

One great adventure

Most people go riding for a weekend; some for a month; some for a year. However, no one has ever been riding like these two. Meet Simon and Lisa Thomas, motorcycle explorers like no other.

Interview Rennie Scaysbrook

Photography © Simon and Lisa Thomas, Independent Observations



As I sat in the kitchen of Simon and Lisa Thomas's temporary cabin in the north-west Sydney suburb of Dural, dictaphone at the ready, Simon said something that has resonated with me ever since.

"Prior to our trip we had an excellent standard of living, but no quality of life. Those things are very different."

Indeed they are. The comments stretch deeper than mere words. Because for all their worldly possessions – which consists of not much more than two motorcycles, a camera, lap top and a few odds and ends – Simon and Lisa Thomas have an extraordinary quality of life. They have seen more of the world than you would ever believe, and crammed more living into the last 10 years than most would in 10 lifetimes.

Simon and Lisa are the Adventure rider's riders.

10 continuous years on the road, starting in their native England before going around northern Europe, into Africa, South, Central and North America, Asia, Australia and now New Zealand, have given this married couple of 17 years a vastly different take on life than absolutely anybody I have ever met before.

"People are amazed at some of the problems we have been able to overcome," Simon states. "What we've realised, as a team – and as individuals – is we are so much more resilient and capable than we ever imagined. Our lives have been strapped to two wheels for the past decade; we are continuously problem solving."

The two have faced broken bodies, bikes, four bouts of malaria, government riots, street shootings, visa issues and a poverty-level financial state for much of the journey, yet when you talk to them, the phrase "don't sweat the small stuff" immediately springs to mind. They've managed to make a rear sprocket with nine teeth on Lisa's 650GS last the journey across East Timor to Australia, and make brake pads from a wrecked twin-engine Cessna in the Amazon fit the rear plates of Simon's 1150GS. ▶

Left Simon and Lisa have been riding around the world for 10 continuous years, starting in their native England before going around northern Europe, into Africa, South, Central and North America, Asia, Australia and now New Zealand.

Above What a place to ride! Lisa about to tackle the mountains in Kyrgyzstan.

Below Simon getting the big GS sideways in the sand of the beach in Goa, West India.





Riding into the far reaches of the world takes you to incredible places like Mount Bromo, Indonesia, here seen in an incredible sunrise.



Reflective in the middle of Australia during the duo's tour here in 2012.

Simon and Lisa are immediately unique. Both long-time motorcycle riders with no children or plans for such, the pair have a quirky sense of humour exclusively their own. Simon, at 41 and almost 10 years Lisa's junior, has this cheeky British schoolboy demeanour he uses to get his way – like saying I looked like I was starving just so he could get into the fridge and open a box of Maltesers. He strikes me as the kind of kid that would get up to all the mischief at school while you would get busted for it.

Lisa – the woman who has ridden the longest continuous motorcycle journey than any other woman in history – is happy to slap Simon down a notch and keep him in line but herself displays a confident charm and character that's obviously been moulded by what she's seen and experienced in the last 10 years. It sounds obvious but there really is a special worldliness to the two.

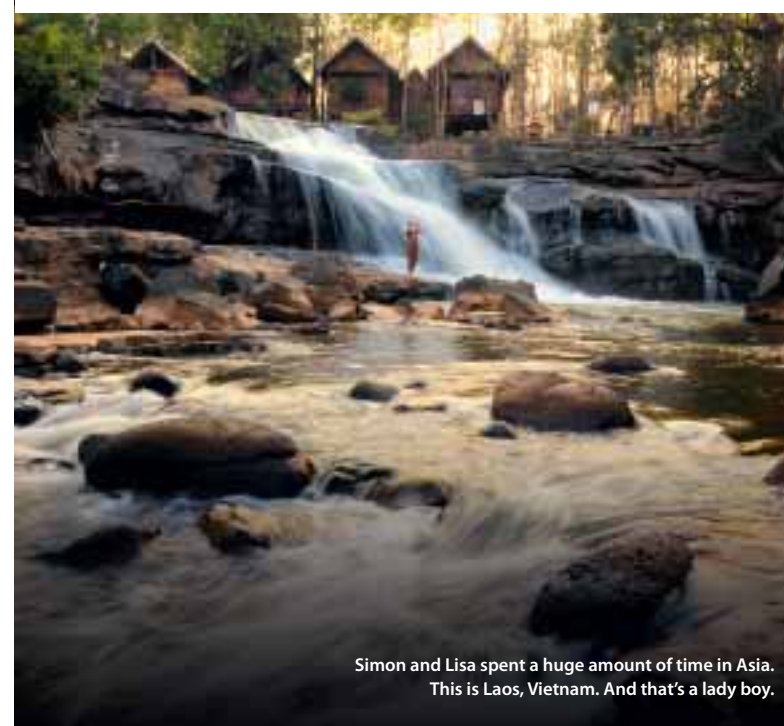
“Over the years we have slowed down because it's not just about the riding,” Lisa says who, teamed with Simon, has ridden 460,000km on the trip so far, breaking the record which previously set at 162,000km. “It's the stopping and meeting – we've had such wonderful experiences when we least expected them. Like waking up in the morning on a Mongolian mountain and being distracted by a sound, only to realise it's some old Mongolian riding bare back on a pony.

