

Horizons

Unlimited

BY DAN HILTON

' R O U N D T H E W O R L D





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Far, far away: Desolation, beauty and a chilling reminder in the flooded sands of the Atacama desert, Peru. Water on the sand is an early warning: El Niño brought heavy rains, flooding the Pan-Am Highway and destroying hundreds of bridges across Ecuador and Peru.

It's tough to say who should claim the title of World's Greatest Adventure Motorcyclist. The list would be a long one, and would include names like Fulton, Barr, Scott, Simon, Pedersen, Wallach—men and women who followed their front wheels, fulfilled their dreams and literally wrote the book on adventure motorcycling.

While these men and women inspired generations of two-wheeled vagabonds, few have done as much for globe-trotting riders today as Grant and Susan Johnson and their Horizons Unlimited (www.horizonsunlimited.com) adventure-touring Web site. The Johnsons are icons in the round-the-world (RTW) motorcycling community not only because of their global travels, but because of what they've done with them.

The Johnsons host—or more appropriately write, edit, produce, manage and coordinate—the largest and most successful adventure-motorcycling Web site on the net. Scratch that. It is the largest adventure motorcycling cooperative ever conceived, and has grown into a global network of motorcycle travelers, a full-time Internet business and a bona fide adventure-motorcycling phenomenon.

Grant Johnson began his motorcycling career on his 16th birthday with a '65 Ducati Scrambler. It was love at first kick, and his passion for motorcycling eventually led to several Canadian racing championships and gold medals in cross-country. He opened a successful Suzuki dealership after retiring from racing, and spent his free time touring the highways and back roads of North America.



Cold, tired and wet but loving every minute of it in Alaska.

When he met Susan, his future wife and travel partner, she was working as an accountant, but her latent travel bug didn't stay dormant for long.

On their first date, she asked him what he planned to do with his life. "Travel the world by motorcycle. Wanna come?" He never expected her to say yes.

Three years later, they quit their jobs, stored what they couldn't sell, and purchased a not-so-shiny new BMW that literally fell off the back of the delivery truck. "They gave us a really good deal, and the damage wasn't bad." After some minor repairs and major modifications—including upgraded suspension, an oversize gas tank and handmade panniers—they were off. Destination? "South."

That was back in 1987, and by the time they returned home their journey had spanned 11 years, 39 countries and more than 80,000 miles, all on one bike. "I still ride it today—in fact I just replaced the original clutch." It was during this odyssey that the idea for Horizons Unlimited was born.

"People wanted to know where we had been, where we were going and what the conditions were like. We were spending so much time sending letters and e-mails, we had to find a better way to share our experiences." That better way was the Internet.

"We built a simple Web site and updated it from the road so people could get the latest information about our trip." That simple site evolved into Horizons Unlimited. Just how useful is the information on Horizons Unlimited? Point, click and find out. Want to know the current import fee for entering Honduras on a motorcycle? Read the monthly newsletter. Not sure how often the ferry runs from Malaga to Mellila? Check out one of the 44 forums on the bulletin board. Trying to find out how to ship your bike from Thailand to Turkey? Click the "Shipping" link.

You can even find the current weather conditions in New Delhi, the best place to eat in Saigon for under three bucks, and the current price of gasoline in Moscow. This is in addition to all the regular information like bike discussions, gear recommendations, packing tips, health and safety information and much more. It's all there, just sit back and surf.

This kind of information isn't for everyone of course, but neither is Horizons. It's targeted at a specific type of rider: adventure travel motorcyclists, people whose idea of a decent ride is one that crosses continents and takes weeks, months or years. "This kind of riding has been popular in Europe for years, but these days most of our new members are American."

Lucky for them, Horizons has a lot to offer. In terms of content, contributors and quality, the site has no peers. There are more than 14,000 pages of information, thousands of photos and travel stories, and real-world advice from over 8,000 registered members in 120 different countries. Many of those members are out there, right now, riding all over the world and sharing their experiences online. Even CNN can't compete with this kind of coverage.

Horizons also boasts an impressive list of professional contributors and members, grizzled veterans of RTW motorcycling like Ted Simon, Helge Pedersen, Kevin and Julia Sanders (current world-record holders for two-up RTW motorcycle travel) and *Motorrad* journalist Michael Schroder, to name a few.

