



RUST

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Looking for
Mexico

ISSUE #10



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AM I AN ENDURO SNOB?

BY JON BENTMAN,
PHOTO: HUSQVARNA

I DON'T THINK I've ridden so much in ages. I've technically had four weeks in the saddle from the last eight and starting in 48 hours I've another nine-days to add to the tally. Only thing is, it's all been on big bikes – a BMW R1200GS and a Triumph Tiger Explorer 1200, probably with a Yamaha Super Tenere to follow. Now I love these big adventure bikes, they are a delight (*unless they are sitting up to their tanks in Madagascar mud*) but why is it that in my mind time on them doesn't qualify as 'real riding'?

Real riding to me is getting out on the enduros, like my long term Yamaha WR250F that's sitting quietly in the corner of the RUST workshop (*ahem...*). But I do wonder if I'm being a bit snobbish about what constitutes 'real riding'? You see, what I like about enduro is that it is so damn physical, so often so demanding – and I like the fact the trail simply does not take prisoners. And that the clock never lies: if you are slow it tells you, and (*via the published results*) it tells everyone in the entry as well, to the decimal point. There's no hiding, no faking it, it is out there in the public domain. And by the way, I am slow. My only good results have been reward for a hard day's slog, never for having executed a lightning dash between the tapes. And I'll be honest in saying I'll not be getting faster anytime soon, there are just too many days I need to be at the keyboard, or – it seems – trying to prevent 300kg of adventure bike from dropping through a rotting wooden bridge.

Now probably because of the plethora of such heavyweights being featured in recent RUST issues we've had a few letters bemoaning the apparent lack of enduro/trail content. Well, as you can see, as I'm something of an enduro snob, too, then I'm fairly sympathetic on that account. Only I think our correspondents have been a mite unfair. In recent issues we've had plenty of enduro content,

including the recent Yamaha WR250 (*two-stroke*) test, features on EnduroGP, on David Knight and a comprehensive guide on how a clubman rider can affect a pro set-up on his enduro bike. What has happened, though, given RUST is published short-and-sweet every fortnight, is that the content bias per issue has swayed one way and the other quite markedly, and sometimes a whole issue is dedicated to a single bike or event. But as well, our audience is not the same as that which the late TBM (*from which RUST has sprung*) communicated with. RUST is much more international with an audience with more wide-ranging interests.

RUST will continue to evolve and grow, with enduro/trail at its heart but embracing the wider biking scene, as in fact we all do. We're a small team, but we're expanding and will soon be featuring more content from our handpicked team of international writers and photographers. And yes, there'll be more enduro, be it EnduroGP or the Welsh Two Day – and we'll be deeply involved with the International Six Days Enduro this year, too. But that content will continue to sit alongside more adventure and more '*heritage*' (*that's old bikes, and 'new-old' bikes!*) and more dollops of motocross for that matter. And for those that demand more – there will be much more: at the risk of exerting ever greater pressure on our backroom boys we'll be launching the Mark II version of the www.rustsports.com website very soon; then there'll be masses of 'more'!

In the meantime, I'm going to forget about my enduro snobbery for a week and go and play in some Portuguese dirt on an unfeasibly heavy adventure machine. If you're doing the same, or cutting loose on something much lighter, then please do feel free to share your experiences with us, via our Facebook page, or if you want to be more personal then via email: editorial@rustsports.com. We're always keen to receive your feedback.





THE END

IT'S ALWAYS SAD to farewell a rider, especially a time-served pro – and even more so if he's forced out by circumstances beyond his control. For Charlie Mullins, a star of the AMA GNCC scene for a good decade now, his time came this last week. A training accident two seasons ago saw him dislocate his right wrist and break a scaphoid in his left. A bit of surgery and a few months of rehab and he'd be back, everybody thought. But the damage was more extensive and malingering. And now after two years of trying to make that comeback, Mullin's has had to accept his wrists will never recover enough to race again. For the 2011 GNCC Champion it's over.

In his farewell address he's demonstrated eloquence to match his racing skills:

"I fought to not be the statistic. I thought if I trained harder than anyone else, put in more time on the bike, rode through the pain, maybe it would work out for me. I could be the exception. Man, I wanted that to be true. I held on to that hope for two years. I spent two years, praying and sweating my way through the pain, trying to get back to where I was and it's taken a toll on me. It wasn't until last Thursday that my hope was gone. Once the hope is gone, I knew I couldn't get on the bike safely again. I have family to care for and I cannot risk my life knowing I'm not in control."

"Today, I'm not okay. Knowing I will never professionally win a GNCC again breaks my heart to the core. I am mourning the loss of my career and passion as I turn and walk away so abruptly. I am left with a deep sadness that only time will heal ... With that said, feel no pity for me. I had a decorated career. I won races, I battled with the best in the world and I am proud at what I was able to accomplish in my 10 years of professional racing."

Good luck for the future Charlie Mullins – we're sure further success awaits.

Image: KTM



THE SLIPPERY SLOPE...

Soon as the current headlong rush of deadlines and test rides recedes we'll be revisiting the United People of Adventure Madagascar 2016. It was a true adventure – a ride into the unknown, where you never knew what you'd face around the next curve, there being no pre-ride and no one with any experience of having ventured into the backwater that is Est Cap. Is there anything to fear here? For Gudmundur Bjornsson (*of Iceland*) plenty, he's contending with a bike that's nearing 300kg as he slips and slides down this wet-clay track. Can he keep it upright? Will it stop before the bridge? And if it starts 'going away' he knows he got to get well clear to avoid getting trapped and injured. Then when he gets down to the bridge, you can see those planks are old, crumbling, and ice-like in the rain. Gudmundur has a lifetime of riding enduro to fall back on, but even so, this stuff really makes you sweat...

**Image: Ramona Schwarz,
Touratech**





A NEW EXPERIENCE

BY CHRIS EVANS,
PHOTOS: RUST ARCHIVE

New season, new bike. Sounds simple enough. Only not if you live in France, evidently. But our man on the Continent learns a valuable lesson...

