

TRAVELLING: NICK SANDERS THE INCREDIBLE RIDE (2)

TEX MEX

VAN PRUDHOE BAY (ALASKA) TO USHUAIA (ARGENTINA)

Once again I'm at Wrights Motorcycle Parts in Salt Lake City, a large and highly respected bike shop located off I-15 on South State Street. My friend Tim is waiting for me as he always has done since I first turned up during my Journey Beyond Reason 19 day world ride in 2005. Tim waited for me when I last tried to get the Pan Am record during my Anatomy ride, and here he was again, waiting for me and looking after me.

Words by Nick Sanders

Pictures Nick Sanders





“Compared to how I knew Mexico in the past, this beautiful country has gone mad and should be committed to an asylum.”

It's important to be looked after on a journey as raw as this. Just then I felt very small and was quite sure this journey had no extrinsic value. I felt my emotions welling up inside me but tried to conceal them as best I could. What was the point in expressing yourself when you had to be tough? I chose my life and it was only me who constructed my route through it. What had really intrigued me this time was the depth of my feelings as I had prepared to set off on yet another record journey.

“Hey Nick, c'mon talk to these folks, they're big into motorcycling,” and so it would go on, me being wheeled out to the waiting, the master of my own reality show. Tim's team worked through the night, replacing the fork seals, front brake pads, dropping the oil, changing my Continental tyres and disingenuously cleaning the bike. I had hoped to take it into Mexico looking ten years old because with 20,000 miles / 32,186.88 km on the clock, it's done the requisite mileage. Now it looks new. I have completed five full days, each 24 hour period covering 895 miles / 1440 kilometres with 2 hours sleep each night. Each morning I wake up shaking, struggling to control the transition into wakefulness. At the end of the day, when I step off the bike, I have only minutes to eat and drink before I have to put my head down and sleep on my tank. It is 1.35 am in the morning and I must leave for Douglas, Arizona before 6 am. I have allowed myself four full hours sleep at a friend's house before attempting to ride across Mexico in three days. After 99 miles / 160 km I see a quiet sandy side road and pull off the freeway, park the bike and lie down beside it. I sleep for one hour. Five meters away is a train track, a yellow Union Pacific Railroad engine sounding its horn as it hauls its load right past me. I barely notice, so tired am I. Having now ridden south across Alaska Canada and now continental USA, the next morning I am in Mexico. This country has

the potential to be extremely dangerous. Over 40,000 people have been killed in drug related violence since 2006 when Mexican president Felipe Calderon began the fight against organized crime.

Over 230,000 people have been displaced because of turf wars between rival cartels, and in Chihuahua, the Municipal Planning Institute reported that there were 116,000 empty homes in nearby Ciudad Juarez due to these warring factions. According to government figures, a total of 15,273 drug-related crimes occurred in Mexico in 2010. Fifty percent of them were concentrated in three northern states: Sinaloa, Tamaulipas and Chihuahua.

In an attempt to gain control, the cartel known as the Zetas terrorized the civilian population forcing them to flee. In Ciudad Mier, a small town near the American border, 400 people had to leave urgently to the nearby town of Ciudad Miguel Aleman after the cartel issued an open threat to all the inhabitants in November 2010. The backup vehicle driver on my most recent client tour was taken hostage by bandits masquerading as police and held overnight at gun-point before mercifully being released unharmed. What can I do? I have to ride through here to get to Central America where worryingly, the situation in Guatemala is comparable. In the Mexican countryside the pace of life is slow but the dangers severe, and in the city of Chihuahua through which I pass, the atmosphere is supercharged. I don't fear for my life but I do ride quickly through the center and stop for no one. Compared to how I knew Mexico in the past, this beautiful country has gone mad and should be committed to an asylum. If you could put a single drug runner into a doctor's surgery you would recognise symptoms of delusion which have appeared gradually since 2006. You might also deduce that the patient is sentimental yet suspicious; irritable and introverted, depressed, obstinate, jealous, selfish, unsocial and embittered. Overlay this with psychopathic tendencies capable of killing at the slightest provocation and you get

an idea of what it's like travelling through The United Mexican States.

