

The Right Way Up: A View from a Novice

Until late last year, motorbikes had not been a part of my life, nor had I heard of 'The Long Way Round' or 'The Wrong Way Down' or thought of Ewan McGregor as anybody but the guy from Trainspotting and that silly movie with Nicole Kidman.

As a boy I didn't have the regulation 50 cc motorbike that most of my school mates seemed to have as soon as they were able to pass their learner's licenses, nor did I currently have much desire to tempt fate further than my gentle daily commute by car to work and back.

This was largely due to my mother's formative influence who, to this day, views anything of a two wheeled and motorized variety as positioned somewhere between Beelzebub and the fires of hell in terms of her affections.

Having grown up with this as the official party view, it is not surprising then that when I mounted a brand new BMW 1200 GS Adventure in November of last year, it was with a mix of healthy respect and screaming terror that I turned the key and appreciated the purring growl of the big engine.

This, I thought to myself, is insanity " Well my boy, you have just taken it one step too far - you can't pull out now, this is Icarus flying too close to the sun, this is Sundance taking a suicidal stand at the OK Coral so as not to look silly in front of his mates, this is 260kg too much bike for you to chew and swallow- you numb skull !" - or feelings to that effect.

You see, the problem with the beast connected to the key that I had just turned was that courtesy of a kindly BMW dealer, it had been delivered into my home garage and now belonged to me. Added to this was the nagging problem that by turning the key, I had just exhausted the sum total of my entire technical knowledge of this motorbike and was at a loss as to what to do next. Given that the bike was here and it had started, I could no longer use good old fashioned denial as a remedy for this situation and so my mind moved swiftly onto the obvious next step, blame.

I distinctly remembered the conversation that had started this lunacy. Sitting with the customary Amstel Lager in hand, my good mate Carlo Gonzaga had explained that he and Curt Silver, another great friend of both of ours and an experienced biker had decided that they were going to ride to London from South Africa by motorbike. I could sense that there was a request coming in this explanation that would probably involve expense and discomfort on my part. 'Why don't you come and drive backup for us in your Landrover Discovery ?' came the innocent question. I considered this deeply for about 2 seconds – the picture of spending a month alone with my iPod, following a plume of dust up the African continent, while knocking a large chunk of value off my

brand new Discovery ranked closely up there with sawing my legs off and walking over broken glass.

The possibility, however, of these two having more fun than me was also not acceptable.

In hind sight, I know now that this was a defining moment - this is the point at which I could have wished my two bike mad friends luck and walked away quietly into the night.

Not so, however, in a flash of pure genius my retort banished the image of the lonely support vehicle forever. "Why don't I buy a bike and come with you ?".

And so it was that I reconfirmed that nobody ever had a bad idea after 6 beers.

In the ensuing excitement, the trip expanded to include Carlo's dad Luigi and turned into an attempt to assail the world record for a land pizza delivery by delivering a Scooters Pizza from Johannesburg to London. Given that we are all involved in some way or another with Taste Holdings, parent of the Scooters Pizza franchise pizza delivery chain, the pizza delivery angle made perfect sense in our tiny little brains at the time.

The world record bit would turn out to be the easiest of our challenges given that, understandably, to date nobody had bothered to set such a silly record.

So, blame successfully assigned, which brought me back to my immediate issue. I had a brute of a motorbike growling cheerfully to itself in the middle of my garage and I didn't yet have enough skill to even move it aside to accommodate my car.

The very next milestone in my motor biking career proved to be two profound mechanical discoveries that both surprised and amazed me. One, there is no fan cooling my bike's radiator and two, the battery does not charge unless the bike is engaged and moving. How, you might ask yourself, would someone so new to the art of motorcycling happen upon two such thundering discoveries. Well simple, my unriden bike showed a battery warning icon and in my concern, I started the ignition to allow it to charge and promptly forgot that I had the bike running while I nipped inside to make some toast or some other pressing concern.