AFTER 43 YEARS of riding off-road there aren't many 'firsts' left. The first crash happened a very long time ago, probably around the same time as the first wheelie or first jump. First four-stroke, first three hour struggle to fit a mousse, first drowned engine, they're all along way behind me now. But just recently I did 'accomplish' a first I was really hoping to avoid: first brand new motorcycle brought at (almost) full price from a regular bog standard bike shop. Boy was it expensive.

The original plan had been to get another season out of the 2010 530 EXC that is essentially a very essential second bike, in the van just case... Unfortunately its ex-factory, cross-drilled motor developed a death rattle and was sent over the channel to the very excellent Tony Woodhams at Sussex Sports Motorcycles. I mention him here not because I owe him one, or because he gave me a discount but because part of a journalist's job is to impart useful information. If you cut him down the middle Tony would bleed bright orange and what he doesn't know about the Austrian bikes just isn't



worth knowing. Plus he takes his time and tries to save you some money into the bargain. As a little aside, while I was dropping the 530 off he gave my 500-hour 350 a quick once over and let me watch as he checked tappet clearance and replaced the clutch cush-drive that I didn't even know existed. It was a pleasure to watch him work and he was generous with his years of knowledge. All that was back in February. I had decided it was time for the 530 to go, once Tony had worked his magic, which left me plenty of time to find another low mileage 350 before my first trip at the end of March. Or so I thought.

I don't know much about the second hand vehicle market in the UK anymore. But with the pre-Britexit exchange rate and the hassle of registering bikes in France I did know it wasn't worth buying one in the UK – and that despite the ridiculous prices second hand cars and bikes command over here. A quick scan of the classifieds told me I was looking at 7000 euros for a nearly new example which seemed insane but with time ticking away I bit

the bullet and headed an hour out of Paris to visit a dealer with a 44 hour 2015 350.

Now if you've ever holidayed in this undeniably beautiful country, or even just popped across the channel on a day trip, you'll know that service isn't a Gallic strong point. Apparently when McDonalds first opened here they had to close all their outlets for a week to try and train the staff to be polite. Obviously none of the staff at the KTM dealership had ever worked for the hamburger empire. After waiting 15 minutes to get anybody's attention I was informed that the 350 that I'd come all the way out to see was up on a mezzanine and couldn't be ridden. We climbed up to have a look at it and was then told we couldn't hear it run as the battery was flat. I mentioned that they come with a kick start as standard and eventually, after much rolling of eyes, the salesman was persuaded to bring it to life. Apparently it was the boss's and it looked like he'd taken about as much care of it as his staff did with his customers, but it sounded okay, so I agreed to pay the asking price if the absent owner could ring me to discuss an arrangement with the cost of changing ownership.

That was on Saturday and with no news by Tuesday I got on the blower to see how things were progressing. No answer. I tried again on Wednesday and Thursday, still no answer. Finally on Friday I discovered their Facebook page and also the fact that they were closed for a week's holiday. Tuesday morning the following week (*all bike shops are closed on Mondays in France*) the boss answered the phone only to tell me the bike had been sold. A day later he rang me to let me know they'd had a 450 in if I was interested. I politely declined...

Back to the classifieds and on Wednesday I found a Six Days for sale, privately for 6500. In the ad it said it was an hour south of Paris but when I rang he said the bike was actually in Paris. I should have heard the alarm bells but agreed for him to bring it around to my flat on the back of a trailer. Again it didn't look anything special but sounded okay, so I offered him the full asking price and we shook on the deal. Just as I'd arranged the

bankers draft he rang me back to say that he'd decided not to sell the bike. I didn't bother to ask him to pay the bank charges.

Starting to feel a bit desperate I rang the Paris bike shop where I been buying parts and getting bad service for almost 25 years. No, they didn't have any second hand 350s but they did have a new one for 8750. A quick call to the accountant revealed I could get the VAT back. It was going to cost me exactly 7000 euros. It was the last one in stock and I was round there writing the cheque within the hour.

“ Apparently when McDonalds first opened in France they had to close all their outlets for a week to try and train the staff to be polite... ”

I'd always imagined that buying a brand new bike off the showroom floor would be an almost mythical experience, but after all the grief of the previous two weeks it was simply a relief. Since then I've been saving my 2013 model and put 50 hours on the new bike and in the future have vowed to buy new bikes and turn them over on a yearly basis. The initial cost might be slightly more but the hassle much, much less. Plus I've noticed that you spend a lot less time working on new bikes compared with ones that have a zillion hours on them. The only problem is what to buy next to replace the other 350. With a garage full of KTM spares, another 350 would be the logical choice, but since buying the new 350 I have ridden a couple of bikes that have made a big impression on me: the new reverse cylinder 250 WR-F and the 300 Beta Xtrainer. The Beta is what the Freeride should have been and is fantastically accomplished in technical going. Maybe a little too narrowly focused. The Yamaha is race orientated but I have never felt so safe on a bike before. The engine is a bit peaky for my needs and it is horse-tall but the chassis is simply amazing and the suspension so comfy. If I can find a way of lowering it without ruining the bike's balance, the hassle of getting to know another brand might just be worth it.



Road-book Enduro Tours in France

DATES FOR 2016!

25/26/27 May	Pyrenees
8/9/10 June	Lozerian Bis
21/22/23 Sept	Pyrenees
5/6/7 Oct	Lozerian Bis
1/2/3 Nov	Massif du Morvan



Prices: Massif du Morvan and Tour du Morvan £450. Lozere. Lozerian Bis and Pyrenees £480. Includes half board accommodation, support vehicle and mechanic, loan of road book and road book reader.

