

— RIDE OF — DREAMS

After being given four weeks off to celebrate his 50th, **ALAN PERRINS** was in the search for a dream motorcycle adventure that he wouldn't forget in a hurry. It sounds like he found it...



WHO'S WRITING?

Alan Perrins has been into motorcycles since he was a kid. At the age of 16 he got his first road bike, a Suzuki QR50 ("Google it and try not to laugh," he says). Since then he's been hooked and there has always been a motorcycle in his garage. As Country Manager for Jack Wolfskin, Alan attends the annual OutDoor Show in Friedrichshafen, Germany, and his bike almost always his transport of choice.



**WILD, RUGGED
AND OPEN TERRAIN**

“W hat the hell do you think you are doing planning to ride a motorbike through Africa when the government is advising you not to go there? Are you completely mad?” It was a fair point. My wife gets quite worried when I go off on my biking tours at the best of times, so I thought it only kind to omit the North Africa element when explaining where I was going in a few short weeks. Wrong!

If you remember from a previous article in the May/June 2017 edition, I asked the readers of *ABR* to share their choice of destination for a four-week trip of a lifetime. I chose a winner from a selection of celebrity adventure bike riders and regular *ABR* readers alike. The route that I picked was the circular route around the Med, which by necessity involves crossing North Africa, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, then a ferry to Italy etc. It was true, the official government advice was: “The FCO advise against all but essential travel to within 30km (18 miles) of the remainder of the border with Tunisia”.

In my defence, and from my own investigations, I believed I would be safe if I just used my common sense. After all, I have read many articles and adventure travel books and if the authors had heeded the many warnings, then there would have been no adventures and no books would ever have been written. Having said that, it was clear I was not going to Africa. I was back to square one, where was I to go?

I was not asking for much, just to be able to ride through des-

erts, grasslands, mountains, jungle, across rivers, travel up great waterways in a canoe, peer into volcanos, visit ancient ruins and lay on a beautiful sandy beach with good weather guaranteed. Oh, and I wanted to ride dirt bikes off-road and big adventure bikes on the trails.

“Ecuador,” said the man down the pub. “Ecuador has the most amazing bio-diversity on the planet.” A quick search on the internet brought me to Ecuador Freedom Bike Rentals (EFBR), based in the country’s capital, Quito. They had a really great range of bikes, including dirt bikes and big adventure bikes. A quick call, a few email exchanges and I was sorted.

So there I was, on a plane from Amsterdam direct to Quito for a four-week adventure of a lifetime, and the wife almost approved.

As the plane descended slowly to our destination, I peered out of the window excitedly and gazed in wonder at the huge expanse of jungle, mountains and pastures, all criss-crossed with trails and dirt roads. Just a few days after landing I’d be starting my adventure and riding this amazing landscape. I say a few days time as I first had to spend two days acclimatising. Quito is situated at 2,850m and some of the mountains I would be riding up rise as high as 4,500m! Immediately upon landing I felt the effects of the altitude. Just climbing the stairs to baggage claim left me feeling short of breath.

For the first part of my adventure I opted for an organised trip, the ‘Cloud Forests, Coast, and Craters Tour, a seven day guided motorcycle adventure covering about 850 miles.



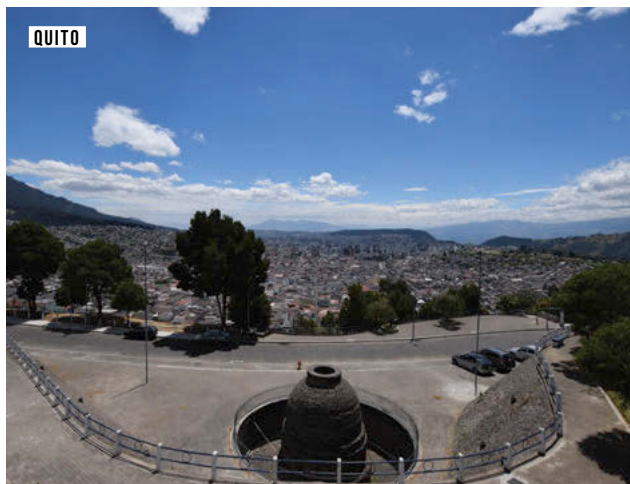
DEPARTURE DAY



EXPLORING QUIET COUNTRY ROADS



ON THE EQUATOR



QUITO

With slight trepidation I met the other guys on the trip, Shawn and Phil from Santa Cruz in the States, Terry and George from Toronto, Canada, and Ken from California. I was glad to be sharing this first part of the journey with other adventurers as I must admit, I felt slightly apprehensive, but excited.

