

STORY AND PICS STEVE CROMBIE

LOST ON ADVENTURE

{PART TWO}

- ENTER THE AMAZON

The Amazon River and surrounding rainforest is more than 100 million years old. Tributaries at the upper reaches are 40 metres across. The river mouth at the finish is over 400kms wide. Otters, water iguanas, pink dolphins and piranha run wild in the river, while caiman, toucan and jaguars manoeuvre their way between the trees. Travelling the river would be a momentous undertaking, but for Steve Crombie and his Honda NX650, just getting to the boat was a trek of biblical proportions.



LEFT: Chewing the grass with a semi-aquatic capybara, the largest rodent in the world.

RIGHT: Andreas pondering whether he should use his spanner to tighten a bolt or flip the cap off another beer.

BELOW: When they're good they're good, when they're bad they're a bloody nightmare!

BELOW LEFT: Changing a tyre on the roadside. Everyone wants to have a go.

TOP RIGHT: Get comfy fella ... bike'll be there a while.

THE PLAN WAS TO TRAVEL 7000KMS BY RIVER FROM THE TOP OF THE ANDES EAST TOWARDS THE MOUTH OF THE LARGEST RIVER DELTA IN THE WORLD WITH MY HONDA NX650 IN TOW.

People have sailed, paddled and puttered down The Amazon, but I dragged my overladen 260kg adventure bike on and off countless boats, through malaria-infested villages, leper colonies, drug-smuggling boat wars and random religious camps from the Andes to the Atlantic Ocean.

All that came later. First up I had to get ready and get to the boat.

NO MOSS IN QUITO

I arrived in Quito, the capital of Ecuador, to prepare my bike – compression issues, worn valves and warped rims – dump some gear, find a map, fix my camera and head to the first place I could jump a boat. I had a crappy little room while I was rebuilding the NX and the three insanely fit strippers living downstairs gave me a helping hand when times were tough.

There's only one boat a month that heads towards Nuevo Rockafuerte (famous for the illegal animal trade and drug smuggling) on the border with Peru, and later to Iquitos some time the following month. At 1:13pm on Saturday my engine was spread over the floor of a local mechanic's workshop and I had to arrive in Coca (Ecuador) by Sunday night to finalise arrangements for the first stage of my river assault.

No probs.

FRIENDS

A newfound friend, Dr Rosenberg (doctor for US embassy), had been laying down his knowledge on the parasites and bugs occupying the Amazonian environment I was about to enter. He knew all about worms that pop their heads out of scabs, fish that swim up your urine stream and fevers so intense you slide off the bed, among other delights. He also informed me this area is known as one of the worst places in South America for malaria. I'd already managed to get Giardia, amoebic dysentery and parasites running trails through my feet, so I thought it'd be great to try avoid some of these new and interesting phenomena.

You can never be totally ready, and I guessed it would take a month to be properly prepared. Unfortunately, I only had a few hours.

My bike was going to be sorted Monday, then, "Wednesday". "Thursday for sure." By Saturday 4:30pm I was getting a little worried. I was supposed to take a boat from Coca, on the Napo River in Ecuador, to Nuevo Rockafuerte, on the Peruvian border, leaving

Monday morning. After discussing with 10 people the time necessary to arrive by bike I was informed it was between six hours and 24 hours away. So if I'd left at around midday I should've arrived in good time for the boat.

At 5.00pm we were still fondling my bike and Andreas the mechanic was helping while I ran around getting visas and finalising preparations. Andreas smoked an excessive amount of weed and his watch was actually set to a different time, which he said was his time, "Andreas time" ... His timing sucked.

At least he was moving around the bike and touching it. I guessed that must've meant he was doing something.

The quantity of beer being consumed was a little disconcerting as well. There was also the matter of him claiming he'd never seen an engine like this before. It soon became clear he had no idea what he was doing.

I had to run off for an appointment with the Brazilian Consulate and it felt like I was leaving my girlfriend in the hands of a randy chimpanzee.



ONE FOR THE ROAD

It was at this time I spotted an old drinking buddy, The Hollandaise Hitman. Not hard considering he is 6'6" and 50 years old. Deep crevices line his forehead. Scars from various knife and gun wounds puckering his body. He'd just been released from prison and was looking to celebrate, so we drank a beer or two, or maybe three. I didn't keep an accurate count.

At 3:45am I waved goodbye and dived into bed for a short nap.