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Back Issues



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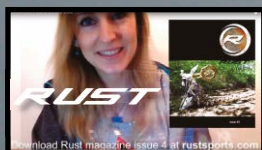
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ISSUE #1



AFRICA TWIN SPECIAL



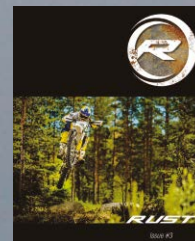
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HUSQVARNA 701 SPECIAL



YAMAHA WR450F SPECIAL



ISSUE #3



ISSUE #4



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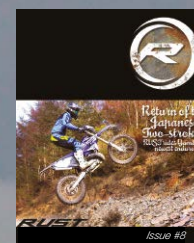
ISSUE #6



ISSUE #7



GS TROPHY SPECIAL



ISSUE #8



ISSUE #9

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700KM ON A KTM 450EXC

Words:
Warren Malschinger
Photos: WM, KTM and
RUST archive

RUST's publisher Warren recently took a 2016 KTM 450EXC on a 700km four-day trail ride – a great opportunity to see if the meanest racer in KTM's fleet might also be your best trail friend...



700km
ON A KTM 450EXC



Right:
João and
Pedro from
Horizon
Adventures

FOUR DAYS TRAIL riding in central Portugal is something of a luxury. Doing the same on a near brand-new 2016 KTM 450EXC only makes the pleasure all the more sublime. What an opportunity...

Now I'm already a big Mattighofen groupie – having a 2015 Husky TE300 and 2016 KTM 200EXC in the workshop – but something you'll notice already there: they're both two-strokes. Yeah, I still love two-strokes first and foremost, and that's probably because I'm of the generation that was brought up on





Right:
The grips look the
part but after
700km Warren's
hands were ready
to call time...



700km
ON A KTM 450EXC

them. In the 1970s and 1980s that's all we rode, that was unless you were some kind of a CCM-BSA nut, or could put up with the overweight and underpowered world of Japanese air-cooled thumper trail bikes (*you know, TT Yamahas, XR Hondas – yawn*). It took a special kind of guy to love those, typically older, big into his engineering. But if you liked speed, heck, why bother, two-strokes ruled.

So I still struggle with finding enthusiasm for the four-

strokes, they're simply not my first choice. That said, with each ride of these latest generation four-poppers I like them more and more, and the KTM 350EXC I've really started to appreciate. But 450s and 500s – not for me. Only JB's been beating me up on that, and when talks of these bikes in the way that gets my attention – speaking of monster power, eye-watering speed, the sheer thrill – then yeah, I start to take notice.



So when Pedro at Horizons Adventures told me I'd be riding a KTM 450EXC for a recent four-day trail ride in Portugal I was both slightly-disappointed, and at the same time I knew this was an opportunity to make my peace with KTM's big gun.

WARREN'S RATINGS

Now I could go through this bike longhand but, as JB said, we have enough long features going on in RUST as it is, so a quick-fire run through of the key issues that four-days in the saddle reveals is perhaps the better idea. So here's the feedback, and in no particular order, just how they come to mind:



700km

ON A KTM 450EXC

Reliability: 10/10 – the bike started hot or cold without issue. It does need neutral when it's hot but this is a minor non-material issue.

Brakes: 9/10 – the brakes worked well throughout the ride and I felt no fade at all, the only comment I have is a personal preference and that is I missed the step plate which bolts onto the rear brake lever (*from KTM Power Parts*) which I have fitted on my own bikes.

700KM ON A KTM 450EXC

Grips: 2/10 – Seems kind of odd to mention grips like this, but this is because they actually made a big impression on the ride – for all the wrong reasons. Yeah, I really don't like the stock grips on the bike. I understand that these are functional for a crosser on a 30-minute moto but over days of riding they are harsh and guarantee blisters after a few hours. I would suggest that these are replaced ASAP if your considering riding longer than a 30 minutes at a stretch. I landed up using duct tape and blister plasters to fashion a set of grips I could ride with after both hands had blistered quite badly after the first 200km.





700KM ON A KTM 450EXC



Ergonomics: 9/10 – Overall I think the ergonomics and physical handling of the bike are solid. The frame is a little rigid with the standard suspension but the cockpit and riding position for the average rider will feel good. I would prefer a high seat to make the transition from sitting to standing a little less effort and a slightly higher bar for long days on the trail but again that's personal and I think KTM have done a great job delivering an all rounder for the weekend warrior. It can be ridden or raced without difficulty as is.

Power: 8/10 – I like the 450's power delivery; although it can be snappy in tight technical sections, overall it's useable and provides smooth mid-range torque on open flowing tracks. Over the few days riding I found myself wanting to change the gearing on the bike a few times, especially between first, second and third. I find the transition



Enduro

700KM
ON A KTM 450EXC



from first to second and second to third too short and so I would be gearing up to widen the ratios low down. This would reduce the snappy throttle response and minimise the gear changes in tight sections. Mostly I wanted a slightly longer second and third gear.

Durability and build quality: 10/10 – this is one area that I cannot fault KTM. I put the bike through its paces transitioning from thick sand to rocky mountain passes with the odd off here and there. It seems I like to have a single off each day to test the bike's and my durability and the bike fares far better than I do. The build quality is undeniable and I'm impressed by the reliability and strength of the machine.

Suspension: 4/10 – this is the one area





700KM ON A KTM 450EXC

that lets the bike down. Not in all aspects but I cannot stress enough the need to get the suspension tuned on any KTM or WP equipped bikes, and in this instance it makes no difference if you have an open cartridge or 4CS forks or linkage or PDS. Stock, the suspension is just horrible! The primary reason with the forks is that they just don't work in the first part of the stroke. They are so harsh that it makes the bike kick on small pot holes, square edged rocks, roots or just about any obstacle you can think of, but the most significant factor is that it robs you of confidence and certainty. Because the

SAME OLD SAME OLD...

What were the annual updates?

It's surprising how little the 450EXC has changed over the years. Tearing through our archives, it's clearly been a long time since the last significant update for this model. Chassis-wise the last real change was for the 2014 model year when KTM opted for thinner-walled frame tubes for the frame, thus saving 300g. Last significant engine change came for the 2012 model year when KTM reduced the physical size of the motor (*while retaining the same bore and stroke*) while adding fuel injection.

