

12 YEARS ON THE ROAD

HAPPY NEW

As the sun rises on 2015, bike travellers extraordinaire Simon and Lisa Thomas will wake

By Simon and Lisa Thomas
ADVENTURE RIDERS

It was only supposed to be 18 months, but months turned to years, and now - over a decade later - we've lived more than I thought we could in a lifetime. We've racked up over 250,000 miles, explored 78 countries on six continents, traversed 27 deserts, slurped mint tea with Tuareg nomads, stalked lions with Maasai warriors and talked into the night with Mongolian eagle hunters. We sipped the air at 17,234 feet, froze on the ancient Silk-Route in Tajikistan and boiled alive at 72C in Las Vegas. Four bouts of Malaria, four cases of dengue fever, 27 punctures in India and a broken neck in the Amazon Jungle later and we still wouldn't change a thing. Those 18 months were supposed to make up for the year-and-a-half I spent bed-ridden after my bike met a car and my right foot got separated from the rest of me. The accident changed everything, once I got walking again we said goodbye to our jobs, security, savings and careers and hello to an unplanned future. Really, it was the best thing that happened to us. So after two years of planning we resigned from our corporate lives, sold much of what we owned, closed the front door, loaded our bikes and slid away quietly to start our 18-month motorbike journey around the world.

Continued over



WE WEAR

to their 12th consecutive New Year on the road



PICTURES BY SIMON AND LISA THOMAS

2003 01 JAN New Year in: Western Sahara

I yelled to Lisa: 'What the f*** are we doing?'

Highlight: Crossing the Sahara Desert
Scariest moment: Leaving civilisation on the first day!

2003 wasn't so much a learning curve as it was a vertical ascent. Those first 12 months turned two adventure riding newbies into hardened adventure-seeking junkies. We reached Nordkapp (the most northerly point in Europe you can ride to) and patted ourselves on the back. The next month we were sipping Vodka outside the Kremlin. The following day Chechen rebels blew up a café 500 metres from our hotel. Three weeks later a suicide bomber blew up our hotel, killing 27. We made a narrow escape. The hardest part of the year was riding exhausted and dehydrated, deep in the disputed territories of the Western Sahara, and in the middle of a minefield. We were gambling with our lives, out of our depth and in a landscape that demanded skills we'd yet to acquire. It was pitch black when I yelled to Lisa "What the f*** are we



doing?" Reality belted me in the chest like a sledgehammer. It was real, and nothing like the adventure I'd imagined for so many years, but that experience saw me coolly handle whatever insurmountable problem came my way from then on. Four days later we crossed the Sahara and survived the toughest riding either of us had ever taken on.



It looks idyllic, but we were lucky to survive getting caught in a minefield

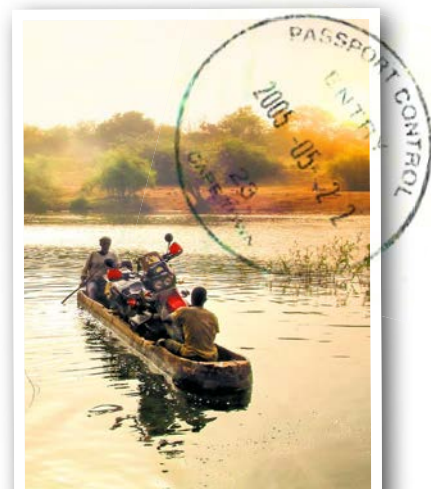
2004 01 JAN New Year in: Cape Town, South Africa

Let the good times roll

Highlight: Finding a feeding lioness and her cubs close by while we searched for firewood.

Scariest moment: Stripping a propeller-driven plane to cram ourselves and both bikes in for a flight past Nigeria where 300 people had just been macheted to death on the border.

I had no idea you could squeeze two bikes into a hollowed out tree trunk to cross a river. Africa's west coast saw us acquire new skills and perseverance. We roasted in some of the highest temperatures to have ever hit Mali and our walking pace riding speed meant the heat rising off our bikes was cooking us alive. We ran out of water, hallucinated, had severe cramps, kidney issues and rode through bush fires.



Please don't capsize, please don't...



A bridge too far...
resulting in a
broken neck

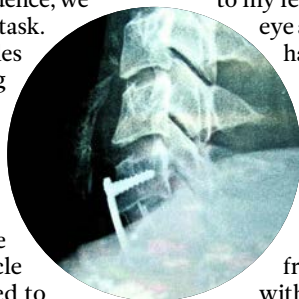
2005 01 JAN New Year in: São Paulo, Brazil

Welcome to the year of living dangerously

Highlight: Being alive at the end of it.
Biggest lesson: We all have depths of physical and mental reserves we never imagined were there.

