

Our new World Travelers Simon and Lisa Thomas



In May 2003, Lisa and I left our jobs, sold everything and on two BMW motorcycles set off to see the world. The plan seemed simple enough – ride, eat, sleep and repeat until we had our fill of the 122 countries and 7 continents the planet has on offer. The decision to depart on our journey six years ago was not a simple one. A number of tough circumstances forced us to re-evaluate our lives. After a serious motorcycling accident, I came close to losing my right foot and spent the next two years undergoing five major surgeries and learning to walk again; and within the same year, Lisa's father underwent major heart surgery and my mother was diagnosed with cancer. Life was sending us a major wakeup call.

Change needed to happen. If not now, when? We needed to address our perspective on life: who we are and what we want to be. We're lucky enough to be able to do it together.

Since leaving the relative safety of a well-planned life, we've lived more in the last six years than we ever imagined we'd live in a lifetime. Recently, a friend asked, "So, how old are you?" Our reply, "Old enough to know how lucky we are, and young enough to be looking forward to the next adventure." We grinned at each other, knowing that what we spoke was the honest truth.

When the day ends and you are dirty, sweaty, tired and camped on the periphery of a Massai village in Tanzania, the full scope of life comes crashing home, and you understand the broader meaning of living, and the human condition in all of its glorious variation. Nothing but a motorcycle can get you to the places and in touch with the people we have had the pleasure of spending time with. We have turned what was once a weekend hobby into a way of life that we wouldn't trade for anything, and we have no intention of ending our travels and settling anytime soon.

There was a time when our days would start with 20 minutes of figuring out what to wear in order to make the right impression on the right people. Now, with only one change of clothes, and an open mind, it's not a problem. We've traveled from the northernmost tip of Norway, across the Sahara and down to the most southerly point of Africa (twice!). From Ushuaia, Argentina to Deadhorse, Alaska. We've spent a lot of time living outside the normal parameters that people place on their lives. We have enjoyed meeting and making friends with a wide variety of people and having our horizons broadened as we redefine for them what a "normal, happy marriage" can be. And we're only halfway through. Stay tuned...

[Our publication of Simon and Lisa's world-ranging exploits begins in the June '09 issue.]

R1100GS & F650GS Modifications

Bike Preparations



Sometime in between the exhilaration of the decision to go and rolling through the first mile of the long-awaited 'big bike trip' comes the thrill and the challenge of bike preparation.

Sure, some of it can be a bit laborious, even frustrating, working in the garage, battling that one last rusted bolt that then snaps just as the last light of day fades. On the other hand, there's the growing excitement as the months pass and your beloved two-wheeled plaything that once looked like so many others becomes truly your own, with a more aggressive come-hither look, a bolder sound and curvier shape that screams, "I'm an overland adventure bike – let's ride!"

Our excitement grew as we frenetically thumbed through the collection of motorcycle accessory catalogues we'd collected over the years. A choice that had been hovering over our heads for years had finally been made: We were going to take the mother of all bike rides, a mammoth motorcycle odyssey

that involved driving our two BMWs around the world, with our wheels turning on all seven continents and 122 countries. All manner of gizmos, gadgets and high-tech farkles that we'd long lusted over could now be justified. Sort of.

With the endless list of aftermarket accessories now available, we also knew we could easily be our own worst enemies, spending much needed travel cash on kit and modifications we weren't completely sure we would or wouldn't need, caught up in the excitement of 'modification-itus'.

The Plan

One thing we were sure of was that we needed a plan, and we wanted to keep it simple. We'd take Lisa's stock 2002 BMW F650GS and my older

'99 R1100GS and make them stronger, more off-road ready, field repairable and lighter wherever possible. One short week after placing our initial order, the first of what were to be many, large heavily taped brown boxes turned up on our doorstep – and so it began.

We would cross Africa's notorious Sahara Desert and two years later, in South America, our journey would take us through the heart of Brazil's Amazon rainforest, both ambitious undertakings. Fuel capacity was going to be an issue. Early on, we swapped out the fuel tanks on both bikes. We had done our homework and had learned that our options were a little limited, with only a few manufacturers fabricating larger tanks; but only Touratech made tanks for both the 1100 and 650. They'd been tried



🔧 **F650GS:** Touratech rally engine sump protector with new, higher sub-frame.