Red faced and feeling more than a little silly, I found myself stuttering and mumbling my way through an explanation to my local BMW mechanic when he arrived to trailer my sorry mess of a bike in to the workshop. Oil had leaked everywhere through a melted oil sight glass, several gaskets had been destroyed and the engine housing had changed color from a shiny silver to a noble looking burnished gold when the bike quietly approached the temperature of the sun as it

growled away to itself stationary and alone in my garage. Not a good start. Mercifully, the mechanic managed to keep a straight face through my explanation before admitting that he had not dealt with a similar situation before so would have to completely strip and rebuild the engine before he could give me any indication as to whether the bike would ever start again.

I wondered secretly to myself whether it would not be better to just slip this guy some cash to drop the bike into the Jukskei river and deliver me a new one rather than face the ridicule that I knew would be coming from my understanding friends.

Anyhow, a week or so and a further dent in my overdraft later, she was back in my garage, as big and intimidating as ever but with a thoroughly run in engine but no further lasting injury.

The exact order of events now escapes me but certainly, I accepted my fate and threw myself in to conquering this mighty bike. I survived lessons on a school field, lessons on the banks of the Jukskei river, basic lessons on the road, all administered by the long suffering Carlo who by now had been unanimously appointed expedition leader of our hair brained pizza delivery scheme.

In the three months that it took me to successfully get an appointment for a learners license I managed to rack up over a thousand km's in the residential estate that I live. I was beginning to feel decidedly like a gold fish, in fact, it occurred to me that I might want to install a plastic ship wreck and some sea weed on my route around and around the estate. But, thankfully, the day came when I could emerge from our estate, the ink not yet dry on my learners license, point my bike at the horizon and lean into the throttle.

This got me about 2 km away and back and I don't think that I ever abandoned the safety of third gear but I can't remember a greater sense of achievement in my 33 and a bit years. Maybe there was something to this motor biking thing after all !

"Falling is a state of mind, if you look down, you will go down." For somebody that had had more than a passing acquaintance with physics at University, I wasn't convinced. As far as I was concerned, with out any opposing force, gravity would cause any object (and most especially a 110 kg learner motor cyclist) to accelerate towards the center of the earth at roughly a constant 10 meters per second. And when the ground interrupted this acceleration it would become inevitably clear just how little your state of mind had to do with things.

This was the first of several on and off road BMW bike courses that I would do in trying to master the skills required not to provoke the laws of gravity into action. It was also the first of many sound bites that I would hear from all sorts of people that actually knew how to pilot a motorbike properly. "Keep the black stuff on the road" (I thought this one was particularly helpful). "Those who ride alone, die alone" (nice ring to it). "Stand up, look up, roll on". "There are old riders and bold riders but few old, bold riders" (priceless).

Finally it dawned on me, motor biking is as much art as science, you've got to stop thinking about riding and start feeling it more. Armed with this realization, all these helpful sound bites started making a lot more sense and things fell into place.

In the interim, I had also put in to practice a few of my newly learned emergency stopping techniques and unexpectedly fallen off of my bike several times. As shaken as these experiences had left me, everyone built my confidence. The worst fall had been on my first patch of gravel road somewhere near Dullstroom. As is typically the case, it took about hundred meters of gravel for me to decide that dirt was easy and about five more kilometers to become 'windgat' enough to unexpectedly throw myself off of the bike in a spectacular sliding put down that left me puzzling over the exact sequence of events and put the first of several battle scars on my 'big girl'. While lying on my back in the dust waiting for my basic heart lung functions to restart I reflected that even more surprising than the fact that I was lying in the dust on my back was how relieved I felt that I had finally had a decent fall and I clearly wasn't dead ! I had proved conclusively that falling off a GS 1200 Adventure did not automatically result in a death sentence. Sure it wasn't pretty but I was a alive and this was a good thing.

This fall was a major boost to my general biking confidence and therefore also a contributing factor to my next near death experience on a motorbike which did not take long coming at all. In between holding down a day job as the CEO of Taste Holdings and planning the Africa trip Carlo also managed to find time to make an honest woman of his wonderful but long suffering girlfriend and fiancé, Tamryn earlier in this year. With friends and family converging from around the world for the wedding, this put the four co-conspirators, including our London based conspirator, Curt, in roughly the same geography for long enough to plan a test ride. What we were going to test, none of us were sure but it sounded good enough to get us all a free pass from our wives and concubines and we didn't waist any time in pointing our bikes in the direction of Long Tom pass with the intention of then turning around and heading down into Lesotho for a crack at the road up to Katse dam and back.

