



# Riding to Freedom

By Paul Pitchfork

On 10 February 2012, I bade farewell to a long career in the military. For 18 years I had been an officer in the Gurkhas, and for many years before that a career in the Army had been my focus.

But after many operational tours, culminating in a deployment to fight in Afghanistan, an inner voice told me it was time to leave. I didn't know what I wanted to do next, and the decision to leave an organisation that was a deep and integral part of my self-identity was incredibly hard one, but intuitively I knew it was the right thing to do.

My plan after leaving the Army was to spend two years preparing for and then undertaking a solo row across the Indian Ocean. I went as far as buying a custom-built ocean rowing boat with the money the Army had given me when I left. Then one morning in May I woke up and saw the absurdity of the proposition. I had spent most of my adult life working to a plan, driving myself and proving myself. I had a major personal transition in life confronting me, and five months alone in a small boat on the high seas was blatantly *not* what I needed.

So I sold the boat and contemplated the blank canvas that suddenly confronted me.

Two months earlier, I had finally passed my motorcycle test after years of procrastination. I was the proud owner of a brand new Triumph Tiger 800 and had fallen in love with thrill of the ride.

Travel had always been one of my passions, so the idea of a long motorbike ride across foreign lands came easily to me. Here was an opportunity to open the doors to something new and unpredictable.

So the decision was made. I dug out and read the unopened copy of *The Long Way Round* that had been gifted to me a couple of years previously, and bought Chris Scott's overlanding bible, *The Adventure Motorcycling Handbook*.

When test riding a 990 Adventure at my local KTM dealership, I saw an almost new and fully-prepared Yamaha Tenere 660 sitting on the forecourt.

Three days later it was parked beside my Tiger. After a little research, South America was chosen as my destination. And five months ●●►



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after the decision to sell my ocean rowing boat, I drove my moto out of the customs shed at Buenos Aires Airport. A very new, and profoundly impactful, chapter of my life had just begun. Eighteen months on, it is still unfolding every day.

As a soldier nearly all my adult life, I had become used to structure, organisation, having a defined path ahead, always being 'in control'. After leaving the Army and stepping out of that template, I could recognise the constraints that this way of living imposed upon me.

I was suddenly very free - an anonymous rider on foreign roads, no longer in control of what life would deal me, with my worldly possessions on the back of my bike.

For me, this experience of expanded freedom has been profound. Yes, at times having an empty horizon and undefined possibilities ahead of you can feel like a lack of direction, a lack of purpose, and can be unsettling. Letting go of the need to have a purpose can be very hard for people who have had a strong professional focus for many years.

But during my time travelling I have come to see the importance, indeed the imperative, to *force* ourselves to occasionally stop and take stock; to have no purpose for a time; to embrace that empty horizon.

Only then can we really see where life has thus far led us to, who we have become, and where life's flow wants to take us next.

It is very hard to 'flow' when you are living within a routine. However, it's easy on the road. I had a plan, or at least an idea, when I set off from Buenos Aires in November 2012: I was on a road trip, Ushuaia to Colombia, six months to a year.

As I write, I am still in central Peru, with many months of travelling ahead of me. I've learnt to stop planning and controlling - a broken moto in Patagonia less than two months after setting off, which took six weeks to repair, taught me that early on.

By 'going with the flow,' and sometimes 'rolling with the punches', I have found myself in wonderful, unexpected places.

And I have met special people who would otherwise not have crossed my path. When you travel, especially on a moto, plans rarely work out and surprises lurk around every corner.

A long bike ride has turned out to be strong tonic. It was exactly what I needed; a chance to reflect, an opportunity to see other ways of life, a lesson in letting go of control and learning to trust what life has in store for us. Above all, it's been a taste of *real* freedom, and it's enormous fun - something we all need in our lives.