

Utixo, Old Bridges and Bear Hugs

Firstly, an introduction to the team.



Mallie Cox – the “Ou Man”, highly experienced, veteran GS and KTM rider. R1200GS ADV



Glenn Lang – my friend and long time riding partner. R1150GS, ADV Conversion



Michael Nieuwoudt – new to the world of GS touring – R1200GS



Myself – R1200GS ADV

We wanted two things! The first was a fun, chill out ride. We weren't looking for toiling through desert sands, or climbing mountains or 1200km+ days. We wanted a, last for the year, boys getaway. One that would take us to pleasant bush surrounds where we could ride open roads, chill out with a beer, eat mountains of beef and pay homage to the Captain. One where we could run with on an average of 500 – 600km per day and still feel fresh thereafter.

Secondly we wanted a hot trip! Hot as in weather; we'd done a few trips during the past year and all of these, for some reason or other, had been in the cold with us wrapped in layers of garments to prevent the wind ripping through. We were looking forward to days of 30+°C where we could ride with open helmets and let the wind fill our jackets, where we could have a smoke break with sweat dripping rather than us huddled over our exhausts for warmth.

It didn't start like that though. As we filled our tanks at the bottom end of Hendrik Potgieter drive, the awakening sky was grey with threatening rain. Being overconfident, I hadn't bothered packing a rain suit into the luggage and I wondered whether I'd regret my decision. Thankfully though, my small clothes bag strapped to the back seat was waterproof. Excited little boys jabbered about each other's kit, fiddled with GPSes, checked tyre pressures and eventually fuddled out of the filling station.

We purposely start our trips before morning traffic and it was easy riding at 5am through Magaliesberg, Koster, and the light rain around Swartruggens didn't have us batting an eyelid. At the toll gate we met Piet (we named him that through lack of intros) on his bicycle. Unemployed Piet lived in Krugersdorp, had ridden to Rustenburg because he'd heard of a job opportunity (which hadn't panned out) and was now returning home – clearly the long way around. We admired his enthusiasm.

Zeerust Wimpy fed us while we phoned our loved ones, quenched our bikes' thirst and headed for Skilpadshek. Formalities were quick and easy and similar at Pioneer gate on the Botswana side. Third Party discs were out of stock and weren't charged for these as a result. It must've been the fastest border crossing ever as we headed for Kanye less than 15 minutes after our arrival at the SA side of things.

One of the characteristics of our longer rides is frequent stopping. Glenn and I frequently do 1000km days and our routine is to stop every one and a half to two hours. Firstly Glenn's lungs need to import fresh batches of menthol, but more importantly, it keeps our minds and bodies relatively stress free and we usually arrive at our destination without feeling as if we need a week to recuperate. Besides all this, Mike's bike was running the smaller 20 litre fuel tank and he'd have to juice up more regularly than us with our 30 and 33 litre tanks. Jwaneng was our next stop where hawkers at the garage became an irritation. Not local ones mind you; these were Zimbabweans hawking trinkets. Glenn had spent a few rands with them but they didn't acknowledge the word "NO" from the rest of us and hung around our huddle until we eventually left. A noticeable absence from the area was the De Beers blimp – obviously off for repair after it's accident earlier this year.

The Trans-Kgalakgadi is beautiful at the moment. Most of the bush is green with only the occasional dry sandy patches. Temperatures were high and the beers and swimming pool were very welcome when we rolled into Kalahari Rest.



en-route Kang

We'd planned to eat in their restaurant that evening but being the only guests, Nkosi was very obliging when we asked him to serve the meal uncooked at our camp with enough braai wood. A wheelbarrow load of wood was delivered as the appetiser and despite the rump being utterly crap; we had a great evening under full moon with a rainless sky.



Night sky at Kalahari Rest

Exiting camp the next morning was truly special with yours truly managing to find the "short cut" which added 4km to the 500 meter distance to reception. By the time I reached terra firma my clutch smelt as bad as yesterday's socks, and my sense of humour was equally foul. Where I went wrong I still don't know other than I took a left when I should have veered right and this landed me in the sand pit at the bottom end of the place.

