

DESTINATION SOUTH AFRICA

AFRICA GRIN

Words and Photos: Julian

A recce run for a South African motorcycle tourism destination? We sent Julian – our Cape Town crusader – to give us the low down.

It doesn't get better than this. I'm on the pegs, piloting the Africa Twin up a steep rocky climb in the middle of the vast Cederberg wilderness. Ahead of me, a troop of baboons scatters away from the track and up into the deep red cliffs, the alpha male hanging back long enough to make me suitably nervous.

Further down the track, my riding companion, Laurie, follows on the BMW and as for Toby, well he's on the KTM 690 and is nowhere to be seen. But no matter – I'm riding one of the most iconic adventure bikes ever made in the very country that inspired it some thirty years earlier. I literally could not be happier.

The chain of events that took me to this somewhat enviable position perhaps need explaining. Toby – the KTM pilot – runs a tour company called Ride Expeditions, who I've ridden with quite a few times in India, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Apropos of just about nothing, Toby had recently decided to relocate his head office to sunny Cape Town in South Africa. Now, apart from the obvious problem of the region in the grip of the worst drought in the country's recent history, it seemed like a smart move – great weather, fantastic beaches and more importantly, the prospect of some incredible riding.

So, with little more than a month's notice, Toby fairly easily twisted my arm and roped me into a recce ride to test the terrain, check which bikes might be most suitable and generally get the feel for the riding possibilities in his new home.

The planned bikes were at both ends of the adventure spectrum with a hired Africa Twin pitted against Toby's recently purchased KTM 690 Enduro, so two very different riding experiences were guaranteed. ➤





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4 x 4s only - true!

When a few weeks later Toby's older brother Laurie, was drafted into the ride, the addition meant we could extend to a third option in the form of a BMW F 800 GS Adventure. This was becoming not only a recce ride, it was a three-way fight between some of the most popular adventure machines – now that's my type of trip.

With Laurie arriving just after me, and Toby on airport collection duties, I grab the keys for the Katoom and head off to explore the area to the South of Cape Town. Outside the city and away from the uncomfortable sights of the sprawling townships, I head down the south coast.

It's a strange mix of familiar sights and even more familiar names – the towns look unsettlingly British, as are a vast proportion of the people. In the course of an hour, I pass through Scarborough, Polperro and Llandudno, a journey that would have taken the best part of a day in the UK, their South African counterparts bearing little resemblance to their namesakes in the UK.

The KTM is a joy to ride and even on off-road rubber, I'm grinning all the way to the Cape of Good Hope, the iconic point at which

the Atlantic and Indian Ocean meet. I take my turn for the obligatory selfies with the sign, hardly believing that I'm at the very tip of Africa on a dirt bike!

Monday morning comes and with the brothers off to fetch the BMW, I take an Uber to grab the Honda from Somerset West, some 40km out of Cape Town. With the paperwork signed and with a certain disappointment as to the fitted Mitas E07 tyres' potential off-road abilities, I take my life in my hands to tackle to horrendous rush hour traffic and the homicidal minibus taxi drivers.

Arriving at Toby's, there's a palpable sense of excitement as we set up our bikes and attach our luggage. We all keep it central and sensible, Laurie with a suitably small holdall on the KTM, me with a SW Motech dry bag on the Africa Twin and Toby using the freebie top box we managed to blag with the hire.

At just after 10.00am, much to my OCD 'leave on the hour' annoyance, we hit the road, blasting through central Cape Town and heading due north towards Table View. The irony of the name is not missed as the decidedly British weather means that Table Mountain is all but invisible.

The road soon becomes pencil straight and

temptingly smooth, but with the 690 dictating the pace, the Honda and BMW are kept to sensible speeds; a theme that will continue all week, albeit reversed on the off-road sections!

