



Taking stock in the Sahara

We've all dreamed of the ultimate trip to the Sahara and crossing one of the most inhospitable places on earth by motorcycle. Lee Mears did just that and survived to tell the tale in his own inimitable way

"Okay," I say, "let's take stock". The facts of our current predicament are this. We are 10 motorcycles and one 4x4 with a fully-loaded trailer, sat on the beach deep in the Mauritanian Sahara. I'm stood on a large rock with the tide washing in and out over my feet. There isn't a single road for more than 70 miles in any direction. To our front, cutting imposingly across the sandy beach, is a big, rocky ledge jutting into the rolling surf which bars our progress. To our right is the sea and the tide is coming in at an alarming rate. To our left are impenetrable sand dunes nearly 100ft high. Approximately 50 metres to my rear is a motorcycle with a burned out clutch which is – quite reasonably – refusing to be ridden anywhere. About three miles ahead and beyond the rocky outcrop yet to be negotiated, is the only place within 20 miles where we can get off this beach and away from the ominously encroaching water. Furthermore, we had about one hour of daylight left...

I look out to sea as my brain, somewhat fried by the unrelenting Saharan sun, slowly ambles into life as it searches for solutions to my glut of dilemmas. From my right I hear the familiar sound of a 650cc single approaching. I look round to see Christie heading towards me at speed. Christie has already secured a reputation for what can only be described as an "uninhibited" riding style wherever sand is involved. It is no surprise to me then that he should turn up, and with a cursory glance at the rocky ledge barring his path, select a route, and with a twist of his wrist simply get on with it. At this point his standing as a confident, if somewhat maverick sand rider was – we all believed – assured. Eyes of steely determination shone out from within his helmet as the bike lurched off the flat beach and rose onto the thick, soft and rutted sand which topped the rocky ledge.

You can tell a lot from looking into a man's eyes – whether or not he is in control of his motorcycle for one thing. As the bike rose onto the ledge and into

the soft sand, eyes of steely determination changed into eyes of confusion. Eyes of confusion, in turn changed into eyes of panic as the bike heaved towards the cliff edge and the surf beneath. Finally eyes of panic turned to eyes of calm resignation as motorcycle and rider, now reconciled to their fate, disappeared over the edge and into the sea below. "Okay," I think again, "let's take stock".

We are still in the early stages of a marathon four-month expedition from the UK to Cape Town. Most riders are genuine off-road novices, and our excursion out into the wilds of the Sahara has already generated enough stories to bore countless grandchildren with in years to come. That is, after all, why we are here. The 300 miles of desert that separate North Africa from sub-Saharan 'black' Africa have long been a part of overlanding folklore. It was a right of passage which the intrepid traveller had no choice but to tackle.

There was simply no road linking the north of the



Re-grouping in Mauritania



Camped out in the desert



Fixing the clutch in the middle of the night



Riding along the beach in Mauritania

Sahara to the south – at least not for 5,000 miles anyway. That was until a brand new trans-Saharan highway was completed last year which removed the need to tackle the desert head on. For the local inhabitants the new road is a blessing. It brings commerce, convenience and a real chance for progress which will quite simply change the lives of thousands for the better. It is our worst nightmare however. That the globe should develop to the extent that we are deprived of our adventures is intolerable. We therefore choose to ignore the new road. For us it simply does not exist.

On our arrival in Mauritania, Benny, my usual guide, has apparently fallen ill. I request another fearing that perhaps the new tarmac has made them all redundant. A small schoolboy is presented to me with an assurance that “he knows the way”. I sense he knows the way as much as I do – keep heading south and you’ll get there eventually. The fact is that most who venture into the desert ill prepared and ill advised make it to their destination somehow.