What was new for 2016? Reworked open cartridge forks (*clearly not that successfully a job!*), smaller 22mm front fork axle (*correcting an earlier change from 22mm to 25mm – an AMA supercross inspired modification that we assume didn't work*), CNC machine triple clamps (yokes) replacing the old forged ones, orange-anodised rear sprocket, seat logo, a different light switch and of course, bold new graphics.

So the ground-up all-new 2017 model to be launched this month is bang on schedule in the near-traditional five-yearly pattern of redesigns at KTM...





700KM

ON A KTM 450EXC



suspension is causing the bike to kick and hop during the initial part of the stroke it makes the bike harsh on the handlebars, it hurts your wrists and arms and makes the bike feel unstable.

No matter how hard you try to find the right compression and rebound settings it just doesn't take the harshness away. Once you've blown through the initial part of the stroke the forks work fine and do what they should, in fact compared to the initial part of the stroke they feel plush in the mid-stroke. But if you encounter a unseen obstacle, rocks, ravine or roots because of the uncertainty of the forks initial reaction you'll find you're more inclined to make a grab for the brake rather than confidently attacking the obstacle.

Similarly the rear end hops about in the initial part of the stroke and rather than being able to use the traction I found the rear a little skittish. Forget about spending money on power parts on these bikes, spend your





hard-earned on the suspension first – I guarantee you that you'll blow by the guys with all the fancy new pipes and performance parts.

THE FINAL VERDICT

Overall the KTM 450 EXC is a versatile and functional bike that is well built, durable and surprisingly user friendly. For the average rider it's a good race bike – you'll never want for more power! – a great trial bike or simply a

stonking weekend toy!

In my opinion you can ride and race the bike as is, but for a spend of around £500 on a suspension upgrade, new grips, and some sprockets you'll transform this machine into a true pleasure to ride or race. So am I ready to replace my two-strokes. No, it's not even close – but I've a new appreciation for these big machines, but if my usual riding was more like that in Portugal then maybe I'd be seriously reappraising...

700KM

ON A KTM 450EXC

2016 KTM 450EXC Specification

Engine: 449.3cc, liquid-cooled single-cylinder SOHC four-valve four-stroke

Bore & stroke: 95 x 63.4mm

Fuelling: 42mm Keihin EMS fuel injection

Starting: Electric and kick

Transmission: Six-speed gearbox, wet DDS multi-plate clutch, hydraulically operated

Chassis: Chro-mo steel tube frame, alloy sub-frame

Front suspension: 48mm WP USD forks, fully adjustable, 300mm travel

Rear suspension: WP PDS shock, fully adjustable, 335mm travel

Front brake: 260mm disc, Brembo twin-piston caliper

Wheelbase: 1482mm

Seat height: 970mm

Dry weight: 111kg

Fuel capacity: 9-litres

Price: £7599 (UK), €9495 (EU)

Contact: www.ktm.com



Tested



LEATT GPX 6.5 NECK BRACE

Supplied by www.leatt.com

I REALLY LIKE this product. I know that there are proponents and opponents on the neck brace debate. Me, I'm a believer and wear one every time I ride. I like the Leatt 6.5 especially because it is so light, easy to use and fits cleanly with the Leatt 5.5 body armour.

The improvements to the 6.5 include a reduction in weight, lowering of the rim to provide improved helmet clearance while a new foam liner make this quite different from the previous 5.5 version. It looks sleeker and more streamlined, and the way it integrates with the body armour is excellent, making it feel more secure.

The emergency release system is easy to use as is the one opening and locking mechanism on the brace which makes putting it on and taking it off a breeze. Leatt have also ensured that the brace can now be adjusted without tools and the rubber bearings allow fine-tuning and angle adjustment of the brace for a good fit. The rubber bearings come in a number of degree stops ranging from 0-15 degrees in increments of 5 degrees. The brace comes in two sizes S/M and L/XL

I found my range of helmet mobility to be very good with the lower profile of the 6.5 but not so much so that I felt a compromise on safety by not having the helmet strike the rim stops at an appropriate angle which is an essential safety feature. Overall I'm impressed with the product's feel, functionality and weight. Score? 10/10

Warren Malschinger

LEATT 5.5 HD Pro Body Armour

Supplied by www.leatt.com

THERE'S A LOT to like about the Leatt 5.5 Pro – I love the wrap-around rib protection and the integrated neck brace slots which both work a treat. The core of the body armour is comfortable, well ventilated and although it looks bulky is virtually unnoticeable when riding. I've had a few offs and the armour has done its job well, remaining in position on impact, and on that score I could not be happier.

However, not everything was to my liking with this kit. The triangular clips and sliding adjustment system on the shoulder cups just doesn't work and I've resorted to making a few modifications to make it wearable over the longer term. The foam extension pads that attach to the shoulder cups are in my opinion a waste of time and could be binned entirely. In fact the whole shoulder cup clip system is pants! They came loose on every ride, and riding with the shoulder cups halfway down your sleeve and impeding your arm





movement is dangerous, so I've had to resort to securing the shoulder cups with zip ties threaded through the triangular clips. Only that means the neck brace securing straps can't be used properly... Then there's the velcro adjustment that your arms go through to secure the shoulder cups – they're just way too small. I've had to fashion a home-made Velcro extension to both straps so that I could comfortably extend the adjustment to fit around my arms to prevent cutting off the blood flow! I'm not an oversized guy with huge arms so I can only imagine that this is a widespread issue for anyone over 160 pounds (c.80kg).

So I would rate the 5.5 Pro for the core protection a 9/10 but a lowly 2/10 for extremity protection. Only here's the thing, it turns out Leatt have already updated the 5.5 Pro and rectified exactly those shortcomings I've identified. The shoulder cups are now sewn into position so cannot detach and the elbow protection – which you can zip off if you don't like (*many riders suffer arm pump when wearing elbow pads*) – is also nicely secured. I'm impressed that they've addressed those shortcomings so quickly. So now I think the revised 5.5 Pro is worth a solid 9/10 all round. Just make sure you're buying the latest version when you shop!