It's this ability to interact with icons of adventure motorcycling that sets Horizons Unlimited apart. It's a kind of Royal Geographical Society for Motorcyclists—all the information and support without the pomp and attitude. Members can learn from those who know and share their experiences with each other from the comfort of their desk chairs. This is grassroots community on a global level, and it's exactly what the Johnsons hoped to create.

1: Mud, rain and muck cover everyone and everything on the Dalton Highway, Alaska. 2: Susan takes a break with an unexpected campsite visitor in Australia. 3: Friendly faces and willing hands: Villagers in Peru help Grant muscle his loaded BMW across a makeshift bridge. 4: Roman ruins make a dramatic lunchtime backdrop in Tunisia, Africa. 5: Exploring backroads and byways of the Andes Mountains, Ecuador. 6: Susan and Grant strike a pose at Norway's chilly North Cape, continental Europe's northernmost point.







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1: Big sky, big color: parched desert and extreme heat in Namib-Naukluft Park, Namibia. 2: Bikers park and pose on the Loch Promenade, Isle of Man. 3: Giant sculptures dwarf Grant, Susan and BMW in the Atacama desert, Peru. 4: Crystal waters and snowcapped peaks in Torres Del Paine National Park, Argentina.

Community is nothing without the face-to-face however, so the Johnsons decided to extend the Web site experience into the real world. "When we left England, motorcyclists from all across Europe came to our going-away party. The camaraderie and enthusiasm was fantastic, so we decided to make it a regular thing." The following year, the Horizons Unlimited Motorcycle Travellers Meetings were born.

The idea was to build on that camaraderie and encourage more people to follow their adventure-motorcycling dreams. This year, meetings will be held in South Africa, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Mexico, Australia and Argentina. Grant and Susan do their best to attend as many meetings as possible, but these days

Getting repairs in an Ecuadorian bike shop: quality work, bargain price.



that involves a lot more flying than riding.

Of course not all members make it to the meetings, but that doesn't mean they don't get together. "We heard about people riding through Siberia, seeing a Horizons sticker on another bike, and pulling over to start a conversation. At first it was rare, but it started happening more and more." The Horizons logo—printed on T-shirts and stickers available through the site—became a kind of beacon, a familiar and welcoming sight for motorcyclists in distant lands.

The Johnsons saw this as an opportunity to make Horizons even better. "We wanted to find a way for people to meet other like-minded riders anywhere in the world, so we took it one step further and made an online community." They created a system that lets members setup e-mail communities for specific areas—virtual clubhouses. The result? Instant interaction for adventure motorcyclists.

Members in that area receive messages sent to the list, and anyone can respond. Today there are 328 Horizon comuni-



Ecuadorian girl: Grant and Susan were humbled by the warmth and friendliness of the people they met.

1: The sun makes a dramatic entry through the clouds above Uluru (Ayers Rock), Australia. 2: Susan watches an impromptu camel crossing from a safe (?) distance, Tunisia, Africa. 3: Too cold, too far: Exploring "Esperanza" Base in Antarctica sans bike. 4: Warm Enough: Up close and personal with a raging bush fire in Namibia, Africa.

ties in 76 countries offering free information and assistance to motorcyclists all over the world. "The communities really help a lot of people overcome their doubts and fears, and encourage them to stop dreaming and start doing."

Overcoming those fears can be difficult, especially these days, but the

Johnsons insist adventure motorcycling is as safe as riding in your hometown. "You don't need a special bike or any special training. People tend to ride more carefully when they're in another country, so even though there are risks, they're small. Adventure motorcycling really is something anyone can do."

A glance at the Web site confirms this. A Japanese woman is riding around the world on a 225cc Yamaha trail bike, an Australian couple is circling the globe on a Harley-Davidson, and a young British pair is riding from

Kazakhstan to Iran on 50cc scooters. Not exactly the images that come to mind when we envision adventure motorcyclists. Add to this the thousands of other Horizons members of all ages and experience levels, riding every kind of bike imaginable, and adventure motorcycling starts to look almost easy.

Of course it isn't easy, but thanks to Grant and Susan Johnson, it's a lot more doable and a lot less intimidating. "People we've never met tell us we changed their lives, that they couldn't have done it without us. That's life-changing stuff for them and us, and we love it."

The Johnsons weren't the first to travel the world by motorcycle, nor will they be the last. But unlike Fulton, Barr, Simon, Scott and other icons of adventure motorcycling, the Johnsons have done something unique. They've not only inspired thousands of people to follow their dreams, they've also empowered them. That's a simple distinction, but one that makes a world of difference. **BT**

www.horizonsunlimited.com

