

WORDS AND PICS BY STEVE CROMBIE

**SYDNEY-BASED STEVE CROMBIE, 27, HAS JUST FINISHED A TWO-YEAR, 90,000KM TRAILBIKE TREK FROM AUSTRALIA TO THE ARCTIC CIRCLE. TRAVELLING THROUGH EVERY COUNTRY IN SOUTH, CENTRAL AND NORTH AMERICA. IT'S THE FIRST LEG ON A ROUND-THE-WORLD TRIP TO RAISE AWARENESS OF YOUTH SUICIDE AND DIGITALLY CAPTURE THE VARIOUS CULTURES OF OUR PLANET BEFORE THEY'RE PROPELLED OFF THE FACE OF THE EARTH.**

# LOST ON ADVENTURE {PART ONE}



Above: Argentina: Ruta 40 – 8 punctures in 45 kms (see top trails)

**It took me two years to work my way from Ushuaia, Argentina – 54°48'00"S, 068°18'00"W, the southernmost city in the world, to Prudhoe Bay, USA – 70°19'32"N, 148°42'41"W, the northernmost accessible point in the Americas by road. I dragged my Honda Dominator for about 7000kms down the Amazon on and off 60 different boats, crossed the Andes three times, rebuilt my engine four times (in the Bolivian Andes, on an island off Venezuela, in Mexico City and on the shores of Vancouver in Canada), met the President of Panama on a deserted airstrip in the Caribbean, and passed**

## THROUGH THE AGES

Since the age of five I've been obsessed with National Geographic magazines and the Guinness Book Of Records. I watched Robert De Niro in The Mission and decided I was going to go the Amazon.

At 20, after adventures across Australia and South East Asia, I wrote a list of things I wanted to accomplish. No. 1 was "Ride around India on a motorbike."

For the next five years this dream festered and bubbled. Ride around India. Ride from India to the UK. Ride from the UK to Australia. Why don't I just ride around the world?

I became obsessive. For three years I researched – people who had flown, hitchhiked, walked, shagged and sailed their way through some serious intercontinental adventuring. I tracked experienced adventurers down and squeezed their brains until they changed their phone numbers.

But how the hell to pay for it? I started studying the stuff that was going to help me pay for the trip. I learnt how to make a website. I got a job where I could hone my skills, make some cash and start saving. I ended up completing my MBA. Crafting every assignment I could around the trip, to the amusement of many professors.

**out at his next-door neighbour's country retreat after he handed me a suspicious looking cigarette.**

Guardia, dysentery and various parasites called my insides home. I starved and dehydrated my way to near death in Argentina, relocated my index finger in a Chilean forest, almost smashed into the side of a puma in Guyana, and chipped my neck in Nicaragua. I got so sick I couldn't move or speak. Pus and blood oozed from the wrong places.

But I made it. Just. And I wouldn't change it for the world.

As plans progressed, one of my best buddies – who should have come on the adventure – died.

I hooked up with an organization called Youth Insearch and in his honour dedicated the trip to raise awareness of youth suicide. They run camps to help troubled kids solve their problems, create dreams and goals and turn them into reality. If you want to check it out visit <http://www.youthinsearch.org.au>.

After two years this trip has become my life. I'm addicted to living on the road in my two-wheeled off-road mobile home.



Above: USA: Maintenance in the back streets of San Diego, California

Insets top to bottom: Chile: 15 Maoi on Ahu Tongariki on Easter Island.

Mexico: semi-trailer driver who rear ended me into an intersection. Squeezed 200 pesos and a photo from him for the damage.

USA/Canada border: Hardcore Christian told me the devil was inside me.



## PREPARATION

**Take overland adventuring seriously and prepare as much as humanly possible. Without a movie star support crew and big dollars falling from your pockets the road is a little harder.**

You need to mentally, physically and spiritually prepare yourself for starvation, sneaky thieves and self-appreciation sessions. Expect anything to happen.

Choose and prepare your machine carefully. It will go from best friend to worst enemy in a heartbeat. When it comes to equipment, the chances of a Big W just around the corner are pretty slim, so you want to trust every item on your bike with your life.

**A basic summary of the planning I did for the trip:**

**First Aid:** The more you know the better. St Johns has good basic motorcycle and Outdoor Survival First Aid courses. If you fall and stake yourself on a fence or get gored by a wild pig there's nothing worse than not surviving to brag to your mates about it.

