

SAMPLE

LOVE, ON A BIKE

Janapar

TOM ALLEN

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The author has tried to recreate events, locales and conversations from memory. In order to maintain their anonymity in some instances, the names of individuals and places have been changed, as have some identifying characteristics and details such as physical properties, occupations and places of residence.

*For saying 'yes' when the chance comes
to divert into unknown waters*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tom Allen left home on a bicycle in 2007 at the age of twenty-three, and has since travelled on four continents by bicycle. He lost count of miles pedalled when his cycle computer was stolen, and is absolutely fine with that. Travel and adventure now occupy a central role in his life. He has no fixed abode, has bases of sorts in the UK and Armenia, and runs a popular adventure cycle-touring website at tomsbiketrip.com.

Janapar, written alongside a documentary film of the same name, is his first published work.

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by Tom Allen



CHAPTER ONE

The Sahara doesn't really look like I'd pictured it. But then nowhere ever quite did.

My bicycle rests against the milestone. A slope of crushed red rock drops from the roadside and slips into the sand. I pull a bottle of water from the rear pocket of one of my bags; take a swig. It's hot enough for a bath.

I replace the bottle. These dusty bags contain everything I need to survive the world's largest desert. A thin sleeping-bag, a handful of tools, a change of clothes. I'll soon run out of water and food. But just because this is the Sahara doesn't mean there's nobody here. There's a road, after all. A brand new road, unadvertised, running down through the Sahara. Sooner or later, roads mean people. And people mean water and food. Right?

The sun has barely set, but I'm cooling down now, my senses recalibrating to a motionless world. When life is scrolling past you, it's difficult to register all the detail and intrigue – especially in a place as otherworldly as this. And there's a stillness and silence here of a kind I've never felt before; beautiful, yet at the same time deeply frightening.

My breathing gradually slows, and as it does, the last remaining sound dies away. I take off my boots, and with bare feet I pad around in the sand. It feels cool and soft between my toes. I look about. Broken mounds of black and crimson rock stand out against the sand, all painted in twilight pastels.

There is nothing here. I shouldn't be here, a young man from rural England, at home with green and pleasant. This is a place to run from, not to explore.

And I don't know how far I'll have to ride before I find supplies. I bought a reassuring amount of food and water and then pedalled south before I could change my mind. A day of riding later and I still have no more idea of what lies ahead. I am banking on little more than a roll of the dice. And my number had better come up, because a bad roll in a place like this could have the worst consequences of all.

I unstrap my belongings from the bike, telling myself that this is probably just another dip. The world has been merciless with my emotions. A free meal can have me beaming with joy, but this joy can be turned to rage by a single thoughtless driver. Too often I feel like I'm hanging onto my mood for dear life as it thrashes and squirms. It was never such a rollercoaster when I had someone next to me.

My tent sits upon the sand, constructed. I don't remember putting it up. I must have done it out of habit, I think, and I rummage for my video camera. This thing has had the questionable privilege of seeing me at my worst and my best. I'm not quite sure where tonight is going to fit into the spectrum, but for almost two years the camera has been my closest confidant, so I find a rock on which to sit. Adjusting the tripod legs, I position myself in front of the lens, the interaction as familiar as picking up the phone and calling a friend.

Flipping open the tiny screen so that I can see myself, I recoil with surprise. Matted greasy hair of about three months' growth is plastered against my scalp. My beard has reached a length at which it adds a decade to my age. The bridge of my nose is burnt deep red, and my skin and clothes are coated in a beige film of dust, sweat and grease. I look worn out by thought and worry. My face, it seems, could tell my story on its own.

I adjust the camera to produce the best possible picture. The well-practised calibrations happen in an instant. I have lost count of the hours of footage I've shot. I usually capture plenty of the scenery behind me, but something suggests that the important thing tonight will be written across my face, so, pressing the red button, I zoom in slightly and my mirror image fills the frame: some guy, talking to a camera in the middle of a desert. I fold the screen back out of sight, fix my gaze on the dark circle of glass, and open my mouth to begin to speak.

‘ ... ’

I try, desperately, to force a word – just one word – to come forth. But it's as if words have lost all meaning. I am entirely unable to speak. Because there is no utterance on Earth that comes close to expressing how I feel.

I shake my head and stare into the distance, looking around at the desert, as if answers will come springing from behind the dunes. I look back. There it is. Right before my eyes. How stupid. How stupid to think that I could pour it all out into this thing, this little black box of cables and microchips. It is nothing but a placeholder for what I *really* want, which is to take her in my arms and to tell her I love her and that I'm a poor stupid fool for having done this; to beg her forgiveness and to lie down on the ground and tell her how scared I am right now.

I try again.

I must continue telling this story.

Well...

This is it. This is where it gets tough.

This is the... um.

This is the... er...

This is the furthest I've ever been from civilisation. In my life. In the Sahara Desert. Of Sudan.

Yeah, I just... I just cycled out of this little port town, and into just these vast, empty wastes. Of nothing. Of nothingness.

There's not... I... I can't hear a thing. It's completely and utterly silent. There's no slight background noise from a road. There's no dogs barking in the distance. There's no birds singing. It's just completely and utterly silent. And that makes me feel even more... even more exposed than I do anyway.

I really don't know... what I'm doing. I've got off this boat, and I've put about twelve litres of water on my bike, stocked up with enough food to last me for about two days – and just left! And now I'm just hoping for the best. I have no previous experience of dealing with vast distances in the desert. I've no experience with cycling in sand. I've no experience of cycling in this kind of weather. Just pure... un-... un-... pure... ugh, my god. I can't even string a sentence together.

I need to get my head round all of this.

Yes. Just pure unbroken sunlight from sunrise to sunset. Not a single cloud – no, nothing. Completely empty sky. Completely empty dead landscape. Just me. On my own.

And I just feel... I just feel confused. Really. Just confused. What am I doing? Where am I going? I don't know what direction I'm going in, because every direction looks the same. There's no traffic to stop and ask. There's a river – the longest river in the world – around here somewhere, though I've no idea where! How ridiculous is that?!

My god, it's just...

And this is just Day One.

Tomorrow morning I'm going to ride my bike. And however I feel, it doesn't matter – I've just got to keep going. That's all. Nothing else. Going, from one little pocket of existence to the next.

And I really – I miss Tenny so much. So much. And right now I'm here, talking to a camera, and she's in Armenia, on her own. Waiting for me to come back.

