

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Lois on the Loose

Lois Pryce

Contents

About the Book
About the Author
Also by Lois Pryce
Title Page
Dedication
Acknowledgements
Map

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen

Copyright

About the Book

Lois Pryce has one big passion in life: motorcycling. This is the story of how she threw in the day job and followed her dream of escaping. But she didn't escape a little bit. She rode her motorcycle from the northernmost corner of Alaska to the southernmost tip of South America. Alone.

Armed only with the Spanish words for 'caution' and 'cheese', Lois was rather under-prepared for multiple bear sightings, bribing her way through borders, spending a night in a Mexican brothel and crashing her bike in the wilds of Patagonia.

She most certainly got the adventure she craved. Her hilarious, brilliantly written travelogue will appeal to everyone who's ever dreamt of jacking-it-all-in and running away to see the world.

About the Author

Torn between the career paths of two illustrious relatives, Max Born, the Nobel Prize Winner in Physics and his granddaughter, Olivia Newton-John, Lois Pryce abandoned her interest in Quantum Theory at the age of 16, left school and spent the next couple of years as a carrot picker, painter and decorator and failing an audition as a kiss-o-gram before bowing to the inevitable and going into rock 'n' roll. After various underpaid jobs in record shops and as a product manager in the Beeb, she decided to jack it all in and ride her trail bike from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. Her on-line diary of her journey became a cult hit and led to her first book, *Lois on the Loose*. She is currently writing her second, about her trip from Tangiers to the Cape of Good Hope. When not on her bike she is at home on her houseboat with husband Austin.

Also by Lois Pryce

Red Tape and White Knuckles

LOIS ON THE LOOSE

LOIS PRYCE



arrow books

To Austin, my real-life superhero

Acknowledgements

My trip was made a whole lot more fun and successful, thanks to the generosity and kindness of many wonderful people, both back home and on the road. I hope I get the opportunity to return all these favours one day.

At Home

Infinite gratitude and love to Austin for his unstinting support during the trip and the writing of this book; my brother Nat for hours of excellent webmastery, without which this book would never have happened; Mum and Dad for never telling me anything was dangerous; Gerald Vince for the welding and luggage prep; Paul Mules for his patience and good humour on those early trail rides; Richard Baird (RIP) for crate-building assistance; Sarah Crofts for her wise words; Tiffany Coates for advice and tips from the road; Chris Scott for publishing my stories in the *Adventure Motorcycling Handbook* (and for writing such an inspiring book in the first place); Angie and Trundle for last-minute tinkering; and to Lisa Hall for her warm welcome home.

On the Road ... in order of appearance

Mike at Delta Air Cargo in Anchorage for going the extra air-mile; Gordy and Lee Woodley for taking me in off the street; Vito and Heather for their heart-warming hospitality; Grant and Susan Johnson for tea, advice and for creating www.horizonsunlimited.com which has helped many a globe-trotting biker; Yvonne Regehr for taking me trail riding in BC; Karen and Rob for showing me a good

time in Vancouver; Susan Barber for helping me after I fought the law (and the law won); BSA Barb and Rory for a great welcome to America; Eric and Erin Sowle for a week of fun, trail riding and crazy golf; John in Portland for helping with the kick-start; Jerry and Nancy for some good ol' American hospitality; Rick and Erica for a wonderful night in their special houseboat; Kaaren and Toby Boothroyd for Californian luxury and goat-wrangling; Johnny and Lynn for good times in Oakland and for getting this whole book thing rolling; Eli and Rob for providing a corner of England in SF; Pete and Melissa for a great night out and top yarns; Karen and Lola for a wild night on the town (hope you haven't lost your car again); Marc and Darlene for being old friends amongst strangers; Linda and Ted Lazarus for their spectacular hosting in the lap of luxury; Nino, Leo and Helen for motorcycle maintenance and real tea; Christine and Brian for hospitality, a haircut and moral support at the tattoo shop; Joe and Lara for putting up with me for so long, for letting me change tyres in the living room and a million other things; Rachel Delavaud for turning up when she did and being a top travelling companion; Juan Carlos Ibarra for calmness and civility in a strange land; Aiza Gomez for giving me a pair of socks; Edgardo Loo Berroa for kidnapping me in the nicest possible way; Carolina in Bogota for taking me in at a moment's notice; Ricardo Rocco for livening up the proceedings and for being an all-round good guy; Sjaak for passing on his tips from the road; Willem, Zoila, Jessica, Johan and Maurets in Cuenca, who welcomed me into their home on the spur of the moment; Jeffrey Powers for all his help in Cuzco getting my bike sorted; Dieter for being a nice Swiss chap; Robb for helping sort out a horrible mess; Frank and Ann likewise and beyond; Ziggy for coming to the rescue; and finally, to all the people who sent me words of encouragement and offers of hospitality while I was on the road, it really made a difference. Oh yes, and another

extra thanks to Rachel, as I know how much she enjoys these lists.