**Riding Skills:** You're more than likely confident and capable, but an extra riding course to tidy up your skills always helps.

**Survival:** Learn how to survive in the environment you're riding in, especially if your bike shits itself in the middle of a forest, desert or city slum. Read survival books, memorize the key skills and practice so you have the resources to survive some of the worst conditions on Earth and still light a fart at the end of the day. The SAS survival guide and the US Army manual have some great tips.

**Fitness:** Take note of how you ride on an empty stomach. What if you're riding every day? How much more do you eat on the road? Learn about your body.

After an 18 hour riding day you have to be prepared to pick up your bike if the need arises. No-one else is going to do it. Basic sit-ups, push-ups and chin ups will do most of the work. Don't forget to drink heaps of water. The new Camelbak Alpine Explorer is the perfect size for carrying food, water and visual aids for when you get lonely.

**Food:** You'd be surprised what you're prepared to eat if you're really hungry. Sloth, insects, pig brains, rattlesnakes, rats – anything that will fit in your mouth. But understand what the locals eat and take your cue from them.

**Test runs:** Get to know your modified bike, test your gear and capabilities on different terrain in rain, snow and searing heat. Can you fix a puncture? (don't deliberately puncture it with a nail gun, but ensure you know how to fix one if it happens). Let people know where you're going and how long you're going for.

**Administration:** The paper trail alone can stop most people from getting their arse out of the garage. You need to consider a carnet de passage (moto passport), insurance, freight, consulate advice, rego, injections, passports, visas, political situations, licensing and more. You've got to keep on top of it all. The Horizons Unlimited website runs through all this info. Check it out at [www.horizonsunlimited.com](http://www.horizonsunlimited.com)

**Navigation:** Learn how to use a GPS. If you are using a GPS you probably have no idea where the hell you are, so learn the basics of the local language of the country you're in – especially numbers. It is handy to know if the next fuel stop is 40 or 400 or 4000kms away. Not every country has user-friendly road signs, or even roads.





Above: Panama – Puerto Belo: Illegally entering Panama on a former drug smuggling boat from Colombia.

Below: Bolivia – Sucre: After sleeping on their classroom floor, they chased us out of the village.



Top: Brazil – Rio De Janeiro: Riding past statue of Christ (Christo Redentor) one of the man made wonders of the world.  
Left: Panama: Welding the teeth from a 520 sprocket onto the centre of a 530 sprocket.  
Above: Brazil: Spearing fish with locals in northern Amapa. Slept in building behind.



#### HIGHLIGHTS

##### SOME OF MY FAVOURITE RIDES WERE:

**Chile:** Carretera Austral. 1100kms, 85% dirt  
**Puerto Montt – Villa O'Higgins.** All gravel, this trail carves through northern Patagonia between the Andes and the Pacific Ocean. Criss-crossing between glaciers, mountains, waterfalls and virgin forest. Hot springs, rivers, lagoons, world-class fishing and white-water rafting. On the few boat sections that split the path you are likely to see sea lions, whales and penguins.  
**Argentina:** Ruta 40 – 2480kms, 85% dirt El Chaltén – Esquel. The most remote road in Argentina skirts through Patagonia and the eastern side of the Andes. Super remote desert and chunky tyre tearing trails. I slid through the mid-section of Ruta 40 with an Aussie mate who got eight punctures over 45kms. Bring a puncture kit.  
**Bolivia:** Valle Grande – 850kms, 65% dirt. Santa Cruz –Valle Grande – Sucre. Che Guevara was murdered near here and buried in 1967. The trail goes from above 4000metres down to 700metres. From ice-capped mountains to powdery volcanic ash trails. Cloud forest, 20-foot cacti, coca fields and river crossings mark the way. Not a soul in sight. My favourite trail.  
**Bolivia:** Salar De Uyuni. 700kms (approx), 100% dirt.