Warren Malschinger



MOTION PRO TYRE LEVERS

supplied by www.madison.co.uk

I'M PRETTY SURE I first saw these levers being used by the TRF's John Vannuffel during the TBM cross-country trail ride we rode in 2014. There was an immediate case of tool envy (*which sounds very wrong, eh?*), but I knew I needed some of those levers for myself.

I was attracted first by their light weight and precision finishing. These are levers made from T7075 aircraft-grade aluminium and are billed as unbendable and unbreakable – but are of course very light, too. But when I used them I was as impressed by the fact they were gentle on the alloy rims on the Honda CRF250L on which I was changing tyres. There's a lot of feel, and the 'spoon' end gives a broad bearing surface and so there's minimal reason for the rims to get marked as they might with narrower levers. I ordered two types. Plain levers and a 'combo' lever that came with a 24mm ring on the end – ideal for the CRFs axle nut. That added versatility makes the combo lever a cert for the bum bag on trail trips.

Obviously they are a little more expensive than standard levers, but '*buy well and you buy once*' applies here. With these on hand, there's no putting off the job, either – you actually look forward to changing tyres!

Jon Bentman



A few years back, Australian photographer Thomas Wielecki, and his wife Jane, took a year out to go looking for America (on bikes, naturally). Only when they arrived it was underwater. So they escaped to Baja while the Yanks pumped their basements dry. The experience was suitably surreal. . .

Words and photography : Thomas Wielecki

Looking for Mexico



Adventure

THE DRIP ON the window sill is driving me insane. Jane is asleep oblivious to this painful hammering on the brain. It's been raining for the past eight days. We hate Hollywood. We hate the traffic. The food stinks. This is the beginning of our great tour of America: a dark grey room with a drip and a view of a brown wall.

On day three we bought Jane's bike, a 1997 BMW F650 with only 9919 miles. It was precisely when we picked up mine that the deluge began; a week after our arrival in Los Angeles. For no apparent reason I handed over a bunch of cash for a 35-year-old R60/5. My decision was impulsive driven by the heart and not the brain. Jane was not impressed. I was in love.

Everything is ready including the custom made racks by a welder on the rough side of LA. It's still raining. The whole of America is under one big thundercloud. The forecast is grim. Los Angeles' annual rainfall has already doubled before the second half of February. It's raining in Vegas. It's raining in San Francisco. It's raining in the east. North America is drowning.

Each night I lie wide-eyed staring into the blackness. Each night I count the drips. Before we rust away completely I make one last superhuman effort. I nudge Jane in the middle of the night. "You want to go to Baja?" She makes a small noise and rolls over. Tomorrow we go to Baja.

Two days later we get to the border. Only a speed hump slows our progress into Mexico. The border town of Tijuana is a dump so we race as far south as the afternoon will allow us. Immediately everything deteriorates: buildings, roads, cars. Dust is everywhere. But we're here. The sun is shining. People are out. Trees are green and the sky is blue. We float on a cloud of happiness.

Ensenada is the first town of any size we stop in. Starved we're drawn to a giant TACOS sign outside a little yellow restaurant. A large woman in a salmon-pink tracksuit and white sneakers seats us. Her hair is a large puffy ball of fairy floss. Her smile reveals a row of perfectly white teeth. She's the waitress. We ask for a taco each. Rapidly she brings us a taco each; a really small taco each. She







watches us from behind the safety of a little plant in the corner. We swallow the tacos whole. She hurries back with her notepad and asks with the only English she knows: “More?” We’re still a long way from Mexico.

INTO THE DESERT

The Baja I was expecting finally spreads before our eyes after we cross a small range of hills: nothing but a straight road cutting a dry flat desert in half. San Felipe and the Sea of Cortez are somewhere over the horizon and to the east. But the peace of this setting is brief. Not too far into the afternoon we encounter a growing number of vehicles coming the other way. The closer we get to town the denser the traffic becomes. We’re in the middle of the desert and it’s bumper to bumper. With the town in view the traffic comes to a standstill.

The chaos is absolute. Imagine being dropped suddenly into a pot of popping corn. It’s hot, noisy and you have no idea which direction the next horn will come from. The dust and glare of high beams and flashing police vehicles drops visibility to zero. This is San Felipe. It’s Sunday night and the Baja 500 has just finished.

We reach the relative safety of a sidewalk. Before I manage to find someone who’s not drunk or deaf to ask for directions to a campground, it gets dark. God just put a lid on the popcorn.

“La Jolla” (*The Jewel*) park is a line-up of leafy cabanas glowing in their own bubbles of light. It looks cosy from a distance. But inside it’s a war zone. Uncontrollable kids, quads kicking up dust, motocross bikes weaving between tents and circles of women exploding with laughter that could knock an elephant off its feet. Inside this confusion the men hang around their cars drinking beer, each with doors wide open pumping Mexican hits that can be heard in China. Everyone plays something different. Strangely it doesn’t bother anyone. The man in charge is drunk and will take only American dollars. He insists we’re very lucky: “joo gat de las one”. Our spot is a slab of concrete in the middle of this anarchy. In the morning we’re woken by the sun and the silence. I have no idea how and when we managed to fall asleep but the



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morning is perfect. The park is a mess. Jane rots in a half-sleep until the heat pushes her out of the tent. I'm sitting on a milk crate holding my head between my hands. The only sounds are those of the cabana roofs rustling in the gentle breeze and a fly buzzing my ears. We run before midday.

The road deteriorates steadily from pavement to widening cracks to potholes and finally to dirt. Matilda – I've given in to naming the old R60 – seems to handle the surface quite well. With all this weight and soft fork springs she glides. We come upon a giant cactus with long arms reaching for the sky. I shiver with excitement and spend an hour photographing it. Little do we know that hefty expanses of Baja are covered in cactus forests.