After a year of research no-one, as far as we could tell, had successfully negotiated the Amazon jungles north to south on large-capacity bikes. Fuelled with a new sense of confidence, we thought we'd be up to the task.

We only managed 155 miles on day one before being stopped by the worst bridge we'd ever seen. In 100% humidity it was less like breathing and more like being water-boarded. Exhausted, we chose to face this obstacle the next day. We rushed to build a fire having seen a black jaguar cross the track just 100 metres from where we stopped. The next morning we walked the bridge a few times - determining that the left side looked stronger. We would normally walk the bikes over anything this precarious, but the wood was so rotten it crumbled at the lightest touch, leaving nowhere to walk alongside the machines. I made a start and in



a moment the wood gave way and I was flung three metres into the wet rocky foliage of the river bank. I was out cold for 45 minutes, leaving Lisa time to face a few unpleasant realities. If I didn't regain consciousness she'd have no choice but to leave me there. Five hours later and I managed to get to my feet. I was blind in my left eye and paralysed on my left hand side. Passing out from the pain four to six times a day became the norm.

We spent the next four days by the mud track repairing a fractured sub-frame and 34 separate breaks in six feet of fried R1100GS wiring loom with duct tape and a Leatherman. We then pushed on through a mud hell that I never want to revisit and limped into Sao Paulo three weeks later. Finally in hospital we found out Lisa had full-blown malaria and my neck was broken and dislocating. Half a millimetre more would have severed my spinal cord and killed me. Following a nine-hour operation and six weeks of recovery we hit the road and headed south to Ushuaia.

2006

01 JAN New Year in: Mexico

'We sped by as lava burbled in volcanoes'

Highlight: Riding hard from the Argentinian Patagonia up into the clouds of the Bolivian Altiplano.

Scariest moment: Being in the blast-zone of an active volcano.

The Bolivian Altiplano was special. It's just you, your bike and the unfiltered pleasure of an intoxicating landscape. We were surrounded by vast deserts of beige and rust-coloured Mountains. We sped by as lava burbled in tall, jagged volcanoes;

on their flanks, baby mud volcanoes erupted and hissed through frozen soil. I remember standing on the shores of Laguna Colorado, a lagoon of iridescent red water framed by copper mountains. In the acidic waters thousands of flamingos stood motionless as if posed for National Geographic. The frozen air was a constant reminder of our 17,323ft altitude. Drinking enough water was tough as it had all turned to ice.



2008

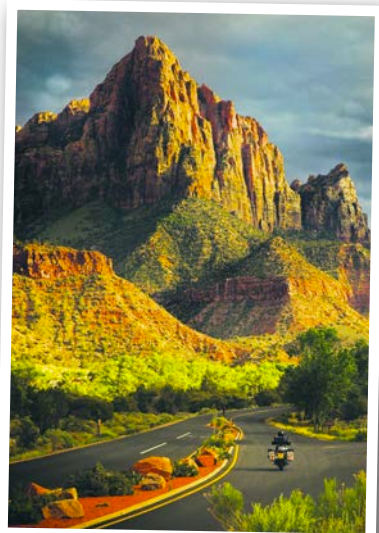
01 JAN New Year in: Belize

The highs and lows

Highlight: Three weeks of camping on a white sandy beach in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula.

Low point: Three weeks of riding in cold heavy rain in the USA.

2008 was a year of highs and lows. Riding into Yosemite National Park was a beautiful experience and we enjoyed the simpler riding among some of the USA's most spectacular National Parks and made friends for life. However, the downside was that Lisa had been ill for a couple of years and I almost found religion when she was rushed to hospital for surgery.