The bike I chose for this part of the trip was an immaculate Triumph Tiger 800 XC – well, I had to fly the flag! It was the heaviest bike chosen, as all the others opted for either the 800GS or the Suzuki DR650. Had I made a big mistake? Time would tell. We were also supported by ‘Frenchy’ in the support truck and two guides on bikes, Andy and Court, the owner.

We departed Quito on a Sunday when the traffic was very light. The first day was quite a short one at just 64 miles, with stops at places of interest. Personally, I like riding big miles when I tour. When I questioned Court as to why all the day’s rides were very short he assured me that in Ecuador these daily miles were long enough. I was to shortly find out how right he was!

The first three days heading over to the coast, we mainly travelled on good roads with quite a few detours to sample the numerous trails, tracks and ungraded roads. On the road, I knew I had chosen the best bike, but on the dirt it was a different matter. Those on DR650s zipped around the trails without concern while the Triumph had to be ridden with a more measured style. As the week progressed and we tackled even more rugged terrain, this unsuitability became more obvious. Sure, the Triumph could negotiate the roads safely, but at a slower pace, or with a

higher level of competence from the rider! Some of the rock-strewn roads had boulders the size of bowling balls and pot holes a foot deep.

We stopped and ate lunch in some of the remotest locations you could imagine. Some were proper restaurants and some were just roadside cafes; always the food was fresh, good quality and plentiful.

Ecuador is covered by hills, mountains and valleys. As a result there are many amazing waterfalls and beauty spots. On several occasions we parked the bikes and hiked an hour or so to a picturesque location and spent an hour swimming and recovering from the humid heat. The walks through the forests were amazing, but sweaty.

This abundance of water also allowed lots of opportunity for river crossings, something that’s surely on every biker’s bucket list. Some of the bridges we had to cross also made great photo opportunities, especially the ones that were officially closed!

EFBR supports an initiative called ‘Pack for a Purpose’, where they encourage every rider to bring essential supplies to distribute personally to the more remote schools. This was one of my favourite parts of the trip. We rode up to the school and all the classes instantly stopped and all the students, as young as six, came out to greet us. They all lined up excitedly as we handed out books, colouring pens, pencils and balls. We were asked not to take sweets, but only essentials. Shawn and I ignored this and both brought large bags of sweets which, luckily, were enough to ▶



WHAT WORKED

1. A hydration pack – essential.
2. Rev'it! Sand 3 Textile Jacket – tough with loads of zips for much needed extra ventilation.
3. SIDI Adventure Boots – new for the trip and as comfortable on day one as day 30.
4. AGV Compact ST helmet – I felt sorry for the guys in full face helmets!
5. Proper biking socks – you will thank me.
6. A wide-angle lens and iPhone – both did a great job.
7. Using a local company – I would have missed so much if I didn't.

WHAT DID NOT?

1. Motorcycle trousers – they were just too hot. Kevlar jeans worked better.
2. Waterproof gloves – I never used them, even in the heavy rain.
3. Hard luggage – I preferred soft luggage, as it's easier to carry to hotel room every night.
4. Sunglasses – the tinted drop down lens in the AGV was much better.
5. Keeping secrets from the wife – well, maybe a few.



go around. We were definitely the kids favourite that day.

As the week progressed, we headed back inland from the coast and gained a lot of altitude, eventually reaching 366m. The roads really deteriorated and, along with the altitude, made riding the big Triumph hard work. In most villages in Ecuador the locals build their own speed bumps, often just out of dirt, some small, some huge. Riding in a group had its advantages as every rider would indicate to the rider behind any possible dangers such as these improvised speed bumps, pot holes or dead animals. As we always rode in the same order I had the privilege of following Shawn, from Santa Cruz, who took this signalling to a new and humorous level with intricate and exaggerated gestures with gymnastic precision. I am confident we will soon see this added to the Olympic Games line up.