The Book

Much gratitude is due to my super-agent Faye Bender for her perseverance, professionalism and encouragement; to the unstoppable Jenny Meyer for getting this book published in various corners of the world; to my editor, Oliver Johnson, for his steady encouragement and wise words but, most importantly, for just getting it; to Charlotte Haycock at Random House for her dazzling efficiency and attention to detail; to Eleanor for the fantastic cover design; to Charlie Boston and Simon Radford for their sanity-saving office space and generosity; and to Simon Kennedy for his sage editorial tips.

Adventure Map



ONE

THERE'S A MUCH-QUOTED line from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* that says travelling by car is like watching a movie, but riding a motorcycle is like being in one. As I rode my bike onto a home-bound ferry after a fortnight's holiday in France, I pondered this idea and decided it was wrong. Motorcycling was much much better.

But sadly, a return ferry journey is never as exciting as the outbound voyage. Rolling off a boat on a motorcycle into a foreign land is one of the most exciting experiences I know. No matter where it is in the world: freewheeling down the ramp, the metallic clank that marks your arrival, and your first glimpse of a strange land. Everything looks different, sounds different, even smells different - you feel different.

The Pride of Portsmouth gave a mournful hoot as she chugged out of Le Havre docks into a reliably grey English Channel. In just a few hours I would be pounding the familiar tarmac of the M3 back to London. I looked at my watch and noted that at exactly this time tomorrow I would be clocking in at the office again, sitting at my desk, ploughing through two weeks' worth of yellow Post-it notes and pointless memos.

How can I hold on to that just-rolled-off-the-ferry feeling? I wondered. How can I make it last? It was time to come up with an answer.

Returning to work after a holiday is rarely a pleasant experience, but it can be made that little bit more bearable if something interesting, or preferably gossip-worthy, has

happened in your absence. On this occasion the heart-sinking tedium of once again clocking in at my BBC job was only slightly redeemed by the excitement of an office 'refurb', or paint job to you and me. Where once there was grey, now there was beige. Predictably, there was even a celebratory memo about it on my desk - but the colour, apparently, wasn't beige, it was 'taupe'. All part of the 'fresh contemporary feel' that was being 'rolled out across the corporation'. It translated roughly as 'Forget your bonus, we've spent it on paint. The Management'. Other than that, things seemed pretty much the same; the office plants were still either slowly dying or fake - a description that could be applied to most of the staff too. This wasn't what I was after; I'd set my hopes on the news of an office affair, a dramatic resignation or at least a good old-fashioned sacking in which the employee in question was escorted off the premises. Why do they do that? I wondered idly, as I trudged up the stairs. Maybe in case the redundant worker freaks out in the lobby and makes a violent lunge at the Investors In People award?

The funny thing was, I was early. That never happened. I prided myself on typing in my password as the computer clock flicked from 08.59 to 09.00. I've always been suspicious of people who claim to like arriving at work with time to spare. Don't they have a bed to lie in? At this deathly hour the only other living thing in the office was my boss, and he barely fitted that description. We greeted each other with our customary bored good mornings and our mutually resentful look that said, 'Christ, do I really have to spend another day with YOU?' Like with an unhappy marriage, we were tired of saying good morning every bad morning, tired of looking at each other every day, and tired of travelling to this air-conditioned, jargon-infested institution five days a week. It was a painful ritual, but fortunately today he was on the phone, which avoided any of that excruciating how-was-your-holiday chit-chat. Since

the latest restructuring (a popular hobby of the top bods) he had lost his private office but gained a company car; however, this juggling of status symbols meant that the poor chap was now forced to work amongst his open-plan minions. He was always in the office before anyone else, although one could never tell if this had less to do with professional ambition and more to do with avoiding life at home in the suburbs. Unfortunately, his arrival in the open-plan area, known fondly as the Pigpen, silenced us banter-hungry worker ants, resulting in a steep rise in the use of the computer system's instant messaging facility.