Some don’t. Just days before our arrival, a truck filled with gap year students and mistaken career breakers decided the desert route would be more fun than taking the tarmac. Without a guide and without a clue they disappeared into the wilderness. Nouadhibou was filled with righteous and smug locals eager to recount their story of near disaster. “Stuck for 7 days! They nearly didn’t make it

back!” The hapless mis-adventurers had been lucky and limped back to their starting point a week after leaving. They endured days of rationed water and soul-sapping digging in severe heat, desperate for a sight of tarmac – or another human being at least. It’s the stuff nightmares are made of. My earnest looking guide – 14 years of age at the most – was dismissed as I looked up to see Benny marching into the campsite. Impossibly tall and unfeasibly cool in his immaculate flowing robes and wrap-around sunglasses, he has all the hallmarks of the genuine Saharan guide.

And so here we are, two days later and 200 miles into the desert. It has so far epitomized all of the reasons for coming here in the first place. Tough, hot, testing riding means we are all thoroughly exhausted, but at the same time we know that what we are doing is something very special. Most riders’ lack of off-road experience means low speed spills have been had by almost all, but that is to be expected. Training for the expedition had begun on a freezing cold March morning near Peterborough. Negotiating the slimy, waterlogged mud of Cambridgeshire may be good practice for the central African rainforests, but riding in sand is a pretty unique skill which can only be acquired in the sand.

For this reason we had spent some time in northern Morocco trying to do just that. There’s nothing quite like having to pick up a 200 kg

motorcycle in the desert heat to instil in any novice rider a resolve to not fall off. Under the guidance of Mike (our expedition mechanic) the basic skills for preventing rider and bike going their separate ways in soft sand was being gained. A mispent youth riding in the deserts around Dubai, and a veteran of the prestigious UAE Desert Challenge, ensured that under his instruction the ‘knack’ was generally quick in coming.

A week or so later and with one final practice session under our belts it is time to leave the black stuff for the next 300 miles. As we turn off the pristine tarmac and head into the desert I can’t help but feel an incredible sense of nervous excitement. This is what it is all about! I’m looking at 10 motorcycles snaking their way to the sandy horizon before me and in spite of the nervous excitement I’m feeling, I’m grinning like a Cheshire cat. My life in the UK – the rain, work, evenings in front of mindless television – seems a million miles away and has quite simply lost all relevance to me now. For the next three days my ‘other life’ does not enter my mind for a single second. The first 60 or 70 miles are fairly slow going with rocky tracks and the occasional patch of soft sand. A few minor ‘offs’ are had, but with each passing hour the confidence of the riders grows and grows. At the end of day one we set up camp way out in the Saharan wilderness. The wind is blowing and our evening meal consists of a distinctly

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sandy spaghetti bolognese which is eagerly crunched through by all. Bikes are given the once over and very soon the only sounds to be heard in our nomad's campsite are snores.

Day two sees us crossing vast and featureless desert plains and speeds pick up considerably. As our route takes us towards the coast the pistes become progressively sandier and tough going. It becomes tiring work, mentally and physically. The 10 miles of particularly soft tracks leading down to the beach require constant and intense concentration, and it is a weary party of travellers which eventually meets up with the sea by late afternoon on the second day. For this section of the route timing is crucial. Start off along the beach at the wrong time of day and you risk getting caught out by the incoming tide. Tall sand dunes hem in the beach much of the time and prevent any escape from high tide. We need to push on or risk being trapped. As we head down the shoreline we pass the skeleton of a bus, half buried in sand and in several feet of water. Yes... we need to make progress. We cover good distance until we reach the obstacle on which I am now stood, and off which Christie has just ridden.