Another favourite location was the Altiplano, high up in the mountains, which is basically a cold desert with herds of wild alpacas roaming freely. The cold air and endless views of roads disappearing into the horizon gave me the feeling of being somewhere special that I would always remember and cherish.

Heading back to Quito, we stopped in several plantations (bananas, nuts, cocoa etc). One of the weirdest rides was through one such plantation, where the light and the huge trees gave an eerie light and feeling of foreboding.

In general the locals paid us little attention, despite the fact that in the entire month I only saw a dozen or so other adventurers. What amazed me was that when the locals did come to talk, they were all only interested in the DR650s. The Triumph was definitely the looker of the bunch and I doubted there was even another Tiger 800 XC in the country. Yet they all coveted the Suzukis.

The next part of my trip was a solo, self-guided 10-day exploration of about 1,200 miles. I walked around EFBR's showroom like a kid in a sweet shop. The choice of quality bikes was mouth-watering. As well as the bikes previously mentioned, they offered a KTM 1050, 690, V-Strom 1000, Ténéré XT660, Husqvarna 701, and even the all new SWM 650R. All very tempting, but as soon as I saw the almost brand new Africa Twin my mind was made up.

Ken, the Californian, had such a good time on the previous tour he decided to join me for the first four days of my next adventure. He chose the V-Strom and within one hour we were off with butterflies in our stomach and a full tank of gas. Perfect!

Our Sat navs were pre-programmed with all our hotels and places of interest to visit. Within a few hours, our route took us off the main highway and onto the now all-too-familiar dirt roads up and down the numerous hills and valleys. Straight away I felt at home on the big twin. Unlike the Triumph, it flattered my riding and gave me huge confidence.

As in the previous trip, the hotels we stayed in were absolute luxury and we were often the only ones staying. Some of the countryside we rode through reminded me of Scotland, with lush green hills accompanied by a light drizzle of rain. Traffic was always light.

One strange incident typifies Ecuador. I was leading us and following the Sat nav as we entered a small town. All the towns have a central square and are usually one way only. As I entered this particular square, I had my eyes down trying to make sense of the directions. Unknowingly, I entered and started driving round the wrong way. Immediately, I realised what I had done, gazed up and saw right in front of me a police car with the officer staring straight at me. I carried on and left the square at the nearest legal exit with Ken following me. I could almost hear Ken cursing me over the sound of the engine. The officer did nothing ▶

but stare at me, and this again was typical of Ecuador. Several times we passed police well over the speed limit, as the locals also did, yet nothing happened. By the way, speed limits are ridiculously low and even drop down to 12mph in places!

Possibly the best hotel was one that we stayed in for a night on the very edge of the Amazon River. The hotel had no electricity in the rooms, just in the open plan reception. As the sun disappeared below the horizon, the separate lodges were illuminated by old-fashioned kerosene lamps that lasted all night. As dusk drew closer we were treated to a visit by the local monkeys and serenaded to sleep by a cacophony of insects; I can't even begin to explain how loud they were! In the morning we went on a short boat trip up the Amazon to visit another amazing waterfall, but the best part was the journey back. Ken and I decided to float back down the river in inner tubes. It took about an hour, but was just another magical moment I shall always remember.

After Ken left, I carried on by myself, relishing the challenge of exploring on my own. All was good until one night I developed a fever. I decided then to get up very early the next morning and head off directly to my next hotel, get there early and spend the day in bed recuperating. Stupidly I deleted all the waypoints on the Sat nav except the hotel where I was heading - bad mistake!

Turning on the Sat nav at 5am in the morning, I was pleased to see the journey would only take four hours. I set off feeling drained and exhausted, but happy to know by lunch time I would be tucked up in bed with a beautiful view of the beach. After only one hour I realised something was wrong, very wrong. The Sat nav had chosen a very direct route, but it was off-road and took me straight over hills and valleys; exactly what I didn't want. After three long hours I had only covered about 25 miles. I then noticed I was very low on fuel and started to panic, as I had hardly seen anyone around all morning. Eventually, I found someone, but struggled to make myself understood despite my very best charades display. You would think a grown man crying, pointing to his petrol tank and making a 'squeezing the nozzle' motion would make my needs obvious. Apparently not.

