

# THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

## ON A SCRAMBLER

Words & photos: Paul Pitchfork

After three years on the road in South America riding his Yamaha 660 Ténéré, Paul decided to take a different approach when he and his girlfriend headed for the Scottish Highlands - choosing to go 'small and light' on a Ducati Scrambler. He returned with a very different perspective on what makes an 'adventure bike'.



**Y**ou can have an adventure on any bike. It's a well-used mantra, but mention 'adventure motor biking' or moto-touring these days and most riders, it seems, think big. In fact, the marketing strategies of some motorcycle manufacturers over the last few years have convinced many that a bike can't be an 'adventure bike' unless it's at least 200 kilograms and 800cc - and ideally a whole lot more. And how many magazine 'shoot outs' have we seen featuring BMW's R1200 GS, Triumph's Explorer and one of KTM's ever more powerful beasts, looking to crown the ultimate adventure bike?

There are good reasons why we like these two-wheeled behemoths. Big means a relaxed riding position, tucked in behind a screen. Big means the capacity to carry a significant load - in excess of 100litres with ease. Big means comfortable cruising for hours. It also means long range, since

big bikes can have big fuel tanks. Big means powerful engines. In many cases, big also means lots of clever electronics to make your ride safer and smoother. For most riders, it seems bigger is better. This holds true for tourers just as much as for adventure bikes, perhaps even more so.

I am, to some degree, guilty of putting this philosophy into practice. I rode around South America on a Yamaha 660 Ténéré - by no means the biggest in terms of engine size, but it's one of the tallest bikes out there and capable of carrying substantial loads. I appreciated its upright and relaxed riding position, making light of a 400-mile day in the saddle. So too its planted stability, even on rough roads with heavy panniers and a holdall behind me. And yes, it ticks all the

boxes for what perceived wisdom tells us an adventure bike should have: a large fuel tank, wind protection, long suspension travel with excellent ground clearance, a strong sub-frame, a highly reliable and relatively simple engine, and an all-up weight which allows a rider to pick the bike up when it has been dropped. I also ride a Triumph Tiger 800 when in United Kingdom - smaller than the twelve-hundreds out there but still a big bike. And I love both machines. ➤





"Big bike syndrome was well and truly on display in the Scottish Highlands."



Given this personal benchmark, I was unsure how a 1500-mile journey from the south of England to the northern tip of Scotland and back, tackling motorway, winding mountain roads and everything in between, would pan out aboard a very much smaller bike; we had opted for Ducati's Scrambler. Set against the criteria I have just listed which the Ténéré fulfils so well, this bike seems to qualify as the consummate anti-adventure bike; the tank is relatively small, it has no wind protection, the suspension is agricultural, ground clearance is limited, and it's just so small. Surely the riding position will be cramped; and where will the luggage go?

#### READY TO RIDE

Not all my doubts were allayed after the first day riding the Scrambler. With 80 litres of carefully selected luggage attached to

the bike there was still enough room to sit comfortably, but the riding position did indeed feel cramped compared to my other mounts. Rotating the bars forward helped. It felt a little unnatural for me to be so close to the ground and indeed so close to the front wheel. However, the further I rode the more used to the Scrambler I became. The Comfort Seat from the Ducati parts catalogue lived up to its name and the addition of a small fly screen made a huge difference at high speeds. The long drive north up the motorway was far less of an ordeal than I had expected.

Big bike syndrome was well and truly on display in the Scottish Highlands. With the British summer struggling valiantly on into September, the best riding roads in the British Isles were still attracting a significant number of motorcyclists. The twisting and relatively traffic-free roads

inevitably attracted a fair share of sports bikes, but everything else was on display to one degree or another, including Goldwings and custom choppers. However, the big 'adventure bikes' and tourers were without question the most ubiquitous. And yes, I am mainly talking about BMW's all-conquering R1200 GS, inevitably.

After two days of riding, we were deep into the mountains and I was thoroughly dialed into the Scrambler. It is so easy to ride; balanced, planted, yet very agile. The engine has its faults - Ducati still haven't resolved the throttle's snatchiness in first and second and I found the fueling under 3500rpm to be far from smooth - but it is lively and responsive if you keep it in the higher rev ranges, and full of character. The further we went, especially along the single-track roads through the mountains and along the coast, the more natural riding the diminutive Ducati felt. ➤



“Low, lightweight and with an impressively tight turning circle, it was a breeze on the Scrambler.”

We were there to explore, not to ride from A to B. Curiosity led us down numerous side roads, nearly always ending in a U-turn. Looking for photo opportunities or lunch spots saw us riding over verges, up grass banks and along paths. Low, lightweight and with an impressively tight turning circle, it was a breeze on the Scrambler and after three or four days, I was enjoying this bike so much that I was no longer giving its characteristics much thought - I was just riding it. So my 'road to Damascus' moment caught me by surprise, coming out of nowhere. It just hit me....

Why, and indeed how, have we got so obsessed with big bikes, when a small bike like the Scrambler can do it all yet with so much more ease, simplicity and fun? It struck me as so obvious - almost too obvious. So, I went through it in my head to see what I was missing. This bike is fast,

comfortable, able to cruise at 90mph (with a flyscreen attached) on the motorway and dance through corners on the narrow mountain roads; it would also be great around town. I was carrying 80 litres of gear on the bike without noticing it was there. I could ride it over moderately rough ground, turn it on a pinhead and maneuver it in tight spots with ease. It looks great, sounds great and is very cool. The tank is a bit small but good enough for about a 140 miles. So no red flags there. I then cross-referenced with the 3000 miles I had ridden the Tiger earlier in the summer - perhaps this would highlight flaws in my new, enlightened view. Still nothing flagged up.

By the time the two-week trip came to an end, I had established a strong bond with the Scrambler. My riding style had changed in some ways to adapt to its differences. I had also forgotten what had

bothered me in the first couple of days riding, when I was still calibrated to the Tiger. It was a reluctant farewell when we had to hand back the bikes to Ducati at their headquarters in Silverstone.

A couple of days later I was back on the Tiger. It felt so different to the Scrambler, and on paper it should have been a much better ride; the open riding position felt much more relaxed; the silky smooth triple pulled effortlessly at 2000rpm, when the Scrambler would have complained and demanded down shifting; the Tiger felt so much more planted and assured compared to the smaller bike's coltish friskiness. But something was missing.

I couldn't really put my finger on it. There was no one characteristic which I could identify; rather, it was something to do with the essence of motorcycling - the bond between rider and machine, and





This could be close to paradise...

the feeling that generates. Riding a small bike felt more visceral, more immediately accessible to the senses. There is a more tangible and intimate connection between rider and machine; every move the rider makes is immediately picked up by the bike – a flick of the hips to initiate a turn – just as a young dog hangs on every gesture of its owner, straining to play. I was missing the Scrambler's mischievous

edge; it felt I had lost my partner in crime and was back in the company of a more cultured, reliable – and dare I say it, slightly boring – friend.

As I contemplate another trans-continental trip somewhere in the world and sometime in the future, I now have a very different view on which bike I may choose. I no longer see motos such as the Scrambler as merely second bikes – stable mates of

the big serious machines like the twelve-hundreds, which only come out for a bit of fun or to commute around town. They can do so much more, and in a way that the twelve-hundreds cannot – a way that really reminds us why we choose to ride bikes. Are they victims of the big bike agenda, left parked up in the garage waiting for a Sunday ride? To a degree, yes. And so too, I sense, are we. ■■■

“By the time the two-week trip came to an end, I had established a strong bond with the Scrambler.”

