

THE MAN  
WHO CYCLED  
THE WORLD

MARK BEAUMONT

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# The Man Who Cycled the World

Mark Beaumont

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This book is a work of nonfiction based on the life, experiences, and recollections of the author. The author has stated to the publishers that, except in such minor respects not affecting the substantial accuracy of the work, the contents of this book are true.

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# *Contents*

*Cover*  
*Title Page*  
*Copyright*

## *Acknowledgments*

### Map

### Prelude in Something Major

### Leg 1: Paris to Istanbul

Chapter 1  
Chapter 2  
Chapter 3  
Chapter 4  
Chapter 5

### Leg 2: Istanbul to Calcutta

Chapter 6  
Chapter 7  
Chapter 8  
Chapter 9  
Chapter 10  
Chapter 11  
Chapter 12

### Leg 3: Bangkok to Singapore

Chapter 13  
Chapter 14

### Leg 4: Perth to Brisbane

Chapter 15  
Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

---

Leg 5: Dunedin to Auckland

Chapter 19

Leg 6: San Francisco to St. Augustine

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Leg 7: Lisbon to Paris

Chapter 25

*Epilogue*

*About the Author*

## Acknowledgments

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From a secret ambition, nurtured through university, the world cycle grew arms and legs to launch my career in the adventure world, which I am now able to continue. It is one thing being good at what you plan to do, but it is quite another to find the emotional, financial, and logistical support to fulfill your dreams. For that mountain of help I owe many people a great debt of gratitude. These brave souls said “yes” when most said “no.” After achieving my 18,000-mile target, it is easy to say in retrospect that it was a sure bet, but if you looked at my CV and my ambition after leaving university, then I can understand if you would have wished me luck and given your apologies like most did.

I am dedicating this book to Una, my mum, who has been the rock of support for all my ambitions from an early age, and who continues to work with me.

Heather and Hannah, I am very lucky to have two such cool sisters who have always gently ribbed my ways, but who have always been there to support. Heather, a special thanks for your help with Mum’s work while I was on the road, and for the hundreds of text messages encouraging me. Although not family, I would also like to put David Peat right at the top of this list. David has become a great friend and supporter over the last few years, and made the Scottish BAFTA-nominated BBC series *The Man Who Cycled the World* happen.

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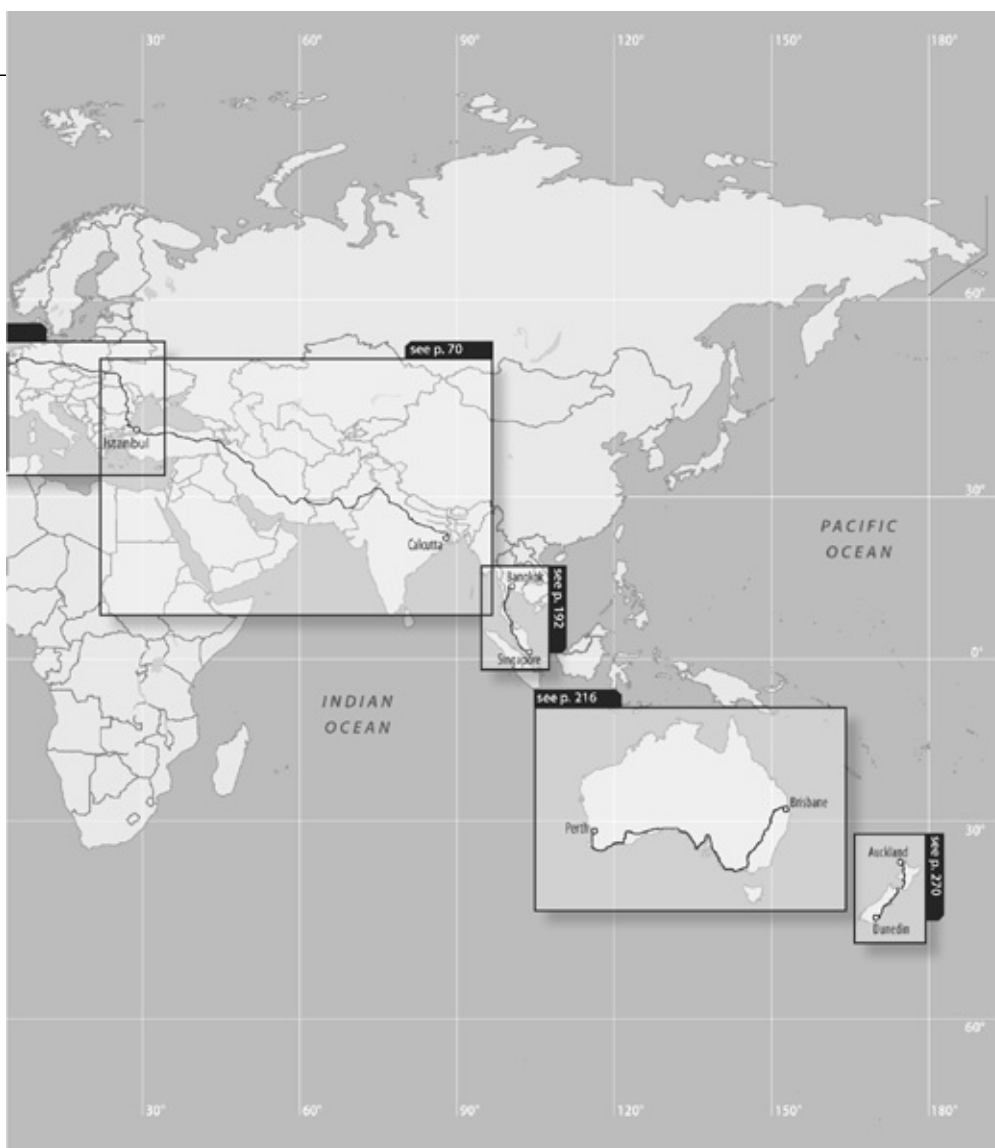
Writing this book has felt like an expedition in itself and was a far tougher challenge than I had imagined. Many thanks to everyone who has encouraged and guided me, including Stella my agent ([www.jennybrownassociates.com](http://www.jennybrownassociates.com)), Giles my editor ([www.booksattransworld.co.uk](http://www.booksattransworld.co.uk)), Caroline MacKechnie for translating the many hours of audio diaries, Rachel Lin for doing months of first edits and research with me, Mum for all her many reads and edits, Daniel Balado-Lopez for taking me through the copy edit, Madeline Toy for all the publicity, Phil Lord for the design of the picture section, and Matt Johnson for the cover design.

