



# THE TRAVELLING: NICK SANDERS INCREDIBLE RIDE PART 1

## FROM PRUDHOE BAY TO CENTRAL AMERICA

I've just arrived at the Prudhoe Bay Hotel again. Everything is familiar. I know the skyline, lined with heavy machinery, drilling rigs and trucks, portable accommodation cabins locked together several stories high. I know where to get fuel and how to find the start of the Dalton Highway. It's strange to feel so familiar with the route to the Prudhoe Bay Hotel in such an obscure place. Standing on gravel patches laid on the tundra, all the buildings are constructed in winter when the land is frozen.

Words by Nick Sanders

Pictures Nick Sanders





**A**s I arrive at the start of summer, here in the northern hemisphere, graders are smoothing the dirt and gravel roads. The sun is high in a bright blue sky and will not be near the horizon for several weeks. To the few world bikers who make it to the town of Prudhoe (or more correctly Deadhorse), with its migrant population of 12,000 oil workers - adjacent as it is to the largest oilfield in the USA - this small town is the northern terminus of the Pan American Highway. It's also the most northerly point accessible by road in North America. I am attempting to ride the length of the Americas from here to Ushuaia (Argentina), a city half a world away at the southernmost tip of South America. Then I'll turn around and immediately ride back again. I want to do this as fast as I can.

The interior of the hotel is carpeted and warm - comfortable even - and once in the room I unpack. I have four cameras and a computer, assorted wires, cables and plugs, a toothbrush, vehicle and personal documents and little else. What keeps me warm I am wearing. The lack of darkness at night is disturbing, and I'm excited by what lies ahead: the isolated roads,

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the mountain ranges and deserts, the alto plano and the high plains, cities brimming with smells reminiscent of the Orient and Asia, the Caribbean; residual scents from a hotchpotch of houses made of dried earth baked in the hot sun. My mind is racing: too much energy, I can't relax; then suddenly I'm at peace, my eyes close and I drift off to sleep.

Yamaha's Super Tenere seems capable of dealing with every conceivable motoring environment and nothing troubles it. If the R1's character was one of incorrigible naughtiness, the Super Tenere is insolent by comparison. It handles a far greater range of surfaces than I am capable of travelling across with equal ability and no loss of comfort. Surely something should have snapped or come loose by now, I worry. Yet all remains secure, and there are no fluid leaks, no stains on the road after being parked up. >>> But we still have a very long way to go.



Ride around the world seven times, and up and down the Americas 7 times and you might look this tired too.



The perfectly mirrored landscape.



The next day I prepare to set off. There is no ceremony for my start, no acknowledgment of what I am about to attempt; no one here to see me off or wish me luck at the start of what I fervently hope will be an unprecedented achievement. There is nothing more than a subdued level of interest. To be honest I kind of like it that way. Though present, I was in a sense invisible; too absorbed in my anticipation of the task ahead to be noticed. The hotel receptionist and the chef sign my witness book, a written document signifying I do actually exist and am indeed where I say I am. “Goodbye,” I murmur, “see you when I get back.” The receptionist waves, not understanding the significance of my statement.

**“Every change of gear, every hour on the bike, and with every breath, a heart that beats so heavily that you feel really, truly alive”**

The sea is frozen and outside of the town there is no sound. Like the sea, the wind is still. I am suddenly overwhelmed by the freedom of being alone. There is a responsibility in having to deal with self governance: everything is under your control; every change of gear, every hour on the bike, and with every breath, a heart that beats too heavily that you feel really, truly alive - but sometimes it’s so much. Imagine colours too vibrant, blue so bright it hurts your eyes; the unrelenting throb of the engine pressing to take you faster than you want to go, until, gently restraining, you pull back on the reins. Most of the road to the first settlement of Coldfoot is unsurfaced, but the Super Tenere dispatches piste and paved road with equanimity. En route, straddling the North Slope Haul Road on the Dalton, the famous Brookes Range is bisected by the Atigun Pass, a steep-sided treeless valley. This is spectacular country - wild, spacious, raw, and inaccessible to most travellers for most of the year. I am on the route along which the Ice Road Truckers travel all year long - down Ice Cut, up and down Chicken Run, engine braking down Oil Spill Hill, dust clouds blowing up Beaver Slide. It is minus seventy degrees in the winter, a little over freezing in the summer. >>



Nick’s trusty Yamaha Super Tenere.



It all starts from here.



The snaking Alaska pipeline.





Think there is room for one more?



Desolation Bay' looks as dry as a bone.

Now, although the lakes are still frozen, it is warming up, but very soon it will begin to cool again. The window for being able to ride a motorcycle here is truly that short.

