

F W e



# FREE WHEELS EAST

'The BLOGS'



2 bikes, every continent, no aeroplanes



**These blogs were posted on the  
road between 2005 and 2007  
- they have not been edited.**

**By Jamie Mackenzie and Ben Wilson.**

## **TUESDAY, APRIL 05, 2005: TELEVISION, CAMERAS, HP, MANIC PACKING AND GOODBYES**

The last few days have been laced with a concoction of stress, fatigue and high emotion, pulsing with an adrenalin-packed, sickening, nervous excitement which will, we hope, have abated by the time we sit on the cross-channel ferry from Dover to Dunkirk in no less than eight and a quarter hours' time. Yes, we will be on the road tomorrow to begin the ride that follows the sunrise.

### **TELEVISION**

BBC South East Today visited Brook Farm this afternoon, interviewing Ben, Jamie and Maggie (Ben's Mum [fondly known as Midge]). The filming included gripping action shots of the pair hurtling by the cameras at break-neck speeds.

To see this footage, tune into the News any time throughout the day. Attention: Ben and Jamie are more likely to appear in the morning, as something more newsworthy could well happen during the day.

### **CAMERAS**

FWE's filming commenced today. Brother Jack (aka 'Slug', 'Jazz' or 'V') filmed the interview with the T.V crew on our very own broadcast-quality Sony D.V cam. The Camera will be transported around the world for Jamie and Ben to capture some of the greatest moments of Free Wheels East's journey. Then it's up to Dontwalk Media to make it look good!

### **HP IPAC DONATED**

Hewlett Packard have made the generous donation of an iPac, an all-in-one personal computer/phone that fits snugly into the palm of your hand. We will be picking up our emails on the iPac and letting you know all the latest through [www.freewheelseast.co.uk](http://www.freewheelseast.co.uk).

## **FRIDAY, APRIL 08, 2005: AND SO IT BEGINS**

The FWE team are making great progress and after two, fifty-mile days are taking it easy and enjoying the city of Antwerp, Belgium.

Saying good-bye was the hardest thing we've ever done and I never wish to go through it again. It all seemed so rushed and unplanned but that probably worked for the best, I suppose. There were loads of things I wanted to say to everyone but somehow they never even came close to coming out. I have an image burnt into my mind of us waving to the family from the top of the departures ramp at Dover. I'll never forget that.

We made the ferry fine and had a few glassy-eyed pints to drown sorrows. We took a long time to find our way through Dunkirk and then on north to the Belgian border where we had to battle hard against some stiff headwinds. The legs were burning and the cheeks were red when we arrived in Ostend where we booked straight into a hostel for the night.

The following day's ride was much easier as we picked a route heading north east towards Brugge. We did some great filming then carried on. The bolognaise sauce then exploded in my rear pannier, covering everything with basil-flavoured muck. I wasn't amused and declined Ben's offer to film me cleaning it up.

We entered the Netherlands having taken a wrong turn near to the border and after cycling down a motorway with cars flashing and people holding fingers up and swearing, we were soon in the countryside and again cruising at 18 mph. We saw a farm house and headed up the drive to see if we could poach a plot of land to sleep on. We were allotted a perfect spot, sheltered by a barn on soft grass. As we were preparing the tents the wife approached and asked if we'd like to go in and have noodle and meatball soup with bread and a hot tea. We accepted and dutifully scooped the lot. Many gratitudes to them. All that night it rained hard, really hard, and by the morning moisture was seeping into the inner sanctum of slumber. We packed the bikes in the rain, had a small bite to eat then started the day's pedalling. Ben's knee is sore today and we've taken it easy for the most part, but are still pleased to have completed 30 miles before lunch.

We might stay here for the night and give the knee some recuperation time. A shower would be welcome, having not washed for a quite a few days now.

So people, team FWE roll on and averaging a country a day. The roads are flatter than you could ever imagine and are straight for mile after endless mile. All in all it isn't the most exhilarating riding in the world but is probably just the sort of introduction we needed to life on the road. Ben keeps us moving with our high octane Creatin drinks and the dried bananas are doing wonders for our internal systems. Ben especially has experienced some really dire gut-related situations and we're still thousands of miles from the Orient. Sunday, April 10, 2005: teething problems

The team are still in Antwerp! Ben's knee problem is worse than we at first thought. He'll see a doc tomorrow and fingers

crossed the news will be kind. Keep an eye here...Will Ben's knee get better...Will the team be back in the saddle soon... Or will it be a lengthy lay off? We must all wait and see!

### **MONDAY, APRIL 11, 2005: THE VERDICT...**

...and the verdict is - the knee lives to cycle another day. In fact we've been given the green light to depart as soon as we want. Ben went to the hospital early this morning with a sense of ominous foreboding as the knee didn't seem any better from the previous day. With his trousers down, the doc looked him over, had a feel and announced that it was an inflamed tendon and as long as we took it easy it'd be as right as rain in several days. So team FWE will be back in the saddle at day- break tomorrow, striking a course north/east to the Dutch border. We'll keep a steady heading for several days and arrive at the German crossing some time towards the end of the week. Freedom once again, the wheels roll on.

### **SATURDAY, APRIL 16, 2005: 400 MILES AND NO HILLS**

We left Antwerp with the knee well bandaged and in good spirits. The weather has not been perfect -quite a bit of rain- but thankfully before today we had not endured a headwind.

The countries have been flying by. We sped over the straight roads of Holland and before we knew it we were in Germany -where the roads so far are also straight. In fact, we have not had to climb one hill yet. Not one!! We are getting a bit apprehensive: what will happen to us if we do have to climb one? Will we make it to the top?! Mountains loom in the distance. I fear that one day our merry expedition will encounter a gradient of some sort.

We have been doing quite a bit of getting lost and are only

just beginning to get the hang of picking our way through the German cycle routes.

Now we are in a small town just north of a mountain range south of Hanover. We should be leaving for a city called Bielefeld in a few minutes.

So much has happened over the last few days that it is going to be difficult to summarise. Our diaries are written every night without fail and one day all the details will be available for all to read.

#### **IN BRIEF:**

Jamie got attacked by a wild hound which broke from its owner's lead. It would've ripped out his throat had the owner not screamed some German command for NO. Jamie looked a little sheepish from the ditch he had dived into.

We've slept in a Wendyhouse.

Salami and cheese is our staple diet.

Washing is not easy, we smell bad.

Ben has a bite the size of a golf ball on his forehead.

#### **FRIDAY, APRIL 22, 2005: BERLIN - A WELL EARNED HOLIDAY**

We are here at last! Yesterday lunch-time we rolled into Charlottenberg, a quiet leafy part of the city, close to the centre of Berlin where Ben's friend Sari lives. Stopping by the Berlin sign we celebrated with a cheaper-than-water Liddles wheat beer. Feeling pleased as punch, we whipped

out the video camera to record the moment.

Sari has a perfect pad; a welcoming little enclave for the hardened cyclist. You would never know that the city bright was so close.

By the time we got to Berlin, we were just about spent. Over the last six days we have done nothing but battle into a godforsaken headwind, which at times nearly stopped us in our tracks. The northeasterly seemed to take pleasure in freezing us to the bone. It was such strange weather. It felt like it should be warm but in fact was bitterly cold. Our tents have been dusted with frost in the mornings and even with nearly all our clothes on deep within our sleeping bags, we have felt the wind's bitter nip.

Walking - since shelving the bikes for our stay in Berlin - has been difficult; it's a bit like finding land legs after being at sea. Going up stairs burns the thighs; if you stretch out in the morning your whole lower body feels as though it's on fire. The time to relax has come, to rest our pistons and compose ourselves for the push to Moscow.

On our way to the capital, we met some ever-so-friendly Germans. Camping is difficult because there are no wilds in Northern Europe. On our way East we took to asking locals if it would be alright for us to sleep on a patch of their grass. We were taken in every night -with but one exception- and given grass and sometimes a roof, hot coffee and food by: a friendly pig farmer, a family with a farm who specialise -in addition to the farming- in flat-packed housing (they had a very comfortable Wendy house), a demolition man and his family, an I.T consultant, his graphic designer wife and their two little girls, a couple with a converted windmill, a

windsurfing instructor and her husband -a businessman who sells exotic trees all over the world- their boys, a bunch of bronzed surfer dudes who played in a band and their daughter to whom we gave our autographs.

The exception was a place called 'Gutter' a vile little village, full of unhelpful, rude people who -after we came close to begging- eventually gave us a patch of lumpy dirt right next to the softest of grass. The people of Gutter ought to be ashamed of their measliness and take a leaf out of the book of our friends formerly mentioned.

It was Sari's birthday yesterday and, half dead, we sampled the Berlin nightlife. We went to a club which, very kindly, provided beds with pillows! We drank beer and felt happy. Everything had a dreamy haze around its edges. We wore smiles and looked on at all the gyrating German bodies in wonderment.

#### **MONDAY, APRIL 25, 2005: THE RUSSIAN CONSULATE**

10% of all Berliners are Turkish -there are a lot of Kebabs to be eaten. For around 1.50 Euro you can pick up a really greasy one. A man we met in our local corner bar insisted -after we told him about the trip- on buying us one very large beer, a hot German sausage called a curry wurst, followed by another large beer to "cool the mouth", all the time laughing and telling us we were crazy.

Sari has a Turkish water pipe, we call it -as many do- a Hubbly bubbly. On a night we have been known to while away the evening passing around this peace pipe. The tobacco is either apple or fruits of the forest; both taste much of a muchness.

Away from the lazy leisure of Sari's flat the night culture is moody and cosmopolitan. There is no point in going out before 10:00 because the place is dead. But when it wakes up, oh boy: there are cocktails and flame-throwers and cars that can fly.

There are hookers parading on every corner -apparently legally- accosting the innocent passer-by. A bar selling 100 beers and 40 whiskeys has intrigued us for a few hours. The nights are long and the days short.