🔧 **F650GS:** Touratech 30mm bar risers.

🔧 **F650GS:** Öhlins' heavy-duty progressive fork springs.



and tested, and even run in the famous Paris-Dakar rally for years, which was good enough for us!

Oversized Gas Tanks

The R1100GS's regular 21-liter (5.5 gal.) mild steel fuel tank was swapped out for a larger but lighter 42-liter (11 gal.) Touratech tank. The beast was made of Polyamide 6, a high-tech plastic composite with a higher tensile strength than steel, yet lighter than aluminum. The F650GS was to get two additional Touratech 11-liter tanks, placed up front and all plumbed back into the original 17-liter (4.5 gal.) under-seat tank, with an additional steel reinforcing front frame that would hold it all together. The bikes immediately took on that oversized rally bike look, and our faces gained huge perma-grins.

Suspension

With the tanks in place, we needed to look into getting better handling out of the bikes with the extra weight of all that gas onboard. One of the single

most effective modifications made to any bike has to be suspension, and we chose to go with Öhlins. The 1100 was kitted out front and back with up-rated units with over-rated springs, to absorb the extra weight, and then years later it was personalized with a complete re-valving in the USA by the clever techs at 'After Shocks' in California. The 650 was beefed up at the back with an Öhlins shock, again with a heavy-duty spring, but the front treatment needed some thought. With Lisa standing only 5' 2", using Öhlins up front would have made the bike too tall. So, we settled on replacing the standard soft springs with harder and more progressive Würth springs, which go a long way toward solving the blown-fork-seal issue known to affect the F650GS model.

Carrying Gear

With suspension and tanks taken care of, we turned our attention to the proper panniers. We looked into a number of metal makes, knowing we'd be living out of them for many years and using them as suitcases/tables/seats/ballast as needs demanded.

There are several good ones (including BMW, Hepco & Becker, Touratech and All Jesse's, to name but a few), but we quickly winnowed the choices down to a short list based on our requirements. We ruled out the BMW units as a little too fragile for our needs. The Jesse bags were simply too big and the Hepco-Becker styles too difficult to field repair. Touratech won out, and their cases were ordered and fitted to both bikes. The simple rectangular design makes them easy to bash back into shape after a fall, and we're pleased to report that the same set has served us well for seven years.

Cool Stuff to Remember

If you're going to add locks to the hinges (a must), get the keys matched;

that way one key fits all and you're not carrying separate keys for each case. While you're at it, order the optional Touratech inner bags. They are designed specifically to fit the panniers and are brilliant, especially when you've booked into a motel late, find out that you're on the fifth floor and the elevator is out of order. Trust me, one trip with a bag is better than half a dozen with only the odds-and-ends you might have to carry on repeated trips to the parking lot.

Comfort

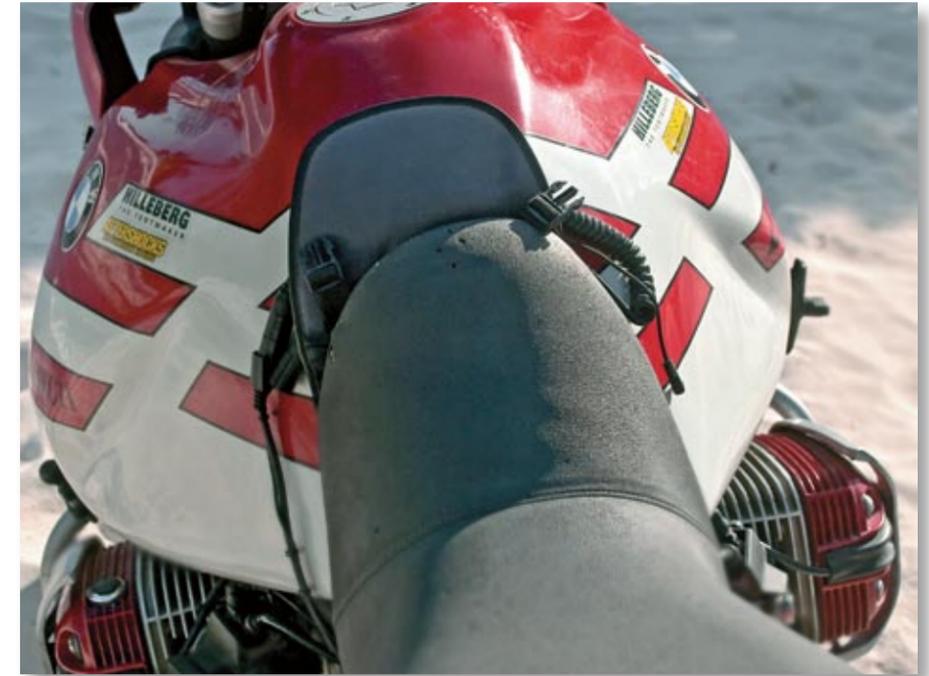
Comfort and durability were added as factors to our original 'goal list', and Lisa's new Touratech sport seat was reshaped, scooped as low as possible (allowing her to 'flat-foot' her bike), and a gel pad added to increase comfort on long riding days. The two-part seat of the 1100 was upgraded to a single-piece high sport seat. We also swapped the narrow BMW foot pegs of both bikes for extra-wide rally pegs, ensuring that we can stand for hours on the pegs without bruising the soles of our feet.