We are heading south along the corridor of desert trapped between the Gulf of California and a barren mountain range. Sierra San Pedro Martir is the only piece of geography that blocks the cold westerlies from reaching Baja's eastern shore. The Sea of Cortez is gentle and warm compared to the open Pacific Ocean on the other side of the peninsula. Many Americans know this and migrate here for the winter. Some stay and lose their bearings. And along with their bearings they lose their minds.

Except for some sun faded billboards there's no evidence of man's existence. *"Lots for sale", "Ocean views", "Lot for rent", "Hurry last few left"*. They all advertise imaginary parcels of land. All you see are arrows pointing to them. Mostly there's just desert.

When shadows creep onto the road towards late afternoon I realise we're riding into hills. The track begins to twist around bays and rocky outcrops, intermittently sprouting dwellings eaten away by neglect – silent reminders of failed dreams. Was it too lonely here? Was it too perfect? Businesses quite obviously set up to cater for inhabitants of these 'lots' lie as lifeless as the rocks they were built on. Some are grand with columns and arches, others erected in opportunistic haste. Advertisements promising cold beer, food and showers only give empty hope. Stripped vehicles and rusted fuel pumps attest to the ultimate betrayal: this is the road less travelled.



Just being here is a tremendous joy. I look back, Jane is nowhere to be seen. The only thing around is the hugely satisfying cloud of dust hanging behind me. Tonight we camp on lot 8a neatly separated from adjoining lots by a line of rocks. It's entirely square and possesses a tremendous water-frontage. Whatever refuse we can scavenge we employ to make a fire.

FADED BLUE SHORTS

A couple of figures shimmer in the afternoon heat haze up ahead. Soon we reach them. They carry large machine guns and are hardly distinguishable from the surrounding desert. Their uniforms are equally barren. This is the third "*punto militar*" (*military checkpoint*) we're stopped at. Ladislao, the '*sargente de caballeria*', is very happy to see us (*wouldn't you be in this desperately lonely place?*). His friend stands squinting in the sun a few metres away. Evidently he's shy.

"*Narcotraficantes*," explains Sergeant Ladislao; drug traffickers coming from the south. But with one passable track through this part of the east coast, only a drug merchant on drugs would drive a truck loaded with narcotics along this road.

Making sense of the map out here is slightly more strenuous than it might at first appear; one road, one coast, and only a couple of place names breaking the vast print-free expanse. Puerto San Luis Gonzaga should be somewhere up ahead, but with a total absence of any landmarks to locate oneself, one feels terribly lost.

Jane stops on a hill up ahead. *Why did you stop?* "*I want to have a look.*" A look at what? "*Just this,*" she points to the sea. What is it? "*The sea!*" We take our helmets off, silently look at the sea and carry on south. And it struck me, then and there, that perhaps we were beginning to lose our bearings. And that if we continue losing our bearings we might start losing our minds.

'The men hang around their cars drinking beer, each with the doors wide open pumping out Mexican hits that can be heard in China. Strangely it doesn't bother anyone... Almost'

Around a bend in the not so distant distance is a bay, a settlement and a neat main street. The sea is a shade of the most extraordinary blue. It is apparent that the street is actually a runway for the small aeroplanes parked in the front yard of the line of houses. A few rusted cars are visible but other than decoration their purpose out here baffles us. A couple of boats bob quietly off the white sandy beach. There's even a bar with cold beer and food. Perfect.

While we deservedly suck on our beers and sit on the breezy veranda, we catch rare glimpses of the inhabitants. Thin leathery old men in faded blue shorts appear to be the only species living here.

Not far down the road is Gonzaga Bay. Here we find fuel for three times the usual price and a couple of thin leathery old men in faded

blue shorts driving an old Volkswagen. One is a Vietnam veteran and the other has bent fingers and a tattoo of the American flag on his chest. I corner the elusive "*locals*" in the hope of learning about their basic customs. They divide their existence between three distinct rituals: poker, party and fishing.

The third is to supplement the losses incurred by the first. And the second acts as a cushioning device. Chuck and DeeJay have led this extravagant lifestyle for a quarter of a century. Time is worthless here.

THE FADING OF THE LIGHT

After four days of dirt we join Baja's main highway, Ruta # 1 Mexico. My heart sinks at the crossroads when I discover that the original California license plate that's been with Matilda for 35 years is gone. Blinded by deep mourning I don't even notice the dented rims, loose head bearings, sagging springs and ripping luggage until some days later. For the next few nights I weep silently explaining my puffy eyes to Jane as an allergy. To this day I catch myself shedding a tear for it. Saguaro forests carpet the hills and plains on the western side of the





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peninsula as we cross over the spine of Baja. Before sundown we get to Guerrero Negro by day's end. The town is thoroughly flat and gives the impression of moving at great velocity in the cold steady wind. Clouds bursting with the setting sun's fire race overhead. Dust travels in horizontal swirls carrying with it all sorts of airborne litter.

The following afternoon we go to Ojo de Liebre, where the whales hang out. The road slices through dull terrain and the sky is the colour of dirty milk. It's a land without shadows and unrelenting wind. We're on the edge of the salt flats; by volume here's the world's largest production of sea salt.

Jane has visions of a blue sun-drenched lagoon where whales frolic surrounded by a leafy paradise. I'm not far off the same fantasy. We arrive. There is no paradise. The world is monochrome. The sky, the bay, the vegetation and the wind are flimsy shades of grey. The only whales to be seen are those painted on flapping plywood boards advertising whale tours.

The punished visitor centre is grey too. I ask about camping. The sleepy woman points to the vastness outside. *"Pick any spot you like, they are numbered."* I can't see anything I didn't see before except for two motor homes standing half a mile apart in the distance. They occupy sites one and two. We buy a tour for a hefty \$35 each and get tossed like a salad in a bowl by the wind and the chop for one long hour. The whales are grey too. Actually they are Gray Whales.