Alarms were set for an early trip to the Russian consulate today. Upon our arrival we were crammed into a room where nobody spoke anything understandable. There was sweat, moustache, bustle and the low irritated drone of short-tempered guards, stressed with the questions of the incessant visa hunters. We queued for hours, grasping a ticket with a number which would -we were assured- be called out in Russian in due course. After some confusion, observed with a frustrated, irritated head shake from the native bystanders we managed to ask some questions. A little boy tripped over Jamie's foot and fell on his face, splat! Screaming, he got to his feet, a graze on his nose and cheek. Jamie gave the look that means get out of here, and we were on the street again with no musk, only fresh air.

Over a strong coffee we discussed our visa acquisition tactics. They will be ours soon, then it will be a day's ride to Poland, but not before another visit to...the Russian Consulate.

#### **WEDNESDAY, APRIL 27, 2005: VIDEOS AND VISAS**

The trees are in leaf, with light filtering through, shadows of the gentle breeze- swayed foliage make grey patterns on

the pavement below. Hooded crows peck around, the sun has not stopped shining; spring is with us in Berlin.

The cobbled streets are quiet until a rumbling car passes by. We discovered an enormous lake just minutes from our door, never realising that this would be our prize if we were to turn left instead of our usual right to Charlottenberg station.. The grass there is just right for lying back, listening to MP3 players and basking in the warmth of the occasion. Still, even in our open space on the shores of the lake, the air is tinged with the smell of Donner meat rotating on a spit. The Turkish meat houses are the only shops that never close. Our night out in the city to celebrate our arrival seems like it happened a long time ago, and now, like the sickly smell of the Kebab, there is an unavoidable, underlying mood of dissatisfaction.

We are having minor problems organising our Visas for Russia and Belarus. To be awarded a visa we need an invitation from a tourist company within Russia. These pricey invitations are sold on the internet. One company boasting a three-minute turnaround has cost us three days. They have our money, but we do not have their service. It is frustrating and demoralising.

Sari works as an air hostess, flying all over Europe each day. We seem to spend most of our time in the internet cafe hoping for Visa news.

The road seems a long way away; between us stand the Russian and Belarus consulates. England seems far away too; we left three weeks ago today. We yearn for the countryside, to escape from the smoke, to sit beside a lake which instead of being overlooked by apartments, is

observed by mountains.

### **SUNDAY, MAY 01, 2005: BACK ON THE ROAD**

The alarms are set for 6am, bags are packed and the bikes serviced. FWE is bound for Poland. After days of hard toil and sweat in internet cafes, our Belarus visas are now firmly in place on page 38 of our passports, costing us the princely sum of 250 euros. Familiar now with alternating between sofa and floor, we must prepare for tents and the unpredictability of our road east.

Thank you, Sari, our hostess, for the keys to your flat. Thank you, Berlin for a stay never to be forgotten. Goodbye, Kaisers Supermarket, goodbye, happy chubby friend in the D.V.D hire shop, goodbye, Indian restaurant on the corner, goodbye, Charlottenburg.

### **FRIDAY, MAY 06, 2005: A EUROPE RARELY SEEN**

Well, what an experience Eastern Europe is! From the crossing in Frankfurt Oder, Eastern Germany, we have seen a side of Europe neither of us realised existed. From the river Oders' Polish shores to Poznan -the city I type this mail from- we have come across dilapidated buildings, filthy children, unfriendly people, awful road conditions -supposedly the worst in Europe-, mosquitoes an inch long which leave swellings the size of golf balls that itch like crazy, and the weather conditions have been poor to boot.

We just assumed Poland would be reasonably developed; after all, it is an EU member state - only, however, since 2004. So desperate were we to get out of the countryside that we cycled a 90-mile day to minimise our time in poverty-stricken rural areas where the remnants of the all-too-recent communist rule are still prevalent.

We have camped in the middle of dark forests, hearing twigs break outside our tents, gun-shots, dogs barking and people shouting. It is enough to make you lie awake at night clutching a knife for fear of the tent cocoon being invaded by whatever creatures prowl outside.

Cycling into Poznan was a hairy event. We were forced off the road by huge trucks, and a bus nearly hit Jamie. We have honed some traffic avoidance tactics. I stare into my mirror looking out for large vehicles. If anything looks like it might hit I scream a warning to Jamie and we both swerve off the road to let the monster past. Our motto is "If you're going to fall off, fall right". To fall left would almost certainly result in the making of Free Wheels East Pate. We always take the smallest of roads going miles out of our way to avoid the big ones. The problem is that in Poland all the roads are big and any road going into a city is frighteningly, unavoidably busy.

Poznan is a beautiful city with Italianate architecture. We are staying in one of the best hotels in the city for next to nothing -telling hotel managers that you've cycled from England can get you a hefty discount. We thought it the best option to keep the bikes safe - at least that is our excuse for living in luxury. The hotel looks like the Savoy only it lacks footmen. On the walls are pictures of all the rich and famous people who have stayed: visitors include Robert De Niro.

The beer is as cheap as water, so I expect we will go out and enjoy a few tonight before we push on to Warsaw some time tomorrow. We have no idea what to expect of Belarus, and are sure it will be even less accommodating than Poland. This thought brings on a shudder. We are going to have to meditate our way to Moscow. Perhaps we will see some buffalo on the way, as Poland has the largest population in

Europe.

You will hear from us again from Warsaw.

Please appreciate what you have. Our haven England is a fine place to live. Take it from cyclists, not tourists.

### **WEDNESDAY, MAY 11, 2005: WARSAW, 1100 MILES AND HALFWAY TO MOSCOW**

We have reached Warsaw, travelled some 1100 miles and are over halfway across Europe on our way to Moscow. We checked out of the charming Hotel Royal on a wet and wild Sunday morning and from Poznan struck a heading north-east.

The powers that be laughed heartily as we struggled against the elements. The wind whipped at our ears and the rain lashed our faces. From Jamie's rear wheel a fine spray of watery-grit found its way into Ben's mouth, eyes, ears and nose. The rain lashed rippled puddles, concealed bottomless pot-holes, hell-bent on destroying the very rims of the expedition. In the distance lightning ripped through the sky, thunder plundered the thick air and vast clouds boiled in menacing columns from the horizon to the outer-reaches of the atmosphere. Clothing was soaked through, shoes were swimming in stagnant brown water and the heart was as heavy as lead - behind us we pulled the very weight of the world.

As the week progressed the weather breathed us a sigh of relief: sunshine filtered through the clouds and the rain abated. It was a 90 mile run to Warsaw where shortly after midday on Wednesday 11th May, we arrived; an historic moment for the FWE team. We've endured attacks by



psychos, rabid dogs with pearly white teeth like dirks, accostings by old men with noses that have been smeared across their faces from ear to ear and even, to our delight, stopped by the police.

It has been a gruelling time for mind, body and spirit and our stay in Warsaw will surely give the weather time to improve further and the bodies time to heal all ailments. The team will recuperate for a full 6 days before taking to the roads again. The bikes are locked in storage, the bags are emptied, clothes are in the wash...it's time to relax.

Thursday, May 12, 2005: water, fruit & salad bowls

The sun shines but we must work. Once again we will endure the rigours of the quest for gaining visas for Russia. It will be a sweaty, tiresome task that will hopefully see the team depart the Polish capital, armed with all the necessary paperwork for legal passage to the Russian/Mongolian border town of Ulan Ude.

Our hotel is a rancid pit, barely to be classed as 'budget'. However, after what some might call 'free spending', in 3\* hotels and luxurious restaurants, FWE will pull in the horns and survive merely on water, fruit and Pizza Hut salad bowls for the week.

The consulate awaits...

#### **SATURDAY, MAY 14, 2005: CROPPED HERBIVORES**

A message from the 14th Dalai Lama's garden: "buy a gun.. preferably a musket." So advised Jo Self, our friend and patron, after reading our last entry.

Warsaw, in fact, has proved to be -as has every other Polish city- most accommodating. Safety is no longer a concern, now that we are away from the wet, windy wilds and the

truck-ridden roads that lead into the cities.

Ben's dripping nose has stopped dripping - a juxtaposition of paracetamol and homoeopathic remedies made sure of that - but for 2 days he has been in bed festering, shivering and sneezing while Jamie speeds around the city completing all sorts of necessary tasks.

A parade, a carnival, a street festival whoops past as I type, excitable Polish youngsters bounce and scream to rhythms so loud that the windows rattle to the boom of bass forced through enormous speakers, piled onto slow-moving floats. For once, the sun is out.

Healthy food is something hard to come by in Poland. The Polish idea of a side salad is a dollop of coleslaw. On our hunt for the vegetable, we have found ourselves in Pizza Hut more than once. Heathens, I hear you call! To remedy the condition that is a lack of greenery, we have taken to eating on occasion five salad bowls each. Our stomachs have turned strange on us. When cycling one gets into the bad habit of being constantly hungry; when cycling one -quite rightly- satisfies one's hunger. It is when one stops cycling that the problem begins. The inactive body still craves the same quantity of food it previously desired on road food. We give in to the craving, passing most of our time stretching our stomachs. I expect we will be obese by the time we return home, barely able to cycle for the fat.

Many will be pleased to hear that our blond locks have been severed and discarded. A life of short hair and all its practicalities begins here..

#### **MONDAY, MAY 16, 2005: LINGERING SMELLS & GAMES OF CHESS**

The stresses and strains of cycling around the world can be hugely overwhelming at times, but when luck and success come your way it is the sweetest of tastes and we appreciate it all the more. Our visas, for the often aloof Russia, are soon to be with us, tucked safe in our passports, nestled close to their Belarus counterparts.