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Lastly I would like to say hi and thanks to everyone I met on the world cycle who made the journey so memorable. I hope we meet again and that you get to live your dreams well.







## Prelude in Something Major

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Eighteen thousand miles. People have cycled much farther than that, but no one has ever truly raced that far.

I would probably never have questioned my desire to cycle around the world if it hadn't been the first question people always asked. It is comforting to think we are in control of our desires. In truth, our choices are the products of influences far too numerous and complicated to grasp fully. "Why would you do this?" There is no good simple answer, and I don't think there needs to be. "Because it is there to be done"—though that doesn't come close to the complex truth.

My motivation for writing this book was to record the adventures of my first major expedition, before time and repetition changed my memories. I have written it as much for my family and friends, and to share the experience publicly, as I have for myself. For everyone involved in the world cycle it was an intense couple of years, and this book is the final chapter, before looking forward to the next adventures.

The four-part BBC1 documentary *The Man Who Cycled the World* was beautifully made and well received, has been seen by millions of people around the world, and was shortlisted for a Scottish BAFTA. However, at two hours, a film could not start to paint a full picture of my six-and-a-half-month race around the world.

A friend recently commented, "I knew what you had done from following your website but it was not until I saw the documentary that I understood everything you went through and how hard it was." It is always lovely when people associate with my expeditions like that, but I did not have the heart to tell him that it was in no way a true and full reflection of what cycling 100 miles (160km) a day for 195 days was like. This book will also fall short. Because I was alone for the majority of the time, the full value of this journey lies in the frame of mind I was in when experiencing each part of my trip—something that is impossible to re-create. However, such comments were fuel to me to write the fullest account possible.

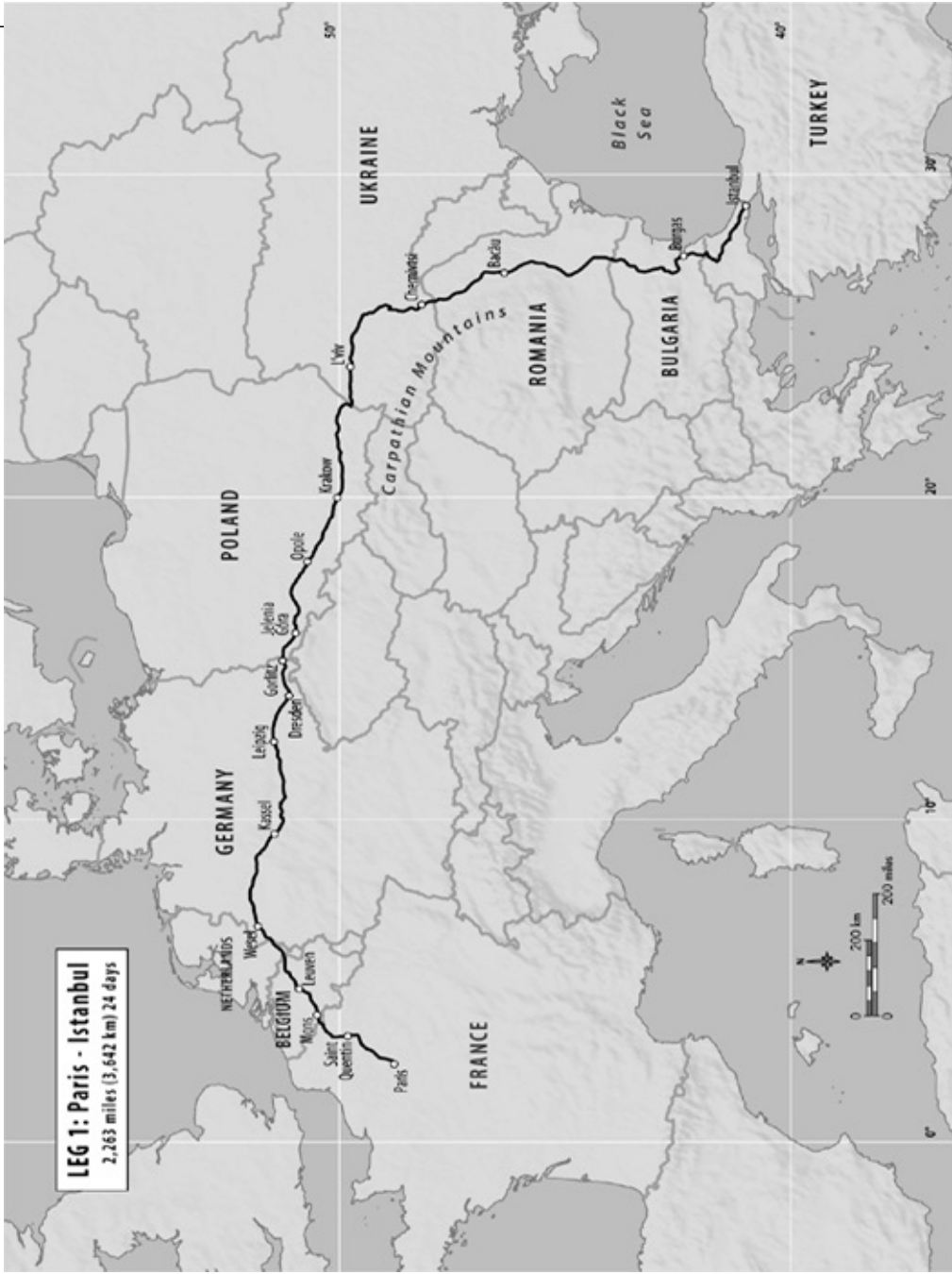
The most important thing, I feel, is that this story is honest. I have insisted on writing myself despite having never written more than a few thousand-word essays at university before. So it was an intimidating task.