Since relocating to the Pigpen, things had gone from bad to worse for the Boss. His recent fortieth birthday had coincided with his self-conscious arrival at work one day sporting an over-gelled spiky hairdo, and his efforts to be 'down with the kids' now included rampant overuse of the word 'street' as an adjective. A brief stint in a punk band in the late '70s gave him, or so he thought, the credentials to talk about 'being on the road', or to suddenly crank up the stereo upon hearing a classic track from his golden era and shout about 'fighting the punk rock wars'. Afterwards, the instant messaging service would regularly crash under the strain.

This morning I'd caught him on the hop. My premature arrival was not part of his plan and he was clearly in the throes of a phone call that he'd planned on making alone. The halcyon days of scrapping with skinheads on the King's Road were a long-forgotten memory today - he had some serious grown-up issues to sort out before the onset of the working day. I hid behind my monitor and busied myself with the tedious undressing that we motorcyclists must endure for our fun. Through the rustle of nylon and creak of leather I couldn't help but catch his *sotto voce* estuary English bristling with consumer rage.

'Is that MFI, Basildon branch? My name is Mr Tyler and I ordered a bathroom suite from you three weeks ago.'

Pause. Sigh.

'Yes, yes, that's right, the Tuscany Moderna in peach coral. Well, yes, it did turn up on Saturday, but the toilet seat is missing.'

I could hear the insincere crackle of MFI Basildon switching to auto-apology mode.

'Well, yes, whatever—'

Interrupted by more Essex crackle.

'Frankly, mate, I don't care whose fault it is, I just want you to ...'

Loud impatient sigh. Voice rising with sheer frustration.

'Look! All I want to know is WHEN CAN YOU DELIVER MY TOILET SEAT?'

I was pretending not to listen but wishing one of my Pigpen inmates was here to share the moment. Strangely, it was at this point that the banality of the situation hit me like a blow in the stomach and suddenly it wasn't funny any more. It was just utterly depressing. What evil mind invented the open-plan office, where we all sit in neat little rows, breathing recycled air, staring at flickering images while salaciously channel-hopping between our colleagues' private lives? Not to mention the regimented plastic ferns, the sandpaper-grade industrial carpet, the view of the gridlocked A40 flyover, the infernal memos laced with newspeak, the polystyrene cups. And this is the Music Department, a supposedly 'creative' environment! A panicky feeling rose up inside me. I've got to get out of here before I turn into one of those people that bring their own mug into work and then write a complaining email to all staff if anyone else uses it, I thought. Or maybe I said it out loud.

The Boss was off the phone now and avoiding eye contact.

'How was your holiday?' he says.

'Yeah, great thanks.' Both of us pretended that I hadn't witnessed him losing his rag over a low-end bathroom

fitting.

That about dried up the conversation so I offered him a cup of tea and he produced a mug decorated with a football team's logo from his desk drawer. The mere whiff of a teabag had its usual effect: the door of our Big Boss's office flew open and from it appeared our leader, 'SuperBri', brandishing a mug sporting rival team colours and issuing me with commands regarding artificial sweeteners while he pranced around in front of Mr Tyler chanting something along the lines of 'Three nil, three nil ... you're going down!' I skulked off to the canteen to the sound of the Boss's fawning football banter.

Of course, SuperBri didn't know he was called SuperBri. His real name was Brian Simmons, but many years ago in a previous job he was overheard making a phone call to an Important Industry Figure, and the conversation that apparently ensued had now entered into music-biz mythology, and spawned his nickname:

Feet up on the desk, bellowing into the phone:

'Hey, mate! Iiiiiiiiiit's ... SuperBri!'

Pause.

'SuperBri!'

Still upbeat.

'Ha ha! Super Brian.'

Slightly faltering now.

'Brian! Y'know, Brian ...'

Voice dropping by several decibels.

'Uh, Brian Simmons.'

In sheepish and barely audible tones: 'Brian Simmons from Overtone Records.'

SuperBri had an ego to match his hospitality budget and skin as thick as the BBC's *Annual Report*. To further compound his Senior Executive stereotype he revelled unashamedly in jargon and name-dropping like it was coming into style. No one could beat his verbal diarrhoea and Z-list celebrity shoulder-rubbing reports. Just a simple

discussion over a forthcoming project would be littered with classic examples of 1980s business buzzwords including 'pushing the envelope' or 'thinking outside the box' and comments like 'actually, I was talking to Mick Fleetwood about this recently.' SuperBri never had 'a meeting at 3 p.m.', he had 'a three o'clock', but most disarming was his habit of referring to himself in the third person as 'the Master'. 'Learn from the Master, guys, learn from the Master,' he would say after deigning to share one of his Great Marketing Secrets with us.