At 7.00am I bolted breakfast and started final preparations before making a break at midday. The most recent informant thinks it'll take me seven hours to get to Coca, so I thought I'd still be OK.

About 40 minutes out of Quito I went the wrong way for 15kms and had to backtrack. My map turned out to be crap, and on top of everything else I sucked at reading Spanish. It was going to be a long day.

At 2.00pm I was almost clear of the highest pass – approx 4600metres – when it started to rain. Then it started to sleet, and the sleet progressed to snow. The bike was performing at about 50 per cent capacity with the jetting gone all to hell, and even though it was dark I was determined not to miss the boat for absolutely any reason.

The thin air had really sucked the life out of the Honda and it pumped back and forth like a wild bull with his testicles caught in a rabbit trap. Maximum cruising speed was down to about 35kph and I was still 5kms from the top when it finally gave up. I tried zigzagging to no avail. There was no point ripping out the carburettor. If I could only get to the top it would all be downhill, but the bike couldn't go any higher.

At this stage it was around minus five degrees Celsius. Not so bad, I figured. I couldn't feel my hands or even undo my helmet and I began to worry I might get frostbite. My gloves were in the bottom of my aluminium pannier, but I thought, "Five kilometres. I'll be OK. Maybe ... This sucks".

In a desperate survival manoeuvre I managed to undo my pants and piss all over my hands to keep up the circulation, and I was grateful to get some tingling feeling.

JET SETTER

We made four attempts at fixing the valves and, seeing as the engine didn't explode, felt we'd achieved a reasonable level of success. Andreas calmly smoked a pipe and sucked on a beer while I tensioned down the top end, pinching up the last bolt at around 11.00pm.

Before returning to town I took the bike for a spin and the motor pumped like an elephant's heart right from the start. It still suffered from altitude sickness and, desperate, I shoved a few copper wires through the jet.

At 12:30am I was ready to go at last. My boat left in 30 hours. With about 14 hours of sunlight remaining I had to cross the Andes and fight my way through the forest. Easy.

Or so I thought...

LOST ON ADVENTURE [PART TWO]

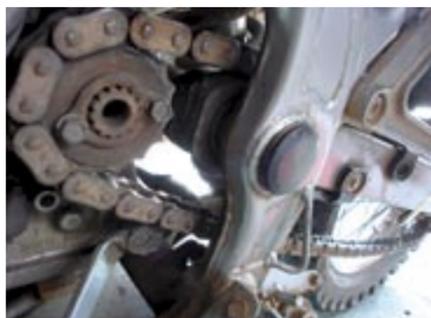
- ENTER THE AMAZON

RIGHT: Cruising through the Ecuadorian Amazon.

BELOW LEFT: After filming wild pigs being loaded on to our trading boat in the Peruvian Amazon I was chased by the local kids.

BOTTOM LEFT: This front sprocket had just about had enough.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Old mate and his kids earning a buck on the piano accordion.



UPHILL BATTLE

Suddenly I heard a truck pelting up the hill. I hadn't finished draining the main vein, and with no dexterity in my fingers I waved him down, cock still flapping in the wind and urine dripping from my hands. As he pulled up I hoped he hadn't seen *Brokeback Mountain*.

After informing him I needed help getting up the mountain, Tito the truck driver responded as though this happened every day. With an unhurried flourish he tied a scraggly, lifeless, three-metre rope between the front of the bike and the back of the truck and started hauling. In my hungover state I hadn't noticed he'd tied the rope between my forks and as the truck lurched forward the rope put pressure on my front guard and denied me any control of the bike. The steering locked. I beeped for him to

stop, but he couldn't hear me. I yelled as loud as I could and he still couldn't hear me. I beeped and yelled, then screamed. I even thought about crying – I was going to die before shagging that Annalise chick from *Fat Pizza*. I knew it.

Then we hit the ice on the road. My front and back wheel started to slide and I felt as though I was on a pair of 260kg in-line skis being dragged up an icy, bitumen, pothole-infested road that crumbled 200 metres straight down off one side.

I wrestled the bars with all the concentration I could muster. I kept having visions of the bike slamming into the road with me wedged underneath and being dragged sideways to the mountain-top; blood, bones and broken gear spraying over the road.

It was the closest I have ever been to physically shitting myself.

MOUNTAIN HIGH

Finally at the summit, Tito untied me and I rolled down the other side of the mountain. The bike was OK, but my hands were still tingling.