Kickstand

We'd been given solid advice years back—"keep things simple"—and with that phrase rattling about, we trashed the idea of having a 'bolt-on' large kickstand foot, going instead for simple diamond-plate steel, cut and welded onto the base of our kickstands. This is an essential modification if you're planning on sand riding, or sand parking to be more precise.

Auxiliary Lights

Nighttime riding is a bad idea, especially when you're off the beaten track and in the dirt, but sometimes it can't be helped. "Hope for the best and prepare for the worst" is another strong motto that applies. After months of research, we dug deep in our budget and ordered auxiliary lights, the Touratech's Xenon system. With



🔧 **R1100GS:** Touratech 42-liter polyamide tank.

separate ballast, they crank up your bike's 12-volt power to over 20,000 volts. The system works without traditional bulbs, so there's nothing that will fracture from the heavy vibration from your machine. Our original sets have lasted seven years and are still going strong.

Protecting Your Sole

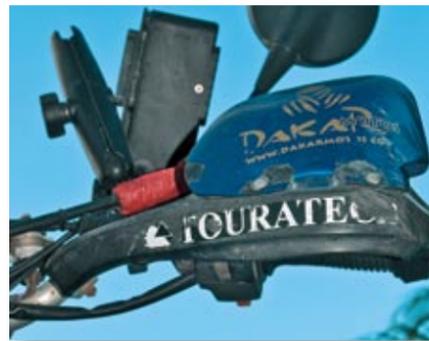
Riding up on the pegs, as is necessary when crossing the Sahara, or any other rough terrain, can be tiring at the best of times, but especially so if your bike doesn't 'fit' you. Things have to be right for you to feel relaxed, and the whole reason for all the modifying and tinkering is to blur the line between where you stop and the bike begins. Often overlooked is handlebar height. If the bars are too low, you'll be leaning down to hold them, with your back cranked at the waist. Allowing for our respective heights (I'm 6'4" and Lisa is 5' nothing), Lisa's 650 was kitted out with Touratech's 30mm risers, giving her a much more neutral standing position and the 1100 with a custom set of mammoth 60mm risers.



🔧 **R1100GS:** Engine crash guards and cylinder protectors.

🔧 **R1100GS:** Rally extra-wide foot pegs.





F650GS: Touratech hand protectors.



R1100GS: Öhlins suspension.



F650GS: Large foot pad on kickstand.



R1100GS: Touratech pannier system.