The eyes of the Toyota Corolla driver were so big through his front windscreen that I suspect he is still trying to get the stretch marks out of his forehead. To be fair, he had every reason for his eyes to be wide as he had rounded a hair pin bend on an Mpumalanga pass to be greeted by an idiot on a large motor bike squarely on the wrong side of the road, hanging off the side of his bike like he was turning a racing yacht in a gale, left foot peg writing the story of the poorly judged turn in the tar mac. The quick reflexes of this unknown motorist were the only things that came between both of us and total tragedy that morning. That incident remains printed on my brain like a cattle brand and with any luck will remain as a sign posted lesson in respect for motor biking that will see me through the rest of my two wheeled career. Needless to say, I limped down the

rest of the pass – my helmet fogged up from heavy breathing – and short of doing a three point turn through the remainder of the hair pin bends down the pass, had gathered a procession of lumber trucks wanting to over take me by the time I caught up with my far more capable friends having coffee in Pilgrim's rest.

From here I managed to ring up a few more less potentially tragic but no less spectacular incidents. I am casting my mind back to Jan Dutoit's three day BMW off road course on his farm near Amersfoort. Here Jan gets some times very inexperienced off road riders to do things with their bikes that without doubt defy logic and in some cases seem to defy physics. This one was even recorded on DVD which shows beyond deniability that I did indeed manage to jump a GS 1200 Adventure, put the bike down in an explosion of dust and smash the windscreen with my chest all in one graceful motion while stuffing up a hopelessly simple training maneuver.

Looking through my recent medical aid submissions, though, my crowning achievement to date must surely have been achieved on a sandy track somewhere between the tar road and Kubu Island in the Makgadigadi pans in Botswana. Here I managed to somersault a GS 1200 Adventure off a deep sand track into a small thorn tree where it came to a firm rest. This might have been amusing had I done it on purpose and not been bitch slapped into the ground by the aforementioned Kalahari sand track, milliseconds before my bike came to rest. Fortunately, nothing that the wonders of modern medicine could not make short work of.

I have also survived the mind numbing, indifferent, incompetent and arrogant bureaucrats that are sworn to protect motorbike drivers licenses every where from the horrible fate of actually being issued to any member of the motor biking public. In the 7 months that it took me just to get a booking for a license (I ended up doing it in Vanderbijl Park of all places), I added up just over one and a half solid working weeks of phone calls to the Gauteng Contact Centre, trips to several different licensing offices, lost bookings and endless hours in pointless queues in Gauteng and surrounding municipalities that were invested in procuring my license booking. Needless to say, the test itself was almost too easy after the long road getting there.

Returning to Fourways, license in hand, I half expected to be received by a ticker tape parade through Fourways Crossing on my way home.

In planning 'The Epic Scooters Pizza Delivery' as our trip has become known, each of the four Epic participants has taken specific tasks that were critical to the success of the trip and run with them. I drew straws for the medical kit, medical evacuation plans, satellite communications, the Carnet de Passage for our bikes, getting a full set of tires and spares to Nairobi and optimistically, for arranging the logistics of returning our bikes from London.

Out of a sense of duty to my parents, I studied at university and almost by accident, earned a BSc degree in Biology and as such, had cause to study a whole bunch of the microscopic nasties that can inflict all manner of death and discomfort on the inhabitants of the African continent. Even so, I was dismayed at the number of vaccinations that my doctor insisted on when I explained my intentions to him. "You are going where, to do what?". By now I was getting used this reaction to a description of our planned trip but the sudden out break of scribbling on a prescription pad had me a little worried as this was an entirely new reaction to add to the list. "I hope that you have thought long and hard about the dangers you will be exposing yourself to, this is going to be no ordinary vaccination course and I am going to need to see you three or four times to complete the regime".

