

ESCAPE



Shedding light on the dark

Lee Mears takes adventurers into deepest Africa on BMW 650 Dakar bikes. Here he talks about his latest gruelling four-month journey

I AM punching the air, whooping and yelling and wearing the broad grin of a man in the midst of one of the best days of his life. Sweat stings my eyes, both arms and wrists ache like mad and my heart is thumping in my chest so hard I can almost hear it. Looking at my fellow riders, who have arrived at this spot just a few moments before me, I see several versions of myself. Dirt encrusted, unshaven and all still straddling their bikes – that grin is on everyone's face. The grin which simply says: "This is a day I am never going to forget".

It is, in fact, day number one hundred and twelve in Africa and we find ourselves at the crescendo of an epic, four month journey from

London to Cape Town, riding into the remote and spectacular mountains of Angola. We've been going all day and have not seen another human being for 150 miles.

The trail we are following, in effect the main road between two of the country's largest towns, is little more than a goat track. This faintest of scars on the landscape has led us deep into Angola's uninhabited southern hills. Today we have so far conquered a number of impossibly steep and rocky ascents on our way south. Each one has been more challenging than the last, and with every successful climb the summit invariably pays host to the same jubilant scenes and relieved celebrations. Wide eyes and

huge grins accompany eager tales of how close we each came to catastrophe as our bikes scrambled, bounced and lurched from one rock to the next – a precipice perilously close to our left, a jagged rock face hemming us in to our right. There is no option on these ascents but to attack, keep momentum, and go for it. Even when everything seems to be going horribly wrong the only option is more throttle, keep attacking and whatever happens, just stay on the bike – hesitate and all is lost. There is no alternative "easy" route and there is no turning back – the sheer drama of each climb is intoxicating.

Later that evening, after such an exhausting, exhilarating day, we set up camp

nestled on a hill in what truly is deepest Africa. The sun dies, the breeze drops and the world falls dark and completely silent. It is the kind of intense silence that I never experienced anywhere before or since. It feels like we are the only people left on earth and our remoteness is palpable and slightly unnerving. Governments could be falling and natural disasters striking the world over – we would not know and neither would we care.

As the campfire crackles into life and warms us in the rapidly chilling night air, talk soon moves on to reminiscing. The world that we have left behind seems so far away to us all – the jobs, the routine, the bills and the bureaucracy of our Western lives a distant memory that makes us almost disbelieve that it ever existed at all. Did we really put up with it for so long? The rain, the mind-numbing television, the traffic, the daily grind – and all repeated over and over, day after day.

After nearly two days of exhilarating but tiring desert trails, we have our first inju-

ry. Rod, a steady, experienced and highly competent rider has taken an unlucky tumble. Falling awkwardly he is concussed and has hurt his shoulder. With his bike in the support vehicle's trailer and himself riding up front we continue our epic ride across the vast sands of the

'Keep attacking and whatever happens, just stay on the bike'

Sahara towards the promise of tarmac, a clean hospital for Rod, and a cold beer for the rest of us. He is a tough character and spends another night in the desert before we are able to reach the medical centre in Mauritania's capital and hand him over to the doctor.

It is at times like this that the seemingly endless pre-expedition planning pays off. The hours spent sat in my office until late at night

thinking up endless "worst-case" scenarios, how to prevent them, or if all else fails what to do when the scenario unfortunately becomes reality. The next day Rod is X-rayed and the news, which we all suspected but desperately hoped we would not hear, is that he has a broken collarbone and his trip is over. We lose a popular member of our team and we are gutted for him.

After the crazy temperatures of the West African Sahel the world thankfully cools as we travel south into the equatorial belt.

The adventures and experiences do not cease as the days and weeks pass, the bustle and chaos of Africa's towns and cities, the innocent tranquility of its rural villages and the boundless hospitality of its people. The corrupt border guards – amusing and exasperating in equal measures, the children – furiously waving and smiling at us as we ride by, or manically chanting as if the Dakar rally itself had come to town.

Chased by rampaging baboons in Ghana, laid low

1. Imagine whole days of riding on mountain tracks like these in Angola

2. A burnt-out tank is evidence of Angola's war-torn legacy

3. Souvenir sellers in Mali spot a likely customer

4. A quick roadside puncture repair, Gambia-style

5. Good practise for the Weston beach race in Morocco

6. Getting ready for a hard day's riding in Mauritania

7. At the site of a destroyed bridge in Angola. Best find another route...

8. Time for a group photo at the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa

9. Something resembling a road in Namibia



continent

with malaria in Togo, we move on into Nigeria – the world's most corrupt country – where the world's friendliest and most welcoming people do their best to redress the balance. As our journey progresses so the craziness of each day becomes the norm, the routine of packing kit and jumping on bikes every morning becomes a way of life, and the colour, sounds and smells of Africa which fill each day feel like they will be there forever.

From dense rainforests in Cameroon and Gabon, the humidity begins to subside as the vegetation thins. Gradually we begin to emerge from the tropics and into the southern hemisphere. This is the most challenging section of the expedition. Central Africa has always been tough with difficult borders, terrible roads, civil conflict and the ever-changing and corrupt governments.

Finally we come to the two great central African cities, Brazzaville and Kinshasa, facing each other over the vast, almost biblical Congo

River – regional centres of culture and conflict where the streets are lined with heaving bars and desperate beggars.

