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FEATURING
2021 BETA 480 RR (RACING)

ON TEST



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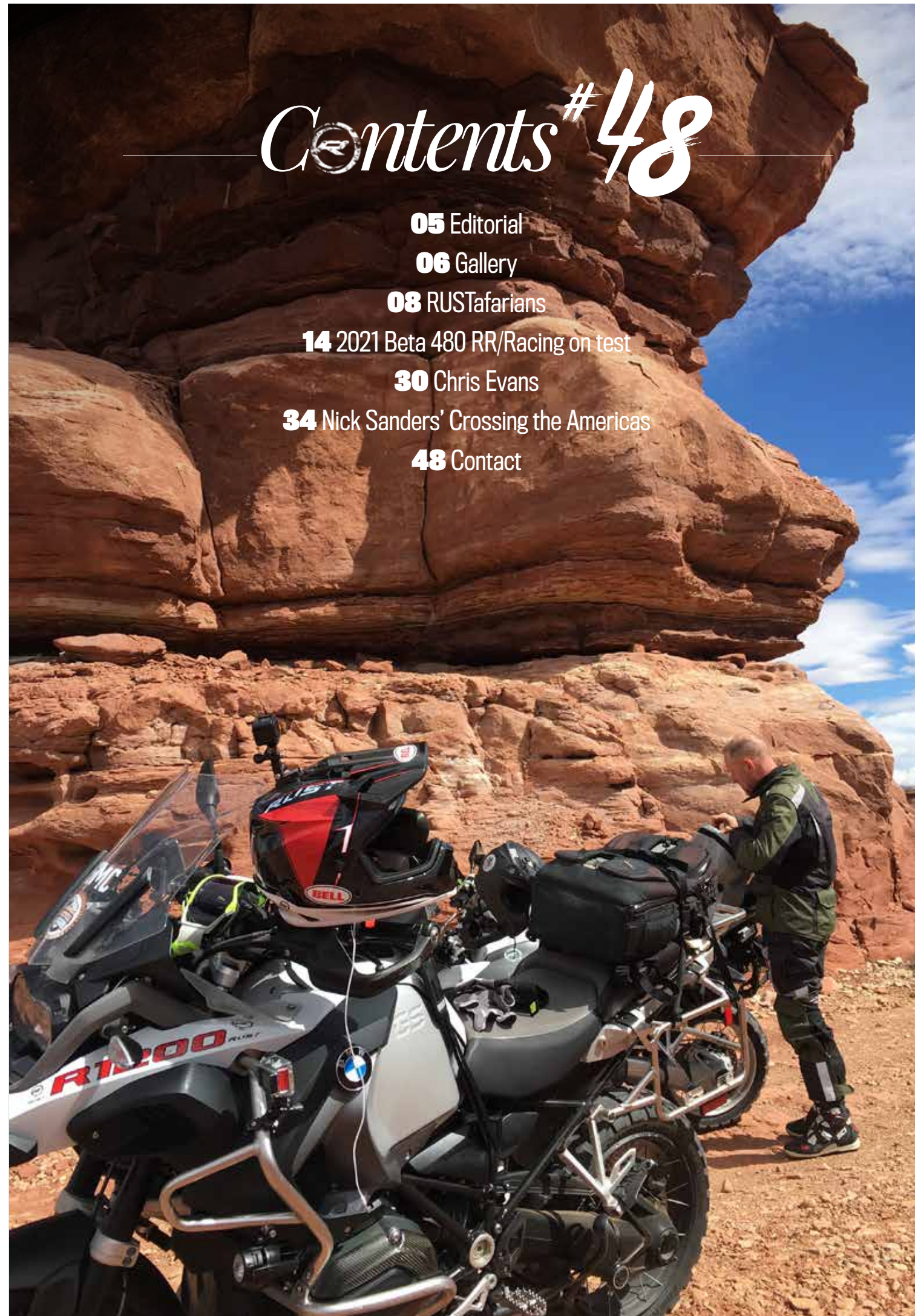
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BACK IN THE GAME



It's good to get back in the saddle. It feels like it's been a long time (it has). That said, the aches afterward – not to mention the breathlessness during – reminded me I'm a long way from bike fit (or any kind of fit). But the moments of joy are worth it. The feeling (however fleeting) when you chase the trail, feeling the bike, the suspension, move under you, working the tyres into the soil, then you brake, lean the bike into a turn, feeling for grip, then crack the throttle feeling for traction. It's a wonderful thing. And maybe one time in ten you do all that with a sense of automation, harmony even, and that inner animal smiles to itself and says something like 'this is me'.

It's been great to get out, to ride, to share company (at a 2m distance for now) and to enjoy the countryside. I don't what it is, but I only seem to really feel that engagement when I'm on a bike. I wish I knew why. We're lucky in the UK that Covid infection rates have fallen and the vaccine programme has accelerated, so that with continued diligence we should be able to ride again more frequently. Hopefully across Europe, and in other stricken regions, things will improve there too so we can all share in the fun.

This issue feels like a new beginning on that account. Back to doing what we love – yeah, doing, not remembering. And two cool stories to share. A test of some great new enduro bikes, here in the UK, and that master of world travel, Nick Sanders, relaying what it is to hit the long road, how it communicates with the soul, via a ride across the Americas.

I hope you enjoy the read. Good health and safe riding

JB



1290

We're testing the new KTM 1290 Super Adventure S as you read this magazine. Hopefully we won't be asked to do any wall of death type stuff as KTM's own test riders did – we're just not that brave. For the curious – what you're seeing here is the Autodromo de Sitges-Terramar, a banked track built near Barcelona for the 1923 Spanish Grand Prix. It fell into virtual hibernation in the 1930s – as depression, then civil war then world war raged – almost never to resurface. Barcelona's Brooklands if you please...