Further north the scenery got better. Usually at this time of year the country side is dry and dusty but the early rains had been good to them, and us. Occasionally along the roadside we noticed a few buck which concerned us a little. Goats and donkeys are predictable but these were not. We had one particular close call when a youngster darted from a bush at the tar edge and missed Mallie by a few centimetres only. Ghanzi was dirty – it always is – but we snacked and refreshed at the Kalahari Arms and visited Spar for the one or two items that we'd forgotten to pack (I, a bath towel, Mallie had left out Mozzie spray) and we got out of town as quickly as we could. The next leg to Gumare was the one that concerned us most as Michael (remember the small fuel tank) would be hard pressed to get the 334km distance to Gumare from his 20 litres. At realistic speeds we'd each get between 15.5 and 17.5 l/100km on these bikes, but we were fully loaded, had panniers causing increased wind resistance, and were trying to maintain a rolling average of 110-115km/h.

We had a roadside break under a welcome tree with the temperature on 37.5°C, sucked on water bottles and stripped off excess clothing.



37.5 °C under the tree!

80km short of Gumare Mike's reserve light blinked at him and we cut back our speed. At the temporary Vet Checkpoint at Tsau we cut back further with me taking up tailgate position, tow strap at the ready. My calculation was that he'd be dry around 10km short of the fuel stop. Storm clouds were building but we all know how unreliable these are in the Kalahari so I shouted into the sky, almost daring it to unleash its worst onto us and give us the relief we wanted. The Tswana don't have many mythical Gods, but later that evening I learnt of Utixo who the Bushman acknowledge as God of Rain. It seemed apt that he be the one controlling our immediate destiny. He must be a temperamental God, for he teased us; spitting down only a few drops but simultaneously turning up the heat a notch. Still the rain built then dissipated only to rebuild with more vigour. I have a distinct image etched on my mind of a black stripe in the centre of my vision, lush green verges on either side, flanked by deep green trees further back, and sitting above this, almost triangular in shape, the thunderous tones of grey storm brew. Utixo teased still, with only the occasional dropping.

There's been a Foot and Mouth outbreak between Tsau and Nokaneng, and all traffic between these is stopped, tyres and shoes are disinfected before being allowed to proceed. At the latter, we looked ahead and saw the rain pelting down not more than 5km in front of us. Some pulled on rain suits, but not having one with, I simply pulled back my jacket sleeves.

"Jeez" I thought, "towing Mike through this is gonna be a treat". We headed out and the teasing continued. By the time we reached it, the rain was more like 8km away. The old man, was playing his cards well, defying us the relief we sought. Eventually though he relented, all he'd wanted was for his guests to approach in full dress. Riding through the meleé was an experience. Wind lashed from the left, then from the right. Rain beads stung but the heat was still there. My temp gauge didn't drop below 30°C during the onslaught, and then it was over. Gone!, with just a few last mouthed spits.

I was wrong on the fuel! Mike and I limped in at 80km/h and when the nozzle was removed from his tank the dial read 19.4 litres. 600ml, enough for another 10km, was what he'd had left.

The turnoff to Drotsky's came up quicker than we expected and the normally slightly sandy track was well compacted from the rain.



To Drotsky's



The easy track

Drotsky's is a well maintained camp with excellent sites, expensive compared to other private camps, but well worth the extra. Eileen was the perfect host. She pointed out over the deck, direction East, at the storms warning us that it could turn nasty. Concerned about our comfort, she checked for available chalets in the event that the heavens unleashed wrath upon us but we remained intent on our little nylon enclaves. We went off to the secluded site 4 and a few minutes later one of the staff was there with a cooler of ice, beer and coke. Heaven on earth....



As evening fell we returned to a chilly pub to rekindle our friendship with Captain Morgan. Mallie anxiously stared at the clock, wishing it to speed it's way to the 7:30 dinner chime. Minestrone soup, home made bread, fillet steaks, with rabbit bits before malva pudding found their way to us eventually; all while watching storms over east of the Okavango river.

The next day was planned as a short ride into Maun and we thought of supplementing it with an excursion around to Seronga but Jan warned that rains had turned that road into a potholed, puddled poor state that was best avoided so we trundled back through Gumare and Sehitwa, - made the turn and pulled over under a tree where we met Jean-Pierre (not his real name! We named him that because during the entire half hour we were with him, we again forgot to do proper intros). Jean-Pierre is French (maybe that explains why he's doing what he is), has taken some time off from varsity studies and is cycling through Africa. He'd started in Cape Town, got to Palapye per rail, ridden to Maun where he'd spent 5 days and was now off to Shakawe. He hadn't distinct plans but was due to rendezvous with a friend at end of February in Gabon.