And the first important truth to set down is this: I have never been a fanatical cyclist. Furthermore, I am a lousy mechanic. When I decided to cycle around the world I had never ridden a race and hardly knew the difference between degreaser (which takes gunk off your gears) and a derailleur (the bit that changes your gears).

I didn't always want to cycle around the world, it just kind of happened.

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## **Leg 1: Paris to Istanbul**



After only 10km, I was exhausted. My legs were fresh but my head dropped and my eyelids started slow-blinking. The surge of adrenaline at the start had passed, and I felt shattered. The last few weeks had been a series of ridiculous and unsustainable routines that had left me completely void of energy at the outset of my 18,000-mile cycle.

By the time our small convoy—Mum, my elder sister Heather, and a friend in a car, plus the motorbike escort to help me navigate the labyrinth that is central Paris—neared Charles de Gaulle airport, I could hardly stay on the bike. This did not feel like normal tiredness but deep, sleep-deprived exhaustion, the sort that leaves you feeling hollow.

Waving good-bye to the escort at Bourget, a bit farther on, I cycled as far as the next café. I had to stop. I had an espresso and Coke, hoping the life would return to me. But all I wanted to do was sleep. I felt silly as the waiter expressed how impressed he was with what I was doing. It did not feel very impressive. I was pale and felt completely washed out. This was the opportunity of my life and here I was waiting for caffeine and sugar to help me back onto the bike before I had even left Paris.

The start had been a slightly confused affair. For Mum and others it was emotional, but I felt somewhat removed. For so many months all I had wanted was to be on the road. Now I was finally at that point, there was no part of me that was sad, or thinking about missing anyone, or no part that was concerned about what lay ahead.

The last day before leaving was hot and clear but spent entirely in room 409 of the Radisson Boulogne, Paris. Only in the evening did Mum, Heather, and I take time out for a send-off meal at Au Vaillant Chez Chemin, a charming wee restaurant near the Porte de Saint-Cloud. It was Dad who said a few words and raised a toast. I have not always had the full support of Dad or seen eye to eye with him, but despite our differences I was grateful for his acknowledgment of the task that lay ahead.

We had laid things out, packed, unpacked, repacked, and sorted all day. When laid out on the bed the kit had seemed like a lot. Amazingly, after juggling items between the four main pannier bags to find a balance, it fitted well. It would have been easy to stay up all night faffing and fiddling, but by one in the morning I could do no more. The bike was ready and packed and we were not being particularly productive with the remaining admin jobs. There was too much to do to feel terribly excited.

An integral part of “living your dreams,” which I was fast learning, is that the reality is almost always different from what you imagine it will be. In my mind’s eye, the day before leaving was a media scrum of international interest, but there were no press calls at all. The media highlight and only pre-departure commitment was a chat on John Beattie’s *Sport Weekly* on Radio Scotland, where I had been a studio guest a few months earlier. A number of local papers had covered the story for the last six months, but I felt disappointed. Fame wasn’t part of the dream, but I had hoped to share this adventure widely, and to pay back my sponsors for their support.

That afternoon I let my frayed cool show when Heather returned with a late lunch and

gave me a ham quiche by mistake. I am normally a vegetarian and this was a meaningless mistake, but it happened to be the tiny event that broke the tension I was bottling. Months later it was amusing to remember this silly overreaction. If I'd only known what I would soon be eating the ham quiche would barely have registered.

Heather spent much of the afternoon finishing a present for me, a lovingly written "advice book" finished with a cover drawing of a stick man cycling around the world. A perfect pocket size, its introduction read, "Here's your little book of useful worldwide info ... enjoy it." It detailed information and essential phrases for each country, listed all my contact details and emergency information, had an itemized first-aid list, and featured other useful instructions.