Image: Rudi Schedl / KTM



RUSTAFARIANS

With Lockdown restrictions easing, the team dare to plan...



JB: TIME TO TÉNÉRÉ!

#JB318



With March 29 (and the easing of lockdown restrictions here in England) just days away (as I write), do I dare to dream? I do.

One thing Lockdown has taught us is to not take our privileges for granted, if an opportunity arises – take it.

So this year, on the moto front, it's about restarting, with as much vigour as circumstances allow. A Yamaha Ténéré 700 is coming my way, so there's a new journey to be had. I want to map out some local loops, somewhere I can quietly practice my riding, get to know the bike, test a few mods. Then I'll be onto whatever rides the splendid Rallymoto team can provide. These guys are opening up the UK backcountry

(such as we have on these crowded isles) to adventure riders like never before, so I'm fixing the roadbook and am keen to get out there.

And should our (and others') international borders open then I'm on that ferry and away, with a Ténéré there's every reason to go as far as you can, so I'll be looking to join Warren on some of his international rallies because while I truly love just riding trail and experiencing the nature there's still a competitive bone somewhere in my body and the excitement of scooting through a stage, on a mission, is still something I crave. After months and months of reflection, it's time to look forward.



JULY: THE THIRD WHEEL (UGH!)

#JB297

No plan is a good plan!



Unfortunately, plans being cancelled has become the norm. And not a good one. With my love for travel and all things adventure I still get extremely upset and disappointed when stuff gets cancelled. So to ensure I continue to be my happy self this year I've decided not to make any plans and keep things relatively fluid. I have a scaffolding of ideas that'd be good to execute but we'll see how things pan out.

#Sidecar – Call me mad, but we're getting a sidecar! Nyah (my daughter) is seven this year and is now starting to love all things motorcycles. The plan would be for the family to spend a couple of weeks in Italy, Spain or Portugal in our new sidecar and enjoy motorcycling as a unit. Also, do short weekend wild camping trips in the UK. By the way, it'll be an adventure sidecar, GS powered – so still kind of part of the brotherhood...

#RallyMoto – I'm keen to attend a few

of Burt's Cannonballs – roadbook-based navigation style events held all over the country. It's a great day of riding with some super friendly people – not keys in a bowl friendly, but close enough. Also, I'd like to partake in the Wales and Kielder 500 series of events.

#Motorcycle events – It'd be great to attend a HUBB or Overland Event or ABR Festival or the new Armchair Adventure Festival, as it's a great opportunity to mingle with the ADV Community, share a pint and share travel stories and anecdotes. All of these kinds of events are super chilled and the only downside is a consecutive nasty hangovers.

#The Continental Jaunt – In addition to the sidecar, I'd love to do my annual two-week motorcycle holiday on the Continent if at all possible – eating good food, drinking stunning wine and riding the best trails and tarmac the continent has to offer. Eastern Europe is on the hit list for this one.

Watch this space to see how many of these actually get done this year but like they say, it's the thought that counts.





CRAIG: YES, BACK TO DAKAR (WIFE PERMITTING)

#CK275



An interesting year lies ahead, and mostly so far on account of there being very little actual interest to be had. My post Dakar 2020 plan was to continue my midlife crisis and go on to do some Baja races, some large desert events and even add an ISDE to the tally of the rallies, Romaniacs and the SSDT which formed part of my journey to Dakar.

I rode a rather safe Dakar, and so I have something of an itch there – to push on a little, this time in MalleMoto/Motul Originals. I recently watched a video of myself crossing the line in Saudi, where the ‘cameraman’ asked me how I felt. My first words: ‘I’ve got some left’. From the outside looking in, I’m not sure those of us driven to do what are quite daft things are ever really satisfied with their lot. Don’t get me wrong, I’m wearing the medal now as I write this – It was FABULOUS to achieve

a dream. I’ve ticked off a few boxes so far, but I do still consider myself young...

Obviously Mrs CSK raises an eyebrow when I mention my planned return to Dakar but MalleMoto 2022 has a great ring to it. There is however a rather large hurdle. Lockdown has become common parlance. It’s a crazy world. I’m now at the stage of climbing the walls, or rather beating up my MTBs by ragging them around the woods a little harder than my ‘exercise only’ remit should allow for. It’s time to get back on the bike (nearly). I have plans – we all have – It’s just whether or not the world continues to laugh at them.

The world awaits, I’d like to be at the Hellas Rally, whenever that will be, I’d like to be at Dawn to Dusk – a decent amount of hours back in the saddle to be had there (I like the idea of solo 24hr) and dare we put it in print, given the chance to log enough hours on a bike, I’d very much like to return to Saudi.



WARREN: BIG RALLY FEVER

#WM151



It’s hard to say what has exactly inspired me to dream up my 2021 journey but I suspect the need to get the hell out of the house was a big one. I knew I needed more than a few days of riding on the weekends or a weekend away to satisfy my wanderlust – my adventures needed to be epic (to me). I’m no Ranulph Fiennes, but they needed to be long and arduous!

On top of the riding, my goals demanded from me travel – lots of it. So what was going to satisfy these demands, these cravings? It could only be rallying. Of course this is way outside my comfort zone, I’m not a natural rally guy, but my need for a challenge has outstripped my nervousness and if you’re going to do something you might as well goes balls-deep.

I’m old so my mind’s a sieve, my navigation sucks. My brain thinks its 20 when clearly my body could pass for that of a sage, I’m that grey, and after 40+ years of riding my mobility is that of an

ironing board. No matter. I’ve hired a mind coach (good luck to him), I’ve booked a navigation boot camp in Morocco with the Dakar legend Jordi Acarons (shits and giggles and an interview to follow in the magazine) and I’ve submitted my first few entries to raids in as many far-flung places as I can.