And I know she's there, and I can't be with her. Because I've decided to

do this instead.

A grey pallor seeps into the sky. Ripples of fabric brush up against each other, nudged by a hint of breeze, but there is little else greeting my groggy awakening. With a practised contortion I unzip the tent door by my head, roll over in the thin sleeping-bag and look out again at the world, all painted in bone and soot, without sound or sensation, as if time itself has ceased to flow. The murmur of pink in the east will soon become a roaring angry whiteness, a heat of such ferocity that it could actually kill me. I drag my bike and trailer back up the slope to where the new road still glistens absurdly, like a liquorice lace flopped across an orange tablecloth. Last night I stood here, more afraid than I had ever been. But the time for self-pity and doubt is over.

So I swing a leg over the top-tube, feel the teeth of the pedal connect with the sole of my boot, lift myself into the saddle, and suddenly the wind is untangling my hair and the sticky tarmac is crackling and the world is scrolling past like a computer game. I have returned to my natural state: pedalling until the action is unconscious, dealing with whatever pops over the horizon, forgetting what falls away behind – until the end of the day, when a moment to digest may present itself. Until then, momentum is all I need to sustain this life – this life of glorious simplicity.

I peer out through my mangled sunglasses. I dropped them long ago – in the Alps, I think it was – and ran over them before I noticed. Still, they do their job. As mile after indistinguishable mile goes past, palpable waves of heat pass through me. The brown tint of the glasses makes the place feel even hotter.

A distant whir invades the trance. I pull over to watch the passing of my first vehicle in Sudan, when it's still just a shape in the north. The shape grows quickly, and then in a spectacular explosion of dust and violence the first of many trucks thunders past me in the greatest sensory assault I've had for twenty-four hours. Of course – it's the day after the weekly ship comes into port from Aswan. Skipping the paperwork has put me a day ahead of the slow train of trucks and buses that begins to rumble past, drivers honking elaborate symphonies in greeting. Then I come across a little lizard perched upon the roadside, and it's as if between the tiny animal and the enormous vehicles I've somehow found my place within this family of desert travellers.

As if to confirm the notion, an encampment comes into view, figures and machines moving slowly through the dust. The tarmac comes to an abrupt end, and I rattle along a tyre track, emerging into a wide circle of shelters and

shipping containers. Stinking tar-stained barrels sit beneath the sun among mounds of sand and gravel, like heaps of dye powder waiting to be mixed on an artist's workbench. Under one of the shelters is a group of men. I instinctively send a wave in their direction. The act of smiling seems to change my mood, and I suddenly want nothing more than to join them in the shade for a nice little glass of tea. Luckily – judging by the way they're waving me over – it seems that they're of a similar mind. I flop down in the shade, feeling immediately at home, and all the trepidation of the previous day evaporates into the heat of the desert noon: I know now that everything in Sudan is going to be OK.

The labourers are not surprised to see a white man on a bicycle. I know nothing about them, the Nubian culture here in the north, or the circumstances of their employment out in the desert. But it's clear that they've been camped here, blasting rock and moving earth, for long enough to have seen my kind before.

'How often do you see a cyclist?' I ask the most forthcoming tea-drinker. He regards me from between a moustache and a furrowed brow, his front teeth missing. I put him at around forty. He's wearing a tidy cotton shirt and trousers with socks and smartly polished shoes. It's an interesting outfit for a road-builder in a stifling desert camp. Roughly once a month, a cyclist – or usually a pair – is seen passing through these parts, he says. That's more than I'm expecting to hear, but I'm not altogether surprised. Because it seems that the renaissance of the long-distance bicycle journey is about to begin.

A few months ago, Scotsman Mark Beaumont had set a new world record for a bicycle-powered circumnavigation of the globe. A few gruelling months of unsupported cycling, linked up with flights between the continents, had secured him a place in the record books and a television career. Several retaliatory attempts on the record were announced, and soon Mark's record had been broken, then broken again, until almost halved in duration. It's funny, because – aside from our mode of transport – I feel little in common with Mark and his peers. My reasons for being here have nothing to do with a circumnavigation, even less to do with breaking a record. I've learnt the hard way that the essential beauty of the bicycle journey lies with the freedom that it gifts the rider: bound by no route, beholden to no timetable. My ride wasn't always so unstructured. But a lot has changed in the last couple of years.

'You see?' asks the chief tea-drinker, walking me out into the sun and pointing up. Squinting, I scan the skyline from our spot deep in the stony hills.

Ridges sit starkly in all directions against the burning sky. Following his outstretched arm I notice the telltale lines and angles of a man-made structure. The size and purpose, from this distance and with my less-than-perfect eyesight, are indistinct. Given its hilltop perch, however, I guess at an old military watchtower.

He lowers his arm and looks me square in the eye.

‘British!’

With a grin whose meaning I can’t fathom, he catches me out with my own ignorance. I smile sheepishly, not knowing what to say. Nobody has taught me about my home nation’s imperial past except for these people, the descendants of its subjects. Given the scale of its influence in the world, though, the British Empire seems quite an omission from my history lessons.

But the look turns to laughter and he claps me on the back: there’s far too much tea-drinking and lying around to do to bother teasing a *khawayya* – a white guy – over a historical triviality. He sits down, and I glance back up at the watchtower. Up on the hilltop I imagine tiny figures: bored, feverish redcoats, wondering what whim had torn them from their families to travel thousands of miles and sit sweating in the sun, looking out over the parched, diabolical landscape of Nubia, days away from even a modestly sized town. And I laugh, because right now I am doing exactly that.

Refreshed and rejuvenated as much by the pleasant company as by the tea and the shade, it’s time to continue. I say my thanks, heave my dusty mountain bike up from the ground, and set a course for the least treacherous-looking path on which to disappear over the horizon – forever out of sight and mind of another collection of souls who briefly became the closest thing I have out here to friends. I didn’t even learn their names.

The camp sinks away beneath a ridge of rock. Ahead of me and in every other direction lies the desert; the same sand-blasted landscape that has existed here for millennia. And my road – my final thread of attachment to the world of man – has vanished. Only a faint set of tyre tracks disappearing into the nothingness indicates that anyone has passed here before.

Well, I came here for a challenge, didn’t I? For something I wouldn’t be sure I could pull off unless I tried. It was the only way I could justify the decisions I’d made. And now I’ve found it.



CHAPTER TWO

I never planned to be cycling alone through Sudan. But now that I am, I have plenty of time – too much, perhaps – to dwell on the complicated tale of adventure and romance that led me here.