My main regret with those last few days was the lack of time for a proper handover with Mum. I was passing over the reins of a year's planning so she could coordinate "Base Camp" from now on. A few months earlier Mum had never even sent an email, so it was not just the "what to do" but "how to do it" that was a very real concern. But we'd run out of time, and just had to hope that what little we had done was enough, and that what she didn't know she would be able to learn.

At seven a.m. on the morning of Sunday, August 5, 2007, I closed the panniers after the final repack, checked out of the Radisson Boulogne, and pedaled off, fully laden on my new bike for the first time. The early-morning sun sparkled on the Seine as I cycled slowly from Porte de Saint Cloud on Paris's ring road to the start. The bike felt balanced and strong but heavier than I had hoped. I smiled all the way, in no rush, thinking absently about what lay ahead. It was one of the first "moments" of free thought I had grabbed for many weeks. Being a Sunday, the streets were about as quiet as they get in central Paris, and I enjoyed watching the lazy weekend café culture and passing mopeds.

This is the day, I thought, with a new buzz of excitement.

I turned left onto the Champs-Élysées and could see all the way down the deserted avenue to the Place de la Concorde and up to the Arc de Triomphe. This was definitely the time and place to start from. The busiest roundabout in Europe has a calm magnificence in the early morning light of a summer's weekend.

I am not sure what my expectations of the start were, but again, the reality was definitely something else. When I reached the Arc a few friends and sponsors were waiting for me, and more soon arrived, but by anyone's standards this was a very low-key send-off. I couldn't afford to pay for a Guinness World Records representative to fly out, so I had to make sure we got suitable verification from the start. A friend ran off to buy the morning newspaper to include in a photo and aptly came back with *Le Monde*. With a degree of ceremony, Heather then started the "witness book," which I was to carry throughout. Despite her best efforts the two gendarmes standing guard refused to sign, but to their credit they did not intervene as we ran about filming, getting photos, and setting up the start.

By eight a.m., the advertised start time, about a dozen family, friends, and sponsors were gathered, looking slightly unsure of what to say or do on such an occasion. My public target was to cycle around the world in under 210 days; my personal target was actually 195. It was an ambitious claim with the current world record standing at 276 days, and given the fact that I'd never cycled for more than a month before. Each person standing there had bought into my dream, however naively. Maybe at that point, having come all the way to Paris, the

final outcome was not important to any of them: each person shared in my ambition, and for that moment, this was all that mattered. Whatever was going through their heads, I was truly grateful for their support, and it spurred me on.

David Peat, my BBC director and cameraman, helped bring some humor to the occasion by lying in the middle of the road while my family fended off the traffic for the official start photos. As a man of my parents' generation I was always amazed to see DP's alter ego appear every time he put a camera on his shoulder, which prompted him to run around with the speed and energy of someone half his age. No shot wasn't worth it for DP, and he jumped around to give the impression that many cameras were on the scene. I had only met him for the first time four months earlier, but he was already far more than just "the BBC guy." He was part of the team, a friend to all the family, the only familiar face I would see once out of Europe.

At 8:30 I waved to DP's BBC camera, my friends and family, and pedaled the first rotation away from the Arc de Triomphe, around the world.

I had always envisioned starting and finishing at the top of the Champs-Élysées, only to go there and realize that the road to Belgium—the first part of my journey across Europe—actually goes in the other direction. In the midst of that last hour of confusion, during snatches of conversations I wheeled over the planned start line on time, simply to stop immediately and spend the next half an hour making sure I was actually ready. During that time it was decided to restart at the pedestrian crossing on the Avenue de Wagram, which runs perpendicular to the Champs-Élysées about 30 meters around the roundabout, and pointing in the correct direction.

The pedestrian crossing seemed amazingly unimportant as a start line to circumnavigation. There was no signage or official start line like I had always imagined, it was simply the line pedestrians had to stay within when crossing the street. A bus blocked the road within the first 20 meters, and I glanced back to wave again. As I bumped my way slowly down the cobbled street and out of sight, I smiled and nodded to my motorbike escort. Here goes ...

Fortified by my espresso and Coke at the café in Bourget, I was on my way again. The sun shone into the early afternoon on the undulating roads north to Belgium, through quiet sleepy villages, thick woodlands, and fields of sunflowers basking in the warm August sun. These scenes did everything to lift my spirits. My thoughts drifted in and out of the present. I started to settle into the bike.

After stopping briefly in Senlis, I cycled on, past a fairytale little château and flat fields of maize with long groves of shady sycamores, then on through Mont L'Avoque and Compiègne. Sandy-colored fields broke the maize monopoly, along with areas of lettuce. After the picturesque village of Yvillers the road wound downhill to Verberie, where I met the car again. It was a Sunday at the start of August, so every café and shop had a *VACANCIERS ICI* sign in its window.

It was important to me that I rode unsupported, carrying all my own kit, but Mum wanted to road-trip the first few days to make sure I was happy with all my kit, and I was glad for the company while I settled in. Considering our limited options, for lunch we sat on the pavement outside a Turkish café to a grand picnic that featured vast amounts of pizza and



quiche—the kind of carbs I would need daily for this race. All the urgency of the day's target was put aside for over an hour as we chatted and ate. The tensions and mania of the morning lifted and a brilliant mood set in for the afternoon. I did not care about the delay. This time with family seemed important before I headed off on my own, and moreover, I still felt weak. I needed to ride carefully for the first week to get into a sustainable pattern and not burn out and injure. My greatest fear was a repetitive strain injury like tendonitis in the first weeks.

