with his legs sticking out, the tyres squashed flat and the engine screaming in protest. Lilac crocuses filled a wet meadow and brown cows crunched them in the rain. The rain fell, day after day. My feet turned white and wrinkly being permanently wet for so long. One day as we ate jam sandwiches on a pavement we looked jealously at a table of girls eating huge burgers in a restaurant. Burgers were beyond our budgets.

One ordinary wet morning we cycled with a bike shop owner who was out on his morning training ride. He had caught us up and slowed down to ride with us. He led us at a cracking pace down winding little cycle tracks and shortcuts.

He didn't speak any English and Chris spoke no German so I translated as well as my school-level German would allow:

"I think that he just said that an aeroplane crashed into the World Trade Centre in New York yesterday...."

It was September 12th 2001.

The next couple of weeks seem peculiar now with the perspective of hindsight. The whole world was frantic, like ants in a damaged nest. The repercussions from the terrorist attacks rushed across the world, waves that continue to wash over us all today. Meanwhile, on the banks of the Danube, Chris and I were cycling to Budapest. We were angered and saddened by the attacks, and anxious and unsure about their implications, but it was hard to feel connected with the world, our world, while we were riding through a country where we knew no-one and no-one knew us and the road was stunning and the sun shone and the river flowed peacefully. Sunshine did not feel appropriate to how we felt we should be feeling.

Days rolled by through densely wooded valleys and beneath striking outcrops of rock, perched with churches and castles. There were lots of middle-aged cyclists ambling along in ludicrous shell suits and ill-fitting lycra. Some cyclists would pass us twice, firstly

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