For the past few days Matilda's headlight has been doing strange things. This evening it dies a terrible death. As the fading daylight demands I switch it on. For the first second everything's normal. The road is compacted sand with a few gentle corrugations. I remember thinking: Wow, compacted sand with a few gentle corrugations. My mind was empty except for the vague awareness that we were riding on compacted sand with a few gentle corrugations.

After the moment of normality with the headlight working in perfect order, I'm jolted by a sudden hiss. The light flickers and dies. Thick white smoke pours out through the rim and trails behind me. The inferno within had caused the chrome rim and glass element to

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separate from its armature. As I lean forward to assess the situation, the rim and glass plummet towards the front guard and dangle freely on two charred cables. Stage two of the headlight catastrophe is under way.

Very delicately I begin to apply the brakes, intently watching the disembowelled headlight. At that precise moment a series of not-so-gentle corrugations send tremors into the most critical area: the front mudguard. First I watch the chrome rim slowly slide forward and fall onto the front tire as it gets dragged under. The glass element which by this stage had severed any ties with the cables is alone, trying desperately to balance atop the guard. It quivers and unhurriedly lurches forward following the rim's exact path. As it gets dragged under, there's a POP. All that's left is a gaping hole with a tangle of burnt wiring.

In the morning I scavenge a length of cable from a wrecked car while the local glazier cuts a round piece of window glass and welds a wire scaffolding around the armature to hold the headlight and its innards in place. We continue south in the early afternoon.

JANE CRACKS

We decide to follow a little used track south along the bleak west coast to Punta Abreojos. An hour later we hit sand and slippery gravel. Patches of mud deceptively masked by a thin crust swallow our tyres. Jane cracks. The corrugations, the sand, this whole bloody escapade, I am to blame for every possible misfortune under the sun. She unleashes a remarkable assault on me for bringing her this way, for dropping her bike. My defence is useless. Her barrage is so advanced all I can do is run for cover.

Matilda limps into town with a broken shock mount. We're exhausted, cold and hungry. There's a lonely taco stand nestled in the dim pool of light under the only street lamp; our single hope for a meal. Just out of town we erect the tent in a gale. The darkness is absolute. Once comfortably inside and wrapped in sleeping bags life isn't so bad. Then it hits. My bowels wake up and go into active duty. I'm summoned five





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times during the night. The trickiest thing is to know where the previous load was deposited. Because we are camped on a featureless expanse of flat sand I'm forced to keep a mental plan of the land mines. The stress deprives me of any sleep. Am I being punished?

We reach the highway and stay on it all the way to the bottom. In most towns there's never a shortage of restaurants, shops and hotels. And the detritus of the modern age is evident. Piles of wrecked cars grow uncontrollably like weeds in a neglected garden. In San Ignacio, a sixteenth century mission with a tourist town around it, we stop in the square under the shade of seven broad trees.

'Like any big city, La Paz is packed full of McDonalds', busy traffic and noise. The shore is lined with expensive hotels and restaurants. Too expensive for us...'

A large truck stops near our bikes. "Alabama", reads the license plate. The doors swing open and a couple jumps out and heads for the square. He has a back-to-front cap on his head and a photographer's vest covering his otherwise topless torso. She has white joggers, a yellow T-shirt with "I'm not happy unless you're a little nervous" on the back and navy tights revealing an ample posterior. "Nothin' here Janice, let's go." They climb back into their monstrous Ford and leave.

Another RV pulls in. This one is from Nevada. Wired to the bonnet is a cow's skull wearing a stars-and-stripes bandana. Pink and blue plastic kayaks are attached to the roof. We escape just in time to avoid seeing the occupants. Later in the day we pass a convoy of eleven titanic RVs as they thunder back north. Santa Rosalia greets us with a smoking rubbish tip. The rusty ruins of a disused factory are next then some more dead cars. On the left is a long sandy beach and a deep blue sea. The Ruta #1 is purgatory between this heaven and hell.

THE MEXICAN AND HIS MUSIC

The final stretch to Baja's capital La Paz is the same tedious highway. A telephone line strung along regularly spaced poles gives it some meaning. But it's like looking at the clock on a boring day at work. Like any big city, La Paz is packed full of McDonalds', busy traffic and noise. The shore is lined with expensive hotels and fancy restaurants. Too expensive for us, we wander off around the bay in search of a camping spot.

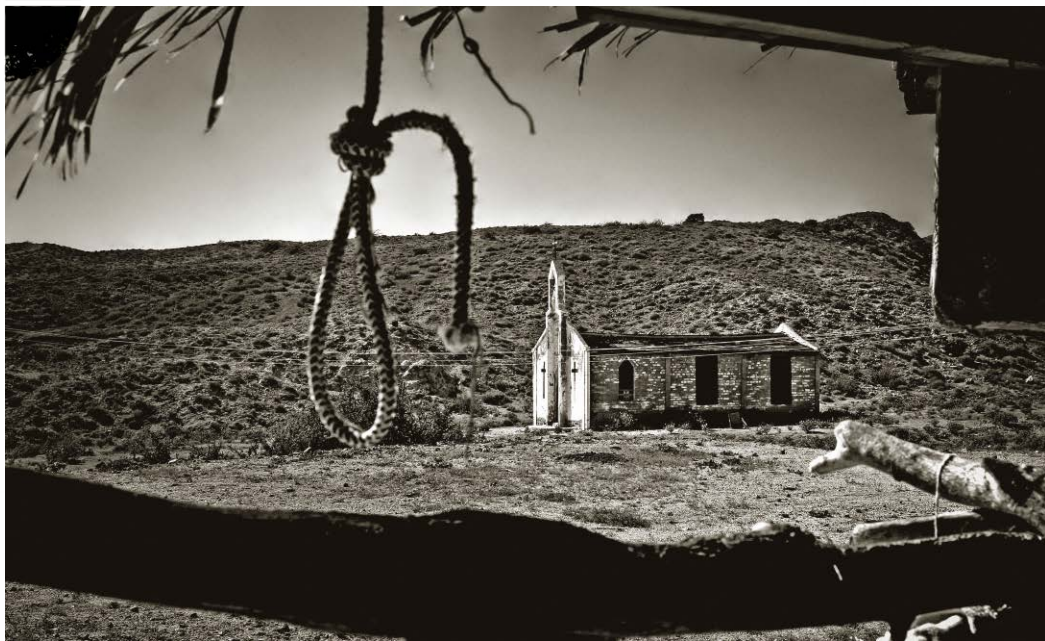
When we reach the edge of the pavement, sandy tracks branch off in all directions. Umbrellas and beachside bars fringe a small section of the shore. Today is Saturday and the place is alive. Cars bursting with screaming young people drive in circles beeping at each other. Noise production is in their blood. Abundant quantities of it erupt from small vehicles. What is it about Mexicans and the car stereo system? It's almost like being Mexican demands you play music that is louder than the next Mexican playing music. But only Mexicans have the astonishing ability to be inside this pandemonium and still be able to carry a perfectly normal conversation.