This break and refuel gave me a refreshed energy for the afternoon and rekindled my competitive spirit. By midafternoon I was suddenly finding the initial joy of company testing. A number of towns we passed through seemed to cause confusion, and rather than figure out my own way through, multiple phone calls were required to make sure everyone got through together. Compiègne, a larger town with Tudor-style houses, proved our greatest challenge.

By 5:20 I had made it to Saint Quentin. Every instinct urged me to go farther—there was daylight, time, and, most importantly, I hadn't yet done 100 miles, my daily target—but it was finished. There was no other town within easy reach and I wasn't going to camp while Mum was still with me. I might as well get a good recovery night and massage.

I have rarely been in such a state. My fatigue manifested itself in frustration and a short temper. As we sat in the town square, which had been turned into a huge artificial beach for eating dinner, I sat quiet and subdued as Mum and Heather tried to stay conversational. Back at the hotel I fell asleep immediately.

After a good eight hours' sleep I rolled out for day 2. This was it, the pattern was set, I was off around the world. It was pouring rain but I didn't care. This was exactly where I wanted to be.

I would not go as far as blaming or thanking my unusual start in life for everything out of the ordinary that has happened since. Born a slightly monstrous and hairy 10.9lb on New Year Day 1983, my only complaint was that it happened in Swindon General Hospital, which is now a block of flats. I have nothing against Swindon, but having lived 99 percent of my life in Scotland I have always considered “Place of Birth” to be somewhat of a scar on my passport. It seems like an unnecessary entry in terms of personal details, and misleading in terms of identity.

You don't tend to question things to which you know no alternative, and thus, while I had a very happy and “normal” childhood, I now know that in the company of a psychologist could easily blame it for everything which has happened since. Heather, my sister, who is eighteen months my senior, had already started at a traditional primary school in Kilmacolm near Glasgow, when my parents decided to set up farm on their own after managing other farms. This move took us to Perthshire, in the foothills of the Highlands, and the fairly remote valley of Glen Ardle, about 70 miles north of Edinburgh. Hannah, my little sister by two years, and I never even started primary school. This decision typifies Mum's outlook as an entrepreneur and freethinker, which undoubtedly helped shape how my sisters and I are.

At the age of five I was entirely oblivious to Mum's reasons for deciding that school was not for us. She had seen how it was changing and dampening Heather's spirit, so without any formal training she decided to home-school us all. It is often hard to separate what you remember from what you have been told in stories countless times, or what you've made up from looking at old photos, but I do have many fond early memories of “school” on the farm. It was great fun. It was not until I went to school at the age of ten that I noticed what little I might have missed out on—perhaps a few social norms. Life in overalls and Wellington boots was a constant adventure: riding as soon as I could walk, skiing shortly after, and helping (or hindering) farm work for as long as I can remember.

Crowhill Farm is a hilly 80-acre smallholding reached by a mile-long dirt track. It sits on a hillside below a large forest that hosts a labyrinth of dirt tracks, which annually used to be turned into a circuit for the Scottish RAC rally. It was therefore a haven for any child to grow up in. I bought my first farm car when I was twelve years old. By the time I left, aged seventeen, I knew every mile of those tracks from horse riding, cycling, walking, and driving my cars and motorbike.

Dad was not from farming stock, so to speak, so his decision to start his own farm was bold. But it was Mum who was always the source of real direction in the family. Their dream was an organic farm. This was a good fifteen years before such things were fashionable, let alone profitable, and certainly not on this scale. They built a goat dairy with sixty animals and bought hundreds of free-range hens. The eight small, hilly fields that stretched out below the house down the valley side to the river held sheep and cattle. Mum's passion was always the horses, and when I was young there were often new foals around and new ponies coming and going. At one point we had thirteen horses and ponies, each with their own story; they became part of the family. A good example of why we ended up with so many is the case of Smokey and Laddie, two scrawny, fleabitten New Forest ponies. These once wild ponies were

at the markets being sold for dog meat when Mum stepped in.

I cannot remember a lot of structure to my early schooling, but I can remember sitting around the kitchen table studying, and being visited occasionally by the local educational authorities. Apart from the normal curriculum, we were also taught cooking, gardening, and Italian. Every Saturday morning I also went to an art class, and I learned to play the cello from an early age. We were fairly free to do what we wanted. We probably didn't have many friends, but we had each other, and you don't miss what you don't know. Despite this quiet upbringing I was never shy. Mum remembers how I enjoyed being onstage in poetry and music festivals all over Scotland when I was as young as eight.

My very first memory is of skiing in Switzerland, at the age of four—the only family holiday we were ever taken on. All subsequent early memories are of being on the farm. Dad was once the proud leader of the FAF (Family Army Force), which was how my sisters and I organized our daily adventures for a number of years. These are too varied to mention but included a number of dens and rope swings, fishing trips with onion bags, and many camping expeditions with some very old canvas tents.