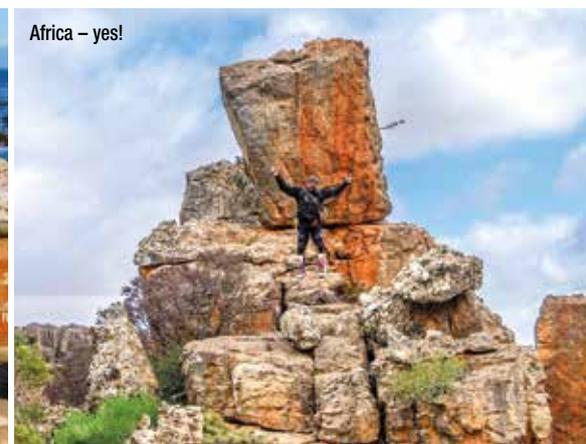
Today is all about covering distance to get to the good stuff, so our first off-road section comes just before lunch with a wide and sweeping track following the rolling countryside. It looks great, but the realisation that this is the first of many near-corrugated tracks takes the sugar off a tad. The surface literally shakes my eyes as the Honda's forks struggle to deal with the incessant stutter bumps. After lunch, there's more off-road in prospect as we're picking up a fantastically long service road that follows the iron ore railway line. It's theoretically private, but a twenty rand note – about \$3 – to the guard, sees the gates kept open for nearly fifty kilometres of open and deserted red trails. Of the three bikes, the Honda is the least stable thanks to those road-based tyres that make the front feel vague and the back lack real grip. We take a brief detour onto some trails marked '4WD only,' but the deep sand and the adventure bikes don't go well, so we bail before disaster – and pain – loom. ➤



Beach huts



At the Cape



Africa - yes!

“We’re on the road early on day two, keen to leave the straight roads and coast for the twisties and the trails in the mountains.”



By the cave paintings

As the sun fades for the day, we hit more blacktop to cross vast swathes of arable land on the way to the Lambert’s Bay, a town whose name promises more than its faded glory can deliver. With steaks and beers in the tank, it’s back to the AirBnB for a scotch and bed – a great first day.

We’re on the road early on day two, keen to leave the straight roads and coast for the twisties and the trails in the mountains. We’ve swapped rides, so I get the Beemer, Laurie the Honda and Toby the KTM. There are more rail roads, then some fantastically sweeping trails before we hit the black top and I’m loving how stable and planted the GS feels with that Enduro front hoop leading the way. Once we reach the road, it’s a beautifully smooth and empty ribbon of tarmac that threads its way up into the mountains as we head for the Cederberg wilderness. The Beemer’s good off-road manners are matched on the road, particularly in the way it drops effortlessly into

fast corners, and we make swift progress to Clan William, the biggest town in the area.

We stop to refuel as we’re unsure where the next stop will be, and while Toby pores over the map, the lure of the Colonel is too strong from the KFC that shares space at the filling station. Chicken Zinger for brunch – perfect. It’s clear that the map we’re using lacks much detail, so we nip into the town and buy a Slingsby map from the local Spar – if you are heading to SA, you need these maps in your travel pack.

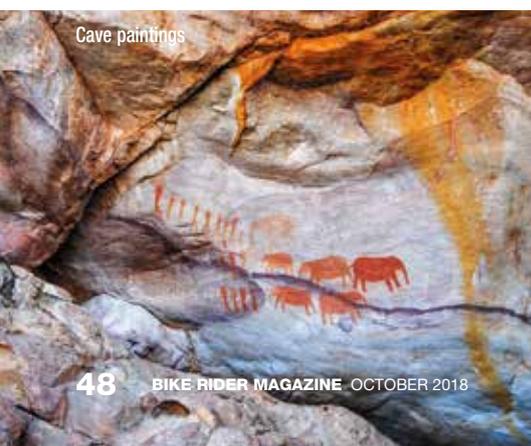
Suitably informed, we set off into the Cederberg proper, with some incredible roads taking us high into the deserted and utterly stunning landscape. It’s a bit like the Himalayas in places, except that the roads are totally perfect and lack the uncertainty of the Indian equivalent. After an hour or so, we take a long gravel road that will lead us to our overnight stop – Enjo Farm. It’s a wonderfully whimsical and dreamy place set some thirty or so kilometres from anything else. Run by a family

that live on site, there’s a central farmhouse with a series of individual cottages dotted about the wide valley, each self-contained and basic like a Scottish crofter’s cottage.