The nightmare of Berlin consulates has been cleansed from our souls, the process here in Warsaw could not have been further removed from previous hostilities. The 131 bus led to the very doors of the Russian consulate, the small queue was quiet and patient, there were no lingering smells of sweaty crevices and the lady who served was kind, considerate and even flashed an occasional smile. It was a most pleasant experience and we look forward to our return trip at 3pm this coming Wednesday to collect the fully validated papers we so nearly died getting. Peace can reign supreme in the FWE hearts once more.

Our drive for health in a country where such a word is lacking from the national vocabulary, has taken a battering over the last few days. Vegetables are about as hard to come by as fruit and when they do appear, they are charged for through the nose. With the nutritional value of a deep-fried turd, we have taken to the welcoming but sickly arms of the American fast food chains. In one such venue Jamie was hustled into a game of chess with an old man: "Play!" he would shout at every opportunity, with spit and brown dribble oozing down his chin from the corner of his wrinkled, toothless mouth. He chewed his gums, rolled his yellow eyes and occasionally smarmed the yellowish comb-over down with a licked hand. The pawns slid around the board on the sticky covering of spittle, often becoming lodged on a dried chunk of food that had taken its opportunity and fled the old man's mouth. His

movements were slow but deceptively cunning. Jamie lost. Money passed to the saliva-riddled hands of the jubilant victor, who proclaimed Jamie "a champion" for his efforts.

Tomorrow the bikes will be wheeled out of the conference room where they're being stored and once again cleaned, serviced and made road-worthy for our push east to Minsk, Belarus. There is a westerly breeze and the sun still shines; an eager anticipation for the road is building once more.

#### **THURSDAY, MAY 19, 2005: A LOCAL INSIGHT**

With all the best intentions the team woke this morning to depart Warsaw and strike a course northeast towards Belarus. The panniers were loaded, bikes were serviced. After midday the keys were handed in at reception to the lady with a nose like a fish hook and we checked out of room 108. FWE walked a few steps over the road to have a final Chinese and plan a route out of the city. With bellies full and suspicious-looking clouds gathering above, we had a late change of mind, crossed the road back to the hotel, spoke to the same women with the fishhook nose and checked back in to room 108.

The last few days have provided us with the insight into Warsaw that we had lacked previously. A couple we met when we first entered the city asking for directions took us under their wing. They were Chris, an ex-beer salesman from Preston, now teaching English out here, and Yvonna, his girlfriend who spoke all sorts of languages and dealt in one way or another with the Russians. They showed us a side of the capital which would otherwise have remained undiscovered. It seems that indeed good quality food can be found. The secret is to find small restaurants that the locals visit, known as milk bars. In these secret cafes piping hot

food is served. We tried a traditional dish, meat wrapped in a cabbage leaf served with mashed potato and gravy, with a garnish of parsley. It was only with the help of our friendly guides that we were able to sample such delights.

At 12:00 midnight last night, the FWE pair watched the Polish premier of “Star Wars 3”. We were in amongst the geeks, nerds and goons. OB1 walked past with a broom handle covered in tin foil, or was it a lightsaber? Following him, a chorus of Wookies calling in excitement as they bound through the cinema doors. There were the lone cardigan wearers, the people in capes, and then, there were the rest of us. Nerd or not, go and see it!

#### **THURSDAY, MAY 26, 2005: MACHINE GUNS & FISH**

We left Warsaw on the 10th day of our stay in the capital. It was great to see the place but even better when we finally got back on the road and were once again heading east. We struck a path north-east towards the border and contrary to what the weather reports were saying, we had fine sunshine on our backs all the way. It took a while to get back into the motions after such a long break and we didn't get to the border until our fifth day of cycling. It was most frustrating as mentally we'd already reached Belarus and all the time we were cycling in Poland it felt like we were behind the start line.

We approached the crossing with quite heavy hearts as we weren't sure what to expect of the country. We had heard so many stories about attacks, muggings and worse and most of the people we mentioned it to totally advised against our going there.

The Polish side was fine and there was a young soldier who

spoke grand English who escorted us through their side of proceedings but he said that despite the fact that we had visas for entry, the guards on the other side were very temperamental and could turn us away if they so wished. He walked us to the bridge. A white line was painted across it where he halted and said he could go no further: ‘The other side is Belarus, I can go no further. Good luck,’ he said. It felt like we were convicted cons walking down death row as we pushed our bikes over the bridge towards the patrol tower. A guard with a machine gun slung around his waist waved us to stop. We showed him our papers, our hearts thumping. He shook his head and said, ‘This is crossing for cars, no bikes allowed, please’. We couldn't believe it. He asked us to wait at the side of the road while he waved on some trucks that had built up in a queue behind us. He came back to us after half an hour and inexplicably just waved us on and told us to go through to customs.

Still dubious, we pushed on to passport control. More armed guards and severe looking soldiers. It was just like you might be able to imagine: almost like a war zone in the middle of some political conflict. To our delight, though, the troops we dealt with couldn't have been nicer, completely contradicting their stern exteriors. Our passports were taken and stamped, we were shown to a currency exchange desk (again we were unprepared and didn't realise about the change of currency, what it was or what it was worth) and we were even told where we could find food and water on the other side. Some high-ranking official came out and asked a few questions, wondering if we held drugs, or even small arms! We had to chuckle when he asked that although it didn't go down very well; he was quite serious.

From that moment Belarus seemed like a paradise land.







All our fears and inhibitions were shelved and every assumption we had held turned out to be quite the opposite. The roads were newly laid, had vast hard shoulders, the people all seemed nice and the weather continued to beam down. We ate a huge lunch when we found the cafe, the owner laying on a feast.

The map we have is in Russian so navigating would have been very tricky if we hadn't made an early decision to stay on the main roads. We had become quite used to taking the small roads which we were sure no westerner had ever travelled along in Poland, that would lead us through remote villages and quaint dwellings, but now, with safety in mind, we stuck only to the highways. They are like a dream, a biker's heaven and best of all they have next to no traffic on them. We would cycle for hours and not see a single vehicle, enjoying the entire lay of fresh tarmac to ourselves.

We cycled hard for 2 1/2 days to reach Minsk yesterday, sometimes clocking well over 80 miles. Usually we stop at about 7pm and look for somewhere to throw the tents down. A farmer's field that is sheltered from the road by a hedge will often do. Several times the farmer has come by, though, and we have had to take evasive action, jumping in ditches etc. We left ourselves 50 miles to cycle yesterday and it wasn't the nicest of rides. We had the choice of arriving that day and taking to the motorway or spinning it out by taking the back roads. We opted for the motorway, reasoning that if the other roads we had been on were anything to go by we wouldn't have any problems at all. We weren't sure if it was legal or not, though, so we were determined to avoid the law at all costs. When our road met the motorway there was a concrete blockade with guards positioned along it. They were checking lorry drivers' papers and inspecting

their loads. There was a narrow channel on the outside, big enough to get the bikes down. It was screened from the guards by the big articulateds and so, under cover, we slipped by undetected and out the other side. Once in the open we pedalled like crazy until out of sight and again to our delight, discovered a sizeable hard shoulder. The heavens opened on us and we were wet through in seconds and remained so until we reached Minsk.

On the horizon huge grey tower blocks started appearing out of the gloom and soon enough we were in amongst them, dicing with the traffic and buses who seem to have no concern for the safety of cyclists. Tourists don't come to Minsk, there is nothing in place for them whatsoever. Finding accommodation was a massive chore but we now find ourselves with a roof over our heads and actually living in quite comfortable surroundings. In one such grey concrete mountain of a block we now dwell on the 7th floor in a small room that looks out onto the grey roof of the next door grey building.

Today we found a park on the outskirts. It appears that there is fishing to be done so tomorrow we will busy ourselves with trying to catch our first victims. We won't, sadly, be able to cook our catch, however, as to our utter dismay our Primus Omni-fuel burner is not working. After the service I gave it in Berlin we had firm hopes of having hot food every night. Indeed, after leaving Warsaw and finally tracking down some good fuel for it, we bought a load of pasta, sauces and fresh veg. On our first night out we sat down at the edge of a field, deep in mozzie country, to cook up a feast, when, despite all our efforts the damn thing wouldn't fire. I can't begin to explain the disappointment we felt when we had to pack it up and get the muesli out. We have muesli

for breakfast and supper now with whatever we can find in a local store for lunch. Should anyone like to contact Primus and convey our disgust, then please, feel free to do so.

Sunday, May 29, 2005: goodbye Minsk

Belarus has the last dictatorship in Europe - you have to be careful what you say. We have cycled about 1500 miles and will be on our way to Moscow tomorrow to meet my brother, Jazzman, using nothing but the power of our legs! It is from Moscow that we will jump onto the train to Beijing.. The adventure continues.

Thanks for all your support. We could not do this without you, our fans! Every bit of encouragement you give is like having people cheering for you running the 100 metres on sports day.

If anyone can help us with sticking the piccies on the site, please let us know.

## **TUESDAY, JUNE 14, 2005: SAFE IN MOSCOW (2030 MILES CYCLED)**

Where do we start? How do you begin to explain all that has happened since we left Minsk some 2 weeks ago? The expense, as you remember, was far greater than we ever could have imagined it would be. We departed the city on the 30th and headed north- east, our destination the countryside, forests, woods and lakes. It was a detour along the P40 that would last an arduous 10 days, a more interesting looking route than the more direct M1 -the main road to Moscow. Our visas would only allow us into Russia on June 8th. We had time to kill. Minsk was baking hot for the duration of our stay, but as soon as we were on the bikes the weather became overcast, a storm looked like it was brewing. We slipped out of the city after lunch onto

perfect, direct Belarussian roads.