Our most ambitious venture was instigated, I think, by Heather, my second in command. The *SAS Survival Guide*, which doubled up as the FAF guidebook, gave us the idea of making our own clothes out of rabbit skins, and this meant setting lots of fence-line snares. This is a cruel way of catching animals and not to be promoted, and I have a feeling this might be publicly frowned on as a childhood pastime now, but while being ultimately fruitless, it was amazing fun and very memorable. (Before the animal activists stop reading, it is worth pointing out that we were not hunting for the sport as I don't think we were old enough for that to appeal to us. We were simply exploring and learning about our world, and our world was the farm.) After the snares were set we then had to check them regularly, which meant walking a couple of miles. Unfortunately the shift pattern for this quickly fell apart, as it was mostly fruitless and therefore boring. It didn't help that Hannah, my younger sister, would not do it on her own. At the time Heather and I frowned on this seeming weakness in the ranks, but in retrospect, she was only seven years old.

Eventually we got ourselves four rabbits. (I can only remember snaring two rabbits, which means that Dad might well have shot the others, though our hunting pride would not have allowed us to admit that at the time.) It wasn't enough to make three sets of clothes, or even one child-size coat, but there was ample for a pair of size 4 shoes.

We soon discovered that curing rabbit skins is not easy. After borrowing a kitchen knife and skinning them, we sat in the driveway and dissected them—a process that took ages and was also a biology lesson. Then we got an old sheet of plywood to stretch the skins on, face side down, tacked out with nails. The youngest troop was then sent to find a hand-sized, flat-sided piece of slate to scrape the hide, before being sent back to the kitchen to ask Mum for some table salt, which was rubbed into the hide. This was repeated regularly to stretch the hide and keep it supple. We then sketched the designs of the cuts we needed for when the hide was ready to stitch.

But then for some reason the project was shelved. Quite literally, we shelved the skins, on the sheet of plywood in the false ceiling in the goat parlor. Out of sight and out of mind, they stayed there for the next ten years until the steadings were sold to be converted into a country mansion. I wish I'd been there to see the workmen's faces when they found out

rabbit skins.

When I did start going to school, I attended a fantastic place called Edradour which had a system all of its own and retained a lot of the freedoms of home-schooling. It was during the few terms I was there that I first had ambitions on the bike. One day I announced to Mum that I was going to cycle to school, and I did. It was 18 miles over moorlands and a hilly path—a fair marathon, especially as I had never even cycled off the farm before.

In stark contrast to Edradour I was sent to my local primary school for the last term before a secondary school to help ease the transition. I learned almost nothing as I was bullied and found the classes boring. When I then turned up on my first day in a school of 1,300 pupils in the middle of a city I inevitably got gently bullied for a couple more years, until I learned the ropes. But school is a cruel place. Even once you have changed, your reputation goes before you. It is almost impossible to move on from that initial stereotype.

At that time, to be a cool kid at Dundee High School you had to be good at rugby. In all those years of persevering I don't think I ever scored a try. I wasn't any better at playground football. A Chinese kid called Hunter and I were always picked last. Everyone else had played football and rugby by the time they were twelve, and because I was labeled as terrible, I remained so.

But I loved sport, and my passion for skiing and cycling grew as I slowly gave up on school sports. Our next-door neighbor was the head of ski patrol at Glenshee, the ski resort nearest my house, and on good snow days I would get a lift with him and spend my time skiing, often on my own. Skiing was my first sporting love. I went at every opportunity, bought the magazines, watched the races, and talked about it with my friends all the time.

Cycling was different: I wasn't, and never have been, obsessed by cycling. My first proper bike was a white Peugeot mountain bike, which I rode about for years on the farm tracks. I was eleven when I read an article in the local newspaper about a man who had just cycled from Land's End to John O'Groats. This inspired me, so I got the car road atlas out and started planning. Mum, always keen not to dissuade enthusiasm, suggested that I try a short cycle first, so we settled on a route across Scotland.

The summer before going to high school I cycled 145 miles from Dundee to Oban with a friend called Lachlann, and our dads. Mum and I spent days going door to door getting sponsorship, and we raised £2,000 for Save the Children and the International League for the Protection of Horses (ILPH). This gave me a chance to meet the Princess Royal and get my adventures in the local papers.

A few years later, during my second year at high school, I went back to Mum and Dad with the ambition still to do the End to End. We went through the same planning and fund-raising only on a bigger scale, and over thirteen days in my summer holidays I completed my first solo, the 1,038 miles from John O'Groats to Land's End. Mum and Dad drove the family car the whole way as support and the ride raised £3,000 for Calton Athletics (a drug rehabilitation charity in Glasgow) and, again, the ILPH. This expedition afforded me my first chance to speak on local radio and attend a number of events. The whole project was amazing fun; I enjoyed the planning and networking as much as the cycle. Within school the achievement also created small ripples and gave me the buzz to do more.

However, around these cycling trips I didn't cycle that much. I bought a road bike when I was fourteen with the intention of cycling more, but didn't actually do that much. In my late

few years at school I followed the Tour de France a bit and saved up for a better bike, but never actually joined a club or even looked into cycling in a race. In my last year at school I spent all my savings on an incredibly expensive model which I hardly ever rode. I eventually sold it during my second year of university to fund summer traveling around Canada with my girlfriend.

In my last years of school, I decided I would go to Harvard. I haven't a clue where this idea came from. I had never been to Boston and they didn't even offer the course I wanted, but I just liked the idea of it. So I studied for and took my SAT exams for entrance to American universities and had my interview with a Harvard alumnus. It all went very well until it came down to the finances: it was going to cost \$27,500 a year in tuition fees alone, before the costs of flying there and living there. I'd gone to Dundee High School with the help of the Assisted Places Scheme, so this kind of money just wasn't possible.