You could almost find religion

2009

01 JAN New Year in: Islamabad, Pakistan

'We'd been riding hard for 16 hours'

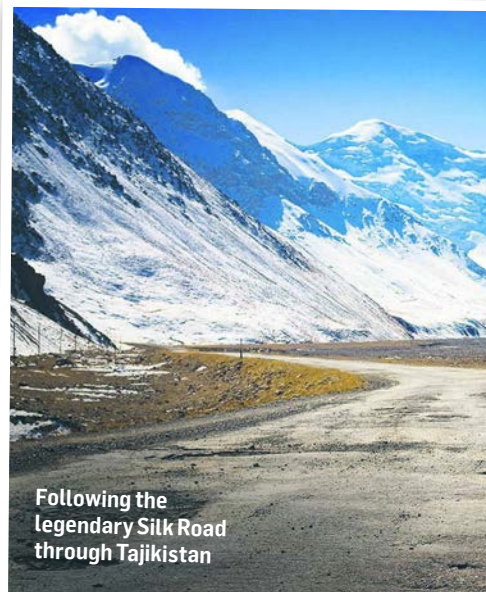
Highlight: Riding across the Gobi Desert and traversing the Silk Road.

Scariest moment: Being held by the Secret Police in Iran.

Siberia is a frozen landscape right? Wrong! We rode thousands of miles through desolate tundra in temperatures over 35°C and donated litres of blood to the region via black clouds of elephant-sized mosquitoes. In Mongolia's Gobi Desert, we sat physically spent and stared at a sea of dunes. We'd been riding for 16 hours and knew we were beaten, there was no way we could ride the extra 40 miles to our next stop. That afternoon two men and one woman approached us and in spite of

'We donated litres of blood via black clouds of elephant-sized mosquitoes'

their weather worn, ancient faces and their stoic demeanour, they shocked us with a contagious, child-like enthusiasm. Despite tough lives, they fed us with genuine warmth and immediate kinship. They offered help, water and food, without any expectation of return, it's the Mongolian nomad way.



Following the
legendary Silk Road
through Tajikistan



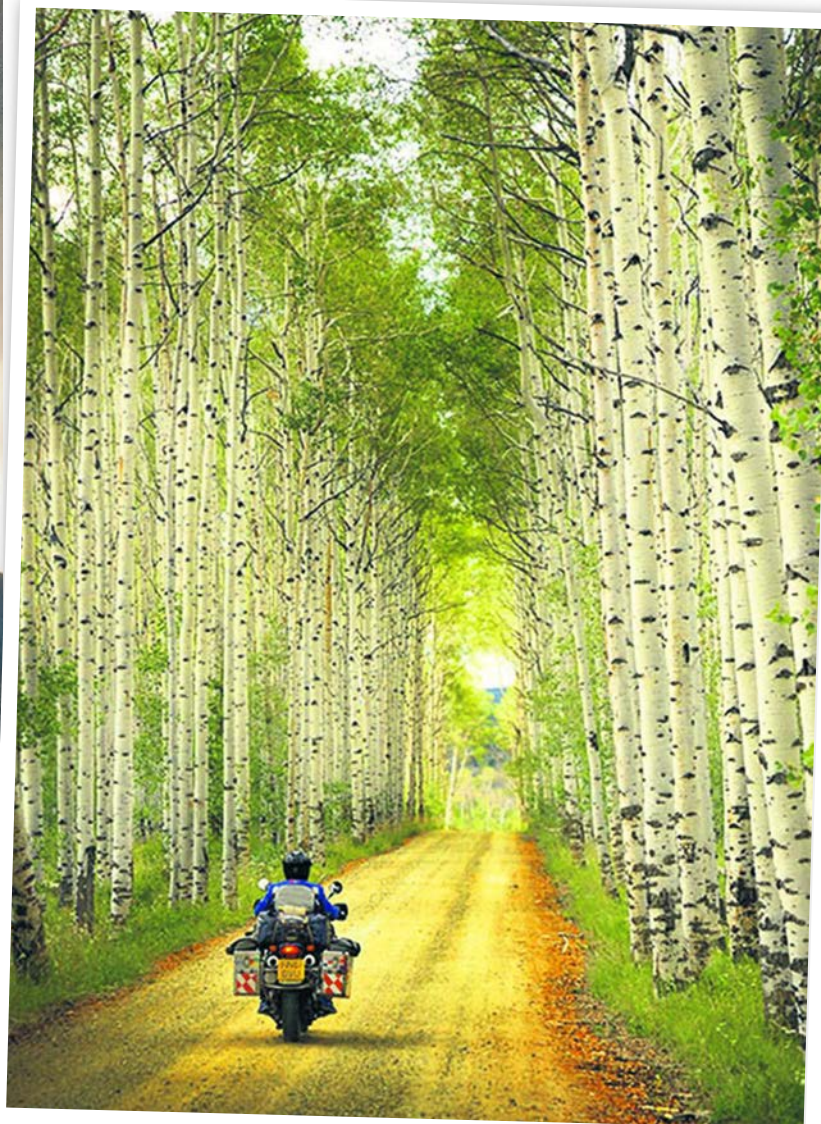
Welcome to the land that health and safety forgot