My mind training has been a revelation – I should have done this 30 years ago, perhaps I would have been less of a git :-). I’ve also been on the push bike to build endurance and so far I’m managing a consistent 150km a week. My (motor)bike time is still non-existent but my engine rebuild parts have arrived while I’m typing this so I’m closer to getting to the two 350s (FE 350, 350 EXC-F) built. Weekend workshop time – brill.

At 55 it’s time to stop procrastinating and challenge myself to live my life to its capacity. I’ll be posting and doing regular updates on my progress – so join me. Check out my social channels and on TBM and RUST as well as on YouTube. I’d love the company. 📺



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We have a guilty secret here at RUST – we like big bore enduros. There's something fun about big power, although given our skill-level, often times the fun runs out as weariness or fear takes over. But always, despite saying light is right, small is beautiful, we think 'we can do this', the big enduro is not our enemy. So with Lockdown easing, an opportunity to test the latest 480 RRs from Beta gave us a chance to prove exactly that – that we can do this...

GO LARGE

Words: & Images: JB ►



‘It’s got some snap, hasn’t it?’ said Harry. We all agreed.

“But you say this isn’t the racer - that’s the 430?” asked Patsy.

“That’s right, this one’s the, er, gentle trail tool.”

Collectively we blew a gentle whistle and checked the stitching on our gloves.



There was a point to this test, a theoretical one. That maybe, just maybe, despite all RUST’s advice on smaller bikes making the best trail bikes, that perhaps that’s no longer the truth. That big bikes have become easier to ride, call for less maintenance, last longer and actually make for a less demanding, less stressful ownership experience. And to illustrate that point, why not take a lesser spotted 500, Beta’s sweet 480 RR, for a Spring woods ride to show just how amenable the 500s have become.

That was the start point, but it was (alas) soon lost, as one particular matter kept hitting us in the face. You see the Beta 480RR is without a doubt a thoroughbred, with proper race-roots. It’s built slim, light and purposeful, there’s a distinct performance attitude embedded in its DNA. It is very much the Italian Stallion, and like a Ferrari, Ducati and even say a Pinarello (a racing bicycle should you be asking) it answers to that essential Latin need to bring a bit of passion, some brio, to the game of life. It should not be ordinary. So this isn’t trail riding. This is trail riding in style... ►





▷ THE SUMMER OF TWENTY(1)9

It says something about the state of the world that here we are in Spring 2021 and only just getting on to testing a 2021 enduro model – in other times we'd have tested this bike some nine months ago. Yeah, Covid and Lockdown has reset our calendar in a big way. Equally, here we were having to use our work exemption to get the test done, while maintaining social distancing throughout the test. However, the sun was out, it was properly warm perhaps for the first time this year and there was the knowledge that within a week so many other UK riders would at last also be able to restart riding, too. It was like a home coming.

Oh, and we didn't have just the one 480 RR to test, we had two, the second being the Racing model – which brings certain upgrades to the spec, most notably the premium-quality KYB AOS 48mm forks. Neither bike had been run more than a few minutes, so the motors were technically 'tight', and the suspension too – especially the KYBs – would have benefitted from some hours to bed-in. Not that either bike seemed concerned. Both revved freely and ran faultlessly. Not exactly purring – they bark! – but happy bikes ready for action.



PATSY WEARS

Helmet: Bell Moto-9 Flex

Shirt: Fly Racing Kinetic

Pants: Fly Racing Kinetic

Boots: Alpinestars Tech 7 Enduro Drystar



RUST last tested Betas enduros as long ago as summer of twenty19 (cue Bryan Adams song) and the MY (model year) 2020s proved pretty slick although the base suspension settings felt distinctly 'clubman' rather than 'expert' (suiting me fine, of course), although with a few tweaks they tuned-up well for the faster riders. For 2021, not much has been changed, Beta rather vaguely suggest there's been a chassis update 'in the steering head area' and in 'the reinforced plates' – for improved feel and durability (these tech briefings really should come with some tech included...). As well, the subframe has been made more robust and durable. There's a new tank cap and there's been attention to the side panels for easier mounting and better waterproofing of the airbox. Apparently the seat has a new foam for improved comfort

(more on that later...). The charging system is improved. The forks and shock had their annual review, and after a speedo update the bottom line is a change from white to red plastics.

The Racing model gets the aforementioned KYB forks but also a higher spec ZF shock. The triple clamps are black anodised. After that the spec changes are mostly cosmetic – quick release spec front spindle, 'Vertigo' handguards, 'black ergal' footrests, 'Racing' seat (with timecard holder), 'Racing' graphics, blah, blah, blah. You could almost ask 'is that all?' but given the Racing model is only £600 more than the RR we'd say 'bellissimo!' – that is no money for that level of fork upgrade, and besides we rather like the blue accents to the graphics.



**THERE IS A JOY TO
RIDING OFF-ROAD ON
QUALITY SUSPENSION,
IT BRINGS YOU THAT
MUCH CLOSER TO
THAT MENTAL IMAGE
WE ALL HARBOUR OF
OURSELVES RIDING LIKE
GODS, AT ONE WITH
MACHINE AND NATURE**



THE RIDING

To benchmark this test we had a 2021 KTM 500 EXC-F along for the ride. For a long time that bike has been the datum for this class. KTM have been refining it for years, it's a class act. However, given that Beta's marketing has been all about the ease of use of their models, that they've made them slightly smaller (size and capacity wise), this should make them real aces in the woods – they should at least be fair competition for the KTM.

Now rather than blather on in a long-winded hand-over-hand manner, let's push this appraisal along in a more punchy manner. So...