In my excitement I had hardly bothered filling out UCAS forms as a backup. You are meant to fill in four or five choices, but I had simply put Edinburgh and Glasgow. I had set my sights on being a civil engineer, and I was accepted on to the course at both universities, but then I had a last-minute change of heart. I'd decided to go to Glasgow University, for no real reason, so I picked up their prospectus to choose again, wishing I had done more sciences so that I could study medicine. I then discovered that if I was changing my subject I would have to go through UCAS again the following year, which meant taking another year out. This wasn't an option, so Mum encouraged me to drive to Glasgow and speak in person to people in the departments I was interested in.

I had no idea what I wanted to do, but I narrowed it down to law and economics, as I figured you could get a good job with either of those. I saw the law professor first and he wasn't very friendly or encouraging. Slightly disheartened, I entered a building that looked like it had been designed by a toddler, the Adam Smith Building of Social Sciences, to meet a very excited economics professor who took one look at my grades and after a five-minute chat accepted me into the program. That sorted, I went off to Europe and forgot all about it.

I spent my gap year in France and Italy, and it was the most important year for learning about my life. I left school with the ambition of being a ski instructor and headed off to the Tignes glacier in France to improve my skiing. It was a good thing that I went on to pass the exam as I had already secured a job in the Aosta Valley, in northwest Italy, as an instructor for the next season. It was the perfect opportunity to shake off the last of school's insecurities, for teaching is the best way to become a better communicator. I had the most amazing twenty-two weeks there.

After coming home, within weeks I was bored of the bar job in a club I'd secured and started looking at another adventure before university started. Within a week of finding a job on the internet I was on a farm just north of Toulouse driving tractors, building poly-tunnels and planting flowers. There were a number of local workers there and I was the only British worker, apart from the owner, who spoke any French, so I found myself in charge of projects and organizing the other laborers. It was a superb summer, and by the time I turned up at Glasgow University I could hardly remember what I was studying.

I quickly shaved off the Mohican I had grown and was dropped at the student halls to be met by a wrestling-mad American and a rugby-mad Scotsman. Brendan, the American, was to become one of my best friends, and a flat mate throughout my university days. Ross, too,

remains a good friend.

Around the ski season and farm job I had managed to fit in another big cycle, my longest yet. Mum found a leaflet about a group who were planning to cycle the 1,334 miles from Sicily to Innsbruck, up the spine of Italy in the footsteps of Second World War Allied troops in aid of Erskine Hospital. It was the perfect summer adventure, and as a group, the perfect introduction to cycling abroad. Or so I thought. The expedition was a success in that between us we raised £50,000, and we did make it in the end, but halfway up Italy some of the group fell out and two groups ended up making their own way north. As the youngest team member I sat quietly through most of the fallout, but at the same time learned a huge amount about logistical planning and teamwork that would come in very useful later.

My four years at university were fantastic, though I did spend most of my time involved in anything but my subject. I wasn't a bad student and went to almost all my lectures, but I found I couldn't focus for an hour. My final degree was economics and politics, simply because I thought that economics should get me a job while politics interested me. For my first years at university I was planning to go into finance afterward. I had no idea what that meant but I was motivated by the money and thought it would buy me the lifestyle I dreamed of.

I was given the opportunity to go to Boston, where I had wanted to study, but this time to do an internship with Liberty Mutual, a Fortune 500 insurance company. For two months I worked in corporate employment, which had absolutely nothing to do with what I wanted to do. It did, however, bring me some amazing opportunities, like flying across the States in the private company jet, and going to see the New England Patriots in the corporate box. The most valuable thing I took from that summer was a single conversation I had with a man called Gene Harris. Gene wasn't my direct boss but worked in the department, and he took me to the football game. He told me about how he had traveled and seen so much after university before starting his current career in his late twenties.

I looked at some of my fellow interns, living the Ivy League dream the way I had wanted to, spending every university holiday working for the company that would then hire them. They were scarily bright and hardworking but dull as dishwater, and with almost no world experience. My perspective on what was important in terms of a career changed that summer. I knew then that I wasn't going to race into the City and try to do what our institutionalized world expects of young people. I wanted to make my own path to success.

I can't remember when the idea first occurred to cycle around the world, but it was at some point that autumn, during my third year at university. I had become ski race captain, and then in my third year vice president of the ski club. At the same time I also became involved in the overall Sports Association as treasurer. The planning, financing, and networking were exactly what I enjoyed, and I learned a lot. The top of the pile was the sabbatical role of president, and I set my sights on this. The election for the post is a public student vote, and the 2005 GUSA presidential election between Farmer and Monty (me) produced the largest turnout for years. I lost, and was absolutely gutted. It hadn't even crossed my mind that I wouldn't win, and it ruined all my plans. My presidential year would also have been the year of training and preparation for cycling around the world.

When I graduated in 2006 I realized that I still needed a year of planning, but I was starting

from almost nothing. I hadn't cycled seriously in years and had fairly serious student debt and no sponsors. I also needed to make sure I could actually do the cycling. My greatest concern was not the physical side of things but the time I would have to spend alone. Therefore, to prove something to myself and to have something to take to sponsors, I set myself a training cycle.