To prevent accusations of not communicating with the lower ranks, he would stroll past the Phippen at the beginning of each week, pausing briefly to punch the air with his rallying cry of 'Good morning, Marketeers!' We wouldn't see much of him after that until our weekly 'brainstorming' session (for storming, read numbing), at which he would inevitably arrive at the end of the meeting, bang his fist on the table a few times and offer words of encouragement straight out of *Staff Motivation for Dummies*: 'Good call! Like it. Like it a lot!' This would be followed by his standard battle cry: 'Come ON! LET'S SELL RECORDS!' before breezing out of the room, his excuses wafting back down the corridor: 'Sorry, guys, can't hang around, I've got a four o'clock with Sue Lawley.'

Through the window, I could see my fellow lemmings moving along the street and across the car park, soon to be sucked in by the revolving glass doors. Exactly eight hours later, the opposite revolution of these doors would spit them all out again to move en masse back to the tube station. It wasn't a complicated process but nonetheless a memo had been issued with the title 'Revolving Doors - Guidelines for Staff'.

As the lemmings began to take their positions, I wondered if they minded any of this at all, or was it just me? Surely I wasn't the only person in this building that craved a totally unrealistic life of non-stop action and

adventure, or at least the challenge of tackling a revolving door unaided? Didn't everyone feel like that, or were they just better at hiding it than I was? Did they all stare out of the window at aeroplanes, wishing desperately that they were on one, going somewhere, anywhere? Did they too watch motorcycles whizzing by with a pang of envy and imagine what it would be like to not turn off at the same junction every morning, but to keep riding until the road or the land ran out? Mind you, that wouldn't take very long in Britain and your epic journey would end in a dilapidated seaside resort like Great Yarmouth or Clacton-on-Sea. No, that wasn't the answer to my itchy feet, but I was on the right track. I decided to muse on the problem for a while longer. After all, it was preferable to opening my post and besides, eBay was down.

I'm pretty sure this was the day I decided to jack it all in and head off on my motorcycle, but it could very well have been another one just like it. There were plenty of days like this and after a while they all blended into each other. I guess that was what kick-started me into action - I wanted every day to be different; I craved the novelty of sleeping in a different place each night, waking up to unfamiliar smells, sounds and languages. Most of all I wanted to be moving along, to always be going somewhere. It's as old as mankind, the urge to roam, but when you get it and succumb to it, for a fleeting moment you kind of feel like you invented it.

The next day was quite eventful. SuperBri resigned. He'd wangled himself a highfalutin new job at a rival company. Nobody could believe it. How did he fool them? everyone was saying, although that was after they'd said 'Hurrah!' or 'Thank God' or any other joyous exclamation that bubbled forth from their delighted mouths. My Boss was the happiest of all and, try as he might, he couldn't hide it. You could see the promotion fantasies running wild in his eyes. Punk rock sensibilities - go to hell! An office

AND a car, it was just too much to bear. I imagined the announcement to his wife that night. 'Cancel the plastic toilet seat, we'll get a wooden one. Things are gonna be different from now on!'

Of course, SuperBri was full of it. Suddenly he was spending a lot of time in the Pigpen, perching on our desks, reminiscing about the early days, how he'd made the department what it is today, but now he needed to move on, he felt it was the right time to go. No one dared tell him he was way overdue. It seemed his new position was terribly important and high profile. 'It's a big job ...' he informed me stoically, his right arm draped round my cringing shoulders '... but, I'm a big job guy.'

'Dear Brian', I wrote in his farewell card, 'it's been a pleasure learning from the Master.' Apparently the collection fund for his leaving present had to be topped up with petty cash.