In fact, I'd never planned on being anywhere *near* Sudan, alone or otherwise.

'I would rather not bike in Africa at the moment,' I'd replied in a typically hard-headed email to my good friends Mark and Andy. 'There's a lot of screwed-up stuff happening there, and there are places in the world that I'd rather see.'

No – the dream that brought us to my parents' house in Northamptonshire one summer's day, bikes packed and ready to leave on the ride of a lifetime, was not of cycling to Africa.



'Speech! Speech!' someone shouted, and the chatter died down in anticipation. Mark was the first to respond, with his typical understated humour:

'Right – see you all in a bit!'

Everyone laughed.

Mark was standing outside the front door on the patio of my family home, me and Andy next to him, our heads all roughly shaved the previous night by someone who'd had a drink too many before picking up the clippers. In front of us was a garden table, and upon it was the huge rectangular cake which my mother had baked in preparation for the big send-off. The white icing was studded with little paper flags on cocktail sticks, each one wishing us a safe journey. And around the table were friends and acquaintances whose chatter dimmed as they sensed the ceremony about to begin. I looked down at the massive cake. It seemed misplaced, as if delivered to the wrong house that morning, leaving some birthday boy or girl in tears.

The crowd watched solemnly as together we grasped the knife handle and cut firmly into the cake. Then, tentatively, we each raised a slice of cake to our mouths. The crowd cheered.

'Right at Rockingham!' shouted my dad from the back of the hubbub. He

loved to create a scene when there were enough people within earshot to make it worth the effort.

‘Straight on, isn’t it?’ I mumbled half-heartedly through my cake, being just the opposite and hating the fact that I’d been put at the centre of attention.

‘Which way is it at the end of the drive?’ asked Mark.

‘Er... right,’ I replied, not sure whether he was being funny.

‘Right? OK – cheers.’

‘You will send us a postcard, won’t you?’

‘Do you know which way you’re going, Tom?’

‘Do you have a plan?’

‘Is it Gretton?’

‘And then Harringworth?’

‘Amsterdam’s the first stop, isn’t it?’

‘You know it’s not signposted from here?’

I remember it so clearly – pottering down to the corner of the high street with the chattering entourage, the way my bicycle nosed its way along as I nursed it down the road on foot, the surprising weight I found myself heaving upright when the unfamiliar machine began to overbalance. And I remember the eruption of cheering and the waving of banners as I transferred my weight onto the right-hand pedal, gripped the handlebars, and stepped away from the ground and into motion.

Every component gleamed with that special sheen that only something freshly pulled from its packaging can exhibit. I shifted my weight back onto the handmade leather saddle. Simultaneously, the left-hand pedal rose upwards and, as I engaged the pedal clip with a metallic snap and looked up towards the road ahead, the crane operator swept the big camera up in a smooth arc, panning to capture Mark and Andy rolling forward ahead of me. We rode round the bend at the bottom of the hill and out onto the main street of the village, amid cheering and clapping, beginning to gather speed.

It felt so unnaturally cumbersome, the steering so heavy – but then it was, after all, the first time I had ridden a fully loaded bicycle. As we passed beneath a string of white balloons, I suddenly wobbled – before nervously correcting my balance. I grinned, imagining the ribbing we’d receive if we collapsed in convoy on the way past my front door. The small crowd passed behind me; rows of familiar faces brought together by us and our journey. I was moved by how many had turned out to see us off – people coming from all over the country. It had given me a real sense of just how important it was,

this thing that we had decided to do. I looked ahead at the brightly coloured luggage of my two friends with whom I was going to live out the next chapter of my life – a chapter that I knew without doubt was the beginning of a monumental tale.

I stole a glance in the rear-view mirror by my right hand, where the send-off party was drifting out of sight. Looking ahead again, I was struck by how smooth the bicycle's motion was. It was a sensation of unstoppable grace, unlike any bike I'd ridden before. The quality of the machine was tangible, the intricate choice of parts coming together beautifully. Given our very specialised requirements, no off-the-peg touring bike had really fitted the bill. Those bikes were invariably designed for road touring, and I couldn't think of anything more tedious than following paved highways for years on end. Nor could Andy, who was riding just ahead of me; tall, lean and broad-shouldered, trusty old blue-and-silver helmet strapped to his freshly shaved head, cargo trailer close to bursting with sacks of equipment, shiny cardboard label still swinging from his handlebar bag. Together we had spent almost a year working towards this moment.

Andy had been a close friend since our secondary school days. We'd grown up on a healthy diet of English, maths, science and football at a small-town comprehensive in the East Midlands; a diet inevitably supplemented in later years with girls, loud music, experimental hairstyles and underage drinking.

But Andy and I differed from our peers in one fundamental way. We lived in tiny villages and travelled each day to the big town school by bus. In the afternoons I returned home to the ancient little cottage where my family lived in peace and quiet, and this, for me, was home. Mum and Dad taught at local primary schools, we went on our annual holiday to warm and sunny places, and life moved slowly, one year indistinguishable from the next. Kettering was little more than the place where I happened to be dumped for a few hours each day, its politics and dramas as strange and foreign as the upbringings of the town kids around me. I'd travelled ten thousand miles on that school bus before my eighteenth birthday, ears plugged with headphones, peering out through the grubby glass at the unchanging farmland of rural Northamptonshire.

During the holidays, Kettering vanished from existence and the land surrounding the villages of the Welland Valley became mine to explore. It was little more than some unremarkable fields, rivers, woods and railway cuttings. But there was always the hope of discovering something that

everyone else had overlooked. These escapades would always be carried out with my younger brother, because our parents had sent us to a different secondary school from the other village kids, and my early childhood friends all vanished when we went our separate ways. As I grew older, Andy's village became an achievable destination for a bike ride, and in that way we became each other's local riding partners.

Then university swallowed everything. Life in Exeter brought brand new friends, unmentionable kinds of fun, socialising and studying in a self-contained bubble. I found people who shared my taste in music, and presented a campus radio show to which they would sometimes even listen. This bubble lasted for three years before silently bursting, leaving me equipped with a large box of records and the theories of Computer Science but absolutely no idea what to do with them. And there was the growing feeling that I'd chosen the degree out of the necessity of choosing one, rather than out of any real passion for the subject.

