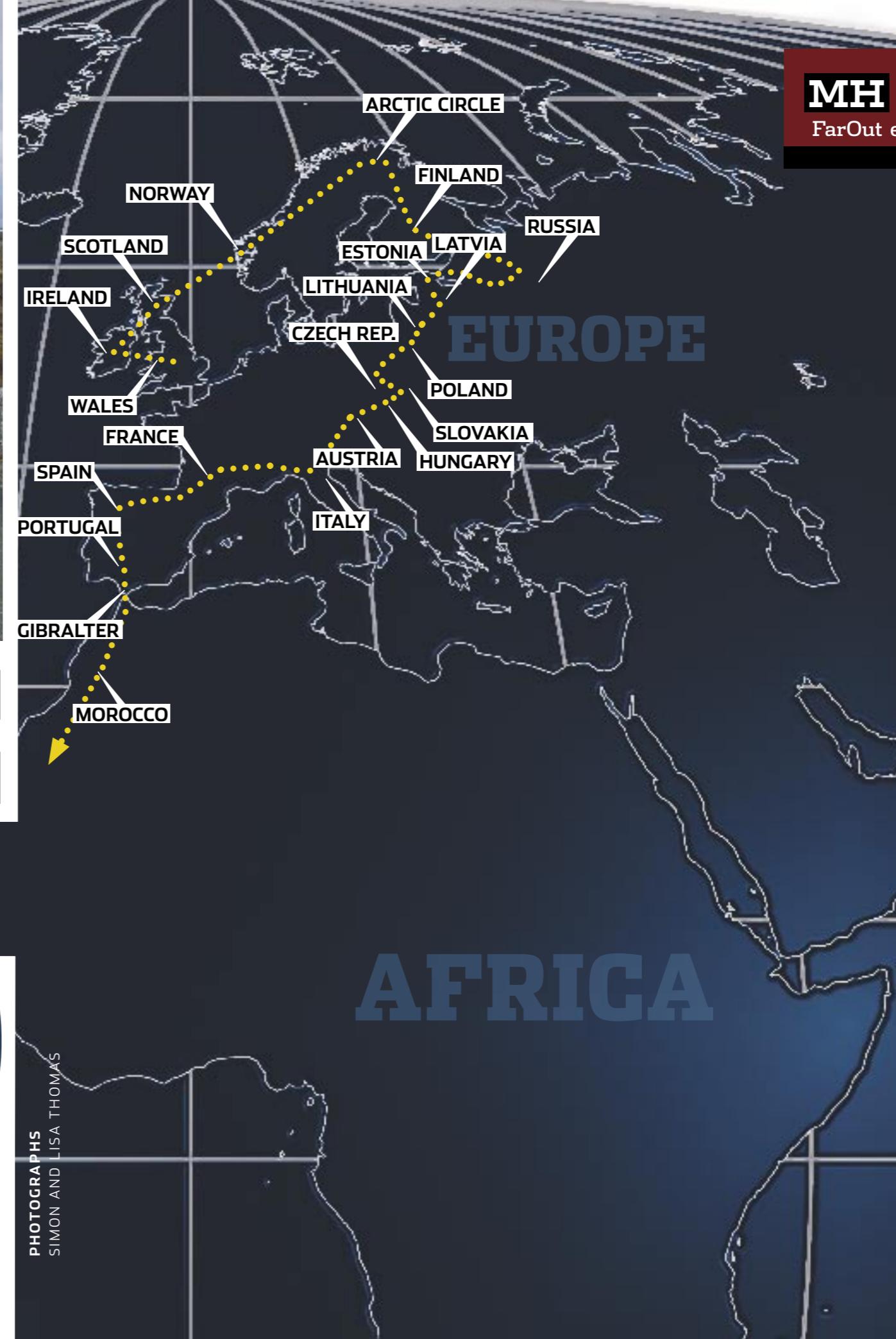




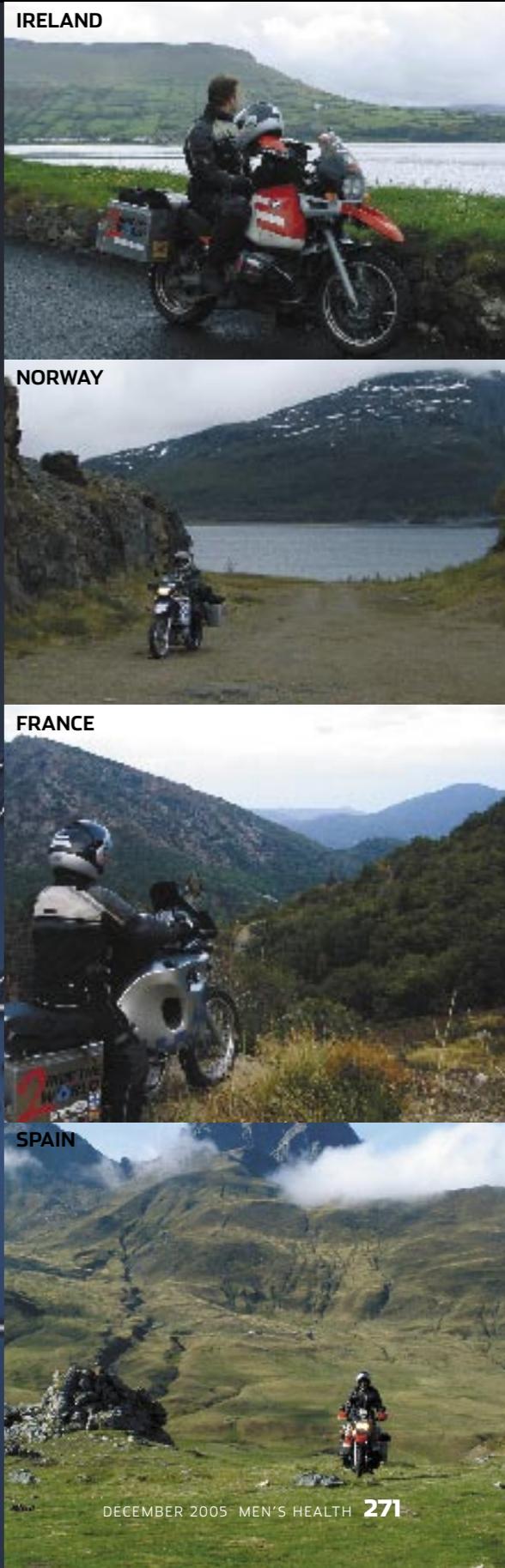
# 2 RIDE THE WORLD

PART 1

A perfectly sane English couple dreamt of chucking in their jobs and taking the adventure of their life. So they did. Now, two years later, they're still biking around the world



**MH ADVENTURE**  
FarOut experiences that take you there  
BY SIMON THOMAS



# Y

**ou can't buy adventure in a shop. After all, where's the fun in that? My wife Lisa and I came across our adventure some 41 countries, three continents, 85 000km and 26 months ago, at the start of our journey around the planet by motorcycle.**

"So, what are you taking on this world trip of yours?"

"Well, err... two BMW motorbikes, a tent, a really, really big map, a decent pair of boots. And, oh yes, my wife."

"Yeah right! You're going to ride around the world with just your wife, 24-7? You must be completely mad!"

"No," I replied, "I'm just really lucky."

It had been a long time coming. For years we'd laughed off our throwaway comments of chucking everything in and riding off into the wild blue yonder to explore exotic lands. But how could we do that? How could I just walk away from a telecom company I'd built from scratch? How could Lisa throw away the great sacrifices she had made to earn a computing degree as a mature student and say goodbye to her new career as an IT analyst?

We were just starting to earn good cash, but were plagued by the nagging sense that there was more to life. Every so often, after a bad day at work, we would open a bottle of wine and explore



Simon and Lisa Thomas in Ireland, Belfast... ready to take on the world

this travel fantasy. We'd allow ourselves to consider the idea. Hell, why not? We're capable, self-reliant, determined. Surely we could... Then the real world would flood in: what about work, the bond, pensions, career paths, insurance, blah, blah, bloody blah. More important, how could we afford it?

