

St Bart's
Easter Supplement,
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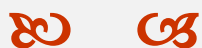


Trips

1 Naked ambition

by

Ron Kirk



One of the joys of reaching the ripe old age of 70 is that you have the luxury and time to self-indulge and reminisce on life's past experiences.

One discovery I made very early on in life was the joys of motor cycling. Having returned from South Africa in 1974 after a four-year stint with Anglo American, I ended up at the Head Office of Courtaulds in Hanover Square, London. Having set up home 35 miles away in Copthorne in Sussex, it soon became apparent working for the Deputy Chairman resulted in arriving back at my local train station late at night. There were no taxis and no buses after 8pm and home was still three miles away.

The answer obviously was to buy an 850cc BMW R85 that would glide me through the London traffic so I could guarantee to be home within an hour and a quarter, door-to-door. Not only was I able to hone my biking skills, but when I could, I later travelled farther afield when family commitments allowed. Sue authorised me to go off on my own at times when the children were growing up for the odd few days, even to the Continent to visit the Grand Prix's at Assen and Hockenheim with all the other 200 motorcyclists. When work became particularly challenging, motorcycling proved to be a great 'antidote' to wind down and shoot the breeze. You really can't think of anything else as you purr along between 50 and 70 mph along

beautiful winding roads. You leave all your cares behind you on the tarmac.

By 1991, I was still motorcycling and still on a BMW but this time a bigger machine of 1200cc and four cylinders instead of the normal two. Through a continuous series of work-related challenges, I was to become physically and mentally worn down. I had spent nine years with Courtaulds managing the decline of fibre and yarn production in the UK and overseas, endured the Ulster problems and spent three hard years painfully returning a brewery group to profitability. I was shattered. In this year, I had planned to leave the brewery before I could start up my own businesses. I decided in the resulting break I needed a strong injection of that 'antidote' again. But where to go ?

Scandinavia, Constantinople, South of France all sprang to mind. It needed to be a bit different, slightly exotic and a challenge in itself. I then decided why not Dubrovnik in Croatia. Using a piece of string on a map, I could make the Adriatic coast within two days and then spend the next day gently breezing down the coast to Dubrovnik with a clear view of the Mediterranean all the way. I wouldn't book hotels en route, just the Dover-Calais ferry and three days in a hotel at my destination before returning. Having got leave of absence approval from Sue for the total 10 days trip all was set, just needed to do a

short maintenance on the bike, give it a good polish and load up. There were no GPS devices in those days so it was maps and a personal log to memorise the route.

Within a few days of some basic planning, I was on my way. The first two days were fairly predictable, down the A1 from Southwell, M25 and then M20 to Dover. Got to the front of the car queue at the Dover ferry port and boarded, tying the bike up with ropes left by the crew for the purpose. Soon on my way, following the familiar routes across Holland, through Luxembourg, France, stopping the first night near Metz, then into Germany. The auto routes make riding easy, but boring, it's just a question of buckling down to chew up the kilometres crossing the Northern European Plain.

After the first day, the scenery changes. You cross the Danube, the signs for München appear and the scenery starts to change, with the first sight of the Alps as you approach Salzburg. It soon becomes apparent the 'string planner' was not quite accurate or I hadn't quite followed the route accurately enough. Rijeka, my second day's target on the Adriatic coast, wasn't going to happen. I wasn't even going to make it over the Austrian/Slovenian border and plumped for Klagenfurt in Austria as my revised targeted destination for the second night.

Now the ride becomes interesting, passing the birthplace of that musical genius Mozart and the location for the film 'The Sound of Music' ! The Sulzbergers really detest the Americans for using their town for the film as, in their eyes, it demeans their cultural heritage. It didn't, however, stop me humming to myself 'The Hills are Alive with the Sound of Music' and, of course, 'Symphony No 40 and Piano Concerto No 1'. There were no radios or music centres installed on bikes in those days. Recently, I told my dentist (nickname Bruno) on my third visit for extensive treatment that in my apprehension of the visit, I had dreamt the night before playing the piano, pitch perfect to Mozart compositions (I don't play the piano) ! During treatment, as fellow brass instrument players, we enjoy several orchestral pieces as he drills away.

Entering the foothills of the Alps, I soon start passing through the long road tunnels and, as you exit, sudden new vistas appear of high, snow-capped mountains, river valleys and castles, perched seemingly precariously on stump-like hills. This was the real business, I thought, worth all the investment of the long, hard drive on the first day.

Klagenfurt, in the main square, is a typical Austrian town. I made for the main hotel to find the place deserted; it was a public holiday.