One autumn day I was interviewed for an appropriate-sounding job as a software engineer in Barnstaple. I sailed through the interview and took a handful of tests to prove my skills in the fields of programming and database design. But when I was offered the job on the spot, I realised with a shock that this could actually be my future. Did my destiny really lie in an office in a small Devonshire town? It was a recipe for a stable, comfortable existence – of that, there was no doubt – and there was much to like about Devon, with her coastlines and moors and custard and her ever-so-quaint traditions. But at the age of twenty-two, what was the value of a stable, comfortable existence? Where was the risk? The excitement? The adventure?

I told my potential employer that I'd think about it, drove home in my mum's Vauxhall Astra, gave my Dad back his tie, and tapped out a short email to the company.

'I'm writing to let you know that I will not be able to accept your position at this time,' I wrote. 'I have decided to spend some time exploring my options before I commit to a career.'

The young and enthusiastic director with whom I'd spent the morning talking wrote back within minutes.

'Sorry to hear that, Tom. You were first on my list. But probably good to get it out of your system. Good luck!'

So I was going to explore my options, duty-bound to 'get it out of my system'. I just wasn't sure what these options were, or how I was supposed to find them. And I soon found myself back in the musty old bedroom of my

adolescence, ten thousand pounds into the red, with my graduation-day portrait hanging in the downstairs loo and a depressing-looking question mark above the last three years of my life.

If anyone else had suggested it, I'd have thought twice. But when a text message arrived from Andy a few months later, the last piece of the jigsaw fell into place.

‘Mate. I have decided to cycle round the world.’

I read Andy's message from my spot beneath a tree. In my lap was the copy of *The Adventure Cycle-Touring Handbook* that I'd just put down – a book which explained, in detail, the practicalities of cycling round the world.

I'd bought the book whilst browsing in a store that morning, not knowing it would become one of those twists of poetry that sometimes emerge from everyday life. As I sat under the tree, the future came into focus. Job applications had long been shelved. Shunning the temp-job circuit in favour of eking out a living as a freelance programmer in my bedroom, I had no ties that couldn't easily be cut. I'd been stashing every penny I could in a savings account, and with nothing else to lose, the idea could not have made more sense. Yes! My best mate and I were going to cycle round the world!

The idea thrilled the heck out of me. *Cycling round the world!* It was such a delightful little combination of words. It undermined the status quo so wonderfully. A bicycle was for short journeys, and for eccentrics, fitness freaks and the financially challenged. What better way to blow people's expectations out of the water and cement my maverick reputation?

Since graduation, my university friends had developed a habit of donning backpacks full of expensive apparel and credit cards and Lonely Planet guidebooks and setting forth into the unknown. They'd go for months at a time, wandering the Planet's well-worn paths in – I scoffed – a Lonely kind of way. But they inevitably came back with curiously similar photos, stories, bank balances and signs of premature ageing brought on by heavy drinking and sunburn. Then they would leap back into the rat race as if the mind-expanding experiences they'd yarned about in the pub had turned out to be nothing but a long holiday, a temporary escape from reality and responsibility; an obligatory part of being Western and middle class and in one's early twenties and having money to spend and an easy passport to travel on. And all too often their stories seemed to involve starting out poor and itinerant and hard done by, becoming enlightened as to the folly of

Western materialism, and then putting those new Eastern philosophies into practice by getting a high-powered career in a multinational corporation.

I could certainly see the appeal of full-moon parties on South-East Asian beaches, of performing improbable yogic stretches at sunrise in Goa with the aroma of fish curry still lingering in my dreadlocks, of pretending that sleeping in a hostel was poverty redefined. But I was always held back by a feeling that there must be more to it than those recycled clichés; than bus journeys, bedbugs, touts, temples and the company of other rich young white people on unique journeys of self-discovery. And so I never bought a seventy-litre backpack or a pair of ultra-light zip-off trekking trousers, and I never danced the night away in Thailand or pulled a muscle one morning in India.

No. I wanted adventure and authenticity, bewilderment instead of beauty, challenge rather than charm. I wanted my preconceptions dashed against the rocks of reality. I wanted to discover how little I knew.

With a similarly deep distaste for conformity, Andy had also avoided the backpackers' trail. The difference was that he'd found an alternative, rather than sitting on his backside like me. While I was moping about in my East Midlands village and my mates were elephant-trekking in Thailand, he'd been working as a mountain-bike guide on the small Croatian island of Korcula. Through his experience and passion for riding, Andy had taught me everything I knew about bicycles. There was no way I would be able to get my act together without him. I thought his idea a stroke of genius, taking mountain biking to its natural conclusion.

The ball was soon rolling. Both being far more interested in off-road than on-road cycling, we quickly hit upon the idea to attempt the round-the-world journey on dirt roads alone. It would be done for the thrill of adventure, of course, rather than to break records, though in all likelihood it would be the first journey to be carried out in such a way. What could be more worthwhile than doing what we loved, mountain biking across a vast range of landscapes for the next few years? And we would learn so much about life outdoors. Given the terrain we were likely to cover and the laughably small budget on which we would need to do so, bushcraft skills would be needed simply for day-to-day survival. I mail-ordered a set of brass rabbit snares and a pocket-sized copy of the *SAS Survival Guide* in preparation.

A route plan was soon under way, and I dropped an email to my old university mountain-biking buddy and housemate Mark, who had recently lost

his job at the owl sanctuary in Dorset and was labouring away unhappily as a mortgage analyst for a building society.

‘I was going to email you to see if you were interested in the first bit of next year’s bike trip,’ I wrote. Though it would still be more than six months until we departed, I was excited and I wanted to share it. I’d been scouring maps and books detailing long-distance walking routes, pilgrimage trails and cycling paths across Western Europe, and my efforts had strung together a fascinating-looking tour of France and Spain, heading as far south as Gibraltar before looping back up via the Alps to Geneva, where some friends had offered to put us up. Between bouts of heroic biking, the plan featured a healthy menu of medieval and religious history, cutting-edge continental culture, gastronomic wonders, and spared time for the beautiful women we would meet along the way. About two and a half thousand miles in length, it had been designed to gobble up maximum distance and variety before we left Western Europe, and I guessed that it would take us two or three action-packed months to complete it. From Geneva, Andy and I would head east towards Turkey, offering Mark an easy route back to England via Belgium. Having a girlfriend to think about, Mark only wanted to spend a couple of months with us, rather than choosing freedom, ditching the relationship and becoming a fully signed-up member of our team.