Even with SuperBri out of the picture, the world of taupe and lemmings held little appeal and I started to do a bit of research into this idea of mine - a long-distance motorcycle adventure. The whole thing started out quite vague, I didn't really know where I wanted to go; I just knew I wanted to go somewhere. In quiet moments I casually searched the net on 'motorcycle round the world' or something like that, then I started to dip into technical articles about suitable bikes for different terrains. 'Any bike's subframe is liable to crack with the extra weight of the luggage when travelling on corrugated dirt roads,' it said somewhere. Hmm, I thought, mental note: strengthen subframe. Second mental note: find out what subframe is. But soon I was calculating saving plans and making lists and scaring myself with US Department of State warnings of civil war, robberies and terrorism in every country that I fancied visiting. I checked what it said about the UK and it was pretty much the same, so I stopped paying attention after that. By their reckoning I should have been robbed by

a bogus taxi driver, bombed by the IRA, pickpocketed, mugged and date-raped while having a drink in a pub and killed, or at least injured, in a train crash caused by our chaotic rail services. I felt slightly cheated by my humdrum, uneventful life after reading this and wondered if there really was any need to motorcycle across Colombia or the Congo when there was clearly so much action that I was missing out on here, on my very own doorstep.

These planning stages were full of promise and nervous excitement as it gradually dawned on me that I really was going to do this, that in the near future I would be On The Road in a faraway foreign land, that this adventure I had dreamed of for so long was due to be plucked from the depths of the Fantasy file and plonked squarely into Reality. On a research jaunt to a travel bookshop, I was fortunate enough to engage a sales assistant with a discerning nose for motorcycle-related literature. 'You've got to read *Jupiter's Travels* by Ted Simon, it's the all-time classic motorcycle travel book, and you must get the *Adventure Motorcycling Handbook* of course.'

'Are there any motorcycle travel books written by women?' I enquired. It seemed the answer was no. There were a few serious tomes on the joys of motorcycling from a female perspective, but I knew all about that already - that's why I was here.

Back home the bookshelves were creaking and the adventure was brewing. I leafed through action-packed chapters on emergency gearbox repairs in a Siberian swamp or being rescued from certain death by Tuareg nomads in the Sahara. It was all out of my league; big boys' stuff - men who could pull wheelies and fix seized engines with a Swiss Army knife. But as I read on, this only made me more determined to have a go. My rational mind told me that if someone else had done it, well surely, that meant I could do it too. After all, I reasoned, what was the worst thing that could happen?

The balance between doing enough research to ensure a successful expedition but not *too* much that I scared myself to death with doom-laden facts and figures turned out to be one of my biggest challenges. In the end I banned myself from reading motorcycle travel material at bedtime, as I got so excited I couldn't sleep. Even poring over maps after 10 p.m. induced hours of feet-twitching insomnia, thus my night-time reading was eventually restricted to a book on the milder subject of global weather systems. But sooner or later, I had to decide where in the world I was going.

You imagine that most people can name their dream destination, their 'I've always wanted to go to ...' hotspot. My problem was that I've always wanted to go everywhere, so with my map of the world laid out on the floor, the decision-making process went something like this: it's got to be somewhere hot, and I'd like to see those big cacti with the sticking-out arms. OK, Mexico then. Well, why not do the whole continent? North and South America. South America? Ooh yeah, nice and exotic, Carmen Miranda and all that, always did like her hats covered in tropical fruit. And I do want to go somewhere with palm trees. Yes, South America sounds like a good plan.

I considered it hatched.

It was around this time that I was given a significant piece of advice. Naturally, plenty of opinions start flying around when you decide to do something like this, usually along the lines of 'DON'T!' from people who watch a lot of television. But this pearl of wisdom, given to me by a world-traveller friend of mine with thousands of miles under his belt, was:

Make it a mission. Don't just meander here and there. State your goal before you leave, whether it be to motorcycle around the world, or from A to B, or whatever. But this sense of purpose, even though it's self-imposed, is very important in keeping you focused.

Now I must admit I scoffed a bit at first as it sounded rather too regimented and organised - all the things I wanted to get away from - but the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Later that night I laid out my map of the world and sprawled myself over it, peering at the Americas with a new-found sense of purpose. I would start at the top in Alaska, I decided, and ride right down to the bottom, to the very tip of South America, Tierra del Fuego - the Land of Fire - to the most southerly point in the world that can be reached by road - a little Argentine town called Ushuaia.

'Ushuaia.' I said it aloud to myself. I'd never heard of it before, but this little town at the end of the world was to become my sole focus for the foreseeable future. I studied the map for a long time, examining this vast land mass that would become my temporary home. I traced a route down the West coast and discovered that my journey would take me over 16,000 miles, across mountains, deserts and jungles and through Nicaragua. Which was a surprise, as I'd always thought it was in Africa.