Jean-Pierre

He told us he relied heavily on solar power. An A4 sized solar panel powered his radio, light and recharged batteries for his camera. His home made solar oven was heavy though.



solar oven capable of reaching 70°C

For a short while in it's history Maun was looking as if it was becoming a tourist town as it seemed the town elders where "beautifying" the former frontier town. Somewhere more recently though this plan has been abandoned and the town is more dirty than I remember it compared to a year or so ago. We headed straight for the airport wanting to check on the touristy delta flights. Mack Air weren't able to help that day and although Delta Air could, we decided that the tariff was too high. The asking rate now was the same level per person as we'd paid for an entire aircraft approx 3 or 4 years back.

After a firm decision to braai at camp that evening we pulled up at Spar for stocking. Everyone we'd spoken to had warned us of the out of control crime in Maun (come to JHB I say) so Glenn and I did the shopping while Mallie and Mike "stood guard" over our possessions in the car park.

A "woman in a Pajero" asked Mike where we planned to stay and when he replied that we weren't yet sure, she replied "you must go to the Old Bridge". "It's a fun place and the locals are visiting there to party tonight" she said.

Glenn and I looked sceptically at each other but Mallie was keen as beans. The last thing I was looking for was a noisy camp with blaring music into wee hours. I still have horrible memories of Sitatunga Camp for that very reason. To pacify Mallie, we undertook to investigate.

Glenn and I rolled in and smiles swept our faces before our helmets came off. Helena bounced out to welcome us, thrust beers into our hands, explaining how things worked and what was on offer. We looked at each other, smiled in memory of Fat Monkeys and said in unison " we'll be staying in the camp please, do you have a braai for us to use so we don't damage your grass". My mind skipped to Island Safari Lodge. Sean Watson had asked me to pop in and I'd been thinking of camping there after his promise that the site had been cleaned up and revamped, but the thought of another 2.5km of loose sand when we were in the immediate surrounding we were, was a no brainer.



View of communal area



Looking out onto the Tamalakane

It's a small camp on the Tamalakane River. The camp site won't accommodate more than 3 or so 4x4's at a time, although there are a few onsite tents behind private bamboo fences. Ablutions are really good and there's overall a warm funky feel to the place. Don't go there though if you're the type to be in bed by 7 after a cup of tea.

While waiting for the others to roll into camp, David, Helena's husband and co-owner, strolled over with a bowl; "hot sunflower seeds" he offered. Thinking they were peri-peri we stuck our fingers into the bowl and yelled as we realised "hot" meant roasted.

We'd bought enough food to feed both ourselves as well as the local regiment of the BDF. The rump was first rate, covered with our home made garlic sauce – garlic cloves roasted over the coals in garlic butter - (you'll note there were no women with us), baked potatoes with chakalaka and salad and fresh rolls. Knowing we had no hope in hell of finishing the food, we fed Rufus the dog (we named him that), and Jerry the security guard (we named him too), then Rufus again.

Later we went back to the pub for a night cap and met Rino the drunk (we didn't name him). He'd been there in the background when we arrived, been sucking on alcohol since morning but now he was glaring at us. After he overheard us mentioning our trip to Kubu Island some years back he stumbled over to Mallie and launched a tirade starting with " I'm gonna f*ck you guys up". He ranted about how self drive tourists were scourge of the earth and ruining the tourism industry as well as the environment. "It's my area and I'm gonna f*ck you and anyone else up who comes near my place again". Knowing the status of Kubu Island, we asked where he referring to and where "his place" was but he either wasn't able or didn't want to answer. When I told him that Kubu Island was a public area managed by the Mmatshumo community he seemed confused and out of touch but didn't relent. Helena managed to calm the sot down and he retired to a corner bench babbling to himself while drooling into his drink.

Next morning we fed on the heartiest of breakfasts and I stumbled upon Rob and Georgie (Simon was still sleeping off the previous night's exuberance) of Africa2Ormond. They'd spent 4 days in Maun performing repairs to their 130 Defender before heading off to Mozambique then taking the long road north on their Trans-Africa exploit.

I don't know what it is about Maun. I've always liked the town but it's a dump. Most of the camps are nice enough and regular travellers all have their favourites – the Bridge has become my new one, - but the town itself could be so much more than it is. It's the gateway to the delta, has an international airport, most safari companies operate from there, commodities and most essentials are available off the shelf; but still there's no inspiration to tidy the place up. Locals and service providers are more engrossed with their own than with their guests who seem to rate somewhere further down the service level scale. Don't get me wrong, I'm not slating the Old Bridge people as they were pretty good, but rather tour operators in general. Some of them have come under hard times, partly of their own making and partly because of government policies, but this should inspire them to do more to entice their clients rather than chase them away. Enough of the bitching session!