Mark had been a good friend throughout our days as a student; a bookworm, sceptic, passionate eco-warrior and Bob Dylan enthusiast, tall and skinny, with a floppy blond mop and a thoughtful-looking goatee. The fact that, like me, he was not particularly athletic was comforting, although I noted that he had become a dab hand on a unicycle. Studying for a degree in English meant that he’d spent a lot of time reading, usually without getting out of bed. And, when he wasn’t devouring literature, the house that Mark and I had shared with five other students had become the venue for debates of great philosophical significance, as well as Mark’s occasional fire-juggling performances. After graduation, he’d spent a week with me and Andy on a spur-of-the-moment bike trip through the Scottish Highlands. The two had hit it off and a great deal of hilarity had ensued. Despite the trip itself being ridiculously ill-planned and thus the coldest, wettest and most miserable week of our lives, we returned home with the strange conviction that it had been the most fun we’d ever had. The trip had sown the early seeds, and so Mark was the obvious third rider. Our combined intellects would surely be able to find novel answers to many of life’s great questions as we undertook our unprecedented mountain-biking odyssey.

I liked Mark because he would never back down from a debate. He held strong opinions and extolled them with passion, particularly when they involved science, religion, or – heaven forbid – both. He was quick to point out flaws in others' arguments, and I considered him the kind of ultra-rationalist who'd be able to defuse disagreements between me and Andy, helping us to work logically through the challenges we'd face. As well as this, Mark managed to be laid-back to an almost fatalistic degree, and his relaxed and candid demeanour would help me avoid taking myself too seriously. The trip, after all, was supposed to be enjoyable. Mark's company would make it all the more so.

'Ever thought about just heading south from Spain to cycle down through Africa?' he wrote in response to my email.

I didn't want to go to Africa. It was too dangerous. There were far too many problems in Africa – it was all I ever seemed to hear about in the news. A terrible place for a bike ride. In any case, Mark was treading on my toes: I'd spent ages coming up with these route plans, investing weeks of my time in the creation of intricate off-road routes. Mark wasn't even coming with us all the way – he was just going to tag along for a few pleasant weeks in Western Europe, at my invitation!

Eventually I suggested that we cycle to Gibraltar and hop on the ferry to Africa for a day or two before continuing on our way, and returned to my route-planning for Eastern Europe and Turkey. It'd be easier to find off-road routes from that point on, because paved roads would obviously become rare once the developed world was behind us. Mark's enjoyable and provocative company would be welcome during those first months in Europe; the months that would be the testing ground for our equipment, and where we'd toughen up for the hard riding ahead. We would depart as a group of three, and setting off from my front door seemed the natural way to begin.

There were no more emails to send. No more questions to answer. The stack of to-do lists remained to-be-done. And it no longer mattered, because we were finally on our way. Norwegians, I'd heard, called this moment 'the doorstep mile' – the first step of a long journey, and the most difficult to make.

Resting on a roadside verge a few miles east of my village, I tried to suppress what I supposed was the ache of separation, pretending to Mark and Andy that everything was fine. They were in high spirits on what was turning into a pleasant English summer's day, adrift with the fragrance of flowering

broad bean and rapeseed. I didn't want to disturb this by complaining about homesickness while still a stone's throw from my own bed, so I kept my thoughts to myself. Mark and I sat in the sun while Andy rooted through his bags to find the tools to adjust his saddle position. Then we stopped again so that I could tweak the angle of my pedal clips, and again for Mark to dig out his sun cream. But the pace was unhurried, and we chatted together about this and that – the music at the party, the sensation of wind on our freshly shorn bonces, the crawling slowness of climbing hills with all this weight on our bikes. We trundled through limestone villages of receding familiarity, and in the mid-afternoon I checked our progress on the newly installed odometer.

‘You’ve got to be kidding.’

‘What?’

‘What’s the mileage, Tom?’

‘Well, according to this, we’ve done *seven and a half miles*.’

‘Jesus...’

‘Is that all?’

‘Maybe there’s something wrong with the connections...’

‘My thighs are already killing me.’

‘Perhaps we should have done some kind of training?’

Then Ben and James, the filmmakers, turned up in their car, talking enthusiastically about setting up a big cinematic shot with Harringworth viaduct in the background. I put on a fake smile and did a lot of nodding.

Our route out of England had been designed as a quick getaway. The nearest port being Harwich, on the East Coast in Essex, I’d photocopied the relevant maps and planned a fairly direct three-day route on cycleways, bridleways and public footpaths to the port. Resuming our ride, it wasn’t long before we reached the first unpaved section of the route, which had been marked as a footpath on the map. This represented the beginning of the off-road ambitions we’d spent so long fostering. Off the road we finally turned, and along the edge of a freshly ploughed field. By the time we’d arrived at the far end of the field, our tyres were caked in mud, and we’d had a rough time trying to haul our heavily loaded bikes along the rutted trail. Why was dashing down these tracks so much more difficult than on a normal mountain bike?

Reaching the stile that led to the following field, we realised that to cross it would involve taking all the luggage off the bikes, detaching the three trailers, and repeating the process in reverse in the next field. And the same would need to be done for every gate, fence and stile thereafter. For the entire

circumference of the planet.

This hadn't seemed a particularly big deal while I'd been studying maps and guidebooks in my bedroom, but it was clear that doing so would demand an enormous amount of time and energy. It would take us *weeks* to even leave *England*, let alone reach the south of Spain.

'I'll go and have a look at the next field,' volunteered Mark, 'and report back. And then we can decide what's best.'

As he climbed the stile and disappeared through the undergrowth, I looked down at what had begun life as a mountain bike. It was now a cumbersome machine with an extra wheel, fat tyres and beefy suspension forks, piled high with all the equipment I thought I'd need for an off-road expedition round the world. It was about as nimble as an elephant. It weighed almost as much as *me*.

'It's even worse over there,' said Mark, coming back into view.

'Right, let me have a look,' I replied, striding over. Andy remained quiet. I climbed the stile and pushed through the mass of thorns and saplings blocking what was supposed to be a public right of way, and emerged into the daylight to find that the next field was precisely that. A field. There was absolutely nothing about it that screamed: 'Ride across me!' It was just a boring, empty field. To drag our bikes and kit through it would be completely pointless.

We hung around dejectedly for a couple of minutes before picking up our bikes, yanking them round, and starting the long push back towards the road, in silence. And we set off once more down the tarmac lane. We would reach Harwich much more quickly by road, anyway. And once we left the familiar confines of England, we'd press ahead with our carefully laid plans. After all, it would be within those unknown lands that things would start getting interesting.