With my route now inked on to the map, it was time to deal with Conundrum No. 2 - The Bike. Up until this point my world of motorcycling had been limited to vintage British road bikes, due to a longstanding love affair with 1950s leather-clad rockers. At the age of thirteen, that magical time when you first realise that the opposite sex might actually have something to offer, I began plastering my bedroom walls with pictures of *Wild One* era Marlon Brando, Gene Vincent and any other greasy hoodlum that had ever straddled a chunk of throbbing Brit Iron. Although it was many years later that I finally got round to acquiring my motorcycle licence, the obsession with all things noisy, greasy and rockin' had never gone away, and against the advice of experienced and, frankly, sensible motorcycling friends, I cut my biking teeth on a 650cc 1963 BSA. This scheme initially involved more gnashing than cutting of

teeth, but after a series of 'character-building' breakdowns, accidents, electrical failures, oil leaks, snapped chains and the many miles of obligatory pushing associated with British bike ownership, (wo)man finally triumphed over machine and the suitably shiny black and chrome BSA became a trusty friend, providing me with many happy road miles.

However, I realised it wasn't the most practical choice for this expedition into the Americas that was slowly taking shape in my mind, and I set my research gene into action on the 'What Bike' question. I knew I wanted some sort of off-road model, as I expected (and secretly hoped) to encounter all manner of bone-shaking terrain and dodgy road surfaces, but clocking in at five feet and four inches, I found the seat heights of the popular bikes left my feet dangling in mid-air. All my research pointed me towards either tall, heavy, rally-style 650s or enormous BMWs with ABS, computerised knick-knacks and engines the size of a small car, with a price tag to match.

It was important to me to choose a bike that was light enough to pick up by myself; and to wriggle free from, should I ever find myself squashed beneath it. I had once been pinned to a spot of London tarmac by the BSA, watching the petrol tank empty its contents over me: I was keen to avoid a similar plight. On that occasion I was fortunate enough to be rescued by a couple of sturdy pensioners, but, I wondered, would I be so lucky in the middle of the desert? I didn't feel that I could rely on the local nomads as the fourth emergency service. Most importantly, I wanted a bike that could go anywhere, that would be a friend, not a foe, in a tricky situation, and whose paintwork I didn't have to worry about scratching. Cheap and cheerful were my watchwords and after much deliberation I decided to fly in the face of perceived wisdom and opted for a 225cc trail bike: the Yamaha XT225 Serow. It was small, light, economical and named after a stocky

little mountain deer. What more could I ask for? What I wasn't prepared for were the howls of derision and hoots of laughter from those who considered themselves in the know.

'You're going to do it on a 225 dirt bike?' they would exclaim. 'I pity your arse!'

'Sixteen thousand miles? At fifty miles an hour!' spluttered another.

'Fifty-five,' I corrected him.

Even the man at the airfreight company felt the need to put in his penny's worth when I requested a quote for flying the bike to Alaska. *If you don't mind me saying, this is the wrong bike for this type of expedition*, he scrawled on the faxed quote. I threw it in the bin and phoned another freight company.

If I wanted some sound advice and encouragement, I only had to look to my fellow riders, friends and strangers alike, and reap the rewards of the community spirit that burns brightly between motorcyclists of all descriptions. Whether it's a wave from a rider whizzing past in the opposite direction, or stopping to help a broken-down bike at the roadside, this solidarity cuts across the usual social boundaries and you find yourself meeting all sorts of unlikely allies. There's nothing like the shared experience of getting cold, wet and dicing with death amongst negligent car drivers to bring folk together. Or as one retired BMW-riding gent, who came to my assistance when I broke down on the M40 one cold dark night, put it: 'Motorcycling's a great thing. We'd never be having a chat if it wasn't for bikes, I'm twice your age and you'd probably think I was a dirty old man!'

Despite this unspoken unity, motorcyclists still manage to split themselves into subcultures aplenty - sports bikers, Brit bikers, Harley riders and all the rest, each with their own hangout, so after a bit of research I wasn't surprised to discover the existence of a small band of 'adventure

motorcyclists'. Although, by their very nature, their hangout was the world itself. But the advent of the internet had connected these globe-riding souls and, in the process, provided a source of inspiration and assistance for those who yearned to follow in their tyre tracks.