We unload the bikes and while Laurie and I are happy to just chill, Toby is keen to investigate a ‘pub’ that is supposedly 25km further up the trail.

His instincts prove spot on as – after a short ride – we are rewarded by an enthusiastic and warm welcome from a family that has set up ‘Bikers Heaven’ as a dirt biker’s resort of sorts.

It’s all a bit homespun and cluttered with Graham Jarvis’ Roof of Africa Husaberg sitting among a collection of dirt bikes, but they’ve got a fridge full of beer, a whole lot of enthusiasm for bikes and plenty of tales to tell until the sun goes down. Returning to our cottage hours later, we collect the barbeque pack the farm has prepared for us and spend the rest of the evening cooking and eating under a star-filled sky. ➤



Cave paintings



Bike and canvas



30 degrees and in a woolly hat



“From the top, we overlook a vast plain beneath us, sweeping down the appropriately-named Skittery Pass.”

Brothers together - Toby and Laurie stop for a landscape fix

In the morning, we're reluctant to leave this bit of paradise, but with more ground to cover, we load up before heading up to the farmhouse as luckily, they've got 200 litres of unleaded in the store to replenish our tanks. In a curious appreciation of the owner's hospitality, Toby manages to spill almost half a litre of unleaded over her shoes, but she's too polite to mention it. Suitably filled, we head away from the farm on the long trail out and then pick up some more sweeping roads that take us on to Wuppertal. We're hoping for a real African village, but the reality is something almost French, with an ornate church, a whitewashed café and shop, and rows of flower bedecked cottages with smiling and waving locals.

We stop for a cup of tea and a Fanta, while some elderly Afrikaans tourists talk patronisingly about the locals while chain-smoking themselves to an early grave – it's a charming scene ...

Leaving the village, we head into the rocky stuff. I'm back on the Honda and Laurie on the BMW and, as we follow the sinuous track, Toby is like a caged animal desperate to slip the leash and open the taps on the KTM. When we reach the junction that will take us high into the mountains, he can't resist and is gone, but it's

no matter - I'm loving the challenge of taking the Africa Twin up this epic trail, the big engine powering over 200 kilos of bike up impossibly rough climbs without missing a beat. Given his relative lack of recent off-road riding, Laurie is doing in an impressive job on the GS and when we eventually catch up with Toby at the top of the pass, the sense of achievement is huge. This is adventure riding racked up to 11 and it is simply wonderful.

The afternoon trails are filled with long and gravel strewn trails, but with the gravel more like polished marbles, I'm glad to have swapped to the orange bike, its good tyres and nimble handling making short work of the terrain. Toby has to use a tad more body English on the Honda, but within a few hours we arrive at the Oasis backpacker's campsite for the night. As it's only early, there's time to ride over to see some incredible caves and cave paintings in the Staatsall nature reserve. The place is utterly deserted save for a handful of kassies or rock hyrax that now inhabit the caves, but there's a calming spirituality about the experience that stays with us all well into the evening and our deep sleep under canvas.

After another fuel top up at the campsite, we set out early on day four.

We've some big mileage to cover if we are to reach Suurbaak before dark, so I'm pleased to be on the Beemer. The route is split between gravel and hardpack dirt for almost the entire time as we make our way through the astounding landscapes of the Grootriver and Blinkberg Passes. We hang a left to travel over the equally awesome Katbakkies Pass that climbs off the valley floor to a high peak, the final sections conveniently and unexpectedly tarmac'd to increase the grin factor. From the top, we overlook a vast plain beneath us, sweeping down the appropriately-named Skittery Pass to reach the bottom.