We were to become men of the woods, hermits, living from our tents, foraging for food, roasting luncheon meat sausages on open fires with sharpened sticks. We did not cycle very far between camp sites which we usually found just away from the road, only ever to be disturbed by farmers with horse-drawn ploughs. The tractor is yet to be imported to Belarus. The weather became gradually worse: sometimes we were forced to retire to our tents for days on end, an audible drone of inch-long mosquitos waiting in their thousands outside, vast squadrons with a blood lust. To pay a visit to a wild lavatory is fatal if you forget to deet your behind. Ben was to discover this, turning his usually soft skin into a rough, incredibly itchy mountainous terrain, every bit of white flesh distorted. The bites can wake you up scratching, eyes closed in ecstasy, trying to block out the inevitable post-itch traumas.

We invented a game when a light breeze blew enough to disperse our attackers. It was called Rock Boule. Select 5 rocks each, then take turns to try and hit a smaller jack rock. Feral hollers of enjoyment shook the marshes of the north east.

After cycling past a black and yellow snake sunning itself on the tarmac by the side of the road, we thought it was time we had a break and pulled off to lie in a meadow of tall wild flowers. We fell off the bikes and sprawled onto the bed of green. There was a sudden screech of tires and into our haven flew a careering beige Lada, a manic man behind its wheel. The Lada sped a hundred metres into the field along a track, its driver slammed on the brakes and jumped from the car. Jamie and I looked at each other with

eyebrows raised. The driver was bald and thickset. What was he up to? There were some men at the side of the track we had not noticed before. There was a shouting match bouncing between the driver of the Lada and the men. The driver was crazy with anger and with a battle cry went for the other men with his fists. One guy took a punch from the driver, it knocked him clean off his feet, sending him flying backwards into the grass. More punches followed. Then as quickly as he had arrived, yelled and administered punches, he left in a cloud of dust and screeching wheels. We got out of the field as fast as we could and back onto the road.

But a day's ride from the Russian Federation's border, we pulled into a motel. With seconds to spare the heavens opened and all the rain we had expected since Minsk fell in thick sheets from a deep purple sky.

We arrived at the motel tired and dishevelled. We departed exhausted and on death's door; it was not the relaxing break before the push through Russia that we'd intended on having. We were introduced to the Eastern European culture of drinking in a way we'd dreaded since arriving. Vodka and Belarussian Whiskey are an evil that in this part of the world is consumed as freely as water and it was a night-long session of a combination of the two that we were subjected to. The folk at the Motel were some of the kindest we've come across, plying us with food, beer and the wicked spirits for as long as we were standing. Memories fade as events that evening unravelled. Football with plastic bottles; England V Belarus (England got a drumming), 25 Belarusians standing on chairs singing God Save the Queen, 2 Englishmen lying on their backs singing Inky is a Cat, whittled sticks placed in a fence and a fireman's lift up the stairs.



The fireman's lift of the previous evening was administered by a real fireman, no less than a Major in charge of the nearby city's fire station. At 7:00 in the morning the fireman requested our presence at the fire station. We were bundled into a green Lada by the owner of the Motel bar and driven through the rain into the city. The fire station turned out for us. They put on a special display of ladder climbing skills, made us watch a video of horrific road accidents, dead bodies which really shook us up especially with a little of the 93% Whisky still in our blood. Then their pride and joy was produced: a carbon dioxide gun with "a bigger kick than any weapon". We were dubious, particularly when it was forced into our hands and the words "you try" were uttered. Sheepishly, we were each nearly blown off our feet as the trigger was pulled and a ball of gas sailed into the air. "This is Belarussian invention," we were told by proud fire officers. The kick was enough to break an arm if you didn't brace in the right way. The rest of our stay was spent adamantly refusing Vodka.

We were eager to get to the border, get into Russia, get to Moscow and complete the first leg of FWE. We left the Motel on the 7th June and struck out towards Russia. It was still 60 miles away and we couldn't cover the ground fast enough. We arrived at the crossing under heavy, ominous skies that threatened a deluge at any moment. A grey arch -the border- spanned the road; it was as dull as the sky. The trucks and miserable looks on the drivers' faces completed the scene of despondency. But we were riding high; we had, after all, just cycled to Russia. Our visas permitted entry for the next day but no one looked interested in checking our passports so we slipped quietly by, through the vast arch and onto - at last - Russian soil.

For days after we cycled along the E40 or M1 as they call it here. It was a hazardous road, fraught with danger at every turn of the wheel. Trucks like houses whizzing past us, drunk drivers snaking paths towards Moscow. At times the hard shoulder ran thin, perhaps no more than a foot wide, at others and more often than not, it disappeared altogether. It was a nightmare and we hope never to encounter such roads ever again. Many times "Bail" was yelled by a hawk-eye Ben looking backwards in his wing mirror more than ahead; many times a late swerve spared us. Luck and higher powers were definitely on our side. We would cycle nearly 100 miles on our opening day and similar distances thereafter.

We stayed in more motels, saw wild moose and even had a bear in the garden at one stop. I pulled the curtains back after having a long shower to see a huge brown bear metres high staring back at me from no more than 5 metres away. You can imagine my surprise I hope. Sadly for the bear and indeed us, it was in a cage. It pained us every time we looked upon the majestic beast to see it pacing its small enclosure.

On the 11th June we were 140 miles from Moscow. There was an air of impending horror in our souls and we drew designs on eating the distance in one sitting. By sun down that day though we were a painful 19 miles short of our destination. We camped that night at the foot of a hill, surrounded by trees, safe in our canvas cocoons for the last time for some time.

We woke at day break, the sun beamed through thin cloud for the first time for what seemed an eternity. It was to be the day we achieved the greatest accomplishment of our lives to date. I can barely describe the emotions that ran through us as we packed the bikes for one last time and took to the

road. For so long now we had striven to be in this position, for so long it had been our lives' and all-consuming thought. It was a dream being realized and there is surely no feeling better than that.

The spires of Moscow sat on the skyline, silhouetted on a canvas of surreal yellow light, and we headed towards them.

We arrived in Berlin at the time of the May Riots; we arrived in Warsaw at the time of vast anti-capitalist demonstrations; and we arrived in Moscow on Russian independence day. Cheyken rebel attacks were imminent. Sure enough, a train going between Moscow and Grozny was bombed. Red Square was closed for the state occasion, a massive concert was to be held, the poplar trees had sent fluffy seeds on floating journeys around the city and the air was thick with them like confetti raining down from above.

Exhausted, we went to the best Hotel in Moscow to ask for help finding accommodation, the Hyatt. The manager could not give us a room, but he advised us to visit the Aurora. Ben walked in and told the tale; he walked out with a grin. The manager Chris Sommers had offered the FWE pair a night in the Luxury Suite, a \$1000/ night room plus full use of all the facilities - a swimming pool, sauna, spa, steam room. To Chris we owe our sincere thanks. It was heaven to plunge into the water, to soak off the grime of the last two months. The Hotel won the prestigious Russian Hotel of the year award and recently hosted such guests as Michael Gorbachov, the French foreign minister, Geri Haliwell and most famously, the most hated man in the world himself, George Bush who once snuggled in one of the very beds we tucked into for the best night's sleep in our lives.

One of the footmen took a particular interest in our travels. His name was Mitya. He told us we must stay at his house and that his "Mamma is a very good cook". How could we refuse? Mitya has wonderful English, knows the city like the back of his hand and his Mamma really is a very good cook. His flat is where we are staying now in the factory district of the north east, on the oldest Metro line in Moscow. Mitya showed us the city the locals' way; he is organising our tickets to Mongolia on the railway; he helped us to conquer the complications of Russian telephones, to talk emotionally with our family for the first time since leaving England. What a super chap he is. He assures us that if any one of our friends would like to stay in Moscow, they can stay with him and sample Mamma's cooking!

Jack who has heroically shaved his head of golden locks for our charity Practical Action to raise money for the cause-will arrive on the 16th to join the expedition for its downhill run through China to the beaches of Thailand, the jungles of Sumatra, and ultimately, the land of Oz. Neither of us can wait to see him.

#### **FRIDAY, JUNE 17, 2005: TWO BECOME THREE**

Yesterday at 9:20am, two became three. FWE have swelled their ranks with the addition of Jack Wyslun. Jack will be joining the team and sharing the adventures for some 2 months before continuing through SE Asia.

Moscow has revealed itself in ways we couldn't have foreseen upon our arrival nearly a week ago. Our good friend Mitya has continued to excel as our guide, translator and host and with his help we are now in possession of our tickets to the Orient aboard the Trans-Sib.

Several days ago on a bright Mockba afternoon, Ben and Jamie were strolling down Old Arabat Street in the west of the city when they happened upon some familiar faces that over the years had provided much entertainment for the pair. A stout, long-haired man was standing hunched over a bin scraping olives from a pizza. He was clad in combat shorts and a white t-shirt. He looked up from what he was doing, satisfied that all the olives had been jettisoned; but what was this? It was Party Boy from Jackass. He grinned at us: 'I hate these damn things,' he said. Ben approached Party Boy who was now listening to some traditional Russian music while piling the slice of olive-less pizza into his mouth. While engrossed in conversation about the interesting sounds being spewed out of two gigantic speakers, another man appeared: aviator glasses, blue smock and gold-trimmed flight cap; the man himself, it was Jonny Knoxville. Team FWE chatted with crew Jackass, trading stories, compliments and throw-away comments. 'We're planning on throwing Jack out the window of our train,' Ben says. 'I don't think your mum will like that,' came the reply from Jonny. Traded details were passed from team to team, respect swung both ways. Jonny wanted a pic of us with him; we posed, signed some FWE cards and disappeared into the crowd.

Several days ago, upon waking early in their motel room, Jamie turned the television on and selected MTV on the remote control. Watching the screen he quickly realised he was looking at himself! Footage taken from a music video that the FWE pair had appeared in along with their friends Monty Burns and The Flange, was now being beamed to the black & white television set before them in a remote, seedy motel in Russia. Surreal really is the word.

The team now prepares for the next stage of the adventure.

Soon they will be on the other side of the planet. On the 19th June at 2:30 in the afternoon they will board their train and be transported to Irkutsk. From here they will trek overland by bus and horse to Ulan Ude before entering Mongolia.