**Uyuni – Isla De Pescado- Laguna Verde – Uyuni.** At 3650m it's the highest salt plain in the world. Further south it reaches 5000metres in altitude. Riding at -20C through icy rivers, washboard dirt trails, large rocks and sand. Extreme adventuring at its best.  
**Amazon – 100% dirt.** Any jungle roads through the Amazon. Adventure around every corner. Almost hitting pumas, running over boa constrictors, hunting with locals, crazy mud trails. Anything can happen. Favourite Amazon trails would be in Iquitos – Peru, Leticia – Colombia, Manaus – Brazil, Santarem – Brazil, and the whole of Amapa (the poorest state of Brazil), which borders French Guiana.  
**The Guiana's.** 2000kms (approx), 50% dirt.  
**North Brazil – French Guiana – Suriname – Guyana.** Remote virgin jungle lines the way. One road in from the northern lip of the Amazon River in Brazil and one road out through the south-western corner of Guyana. Huge rivers border every country. Bypassing rastafaris, arms/drugs smuggling, space shuttle launch pads, penal colonies and pumas (highest concentration of pumas in the world). In the wet season roads are only accessible by Unimog or adventure bike. I rode this leg with an English friend on the back. One-third of the way with a blown shock which

I'd rebuilt five times already. I found a second-hand shock from an old Transalp in Cayenne for \$200.  
**El Salvador – Pacific Highway – 320km, 0% dirt Honduras border – Guatemala border.** A newly paved highway curls and cambers along the sub-tropical Pacific Coast past unspoilt beaches and fishing villages joining Honduras to Guatemala. If there was no speed limit this would be awesome racetrack. Lots of Crystal Meth addicts. Watch your bike in built up areas.  
**USA – The Million Dollar Highway.** 120km, 0% dirt Durango – Ouray (Colorado). Massive s-bends wind their way through Colorado over three separate 3000m+ San Juan Mountain passes. Million dollar views around every turn.  
**USA – The Dalton Highway aka 'The Haul Road', 660kms, 85% dirt Fox Spring – Prudhoe Bay.** The Dalton Highway (Alaska) runs alongside the Trans-Alaska Pipeline into the Arctic Circle. The gravel road is well graded most of the time and there are lots of bears. A few years back they had a Polar bear walk halfway down. Polar bears are one of few animals that actually hunt people. Eight people were eaten this summer by grizzlies, which grow over three metres tall. Never camp on bear trails or near rivers. Dust can be a problem.



## LOST ON ADVENTURE (PART ONE)



Above: Steve Cromie's Route around the globe.

**THE PACIFIC**  
The first leg of the trip I island-hopped across the Pacific from Australia to New Zealand, Tahiti, Easter Island and on to Chile. The highlight was Easter Island, 3000kms from its nearest inhabitants, famous for the Birdman cult and the hundreds of 30m stone statues dotting the landscape.

The island is triangulated by two volcano's and the small town of Hang Roa. The 3000+ population has some awe-some riding and beautiful people with a love of Pisco (local grog) and salsa beats. The Crusty Demons built tracks and filmed some serious stunts there a few years ago and you can hire an XR650 and tear around the island at a million miles an hour then pass out free on the beach for as long as your heart desires.

**SOUTH AMERICA**  
South America is the best place in the world behind Oz, and where I got dangerously behind schedule. Raw beauty, proud people and unimaginable terrain make it the number one location on earth to find a wife, drown yourself in beer, stuff your face with exotic food and ride hundreds and thousands of kilometres without ever crossing the same path twice.  
The best countries for culture, people, ladies and lifestyle would be Colombia and Brazil. In Brazil, a beat bounces through every crumbling door frame. Colombians would do anything to put a smile on your face. There aren't really any road rules so speed limit and riding style is left up to in more remote locations.  
The least favourite country was Venezuela. On the bright side petrol was seven cents a litre.

**CENTRAL AMERICA**  
Every country in Central America has off-road adventure enthusiasts. In Costa Rica and Panama the riding was at its best. Huge clubs of the super-rich (only the upperclass can afford bikes there) flowed through the streets where there are no rules. Even so, it was the culture of Panama that stuck in my head.  
Manuel Noriega's final stronghold, Casco Viejo in the old part of Panama became my home while I waited for parts. It was \$3.50 a night and 60 cents a meal. I made clutch cables from kids' bikes, air filters from random parts, brake pads from



asbestos and welded new teeth from a 520 sprocket onto my 530 sprocket as my new ones from Chain Gang didn't make it through customs.  
Crack-heads scavenging the last sips of my morning juice, prostitutes begging for work at my door and 12-year-old kids shooting each other dead outside my window made for colourful memories. I shared a room with a dreadlocked Argentinian hippy unicyclist and his hoola hoop of fire girlfriend. You can buy a pound of fresh tuna for 70 cents and eat it raw. Cocaine is \$3 a gram. I even managed to get a few other travellers out of jail.  
One morning I told the 60-year old lady who ran my run-down hotel to wipe her nose after a huge wad of cocaine had welded itself to her nasal hairs.  
The rest of Central America is awesome but there was a little too much US influence. Belize was amazing. The real pirates of the Caribbean. It's the only country where a car intentionally tried to run me over for fun.