Searching the countryside for a place to hide three tents and three very conspicuous bicycles, we finally found the perfect spot: Deenethorpe Village Green. As well as being surrounded on all sides by the mansions and meticulously tended gardens of the local gentry, we were also clearly visible to anyone passing through the tiny village. Despite Andy's complaints, Mark and I decided that the green was absolutely ideal. A fantastic find – I'd been looking forward to wild camping for so long.

'We'd be looking for two tents,' I'd said. 'We basically need to be independent, because we're thinking we might ride separately for some of the

time. And obviously we'd each like a bit of privacy from time to time!'

With a few months to go before departure, Andy and I had found ourselves selling our grand idea to an outdoor equipment retailer. We'd got as far as their meeting room by cold calling every outdoor equipment manufacturer and retailer in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. After weeks of rejections or non-responses, I'd become frustrated by how little interest these companies seemed to take in our project. I couldn't understand why any marketing manager would pass up on the publicity our journey would generate for the sake of a few quid's worth of gear.

Then one day, Andy – who had been emailing sponsorship proposals to companies for weeks – received a reply from an outfit who asked us over for a chat. We designed a logo, ironed it onto a couple of cheap T-shirts, printed out some important-looking lists and rolled up to their office in Coventry.

'Well, lads, I have to be honest,' said Jeremy Burgess, leaning back in his chair with a squeak of leather, 'when I first heard about this from Martin, I thought you guys must be complete idiots.'

The two of us smiled nervously.

'But I think you've convinced me that you might actually do this.'

Finally somebody was listening to us – the managing director of an on-line outdoor gear retailer, no less! A simple contract was drawn up: we'd wear their T-shirts, put their logo on our website, sticker the heck out of our bikes, and plug their brand whenever we could. We'd also send them a monthly report by email, which they would send out to their subscribers to demonstrate how generous they were with support for noble expeditions like ours. And, in return, we'd be given essential items of equipment – tents, camping mats, sleeping-bags and various small accessories – free of charge, which of course was what we wanted to get out of the whole thing.

At this point we still didn't have any actual bicycles to ride. But we'd finally got our sponsorship drive out of the starting blocks, and we felt sure that other companies would follow in this supplier's footsteps. We set a departure date for the early summer, put a bundle of leaving party invitations in the post, and I set to work on publicity for the project, which by now we'd branded Ride Earth after a brainstorming session by Andy. Playing to the circumnavigation, the cycling and the off-road nature of the journey in one catchy slogan, Ride Earth rolled off the tongue far better than Pedalling To Purgatory, Circum Gravitation, and A Wheelie Long Way, which had been some of his other ideas.

Physically extracting the equipment from Jeremy and his merry band of outfitters proved easier said than done. With only a few weeks to go until the big day, I was parking the Astra outside Andy's house, having just returned from Coventry where I'd had an unexpectedly brief encounter with the company's marketing manager, Dominic. But I had managed to retrieve what I'd gone for, and, dumping a big cardboard box on the lawn in Andy's back garden, I ripped it open and began inspecting our haul.

'Did you see anyone apart from Dominic?' asked Andy, pulling a bundle of tent material from its carry sack and sniffing it curiously.

'No,' I said. 'I didn't actually go into the office at all. No Jeremy, no nothing.'

'You'd think they'd be a bit more enthusiastic.'

'I dunno. I don't understand either.'

'Bloody hell!' exclaimed Andy, wrestling with the elasticated tent-poles as they unravelled. They seemed to have taken on a life of their own and were now in danger of causing serious facial injuries to his dad, who had come to watch from the safety of the kitchen doorstep.

'That's absolutely ridiculous!' I laughed, ducking out of the way of the whirling mess of poles. 'I've never seen anything like it! Is it fibreglass? Or some kind of bizarre metal?'

'Metal, I think. Aluminium or something, with a bit more spring in it. Bit of extra elastic!'

'Now, that's good, isn't it?' remarked Andy's dad as the poles clicked together and began to behave. He was a mechanical engineer and loved all things functional and cleverly designed. The family's little garage had not contained a car in several decades; instead it was filled to the brim with arcane machinery and projects in stages of semi-completion, stinking of rust and oil, every surface littered with drill bits and bolts and jars of important-looking coloured fluid.

'My god – I feel rough,' I muttered, coughing. I'd caught a cold and was trying my best to ignore it and continue ploughing through our ever-growing stack of to-do lists.

'Yeah, I noticed that on your Facebook,' said Andy. 'Oh yeah – I started a group for Market Harborough Swimming Club...'

'Yeah, I saw that.'

'... and loads of people I used to know started joining it!'

Andy had always been a natural athlete. I had not, and this was slightly concerning. I worried that as a dismally below-average sportsman I'd be

unable to keep up; that I'd drag the ride down by being slow and unfit. But these were small hurdles. We'd find a way round them, just as we'd find a way round anything else that got in our way. Once we set off, we'd have no choice.

Returning to the task at hand, we inspected the semi-constructed tent, smooth and humpbacked like a fat green slug. It was my first encounter with this stratum of outdoor equipment, the type that gets displayed prominently in shops like Millets' and Blacks' with price tags that make you feel guilty for even *looking* at them.

'You have to bend these quite a lot, don't you?' said Andy, having consulted the instructions, now clipping the tent's body onto the naked pole structure. 'I mean, it's quite spring-loaded. But it is very straightforward. Hopefully.'

'Andrew, did you want this ice cream and peaches?' called his dad from the doorway.

'Yeah, in a minute,' he replied, not looking up. He draped the waterproof flysheet across the tent and it finally began to resemble the illustration on the front of the booklet. He groped through the fabric for the pole structure and lifted the entire thing off the ground with one hand. It seemed to float weightlessly into the air like a pointy green windsock: my home for the next few years.

'That's pretty damn light!' he said, putting it back on the grass and stooping to unzip the door. He crawled in on all fours, lay face down with his socks sticking out of the doorway, folded his arms by his sides, and ceased to move altogether.

'That feels good!'

'Nice.' A sudden image came into my head of this exact scene played out at forty degrees below zero, deep in the Siberian tundra.

'Did you want these peaches and ice cream, then?' came his dad's voice.

'Yes, for god's sake!' snapped Andy, irritated at having his crowning moment disturbed by a parent.

'Do you want it in the tent?'

'No...' replied Andy, wearily, extracting himself.