Exciting times are afoot. Adventure beckons, new challenges arise...courage and strength are needed... FWE thunders on.

### **SATURDAY, JUNE 18, 2005: ALL ABOARD!!**

Our stay in Moscow is sadly nearing its end. Today we shuffled past the corpse of a pickled politician, the man who gave the communists revolution: little Lenin. He was small and looked suspiciously like a wax work. FWE are yet to be convinced. We have seen more convincing effigies in a family game of Rapido. In true capitalist form we slipped a few quid each to the guards to skip the vast queue and view the tiny cadaver of communism.

Mitya and his family have taken Jack into their home as willingly as they took us. We were given a gift, a bottle of fine Russian cognac "to keep you company on the railway". Tomorrow our train will pull out of the station at 2:00 to chug us to Irkutsk. Mitya himself will not be there to say goodbye, for he is working at the Aurora. However, to compensate, his brothers and a small party of well-wishers will wave us away from the platform. The journey will take us four and a half days. We will be in very close quarters and are slightly concerned for our comfort.

Upon the evening of Jack's arrival we played a "Concert". Mitya is a geography teacher on Saturdays at the local school. The staff room was our stage. We could remember few songs, but it went down well, particularly 'Back in the U.S.S.R' the timeless Beatles number. They all knew the

words and the beer spewed as foam from freshly opened bottles. The Russians had a few songs up their sleeves too, serenading us with haunting melodies, evoking nostalgic glassy-eyed stares, then claps and appreciative toasts.

Jack has brought an extra spark of life with him; he has fully renewed our enthusiasm and we babble stories, filling in the gaps between Dunkirk and Moscow.

You may not hear from the three of us for a little while, maybe until we arrive in Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia) in a week or two. Until then, imagine us cramped together playing Poker in pools of sweat, then sleeping, reading and staring out of the window at Siberia!

#### **FRIDAY, JUNE 24, 2005: MR NICE FROM EUROPE TO ASIA**

Today the team is in Irkutsk, watches set to Hong Kong time. They are farther east than Bangkok and on the same latitude as Lowestoft. They have travelled 6,000km to be here, journeying for 4 days. This morning they applied for visas for Mongolia, booked tickets aboard a train to Ulaanbaatar and this evening will head to Lake Baikal, the oldest and deepest lake in the world.

Before leaving Moscow on Monday 19th June, FWE had the strange and surreal pleasure of the company of Howard Marks for the evening; the biggest drug baron in history, no less. FWE were invited as 'special guests' to attend a black-tie affair in a 5 star hotel, organised by an ex-pat football league that plays in the city on Sundays. It was their annual dinner and Mr. Marks was the guest speaker.

After Howard's talk, Ben, Jamie and Jack all went backstage in search of the infamous man. We followed a sweet and

pungent scent through a maze of passageways and sure enough found the long-haired Welshman sitting in a darkened room with his scouse friend, Harvey.

'Bob Marley was Welsh,' Howard told us, soon after introductions were complete. It was a slice of insight from his new book which he is working on and due for release soon. 'So was Elvis,' he continued.

He smiled and chatted freely, pleased for us to keep the camera rolling through- out. He'd apparently been tipped off that FWE were, like himself, guests of honour and would possibly be filming for their documentary and mentioned that he had been hoping to meet us. His chum from the north, was a great talker and related many a yarn about Howie and his past antics, the kind of story that doesn't usually reach the light of day if you know what I mean. The five of us laughed and guffawed, enjoying fruity wines, fine whiskeys and sumptuous tales of past experiences.

Howie and Harvs were disappointed when we had to bid our farewells but promised to check the site out and mail whenever they could.

The following day, under baking sunshine, we said so-long to our hosts and friends, the Mityas. They have been a godsend and we are truly thankful for and appreciative of all that they have done. Muma cooked one last breakfast, then with Sasha and Sergei we left for Leningradski Train Station to catch our 2:40pm train to Irkutsk.

In carriage 4 of the third class variety, we set up home for our journey across the final reaches of Europe to Asia. It was a gammon rasher of a crossing. The scenery slowly

transformed from city to scrub to Taiga to steppe and on the second day we passed the Ural mountains, completing the first of our seven continental crossings.

The conditions were cramped, sweaty, stuffy and often unbearably smelly. Fart lingered in the air, stale and rancid. We read books, wrote diaries, and played games of magnetic chess against local men; but best of all we stuck our heads out the window from the top bunks and watched the majestic views flash before us.

Jack didn't defecate for the full duration; a feat of epic proportions and worthy of a special mention we feel. Well done Jack!

We are staying in 'Downtown Hostel' ([www.hostel.irkutsk.ru](http://www.hostel.irkutsk.ru)) and for any of you fellow world-beaters out there visiting the city, it is a fantastic place with a warm and friendly atmosphere and gets two thumbs up from FWE. Thanks must go to them for the especially welcoming kindness they showered on the team!

Baikal-bound we are, fishing rods primed with our last two lures, wallets worryingly light but hearts and minds soaring in the clouds.

#### **FRIDAY, JULY 01, 2005: "SAIN BAINU ULAANBAATAR"**

The train clunked along the tracks, freedom was ours! We had crossed into Mongolia! But a few moments ago we were sitting in our compartment awaiting a hefty fine, or even prison. Let me explain.

It all began when we entered Russia from Belarus all that time ago at an un-official border crossing. Of course, we did not realise our error at the time, not until we met with

Jack who said something about needing to get 'stamped' into the country. We passed our visas to a guard who may never have experienced the pleasure of smiling. Then they were gone, whisked away for the official perusal. Our hearts pounded for the half hour that they were away from us. The heavy clump of guard boots along the carriage corridor did nothing for our nerves. Relief! They were stamped, no questions asked! Soon we were looking out over horses and happy children playing by the track; some waved as we passed. Happiness -a phenomenon unknown in the demeanour of the Russian- was here for us to be infected by. It was in our hearts as we waved back to white smiles and laughter. They couldn't believe the westerners waved back!

Our last days in Russia were far more spectacular than we imagined they would be. Lake Baikal is truly beautiful if you take the hydrofoil at the speed of light up the coast from the small fishing village of Listvianka to Bolshie Koty - an even smaller fishing village. The wooden architecture, roaming horses with foals, undulating grassy knolls with a backdrop of nooky crags and mountains could have been cheesy if it wasn't for the lovely edge of a moneyless atmosphere, and the quiet, friendly appreciation the people there showed for all they had.

The family we stayed with took us out onto the crystal clear waters of the lake on an old power boat, falling apart at the seams and smelling strongly of the endemic fish, Omul, which we ate enough of to give each member, save solid-bowel Jack, an inconvenient and explosive problem.

We stayed there long enough to see some of the rare Nerpa Seals, peculiar to Lake Baikal. Our zoologist and hawk-eye

Wylson Jnr strangely did not see them before Jamie who assured us he'd always been good at spotting seals. We told a local who raised his brows and told us he'd never seen them before.

Pockets of preparation have left us exhausted on this bike-free leg of our adventure, both in Irkutsk and UlaanBaatar. In cities there is a lot to do; buying train tickets, organising accommodation and making sure we spend the little time we have in these wondrous places wisely. It has drained every drip of our energy and with extreme mental fatigue we sit in this hot, slow cafe after one of the most vigorous adventure-planning days of our lives draws to a close. Tomorrow we will enter the Gobi Desert with a Russian jeep, driver, cook and interpreter for one week, with the prospect of riding camels, horses and climbing mountains a reality. Our trip was made possible courtesy of Tseren Tours of UlaanBaatar - an 'off the beaten track' set up, run by kind people who want to show those interested in the Mongolian countryside, the real Mongolian countryside, as opposed to a stinking tourist trap.

Today -as payment for our toils- we have a 90-day visa for China firmly stuck in our passports, our tickets to Beijing are booked for the 9th July; we even managed to slip in a highly competitive game of Hopscotch, which Jamie knew the rules to... and a game of the old favourite, rock Boules -invented by FWE I might add, outside the Chinese embassy in the dust.

### **MONDAY, JULY 11, 2005: NO MORE MUTTON**

At 3 o'clock yesterday afternoon the train came to its final resting point in Beijing station, China. It was the last stop of our trans-Siberian / trans-Mongolian journey and through

our window we have witnessed the gradual transformation of Europe to Asia. It has been an amazing trip, one that has surpassed all expectations. Clearly I remember the painful days at base camp in Kent all those months ago, sweating over a computer, hanging on a phone, inquiring and researching. So many fallacies have been laid to rest and false information banished. Let it be known that Jack has made the entire crossing of the continents, from England to China on little over £150. In addition, the guards and carriage personnel have been courteous, polite and acted above and beyond their call of duty on many an occasion. The bikes, although cumbersome, have provided little concern and the fabled hardship of transporting them through China was simply not true. Indeed, they had their own carriage at the back of the train and were even provided with their own guard.

Our expedition into the Gobi was a week that will never be forgotten. For seven full days we sped across the sands at lightning speed in the beige Russian jeep, guided skillfully by our driver Khoyga, over terrain that rattled our bones and delighted us no end. Sometimes the Jeep's four wheels left the ground altogether courtesy of lumps and bumps in the road only seen at the last second. Khoyga assured us he'd only ever flipped a car once before. Our cook and guide was the lovely Eenee; an eternally happy girl who had our every interest at heart and was a mine of information on all that we discovered. We slept in gers, forced from our tents by howling storms that rampaged across the desert plains. We were welcomed in by strange and wonderful folk, offered food and drink and shelter, their kind and weathered faces beaming smiles the day long.