Protecting the Bikes

With the bike metamorphosis almost complete, it was time to look at protection, more for the bikes than for us. Our once placid machines appeared ready to take on the world, looking taller, wider and soon also sounding louder, with a new custom-made exhaust system, courtesy of Scorch designs in South Africa. We now had more to damage and that needed addressing. The cylinders of the R1100GS pot engines are an obvious impact zone, but in this market, unlike the limited number of oversized gas tanks we had to choose from, there's no shortage of solution providers. BMW, Touratech, Hepco-Becker, Wunderlich... the list goes on and on. All of these steel-framed puppies are strong; however, the crucial considerations should be how and where they're mounted. If an oil and filter change is going to take you an hour simply due to the location of the bar mounts, you ought to take your business elsewhere. On the 1100, we fitted the neat solution from Touratech, which also unbolts half-way down, allowing easy access to the sump guard and oil drain plug without having to dismantle the whole engine protection system. The cylinder heads were then further protected by replacing the flimsy BMW plastic guards with the stronger cast aluminum guards from Bill Stanton in the USA – and yes, they're still on the bikes and doing just fine seven years on. Protecting Lisa's fuel tanks was a little more complex, as no one yet builds guards for the Touratech auxiliary tanks on the F650GS. We called on the help of Chris Canterbury, a good friend in California, and he rustled up a set of custom fuel-tank protectors that wrap neatly around the tanks and protect them from catastrophic impacts like piercing rocks on bad spills. We also added a set of Touratech handguards, great for shielding you from broken wrists and doing a darned

good job of looking after your levers to boot. Let's face it, the plastic OEM ones really aren't going to do much in a fall, other than break, which, while better than breaking a hand, are still pieces to scrap at the end of the day.

A Work in Progress

At this point, the job is almost done, but we always keep in mind that our bikes really are works in progress, responding to the changing needs of the terrain we anticipate riding when looking two to six months ahead. The world is an enormous place. A short time ago we swapped out the sump/crash guard on Lisa F650GS for an impressive looking rally guard made from 3mm aluminum, which has several huge advantages. Much stronger than stock, the whole guard drops with just three bolts, providing easy access to the sump drain plug, etc., and best of all it came with a new sub-frame which gives Lisa an extra 1 1/4 inch of ground clearance. And last, but by no means least, are the most recent modifications that we wished we had made years ago: the front rims. Lisa's standard 19" front rim was swapped out for a 21" from a sibling BMW Dakar model. Not to be outdone, we purchased a 21" rim designed for BMW's HP2 model and had 'Woody's Wheels' in Colorado lace it onto the original hub we'd cut from the R1100GS's original 19". What a tremendous improvement to the handling on both bikes; riding in the soft stuff becomes dramatically easier with significantly more control and big holes become smaller as the 21" rolls over instead of into them.

Although half of the world has already passed underneath our wheels, our bikes are now better prepared to take on the rest.

See you on the road.



R1100GS	F650GS
Touratech 42-liter polyamide tank	Touratech 39-liter polyamide tank
Touratech Desierto fairing	BMW high Dakar screen
Öhlins suspension (front and back)	Touratech Xenon high-output auxiliary light (right side only)
BMW HP2 front 21" rim (hand-laced in USA)	Touratech fog auxiliary light (left side only)
60mm bar risers (custom made)	Touratech 30mm bar risers
Touratech pannier system (41-liter right and 35-liter left)	Touratech 35-liter pannier system
Scorch custom exhaust and straight-through connecting tube	Scorch custom exhaust and silencer system
Rally extra-wide foot pegs	Rally extra-wide foot pegs
Galfer braided steel brake lines	Galfer braided steel brake lines
Galfer Wave® rotors (front and back)	Galfer Wave® rotors (front and back)
Touratech Xenon high-output auxiliary light	BMW 21" front rim
Touratech high sport seat	Touratech sport seat
Touratech engine crash guards	Custom auxiliary tank crash guards
Jim Stanton cylinder protectors	Touratech chain guide
Continental TKC80 tires	Continental TKC80 tires
Rear sub-frame reinforcements	Touratech rally engine/sump protector with new, higher sub-frame
Touratech hand protectors	Touratech hand protectors
Touratech center-stand skid plate	Touratech center-stand skid plate
Large foot pad on kickstand	Large foot pad on kickstand
	Heavy-duty progressive fork springs

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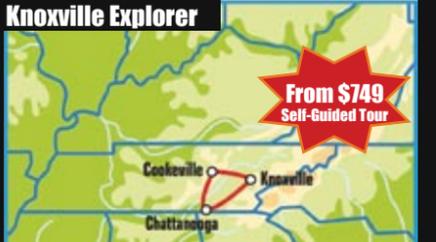

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