“So you offer him some tea and he squats down, wearing the fur of the Mongol empire. But it's black tea and he doesn't like it, and spits it out (laughs)!”

The nomadic lifestyle of the two may strike you as extreme, and by all accounts it is. They live off the smell of an oily rag, joining the dots financially while joining the dots on an atlas. Over the years they have learned to benefit in various ways from what they are doing, >



The Altiplano in west-central South America – check out the gear these two have to ride with!



Simon and Lisa spent a huge amount of time in Asia. This is Laos, Vietnam. And that's a lady boy.

How did this journey get started?

“When Lisa and I first got together,” Simon begins, “neither of us had bikes. I had a good job in marketing, and Lisa had just moved into working in the computer industry. Shortly afterwards I had a bad crash and had my right foot taken off bar a few tendons and some skin and, five surgeries and two years gives you a lot of time to think. “My mum had cancer, Lisa's father had a quadruple heart bypass, we were working really hard, and for what? All the shirts, cars, watches... We had been talking of a big trip for a long time, and had to do it or shut up. From that moment everything got sold. “We thought with the camping gear we have, we could go three months. That's a long time when you have a career. But three became six, then 12, and eventually we decided on an 18 month trip. During my hospital stay I had started some telecoms companies and they were doing quite well, so the trip became a career break. I ended up selling 49 percent of the shares after one of the companies went limited. Lisa could then afford to take a break, and the dividends from the company would keep us afloat while we were away. But the pricks that ran the company screwed it into the ground – it closed five years ago.” “After two years,” Lisa says “we still had a house, and we could re-enter our careers. But we asked ourselves 'are we ready to return?' And the answer was no. We'd only just begun.” ■





Above No prizes for guessing where this is. Africa is at the very top of the couple's riding bucket list. **Below** Calling the Gods in Mexico.

Tyre hunting

Simon and Lisa are a resourceful pair, but this story about finding tyres in the most unlikely of places is a ripper.

"We came through Mongolia, Kazakhstan, back into Central Russia, Kurdistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Iran and by the time we got to Islamabad over the Silk Road we'd spent the last month wondering what we are going to do about tyres," Simon says. "The white on each front and rear tyre was coming through, and there was nobody, anywhere, that could give us tyres. We were screwed."

"We got on the internet forums, asking anyone out there for help, and amazingly we got a post saying, 'this may be of no use to you, but we were in Islamabad and we changed our tyres."

We took the old ones off that were in a pretty bad way, and where we were camped there was rubbish tip next door, so we threw them over the fence. They should be there."

"So he gave us the GPS point from where he was camped, we found it, worked out where the tyres would have been thrown, and located them. We had new tyres; they were the right size, a bit sun damaged, but better than what we had. That got us all the way through Pakistan and India. The tyres were covered in shit and slime, and the stench was just terrible, but you do what you have to do."

"The first new set of tyres since was when we turned up in Australia." ■



from public speaking in the US and Australia to photo exhibitions in Malaysia and writing stories for magazines (one of which you'll see in the next issue of *Free Wheeling*) but it is day-to-day living, clearly not for everyone.

"People think we must be independently wealthy to do a trip like this, not true," Simon says.

"At the end of the first two years we still had a house, which we sold, and we lived off that for a while," Lisa says, who admits she and Simon have been out of England so long they are no longer considered residents.

"But when we arrived in Melbourne last year, we had 53 pounds (\$80) to our name. We couldn't leave because we couldn't afford fuel. No credit card, no savings, no gem or ring or watch to sell. It's everything, all gone."

But they still manage to get by, with a combination of scrupulous planning, a frugal existence and, an undoubted deep love of each other, and of motorcycling. It takes guts and bloody single-mindedness to want to ride day in, day out when your body is aching and your mind is over the two-wheeled thing leaning outside the tent.

"People often ask us, what's the best bike to do a trip like this on?" Simon says. "The best bike is the one

you're passionate about. If you chose one based on its practical application over passion, your journey is going to be short. Because if you don't get excited about getting on that bike after you've had two weeks of 16-hour rides through sand, rock, shit, your fingers are bleeding and your back's in knots, it's going to be a short, lacklustre trip."