Over the years, the topic raised its head with noteworthy frequency. Finally it became clear that this was more than just an idea. We gave ourselves a month, 30 days, to seriously think about it before making a final decision. D-day arrived on a cold, wet Monday morning, midsummer in the UK. After a few deep breaths, we agreed. We'd sell everything and make our dream a reality.

There were some other factors in our decision-making bowl – like the fact that our lives had been turned on their heads in the previous year. Lisa's father had undergone emergency heart surgery and my mum was diagnosed with cancer. For good measure, I'd had a serious motorbike accident that resulted in me almost losing my right foot, five operations and more than 12 months of no walking.

Twelve stationary months gives a man time to think. I realised I'd been planning for too long. It was time to live life.

And that's how we started. Two people with a passion for travel and things



Sign in Alta, Norway



Kit for the road trip

Frames were welded on for extra strength, suspension was changed in favour of something more heavy-duty and rebuildable. The standard exhaust and catalytic converter were slung in favour of something lighter and louder. Handlebars were raised, foot pegs widened.

## Northern exposure

By May 2003 the bikes looked ready to take on the world – so we did. We unwrapped our adventure on the easy, undulating hills of Wales, Ireland and Scotland. This, we knew, was the warm-up, where all was familiar and the landscape undemanding. No wonder the Vikings swarmed the area with such ease.

It wasn't long before we returned the favour, booking our trip aboard a huge ferry bound for Norway, the land of the midnight sun. Silently cruising from Shetland towards the port in Bergen, the jagged beauty of the Norwegian coastline had us mesmerised.



The road to the most northerly town in the world

After a brief stop in Bergen we mounted our bikes. There was almost 2 500km of rugged coastline, ice-age glaciers and fjords to be crossed as we headed deep into the frozen Arctic. The relative comfort of Bergen soon seemed a warm memory. We headed north for nine exhausting days, our first real test. It was freezing. We crossed the Arctic Circle (at 66° 33' 38" N) and took a few rushed photos, grimacing rather than smiling at the camera. When it was Lisa's forty-first birthday, all I could think was, "Stuff the cake. But I'll take the heat from those 41 lovely candles." When we got off our bikes we savoured the sensation of warm blood slowly rekindling the feeling in our painfully numb extremities.

Over the next few days, things got tougher. Heavy snow made visibility poor. Changing gears became a battle as numb feet clumsily tried to snag the lever. Insulated Gore-Tex gloves and electrically heated jackets and grips were having little effect on my painfully numb hands and fingers.

The slow driving on slippery roads required all my attention, but the stabbing cold made concentrating difficult. My thoughts wondered off until I thought of Lisa. How was she? How much further could she go?

As the harsh reality of our adventure began taking root, we caught our first

## The Master Plan

Five steps to making your trip happen

**1. Motivation** Figure out exactly why you're doing the trip and what you want to get from it. Is it a three-month break or a bigger commitment? Either way, you're after a life-changing journey of discovery.

**2. Save** You need a budget, a personal savings plan that ensures you cut back on everything. Have a good hard look at what you can sell. If you can afford to keep your house, the rent could service your trip. Your social life may take a back seat as you're forced to drop out of those Friday-night drinks with your mates. But look on the bright side: while you're out adventuring, your friends will still be back home getting over that expensive hangover.

**3. Sponsorship** For a bigger trip, you need to think of this as a package of adventure, marketing, business and sales. There's supply and demand here, so before you even start looking for sponsors, you need to give your project a plucky identity like "2-Ride-The-World" or "The Ultimate Journey". Above all else, come across as professional to a potential sponsor. And make it sound good. Is there a higher purpose to your journey? Can it benefit others? Market yourself and be imaginative about how your project – and any media interest you gain – can commercially benefit supporting organisations. Don't make promises you can't keep.

**4. Plan it** Once you have a handle on how much money you don't have, you can start planning; the biggest factor defining your route and timing should be climate. Pushing a laden motorbike or 4x4 through a muddy monsoon-drenched jungle is no fun.