Meanwhile, back in the Pigpen with no SuperBri, there was a distinct lack of envelope-pushing. I decided it was time to remedy that in the most literal fashion, and on the following Monday morning, I gave a white DL envelope (as the stationery department insisted on calling it) a gentle shove over to the Boss's desk. He gave me a knowing look, but rather than sit there watching the relief flood over his face, I took a timely walk to the canteen for a celebratory cup of tea where I observed two identikit media blondes fighting silently, but with thin-lipped determination, over the few pieces of kiwi fruit in the otherwise uninspiring BBC-issue fruit salad. If there'd been any doubt that I'd made the right decision, it was removed at that moment. Back upstairs I was ushered into an office, its walls constructed entirely from glass - another brilliant stab at dehumanisation from Evil Office Design Plc. The other Pigpenners were watching and making silly faces at me.

'So, this is it. You're leaving us,' said the Boss, my resignation letter still in his hand. He was attempting a neutral tone of voice but I'm sure I sensed a touch of glee sneaking in.

I nodded, trying to look thoughtful and reflective.

'So what are your plans?' he asked with a casual politeness.

I recalled the one and only time I'd opened up to the Boss and told him I was unhappy in my job. His suggestion then was that I should leave to set up a business painting folk art on to watering cans along the English canal system, so I was looking forward to this conversation and hopefully picking up some more career advice.

'I'm going to motorcycle from Alaska to Argentina.'

He gaped at me.

'By yourself?'

'Yes.'

'Well, that's quite something!'

I could tell he didn't believe me.

'Well, as you know, I've had itchy feet for a while,' I said, which meant, 'Well, as you know, I've despised this mind-numbing, soul-sapping job for a while.'

'Well, well, well! Yes, that's quite something! Not the usual backpacking in Thailand for you, eh?'

I laughed, for various reasons, but mostly at his MFI-esque concept of adventure. But he wasn't laughing, he seemed preoccupied by something. Suddenly an air of melancholy enveloped him and he slumped on to a nearby designer sofa, his gelled head in his hands.

'You're doing the right thing, y'know,' he said seriously.

Finally, I'd done something he approved of!

'And you've got to do it now,' he continued, 'before you get married and have kids and all that stuff. God, I wish I'd done some travelling, bit of backpacking, driven across the States or something. Now I'm married, I've got a mortgage and the children ...' He tailed off miserably before hastily following it up with what everyone says immediately after they've bemoaned the fact that their offspring prevent them from doing what they want.

'Don't get me wrong, I love my kids, wouldn't be without them, but well, y'know ...'

I spent the next twenty minutes listening to him ponder on forty years of what-ifs.

Upon my return to the Pigpen, I dived for the phone and hastily booked a one-way ticket to Alaska.

'I can give you a return for the same price, y'know,' said the travel agent in a broad Liverpudlian tone that gave the unfortunate impression he was offering me a dodgy deal.

'I know,' I explained, 'but I'll be coming back from Buenos Aires and I don't know when.'

'Sounds like you've got a bit of a journey ahead,' he remarked, as he tapped my details into the computer.

Brimming with the excitement of resigning from my job and now booking my flight, I couldn't help but share my plans with this stranger on the end of the phone. Unfortunately, he didn't share my enthusiasm.

'You're going to ride a motorbike on your own through Central America? Through Honduras, El Salvador and all nutty places like that?'

I answered eagerly in the affirmative.

'You're fookin' mad, lass,' he surmised with a cruel cackle. 'They're all killin' each other over there, they'll 'ave you for brekkie.'

He chuckled merrily at this amusing scenario, completing our transaction with, 'Well, good luck, luv, you're gonna need it.'

I was feeling buoyant enough to dismiss him as a small-minded, scaredy-cat Scouser, although a small part of me wondered if maybe he had a point.

But this was no time to go getting the wobbles. I put the phone down and sent an email to my friends, family and colleagues telling them I didn't have a job any more, but I did have a motorcycle and a seat on a plane bound for Alaska.

'Are you going to have a mobile phone with you?' said my mum when I called her with the news later that day.

'No, but ...' I paused, as an idea presented itself to me, 'I'll do a website, so you can keep track of me.'

'Oh dear,' she replied, 'does that mean I'll have to get a computer?'

It wasn't long after my resignation from the Pigpen that I was bending a friend's ear with an update of my plans when he interrupted my excitable ramblings about rabies vaccinations and heavy-duty inner tubes and other fascinating subjects that fill the mind of the budding motorcycle adventuress.

‘You know what,’ he said, ‘you should meet this mate of mine. He’s ridden his motorbike round the world twice, he could probably give you some advice. His name’s Austin. Actually, funnily enough, he reminds me of you, you’re like a female version of him.’

