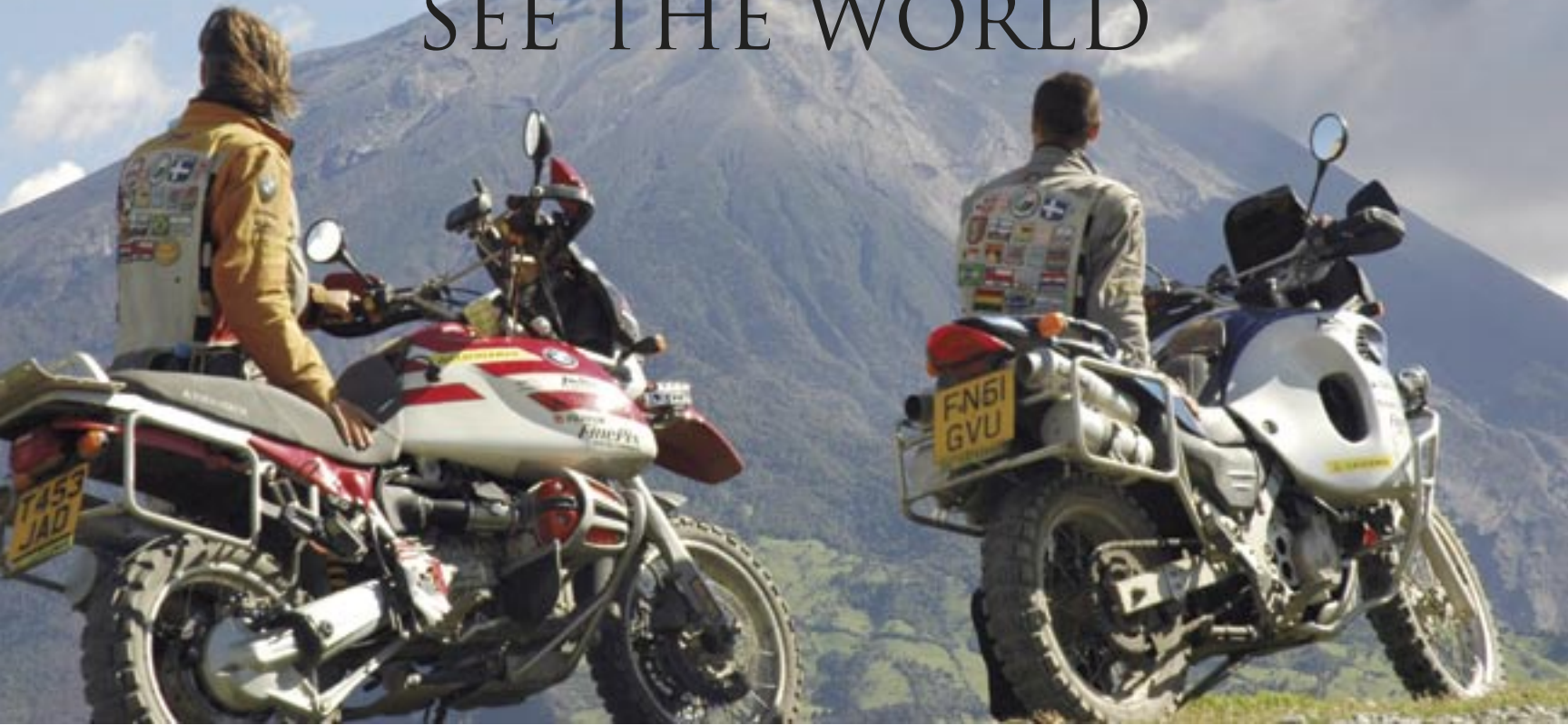


RIDE THE DREAM - SEE THE WORLD



By Jean West Rudnicki

Deep in the Amazon Rainforest, at the bottom of a decrepit wooden bridge, amid dripping wet foliage, lay thirty-four year old Simon Thomas, adventurer extraordinaire, out cold. Above, the wheels of a motorcycle spun as the machine lay on its side, balancing precariously on the bridge and in danger of toppling over the edge and crashing atop the unconscious biker. His wife, Lisa, scrambled to hit the motorcycle's kill switch then rushed to her husband's side not certain if she would find him dead or alive.