**5. The right gear** Make a wish list of gear and prioritise the stuff you're really going to need, not the flashy tackle your mate thinks is cool. Approach the companies that produce or sell the stuff you need and ask for a discount. Or, if you feel you can offer something in return, ask for kit sponsorship. But remember, no one owes you anything so don't take rejection personally. The company you're asking may have up to 200 requests for sponsorship that week. The smaller companies will often support you more enthusiastically.



**AFTER A FEW DEEP BREATHS WE AGREED: WE'D SELL EVERYTHING AND MAKE OUR DREAM OF RIDING AROUND OUR PLANET A REALITY**



Washing in Norway

glimpse of the kind of stamina, of sheer miserable determination, we would need to face this trip. The cold sapping our strength as we inched towards civilisation, we were forced to stop every 40 minutes, peel ourselves off the bikes and draw warmth from Tinkerbell's scalding cylinder heads. Hammerfest couldn't come soon enough.

By the time we got there, the most northerly point in Europe at  $71^{\circ} 10' 21''$ , we'd ridden in  $-23^{\circ}\text{C}$  temperatures, broken icicles from the bikes, been stunned by the harsh, unquestionable beauty of this country and were heroically displaying our, "I've been to Hammerfest, the most Northerly town in the World" sticker.

Norway didn't so much dent our budget as cave in the rear end. We're talking R50 for a 500ml bottle of beer. We sought sanctuary in Finland, home to the smiley fat chap with the chimney-stack fetish, the land of lakes, Christmas trees, wonderful roads and grumpy campsite owners with hygiene issues and dodgy haircuts. But that's another story.

Our base here was Inari Lake, the spiritual home of the Sámi people who have inhabited Northern Scandinavia for more than 9 000 years and one of the most serene places on Earth. It was the perfect place to recover from the gruelling Arctic leg of our trip and, with our energy and body temperatures rekindled, we waved goodbye to Lapland and made our way back into Norway's north-east and the small border town of Kirkness en route to Russia.

## Border crossing

The Russian leg of our trip was going to be a test. We'd already flirted with the occasional day of needling tension and endured a few hours of angry outbursts and imaginative expletives. On bad days,



Lisa receiving a fine in Russia

## Five Tips on Travelling Light

*Leave the kitchen sink*

1. The more capacity you have, the more stuff you'll take. Rethink if you have more than a tank bag, two panniers and a roll bag.
2. Always make sure everything you use has more than one use. A frisbee is a plate, a bargaining tool, a holder for broken pieces of bike and a fan. A groundsheet is also a tarp and a hammock.
3. Use compression sacks for packing everything from clothes to sleeping bags.
4. Have one change of clothing so you can wear one and wash the other. If you've got space, pop in a few items that will look nice, should the occasion arise.
5. Ensure your batteries are the same type, and replaceable wherever you're going. If you're taking electricity- and battery-operated items, such as a shaver, radio, GPS or camera, make sure they all use the same type of batteries. AAs and AAAs are the easiest to recharge.

we'd keep score as to who won the most f-k-offs for the day. We thought of it as rough verbal foreplay.

We'd been together for 12 years but we were going to have to rely on each other more now than ever before. Even though we were seeing the world, our relationship was becoming more insular and potentially more explosive. Unable to interpret the written word (Russia uses the Cyrillic alphabet), we would battle to make ourselves understood in a very alien country – and would only have each other to take out our frustrations.

The Russian border lives up to its formidable reputation. Razor-wire fences, cameras and Kalashnikov-toting guards in green uniforms ensure nobody wanders off. A chisel-faced Russian behind a grey desk checked our paper work and frowned. He shook his head and waved his hand at us. Not quite sure what this meant, we gingerly tiptoed outside. The boom was raised and – bloody hell – we were in Russia.