MOTOR

Yep, like we said, the Beta 480 (actually 477cc) has some snap. It's not bad-ass arm-wrenching snap, but there's a sense of kick, of a lighter flywheel. Perhaps, too, that cubic capacity puts it closer to a 450 in characteristic. When tested back-to-back with the 430 RR (in the 2019 test) it felt a lot more 'long power', but when compared to the KTM 500 here, you can see it's a quicker rev and feels lighter and more 'spiny'. The KTM really feels super laid-back compared to this, all bottom-end lug, where the Beta does seem to prefer to rev. It came to the point where we thought, well, the KTM is nicer.

Only then we remembered the map switch on the Beta, so swapped it from the 'sun' setting to the 'rain' one and discovered a whole second bike! The rain setting felt to take away the top 15% of the snap, slowed down the rev and gave us a ride that was much closer to that of the KTM. At the end of the day Harry took us to a trials venue within the woods, where there's a three-foot log step followed by a steep super-slippery climb over leaves and loose soil and here the Beta – in that rain mode – just aced the section finding grip all the way up the slippery bank. The first time we thought it might have been luck, but he repeated the feat over and again.

The hydraulic clutch and gearbox proved



HARRY WEARS

Helmet: Bell Moto-9 Flex

Shirt: KLIM Dakar

Pants: KLIM Dakar

Boots: Alpinestars Tech 10

no-nonsense, entirely fuss-free although being on stock gearing it was a little over geared, we'd prefer for nadgery work to gear it down so we could use second gear for the slower stuff rather than first. But that's normal with all dirt bikes. It has that proper enduro spec six-speed gearbox too, which means fast going and road work is not an issue, so you can go for that lower gearing without having rev the nuts off it on 'liaisons'.

In all the motor is a livelier prospect than the KTM and that's no bad thing, different strokes for different folks and all that. It makes the bike racier (which of course wasn't the objective here) and a little more

responsive, where the KTM has the feel of a big deliberate unit (albeit very capable).

CHASSIS

The chassis matches the motor, it's at the livelier, quick-steering end of the spectrum. It is at home in the trees and will match smaller machines in the cut and thrust of the tight single track. By comparison the KTM feels quite deliberate, and about 10% bigger – initially that feels like a handicap but we have to hand it to KTM somehow the big orange bruiser can still dance, but it does it in a different way so you just have to relax and trust it, it turns. On the Beta you can ride it in



standard enduro mode, elbows up weight over the front with the usual attack – it's a race bike first, trail bike second. The light steering persisted to the point of ever so slight twitchiness when you opened it up on faster straights where you would feel the odd misaligned rut or stones or roots through the 'bars. The KTM pretty much didn't register these, so for faster rally-type going with the Beta we'd probably look at fitting a steering damper just for peace of mind and the energy saving.

SUSPENSION

This bit is awkward. You see the KYB AOS 48s are such imperious forks you just can't help but tip your hat to them (and the Racing model). Literally straight out of the box with no messing on the adjusters, they made such a difference, giving a plush ride that was also so sensitive to the terrain. Credit to the upgrade ZF shock that Beta has matched to the forks, this too performs very sweetly. So, on the standard bike with standard ZFs there was this slight sense of harshness from the suspension, it would skip over the bumps, felt a bit harsh on the compression mid-stroke – and yes, probably with some running-in they will improve – but the Racing model by comparison felt works-spec. Faithfully following the terrain, smoothing, giving the rider a much more comfortable ride, the Racing was the one on which you



▷ could push harder.

Our benchmark KTM meanwhile, with 15 or so hours on it, had nicely bed-in its WP XPLOR kit and so was riding suitably plush – but almost to the point of being soft. On the Beta Racing we had the feel of a plush ride and a lot of scope for more pace, on the KTM it was a plush comfortable ride but with that sense that for hitting big stuff at speed, or riding deep sand you probably would want to either work the adjusters to the max or seek some professional help with a suspension tune.

So the awkward bit: yes, that £600 upgrade from the standard RR to the Racing, it's a no-brainer, we're picking the Racing every time.

BRAKES

This bit can be quick. It's Nissin kit and it worked just fine – as so much of enduro braking kit does these days. We'd have to be top hard-as riders to make this stuff sweat.

ERGOS

The Betas are proper enduros. Small, slim, exquisitely packaged. There's no bulk. The bars felt narrower than those on the KTM (good for narrow gaps in the trees) and they were lower (the KTM had risers fitted) and so the ride position was classic enduro, pitching the rider neatly over the front. Again, on the Racing, with that great suspension setup this meant you felt properly connected to the bike, ideal for press-on riding, it felt natural to level your back with the tank/seat, get those elbows up and push-on. In the tight stuff



you could ride stood thus, or sit and push your inside boot out, it did either/or quite nicely.

By comparison, the KTM felt like a Range Rover, you sat down and worked the big steering wheel – at least it felt like a wheel – through the tighter stuff. Again, while that description sounds negative this worked super effectively, but it was riding big bike style, where the Beta rider could adopt regular enduro style. On the plus side here, the KTM's saddle was quite comfortable, where both (apparently improved) Beta saddles were distinctly, er, 'sporting' – great for racing, a little less forgiving of old butts that like to sit more than stand...

FIT & FINISH

The Betas are definitely well-made, there's craft and pride in their assembly and the



styling is traditional race bike, as Italians like. That race bike business did mean they were a little louder both in engine and exhaust noise. Perhaps relating to that snap, there's a bit of an edge to the exhaust bark that catches the ear, where the KTM is actually fairly muffled start-to-finish. Ridden in a trail bike fashion there's no complaint, but throttle jockeys might find themselves causing a little irritation with the wider community.

All the levers and controls are also well crafted and thoroughly natural. Nothing sticks out, no two components clash and details like the black ergal footrests on the Racing model really delight. Most certainly there's no sense of cost-cutting. And we said it before, the Racing model is such a looker.