'Aerodynamic!' remarked his dad, stepping out onto the lawn. 'If the wind's blowing, which way d'you pitch the tent?'

'Erm... well, that way, don't you?' replied Andy, drawing a line in the air from the rear of the tent to the open door.

'Well, yes, I would say so. I mean... basically, that's how it's designed,'

continued his dad, going into demonstration mode and pacing about on the grass, gesticulating at the construction, ‘because you’ll be camping in hurricanes sometimes, and obviously – if the wind’s blowing *this* way – it’ll make it calm *here*, won’t it?’

Andy seemed embarrassed at his dad’s sudden display of interest. He pulled another plastic wrapper from the box and shook out the contents. ‘I guess this is the floor protector,’ he said to me. ‘Does it go underneath the tent or inside it, d’you think?’

‘I’d guess it went underneath,’ I replied. ‘But then I’m only a novice at this kind of thing.’

‘Well, I’m only a novice as well. I don’t know any more than you.’

‘I love how it comes in its own special “sac”.’ I pointed at the little bag on the ground.

‘Everything comes in a “sac”, doesn’t it, when it’s to do with the outdoors?’

‘Yeah.’

‘It’s never a bag, either. It’s always a “sac”.’

‘Yeah.’

‘A “sac” with a drawstring.’

Andy unrolled the groundsheet on the lawn in his parents’ back garden. ‘This’ll be nice for picnics. In the Himalayas.’

Of the many reasons why I was happy with the idea of working with Andy on this epic mission, foremost was his off-the-wall sense of humour – the ideal temper to my hard-headedness and ruthless sense of justice. If anyone could keep spirits up when the going got tough, it would be him, and for that I was thankful.

He’d always been a creative mind – a maligned genius, holed up in his bedroom until the early hours, producing artwork and musical compositions of marvellous complexity that nobody could understand. On one occasion, answering an unexpected knock on the door late in the evening, I’d been confronted by Andy, who’d run several miles across the fields in the dark, taking shortcuts through people’s gardens and hiding in their hedgerows to avoid being seen, for no other reason than his own amusement. He had just popped by for a cup of tea and to ask if I wouldn’t mind giving him a lift back home.

Andy cared little what anyone else made of his behaviour. He had once turned up for a big night out in his mother’s horse-riding jacket, insisting that

it was perfectly appropriate attire, yet to this day I'm not sure whether he was being ironic. For Andy, the world was a place in which to experiment and to defy convention, and he was just the sort of lateral thinker you'd want along on a journey round the planet.

As Ride Earth grew in scope and ambition, respectable brands from the cycling and outdoor industries became attached to the project, and we found ourselves attending a series of newspaper, radio and television interviews. Sponsors expected to have their brands promoted in return for the freebies, so we were obliged to seek the kind of attention that would keep them happy. Our crowning achievement was a short feature at the end of the regional news on BBC One, in the slot that would normally be filled by some feel-good tale of local eccentrics and their quaint little projects.

The significance of what we were about to do was confirmed when we were invited to a meeting with one of the owners of Kona Bikes, a long-established manufacturer of bikes for true cycling enthusiasts. The meeting would be in Switzerland, naturally, in a posh chalet overlooking Lake Geneva with a cracking view of Mont Blanc. Andy and I flew out one morning, touched down to find Central Europe bathed in an unseasonal warm spell of weather, and spent an enjoyable day chatting on a sunny balcony over wine and pizza, impressing our prospective sponsors with the detail and subtlety of our research. Finally, we were offered whatever we liked from the company's product catalogue, driven back to the airport, and arrived back home in Northamptonshire in time for tea. Even though Kona didn't actually make off-road expedition bikes, we'd chosen two bicycle frames upon which to build our own, together worth *several hundred pounds*!

The meeting's organiser had asked if Mark was coming too, but – without bothering to mention this to Mark himself – I'd told Kona that he wasn't part of our core mission, so there wasn't really any point. I didn't want someone piggybacking on all of my hard work if they were only coming along for the easy bit of the ride.

Following Kona's involvement, interest in Ride Earth snowballed. Although we thought we knew exactly what we were doing, we decided to attend an expedition-planning weekend within the ornamental halls of the Royal Geographical Society in London. There we sat as part of a small audience in a workshop dedicated to the planning and logistics of long-distance bicycle journeys. A woman and two men sat in a row at the front, looking laid-back and unimposing. They almost looked *normal*. This was not the kind of impression I'd expected from three celebrated expedition cyclists

who, having collectively pedalled several times round the planet, were clearly anything but normal. One of the guys had recently wrapped up a five-year epic of more than fifty thousand miles, yet now seemed more interested in doodling on his notepad than impressing the budding adventurers who positioned themselves expectantly before him.

And I wondered just what these three individuals had been through on their adventures, and how their experiences seemed to have humbled them, rather than helping them to grow confident and outgoing. My own return to England, of course, would be far more heroic.

Dumping our bikes on the grass in Deenethorpe, we nervously unpacked our tents and tried to remember how to pitch them. We'd chosen this particular model of tent for its natural shade of green that would blend into the foliage, and I had been looking forward to putting them to the test. I hadn't expected the reality of it to be so fraught with worry. Looking up from the instruction manual with a mouthful of left-over party cake, I saw with horror that a passing middle-aged couple had noticed us.

They slowed their Sunday evening walk; muttered something to each other. Then the wife quickened her pace while the husband crossed the road and marched onto the green with a look of intent.

I gulped down my cake and hissed a warning at the others.

Shit.

We'd been busted on our first attempt, and were about to be booted out into the night!

The idea of wild camping had been a fantasy for years, but I'd never had the balls to actually *do* it, at least not outside a few TA training weekends as a student. This was not for want of trying. On one memorable occasion, Andy and I had set off across the fields near my home with a backpack containing a knife, some firewood and a six-pound salmon, intent on finding a spinney somewhere, lighting a fire, roasting the smelly fish and sleeping in the shelter that we would build with our bare hands. Having failed to find any trees in the dark and become entirely lost and covered in mud, we'd trudged all the way back to the village before cooking the salmon in the oven at two in the morning and going to sleep in Andy's dad's trailer-tent.

Well! This time, things would be different. Wild camping, after all, would be the ultimate expression of freedom. It would be the exercising of our natural-born right to sleep on land which had once been owned by nobody. We would spend weeks – months – at a time under canvas, living a monk-like

existence, sitting round campfires, quoting philosophy, learning constellations, and putting the world to rights as we gradually pedalled round it. Oh yes.