Cabo San Lucas is the southernmost tip of Mexico's little finger. About 20km before is San Jose del Cabo. Here the grime of Baja gradually retreats. High walls hide the mountains of wrecked cars. Quicker than we can acknowledge the change, Mexico vanishes; like going through a gate from one film set into the next. The tall cactus is entirely replaced by palm trees. The desert becomes an undulating carpet of perfect greens; one golf course seamlessly merges into another. The highway becomes a smooth concrete freeway with resorts and big white hotels growing either side.

Not a taco stand in sight. Large cruise ships sleep off shore waiting for their human cargo to "explore Mexico" and return fattened by their experience. At Sea Breeze (*Brisas del Mar*) RV park we are the only tent amongst huge motorhomes housing silver-haired couples with little groomed dogs. The one next to us, a Pace Arrow with Californian license plates, has a satellite dish and a Rolls Royce parked in its shadow. How else would they go shopping? Tax is payable on every-







thing. The US dollar is now the only acceptable currency. Everything is in English with Spanish subtitles. God bless America!

It's anybody's guess where the actual tip of Baja is. We find no sign, nobody knows. A frenzy of marinas, tourists, fast food establishments and souvenir shops saturate the clean town centre. Non-Mexicans wearing pastels of every shade stare at us. It dawns on me that we are the only ingredient in this soup to carry the dirt of Baja on us.

Here we meet Jose, a street sweeper who's been polishing these avenues for the past 12 years. He tells us that today is a quiet day; only two ships. Sometimes four cruise liners anchor in the bay and disgorge 1500 hurried sightseers each. In the afternoon they're herded back to their motherships and whisked off into the blue.

THE THREE CHOICES

When you've eventually made your way down the Baja peninsula, you have three choices: go back up, catch a costly ferry to mainland Mexico, or forget your way back and stay forever. We take option one. From Ciudad Constitucion - about a quarter of the way up - we take the dirt track along the west coast to San Juanico then traverse to Mulege, which puts us back on the highway.

Our map has no road marked from here to Mulege. We rely entirely on locals' directions. For reasons I care not to remember Jane and I have an altercation early during the day and there's a total breakdown in communication. The first few hours go relatively smoothly. We get lost a couple of times, have no idea where we're going most of the time, and tolerate the deteriorating track all of the time. The sun is ferocious.

Trouble starts when we're halfway over the Sierra de la Giganta, the southern part of the mountain range along the Baja. By now the road is but a rough track. Jane's F650 cruises over the terrain leaving me and Matilda in the dust. I never actually lose faith in Matilda, but sometimes she struggles to get through. 'Arroyos' (riverbeds) are the worst. Large round boulders require long suspension travel, a reserve of power and appropriate tyres. Matilda has none of the above. Every half an hour



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or so I'll notice Jane waiting for me in the distance but she'll never actually let me reach her. That would mean an exchange of some kind, which we're still avoiding. The scenery is magnificent; arid and raw. And frankly I'm enjoying not having to comment on it every time we stop. This is a good time to have a fight.

As I crest a steep hill, I see a figure on horseback. It's a real cowboy. When I get closer I notice he's on a real horse. The cows he's driving are also real. The vultures are real. The cactus is real. Pedro tips his hat and shakes my hand. I'm humbled. For a moment I feel like I'm on the set of *"The good, the bad and the ugly"*. Pedro is the good, Jane is the bad and I'm the ugly.

The last seventy miles before reaching Mulege become a major test of endurance. Jane has a leak in the back wheel which we frequently top up with rapidly depleting tyre spray. This does two things: firstly there's a need for basic communication - stop, go, yes, no. Secondly our sightseeing peregrination through Baja becomes a race to beat the leak in the tyre. Descending the mountain range the road is steep, very twisty and the surface is ball bearings. Jane drops her bike twice and Matilda comes down too. Even walking is difficult on this surface. Somewhere in all of this we become friends again. By sundown all the air is gone and Jane has to ride the final 30 miles into Mulege on a completely flat tyre.

That night we celebrate Jane's birthday in the rowdiest bar we can find and get mindlessly drunk. We stumble out into the square when the bar closes. Jane pisses between two plaster swans in the fountain. Somehow we find our tent and collapse.

It takes us another five days to reach the US border. Our final night in Baja is a sleepless one. The intensely loud music starts around midnight. We're unable to escape it even under our pillows. I decide to investigate and poke my head over the wall. In the empty car park I see a pick-up truck with doors wide open and three men drinking beer. And I realise that without *'the music lovers'*, Baja would be a lifeless strip of desert inhabited only by aged American hermits playing poker and drinking beer.



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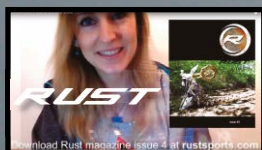
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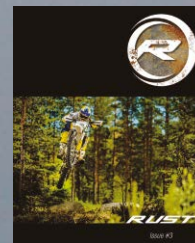
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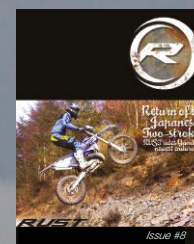
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