The journey will be tough, I know it, but so what? I do still wonder about the relevance of it, but what else would I do with these few weeks of my life? The preparation has taken far longer than that. I have had this route in my mind for years, and the double run - riding south and then returning north - has been a dream for a long time. Young moose gallop across the melting permafrost and into shallow standing water, cold spray splashing over their summer pelts, alternately slowing then sprinting, assessing if they can get back

onto the track I've usurped them from, and for several miles we share this joke. I ride hard and fast. You feel strong at the start of a project, probably because you don't know what you have to face. Then, I contradict myself because this is not strictly true. I know exactly what lies ahead, I just prefer not to acknowledge it. If I thought too much about riding the length of the Americas three times in succession I probably wouldn't even attempt it. Instead I manage the project in my head, dealing with it in small sections instead of exposing myself to the full picture. To ride the 14,600 miles /23,500 kilometre length of the Americas in nine weeks as a training run is quick; to then ride it twice more in succession in around 40 days is something else entirely.

The Dalton is a quiet route, but further south, on denser stretches of the Pan American Highway, there are a myriad vehicles of all shapes and sizes all competing for space. If you are prone to paranoia, there could also be malcontents waiting for a chance to pounce. It isn't a theatre of war, more a pantomime stage on which you stand, but completely exposed.

Right now the road surface is dry dirt. The hard packed earth sometimes changes to dark red, with various shades of brown and gravel added to turn it grey in places. The road has been graded recently, leveling out the corrugations and creating a surface of both hard and loose sections, all bound by mud, wind-dried and baked by the sun.

It's worth remembering that I am not on the Alaskan Highway but north of it, on one of the most isolated stretches of road in the world. Everywhere there are trees. Tall black spruce and aspen stand next to slender willow and birch whilst mountain ash pops up in clusters. Bald eagles compete with bears for trout, often circling around water sources and creeks. Specks of cloud hang in a stark blue sky. Alternating stretches of pavement and hard packed dirt, the Dalton Highway is lined with berry bushes; blueberries, little red cranberries and salmonberries that look like raspberries. I come across occa-

sional small black bears in the road; they beat a hasty retreat at my approach. More worrying are the moose, appearing unexpectedly from the dense brush, often in pairs.

In 1996 I attempted this record and failed, recording 30 days from Ushuaia to Fairbanks. I got bored, disgusted with my poor showing, and went home. In 2010 I tried once more, again on a 21-day schedule. I had to abandon the ride near Santiago de Chile, three days

from Ushuaia. My lack of heated clothing whilst riding in the south gave my exhausted body no time to recover. My paperwork and a camera were stolen, and ultimately my incentive to complete the attempt was simply eroded.

This time I am ready for battle. The bike feels solid. The Super Tenere is growing on me. It is truly a remarkable machine. The R1 is a very hard act to follow though - when I sit on the sports machine it makes me feel special; when I sit on the Super Tenere, I feel confident that something special is about to happen. >>

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For days at a time I am isolated from any kind of news, and as I cross bridges and pass buffalo grazing beside the road, I construct a myopic existence where it’s easier to imagine the world is as I see it rather than as it really is. Before leaving the north I had imagined how riding across frozen lakes might concentrate the mind; the reality had been even worse. It had been very cold and the rain stung my face; the road was slippery with no other traffic so I had been alone. But already this arctic landscape was only a memory; the lakes that were still and the unmoving leaves of the tundra I would not forget, but what had cemented my knowledge of being far from anywhere was the silence. On the road my head is full of the noise of the bike and the white noise of my thoughts - the schedules and plans, the seriousness of my resolve, the fear of failure. During the rare times I stopped and switched off the engine those quiet moments unnerved me, my cacophony of internal sound evaporating in the face of the vast nothingness of true silence. I finish my coffee and leave, checking the straps on my panniers before getting back onto the bike.

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Everything is as it should be. It’s raining, so I select the lowest of the Super Tenere’s throttle control settings and engage the traction control system. The bike’s throttle is controlled by a fly-by-wire system similar to that employed on my last R1 on which I rode the Americas in 2010. Using wheel speed readings from the front and rear ABS sensors to determine when the rear wheel is spinning, the bike’s ECU manipulates the ignition timing and fuel mapping to maximise traction. Personally I like the traction control off, but it does have its advantages in really slippery conditions. I exit Fairbanks in the rain on the Steese Highway and ride towards Beaver Creek, the United States border post where you cross into Canada. It is cold and the incessant rain has caused rivulets to form where the road meets the bush. I am shivering with cold. Just before the frontier I find a public funded information centre. There is an ablution block and the door is open. I park my bike on the grass behind the building and close the door behind me. The story of my life is littered with exhausted possibilities, and as I lie on the floor I know that more lie ahead in a long queue, just waiting to happen. Outside wolves howl and on the skylight above me the rain pelts down. I decide to sleep on the floor for two hours. Fully dressed I lie down, my eyelids close heavily and I drift off immediately into a deep sleep. ■

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



An open road. Open heart. Open mind.