Only the manager was on duty, apologizing he couldn't offer the restaurant but he would be happy to make me a sandwich instead while I made myself comfortable in my room. He showed me to obviously the best room in the hotel as it was a suite with highly polished wooden floors and a bed fit for an emperor. At first, I declined to enter the room with my dirty leather boots and two pannier cases made filthy by the rain showers through Holland (it always rains in Holland). He beckoned me to enter and not to worry. Having freshened up and changed my clothes for a night out in a local bar and for the ride the next day, a silver platter of sandwiches arrived with a variety of fillings. There must have been 15 sandwiches. I ate them all as I was so hungry, having missed lunch in my haste to make progress.

When riding a bike, I now apply the same rules when driving a car: I always stop every two hours either for a drink or for petrol, always have a good breakfast and start looking for a hotel after 5pm. That way, the sugar level stays up, you don't become dehydrated and importantly you can maintain your concentration.

A very early start was required the next day as I thought I must still be 350 miles from my destination in Dubrovnik and I couldn't be sure in communist Yugoslavia that there would be freely available

hotels. I once got caught out in Poland and had the Red Army searching for me, but that is another tale.

I entered Slovenia from Austria by a little-used mountain-top border post and it was from this point the whole trip was in jeopardy. My piece of string hadn't taken account of the ria coast where, at one point, I travelled just three miles down the coast in an hour ! Furthermore, at the petrol stations they didn't meter your fuel, they used a stop watch to work out the approximate quantity you had taken ! Paying for anything was in either of three currencies: the new dinar, the old dinar or deutschmarks. You couldn't travel safely at more than 40/50mph on the narrow winding roads and even that meant using both sides of the road. The technique I worked out was to see if there was any traffic on its way from the next headland and then go for it. On the bends, the road tarmac had regular grooves that I only learnt later what they were designed for. The total distance turned out to be over 500 miles. All this was eating into chunks of available time so all the third day I managed on cups of coffee during the short breaks.

I was always able to see the sea to my right but gradually the scenery changed from a lush green to light brown rock and burnt grass and shrub. It turned eventually to something like a moonscape. By nightfall, the ride was turning into a nightmare. The roads

continued to wind; the road was pitch black (no markings) as was the sky, and no road barriers; if you overcooked the bends and disappeared over the edge, all was lost. By 6pm, any light traffic had disappeared: it was just me and the elements. If I went off the road down the steep cliff face, no one would know and it would take days to find my remains, if ever. Just as these dark thoughts entered my brain, I also thought how on earth am I going to find my hotel at around midnight with no one around ? And if I did find somebody, they wouldn't be able to understand my English. All I could see now was my headlight piercing the blackness and, on turning round a headland, either a cliff face or a beam shooting out to sea. Looking on the bright side, at least it wasn't raining and it was warm but I was in real trouble.

It was getting on for midnight as I made out just a few dim street lights that confirmed I was approaching Dubrovnik. As luck would have it, on the outskirts of the town, I came across a garage proprietor just about to lock up his petrol station, and I was able to persuade him to fill my bike and in my best German (I now realised this was almost their second language), I ask for directions to the hotel. He told me it is simple, just follow that road until you get to the very end and it is there on the right. Oh, what a relief. Within 10 minutes, sure enough there was the hotel. Walking into the hotel, I was met by the night porter who spoke good English and I

apologized for my late arrival. He said no worries. I will take your gear to your room, but as the restaurant is about to close why don't you order a quick meal before turning in ? The steak and chips were delicious and I went to my room to collapse on the bed and vow not to ride the bike again for the next three days. Now was the time to rest and reflect on a momentous ride.

Next morning, I still woke up at my normal time of 6am. I opened the bedroom curtains to see a magnificent view of the blue Adriatic some 14 floors down. It appeared whilst I had only gone up a couple of floors from reception the hotel was built on the side of a cliff face. Looking down, I spotted the Olympic-sized swimming pool surrounded by a series of concrete steps with a few energetic early swimmers doing a few lengths of the pool. To the left was a beautiful, flowered garden with sun lounges leading out to a rocky causeway with places to dive into the sea and stepladders to help you out. That's the place, I thought. I will have a quick, light breakfast and dressed in my tea shirt, shorts and baseball cap lay on one of the lounges and read my book 'In Search of Excellence' by Sir John Harvey-Jones whom I had actually met a couple of years before.

It was a magnificent morning; the sun was still low in the sky and, despite being in the shadow of the cliff, it was comfortably warm. I was engrossed in my book for the next couple of hours, thinking this

is the life, I can relax at last. I heard people talking nearby, chairs being moved about and gradually the cacophony of background noise grew louder as seemingly more people arrived. The sun was now becoming stronger and had broken over the top of the cliff face. Ah, I thought, I had better put on some sun screen before I became sunburnt.

Putting the book aside; disaster. I suddenly realised I was the only person with any clothes on. I'd better move to the swimming pool area only to see a sign on the exit of the garden stating sun lounges could not be removed. What to do ? I didn't fancy a day lying on hard concrete so I thought don't be an idiot, just undress but leave your book lying in a strategic place. Having congratulated myself on my lateral thinking I started applying the sun tan lotion. The problem with sun bathing on your own is you can't apply the lotion to your back. Just as I was struggling to apply at least some, a beautiful, blond German girl, sunbathing with her boyfriend, asked if she could help and asked me to stand-up with my back to her. Now I was in an absolute panic if I say no she might think I am some sort of deviant but if I say yes, I could personally embarrass myself.

