

WORLD TRAVELERS

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Interview With Simon and Lisa Thomas

RR: *What is/was the primary inspiration for your journey?*

Simon and Lisa Thomas: We love to ride and travel, and after a bad day at work we'd sit around with a beverage while we scoured maps and travel books. I remember we both read Ted Simon's *Jupiter's Travels* and Helge Pedersen's *10 Years on 2 Wheels*. We were captivated by the wild adventures and exotic locations. They left us in awe of the daily challenges these guys faced and seemed to always overcome. In one particularly bad year, Lisa's father underwent emergency heart surgery, my own mother was diagnosed with cancer, and I was involved in a serious motorcycle accident in which I almost lost my right foot. Five major operations ensued, and two years lying on my back gave each of us a chance to reevaluate our lives' goals.

Give us a brief timeline of the events (starting with the initial idea) that led up to your departure in May of 2003.

Once we'd made the decision to make the dream a reality, things changed pretty quickly. We sold whatever we could do without

and started to save all the money we could. We returned our rented wide-screen TV and spent our evenings planning and researching instead. Lisa stopped working in January 2003. Packing up our lives, readying the house for rental, and getting our bank accounts, mortgage, and other loans all squared away became Lisa's new full-time job. I still ran my company while transitioning the responsibilities to new directors who had bought a 49-percent stake in the business. In February 2003, we handed over the keys to our first tenants and moved in with Lisa's mother and father. We finalized the modifications to our two BMW GSs, and each of us received 18 vaccinations to protect us from every illness known to man, as well as a few that we'd never even heard of.

Once you finally got underway, what was the hardest thing to get used to about living life on the road?

The knee-jerk answer is getting used to the daily packing and unpacking, but really the hardest lesson to learn was to slow down. It took months for us to get out of holiday mode, where you feel you have to cram in ev-

A quick photo before the tent goes up in Mongolia.

ery experience before returning to work. We learned to take our time and enjoy the little things, like the unexpected encounters with Tuareg nomads or Kenyan Maasai warriors. Every day of travel on a bike is a privilege.

Have you ever re-thought your decision to leave, or have you ever wanted to quit and go home?

That's a great question. On the whole, we've no regrets. We love what we do, and we're confirmed adventure junkies, but anyone who has traveled for this long and says, "I've never thought about quitting," is probably lying. I know that after Lisa became ill in South America and then was forced to have major surgery in North America, she thought about how great it would have been to be with family. There's nothing like a few kind words and a meal from your mom when you're sick. We were devastated last year when Lisa's father suddenly and unexpectedly died. He hadn't been ill, and both Lisa and I questioned how our journey separates us from friends and loved ones. Lisa was very close to her dad, and he had loved seeing his youngest daughter meet the world head on.

What's been the greatest challenge you've faced while traveling?

In Brazil's Amazon Jungle, we were attempting to ride from the north to the south on a track that had not been ridden by large displacement motorcycles. On the second day things went very wrong as I fell from a rotten bridge and landed on my head. I was knocked unconscious, and it was a full five hours until I could stand unassisted. I was blind in my left eye and paralyzed on my left side. We spent four days repairing my damaged bike before riding the most grueling three weeks of our lives to reach a hospital. The diagnosis was a shock. My neck was broken in two places and dislocated. Emergency surgery saved my life. That said, if it had not been for Lisa's strength, determination, and focus under extreme pressure, I doubt I would have made it out alive.

Simon, in 1997 you were badly injured in an accident. How long did it take before you got back on a motorcycle again?

I couldn't walk and was told not to lower my foot below my waist, but after 16 weeks (with my right leg still in bandages); I crawled out of the house. Unbeknownst to Lisa (who was at work), I hoisted myself onto her parked bike, lifted my entire right leg through the center of the handlebars, and rode around the village. A friend told her, and she went mad. My leg was killing me, so I paid a price for that little ride.

After that incident, did either of you think about giving up riding?

NO!

In your experience, what country has the best, most enjoyable motorcycle roads?

Well, the best for us is actually no roads. But if you are looking for great tar, South Africa is awesome, along with Switzerland, the French Pyrenees, northern Argentina, and northern Thailand. The island of Flores in Indonesia surprised us with some great surfaces and wonderful mountain passages. On one day, we rode for ten hours without a single straight!



We cause a stir among a crowd of Iranian men close to the Pakistan border.

A long gravel track in Patagonian Chile leads to the Fitzroy Mountain Range.

A rare evening of solitude among the dunes of India's Great Thar Desert.



The Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia is the world's largest salt pan.

Almost half of your marriage has been spent on the road, which I'm sure brings a unique set of relational challenges. How have your experiences brought you closer together?

We thought we were close before, but in this situation we end up relying on each other 100 percent. Living and working so closely together, we realize that every decision we make affects the other as well. For me, having Lisa by my side validates the journey. I think a shared moment can be a thousand times more rewarding than if experienced alone. She tells me the same thing is true for her. We have to trust each other implicitly.

As you continue your excursion, which places do you hope to revisit? Are there any you plan to avoid?

We would love to return to Africa. Its raw beauty is overwhelming, and we'd love to go back and ride it with ten years of experience and skill sets. We would ride it differently and certainly wouldn't be as nervous! To be able to video and photograph Africa with our new equipment, I think, would do it far more justice than our naive attempt ten years ago.

Never say never, but we'd be reluctant to return to India on bikes. The experience was fantastic, but we feel lucky to have left with all our limbs intact.

With a decade's worth of roads already behind you, how far do you see this venture taking you?

Well, we're back in the USA at present, and have ridden in 78 countries—our goal has always been to reach 122. Realistically, it is

going to take another year and a half to reach the objective we set out with from the U.K. It may be less, it may be more, but we both feel so far ahead of the curve. Like everyone else, our biggest worry is money as our ambitions outstrip our means, and to date we do not have any financial sponsors.

What advice would you have for anyone contemplating setting out on a similar quest?

Determine if the sacrifices and risks are really worthwhile. Decide if you are making the journey for yourself or if you're doing it to

impress others. Set a departure date (a realistic one!) and whatever happens, leave on that date. You will never feel prepared enough, you'll never feel wealthy enough, and you'll never feel you have enough time. But once you are on your bike twisting the throttle, just let the experience happen to you. It's merely looking at the horizon and making best-guess decisions. The rewards, however, are infinite.

A good friend of ours once said, "We have more time than we need but less than we think." **RR**



Simon and Lisa Thomas

In May 2003, we left our jobs, sold everything, and on two BMW motorcycles, set off to see the world. The plan seemed simple enough—ride, eat, sleep, repeat until we had our fill of the 122 countries and seven continents the planet has to offer. The decision to depart on our journey was not a simple one. A series of health issues throughout our families made the choice for us. If not now, when? If not us, who? We needed to change our perspective on life, who we are, and what we want to be. We're lucky enough to be able to do it together.

In 2009, we began writing for *RoadRUNNER* magazine as their World Travelers, first appearing in the March/April 2009 issue. Since then, we've been able to share many of our exciting experiences, and we look forward to sharing even more in the future.