Another essential element to the success the two have enjoyed on this trip is a sharpening and relying on gut instinct. The two believe – and I believe they're right – that in the first world we subconsciously suppress our gut instinct in the hope of being more polite. In the third world, where you may not understand the language, people or surroundings, a sharpened gut instinct is vital.

"If you feel something is not quite right in that particular area, you have to rely on instinct," Lisa says. "We use our instinct all the time, and you get to know the underlying feeling of what someone is saying, even if you don't understand them."

"A lot of time we don't need to talk. I'll look at him and he'll look at me and that's 1000 words that have gone between us. We know what we're feeling." ►



Not surprisingly, Simon (on the red GS) says having a great riding partner is essential to a memorable trip. "An experience shared is worth twice as much as on your own".

Simon and Lisa's top five adventure riding tips

Simon and Lisa are more qualified than anyone to give you pointers on a successful long-distance adventure ride. Here are their top five essentials, some might surprise you.

Multi-fuel stove: "It's basically a mountaineering stove," Lisa says. "Our one is made by MSR, called a Dragon Fly. It packs small, but most importantly can burn any fuel. Unleaded, diesel, even vodka. If you have a quick release connector on your petrol tank, you can cook. If it's a constant heat, you can re-heat food. But if you can adjust the flame, you can cook. If you have crap water, you can boil it. If you have snow, you can melt it. Having clean water is vital."

Flexibility "A degree of flexibility is essential," Simon says. "Your adventure really starts when all your plans have turned to shit. It's often when you meet the best people. Take your expectations; put them to one side, then the journey really begins. Expectations are purely there to disappoint you."

Confidence "You must have a genuine and founded self belief, and ability to problem solve," Simon says. "A lot of people are amazed at some of the problems we have been able to overcome, and presume we had these skills prior to departure – not so. If you have that level of self belief and confidence, there's very little you cannot do."

Camera "Take the biggest and best camera you can find. At the end of the trip you have memories and photographs," Simon says. "Be enthusiastic and creative, and learn about your camera. You want to share those images with clarity. These days there are great cameras for very little."

A good riding partner "It sounds clichéd, but a really good riding partner makes a trip," says Simon. "An awesome experience shared is worth double than if you were on your own." ■