2007 **01 JAN** *New Year in: California, USA*

Saluting the Star Spangled Banner

Biggest lesson: Out-thinking and out-waiting officialdom gets you further than getting upset.
Scariest moment: Being on the receiving end of three surprising road rage attacks in the US.
 By the time we reached the USA we were in need of a little familiarity so we spent the next 17 months exploring. To our surprise there are still unspoilt,

under commercialised, regions and backwater towns in the good 'ol US of A. With our backwheels spinning in the loose dirt we joined the Continental Divide Trail and rode it north. Often referred to as the spine of the USA, it's also the longest off-road route in the world. I didn't think it was possible to ride in the USA all day and not see another soul.



Who knew you could ride all day in the good 'ol US of A and not see a single soul?



2010 **01 JAN** *New Year in: Bangkok, Thailand*

The land of contrasts

Highlight: Camping in the Annapurna Himalayas in Nepal.
Scariest moment: Riding in the outskirts of Quetta (a Taliban sympathetic city), Pakistan, with a fully-armed military escort, when our guards raised their guns, jumped from their vehicles and ran out into the desert.
 We entered India from Pakistan and were riding into a landscape 1.2 billion people call home, where sights, sounds, and smells come at you full force and non-stop. India is the place where absolute poverty plays side-by-side with the obscenely wealthy.



More fun than riding Taliban country

2011 **01 JAN** *New Year in: Penang Malaysia*

Touratech saviours

Highlight: Being humbled by the generosity of people around the world.
Low point: Falling victim to a family in Borneo who were creating accidents as an insurance scam.
 I had to lay the bike on its side and slide 18 metres pinned under it before slamming into the 4x4. The scammers created five crashes in one day, I was the second. It was going to cost £7000 to buy the parts we needed but Touratech Germany had heard of our situation and supplied all the Touratech parts we needed to get the bike whole again. They asked for nothing in return.



It was going to cost £7000 in parts

2012

New Year in:

01 JAN Sydney, Australia

Size really does matter

Highlight: Riding up the ashen flanks of a live super volcano on Java Indonesia. **Scariest moment:** Watching Lisa highside and knock herself out in the Outback. Pinned under her bike, litres of petrol then leaked into her helmet, goggles and eyes.

Australia's big, and before setting foot there we didn't comprehend just how big, big really is. After riding 2500 miles through its centre from Australia's northeast coastline diagonally down to Perth on the southwest shore, we finally got the idea. Australia is so much more than mates drinking tinnys, Sheilas, surfers on Bondi beach and the Opera house. The real Australia is in its blood red centre, in the Outback. I swear that landscape's so big and so ancient it whispers to you.



How close do you dare get to a volcano?