The first five kilometres after the border was a poorly tarred road, after which we hit loose sand and rock. I went ahead, aware that Lisa was looking at my body language to determine the difficulty of the track in front. I fell back on what I'd been taught at the BMW Off-Road Course back in the UK: stay off the brakes on loose stuff or they'll lock up and you'll slide. Keep your hands and grip relaxed. Stay loose. Aggression and speed are key. Controlled "blips" of the throttle were the only thing keeping the GS upright – as the bike went into a slide, a thrust from the accelerator would bring it temporarily upright.

The GS squirmed unhappily underneath me, the tyres scrambling futilely for any real purchase.

Five kilometres later, as I looked back in my rear-view mirror, I saw Lisa's front tyre diving into a large pocket of dust and

sand and sliding out from underneath her as she hit the dirt. Two oncoming trucks screeched to a halt, their route blocked by Lisa and her upended 350kg bike. It was the first real spill of our long journey. Lisa was lucky to come away with only bruises and cuts, her confidence shaken but fine.

It was a tough introduction to Russia but nothing like the "big off" I would have in Africa months later, dislocating my shoulder and cracking ribs. Such spills are part of the deal. As a good friend of mine once said, "If you ride a bike and never fall, you're simply not riding hard enough."

Our journey through Russia was an education. We left Murmansk to cheers and waves of those who'd seen our UK number plates and stared in disbelief as we rode past Nickel, a town described by our *Lonely Planet* guide as "Hell on Earth". Over the years, strip mining has torn up the land around Nickel, releasing enormous amounts of sulphur dioxide into the environment and killing off everything. For 50km around the town, everything is burnt and dead thanks to unchecked scrub fires. If I was a film director shooting a film about a post-apocalyptic world, Nickel would be my location of choice.

After two weeks, the acrid stench of Nickel finally left our nostrils and we checked in to the massive Hotel Russia – 2 722 rooms – in central Moscow. Moscow is a country all to itself with its



## Top 20 Pieces of Gear

*Don't leave home without them*

- 1. Large plastic tarpaulin** Great for protecting water-perishable extras like currency hidden in your bike and for sealing bike ports when crossing very deep water.
- 2. Condoms** Utterly essential, this can be used to form instant weather protection or to create an instant motorcycle workshop. It will save you scrabbling when you lose that vital nut, bolt or washer.
- 3. Dorma-sleep inflatable mattress** These take two minutes to inflate or deflate, are as comfy as your bed at home and pack to half the size of a traditional Therm-a-Rest mattress. Plus it's the invention of a clever South African, Mark Gentle.
- 4. Leatherman multitool** Great for everything from those emergency repairs to your bike or 4x4 to preparing food to cutting your toenails.
- 5. MSR multifuel stove** Will burn almost anything from petrol and diesel to jet fuel and vodka. Easy maintenance and packs small.
- 6. Capestorm Firefly Sleeping Bag** Rated to  $-15^{\circ}\text{C}$ , yet flexible enough to use in hotter weather and pack up small. Don't underestimate the importance of a good night's sleep.
- 7. AA & AAA 12V battery charger** This essential tool allows you to recharge batteries for items like a shaver, radio, GPS and head torch, straight from your bike.
- 8. Fuji FinePix S7000 Digital Camera** At the end of your adventure all you have are memories and photos. A digital camera will save you a fortune on developing costs and you can see the photo you've taken instantly.
- 9. JVC mini-laptop** Packed into an A5-sized shell, this one-gig Pentium processor has 512MB of RAM and 40 gigs of hard drive. Comes with built-in wireless connectivity, firewire, built-in SD card reader, CD/DVD reader and writer, USB connections and a host of other goodies. If you're thinking of maintaining a website of your trip and experience, some type of laptop is essential.
- 10. Panasonic Digital Camcorder** This is the ultimate way to share highlights of your experience with those that couldn't make it.
- 11. Elasticised bungee cords** Great for everything from strapping stuff down onto your faithful steed to erecting impromptu washing lines.
- 12. Electric air pump** This is going to save you a whole lot of grief if you're prone to punctures.
- 13. Minimised toolkit** Make sure you carry all the essential tools that will allow you to carry out basic repairs. It's like a first aid kit.



own rules (or lack of rules), depending on how connected or wealthy you are. The cliché about the Russian mafia running the place is threateningly accurate. You could spend a lifetime here and still be no closer to understanding it.