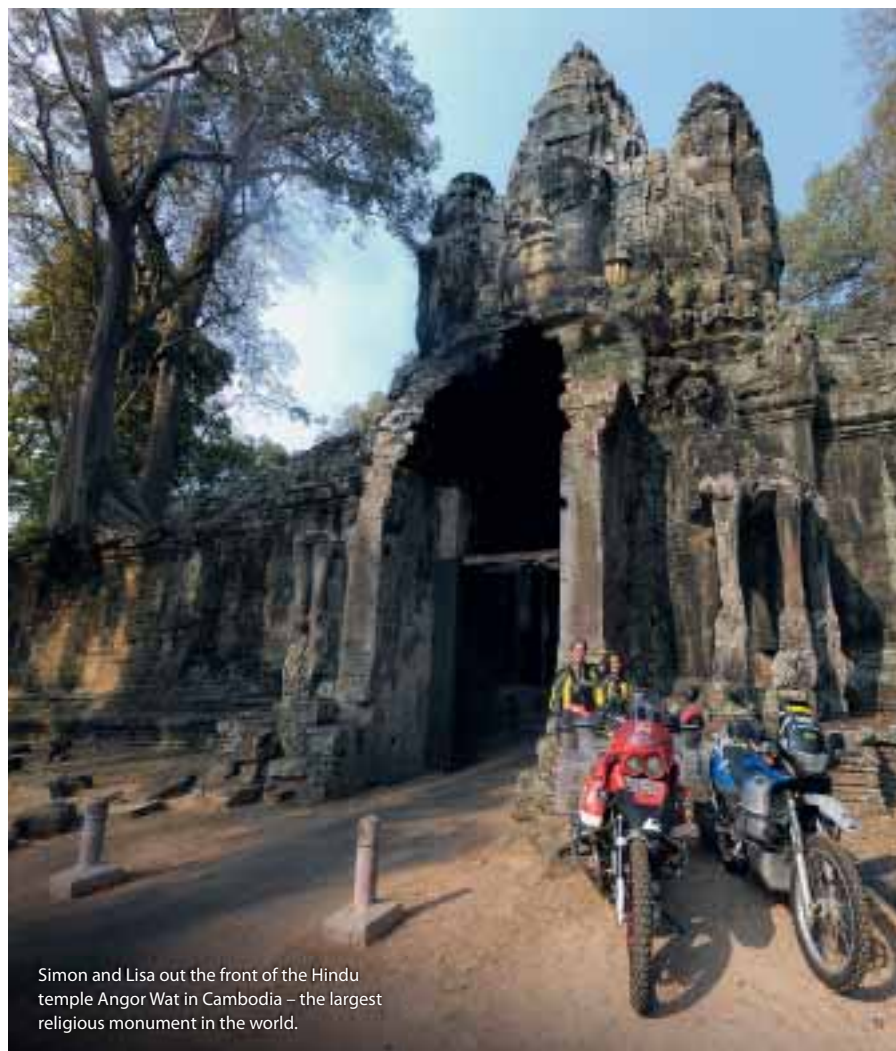
The Indian experience



"Imagine coming into a bar, where there's already a bar fight going on," Simon starts. "Your job is to get to the bar, pour a drink, and get back without getting yourself killed or spilling your drink. That is riding in India."

"It's like nothing I've ever experienced before and never want to again," Lisa says. "We had ridden in Mexico City, Columbia, the Tundra in Russia – and there's a few lunatics there high on Vodka – but it's nothing like India. We were arrogantly prepared, or so we thought. Along with that, you're trying not to shit yourself from giardia or something horrible. There's always some food poisoning; the food tastes great, mind you."

"Simon had a tyre blowout in India. He was running alongside me, then he's on the floor at 60mph. Incredibly, there was no traffic for that split second; had there been he would have been wiped out." ■



Simon and Lisa out the front of the Hindu temple Angor Wat in Cambodia – the largest religious monument in the world.



Hop on the website to track the couple's progress.



Lisa and a local Mongolian lady speaking the universal motorcycle language.

Simon and Lisa's top five riding destinations



Crossing the Sahara, Africa (left)

"That was humbling," Simon remembers. "Africa itself is so vast, so wild. The shortest section was four days, riding 13 hours a day."

The Bolivian Altiplano, Bolivia

"Riding to 17,200ft in the Bolivian Altiplano 2005 was extraordinary," Lisa says. "It's the second highest plateau in the world behind Tibet and 500ft lower than base camp at Mount Everest."

Java, Indonesia

"Riding in Java near the live volcano was amazing," Simon says. "We had fully laden bikes, they were extremely heavy, and there was a lot of riding, day in day out. However the landscape was some of the best yet for photography."

Machapuchare, Nepal (left)

"There is the holy mountain, called Matchpuchari, known as Fish Tail," Lisa says. "We were camped in front of it, with an incredible view and drank the local coffee. There wasn't much riding, but the area was breathtaking."

Australia

"Australia is barren, wild, remote, stunningly beautiful, and gives you a chance to get away from people," Simon says. "You have seemingly infinite space around you. But you know every 3-400km you have fuel and water, so not the usual stress. We had to make sure we could choose rides that made sure we had some fuel at the end, things like the Gunbarrel and Great Central Highway." ■



By their own admission the former corporate couple could never return to "normal" civilian life, and mentioned that when the big trip is finally over, they may settle in Argentina, provided they are allowed to settle there.

"Argentina is a wonderful place, but we also love Africa, it's so wild and raw," says Lisa. "Crossing the Sahara in 2003 was overwhelming, humbling," Simon remembers. "There's a road there now, but there wasn't back then. Before that we spent five weeks practicing our sand riding in Morocco. Thank god we did. We were riding up 160m high sand dunes – dunes 3.2 times higher than the Opera House. Getting up wasn't the bad bit, it was getting down! Don't touch the front brake... and get on the gas!"

Lisa acknowledges the pair are desert lovers, having covered 27 – yes, 27 – of the world's deserts. That includes Australia, one of the areas the pair rate in their top five riding destinations on earth.

"I like Australia; it's barren, wild, remote, stunningly beautiful, and a chance to get away from people," Simon says. "And believe me, after spending a couple of years in Asia, you just need to escape from people. You know every 3-400km in Australia you have fuel and water, and not the usual stress. Australia is not that remote by our standards."

Now the pair are in New Zealand, traversing some of the most spectacular riding on the planet. There are two or three years left in the record-breaking ride, so it's by no means coming to an end. Lisa says there's probably another 100-200,000km remaining and 40-odd countries to see, to go with the 77 already visited. Time is no longer an issue, especially considering this incredible 10-year journey was only supposed to last two years tops.

It's rare in this day and age to meet people like Simon and Lisa Thomas. They're riders with such unrestricted spirits it makes 9-5 city life look like cage living. What they do may not be for everyone, but they have doubtless provided incredible inspiration for people to get off the couch and see the world.

"We are doing this because we can," Simon says. "But this is our life; we breathe in and out, we twist the throttle and off we go."



For further photos and info check out Simon and Lisa's website at... www.2ridetheworld.com – All photos © Simon and Lisa Thomas