

Chapter Thirteen

Amazonas and the Ghost Road

Like all sports, if you do them properly, Adventure Motorcycling (yes, in capitals, it deserves it), has iconic tests; iconic routes, that everyone wants to do, and few achieve. I like to chase these routes, It is what keeps me going. Why would I ever ride on a motorway? To me motorcycles are for sport, not for cruising. I know I am making enemies as I write this. I am not putting down the cruiser, or anyone on two wheels. We all want slightly different things from our motorcycle.

I may as well be in a car, commuting to work, in comfort, with aircon, the radio and a sandwich. Motorcycles are not transport. They are a feeling. They are the ultimate symbol of freedom. Nobody likes a motorbike overtaking them on a motorway, or any road, for that matter. Why, I ask. Because they are having freedom, and an alternative life, rubbed in their face. Competition. The speed of modern life. With men, the macho response kicks in, and they try to race you. Basic and silly. Strangely, women can be even more vicious. If you pull in front of a woman at a traffic light, be prepared, at best, to be rear ended, and not in a nice way. At worst, she will run you off the road, and reverse over you, to make sure the job is done, no witnesses. Whoops, lost it there for a minute. I have not worked out the psychology of why a hairy biker, with a loud exhaust, and a big smile, is such a threat to society. Motorcycling is peace, escape from judgement, and above all the freedom to appreciate nature, alone.

Adventure motorcycling is escaping people, testing your body's coordination and strength, getting fit in the process, and just enjoying our world. It is the same with many solitary sports. Long distance runners have hundreds of kilometres to just think. Don't underestimate this. It is just the road, the pounding of your shoes on the pavement, and the way your body is coping with it. It gives you time to sort out your head, your commitments, your lists, your family, your bills, your worries,

while at the same time, strengthening your body. Kayakers feel it, sky divers, surfers, free divers, climbers, trekkers, Dakar riders and cross country skiers. The list goes on, but the elements are the same. Sport is seriously underrated, and should be compulsory, for everybody over six months old. As should military service, at three. Joke. But we have become way too sedentary, and it is time for the fitness fanatics to stand up to the burger fanatics. All fast food sellers should be fined.

People who play team sports are a little bit different from the solitary loons, like my Dad, the marathon runner. They share the common goal of getting fit, as the solitary sports person, and the thrill of mastering a skill, and improving their times. But they are happy in a group, and often get, and need, validation from their teammates. What all sports do though, is give you that respite from thinking only about everyday life. You are focused on what you love. Test your body, free your brain, and breathe. Ready for real life again. It's hard to go back to the humans around you, everywhere, without respite. You can escape that pressure through your sport. It just makes me want to ride forever. Put on my helmet, shut out the world, and test myself on the world's toughest roads. Why? Ask any lunatic. It's freedom.

When I hear about the Tenere desert, the route through Mauritania, the Moyale bandit road in Kenya, the road of Bones in Siberia, the Danakil depression in Ethiopia, and, the off-road Ethiopian Highlands too, my heart races, and I want to go there. There are different levels of difficulty, but nothing beats Africa. The toughest roads I have ever been on were in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and more than ten other African countries, before any other country, in Europe, South and Central America, get a look in. That is just the way it is. Africa is the hardest continent to deal with on a bike. 'Africa is not for sissies', as the increasingly popular T-shirt says (available on my website...). Oh, and Mexican back tracks, in the rainy season. They are brutal.

There is another level of road, that is hard, and famous, for a reason, but not up there with the tough routes. They just became famous, for some reason, usually for their high death toll, before they were improved for tourists. Still challenging to experience, whether on a bike, a motorcycle, on foot, or in a truck. Do not catch buses on these roads. They tend to crash, and kill hundreds, flying off cliffs, like lemmings, but less bouncy.

These are the Death Road in Bolivia, the Wind Tunnel of Doom Road

in Patagonia, the Devils Trampoline in Colombia, the Georgetown to Lethem Mud Road in British Guyana, the Uyuni to Tupiza Sandviper Road in Bolivia and the one I want to talk about now. The BR319 Ghost Road, in Brazil. The BR319 has a special place in my heart. This was the first time, since Africa, that I nodded to myself (if that is possible), and said out loud:

“You are a proper explorer and adventurer. Well done.”

You, against the road, nobody around, jungle everywhere (obviously Cathy was there, but for me, that is alone. We have been together so long, and had such amazing times, that we merge into one). Heaven, for me was the Ghost Road. It cuts straight through the Amazon jungle, from the eastern Venezuelan border with Brazil, west, through the centre of the Amazon, for thousands of kilometres of nothing; but beauty, solitude, and peace; until the Peru border. The Ghost Road was one of the best times of my life. I would do the whole trip again, despite the hardship.

The introduction to the Amazon, and the jump-off point into the unknown, is the town of Realidade. Try and Google it. It is a ghost town, on a ghost road; but it does exist. Realidade has a rickety, middle-of-nowhere feel; a succession of dodgy bars, rough as hell motels, truck workshops, evangelical churches, and little wooden houses, on dirt roads, that turn into a quagmire of slush, and slipperiness in the rains. In the last few years it has grown, and now has a school and a health clinic, in a boom driven by the lucrative businesses that destroy the jungle; illegal logging, cattle ranching and soya bean production. The BR319 is threatened by another twenty Realidade towns, and that will be its death.

The BR319 is an 870-kilometre, federal highway, that links Manaus, Amazonas, to Porto Velho, Rondonia. The highway runs through one of the most pristine parts of the Amazon, a rainforest that covers half of Brazil, and covers an area, the size of the European Union. (We are crossing it, yay.) It was opened by the military government in 1973, but soon deteriorated, and by 1988, was impassable.

For half of the year, the road is a mud bath. In 2008, work began to repair the highway. The idea was to provide an alternative to boat travel along the Madeira river, that was less dangerous and costly. The project never really got off the ground, and the BR319 once again became the most difficult route.