Their culture is based entirely around the animals they herd;

goats, sheep, horses, camels and Yaks in the west. Every thing they do, everything they eat, everything they are is consumed by the creatures they entertain. Curds, sheep's milk teas, mare's milk and of course the ever-available and nomadic favourite, Mutton. I fully admit that the latter was not enjoyed by FWE, the smell and taste conjuring images of the lambing sheds back home. It was a treat indeed, therefore, when on the penultimate night Eenee surprised us with delicate, sumptuous, tender morsels of fantastically sublime slithers of delectable beef.

Khoyga drove fast, the jeep held fast, Eenee cooked hot food every evening and provided breads, jams and the team's favourite: coffee as and when it was required. Come nightfall the tents were thrown down in the most fantastic places imaginable: mountains, valleys, scrub and sand; we slept nights in all of them, stars twinkling bright, shooting stars flashing brilliant white across the horizon. At times it seemed there was more star than dark in the luminous, meditative skies above. The days moved by, one glorious adventure slipping serenely into the next. We rode camels around the flaming cliffs, galloped horses across grassy plains that rolled endlessly into the blue yonder on the horizon, shared snuff with the elders, saw birds and animals of such magical descriptions - and quite simply enjoyed the time of our lives.

Mongolia is said to be 'The land of Blue skies', and with good authority. It is a jewel of a country and FWE is eternally grateful to the inhabitants for their richness in hospitality and wealth of kindness. Many an evening the three of us would gather and discuss the day's events, revelling in the recognition of our fortunate situation; sharing beers and good company, we all agreed that life was pretty much

perfect.

It is a blessing to leave a country before rot sets in, before the mind dictates that you are tired and in want of something new and even more fantastic. It was, therefore, with quiet satisfaction that we departed at 8:10am on a warm UlaanBaatar morning, and crawled our way east towards the Chinese border. The carriage we were in had the luxury of air-conditioning. With parched Gobi as our scenery the temperature seemed unnatural inside, our solar panel hung from the curtain rail in the window happily converting the sun's rays into power for video cameras and mp3 players.

The fourth bunk on our train was occupied by the son of the Belgian Ambassador for London. He was on his way to the French Embassy where a friend of his father's was providing servants and a swimming pool. Our destination, on the other hand, was the Red Lantern backpackers' hostel. We found it in sticky, sticky heat, Jack on the tube, Jamie and Ben on their bikes. It was on a narrow alley, off a busy street full of bright, cheery, Asian hustle and bustle. The hostel is the epitome of the orient, an atrium with an inner courtyard where crickets chirp, birds tweet and a help-yourself fridge provides us with beer for 15 pence a bottle (630ml) - that's cheaper than the water. Beijing is not the place we'd been expecting at all. It is clean, the people are friendly and fascinated by us. Jack was intently observed by a group of men near the station as if they had never seen the like of him before.

Our mission is to find a bike for Jack to cycle to Xian with us. It won't be a problem getting one, there are more bikes here than cars it seems. A brand new one, with basket up front, costs a pittance - 20 quid.





For the next 10 days we will be tourists before our push into the mountains south west of Beijing. We are headed for passes in excess of 4000 metres. Let us hope our holiday from cycling will not leave us too unfit!

### **MONDAY, JULY 18, 2005: WALL NUTS**

You may have noticed there have been some subtle changes to the website. Chris Porter -the man behind the original site- is on his travels, so has not been able to do much; he is in Thailand on a beach and quite rightly forgetting about things like websites. However, an old friend of Ben's, Guy Campbell, has taken on Chris's job as FWE web editor. Look out for Guy's marvellous additions:

1) A gallery section where you can view photographs. This section will be far more comprehensive as soon as we can recruit someone back at home to scan 8 films (36s) of photos.

2) It is now possible for you to read back over our adventures; Guy has archived the news section.

3) Our position on the earth's surface is now marked onto our map - see 'the route'

Guy is also working on a comments page so that you can leave your feedback as we progress and some flashy bits-and-bobs to give the site an even more professional touch.

Now, back to China...

We have been staying in the old residence of the Emperor's son, the place where the Mayor of Beijing himself lived only 10 years ago. There has been a strange haze shrouding the

city which prevents strong sunlight from getting to us, but keeps the place hot and sticky; a waxy film covers the skin.

One morning we took the early bus to the Great Wall of China. We had expected the mist to have dissipated outside the centre of Beijing, but it was still there with the Wall. From the ramparts the mountains around were barely visible through it, their soft silhouettes seeping into our eyes, the mystical orient; tourists the only blemish.

The wall sits upon a ridge, stretching as far as the eye can see in both directions. It takes 20 minutes to reach it on foot climbing up a steep, winding path. After a severe sweat-inducing trek between the towers the question of descent is then raised... It takes 2 minutes to jump onto a big silver slide, a luge. If you can stall the tourists behind and allow the dawdlers up front long enough, you can hit the slippery beast as fast as a bobsleigh and really scare the officials, who fairly scream at you to slow down through loud-hailers as you bullet past. Everyone talks about the Great Wall, nobody talks about the slide on its side.

We met a New Zealander named Nicholas, a die-hard fellow who took the slide at lightning speed. As a result he won our respect. He's a 'spiggin awesome' fellow and we wish him all the best as he continues west. The next day Captain Nicholas steered our boat around the lake at the Summer Palace - a stacked up bunch of palatial buildings, nestled atop a hill and surrounded by the said water. He rammed peaceful tourists and families with glee, providing us with fiendish memories of shrill screams and frantic gesticulations. Donuts and chicken were played with vast passenger galleons, narrowly missing the dragon in the bows and scratching scales at the stern, much to the wide-

eyed disbelief of the petrified passengers.

Jack has got himself a bike, a practical little number, 18 gears - that's more than us! He'll use it to head into the mountains with us tomorrow. It's silver and has a basket on the front, hope it will stay the pace. It only has to last two weeks, at which point a sad day will be with us, the day that Jack will have to depart, leaving for Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and then Lowestoft.

Unfortunately, several sites and attractions have been omitted from our stay in the People's Republic Capital city. We failed to view Mao, our would-be second pickled dead chap. He is, for reasons equally perplexing as Lenin, a highly measured fellow. Access is limited to those who make the entry gates before 7 o'clock. We are not of such early-bird ilk and tragically lost our opportunity. Always, we will be left wondering if the Mao wax work was of a more convincing form than its Russian counterpart.

So the next stage of FWE lies before us. We are on the threshold of a new and exciting era. The bikes are loaded, four thousand-metre passes lurk (nearly four times the height of Ben Nevis). What adventures await, what encounters, new folk and strangeness will unfold? Will our Thorn Ravens stay the pace? As ever, we'll roll with the tide, take the ups and downs in our stride and continue to live our uncompromising dream.

Life can be great...

### **WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 03, 2005: PIGS EARS & POLICE**

We have cycled for 11 days, covered over 700 miles, crossed 2000m passes, seen the most incredible scenery

on earth...and the worst, have all crashed and fallen off our bikes (Jamie received surgery), have been followed for several days by a Chinese television crew who made a 30 min. docu on us, been escorted around cities by police cars with flashing lights, slept in the dirt, in concrete courtyards, locals' huts and 5-star hotels, eaten pig's ears and jellied weird things, and once again, as always, lived the best lives imaginable!

After a week's rest in the capital city, we tracked west to Laiyuan to commence the second leg of FWE; a jaunt south through spectacular scenery that will culminate in our arrival in Singapore.

We climbed and climbed, constantly grinding the low gears. Round and round the pedals turned, the bikes zig-zagging left, right, left, right, up and up we went, the world shrinking at our feet. Sheer drops of bottomless beauty cascading down into the misty clouds below; distant rumbles of approaching trucks far, far beneath. We scaled the summit, topping out at nearly 2000 metres, drenched in sweat, short on breath but with a view that stretched as far as the eye could see: in all directions mountains rising, mountains on mountains. Craggy peaks, knife-edge ridges, impossible faces, the likes of which only a child might imagine, reached yonder to the horizon. Below in the ravines and valleys birds soared among the wispy puffs of cloud. 'Hold on boys...we're going down' came the call from the head of the troop. Please take a moment to imagine the descent we enjoyed...enough said!

Come the evening, we would find a hut, village or anywhere else that looked like a nice place to stay. Entire families turned out to welcome us, offering beds, food and drink. It was quite indicative of the Chinese nature through our entire

adventure to date. If we stop for lunch or to use the Katadyn water filter by a bubbling water-well, crowds of bemused people from nowhere descend on us. Vast numbers of people gather around, often their total exceeding 100 or more folk.

The days melted one into the next, up then down, up then down. On one particular downhill after a tiring morning's cycle in 35-degree heat, parched and with mild delirium setting in, FWE suffered its first 'incident'. 'Bump!' Jamie shouted, as he hurtled at 30 mph down a mountain. Jack, behind him, uttered a more than mildly audible expletive as he approached it, braking hard. Alas it was too hard: Ben went into the back of him and both, with their bikes, landed in a dusty, tangled heap in the road, carnage and wreckage, bags and blood stretching 10 metres back up the road. A miracle, therefore, that they were all right! Save for Ben's foot which took a bad knock and had a large patch of flesh removed from it, the pair were able to scrape themselves off the tarmac and even continue cycling later that very day.

Ben's mangled limb is healing nicely now but occasionally at night, in the small hours of the morning, the throbbing returns and he can be heard to say 'Oooh, these sheets really chafe on my foot.'

Several days after the first 'incident' FWE suffered a recurrence. Jamie at the rear of the troop, Ben leading the line at the front. 'Bump!' came the shout; Jack swore loudly and broke hard, too hard. Jamie's wheel became tragically trapped between Jack's wheel and the vicious bump. Everything seized, the wheel clamped, faltered and flipped, sending Jamie headlong into the rushing road. The bike ground into the dirt, black Ortlieb panniers snapping off.