‘Just here for the night, are you?’

‘Uh. Yes. Hopefully. Or something. We’re – uh.’

Ridiculous!

‘We’re cycling round the world.’

‘Right...’

A pause.

‘So when did you start?’

‘Erm... this morning...’

‘Well, I guess you’d better come in!’

It was with more guilt than pleasure that I found myself sitting in the newly renovated kitchen of Mr Look-Of-Intent and his wife. As it turned out, the lady who had hurried away from the malevolent-looking bicycle-gypsies was none other than my primary-school teacher Mrs Chamberlain, who I hadn’t seen since I was eleven. She slid another helping of strawberry pavlova under my nose, while a nearby platter of assorted cheeses eyed me in a seductive fashion. Despite being wracked with guilt at yet another wild camping failure, I couldn’t quite believe our good fortune.

We *did* manage to salvage some kind of credibility as adventurers by politely refusing an offer of sleeping on the conservatory floor, Deenethorpe Village Green being far more appropriate for our first night in the wild.

‘Cycle on the right, cycle on the right, cycle on the right... or die!!!’ hollered Mark as we rolled off the ferry and onto the European mainland. There was no turning back now: we had escaped the British Isles and set foot and rubber on the soil of the Netherlands, five days after my parents’ driveway fell out of sight in my rear-view mirror. It was staggering how little time it had taken to cycle to another country – just five days! How small England suddenly seemed – how silly that I’d never thought to cycle more than a dozen or so miles away from my home until now. It seemed so ridiculously easy to hop on a bike and ride it into the great unknown, and I tried to remember why it had taken me an entire year to work out how to do it.

I knew why, of course: the *real* mission ahead was a true epic, rivalling some of the greatest journeys undertaken by man. The surface of the earth now lay unbroken in front of us, from the Hook of Holland to the tip of Singapore eight time zones to the east. At my best guess, we’d be riding for more than a

year before reaching that impossibly distant point, tackling extreme conditions and passing through wildly foreign lands. This winter we'd be battling searing heat in the deserts of the Middle East; as spring broke next year we'd be crawling through the mountains of Central Asia, or perhaps India; meandering through China and South-East Asia as the following year drew on; and we hoped to reach Australia by the end of the second year. Some time later would come the Americas. There was no way such a mission could be accomplished without careful preparation. And my heart leapt at the image of such a line snaking its way across the surface of a globe. What a thing to do!



CHAPTER THREE

Yes – that was the plan, wasn't it? A line, so simple and straightforward. It is impossible to recall how it could have seemed so clear. The miles between then and now have clouded the road to a point where I'm riding into a never-ending dust storm.

The end of each day looks the same as its start, the rubble of the Nubian desert extending endlessly in all directions. Only occasionally do I catch sight of palm branches to the west, rows of green asterisks on the horizon line, reassuring me that the set of tyre trails I've chosen to follow is the right one, or that at least it's heading in the same direction as the Nile. It's not much on which to base my progress. But it's all I've got.

My tyres roll through bulldozed rubble. They sink into patches of sand. They bounce over the furrows that emerge from the passage of trucks, hammering at the corrugated dirt. Gusts of hot air carry grit and dust through the channels of this rugged landscape, sometimes from the side, sometimes behind, but mostly from ahead of me – from the south. Only the wind has the power to make a mockery of my best energies. The going has never been harder than this. Yet, in a way, riding is still easy. Any act of endurance is nothing but one small action, repeated. Press down once upon a pedal and I move forward a few feet. Do it again and I've travelled a little further. Another million repetitions later and I'll have cycled to Cape Town and the end of the African continent. On a physical level, it really is as simple as that – given enough motivation, which is where things have become more complicated.

Right now, I cannot say what I'm trying to achieve by taking this on. I've been telling myself that searching is not going to produce any answers. I don't need to focus on a goal, navigate with precision, or reach some destination. I need to do exactly the opposite. I need to let go of myself, and get completely and utterly lost. Only by doing so can I hope to find my way. This is easier said than done, given my particular menu of personality defects. I find myself prone to wild flights of introspection, harangued by warring voices in each ear: one telling me how great everyone's going to think I am for cycling across the Sahara desert; the other reminding me that I'm a self-absorbed bastard for doing what I did in order to be here. I need a way to switch these voices off. And so I've developed a technique. It's very simple.

Devote one hundred percent concentration to the simple act of preparing

breakfast. By doing so, everything else ceases to exist. Extract, with undivided attention, a bag of bread from the right-hand pannier. Break off the black mould around the edges. Squash a banana into a floury wrap. Devour. Taste the moist, sweet banana; feel the brittle graininess of the bread. Squint briefly at the horizon. Mount bike in a manoeuvre of acrobatic grace. Press down once upon a pedal and move forward a few feet.

I'm hiding behind my bicycle for a couple of hours, because there's nowhere else that I can get any shade in the middle of the day. I don't know how long it's going to go on for. Luckily there's the occasional truck going by now, so if I do run out of water I should be able to get hold of some more.

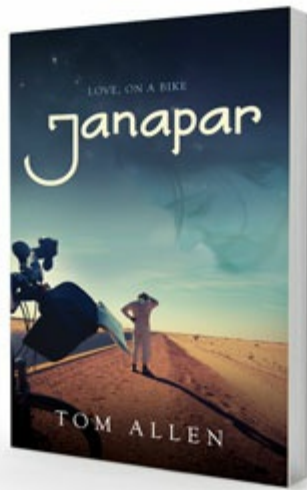
And I was also just thinking about what we mean when we say that we want to go somewhere hot and sunny. And I was thinking that what we actually mean is that we want to go somewhere hot and sunny, and that we can escape from... erm...

I'll try that again.

When we say we want to go somewhere hot and sunny – on holiday, for example – what we mean is that we want to go somewhere where we can escape from it being hot and sunny whenever we want. (Oh – a ladybird. Hello.) So, yeah. It's like people who say that they like cold weather. It's not really that, it's the fact that they can enjoy it whilst being protected against it.

And I guess it's the same for any kind of extreme, isn't it? I mean, really – it does get boring, being out in the sun. It does get very unpleasant, if there's no way of getting away from it, as I'm now finding out in the middle of the Sudanese desert at midday.

There's no air-conditioning. There's no water-cooler. There's no shady little hut, or anything like that. No, it's just burning desert, and nothing else! Not a pleasant place to come on holiday – that, I can promise you.



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