From here it's a dead straight 50km on a loose and regularly corrugated road that follows the valley floor seemingly endlessly. Unbelievably, there are hikers walking this road, baking under the midday sun on arguably one of the most featureless roads in Africa. We eventually hit tarmac, which is a huge relief from the vibration white-knuckle we are all developing, and we press on trying to ignore the lack of fuel in the KTM. The decision catches up with us and although we find a pump, it's frustratingly years out of use, and we resort to a quick syphon from the Honda to get us to Montagu for a fill up. ➤

National monument



Julian leans on the fixtures



Breakfast planning with coffee





Now that's the type of road we like!



Are you with the BMW tour?



Healthy option breakfast



He got the shot, but got drenched!

WANT A PIECE OF THIS?

After the success of the recce trip, Ride Expeditions will be offering tours in South Africa from the end of 2018. Given the fantastic roads and trails in the Western Cape, the intention is to offer both road and off-road tours to customers, with options of both ten and fourteen days. As for the bikes, much as the Hondas and KTMs are tempting, they are going to be running with the BMW F 800 GSs as the best option for dirt and road, and the fact that BMW has the best dealer and support network in the country. They've even got an approved BMW off-road instructor on-board in case you need to brush up your skills before you head out on the dirt.

The first tours will be 'Pioneer Tours' so it's a chance to grab yourself a bargain before the tours join the main ride calendar in 2019.

For more information, go to www.rideexpeditions.com

The final part of the day sees us on the twisting and utterly life-affirming Tradouws Pass that sweeps down for miles to our overnight in Suurbaak. There's a barbecue ready to go, but we take a night off the meat and I cook pasta for the team.

In the morning we've got another long day ahead, so after retracing the pass we breakfast at Diesel and Crème, a quaint and funky diner on Route 62 just outside Barrydale. The whole area is swamped with BMW riders attending a rally, but our lack of head-to-toe co-ordinated Motoraad kit sees us out of the club as we wolf down the Full English. Further up the road, we stop at the infamous Ronnie's Sex Shop, which is neither a shop or has anything to do with sex. Legend has it that Ron's mates painted the word sex on his fruit shop one drunken night, and from that point more people started calling in. These days, it's a bit of a grubby bar bedecked with underwear and foreign currency, not worth more than a 'been there' photo stop.

Miles of fast roads allow us to stretch the big bikes' legs, and Laurie tops 200km/h on the Africa Twin, his grin almost visible through his helmet when we stop for my obligatory pilgrimage to a junk shop. Suitably stocked with a darling little clock, we follow a beautifully sweeping trail up a long river valley, the water a distant memory in

the drought, before heading up to the impressive Swartberg Pass. The road rises thousands of metres up to the summit before sweeping down again in a series of tight hairpins to reach the most anticipated part of the trip – the Road to The Hell.

Ok it sounds a bit overdramatic, but for sure it's a fantastic route that goes on for a staggering 48km of incredible riding along the edge of a series of valleys and passes. We were told not to start it after 3.00pm, so checking the watch at 4.00pm when we pass the sign is not a good start. But it's a joyful route, and as I've got the KTM, it's made all the more fun as we power over rocks, sand, gravel and even some water on our way. The Hell itself is an anti-climax as there's nothing much there, but we press on for another 12km to reach our overnight stop in virtual darkness, all of us hiding a creeping feeling that we are lost. When we eventually stop the engines, it's been a long and challenging day, but perhaps the decision to celebrate with a bottle of rum was ill advised...

Sure enough, the next morning we are all suffering, so after syphoning more fuel into the KTM, we limp on to the nearest campsite for a restorative breakfast among the collected junk and folk art. The owner clearly doesn't see many visitors, and we're hard pushed to get away from her stream of conversation. Our route retraces

our path back to the base of the Swartberg Pass, giving us a second helping of the Hell road.