During the time we were there, the number of Chechen suicide bomb attacks was on the increase. We decided to leave when one bomber killed 13 people who were innocently drinking coffee in a street café a kilometre from our front door. Three weeks later, a young Chechen woman walked into the reception of our

## "ADVENTURE" IS A MISUNDERSTOOD TERM. WE'RE SLOWLY LEARNING THE GRITTY REALITY

hotel and pressed the button, killing herself and 27 other guests.

### Ruble trouble

From Moscow we wanted to head towards the west of St Petersburg in search of the Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. But one career police officer, who clearly had other ideas, chased us for eight kilometres and shoved us into a "questioning room" for four hours. Suddenly our adventure was turning into a nightmare.

Struggling to understand, all we could make out was that we were being threatened with bribery or legal action, for what we had no idea. "Rubles orrr prro-tocal!" he kept demanding. Lisa's short



Mountain pass in Spain

fuse was getting shorter. I had to control myself as Ivan and his colleagues bullied and interrogated her. All they needed was an excuse and they'd keep us here for days – or until we paid them what they wanted. In the end, we crossed Ivan's palm and promised to put a photo of him on our website ([www.2ridetheworld.com](http://www.2ridetheworld.com)) and make him famous. In return, the low-life let us go.

The Baltic countries gave us the chance to relax... a little. We needed to get a move on if we were going to reach Africa. By the time we'd reached southern Spain, we'd enjoyed the sophistication of Budapest in Hungary; been shocked by our visit to Auschwitz in Poland; ridden, skidded and fallen in the mountains of Slovakia; and pit-stopped in Austria, where I spent 14 hours straight, replacing the clutch on the big 1100GS. And this was only the beginning.

"Adventure" is a simple yet misunderstood term and we're slowly learning the gritty reality of what it means. It is dealing with the unexpected; if you're lucky, it is dealing with it with someone special. "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.

Now, after 41 countries, our home-baked adventure has exceeded all our expectations. We have it by the tail and we're planning to make it last for the next three to four years (at least), cover-



Supper by head lamp in Tarifa, Spain

## The Motorcycle Diaries

*Prepare for the long haul*

### Essential bike boosters

1. Long-range 42- (R1100GS) and 39-litre (F650GS) fuel tanks
2. Heavy-duty Ohlins suspension
3. Handlebar risers
4. Lightweight straight-through exhaust systems (get rid of the catalytic converters)
5. Powerful auxiliary lights (the R1100GS is fitted with high-voltage xenon gas auxiliary lights)
6. Additional 12V electrical sockets along with gel batteries – these save getting acid burns when the bike goes over, not to mention the hassle of having to remove them for shipping.

### Suit up smartly

**1. BMW Rally Suits** The Cordura material in BMW Rally Suits is lighter and better ventilated than traditional leather. With loads of vents and zips they're ideal in hot weather and with the built-in and removable Gore-Tex liners they offer protection in the rain and cold.

**2. Motocross boots** When it's wet, wear Sealskinz (waterproof socks) underneath. MX boots take a little wearing in but have already saved their fair share of broken ankle bones. Ours are five years old and still going strong.

**3. The System 4 BMW helmet** The flip front saves you a lot of hassle when you're being checked out by the hundredth police checkpoint of the day. The optional peak means the helmet can transform from a conventional road-visor lid to an off-road style helmet to be used with motocross goggles.

**4. Heated vest and handle grips** We thought these were for girlies too, but when the temperature drops and your core temperature is affected, your riding and concentration are going to suffer. At -23°C, they are lifesavers.

ing another 80 or so countries. It is now 11.30pm and the sky is lit with a trillion tiny gems. We have no idea what to expect tomorrow, but we are certain of one thing: doing this with each other has been the biggest adventure of all. Besides, if I don't make it back, Lisa tells me she'll hide the body and claim the insurance.

Aaah... ain't love grand?

MH