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Professor Emeritus of the UGR: RENE CORMIER

by Paul H. Smith

Traveling near the Hindu Kush mountains with Guillaume. Despite, or perhaps because of the difficult paperwork and bureaucracy needed to get into Tajikistan's Wakhan Corridor, these few weeks were among my most memorable riding of the entire trip.



“People who choose to do big trips crave them. We want to see things differently, away from our normal lives, and to challenge what we’re accustomed to.”

For those who do not know, Rene Cormier is the author of *The University of Gravel Roads: Global Lessons from a Four-Year Motorcycle Adventure*. It is the fascinating story of how he became a motorcycle vagabond, roamed the world on a budget of \$25 per day, and somehow made it work. Since the book’s release in 2011, Rene has been one of the more active speakers on the circuit, proclaiming the merits and rewards of adventure travel by motorcycle. “There was an unintentional benefit to selling everything off before I left. Because I had nothing to return to, there was nothing to be homesick about.” Reading *UGR* or attending his talks provides enlightenment and inspiration, especially for would-be travelers. “When you’re growing up, and don’t move around globally, you get hammered by a narrow band of incoming information that *forms* your world view. But, when you travel, it’s the other way around—your world view is always being *shaped* by where you are, and where you are is always changing.”

Rene was chosen to be an advisor to the *Ted Simon*

Foundation, which exists to encourage and assist travelers in developing their observations and insights into something of value to share with the rest of the world. It helps to ensure those who’ve traveled and want to share their experiences have a way to convey them, whether through photography, writing, film or other creative endeavors.

Rene’s take on this is unusual, “I don’t believe that everyone who does a big or small trip needs to communicate about it. Traveling for me was intensely personal, and still is. There was a time when I thought that when I stopped traveling, I’d remove all the stickers and the big gas tank and convert my bike back into a normal-looking motorcycle—never to tell anyone about where I’d been or what I’d experienced. It was going to be my delicious little secret that maybe I’d tell my grandchildren about on my deathbed. But, as I came into the second year of the trip, I began to realize that a lot of the successes I was having were due to other people. That it was important to make sure others had similar experiences. So I stayed in the ring.”

Below, left to right Local traffic jam with sheep herders and Guillaume in Kyrgyzstan. In Tajikistan's capital I met Guillaume, a Frenchman on an *Africa Twin* going more or less the same way I was. His riding partner had broken his leg coming out of the Anzob Tunnel of Death and was on his way back to France. Traveling alone was never in the plans for Guillaume so I invited him to join my trip.

Two young Buddhist monks take a break from their studies to explore the unusual kit from a traveling motorcyclist. (Mongolia)

Three ladies from the Lake Turkana tribe say hello. This is the lesser used route from Kenya to Ethiopia than the Moyale Road, and very scenic.

It took four hours and countless cups of tea, but my \$10 got me the best looking bike in Karachi. (Karachi, Pakistan)

Rene's story is one that shows how adaptable and resourceful we can be, and illustrates just how much more rewarding a journey is when we venture off without the benefit of deep pockets. "Where things do get difficult, they pass, they *all* pass. I became okay with the process of not knowing how to do things. And learned to ask questions, pick a target, a direction and just go. Even when writing the book, I didn't know a lot about what it would be, but I did know it had to start. You end up realizing that most things work out. You don't know how, but they just work their way out. And it wasn't until well into my journey where those kinds of questions began to dissolve into the background. They may have been useful questions, but they can also get in the way a lot."

After several chats with Rene, I realized he could be a poster child for a burning question many ask: After such profound and life-changing experiences, what does one do for Act Two?

Some adventurers return, to be re-injected into their normal lives, and livelihoods. Others find ways to stay on the road, becoming permanent fixtures out there. A growing number end up seeking more globally aware approaches to life. But there's also the

Driving north in Torres del Paine National Park in southern Chile offers breathtaking views.



option of giving others a taste of adventure—which is exactly what Rene is now attempting to do.

