

Words & pics: Jon Bentman



Round the world adventurer Nick Sanders has opened a motorcyclists 'expedition centre' in rural Wales. But it's not what you might expect. We went along to the first weekend...

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IT'S IMPORTANT TO DEFINE just what Nick Sanders' Expedition Centre is... Only it's easier to explain what it is *not*. It's *not* an adventure school - do not come here wanting to learn how to ride your GS better, or how to pack panniers effectively or indeed to discuss which bike is best for you. Such facilities already exist and Nick Sanders sees no reason to duplicate them. Neither is this necessarily some kind of adventure riding base camp. Nick does hold a fair collection of resources - all manner of maps, books and films - but if you ask him to recommend any particular reading matter he'll respond with an almost curt, *'Anything by me!'*

So what exactly is the Expedition Centre then, and how did it come about? Well according to the man himself, the explanation goes something like this: *'I moved to Mid Wales 15 years ago, with my three children and ex-wife,'* explains Nick (Mancunian by birth). *'It took me a long time to settle into living here and to realise how beautiful it was - more than beautiful, it's magnificent. Wales is one of the undiscovered secrets of the whole British Isles. So then I realised I have these untapped resources at my disposal; the rides around here are as good as any I've done anywhere in the world.'*

'Also, there are a lot of people who already teach people a lot of things, things I can't do. But I can teach people how to get into the right mindset to become an adventurer because that's an acquired understanding and obviously I have that intuitively, and I pass it on almost automatically.'

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So, the centre is a destination in itself; a place to go and ride and hang out with one of the UK's most prolific motorcycle adventurers. Okay I can buy that.

Livingstone I presume

Nick Sanders is well known as being one of a kind. Okay, not strictly the *only* one of his type, but the kind of quintessential British explorer that borders on obsessional. Not actually bonkers, but incredibly focussed and when the chips are down, very, very single-minded and resourceful.

In his youth Nick was a national-level cyclist. As a young adult racing on the Continent he pursued it all the way to semi-pro status. But somewhere along the journey he fell out of the scene - Nick hints that he didn't concur with the, er... artificial performance enhancing strategies of the time.

He was still a madly competitive type all the same and - looking for an alternative channel for his energies - he hit upon the idea of cycling round the world. In what is typical of Nick he managed to encapsulate his first challenge within a readily digestible format for the media, giving the trip a Jules Verne hook: around the world in 80 days.

Nick later cycled across the Sahara (and back!), oh, plus the length of the Andes, not to mention riding to the source of the White Nile. And tucked away one more cycle circumnavigation for good measure.

His motorcycling adventures started later with a round-the-world trip riding a Royal Enfield. And after that - clearly enjoying the hard way to do anything - he took two canal narrowboats, lashed them together to make some weird kind of a catamaran - and then sailed them across the channel, through the waterways of Europe and down to the Black Sea. He sunk one of the narrowboats at the bottom of the Danube but got it re-floated and made it back to Blighty.

The motorcycle circumnavigations sound a bit piffling after that lot. But Nick's never made his trips easy and for reasons only really known to his inner-psyche (not necessarily to his conscious self), he's earned himself a name by making a race of his global circumnavigation. He first took the record of quickest circling at 31 days (for a while concurrently holding the cycle *and* motorcycle records), but has since whittled that time down to a remarkable 19 days... To get all the way around the world!

Like us, you might ask just what he saw of the world... motoring along as he did for hours on end, riding - of all things - a Yamaha R1 (coming from a cycle racing background he found the ergonomics quite acceptable). But actually, when you get to speak to Nick, you find he's quite the thinker, and it's not necessarily the world he's wrangling with... It's himself.

And although Nick's not by any means an off-road





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rider (and he doesn't put himself out there as one), but his style of doing things is very closely related to some of the hardcore loners on the MX GP circuit.

Tearing around the globe with nothing more than a motorcycle, a passport, a credit card, tooth brush and apparently wearing just the one pair of underpants is about as determined as you can imagine. Nick would sit well in a motocross paddock, for he has a similar demeanour to an MXGP star - almost purposefully awkward with the press and focused to the point of selfishness.