Covered in black soot from the coal trucks that drive by, it was only when he was loading the panniers back on that Jamie was able to see through the ingrained grime, that his right hand was severely damaged and ragged. Blood seeped through, the skin hung loose over knuckle and palm. Can you believe that across the road and the closest building to the site of the fall was a medical surgery? Rushed straight through and placed on the operating table, Jamie received immediate attention. The hand was washed, sterilized in burning alcohol and iodine, and swathed in bandages. The damage; four major lacerations, two minor and the sad loss of the nail on the little finger. The fragile digit had been dismembered, stripped clean of the shiny tip. Amazing, don't you think, that again in the face of such adversity, FWE was able to continue cycling a mere thirty mins. after impact?

In Linfen we had a day off, time to recharge the batteries. It was far from relaxing though. We checked into a dingy hotel, neon signs flickered in the alley outside, but were asked to leave for 'government reasons'. We refused, only relinquishing the room when the police knocked on the door and threatened us with imprisonment if there was any further non-compliance. The situation still remains a mystery.

The following day a television crew appeared at our door, cameras rolling, wanting to make a program all about our intrepid adventures. They moved us to a 5-star hotel that provided complimentary slippers, paid for fancy meals in swanky restaurants, drinks and anything else we desired, all the while churning out reel after reel of film. They drove us to exotic locations to shoot scenes of FWE 'relaxing' in their 'favourite' city. Interviews followed interviews and the days ran late. On the last day after the closing scenes were shot early in the morning, we were honoured to be presented

with 'gifts' from the Chinese government, a token of their respect and good wishes for our future safe travel. A limited edition DVD will be released soon.

The final few days ride to Xi'an were in stark contrast to the heady heights of the previous few days. Filthy trucks belched and spat thick clouds of dirt and muck all over the determined team. Blasts from ear-piercing, head-splitting horns that made us jump out of our skins hounded us all the way to the hulking, menacing gates of the Old City.

We arrived late in the evening of the 1st August.

Several days from now FWE will become two once more. Jack leaves to complete his own adventure at Bristol University while Ben and Jamie will struggle on into the foothills of the Himalaya, peaks of seven thousand metres, glaciers and remote, uncharted territories.

Exciting times, exciting lives. Still dreaming, still cycling, still and always 'Free Wheel East'.

#### **FRIDAY, AUGUST 05, 2005: HAPPY BIRTHDAY TELEVISION**

Since arriving in Xian we have had quite phenomenal media interest. The paparazzi somehow got wind of us. There have been photo-shoots in front of the city wall resulting in our appearance -once on the front page- of two of the best-selling provincial papers. I say 'we' appeared on the front page of one, when in reality it was Jack on his old banger, complete with handle-bar basket and shifty expression.. The imposter! Yes, he managed to cycle 700 miles without any training on a bike with all the quality of a Skoda, and yes, he does deserve some acclaim, but to push the very expedition partners out of the spotlight! Dearie me.

Our newspaper articles were soon followed up by interest from the T.V. There was a short discussion with a director and a pretty hostess and before you could say Happy Birthday to Jamie -who is celebrating his 20-somethingth birthday- we were in make- up having our faces powdered. "This talk show will go out to all of China!" we were assured. After being jazzed up, we wound our way through the maze that was the studios to arrive in a dimly lit room. One side was a news-reader's desk, on the other were three chairs on a blue carpet, three enormous cameras poised and a small coffee table with three glasses of water on it. It was Parkinson!

At Shaanxi Television studios we were made to gibber for an hour. Just before the filming concluded a cake was presented to Jamie and everyone sang Happy Birthday in Chinese. Jamie admitted that even though he had experienced 'a lot' of birthdays now, he has never been sung Happy Birthday on Chinese television in front of a potential audience of millions.

#### **SATURDAY, AUGUST 13, 2005: GOLOCK SLIDES LIKE A KILLER BEE**

Since leaving Xi'an we have entered another world. It all began when we left the city of Lanzhou to cycle from 1000 metres above sea level to 3500m, into the altitude-sickness zone. The climb was wandering and tough. Above 3000 metres we experienced lactic acid build-up, headaches and our lungs felt like they were being burnt from beneath with lighters. We had half of our usual energy but persevered until we reached a plateau, the Aba Grasslands, a place very different from the rest of Sichuan.

The Grasslands are populated by a people called the Golocks:

dark skinned, scorched by the high-altitude sun and often seen wearing flowing long-sleeved green robes with highly-decorated swords tucked beneath bright pink belts. They are a formidable sight. The Golocks are fundamentally Tibetan but still practise a primitive form of Tibetan Buddhism which to this day involves animal sacrifice. Regardless of their wild exterior, the Golocks were kind to us and as inquisitive as any other Chinaman when it came to the bikes and our journey.

The thin air, cold winds and the fierce, close sun have sizzled our skin and bleached our hair. The environment is harsh but not too harsh for dogs, yaks, mountain sheep - and Bees...

The bees are kept in hives by the hundred alongside the road. Daily we have to negotiate swarms of angry stingers. With heads down, breathing through clenched teeth, powering the bikes at top speed, we manage to evade most of them. Inevitably we have been stung many times, though. They most often get us in the neck for some reason. Many a roadside refreshment break has been spent extracting the stings with tweezers.

The dogs are twice the size of a usual mutt and have more of a resemblance to a hyena. The savage hounds lie in wait by the side of the road. When they see you the chase is on, slobbering, rabid jaws nipping at your ankles, all the while emitting fearful deep-throated barks and growls. We have taken to stocking up with stones which we stow on our bar bags, ready to pelt at the evil creatures. There is no telling when the attack will occur. However, they always seem to strike when we're exhausted and travelling uphill with minimal energy to outrun them.

Yaks are the most common animal here and are found in vast herds, their long, hairy tails swishing from side to side, nomadic herders watching over them from their sheltered black, Bedouin-like tents. Above the Yaks are the mountain sheep which seem to prefer the grass in the highest, most inaccessible places. Right up on the peaks of the rounded mountains they can be seen, little white specks like desiccated coconut sprinkled on a bun.

We arrived in Barkham yesterday afternoon following some hard, hard riding but surprisingly it was all downhill. The sun, so strong and intense, had melted the tarmac, turning it into puddles of glue, small streams, inky black liquid flowing down the road. Even while descending from on high we had to pedal hard to keep moving.

We crossed the aforementioned grasslands in three days, camping where possible come night. It's difficult to describe the scenery - it's just...indescribable. The plains, so lush and green after witnessing the barren grey mountains in the north around Lanzhou, stretch for miles on either side of the road, rivers, herds of live- stock chewing their cuds, leather-faced minders on horseback watching from a distance. Vast mountains crash down from the sky, thousands of feet up, smashing almost vertically into the grass, kites, eagles and vultures rising majestically on the thermals.

For six days we plugged away, turning the screws, chewing up the miles. On the seventh day we saw some westerners. They were a German couple; the man we had met in Xi'an, Sebastian, was another intrepid cyclist.

Two days ago FWE biked up a mountain that wound up and up back and forth to a height of nearly three thousand seven

hundred metres; we crossed the pass, in doing so entering a portal into a different world. The countryside changed, the Tibetan people reverting to Chinese once more.

Sebastian and his girlfriend had passed along our intended track, the 209 / 317, only the day before we met them and aside from the pending downhill they also informed us of a land-slide that had occurred in the area. It appeared that the road may be closed. If it was true we would be forced to strike a course south east and head towards Cheng Do. It was not an option we fancied and decided to risk all and make for the ominous slide.

A sign in Chinese looked like it said something about road closure; we chose to ignore the characters and skirted around it. At every turn in the twisting road we expected to see a pile of rubble blocking our path. For many miles there was no sign of one. Then, we rounded a sharp corner; we could not have been prepared for what confronted our meek eyes. The full side of a mountain had collapsed, washing the road away in its entirety, spilling waste and carnage into the raging torrents of a stormy river at the foot. Heavy, heavy rain had menaced the area for the last week and this, the almighty landslide, was the result. A one hundred-metre-high by one hundred-metre-wide chunk of soil, trees and foliage had slipped away leaving a scar of utter devastation in its place.

A queue of cars was gathered at the bottom: what were they waiting for? There was no way they were going to be crossing any time this day or for some time after. We indicated that we intended to cross the slide but our gesticulations met with chorused disapproval, shakes of the head and panicked looks. A single, rugged track had been forged by a bull-

dozer, allowing the most hardy of Four-by-Fours to struggle across. As we were explaining to the crowd that we had no choice, that we'd rather take our chances than turn tail and climb back out and head towards Cheng Do, a terrifying rumble erupted behind us, a boulder the size of a mini came crashing down the slope and slammed into the river. FWE gulped and fell silent...but not for long.

Composure regained, the team idled up to the edge of the slide, checked up the bank one last time then in a high gear, heads down, went hell for leather on to the decayed track. It was loose stone, though, and the mud was getting deeper and deeper by the second. The bikes came to a halt right in the middle of the slide. 'Quick, get off and push!' Jamie hollered at Ben, eyes wide with terror. Dismounted and with all remaining strength, we heaved the bikes forward. 'My flip-flop, it's come off in the mud!' Ben shouted, high-pitched. It was like watching a painful scene in a horror movie: the victim is running from the ghastly monster that's bent on their destruction, but stumbles, trips and falls just at the vital moment. A low rumble ahead - there was a shifting in the slide. 'Leave the flip-flop, it's not worth it!' Jamie screamed but even as he said it Ben withdrew his arm and hand from the mud, clutching his right flip-flop. Another fifty metres and we were clear. Rocks and debris flowed down where we had been only moments before; a very close thing it was. Hearts were bumping, thumping in time, leaping in our throats, adrenalin racing around the visibly pulsing veins.

It was supposed to be an easy, relaxed ride into Barkham for our well-deserved day of rest. It was turning into anything but. The road now followed the wild, swollen river for the entire distance to Barkham, descending into a deep gorge that as the day wore on went deeper and deeper. The cliff

faces overhung the road, matted foliage, trees and shrubs crowding down to the road and river. Peaks all around, often directly above our heads, were hundreds of metres high.