# LOST ON ADVENTURE {PART ONE}



**THE DREAM MACHINE**  
Choosing the right bike is tough. There are so many on the market. You need to consider your budget, time frame, availability of parts, terrain, riding ability and possibly which colour goes best with your riding boots.

For the first leg I chose a Honda (NX650) Dominator, mainly after considering its reputation for reliability, ease of maintenance, mechanical simplicity, ease of modification, running on low grade fuel, looks (prone to theft), power and available torque.

Another big plus is the frame. Indestructible.

Now I've finished the first leg and am looking towards the second, Honda kindly helped out with a brand spanking XR650L, which is very similar to the Dominator except it's much lighter and more off-road worthy. The only downside is the need to reinforce the sub-frame.

Once you've got your machine – modify it. You can spend \$20,000 on the ultimate overland adventure machine or you could spend \$2000 building a capable bike that will, at the end of the day, probably do exactly the same thing. There's a huge variety of opinion about what works and what doesn't with mods. Simplicity is often the key. Chris Scott's Adventure Motorcycling Handbook is the perfect read before personalising your own offroad battlebike.

The most important modifications would be: long-range tank, heavy-duty steel sprockets, heavy-duty chains, automatic chain oiler, bashplate, handguards, heavy-duty handlebars, strong headlights, crash bars, high screen and rebuilt front and rear shocks for the extra load.

Above: Ecuador : Coca to Nuevo Rocafuerte: my first boat into the Amazon

Left: Bolivia – Sucre: 1st engine rebuild. Always check your air filter.

Right: Vancouver – 2yrs on and all that's left. From top left to right – bedroll, medical kit, tool kit, hammock, mosquito net, spare parts, manuals, maps, guidebook, boots, helmet, patch kit, cd's, 10metres of rope, notepad, pump, water purifier, saucepans and cooker, cable ties, spare tubes, fishing gear, fuel canister, throwing knives, electric cords (chargers, video tapes, etc), GPS, more rope, cap, spare tape, waterproof canister, spare lock, sneakers, gloves, sockets, tent, sleeping bag, more tape, jacket, protective gear, computer, crap conditioner, two clothes bags. Still shot camera, Ipod.

**NORTH AMERICA**////////////////////////

Three of the world's natural wonders are here: Pericutin Volcano in Mexico, the Grand Canyon in the USA and the Northern Lights in Canada and Alaska, all surrounded by long, hairy dirt trails. All you need is a good map.

Mexico has some great off-road trails and the most expensive toll system in all the Americas. You don't want to rush through here unless you have bottomless pockets.

The USA is exactly how it appears in the movies – plastic and almost perfect (on the surface). After 18 months in Latin America I was dumbstruck. I spent my first days in the US marvelling at shopping centres, free fresh water and wireless internet from my tent. It took me 10 minutes to turn a shower on. I spent half an hour at the front door of a Walmart in awe until the security guard asked me to move on. The tools at the mechanic's seemed like a dream. Previously I waited a month or made my own parts. Now they arrived in 24 hours or your money back.

I rushed through the southern USA and Canada as I had to get to the Arctic Circle before winter set in. Riding through snow sucks with worn out gear. The Northern Lights kicked arse, but the 22 hours of daylight in the far north rooted my sleep pattern.



**NEXT ISSUE:**  
In the next issue Steve rolls through gear and equipment he dragged around on this odyssey. From no-tech to hi-tech, two years on the road teaches you what's worth its weight in gold and what's crap.

He'll also touch on some other adventures, like strapping his bike on a former smuggling boat from Colombia to the slums of Panama City, entering the Amazon with a 260kg bike, exiting the Amazon through the remote Guianas, and tearing his way through ice storms to the Arctic Circle.

Steve has maintained a website from his tent with thousands of photos, video and diary action. [www.loston.com](http://www.loston.com). Check it out.