2013

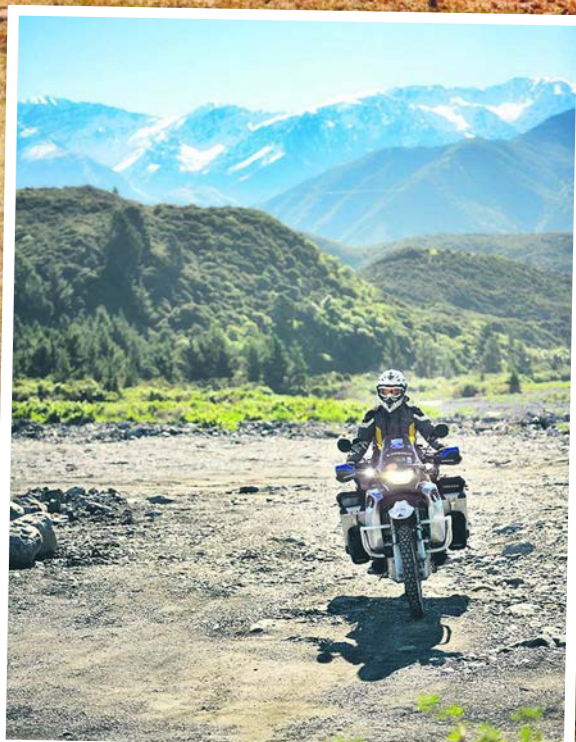
01 JAN New Year in: Belize

In search of dragons and wizards

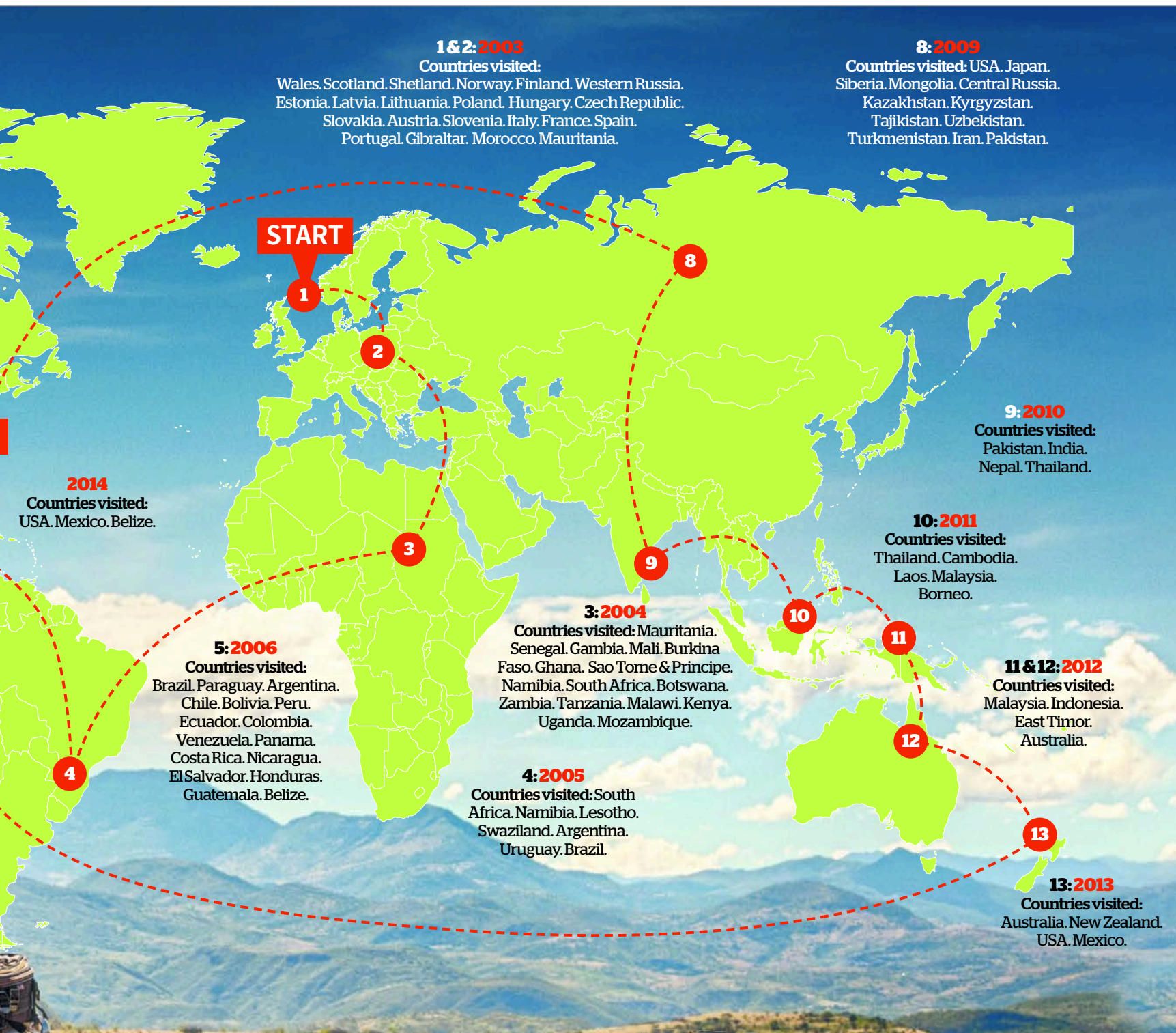
Highlight: Riding the endless curves of the 'Forgotten Highway' on New Zealand's North Island.

Low point: Spending five full days cleaning both bikes to clear New Zealand's quarantine inspection.

We didn't find any hobbits or dwarves but we have to admit New Zealand offers some of the best scenic riding in the world. How they cram so much varied terrain into two tiny islands is beyond me.



We spent five days cleaning the bikes to get into NZ



LIVING LIFE ON THE ROAD

By Lisa Thomas

STICKING IT OUT
There are times when I want to stick a skewer into Simon's head and I know there are times when he wants to strangle me. We've been together 23 years, married for 19 with 11 of those on this trip living out of a tent. We have a very close and explosive relationship and any frustrations we feel are dealt with in the moment and then forgotten. Being together 24/7 just works for us. We've had tough times during this journey when we've relied and trusted each other with our lives. Taking each other for granted has never been an option.