SO, THE 500 IS THE NEW 400?

It's not. 12 months with precious little riding did get the over-active RUST imagination thinking the 500 was indeed the new 400. Perhaps, not helped by previously testing Beta's 480 RR in some degree of isolation in Italy, where compared to the rest of the Beta range it felt like the big lazy chair. But it's not that at all. It is still a cracking bike and by not



THE 480 IS VERY MUCH THE ITALIAN STALLION, IT ANSWERS TO THAT ESSENTIAL LATIN NEED TO BRING A BIT OF PASSION, SOME BRIO, TO THE GAME OF LIFE



2021 BETA 480 RR (RACING) TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE: liquid cooled DOHC four-valve single cylinder four-stroke

DISPLACEMENT: 477.5cc

BORE & STROKE: 100 x 60.8mm

FUELING: Synerject EFI with double injector

STARTER: Electric

TRANSMISSION: Six-speed gearbox, oil lubricated clutch

FRAME: Molybdenum steel with double cradle

FRONT SUSPENSION: Sachs ZF 48mm USD fork (KYB AOS 48mm), 295mm travel

REAR SUSPENSION: Sachs ZF monoshock, progressive linkage, 290mm travel

WHEELS: 21x1.6, 18 x 2.15

BRAKES: 260mm wave disc, Nissin twin-piston calipers, rear disc: 240mm wave disc single-piston caliper

SEAT HEIGHT: 940mm

WHEELBASE: 1490mm

GROUND CLEARANCE: 320mm

WEIGHT: 108.5kg (dry)

FUEL CAPACITY: 9.0 litres

CONTACT: www.betamoto.com

PRICE: UK £8095 (£8695)

▷ being a clone of the KTM 500 EXC-F it creates real choice in the class. If you like your big bore to have a little more race then this is the bike for you. And yes, it is impressive just how good this bike is in the tight stuff, a slow clubman like myself (JB) could ride a regular enduro on this bike quite nicely, so it does bring a lot of versatility.

I also have to admit I fell in love with the Racing model, probably on account of its excellent suspension – there is a joy to riding off-road on quality suspension, it just elevates the experience and brings you that much closer to that mental image we all harbour of ourselves riding like gods, at one with machine and nature. The Racing model is also very good looking (as we've said a few times here). Honestly for UK short course rallies (like ATRC) this thing would be a weapon.

So no, if you're after an enduro bike that also does trail, that's going to be super easy to ride, yet still capable and good for the odd race this is probably not your bike. However, Beta does have one of those for you: the 390 RR. So let's revise the message: the 390 is the new 400. This really isn't working out, is it? If there's a bottom line – we should listen to our own advice, we really should...

...only we shouldn't end there. Okay, yes, while the smaller bikes win the trail game we need to remember the 500s' all-round versatility. For while the smaller enduros win in the tight UK lanes and enduro loops, we can't overlook the way the 500s can be thrown at just about anything. Yes, they make you work that little harder in that closed-course enduro, but take them onto faster flowing tracks, like the wide open trails of Portugal, or even take them into Northern Sahara, and where the little enduro starts getting breathless the 500s once again hit their stride. Yep, there's a range of versatility (Warren calls it bandwidth) that the other enduros struggle to match. So the 500 is the new, er, 500? 📌

THE TEST TEAM

The test team trio here was Patsy Quick and Harry Michael, who formed the Desert Rose Racing bubble, and JB – standing at least 2m away at all times (and outdoors)...

Most will know Patsy as a, er, Dakar veteran (sorry Pats) from the Africa years and now boss of Desert Rose Racing which offers rally support at most of the major European/Africa rallies, plus rider training in the UK, runs practice and race days plus other dirt bike services. Harry is a mechanic at Desert Rose but is also an uncommonly stylish rider who has also turned out to be an excellent and patient trainer. For a guy with little race background until he rode Romaniacs (with Patsy) in 2019 he looks suspiciously like championship material... JB is of course the 50-something clubman who's been faking it as a dirt rider come journo for the last 25 years.





A YEAR OF LIVING ...QUIETLY?

Our homme en France, Chris Evans – we've not forgotten him. And despite a year of not very much at all for all of us we're long overdue checking-in to see how he's faring. As it goes, bunkered down in a rural backwater, he's still living on the edge of society and it would seem legality...

It is so long ago that I can't actually remember when I first started writing columns for TBM – some time back in the very early 2000s. And with a single exception, I wrote one every month until TBM morphed into RUST and strict publishing deadlines went out the window. Since then, column regularity has been a little bit more erratic but still there's been 24 of them up until March of last year.... So nice to be back after over a year of doing very different things to what I usually do / did / talk about.

In my last column I announced that I'd just brought a brand-new Beta 300 RR. By now it should have about 250 hours on it and be up for sale. Instead, it has just 16 hours on the counter. 2020 is the first year since 1993 that I have clocked up less than 200 hours on a dirt bike and that feels very strange. To articulate this feeling any more than that is difficult, in part because so many emotions are wrapped up in all those hours. You see, it ain't just about the riding.

For a kick-off those 200 hours represented a sizeable chunk of my living.

As someone who has been self-employed since I was 24, how I make your money is an intrinsic part of my identity. I'm the chap who rides bikes. Then there's the social aspect of it. Because on my trips, for every hour spent on a bike there is at least the equivalent spent with people in a bar or a restaurant at lunch / dinner. Plus, there's all the stuff you have to do to make those 200 hours happen. All the time spent in the workshop changing tyres, oil, chains and sprockets. The hours on the phone and computer to hotels, restaurants and customers. The hours sitting in vans travelling to and from trips talking bollocks with whoever is unlucky enough to be trapped in the van with me for all that time. Given all those hours you'd imagine that feeling 'very strange' would have a lot to do with having too much time on my hands. In fact I've been as busy as ever, just busy in a very different way.