I decided on the lesser of two evils and let her rub on the lotion but, whilst her tender touch caressed my back, I mentally went through the various forms of appraising investments, their pros and cons,

including weaknesses of discounted cash flow. I may have fantasised as a 14-year-old of such an encounter but not now as an old married man with three children. Fortunately, the theories of accountancy will cool anyone's ardour and it worked.

As I became accustomed to my 'new situation' and it seemed 'more normal', I plucked up courage to go for a swim. What a delight to swim 'au naturel' in the clear water, observing the fish below tracking your movements on the surface. Everybody was behaving perfectly normally and, by the end of the day, realised there was nothing to fear or feel ashamed.

The next morning there had been a quick heavy rain shower so I relented on using the bike. Going up a slight hill to a cross road with traffic lights, suddenly I lost power to the rear wheel and the engine freely revved up. I pulled in thinking my clutch had gone or the gears had slipped into neutral. Just as I sat aside my machine, I saw a car coming down the hill trying to stop at the red lights and continue slowly to slide all the way down. The driver couldn't do anything. The rain shower had made the surface more slippery than a skating rink. At the junction I frantically began waving to traffic to slow down and luckily there were no accidents and as the road quickly dried the road retained some grip. Now I knew why there were those grooves at the bends in the road. Without them, the

effect would have been the same. A shudder went down my spine. I continued on into old Dubrovnik and was stunned by the beauty of the old fortress town. As there were no signs of commercial enterprise, it felt you were walking through history into the middle ages. The foot stones bore all the wear and markings of centuries of use. There were small boats offering trips to uninhabited islands displaying the most delightful flora and fauna. So, in the afternoon, I took such a trip and it was a sheer delight. What a place this was turning out to be. I must bring Sue and stay longer on the next visit I vowed to myself.

That evening, I went off to a local, traditional restaurant and was beckoned over by a bunch of scientists from Roche attending an international conference. They were staying at the same hotel and had witnessed my curious antics by the pool the previous day. We had a great dinner and a lot of banter exchanged, some of it at my expense.

The last day of my stay I decided to repeat the experience on the sun lounger as I needed to rest for the long journey back. I suppose at this point I had achieved all that I wanted from the trip, felt utterly relaxed and refreshed and ready to return home again. Little did I know more was to come. There is always a 'sting in the tail'.

Leaving early in the morning the return ride along the Adriatic was much less frantic and I was able to take in more of the fantastic scenery, especially as I had the luxury of daylight. By the afternoon, I was inland, heading for Slovenia out of Croatia and for the same frontier post. As I commenced the climb up the winding mountainside road, I was forced to a stop by a line of traffic in front. Thinking it must just be road works and single line traffic, I waited and waited with no opposing traffic in sight. Being on the bike, I decided to gradually overtake the line of cars and lorries, taking care if traffic suddenly came the other way.

At the top, it became evident what was the problem. The border had been closed and there were a dozen or so armed soldiers with rifles idling sitting around the frontier post lazily smoking. I rode up to one wearing a rifle over his shoulder and asked what the problem was. He told me there was a military order to close all of the frontier as there was a national emergency and then asked for my passport. As I was only on two wheels could I continue ? I was British and whatever the emergency, it had nothing to do with me. It bit like Dad's Army I suppose, 'Don't tell him Pike', but it didn't work. "The border is closed", he replied.

What happened next took a second or two but it seemed it was all in slow motion. First the red mist appeared and I was thinking who this guy thinks he is stopping me from going home to my own country. Then, my granddad wouldn't have put up with this, after all you lot started the second war he was involved in. And then, the cold calculation, as he sloped back to his mates, thinking I was going to turn around. I thought if I can get between those two half barriers before he could swing off his rifle and take aim he couldn't shoot as it would be an international incident. So, as I dummed I was turning back and I went for it. I heard some cries to stop but I was too quick for them, I was through. So, weaving through the London traffic has its upside.

Travelling down the other side, the traffic jam was repeated and people were coming out of cars asking what was happening. I reported the border would be closed for at least the night and if they had small children or babies their best plan would be to circle back and find somewhere to stay for at least the night. It took me two hours crawling down the line of cars acting like an International Reuters correspondent.

That night, it dawned on me what a stupid thing I had done taking such a risk but at least whenever at home they replayed the film

'The Great Escape' with Steve McQueen at least I could say I have done that but unlike him actually made it !

So, next time when you are on the ferry and you see those bikers barge to the front of the queue while you are sat in your car, ask yourself who is having really having the adventure ?

Ron Kirk

Saint-Malo

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