The Centre

A visit to Nick's Expedition Centre situated in deepest Powys (in central Wales) currently stands as a two night, two-and-a-bit day affair. Guests arrive early on a Friday, leaving lunchtime on the Sunday. Currently Nick can accommodate up to 12 people at a time. There is no set agenda and Nick likes to canvas his guests for their wishes. Not that he'll necessarily accommodate their wishes you understand. This is the Nick Sanders way; he's not one to pander to the public - not even to paying guests - so be ready to find yourself challenged.

Even on his own website Nick confesses to his hosting style being a bit *Fawlty Towers* and if you arrive with that in mind then you'll be well-prepared. But go with the flow and you'll find yourself enjoying it more than you might imagine.

Riding is the main activity and Nick is keen to in-

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roduce visitors to the spectacular local 'white roads' (the smallest of country-lane B roads). And he's right they are spectacular, although it'll help to have a blue sky day to really appreciate them at their finest, oh... and an appreciation of Nick's straight talking.

'The core value of this project isn't the off-road' claims Nick, 'it's the small lanes... [and] the on-road riding with me.'

Naturally there is off-riding available at the centre, and here Nick defers to his collaborator Tony Williams. Tony's a local lad through and through, with a good knowledge of the local trails. He's also an experienced instructor, something he demonstrated with a couple of off-road novices on the weekend we attended.

Tony's a typically accomplished Welsh trail and enduro rider, used to guiding, so whatever your level he can accommodate you. The centre also has a small fleet of Yamaha XT660s available to hire at a very reasonable rate, so there's no excuse for not going out riding, even if you're currently without a trail bike.

The evenings are based around the dinner table within the main building - a newly built barn specially designed for the job, compete with professional-standard kitchen, 32-seat cinema, mezzanine area for relaxing and reading, and of course the main dining area (open plan onto the kitchen with everyone eating together).

The cuisine, prepared by Nick's partner Caroline

(Dr Caroline Taylor that is, she's a GP by profession), is a fusion of Welsh traditional fare and fine dining that will far exceed anyone's anticipations. The two nights' meals we had were simply outstanding. And naturally the dining table is the best place for long discussions about travelling by motorcycle.

Again, don't go asking Nick banal questions such

Food Heaven

It has to be said, Caroline's cooking was divine. Witness our evening menus:

Friday

Smoked haddock in cream with mustard and tarragon

Rack of Welsh lamb with red cabbage and apple, mashed potatoes and leeks

Bread and butter pudding with bananas and sultanas soaked in rum

Saturday

Baked Welsh goats cheese on home grown wild rocket, figs baked with Welsh honey and salted, caramelised walnuts

*Chicken and wild mushrooms casserole with pumpkin and sage risotto and kale
Tarte au citron*

Selection of three Welsh cheeses

Caroline was also able to expertly vary the menu for those with special dietary needs. It all tasted as mouth-watering as it reads.





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as 'would you recommend metal panniers or soft bags?' (unless you enjoy short, pointed rebuffs). And anyway Nick's the wrong guy to ask, he's not one to use either! However, get Nick onto a more juicy travel related subject, up a few levels (cerebrally-speaking), and he'll open up nicely. And anytime Nick tails off - he may become bored - then Caroline, who's accompanied Nick on many of his ends-of-the-earth guided tours, ably steps in.

The sleeping accommodation is separate, there being a varied choice of 'glamping' options (that's glamour-camping) situated on Nick's land, starting with an authentic Mongolian yurt, through wood cabins (all with wood-burning stoves), to a Unimog truck and trailer brilliantly converted.

Each is uniquely furnished - be it Mongolian, American, Moroccan etc - and each represents a memorable place Nick has visited and takes tours to. Given this is Wales though, for ten out of twelve months you're probably well advised to opt for the warmest and keep the wood burner on full throttle!

Also best you know that there's just the one wash-room facility to share between the group (in the main barn), which is a wet room with loo. For those that do get caught short in the night you'll find a chamber pot under each bed - although blokes being blokes chances are you'll lurch off in the dark toward the nearest bushes instead.