Not that I had a choice in the matter, Dr Essey of Intercare in Fourways turned out to be an extremely enthusiastic and useful ally in advising our medical campaign for the trip. He had us testing different malaria prophylactics for adverse reactions, vaccinated us against every disease in the known world (including some that I am convinced he made up) and advised us in putting together a full battery of treatments for most conceivable illness and injury scenarios on the trip. After some basic medical training with him on the application of our kit, we were good to go.

Of course the big issue relating to our health would be the ability to make the dreaded call in the case of disaster and have somebody care enough to fly a fast airplane to places that they may not have heard of to come and fetch us and patch us back together again. For anybody to care this much about us, I discovered, required that we sign a contract and part with some money, lots of it. Even willing as we were, to throw money at the problem, this was still not going to be as easy as it might sound. Firstly, the standard big travel insurance brokers in South Africa wouldn't touch us with their neighbor's barge pole, in fact, I could hear their underwriters laughing down the phone at them. Secondly, when we did find somebody willing to at least entertain our story, the idea of passing through Sudan ("Sure there's a civil war on the go but that's much further west than where we are going to be ...") and Libya proved too much and our medical cover became qualified with no liability for passage through these countries. Eventually a random search through Google turned up a nice Danish company, IHI that agreed to cover us through their Swiss brokers in Cape Town for a very reasonable sum of money. I suspect that they have either never been to Africa or felt sorry for us.

But determined not look a Scandinavian gift horse in the mouth, we have gratefully signed the contract and run.

Not content with a simple south to north traverse of the African continent on a motorbike, we obviously also chose to strap a take away pizza to the back of one of the bikes, ensconced in a

portable freezer. As you can imagine this caused no end of excitement amongst the providers of the erstwhile pizza, Scooters Pizza and before we knew it, we were embroiled in a fully fledged media campaign with yours truly as one of the four reluctant stars. One of the keys to any successful reality media campaign is, we were to discover, reality and lots of it, delivered fresh, up to the minute and juicy, not dissimilar to a take away pizza. This meant of course that we would have to be in contact constantly through out the trip with the ability to upload content for consumption on web, print, radio and TV. No problem, enter Blue Sky Communications. Led fearlessly by Pedro Camacho, Blue Sky hooked us up in no time with a BGAN data terminal and two satellite phones that, between them, cover the full spectrum of satellite networks irradiating the eastern side of the continent and will allow us unfettered voice and data contact with the outside world.

No discussion of a trans- Africa trip would be complete with out mentioning the infamous Carnet de Passage. This ignominious (yes, I looked up this word specially) little piece of paper is what several of the countries on our route require to ensure that we don't cunningly sell our bikes while in transit through the country and make a daring escape by camel, having pocketed the proceeds of the sale without paying tax or duty. The kicker here is that you need your bank to provide a guarantee on your behalf of up to 200% of the value of your vehicle in favor of our friends at the AA South Africa in order to get a Carnet that includes Egypt. Now to be fair, I would much rather be providing a guarantee of this amount of moola to the AA than to the Egyptian government itself, but it does not lessen the sting of having to pony up the value to underwrite the guarantee and is not for the financially faint hearted.

Indeed, having learned that the only legal way into Egypt from the Sudan is to ride across several thousand kilometers of sand through the world's biggest desert, find the only large body of fresh water for several million square kilometers, get on a ship and sail to the top of this Lake Nasser before getting off, clearing customs into Egypt and riding for several thousand more kilometers of desert, I may not be surprised by anything else that Egypt has to offer.

Anyhow, so here we are now in August of 2007 and to be honest, we are running out of excuses not to go on this crazy trip. I will have completed five on and off road bike courses by the time we leave and have about 7000 km on a bike, under my belt. My GS will have been into a workshop for damage repair at least four times in the 10 months that I have owned it.

History will judge the wisdom of 'The Epic Scooters Pizza Delivery' and the novice that thought he could.

Onwards, inevitably to D-Day and our 31st August departure date.

<http://www.theepicscooterspizzadelivery.co.za>