When we first went into lockdown, along with the rest of France, my wife, stepdaughter, dog and myself legged it to the country. The scenes at the train station were like some low-budget dystopian Netflix series. Kenneth the Dog was the only living being in the whole





▷ of the Gare du Lyon to show any kind of decorum whatsoever. President Macron assured us all it would only be for a couple of months (how we laugh now...) and I saw it as a chance to at last finish off the country residence. So, whilst my wife and her daughter illegally walked the legs off poor Kenny I attacked the gaff, assuming I 'only' had until May to get it all finished.

In between knocking down hangars and lighting barbecues I went for a cheeky rides through the woods to visit a friend of mine about 10 kays away. Another refugee from Paris, he was on his own after his wife refused to get on the train at the last minute. The original idea was I'd teach him English for his new job and in return he'd build me a metal balustrade. Basically, he needed the company. In the end we just sat in his workshop drinking coffee and admiring his amazing collection of motorcycles, including at least 10

THE SCENES AT THE TRAIN STATION WERE LIKE SOME LOW-BUDGET DYSTOPIAN NETFLIX SERIES. KENNETH THE DOG WAS THE ONLY LIVING BEING IN THE WHOLE OF THE GARE DU LYON TO SHOW ANY KIND OF DECORUM WHATSOEVER.

twins shock Fantics and a brand-new Godet Vincent. His English is still Inspector Clouseau level and my stairs still have no safety rail.

Obviously when you ride 10 kays everyday through the woods to see your mate you're not dressing up like you're about to do a 500 kilometre Dakar special, just jeans and trainers and a little bit more

caution. When I go out on the bike I always leave the front gate and the workshop door open so I can ride off the trail and straight into the house. This used to be because I was paranoid about leaving the bike out front for the whole world to see. Now, having realised everybody knows I have bikes in the workshop, I still leave everything open cos I'm lazy. Anyway, one day I came down the hill, straight into the house, whipped my helmet and googles off and walked outside to kiss the dog and pat the wife. Imagine my surprise when I reappeared into the sunlight to be confronted by a helicopter buzzing down the lane and then banking steeply round to look directly at me. Not finding what he was expecting, he flew over to the house on the other side of the valley, before coming to have another look at the Evans Family. To be honest I didn't know what to make of it, until I spoke to a friend who

lived 20 or so kilometres away. I asked him what he'd been up to and he said, "well, not riding the bike anymore, got chased by a helicopter." It was only then that the centime dropped.

But as you've probably worked out by now, apart from getting chased by choppers, my motorcycling life these last 12 months had been pretty low key – local, low speed, short duration. On the plus side the workshop is absolutely spotless, the bike has been set up to within an inch of its life (rear shock taken apart twice to make it absolutely perfect) and my knees have really benefitted massively from the rest. In fact, both mentally and physically not running around like a headless chicken (just the Dakar and the Andalucia Rally back in October) has done me the power of good. Rested and organised, I'm ready for whatever the 'new normal' has to throw at me. 🇬🇧



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CROSSING THE AMERICAS

A meditation

Renowned world traveller Nick Sanders was on his way to making his 10th circumnavigation when the pandemic stopped him short. But not before he'd traversed the Americas, an experience that became something of a meditation, as seems to be the case with Nick's travels of late.

Words & Images: Nick Sanders

How difficult is adventure? Well, it took an hour to pack but 40 years to learn how. Camera, tripod, spare chain and a single set of clothes. Phone in pocket. GPS on bike. Airfreight to New York. Unpack. Start ride. Hmm, then I thought, it's possible the difficulty of a journey is related to the life you've left behind.

Adventure is sudden and exciting, compelling and sometimes lonely. I was suddenly in JFK airport, midnight and sleeping hidden on a prayer mat beside the doughnut stand. At the crack of dawn, excited, I boarded the bus shuttle to the

cargo bay with paperwork clutched in my hand. Airports, like cities, have signs that remind you of home yet also format the beginning of your journey. Everything recedes as you feel that first mile where fantasy becomes fact, as your heart feels it might burst as you actually start the ride.

Blat-blatting along the Belt Parkway – a series of limited access highways that feed traffic into Brooklyn and Queens – I thought of things I might have forgotten to bring. The expedition's total luggage included a bag of spanners underneath the seat, tyre levers strapped with spare tubes,

repair patches, glue, a torch and, neatly folded in the side pocket of my jacket, a sponsor's hat. I had packed miniature camping gear for a small person stuffed in soft bags strapped to the crash bars snugly fitted in front of my knees. Pared-down prep for a simplified bike, I was always looking for the perfect ride.

Yamaha's Ténéré 700 was built to accommodate luggage but I liked to see the sleek lines and it interested me to film the elegance of a bike otherwise obscured by stuff. Wheeling along roads I knew, I began to weave between the trucks

through the oily smirch of the Port of New Jersey; harsh winter weather was making ready to download on me as I edged down the east coast of America.

This (planned) circumnavigation would be my tenth on two wheels and the first for this new generation of Yamaha parallel twins. The motor is a straight lift from the MT-07, and whilst the CP2 engine isn't as aggressive as KTM's 790 Adventure, it's a fabulously cheery ride. A year earlier I got to know its character having ridden a Tracer across Russia to the Gobi where every day it put a smile on my face. ▶



AN AMERICA CHANGED

So, it's Day One, three degrees and cooling, bright sunshine, busy on the roads. I ride down the Parkway until the butch skyline of New York punches me in the face as it appears brazenly, like a performance, monuments of ego, courage and muscle in a spectacular salutation to a blue-rinsed sky. The Empire State building stood on 20th West and 34th Street, two million square feet of art deco modernism. All steel and plate glass, every window etched in the smart style of the 1920s

Sniffing the air as if to catch a scent, I paused by Union Square. City life can become a sieve for the mentally ill. You see them stumbling on streets as if colonised from another world, and here there were people face down on the pavement, like in the old days of Bombay, and looking quite dead. It's a grubby city but the only one I know that looks better in real life than on a postcard. All metropolises have palaces and pyramids but to paraphrase John Steinbeck, 'the traffic is madness, its competition murderous... but once you've lived in New York, no place else is good enough'.