The Guests

Paying guests review the Nick Sanders experience

Riccardo Bestagno

(Italian living in Switzerland)

'I've been very happy with the weekend. Nick and Caroline gave me some very good advice on my planned trip to South America. The riding was fantastic, I was not expecting such beautiful country, such beautiful landscapes. Nick rides very nicely so we can stop and we were riding without a hurry. I was feeling really at home, as if with friends. I would recommend this place to my friends, because it's beautiful. The accommodation is wonderful too, the whole place is well done, fantastic. And Caroline is fantastic, she makes wonderful food; nice portions, nicely prepared, no discussion - it's wonderful.'

Helen Jones

'I came here as I wanted to know more about adventure riding all around the world: other countries, other continents. I came with a very open mind, I wasn't certain what I was going to find, what I was going to see or what I was going to do. It's challenging. I would say I've learned a lot about Nick... and knowing and understanding where he comes from has further increased my own confidence in myself. And when I asked for it straight I got it straight! Nick's definitely frank and if you



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don't like that, don't come. For me I'm used to it and I'd sooner have the truth as someone perceives it. It means there's something you can take from it. I've really enjoyed it, I'm glad I came and I'd most definitely like to come back again. And the quality of the accommodation is absolutely first class - far higher than I was expecting - the food is excellent too. And we had good company, I'm glad I met the people I was with.

Matt & Boo (Julie) Sweed

Matt: *'We came as it was my birthday present and we wanted to try some off-roading. It was better than expected, we couldn't be happier. With Tony [the guide], I learnt a lot; within a day I was haring along the trails and now I'm not fazed by riding on the rough stuff.'*

Boo: *Tony was very, very patient and my biggest fear was going down these hills on the trail, but he took me through it step by step so that I gained confidence. We stayed in the yurt, and with the fire going the light dancing around the inside was spectacular - and it warmed up very quickly.*

Matt: *'The off-roading has opened horizons to ride any amount of rough roads. I had no idea Wales had so many dirt roads we could go off-roading on! It's a whole new world that's opened up.'*

Nigel Dove

'The weekend has been very good - very relaxed, very enjoyable. Lovely roads, riding through a pine forest the colours changing with the changing season. Three weeks ago I was riding in the Swiss Alps, but the riding here is quite similar and a lot cheaper! It's a great place to stay, fantastic. It's a mini tour coming here, too. We did a coastal route and did a little off-roading through the woods. It's taught me to be a little more relaxed on the bike, watching Nick ride he's so relaxed, I've learnt a lot about riding just watching him. I'll definitely be back next year.'

Challenge Yourself

Like we said, Nick's plan for these weekends is not for them to be a never-ending Q&A session on everything adventure related... on everything Nick's ever done. If you want to find out more on that score, Nick's written upwards of 20 books that'll help you there.

Nick's right when he says he has an understanding for adventure, but you will need to wheedle it out of him, it'll not be quite as automatic as he infers. But that's not a bad thing - it's exactly this kind of challenge to ordinary communication that you'll encounter if you take on a proper overlanding experience. Look upon Nick as one of those tricky border guards you've got to win over. You don't have to grease his palm with dollars but you do have to engage him mentally to get him to co-operate.

And we have to say, it's amazing value at that: guided tours in the locality, guided off-roading for a few quid more, a glamping experience and fine dining for two nights all for around £200. That's awesome value. As for the rest, well that's your mission. Find a way to charm Nick and he'll open up and reveal his inner charms. There is a suggestion he's even a little shy, so be ready to ask to see his films in his theatre because again there's almost this sense of modesty that stops him automatically suggesting it himself.



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So what we expected from a weekend at the Expedition Centre and what we got were two different things. But that was no bad thing. Nick is a unique personality, a deep thinker, a driven man, but he's not egotistical. You'll find he values family and open mindedness.

His personality is quirky, slightly left-field and - it must be said - off-set by the ever-attentive and practical Caroline. At some point and at some level Nick will challenge your thinking, maybe even your own sense of self. It'll be a fascinating weekend, and honestly how often do you get a chance to spend a weekend with someone like Nick, a true world adventurer? But you'll have to be quick - for there's limited availability.

Yep, typical of Nick he's not overselling himself: *'I'm only running these weekends for a maximum of three or four months a year'*, he says with real certainty. *'The rest of the time I'm off doing other things.'* That's Nick for ya'....

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