We rolled out of Maun and into Rakops uneventfully. The pumps are now modernised and electrically driven. Also a new hotel, inhabited by staff only at the time, has arisen just outside the village. I previously enjoyed the old narrow, broken, twisting tar track to Mopipi. It was interesting and full of character. The new road is a pleasure to drive, but it's just another good tar road that seemed to shorten the distance into Lethlakane. Just before the T-Junction with Glenn up front I saw what looked like a piece of bark in the road. Glenn passed close by without it moving so I "knew" it wasn't a snake and didn't move from my riding line. Wrong! At the last moment possible I saw the distinctive shape of it's head before it flattened under my front tyre. In the mirror I saw the remainder of it's body writhing jumping in the air and Mallie approaching fast. It's not the brightest thing I could've done, and serves as a warning to me to be more cautious next time around.



Near Rakops

Bikes' appetites sated we headed out for the last 160km to Khama Rhino Sanctuary. It was an easy ride that we broke into two legs. Just after our smoke break I looked skyward and saw Utixo's workings again and wondered whether the games where to begin once again. Rain was in the air but the closer we got to Khama, the further off it seemed. I wanted it to rain; not because of heat, but because I knew the sand track from Khama's main entrance to the campsite and I knew that a quick downpour would compact it and make the ride from the entrance less taxing. I called out to Utixo again, this time more of an appeal than a taunt but as we approached I knew it was a lost cause.

I need not have worried. The area had had so much rain over the past two days, the tracks hadn't had chance to dry and we sailed down into site 5 without batting an eyelid. It didn't last long though. The old man still had plans for us. The reserve attendants looked after us well. They scrounged up a decent sized cooler box, filled it with water, coke beer and ice and sent it down to the site by van. Tents were pitched, beers enjoyed and another Captain Morgan seal broken.



Lush from the rains at Khama

We gazed upward and were indecisive about rain, so Glenn and I headed off to shower. A short while later I heard voices and emerged to find the wrath of Utixo upon us. Our group of 4 sheltered under the lee of the ablution roof, luckily with refreshment at hand while we watched the monsoon like rain in it's ferocity. Just as soon as sunlight appeared it closed over again and pelted down more intense than before. "It can't last much longer" I said, "Botswana doesn't get rain like this", but it did. It poured for over an hour and when the sun returned, the roads, campsite and ablutions where under water – yes the thatch roof didn't stand up to the onslaught either.



our private lake

We returned to camp to find a lake but thankfully all tents were on higher ground and all had held out well enough. Mike had erected his on a tiny patch of ground no more than 10cm above the rest of the ground and he was surrounded by a moat. The water disappeared quickly though, an hour later and only small puddles remained. Immensely thankful that we could sleep dry we celebrated with the cooler box contents.

Full of cheer we piled into the game van that had pulled up to transport us to the restaurant for a mediocre meal but high spirited meal.

A damper did occur Monday morning though. Glenn had noticed a gentle knocking from the rear end of his bike which, by the time we reached Serowe, was the whine of failed bearing. A quick check revealed the carrier bearing was dying – hopefully slowly. Limping at 80km/h with me riding tail again we set off, one milestone at a time. Palapye, Sherwood, Martin's Drift, each time wanting just one further step, and at regular intervals me pulling up alongside to get an earful to gauge the degree of retardation and check for the ominous traces of diff oil we knew were coming.

At Ellisras (Lephalale for the perfectionists), we decided not to tempt fate any longer and arranged for safe storage of the bike for the next day or two. I cranked the suspension up on my GS in anticipation of the extra 80 or so kilos and with a sigh of trepidation Glenn climbed aboard with a bear hug of enthusiasm.



Strangely Glenn's bike was deposited in storage with 99980km on the clock. We been so hoping to celebrate the milestone of 100k, but that will have to wait for another day. Amazingly Glenn had dragged out a total collapse of the bearing for almost 300km. By contrast Mallie had similarly lost that bearing on his previous bike and that had only taken him 35km from the point of that discovery to it's collapse.

Marc Hall
Nov'07

*Fuel averaged P5.55/l for 93Octane unleaded which was available at all filling stations.
Total distance completed was 3143km
The 5 days cost approx P2500 each including fuel, food, camping, booze and incidentals.*