There were a lot of countries to cross – 40,000km just to Sydney – and in Maryland and Virginia the temperature dropped to minus 6 centigrade. Beat author Jack Kerouac said how the people you want to know on a journey are the mad ones, the ones 'mad to live, mad to talk, mad about Pluto no longer being a planet.' He writes with a particular purpose and after 40 years of travelling, I believe still in the stuff he says.

Yet Kerouac's America has changed. Long since one of the most welcoming of countries, now cautious, no longer cocksure, displaced from where it thinks it should be. Whilst this mighty continent is the wealthiest nation on earth its people are mostly poor, and as commentator George Carlin once said, 'that's why they call it the 'American Dream' because you've got to be asleep to be in it'.



IT TOOK AN HOUR TO PACK BUT 40 YEARS TO LEARN HOW





The warmth of Mexico beckoned. Instead of hurtling along corridors of concrete I needed quietness and to move through a kinder space. For me sitting lazily on my bike, its chirpy engine singing along in a kind of slowness, you can sometimes slip into an easily forgotten dimension of time. After a week of winter in faceless motels I wound down to the Everglades and the generousness of the southern states. And then pushed on to the west coast of this never-ending land mass arriving once again in the dark, blinking at the mountains and the Mexican lights.



TRAVEL IS LIKE READING A BOOK...

From El Paso you can see across the border to Ciudad Juárez. Until 2008, when there were 138 murders per 100,000 population, it was known as the most violent city in the world. Then the Sinaloa cartel's boss Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán moved in and restored an order among thieves. An odd irony is that across the road, in 2014, the El Paso Times rated its American namesake the safest city of over half a million people in all of the USA.

In this way the United States of America is both super rich and beggarly poor. In odd corners you find settlements where bad things could happen. Half of New Mexico is a trailer park where vast swathes are just covens of debris as plastic and broken consumables become rotting piles in a biblical auto mart.

I think of travel like reading a book. You put it down and later bits of it float to the top of your mind, to be understood as a whole. It just takes a while to read a few pages at a time.

I went back north, to Nevada, and camped on the edge of Death Valley. I sat by my fire and thought about what it was I was looking for. And as you look deeper into the flames you realise all you know is that the back of your head has suddenly got cold and your face has begun to burn.

It was fun to ride through cold mountain air to San Francisco and the languid ease of Big Sur and then the warmth of a desert basin. At Tijuana I crossed the Mexican border into Baja California where groups of expatriate Americans live by the coast. Big pants and braces are quite the thing as cigars are extracted theatrically from clenched teeth. It's a confederation of hardtail bikers playing the part of 'Sergeant-at-Arms', the Road Captain in a Marvel comic, and groups of Mad Max Rockatansky's shuffle around like barflies wearing bandanas and Superman tee-shirts.



According to one Criminality Index, listing extortion, kidnapping, drug running and murder as their modus operandi, Mexico ranks as the third most dangerous country behind Afghanistan and Guatemala. I wouldn't be concerned about that. If you compare the figures with actually riding here on your motorcycle, it's still a dream destination. I've travelled for forty years around this beautiful country and have only had to deal with a kidnapping once.

In the small towns at night you can sometimes hear, in the tradition of early corridos, stories put to song in a danceable polka or with a mazurka rhythmic base. The Mexican revolution of 1910 gave rise to stories of fighters and their ways of life but now this narrative ballad genre has been adapted to stories of drug smugglers, and the

narco-corrido lyrics are often compared to the style of gangster and Mafioso rap. Drug troubadours started to take root in mainstream art consciousness but most of them have since been shot.

I slept beside the road, or in ten-dollar hotels. The bike handled off-road riding with ease allowing me a solid performance. Any ability to push through dirt out here was limited by a knowledge of the consequences of getting it wrong. The tiny sand route to Puerto San Francisquito squirrelled through mountains thick with Prickly Pear Cactus, air rampant with Monarch butterflies and the most beautiful silence as I sat by my desert fire.

ANARCHIST GENTLEMEN & GRANDMAS WITH THIN CUTLERY...

Every motorcycle adventurer has a different reason that compels them

to go. The anarchists are always the gentlemen of the road, yet for me it is my oblivion, my opiate, my forgetting and it teaches me the need to let go. In dreams and on my motorcycle I have gained everything and have learnt never to envy a man who has had an easy life.

The borders of Central America are governed well with friendly officials facilitating easy transit and there is no problem entering each country with your precious iron horse. The shorter route through Honduras let me enjoy El Salvador, a country known for its gangs but instead I found its back streets where someone's grandma hands you thin cutlery and a plate of warm food. In eastern El Salvador I sat quietly watching. A truck driver pulls up, cordial greetings all round, cautious gesture to me as befits benign strangers having

travelled far. Everyone at lunchtime, laughing and joking. Grandma stirs the soup, mum and dad cleaning dishes, a daughter re-spreading tables, grandkids running errands. This sense of family was an example of good living and I finished off my meal with a cup of hot tea.

Each day in this extraordinary isthmus I rode across a different country, sort of lost but heading in the right direction. Nicaragua is one of my favourite countries in the world and I have a fantasy I could live there. I stayed five days and on the eastern end of Isla Ometepe, where I'd taken lodgings, my bike was parked next to my tree house. Dinner was set when the sun hit the lake, tea and cakes beforehand when the parrots start to squawk.