I ride hard on the Carrera Federal 570 near to the Arco Norte. A policeman warns me that San Luis Potosi is not safe to pass through so I skirt this still-magnificent city and head for Santiago de Queretaro. It is dark by the time I reach San Juan del Rio where I quickly check into a hotel and crash on the bed.

The next day, once again I ride hard. All around me, the tension is palpable. There are no other tourists or travellers here and tales – whether apocryphal or not, I have no idea – tell of motorcyclists having been pulled from their bikes and left for dead.

With the two spare rear tyres fastened along the side fairings the bike looks more muscular. I stop again at 500 miles / 804 km for an energy drink and some chocolate. It doesn't take much to keep me going. I feel in great form. Nothing hurts; I worked through my tiredness carefully earlier, thinking my way through the need to sleep.

At the superficial level I am travelling I see only contrasting points of reference: Big flashy cars and men living on garbage dumps; Businessmen in fine suits and men walking along the road in the middle of nowhere, carrying nothing but their own unknown purpose. This is how I must appear to them – a man on a bike with some indefinable purpose. The traffic at night is fast. If you fell off the bike it would be difficult to estimate how many cars would drive over you until perhaps a small car with a small engine might get jammed on your mangled torso and so cause a larger obstacle. During the day the traffic moves even faster, and I ride hard, going with the flow. For 14 hours I bob about between trucks, buses and cars, stopping only to refuel. My route alternates between autopista and untolled routes, providing a stark contrast: The autopista takes you away from habitations and areas of congestion whilst the rural free highway hits every town, village and bit of junk lying around. >>



The face of complete and utter exhaustion.

Dirty-faced tyre repairmen emerge from blackened huts whilst women and chickens and filthily-dressed children hang around dirty shanty buildings. And next to the tyre men, bins overflowing with rubbish are populated by scavenging birds eating whatever they can find. Everyone is waiting for a truck to pull up with a puncture or at least stop for food. Truck drivers are the kings around here. Their discarded sandwiches are pounced on by skinny dogs and women are there to take the truckers' money in whatever way they wish to spend it. The chicken men cook their animals skewered crucifixion-style, and a daytime whore beckons from a doorway. I only catch a sideways glance but it is not appealing, this barrel-shaped body squeezed into a lilac tube skirt.

Up the road the autopista starts once again, and it is an excellently-built highway. At the toll booths you have to look behind as well as in front in case you are rear-ended by an old man who cannot see so well or a youth high on coke; or someone who simply wants to kill you because they can. Toll booths are also a favourite holdup point for bandits. The traffic behaviour on these highways is in stark contrast to the relaxed American way. In Mexico, getting to your destination fast is more important than the possibility you might not get there alive.

It is 5 am and now I am very south, deep into the countryside. After only three hours' sleep I don't want to leave my small sweet hotel. Outside, the banana man delivers his fruit, and in the small restaurant across the way a young woman is hosing down the tiled floor while a little girl runs around her legs. The rumbling noise of occasional trucks is broken