I got a cheap flight to Oslo in early August and headed north. I had no set route, no flight home; I was simply planning to try to cycle as far and as fast as I could for a month. By the time I reached Trondheim after four days my back wheel was broken and I had to buy panniers for the front of the bike for the first time. I was on the old mountain bike I had ridden around university for years, and I suddenly realized that I actually knew very little about touring. I hadn't even used a camp stove before.

Not only was the bike breaking, but I also had tendonitis in the left ankle. I can remember phoning home after a couple of days and having a long conversation about the realities of my plans. I explained that I was going to send half of my kit home because the bike was too heavy, and that I had to start thinking about the cycle differently. I couldn't try to race all the time because it was breaking me physically and wasn't enjoyable. I had to enjoy the journey and just try to stay on the bike for long hours to get the big miles.

Bike fixed, I headed north, up the fjords to Bodo and then over to the Lofoten Isles and up to Narvik, 300 miles north of the Arctic Circle. I purposefully wanted to find the emptiest place possible so that I could see if I enjoyed being alone for long periods. From there I cycled through the most northerly road in Sweden and then south through the thousand lakes of Finland. By this time the tendonitis in the left ankle was very bad, and I also had it behind the right knee, which squeaked like blocks of polystyrene when I walked and was incredibly painful—but I could cycle.

In Helsinki I set my sights on Warsaw, and Mum booked my flight home from there. Through Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania my body got worse and worse. I don't think I could have kept going another week, but I loved it. The sense of freedom, the daily adventures, and the things I saw dispelled any doubt. I would have to put in a lot of training, but I could race around the world. In thirty-one days I had cycled 2,700 miles.

I returned home on a high—and came straight back down to earth. Phil, a flat mate from university, had decided to do a master's at Edinburgh and I decided to get a flat with him again (it would have been difficult to stay in Glasgow and give up the student lifestyle). On my first night there we went to our new local in Broughton, and after Phil bought the first round I went to buy him a pint back and was left with two pence in my wallet. I was on my overdraft limit at £2,000 under and had two credit cards in debt. I hated asking, but Mum and Dad had to help me out until I found work. I was completely broke.

Then, that same week, I went back to Glasgow to see my girlfriend of four years and discovered that the relationship was over. To start with I assumed it was a short break, but as the weeks went on I never heard from her. It was a tough period of insecurity and doubt. I felt I couldn't show doubt in my plan to others in case they started doubting me, but I couldn't shake the feeling that if I had just got a job like everyone else and stayed in Glasgow, then my life would have been very different.

The dream was still on, though. While still at university I'd realized that if I only had one chance to have this adventure then it should be as big as possible, so right from the first

brainstorms I was set on cycling around the world. I researched what had been done before and got in touch to find out what the world record was. I was amazed to discover how many people had cycled around the world by different routes and distances. But only a few had ever gone for the Fastest True Circumnavigation of the Globe by Bicycle. An Englishman called Steve Strange held the record, at 276 days. His website showed an incredible world tour and told of how he had cycled 65 miles a day on average for over nine months.

From my experience, admittedly only on the good roads of Europe, I thought that this was very beatable. I speculated that with the right training I would be able to cycle 100 miles a day sustainably. This was hugely naive—I had no idea of the roads, weather, political situations, or other possible delays—nevertheless it was how I set my target. To get the Guinness World Record I would have to cycle 18,000 miles, start and finish in the same place, go in one direction, and pass through two points on opposite sides of the world, among other criteria. Eighteen thousand divided by a hundred gave a figure of 180 days, and I then added a day off every fortnight to allow for delays with transfers, rest periods, illness, and anything else unexpected. Therefore, long before I had researched how or proved that I could actually do this, my target was to cycle around the world in 195 days.

To give myself an extra margin of error my sponsorship proposal, a two-page introductory document, had as its title “Around the World in 210 Days.” When you have never ridden a race in your life, have never cycled more than 2,700 miles, and have never cycled 100 miles a day for a week, let alone half a year, claiming I could break a world record by two months was a hard sell. It took eight months to get my first capital sponsor, and that was only £500 of the £25,000 initial capital I needed. It was just enough to allow me to give up the day job I had for one month. For three months I had opened the mail, photocopied and filed papers for an engineering firm. The only good part of this was that it was 7 miles from my flat, so a good distance to run to and from as part of my training, which I was struggling to fit around the day job and the night job: planning a major expedition.

To go from punter to pro in one year was the goal, and along with securing sponsors and media interest in the absence of a strong track record on my part, to do that I needed to put some science behind the ambition. I got in touch with the sports science faculty at my university. Dr. Niall MacFarlane and his team of technicians were more than happy to put me through my paces and I completed a range of lab tests to find out my critical power output, the most efficient cycling position, cadence (pedal strokes per minute), heart-rate range, and aspects of diet.

I had sold my good race bike during university when I had no money for half of what it was worth and now had only an old mountain bike, which had been worth a couple of hundred pounds when new. Scouting the local pages, I found an old Fausto Coppi for sale in Greenock, just outside Glasgow, for £250. It was at least five years old and not nearly as good as what I had sold, but it had a strong aluminum frame and, while being slightly smaller, was good enough to get going. This was the bike I would ride every mile of my training for the next year and a half.

Once back from Warsaw in September 2006, I had to work until March 2007, when I found my first sponsor. Time was therefore pretty short to train and I ended up doing far more running than cycling as it was always dark when I could get out. From February until July, when the training increased substantially, I would get up and train all morning, and the



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