Two and a half years earlier the two young Britons had embarked on a dream, selling everything, loading up "Tinkerbelle" and "Tarzan," two modified BMW motorcycles, and heading out on an ambitious, record-breaking journey around the globe, visiting seven continents and 122 countries in a single trip destined to last years. Before Simon's tumble, the couple had traveled across forty-one countries, including a bone-chilling ride to the frigid Arctic Circle.

Back on the hot, humid rainforest floor, Thomas slowly stirred. He remembers landing head first and feeling his helmet compress hard into his shoulders. The fall left him unconscious for at least fifteen minutes, and waking he felt intense pain in his neck and numbness in his left arm and hand. The sensations, or lack of them, troubled him. He downed pain killers, and kept pushing on, fighting rain and mud and a motorcycle that repeatedly wouldn't start forcing frustrating days spent on its repair. It would be three weeks and a grueling trip through the jungle before the couple reached a hospital in Sao Paulo and learned that Thomas had, in fact, broken his neck in his fall. Doctors

were astounded that he survived at all. Another 1.5 mm, they told him, and he would be a paraplegic.

It wasn't the first time this daring young man had defied medical odds. In 1999, while enjoying a successful career in sales and marketing, Thomas was involved in a serious motorcycle accident, which all but severed his right foot and did crush his lower right leg. Doctors told him he would always walk with a limp and would likely not run again. After 12 months of no walking, months of agonizing physical therapy and five major operations over two years, Thomas set about learning to walk again. Not only did he walk, he ran a half marathon, rock climbed in Yosemite, walked the Grand Canyon and played rugby.

The 1999 accident, however, had been one factor in his and Lisa's decision to ride their dream. "Twelve stationary months gives a man time to think," writes Thomas in an article appearing in *Men's Health*. "I realized I'd been planning for too long. It was time to live life."

There were other life-challenging experiences in the year leading up to their decision that weighed in as well – Lisa's father had emergency heart surgery and Thomas' mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer. After spending one solid month in serious deliberation, the couple opted to go for it. Leaving behind good-paying jobs, they would circumnavigate the planet without assistance, while helping to raise awareness and funds for three charities and attempting to set or break four world records.

Thomas, whose background included marketing and promotion, solicited sponsors such as BMW, Fujifilm and others, while the

couple chose three charities near to their hearts – CancerBackup, the British Heart Foundation and Water Aid.

They modified their bikes with larger, long range tanks, and boxes for carrying their kit. Tinkerbell, an R1100GS, is Thomas' machine and Tarzan, a F650GS, bought specifically for the trip, is Lisa's.

The couple said their goodbyes to family and friends and rode off in May 2003, traveling the easy hills of Wales, Ireland and Scotland, as warm up for what lay ahead. In June they ferried to Norway and began a nine-day trek into the frozen Arctic. It would provide the first inkling of what "adventure" really meant and the incredible stamina and determination necessary to see it to its end.

"Adventure," Thomas writes, "is a simple yet misunderstood term and we're slowly learning the gritty reality of what it means... 'Adventure' isn't glossy Hollywood stuff. It's taking a chance, starting down a path that you don't have all the answers to and finding that the unknown isn't always dangerous, it's just unknown."

Reaching the Arctic Circle in time to celebrate Lisa's forty-first birthday, it was freezing, Thomas recounts. The couple posed for some hastily shot photos and rode on. The weather deteriorated

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over the next few days as they encountered heavy snow hampering visibility, and a cold so brutal and extremities so numb, even changing gears was near impossible. Electrically heated jackets and grips did little to help painfully frozen fingers in minus nine degree temperatures.