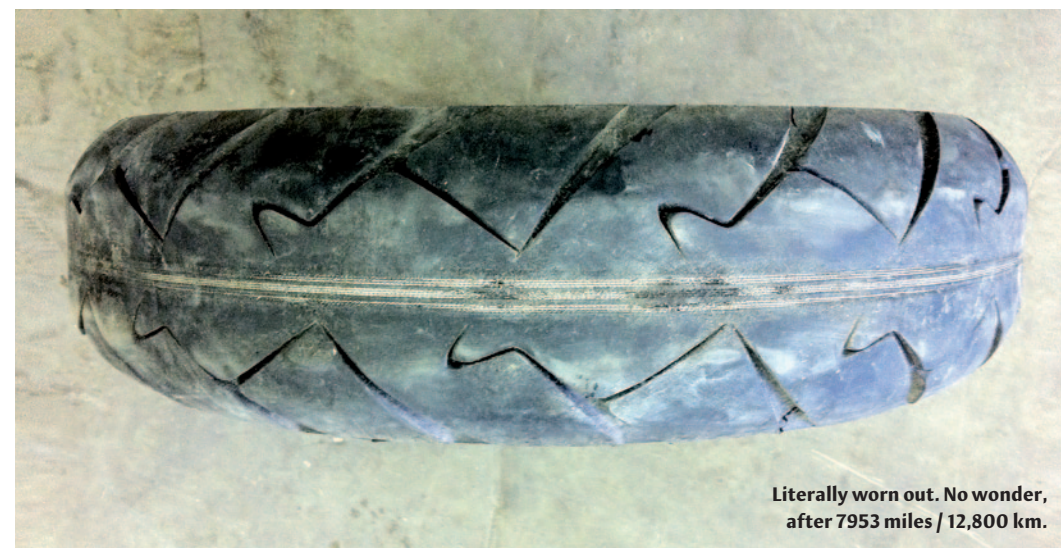
by birdsong and the yearning to stay nearly overcomes my need to push on. In this little place, with its quiet charm and sandy-coloured façade edged in green, I am lonely not just for people but also for the gentleness of a journey that speed castrates. Life on the road has a rawness that travelling so fast quickly magnifies. Perhaps in the way spilt petrol in a hot sun vaporises, moving in a lickity-split snappy sort of way is a similar accelerant to memories. So fast are they made and moved on from that they don't always have time to stick. What I do know is that the Super Tenere feels taut, like a bowstring; a thoroughbred of a bike in restrained clothing. It has an air of understatement, as if to say, 'can I really do this?,' but my God it can. As a vehicle it doesn't scream at you, more creeps up on you

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unawares, always ready to go. My understanding of what this machine can do has been up-ended by the experience it has given me. It is superb, literally a world-beater. After Mexico I enter Guatemala and at the border I am suddenly overcome with exhaustion and want nothing more than to sleep. Travelling through Central America is one long succession of illogical and seemingly pointless bureaucracy, the borders staffed by (mostly) well-meaning people constantly engaged in a bewildering struggle to make sense of an incomprehensible system. Hours pass by as I wait for my paperwork to be processed. Still I wait and more paperwork shuffles about. I sign typed letters allowing me special permission to overcome the previous

stumbling block. It is now dark. I ask one of the customs girls which parts of my route she considers safe at night. Guatemala has a ruthless reputation for those who dare to travel in the dark. I ask about bandits, and she tells me there is a short section near Escuintla where the trees come down to the road. Is it there where armed masked men force people off the road? She nods. It is a poorly conceived idea to suggest that I enjoy this. There is real perversity in riding through the darkness in such harsh, wet conditions, and deciphering what may appear as random traffic patterns is equally dangerous. Riding down such a corridor of trees would be like a mountaineer grabbing onto a rocky outcrop, unsure if it will hold his weight. Outside a curly-haired man holds a broken coke bottle and a bag full of rubbish. Beside him is a little fawn dog. He talks to me in a growling type of language, interspersed with barely recognizable fragments of English. I hear of him having lived in Manhattan and the Bronx, and

while he looks like his adventures extend no further than the nearest bin, that could be a misjudgment on my part. All of a sudden my driving license is returned. A few moments later and the registration document for the bike is handed back to me, as are my passport and various supporting documents. I think I have lost an entire day. Perhaps as I ride across El Salvador it will become clear how I might claw back some of this miserable waste of time. Birdsong from high up in the trees makes me feel almost giddy with calm. I cannot see them warbling because they are small and probably hiding among the topmost branches, but their singing is a beautiful counterpoint to the myriad other human noises competing for my attention. >>



Literally worn out. No wonder, after 7953 miles / 12,800 km.



I ride across Guatemala and then Honduras and then El Salvador and then Nicaragua and then Costa Rica. The traveller has a tendency to assume that the world is replete with interesting people, otherwise why does he travel? Could it be some sense of self-development? Maybe it's a feeling of being in control of your life on the road, an experience possibly absent under normal domestic circumstances. I get up, I ride my bike, I go to bed. Easy. Not overburdened there then! On the other hand, if you're in control maybe you're not going fast enough? Travellers have to take courage. The sound of control doesn't have to

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be a roar though. For me it's the quiet voice at the end of the day that says, 'I will try again tomorrow.'

READ MORE OF NICK'S INCREDIBLE RIDE IN THE FOLLOWING ISSUE OF GLOBAL BIKER.



Poisonous Guatemalan caterpillar, anyone?