MONEY
The first year was an extended holiday. We saved for years, curtailed our social lives and sold almost everything. However, after the initial 18 months we were forced to deal with our finances more seriously. Now, we wild camp and shop in local markets and cook our own food whenever possible. Yep, we're homeless. For the first three years on the road we rented out our house, but when we made the decision to continue, we had to sell in order to release the capital.

THE BIKES:
● 1999 BMW R1100GS – Simon
● 2001 BMW F650GS – Lisa
We've had the same bikes since the start of the trip, although I'm not sure now if that's strictly true. Since we've crashed, repaired, upgraded, swapped and fabricated so many parts over years, who really knows? In essence they're the same bikes.

GEAR
Our tank bags hold camera gear, panniers hold the kitchen, office, spare parts and pharmacy. Camping gear is split between the bikes and we each have a watertight roll bag.

WHY?
We realised that the world owes each of us nothing. The nice things we work hard for, earn, cherish and even come to identify ourselves by, can be taken away. We are the total sum of our experiences and not just the things we have collected. We're just two people that chose to ride around the world.



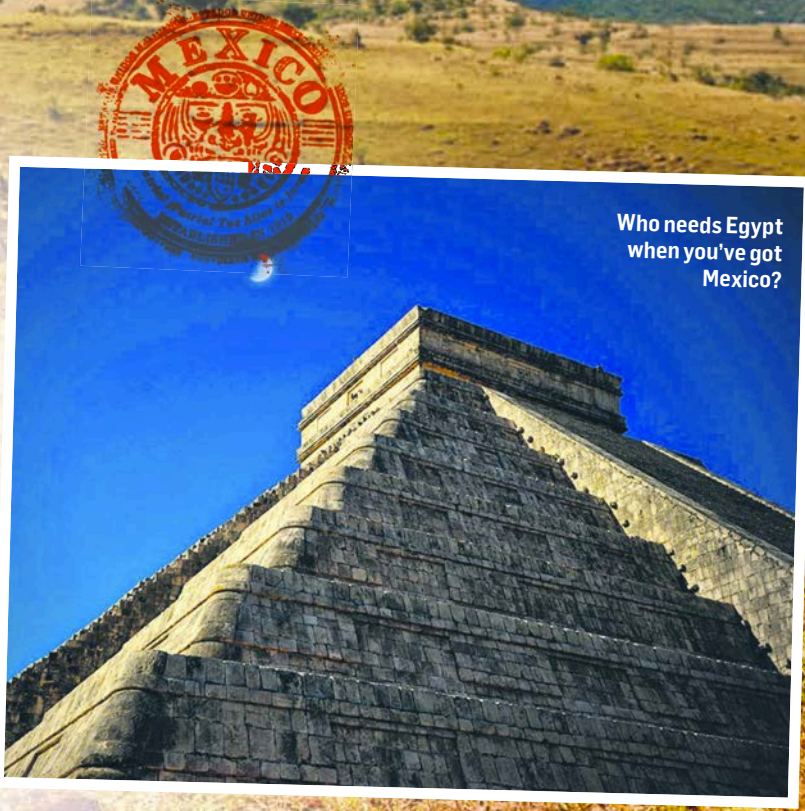
Sat, as we are now on this sandy beach at the end of 2014 – Happy New Year from Simon and Lisa

2014

01 JAN New Year in: Mexico

Beyond the TV persona

Highlight: Receiving a visit from Lisa's mum and her then riding pillion for 2500 miles through the USA with us.
Biggest lesson: Family come through when you've nowhere left to turn.
In Mexico people see beaches, big hats, cartels and dodgy moustaches. Don't be fooled. Beyond the stereotypes, Mexico is a rich cultural blend of native rituals and colonial influence. Throw in for good measure spectacular rides along its coastlines and the Sierra Madre Mountain Range and you can easily get addicted. Taking a peak beneath the TV persona of this vast country has left us thirsty for our next ride there. We've explored jungles and rainforests, hilltop pueblos (small villages) and even dived into the mineral-water clear cenotes (fresh water submerged caves) on the Yucatan Peninsula.



Who needs Egypt when you've got Mexico?

For more on Simon and Lisa Thomas' epic adventure visit 2ridetheworld.com