Eventually, I managed to re-install all the waypoints back into the Sat nav, but I still faced another three hours on the most awful 'roads' you could imagine. Ironically, if I had not felt so ill, this probably would have been one of the best days of riding off-road. I arrived at the hotel knackered and full of fever at 6pm.

My journey back to Quito took me high into the mountains again and across the most amazing national park. It rained throughout the entire journey and the visibility at the very top of the mountains was down to only a few metres due to the mist. The roads were covered in huge dents where rocks had fallen from high above and every mile or so there were fresh rock falls. It was Russian roulette, Ecuador style! Despite these dangers, it was the best day's solo riding I have had.

During Court's pre-ride briefing in Quito, he had told me about a tunnel I should ride down on a particular road I couldn't remember. "If you see a tunnel entrance then just go down it," was his advice. Well, right in front of me was a tunnel entrance that would not look out of place in a Disney movie. I peered down it and even took out my torch, which couldn't even illuminate more than a few metres. It looked like no one had gone down it in years and it was steep, dark and wet from the constant streams of water. After about two cigarettes I decided to go for it. "It's supposed to be an adventure, if you don't you will regret it," I said to myself out loud.

Even with the headlights on full beam I couldn't see much as I

AMAZING PANORAMIC VIEWS



PACK FOR A PURPOSE

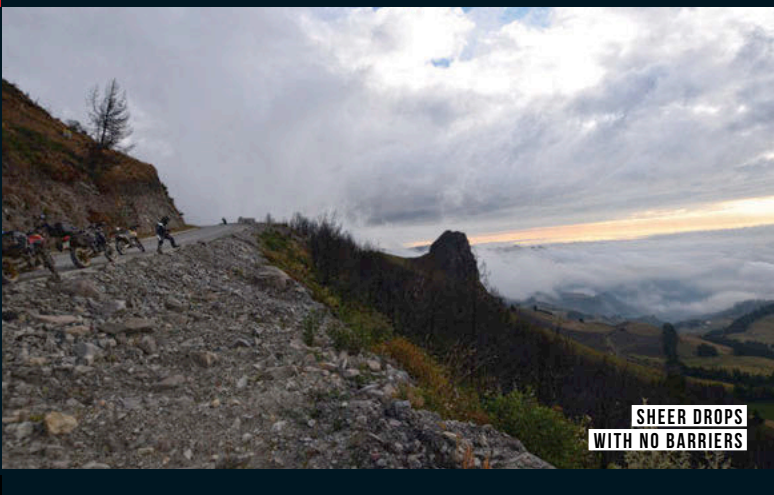


CRESTING THE VOLCANO



CHICKEN FEET AND ANUS, NICE...





descended steeply into oblivion. It was surreal and I half expected to see a swarm of rats heading my way followed by a herd of zombies. I admit, I was really scared and I didn't even know how long this tunnel went, or even if this was the one! 'Shit, shit, shit, shit' were the only words I could think to utter, as the end was nowhere in sight. Eventually, I saw light at the end of the tunnel. I have never been so relieved in my life!

The final chapter in my adventure saw me back at EFBR to choose a bike for a five-day personal guided tour with Raph to guide me. For me the choice was simple, as the route would take us off predominately off-road so I opted for the Husqvarna 701, a bike I had considered buying myself.

Within an hour we were sampling the dirt roads and gaining height with amazing views of mountains and volcanos. As much as I loved the Africa Twin, the Husky was in another league on the dirt. Where the Twin instilled confidence, on the Husky I was Ricky Carmichael.

The highlight of this trip was a day's boat ride up the Amazon to be dropped off and then ride back through the jungle and over dirt roads only locals know about. Although the journey up was precarious, due to the boat being less than stable with our two bikes tied to the back, it was eventually relaxing and a nice break from the many days spent in the saddle. We stopped for lunch on the riverside, where our captain handed us our lunch wrapped in a banana leaf – a fresh trout that had been cooking on the boat's engine. Marinated in onions, chillies and other veg it was delicious.