‘Well,’ I said, intrigued by this cryptic description, ‘I’ll give him a call.’

Austin came round to visit me soon after on a motorcycle that looked like it had come from, or should be going to, a scrapyard, and burst into my world like a Boy’s Own comic book hero. I had my map of the world laid out on the floor and a mental list of technical, geographical and practical questions for him. But it soon became obvious that my innocent fact-finding mission was veering wildly off course, and the evening degenerated into a pleasant blur of cheap red wine, playing records too loud and yakking until the early hours. We met up again the next week, and the next, always under the chaste premise of serious motorcycle discussion, and soon these ‘research meetings’ became a regular fixture in my calendar. But it wasn’t long before our conversations began straying from the official subject matter and there was no more denying it: Cupid had been secretly paying us regular visits too, and had fired a pair of particularly potent arrows in our direction. I’d always heard wise old married people say about meeting their intended: ‘You just know.’ But I’d never quite believed it. Now, for the first time ever, I just knew – and the feeling was mutual! I was totally smitten, and totally annoyed.

‘This isn’t meant to happen!’ I protested to my best friend in an emergency phone call late one night. ‘I’m not meant to meet the man of my dreams just before I disappear off to the other side of the world on my motorbike!’

I had recently extricated myself from the clutches of a long-term liaison, for the sole purpose of being footloose

and fancy free along the length of the Pan American Highway. My message to the mothers of America was supposed to be Lock Up Your Sons! And now this two-wheeled vagabond with a pair of sparkly blue eyes and a naily DR350 had come along and blasted my neatly arranged plans into orbit.

We embarked full throttle on the sort of grand affair they make films about, albeit a Barbara Cartland novel adapted for the screen by Ben Dover. Time stood still and an era of endless fun ensued, whizzing around the countryside on our bikes, lying in fields, chewing blades of grass and making eternal promises. Our nights were spent in fields, under trees or in the back of Austin's Transit van, constantly marvelling at the twist of fate that had thrown us, two perfectly matched halves, together. But throughout all this, the unspoken words hung over us.

'I've still got to go, you know,' I said finally.

'Of course,' he replied. 'You must.'

It was a painful wrench, but we both knew this was just the beginning.

'Fate has dealt us a winning hand,' I proclaimed. 'It's just that the timing's a bit off.'

'We can wait, we've got our whole lives,' Austin said philosophically. 'And I don't want you turning around to me when we're old saying "You stopped me going on that bike trip!"'

It was agreed, but with the clock ticking towards my departure date, I had to get busy preparing myself and the Serow for our grand adventure. Somehow, in between conducting the romance of the century and continuing to work out my notice in the Pigpen, the mundane details of vaccinations, spare parts and luggage systems fell into place. It looked as if I would be heading off to Alaska without a hitch, unless you count falling in love, and, if so, it was hardly something to complain about.

But there was still one thing, other than Austin, that was keeping me awake at night: Spanish. *Español*. Castellano. Crikey! They even had different names for the same language. And I couldn't speak a word of any of them. My route took me through the length of Latin America and my knowledge of the lingua franca was pretty much nada. This wasn't to say I hadn't had a go. As part of my trip preparation I had dutifully attended a Spanish evening course taught by an octogenarian, red-blooded Argentine who should have been pensioned off years ago for the safety of his female pupils. But this being twenty-first-century Bridget Jones London, he was up against a fair amount of competition from the male scholars. Most of the class, it soon became clear, had joined up with the singular intention of meeting a soulmate, or at the very least, getting a *porción*. The few with more wholesome intentions were easily identified by the fact that they arrived at the first lesson with shiny new English-Spanish dictionaries and completed their homework each week, but these budding bilinguals were very much the minority. Sure enough, as we sat in our draughty, prefab classroom every Wednesday evening chanting '*Uno, dos, tres ...*' with not even the slightest attempt at a Spanish accent, glances started to be exchanged, books were being shared, eyebrows were raised and as the weeks went by, the more studious of the new pairings began self-consciously arriving at class together, sometimes holding hands in a bold display of togetherness. The less diligent couplings, however, were never seen again and within a few weeks the body count had dropped from thirty to just four - a mousy lawyer girl who claimed to have a Spanish boyfriend called Fabio, a middle-aged couple who divided their time between a half-built villa in Malaga and a sunbed in Willesden, and me. All of us at the mercy of a sexually frustrated Argentine pensioner. The couple were only interested in learning words relating to construction -