"It's been over a decade since I had a paycheck, at least a proper paycheck. But I wouldn't go back to my former life for any amount of money. Wearing a suit and tie with two weeks' vacation... there's no way. I'd rather take chances, take risks, rather do it my own way. One of the things I've been really fortunate to realize by overlanding with such a limited amount of money is that I'm not afraid of being poor, of not having disposable income, new clothes or a new vehicle. Those things, when you're away from them for a while, tend to lose their hold on us. It's unbelievably freeing."

Rene's solution for the Act Two dilemma? He founded *Renedian Adventures* in South Africa. "The fact that I took a chance on setting up a company at all has a lot to do with my travels. I'd been back for a while and was wrapping up the book when this idea of starting a motorcycle safari company came up. I enjoyed riding so much, I just couldn't imagine *not* doing it, so touring was an obvious choice."

"My wife, son and I now spend half the year traveling the world while I speak at dealerships and rallies, trying to get others to do trips of their own. And the second half in Africa riding motorcycles. We have a very fortunate life. I mean, there's no way that I could have guessed we'd be doing this a dozen years ago. I didn't even know this profession existed. It's a lovely situation to be in."

Although he views his riding skills and experience as transferrable to running a company, his lack of business experience gave him pause, but only briefly. "I realized that at one time I didn't know how to ride around the world, or how to write and publish a book, either. So, I decided to just give it a go."

For Rene, his new venture answers the question: What if I only have a few weeks and I'm after a taste of a motorcycle adventure in South Africa? "What one would really need is six months, but that's not always practical. So, we distilled the best of the best, and put those must-see places on a trip schedule that doesn't make it feel like a death march. I got quite good at that after so many years on the road. There are guys who want to ride from sunup to sundown, but this isn't the place for that. I'm not even sure why anyone would want to come to Africa and do that kind of riding because there's such an inverse correlation between how fast you can go and what you can see."

"When I first rode Africa it occurred to me that it was way too beautiful to hurry through. The big thing here is that the riding is unbelievable. There are beautiful roads everywhere. I can name hundreds from every continent I've ridden personally, but it's exceptional here. In addition, there are the animals you only find in Africa. It's a very special feeling to see giraffe, elephant, kudu, eland or springbok in their natural habitats from a motorcycle."

"One can't spend much time on Africa's gravel roads without feeling the connection. It's different than tarmac because it's earthy. You're covered in dust, which is awesome, and you smell more, too. Experientially, there aren't many times you are in awe of something, especially when you've been thinking about these animals since childhood, and there they are. We often get within a few feet of them. And the first time you see an elephant up close... it's indescribable. I think

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"YOU HAVE THESE GREAT CONVERSATIONS WITH YOURSELF IN THE HELMET. IT'S A BENEFIT OF THIS MODE OF TRAVEL."

The Tropic of Capricorn runs through Namibia, and it is always a favorite photo op.



all this changes our riders. They become more aware of issues like animal poaching, conservation, etc., because they're transformed by deep personal experiences. And these are just some of the accidental benefits of running the tours I didn't anticipate."

"At the end of the day I'd like everyone to know that all travel has inherent risks, as does any activity. But the risks that people perceive for international travel, particularly on motorcycles, seem much bigger than they actually are." Like most riders who've made similar journeys, Rene warns against listening to the fear mongers as both nonproductive and misleading. "Ask the nosy neighbor and they'll come up with a list of people (who they don't know), that had their heads chopped off, were robbed or beaten. Those stories are everywhere. It's up to all of us who do the big trips to come back to refute the nosy neighbor stories—politely, of course." **ADV**

UniversityofGravelRoads.com, JupitersTravellers.org, Renedian.com

Boys on the side of the road hold up skewered field mice as a delicacy to passing cars. The mice are quickly boiled, and after the bitter intestines are removed, toasted quickly in the fire. Ten for \$0.70 also makes them a great deal for the budget traveler. (Zomba, Malawi)