We also spotted a remote school from the boat, so we stopped and carried our Pack for a Purpose supplies up the hill to them. Again, the whole school, only about 30 kids, stopped their lessons and came to greet us. Their favourite gift was a couple of new footballs. The head teacher spotted me trying to teach the younger kids to kick the ball using their instep instead of a toe poke. Immediately, he called all the students together and divided them into two opposing teams and put me and Raph on opposite sides. Playing in that heat and humidity was stifling and, I must admit, I think I took it a little too seriously. Do you remember that scene in the 1969 film *Kes* where Brian Glover (Mr Sugden) plays football with his pupils? No? Good!

Food-wise, we ate at some great road side cafes, plus I finally got the chance to try those witchetty grubs you see on I'm a Celebrity... Although they look disgusting, once cooked they are quite tasty, with a smokey cheese kind of flavour. Another tick on the gastronomical bucket list was when we crossed the border one night into Colombia to sample the best guinea pig in South America. Greasy, but again, tasty.

On the penultimate night we had to cross a major bridge in the area to reach our hotel for the night. Locals at a petrol station informed us that the bridge had been closed due to a major landslide. Checking at the local police station, they confirmed this. Unperturbed, Raph suggested we should go for it anyway, as the detour was over five hours. As I had already crossed two bridges that were officially closed, I agreed and we headed off. Eventually, we arrived and the landslide was far worse than we anticipated, with three large earthmovers trying to cut a way through the devastation. Raph noticed the works manager sitting in a 4x4 and went for a chat. Two minutes later he came bounding back. "They're going to let us through if we are quick," he said. We both threw our kit on quickly and headed over.

As we got closer, the scale of the works became even more daunting. The site manger pointed to this huge expanse of rubble, deep mud and high berms and pointed up. "Shit," I thought, he's serious! Without a moment's we both gunned the bikes and ▶



BLUE SKIES AND ROLLING COUNTRYSIDE



AN ECUADORIAN DRIVE THROUGH



A DIRTY HALF DOZEN

went for it. Raph got quickly bogged down in the thick mud, so I went for a different route up a six-foot berm that seemed to go where we wanted to go. I hit it quite fast and the amazing Husky whisked me up to the top without any fuss. I was so shocked I dropped the bike at the top. Eventually, we got through and on our way. Now that wouldn't happen in the UK!

Although the Husky was an amazing bike, it had its disadvantages. The side stand could just about be kicked back when on flat ground, but if there is a camber then you need a friend or guide to help (thanks Raph). Then there's the rather thin seat. Two days before we were due back I developed a pain in my arse, which I suspected was an abscess, as I had suffered from this several times before brought on by mountain biking. If I ever meet the Husky seat designer in a dark alley, well, you know what I'll do. The result was we headed back via proper roads instead of the mainly off-road route we had planned. Bummer! Pun intended.

Looking back, I got exactly what I wanted: an adventure. I learnt a few things, too. I was sure I would enjoy the solo part of the trip the most, but I was wrong. Sharing this experience with other people was definitely more fun. I also realised that if you are going on a trip like this then pay the extra and benefit from the local knowledge. I stayed in the most fabulous hotels, ate at the best restaurants and saw some of the most amazing sites that I wouldn't have found on my own, even with hours of research. EFBR state that "the best motorcycle adventures start in the middle of the world"! I would agree. **ABR**

WANT TO RIDE THIS

If you'd like to experience something similar to what Alan did, **Ecuador Freedom Bike Rentals (EFBR)** offers a range of options:

BIKE RENTAL

If you like to travel independently, you may be interested in renting a bike from EFBR. You'll find everything from 250cc trail bikes to full-on adventure bikes from most of the major manufacturers, including the Honda Africa Twin, BMW F800GS, KTM 1050 Adventure, Husqvarna 701 Enduro, Suzuki 650DR and many more. Rentals include most of the essentials, such as locks, panniers and pre-installed accessories.

SELF-GUIDED TOURS

These tours are ideal if you'd like to have a plan set out for you, but you'd still like to travel on your own. Self-guided tours generally include the bike rental, GPS with programmed routes, accommodation, some food and, often, plenty more.

GUIDED TOURS

If you're looking to have everything looked after for you, and you'd like to see Ecuador with insights from a local, a guided tour is for you. These trips include everything you'd need, with bike, luggage, local tour guide, accommodation, food, fuel and more being part of the package.

See www.freedombikerental.com for more information.