



Tour de force

This year **Mark Beaumont** of Scotland set the fastest round-the-world cycle-touring record. **Rob Ainsley** caught up with him and found him not even slightly out of breath...

Many of us fantasise about riding round the world. Mark Beaumont – ‘Monty’ to his friends – did it. And, when he rolled into Paris on 15th February this year, he set the record for the fastest global circuit, according to latest Guinness World Records rules. That means going round the world in one direction; on the same bike; finishing where you start; going through at least two roughly opposite points; and cycling a minimum 18,000 miles. Mark did 18,297 in 194 days 17 hours. His route (Paris – Istanbul – Calcutta – Bangkok – Singapore – Perth – Brisbane – Dunedin – Auckland

– San Francisco – Florida – Lisbon – Paris) went through 20 countries.

Like many adventurers, 25-year-old Mark comes across as laid-back but *very* focused. He was raised on a farm in rural Scotland and started large-scale cycle touring early, doing the End to End at 15. On graduating from Glasgow, he spent a year planning his odyssey. He assembled a support team of friends and colleagues, for everything from diet to web design, and set off on 5th August 2007, the best time for the climates en route.

Bombproof bike gear

For equipment, Mark’s strategy of going for strength and quality

Mark in Lahore. He averaged around 94 miles per day, every day on the bike

Photos by David Peat

over convenience of replacement worked: he suffered only relatively minor, fixable problems. ‘I’ve always been an expedition rider rather than a racer, so I’ve always been used to fixing brakes or rebuilding wheels,’ he says. ‘But I needed a low-maintenance set-up.’

A Thorn was a strong contender, but he eventually picked a Koga Miyata with a 63cm aluminium frame. ‘The argument for steel over aluminium is an old one, the idea being that you can’t fix aluminium if it breaks. But I went for strength.’ He’s pleased with his choice. ‘The frame looks good as new even after 18,000 miles. It’s got very relaxed geometry, and the final rig is



incredibly comfortable.'

He went for 700C wheels. 'There are obviously massive trade-offs,' he says. 'The 26 inch size is a world standard and better for availability. But in the end I chose the best 700Cs I could, for least rolling resistance.'

In the trip he went through two front wheels and three back, his two rear-wheel collapses happening near civilisation. The first was in Poland. 'Luckily we found a bikeshop, a little shed in the middle of nowhere. They did an incredible job. I had no more broken spokes to Kolkata.'

Mark used a Rohloff hub with 14 gears. Needing only one oil change and one new jockey wheel, it all worked smoothly. 'Ratios and range were fine. The only comment is that it takes about 500–800 miles to wear in, particularly the middle gears, 6 to 8. And for chains, it's so durable, so much better – I got through only three chains despite desert sandstorms. A normal derailleur would have just got chewed.'

His luggage? Ortlieb.

Staying on schedule

With a schedule to beat, he couldn't take cheap-but-slow options. On-road expenses for the entire trip, Mark guesses, were £3,500–£4,000. 'I camped about two-thirds of the time and took hotels the rest. My spending varied massively.'

Food management mattered too: he needed 6,000 calories a day, but getting it in a decent form wasn't easy in the vast trucking plains of the US or Australia. 'Trying to maintain a vegetarian diet there was almost impossible! There was only low-quality fast food. You live off your last meal and those sugar highs and lows are not what you want!'

Mark's army of advisers at home helped him cope with the physical challenges. 'If you can do a two-week trip, you can go on forever,' he says, 'but it's then the conditioning rather than stamina – the numbing in the arms, the neck pains, the saddle soreness. When I stepped off the bike some days I'd get a pain in my shins and could hardly walk down the street. My back had actually changed shape after the trip.'

Psychological and mental strength counts too. 'The first 9,000 miles were all about surviving – in tough climates, and countries with political issues. Southern Iran and Pakistan were very hard mentally. After that, in the English-speaking countries, it got easier.' (However, Mark's encounters with crime came in motel-country badlands, too.) In some ways, the hardest challenge was coming back: 'Suddenly I was in a media bubble. That took a lot of getting used to. I was burnt out, just taking life day by day, just keen to get back to friends and family.'

World's best cycling

Mark's now back in the groove and writing up his book of the trip (out next spring). The fund-raising aspect of the world trip for a basket of charities continues until December – he's already achieved £18,000, a pound for each mile.

The most beautiful road? 'Route 1 in California down the coast from San Francisco, along the Big Sur. Very hilly for a coastal road, but just

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North America, like Australia, was one of the easier bits – apart from the food

Mark filming in Lahore. The clock was still ticking

Mark's gear for the trip. A GPS was included to verify his journey

amazing! Among the most enjoyable stretches was the South Island in New Zealand, from Christchurch up the coast to Picton – fabulous riding.'

Southern Pakistan, while not as easy to access, was also incredible. 'The single most beautiful day's cycling I had was down from Baluchistan to Quetta and across Jacobabad to the Indus Valley: a hot mountain road with trucks burning their clutches, a railway following you, and amazing contrast from mountains to green farmland in the valley... There are not many cyclists!'

Mark's calm, friendly confidence, and the tales of hospitality and adventure in remote places on his website (www.artemisworldcycle.com), will inspire dreams in many of us. 'If you've done the End to End or similar, you're probably used to all the realities of camping, and being all day on a bike,' he says. 'For this the main difference is culture shock, and different political climates. Coping with food types, languages, and being there on your own on a bike is a very intense experience.' Any advice? 'Routes, border crossings, visas – sort them all out well before you go!'

Now, where's my world atlas...