From Hammerfest, Norway, "the most northerly city in the world," their journey turned southward through Russia, the Baltic nations, Poland, Hungary, Europe and Spain, as adventure after adventure piled on. There were close encounters with Chechen suicide bombers in Russia – one bomb exploding only half a mile from their hotel; detention by officers wanting bribes in exchange for letting them continue on their way; and a suffocating ride through desolate Nickel, a strip mining town labeled "Hell on Earth" by the couple's Lonely Planet guidebook, and with good cause. Extensive mining had released large amounts of sulphur dioxide into the atmosphere. Everything within a 30 mile radius of Nickel was dead and the area eerily barren, not to mention the ghastly smell.

For Lisa, a former fitness instructor and I.T. specialist, the journey isn't just about seeing the countries, but interacting with the locals. "Going through beautiful countryside, experiencing the

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different temperatures and scenery – yes. But it is the people that live there that make the country,” she says in a BBC interview.

Seven months into their odyssey, the couple reached Fez, Morocco in Africa. It took nearly a year to travel the continent, touring Senegal, Mali, Ghana, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, and Kenya before tracking back to South Africa. The roads were often tough and the heat intense. During the trek through Mali, misjudging the route, the couple ran out of water, and endured muscle cramps, hallucinations and kidney problems due to dehydration. A lesson learned, and advice offered, “know your route better than a line on a map.”

At the end of 2004 and into 2005, the couple spent a great deal of energy and effort pitching presentations to would-be sponsors in an effort to secure funding for the next leg of their trip. The process was often discouraging, Thomas writes. The presentation might be received with great enthusiasm, and the partnerships seemingly well on their way to solidifying, when the potential sponsor would suddenly back out for what seemed bizarre logic to the couple. He cites Ferrari as one example, warmly embracing the couple and the adventure until company officials learned the two rode Ferrari’s rival BMW’s motorcycles – even though Ferrari didn’t make a motorcycle.

Their hard work paid off, though, and in June 2005 the two revved up the engines and began travel through South America. It was mid-October of that year when Thomas had his potentially crippling accident. As shocked as the doctors by the prognosis, the couple’s immediate fear was that it might end their trip and require them to return home. Their British insurance company insisted Thomas return to the United Kingdom for the surgery, but the Brazilian doctors were

adamant – the condition was too severe and threatening, surgery had to take place immediately. In a five-hour operation the doctors implanted a titanium plate fusing the broken disc, and placed Thomas in a neck brace for several weeks until it healed.

The day Thomas checked out of the hospital, Lisa, who had been feeling increasingly ill over the ensuing weeks, passed out. Initially she was thought to be suffering from a bladder infection, but as her temperature soared and the pain became unbearable, she was diagnosed with a full blown case of malaria. Her hospital stay lasted six days.

The couple recouped for several months in Brazil, slowly mending and healing and preparing to strike out again. They had been on the road for three years, and their resolve to see it to the end grew even stronger. “We are more determined than ever,” Thomas told the BBC film crew. “The more you experience, the more you see, there is so much more.”

New Year’s Day 2006, the two pulled out to take to the road again, their dream and South American leg

back on track. With more than 52 countries now completed, the couple is currently in the U.S. taking a break with family who flew over from Britain. Their travels are to resume soon.

The two maintain a website (www.2ridetheworld.com) and daily diaries chronicling their trials, tribulations and travel. The photography is breathtaking, and the accounts detailed and reflective of the “gritty grind” of such an undertaking. Lest you feel the urge to chuck it all, pack a pannier and ride off – beware! As one diary entry warns: *It sounds like recently we have been constantly ‘moaning’ about how hard it is – but we do want others to realize that this is not a holiday and that if you are thinking about doing this type of trip you need to be aware of the ups and downs. There will be exceptionally tough times and you will take out your tiredness and frustrations on your traveling companion(s). But as long as you are prepared for this and the need to have an injection of your own culture now and again you should have no problems in continuing.*

Catch you around the curve! ☑



Simon and Lisa Thomas