Benny is trying to convince me that if I wait for exactly the right moment to drive - just as the water begins to recede between waves - the 4x4 will easily make it round the rocky ledge just by continuing along the beach. An overwhelming sense of déjà-vu

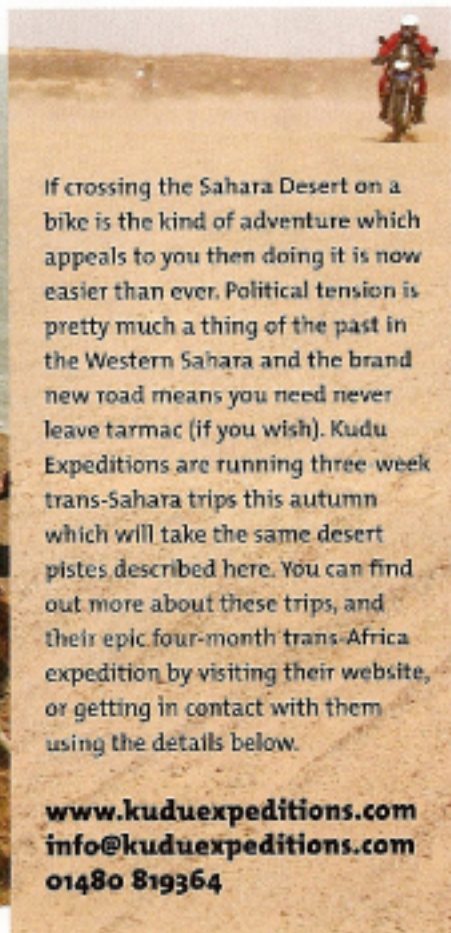
tells me otherwise. Two years ago I had been travelling on my old Tenere with some friends in a car when we reached this exact same spot. A few minutes later their car was stuck in the surf, and with each retreating wave it slipped a few more inches towards the open sea. It was only frantic shovelling, a last ditch effort and a near miracle that enabled them to drive out. We were all in agreement that a minute longer and the car would have been lost. I decide to go for the same route as Christie had just attempted but hopefully with more success.

Tyres are deflated to an unnervingly low level and I adopt the lead-footed approach to off-road driving. It is as much of a surprise to me as anyone to find myself, a few moments later, on the far side of the obstacle, vehicle, trailer and driver intact. I suspect the posse watching this unfold, cameras at the ready, were somewhat disappointed having been deprived of a near certain catastrophe. It had become customary to find a huddle of riders, cameras pressed against noses, at the end of any particularly difficult stretch of sand. The hope is that those following may fall off and provide the entire expedition with entertaining pictures and a good laugh.

The previous day I had been riding a bike rather than driving the 4x4 and had momentarily forgotten that I am, if fact, rubbish at riding in sand. The exhilaration of blasting across sturning desert plains and past pisinely sculpted sand dunes had got the

better of me. Trying to conduct an overly complex manoeuvre at a ludicrous speed the bike had - quite understandably - decided it was no longer going to humour me as I catapulted, head first, into a sand dune. Forget sprained wrists, twisted knees or cracked ribs. That most basic of men's survival instincts takes over: has anyone seen me fall off and am I going to have the piss taken out of me? Adrenaline kicks in and in a fraction of a second the bike is upright with me on the saddle pretending nothing has happened. Unfortunately the enormous smile on Dan's face, 20 metres to my front says it all. Four wheels can have its advantages, and this time the waiting paparazzi have to go away empty handed.

The next hour is a frantic one as the clutchless bike gets transported to our new campsite, safe from the incoming tide. It is half past one in the morning before we can contemplate finally being able to go to bed. We are camped in the dunes at the top of the beach under a billion stars with the warm desert breezes wafting gently over us. Time to take stock one more time... Christie and his motorcycle have both been retrieved from the sea. The rocky ledge has been negotiated and the broken motorcycle has been recovered and given a new clutch. With just 80 miles of desert left to travel everything is back on track... until tomorrow. **END**



If crossing the Sahara Desert on a bike is the kind of adventure which appeals to you then doing it is now easier than ever. Political tension is pretty much a thing of the past in the Western Sahara and the brand new road means you need never leave tarmac (if you wish). Kudu Expeditions are running three week trans-Sahara trips this autumn which will take the same desert pistes described here. You can find out more about these trips, and their epic four-month trans-Africa expedition by visiting their website, or getting in contact with them using the details below.

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