It was reassuring to hear the chirpy way this bike motored me through a



**COLD AIR WARM HEARTS**

I rode out of Bogotá to find a world biker friend in Medellin and then headed south following the spines and valleys of the Andean cordilleras. From Colombia to Patagonia you will find colonial towns where cobblestone streets lead past gilded churches whilst stately plazas remain unchanged since the 18th century. La casa es chica, pero el corazon es grande the locals say – “my home is small, but my heart is big”, and that is the prevailing feeling as you ride alone in crisp mountain air. Other locals say it might be better to judge people not by their country but by their altitude and at 4000 metres, Bolivia’s indigenous communities are starting to engage with a time-warp of their own.

Shuttling through the gears as you climb out of Colombia into Peru and then onto the Bolivian Highlands the warmth of the people cuts through the biting cold. I popped into Hotel Tortora, a roadhouse for serious travellers to warm by the fire. The lads serving me earn five dollars a week and the inequalities of wealth such as I saw on the edges of La Paz show this country to be dismally poor. There is hope of sorts.

High up on the Salar de Uyuni, the world’s largest salt lake, it is a place I always visit when passing. Covered by a few metres of salt crust the underlying brine is extracted for the production of lithium carbonate, a vital energy resource for batteries powering our electric vehicle

▷ miasma of fresh fruit smells and jingly sounds. A baseball match, the clap of a crowd and the sizzle of fresh empanadas you can buy on the street. Always the parallel twin rumble sounded unperturbed, as roads changed to gravel and then to sand. You pass by people in streets, clean and tidy with a sense of life being better than it was.

At Yaviza, in Panama, the Pan American Highway is truncated. Conventionally impossible to cross, the 1800 metre peaks in the Serrania del Darién and the flat marshland of the Atrato River conspire against a new highway being levelled. There are environmental concerns over connecting the continents by road but the transmission of foot and mouth disease from migrating cattle and the ever-present trafficking of drugs are cabals too great to overcome. Airfreighting the bike over the Darién Gap is easy and with help from your agent including paperwork it all costs about €1500. The airline thinks of it as cargo, the physicists as a wormhole, but really it’s as if you have sliced into an exotic fruit because you are suddenly in South America.





▷ revolution. Bolivia has at least a quarter of the world's lithium, including the single largest deposit here, a salt pan so large it can be seen from space.

In the town I found lodgings which were plain, walls covered with a light green gloss paint. It was clean and splendid and around the corner the Llama Café was quite the cutest of hangouts, stood back from the dusty road with its coffee, wi-fi and almond-smelling trays of cakes. I met up with another mate, ex-London man Robin Thomas who runs bike tours across the Salar and into the mountains. I posed questions I think travellers want answering and his honest face gave the illusion they were answerable.

The Salar whilst extraordinary was not passable due to rain having turned it into a lake. On the unmade road leading out of Uyuni, via the oasis of San Cristobal, the gravel accesses you to the summit of the Andes. At the Valley of the Rocks you are riding across a landscape of boulders so huge you tease yourself it's where the Gods play marbles. Monumental towers of cumulonimbi start their advance and the



wind drops to allow a sudden thrash of rain. The storm misfires and moves on and I ride a bit further where in a truckers' cafe I'm served warm soup. I feel I'm a million miles from anywhere.

AND ON FOREVER

The landscape is vast. You can't measure this sense of size with that of the universe except for one thing, when you stand looking at it, it also seems to go on forever. The altiplano between Bolivia and Chile compares as a phenomenal force of nature with the Atacama Plateau between Chile and Argentina further south. Inland from Copiapo the Paso de San Francisco carries you confidently into more motorcycling paradise. And yet, riding a motorcycle can be like a mind game. It's a time-travel 'tardis' up against epochs of geology, Teutonic plates and watersheds, stratas of rock pressed together like a sandwich, to climb once again across the Andes where you with your tent and camping stove get closer to the clouds. At night the darkness is so complete, that when the stars do come out it's like you're floating alone in space. ▷



▷ The Andes is not so much a massive mountain range as a series of cordilleras, Occidental and Central. After camping in the desert by San Pedro de Atacama I started my descent down to the city of Calama, found a bike shop and fitted a new chain. It was now time to push on to Patagonia before meeting my shipping agent in Santiago and transiting to Australia.


In his 1977 book 'In Patagonia,' Bruce Chatwin created an image of Patagonia as 'a low timber house with a shingled roof, caulked against storms, with blazing log fires inside and the walls lined with all the best books, somewhere to live when the rest of the world blew up.' Patagonia was the go-to place for being at the uttermost ends of the earth, and Ushuaia its most southerly city.

For days I camped in tussocky grass. Cooked an assortment of meats on an open fire and with just a bike and my belongings knew no one would love me just for my things. Far away, the legendary Mt Fitzroy stood imperiously, its summit obscured but still signalling itself as the most ruthless opponent of all the jagged peaks.

Way beyond the Carretera Austral across the ocean – my next destination, Australia. Where bushman would carry their children 8000km before they walk on their own. During this rhythmic phase the parent will forever be naming the contents of his territory and it would be impossible the child will not one day be a poet. After friendship and somewhere to eat and live, stories are what we need most. It's like everyone knows a story, about themselves, that character, that plot, how every thought all of the time makes us what we are.

"No, no! The adventures first, explanations take such a dreadfully long time."

Lewis Carroll 'Through the Looking Glass' 📖



**EVERY MOTORCYCLE
ADVENTURER HAS A DIFFERENT
REASON THAT COMPELS
THEM TO GO. FOR ME IT IS MY
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