The descent took me back into the thicker air, and as I tore down the incline power returned to the hard-done-by Honda donk ... for a while. "Crap!", I was losing compression even as I lost altitude.

Back at 2000 metres I dismounted to find my Ecuadorian mechanic buddy had forgotten to tighten some extremely important bolts, which had subsequently fallen out en-route. The Honda's compression was crapping out and oil was pouring out from a variety of places.

The bolts I needed seemed to have a huge diameter and none of the spares I carried would suit. I kept getting paranoid that someone sabotaged my bike.

I had no choice but to shove my finger in

the hole and keep riding.

I came to an army control drug checkpoint guard, and, ignoring him in my concerned state, I instead spoke to his captain. As unbelievable as it sounds, even though we were in the arse-end of nowhere there was a one-stop shop for tools, baby strollers and toilet paper five kilometres further on.

With a finger back in the boiling hole I wobbled off to the tool shop, where the owner and I rifled through every bolt in the store. Not one would do the job. We tried sawing a U-bolt in half, honing down the edge with an electric sander and jamming it in there, but it wouldn't fit. As a last resort we pulled the spark plug out of a chainsaw, sawed off the tip, sanded it down and whacked it in, only to find it was still a little too small. With some creative thread taping, it stayed. I left. They advised me to take a "Short Cut". I did. Stupid idea.

FLAT OUT

Finally under way again, hunger began to intrude on my consciousness. I hadn't eaten anything except two mini empanadas that morning. Time was now perilously tight and, pushing thoughts of food aside, I elected to try a short cut.

Fog kept the range of my vision to about 10 metres on a muddy dirt road, which soon came to a halt at an avalanche. The road workers reckoned it would take about four hours to clear the rubble, and I knew if that happened I'd never make it. I pleaded with them, claiming I was carrying medicine for a sick friend who was spewing blood and would die if they didn't let me through (this was sort of true, but she wasn't dying).

The huge earthmovers butted the bus-sized rocks aside and I bolted through the gaps to the cheers of the workers. I held my breath and hoped I'd get through without being slammed by an airborne bam-bam rock.

From there I flew through 100 strong jungle villages, rivers, and miles of forest.

At 7:00pm the sun set and I slammed a rock resulting in a flat rear next to a broken-down school bus. Like a madman I leapt off and started patching. Of course I pinched the tube.

Working by the light of the headlamp in the pitch black and pouring rain, I repaired the tube for the second time. A superhuman jungle kid took turns with me at the pump, and with the whole thing ready to roll I saw my rear wheel was now 12mm out of alignment.

A FITTING END

It was almost midnight when I found the last bridge was out. Tired and ravenous, I decided to slowly idle the bike across the ford, and of course I fell in. The pannier busted open and heaps of gear fell out: photo CDs, manuals, clothes, cooking gear, rope, batteries, etc. The bike had low-sided and, tired, hungry and weak, I couldn't lift it. Two local buses powered by and didn't help and it was thanks to my anger at their lack of assistance I rallied and hauled the NX upright.

With the bike safely on the other bank I returned to try and recover the contents of the burst pannier.

Fully clothed and on my hands and knees, headlamp stuck to my forehead, partly submerged in the water, I was fiercely determined not to lose anything, and to arrive in Coca in time for the boat.

I had dreamt about this for years. At 1:30am I finally arrived in Coca, found a hostel, ate some chicken-shit sandwich with five-day-old rice and passed out at 3:00am. At 5:30am I was up and ready to board the boat. As I sucked down breakfast the captain wandered in and asked, "Is that your bike?" "Si (Yep)!" I say with an ear-to-ear grin, proud to have made it to the beginning of the 7,000km adventure. "Sorry senior," the captain explained, "it won't fit on the boat." ■

ABOVE: After two hours of negotiating with the captain, the harbourmaster, the local policeman, his wife and their grandmother I managed to weasel my way on to the boat. A few months and 7000kms later I flowed out to the Atlantic still alive and kicking. The first day off the boat I saw a local wacko shot dead on the street by a policeman. Welcome to Macapa, Brazil. To make matters more interesting I managed to destroy the oil retainer on my rear shock – 4000kms offroad with a hitchhiker and a broken shock. Memorable. That's all I can say.

BELOW: I arrived in Iquitos with a half-dead cow. No matter how sick it is it's still worth more alive than dead.