We need to cross from one city to the other which means getting on to the trans-Congo river boat, an experience that will stay with us all forever. The blind and crippled inhabitants of these two remote and imposing cities can ride the ferry boat for free and are consequently used by merchants to transport all kinds of goods for trade on each side of the river. The manic rush to get on-board when the boat docks is physically intense and fascinating. The guards, sadistically striking out with whips at any poor soul who does not move out of their way fast enough, are despised and feared by all. The sweating lads loaded up with 120kg of flour each, dash on near-collapsing legs to the shore.

Amongst all of this frantic activity are a bunch of motorcycles with their travel worn riders staring in disbelief at the goings on around them. It is Africa at its most

raw and a display of the continent's great strengths and weaknesses. The chaos and cruelty equally matched by the people's resilience, unflinching humor and sense of kinship. We make it on to the boat, crammed in amongst the bags of flour and in the depths of a great

'We keep looking at each other with great smiles of disbelief'

thrang of people who have been fortunate enough to make it on too. The noise is immense, the heat oppressing and the experience so intense that we keep looking at each other with great smiles of disbelief – we want to take pictures but the fact that this is an international border crossing means to do so could have serious repercussions. The chaos is repeated as the boat docks on the far side of the river,

and after the great scramble to disembark we are in Kinshasa, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

And so, a week or so later, our journey brings us to this remote Angolan hilltop that is when the adventure slows down into something a lot more relaxed and a lot less demanding as we emerge into what may be termed "civilisation".

We are all looking forward to some easier traveling, but at the same time we are all fully aware that these difficult regions are the ones to savour the most. Soon however, it will be time to re-acquaint ourselves with the western world before we re-join the friends and family left behind.

For now however, we can savor where we are, what we have so far experienced, and what we have to look forward to tomorrow. Wake up, pack up, jump on our bikes and start riding into another unpredictable, challenging, amazing day in Africa.

■ **If you fancy going on a gruelling four month tour of Africa, visit www.kuduexpeditions.com**

TOP TEN TRAVEL DON'TS

A thumbs-up is harmless, right? Try telling that to an angry Iranian



HORIZONS Unlimited Founder Grant Johnson (www.horizonsunlimited.com) knows a thing or two about how not to upset locals in foreign climes. Here are his top tips on avoiding any far-flung faux pas.

According to social anthropologist Edward Hall 60% of all our communication with others is non-verbal – in other words, gestures, body language and facial expressions. When communicating with people from another culture, much is the same, for example raised eyebrows when you meet someone is an open invitation to talk, and crossed arms can be 'I'm not listening'. But there are also many cultural differences that you wouldn't expect, even from one western country to another. There are lots of differences that are minor and won't cause a big problem, but here are the Top 10 DON'T Do's.

1. SOLE SURVIVOR

IN the Middle East and Thailand just showing the soles of the feet to someone is very rude, as you are showing the lowest and dirtiest part of your body, a big problem when you are in someone's house as a guest and sitting on the floor and trying to get comfortable! And in Thailand, putting feet, socks or shoes over or beside someone's head is a huge insult!

2. HANDY ADVICE

WHEN in Greece – don't refuse something by putting your hand up, like a policeman in Britain saying "stop". You're essentially throwing sh*t at them, a gesture which goes back to the Acropolis and a common treatment of war prisoners.

3. JUST FRIENDS

In an Arab country if you have become friends with someone, and you're walking together, he may take your (male) hand in his! DON'T yank your hand away, that would be a gesture of huge disrespect – he is showing you great respect and friendship.

4. IS THAT OK?

DON'T use the "OK" (thumb meeting forefinger in a circle) sign; in Latin America it's "you asshole"! In France, it means a little less; worthless or not ok. In Brazil, Russian and Germany it's the sign for... well I don't think such a private orifice can be mentioned here... And in



Showing the soles of your feet is offensive in Thailand

Japan, it means "money" – so perhaps you are expecting a bribe. In Turkey, OK means "homosexual", and in Iran it's just plain rude.

5. HITCHHIKING

IF your bike is broken in Nigeria, don't try and get a ride by sticking your thumb out; you're saying f*** you, and that car screeching to a stop is more likely to be some guys more intent on giving you a right thumping than a ride. Curiously, it's also the same in Iran.

6. BUSINESS TIME

TREAT a business card with great respect in Japan – receive it with both hands and pass it with both hands so they can read it as they receive it – and stop and read it for a bit, and put it on the table tidily, so you can read it during the meeting. DON'T put it in your hip pocket, you are parking your ass on it! But in much of the Middle East and the rest of Asia, use ONE hand – the right hand – see next...

7. LEFT ALONE

DON'T eat with your left hand, or hand someone even a plate of food with your left hand, as the left hand is the one used for washing yourself when there's no toilet paper and is considered very unclean – and insulting!

Best to sit on your left hand. **8. SHAKING ALL OVER** Shaking hands is normal in our culture, but not in all – and a bone-crushing grip in the Middle East is a big sign of aggression – if you want to convince a bureaucrat to sort out your difficulties with paperwork it's not a good start. A light gentle shake is the norm. And shaking hands with a child in Iran shows respect for the child's parents – a good start!

9. KISSED OFF

It's best not to initiate cheek-kissing, it's too complicated to know when! But when you shake hands with someone in an appropriate country, if they feel they know you well enough, you'll feel a "tug" on your hand – that's the hint to move in – and lean to your left to start. In Latin America it's only one cheek "kiss" – really "air kissing", not a kiss of the cheek, while in Russia it's three times – side to side to side!

10. SNAP HAPPY

IN some cultures, you are "stealing the soul" with a photograph and it's actually terrifying to them. I've seen this fear response in places as far apart as Guatemala and Kenya. And if they want payment, it's always too much – don't just give what they ask for, bargain a bit.

Don't do this in Brazil, unless you want a kicking