If we thought the scenery was done impressing us, we were hugely wrong. The next section drops down through a deep and craggy valley, the road barely clinging to the sides of the rock. When we hit the bottom, we encounter a crystal-clear river, which flows alongside the gravel trail, sweeping left and right for kilometre after kilometre, till it eventually opens up as we meet the road to Prince Albert – no giggling please. We lunch and fuel in this delightfully quaint and almost New England-looking town before heading back and beginning our drop down towards the Indian Ocean and our final overnight stop. We travel through another amazing gorge under the shadow of the Tierberg peak before the landscape opens up once more.

The road to Mossel Bay is a great ride, as the landscape seems to resemble so many other places I've ridden in. One moment it's like rural Wiltshire in the UK, the next were in alpine forests like the climb from Geneva to the French border. I might be on the KTM and limited to around 115km/h, but I've got a chance to take in the scenery. When we eventually arrive to find a beachside guest house, we're all pretty convinced that today has been a pretty good day, and to seal it off, we dine on fresh seafood

and South African wine.

The final day dawns, and with the bikes due back a mere 450km away, there's little option but to munch the miles. I'm on the Africa Twin, so am happy to take on the sweeping roads through the Western Capes wheat belt and on to the vineyards. We eventually cut down towards Hermanus and onto the Whale Coast route, which tracks the beautiful coastline. Epic road follows epic road as we click off the kilometres. Our lunch stop is at the cutely named Betty's Beach, a place made all the cuter by the colony of penguins that nest and generally fool about on the beach.

Although our plan might have been to take in the bottom of the Cape once more before returning home, time is against us, so we stop the engines for chips and beer at a beach side bar in Gordon's Bay. We've travelled nearly 2200km over some of the most stunning and incredible landscapes on three different – yet all hugely enjoyable and capable – bikes. Despite the last-minute nature of the trip and our relative lack of preparation, all the plans have worked like clockwork from the accommodation to the lack of any mechanical issues or – incredibly – any punctures on really challenging and at times, punishing terrain. This is adventure motorcycling as it should be and as I said in the intro – it doesn't get better than this.

WHAT'S SOUTH AFRICA LIKE?

OK, so given the adverse press that the country often gets, you might imagine that heading to South Africa is as smart as juggling with a loaded gun. Yet arriving in Cape Town, it's evident that media coverage is unnecessarily negative and doesn't reflect well on this vibrant and growing country. Yes, there are still often some uncomfortable divisions between the way the white and black people live, but things are changing for the good and there is a positive feeling about the future.

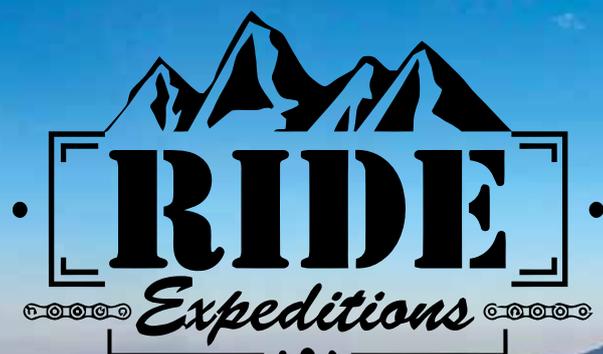
As regards riding here, the roads are excellent, and the trails are just as good. Fuel stations can be a real issue in remote areas though, so good planning is needed if you decide to go solo, but mobile coverage is good if you do get caught out. The towns are very western and have all the things you would expect back home – this is not a case of grass huts and a donkey ...

As a place for a holiday, South Africa has a lot to offer. As a place for motorcycle riding, the Western Cape knocks it out of the park! ■■■

Smooth tarmac and big bikes - nail it



Julian blasts the sand on the Africa Twin



From taking on the highest passes in the Himalayas on a classic Royal Enfield, blasting the jungles of Cambodia on a Yamaha WR450F or adventure riding on BMWs in South Africa, Ride Expeditions have got it covered.

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