The push south continues apace tomorrow. Landslides, killer bees, rabid dogs and electric storms aside, FWE will arrive in Kunming in the last week of August. We're still alive, folks...but only just.

#### **SATURDAY, AUGUST 27, 2005: JELLY BEAN WASH-OUT**

After some fierce cycling, deathly scrapes with mother nature, persistent cloud and torrential rain, FWE arrived in their southerly destination, Kunming, late yesterday evening.

The road from Barkham, the valley-bottom dwelling, continued to weave a steady path through the deep, voluptuous gorge of the Dadu river in Sichuan for over a week, all the time following the river, all the time going down, down, down, all the time in a strong southerly direction. The wind was favourable and for the time being the tropical storms held their breath.

A new week brought new weather. A cold front washed in on a gathering head wind, wielding menacing clouds, threatening rain from dawn to dusk. On the fourth day the heavenly spew was released and havoc was wrought.

Upon arrival in a small village called Detoua near Gonga Shan, or Mt China as it is called, we descended a hill flanked by palm trees and banana plants to the west and river to the east. A haggard group of decrepit-looking locals stood like guardians of the gates of hell across the road. They gibbered away in customary fashion, gathering around, prodding and poking, then upon realising we didn't have any inkling as to

what their incoherent babble was about, parted and pointed down the road. Except, there was no road...it had vanished. Where it once stood, a torrent of gushing, thrashing brown river water chewed further into the bank with every passing moment.

There was no way we could turn back so we looked around and decided to recruit some local help to aid in our continuation. Four burly-looking chaps were selected from the multitude; upon their backs they bore large wicker baskets with mares-tale shoulder straps. By shedding the panniers from the bikes and loading them into the baskets we were able to attempt a crossing. With the road gone we were forced to take to the steep, unstable jungle above the fall. Ben and I heaved the bikes across our shoulders and stepped out. Ben lead the troop, the four load bearers in the middle and Jamie bringing up the rear so as to prevent any deserting members from making off into the undergrowth with the valued possessions. It was a risky operation but was carried out with such military precision that no harm befell the party.

The following day the pair wanted to mount an expedition to Gonga Shan, but without money for guides etc decided to do it FWE style, i.e. little planning and no provisions. With borrowed wicker baskets from some kind folk in the local village we struck out. Hoping to camp somewhere on the mountain, we took our Terra Nova tents and Mountain Equipment sleeping bags and even took some hiking shoes instead of the customary flip-flops; the former we deemed especially worthy of inclusion as we would have to traverse a vast glacier to reach our destination. We hitched lifts as far as possible in trucks and cars but at 3500 metres the persistent thorn in our aching side returned; another road

slide. In fact there were three. All had to be defeated in the same way as the first. Despite the cooling mist, the sweat ran in torrents from our every pore. It was at this poached and parched point the duo realised that they'd forgotten to bring any water with them. In fact food and drink had been entirely overlooked. 'Core wee, I'm gasping. what have we got in way of refreshment Jamie?' Ben said between breaths. 'Hang on, I'll have a look,' came the equally exasperated reply; 'half a pack of peanut flavor biscuits and 5 jelly beans,' Jamie continued. Foolish men, I hear you say, but all was not lost.

After some hours we came to a remote village and were thus able to buy some cold beers. After a short nap and eating two and half jelly beans each we attempted to scale the seven and a half thousand-metres mountain. Our enquiries, however, were all cut short with the same answer 'no Gongga, no road'. It really was the end of the line this time. We were so proud of ourselves for attempting the ridiculous feat though, that we congratulated ourselves with another beer before heading back down to base camp.

The day and its events all happened at just the right time. Both of us were really starting to feel the strain of recent events. The cycling was harder than ever, the weather was shocking and morale was nearing an all-time low.

The cycling over the next few days then went from bad to worse. The road deteriorated to such a deplorable state that it was enough to make us cry at times. On our third day out of Xi Chang we crossed the mighty Yangtze and so entered Yunan, reputedly the most beautiful of all the Chinese provinces. Here the road climbed, I can't tell you how much it climbed. The altimeters on our wrists didn't know what

to do with themselves. We started the day at under 1000 metres, then ascended at a rate of over 600 metres an hour. The head goes down, the teeth grate, clothes drenched in stinking sweat, legs and lungs burning; 'worse' then became unbearable. Pitted, loose rocks, boulders that had only recently fallen lying like sleeping giants in the road. At times it got so narrow a car could not pass. There was no barrier, just a vertical drop on one side and on the other, loose rocks and towering mountain sides. We were trapped, caught in a shrinking tomb of grey rock.

We toiled away, the daily mileage plummeting from the 80's to the 40's, the rain fell harder and soon the road became a swamp, pools of water spanning the width of the track with twisted, slippery bottoms. At times the mud swallowed the bikes to above the axles, shoes and panniers enveloped in the muck.

On the fifth day, the sun broke through and providence shone down. Ben's bike bust. His rear tyre blew out, leaving it in tatters. No loving care or gaffer tape could repair the damage. The replacement rubber met its demise a mile on amidst an explosion like a TNT detonation and a plume of smoke. We were forced, reluctantly, into an air-conditioned van with padded seats, that carried us up and out of the valley, tired and nearly broken men. Never has being driven felt so bad, yet so good.

On the brink of a new era in the FWE saga, we wait with baited breath to see the hand dealt to us over the coming weeks. But for now, a coffee I think.



### **WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 31, 2005: A BREATH AND A SCREAM**

Shafts of broken light flooded through the gap in the heavy curtains; the first splinters of sun we have seen for 3 long, grey weeks. A change in the wind, a change of weather, riding on a fresh breeze, our fortunes have new life. Our Laos visas have been granted, the Thai ones pending. The tyre is fixed and on Sunday 4th September FWE will rumble east towards Boten, Laos.

Limestone mountains, non-greasy food and psycho, screaming bandits with AK47's await; we can barely contain ourselves.

### **THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 01, 2005: THE MARKET SLAUGHTER HOTEL**

Our stay in Kunming is drawing to a close. We've been staying in a little hotel on the outskirts. It is illegal for us to be there of course, but we -as old hats at it- negotiated with the police ever-so successfully and were granted permission by a big-shot police chief to stay.

We failed to mention the unique location of our accommodation. It's right on the main market street, you've never seen anything like it. Along with all the weirdest of fruit and veg, there is a chicken-slaughtering and fish-descaling section right outside our window. When departing from our residence on the way into town we're presented with life coming to its end. Our eyes are confronted with bloody slaughter men, grappling with struggling birds, slitting their throats, dipping them into boiling water and then plonking them into the incredible de-feathering machine.

Then there's the fish that float in pools of water, gulping and

looking very sick. If a punter wants one, the stall seller plucks the unsuspecting gulper from the death pool and takes off its scales while the carp wriggles and writhes. Fish scales, chicken offal and blood flow on the pavement -the chicken blood gets between the toes when wearing flip-flops- and the pungent smell of decaying meat wafts up into our room.

The purpose of this publication is to bring your attention to a change of plan; we are no longer visiting Hong Kong for expense and visa purposes. Something for the next trip we think...

### **THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 08, 2005: 2ND INJURY**

The push south has been halted in its tracks. An unfortunate injury has occurred for which we can find no explanation; Jamie's foot has become unusable. Yesterday he began to feel stabbing pains around his ankle. We made it to a nearby town, where his foot promptly began to swell. It is most out of shape and not a pretty thing to see. We have no option but to rest the offending extremity until it is strong enough to propel a pedal. It is a frustrating thing, poised -as we are- at the gates of paradise.

We wait in restless anticipation for the ankle to mend itself. The healing process is being sped along -we hope- by the administration of a concoction of Chinese drugs: 16 pills that look similar to the heavenly Smartie, are to be swallowed four times a day. Add these to the many anti-inflammatories, a few antimalarials and vitamin c tablets, and the pile of pills really does look impressive; it takes minutes to swallow.

We have heard from our contacts at the two Chinese television companies that filmed us whilst we were here in China. The chat show has been made into two episodes and







is being shown three times a week for two weeks. The other program is ready for its premier soon.

Jamie's injury is a dark cloud hanging over us. We cannot know how long we'll be in this quiet Yunnan town; it may be a while before we escape.

### **SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2005: DR NIC, THE ANKLE AND THE VERDICT**

Still the team are delayed, held-up in a town with no name. After popping a zillion tablets, the problematic right ankle remains a problem. What to be done?

Yesterday morning Jamie hobbled his way along the potted pavement to the local hospital in order to have an x-ray. 'Hi everybody,' announced the Dr with a broad grin, 'It alright, yes...you no cycle though, it not alright, no,' came the educated opinion after he'd scrutinized the pictures with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his stained mouth. 'Hmmm, a bandage is good for you?' said the doctor as he plastered the white cloth in a pink and black goo. He roughly strapped it to the offending area and with a new bag of pills, fresh from Willy Wonka's factory, sent Jamie away, to return in several days for another viewing.



It was also remarked upon by Dr Nic, that we would not be able to cycle for a week, perhaps longer. It was a fresh blow and our spirits took a turn for the worse. Frustration grows daily over the distinct lack of forward progress south. We read, write, eat and sleep and little else. Out of our window we can see the hazy mountains that sweep across the blistering horizon, bathed in sunshine, swathed in dappled green, beckoning us forth and willing a speedy recovery. Soon my mountainous friends, soon.

## **WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2005: A HEAVY BLOW ON THE NOODLE BUS**

There comes a time in every adventure when the cards stack against you, when the odds weigh heavy, tipping the scales firmly the other way and all you can do is face up to your fate and get on with it as best you can. For so many months now we have battled hard against everything that has been thrown at us and in doing so cycled many thousands of miles. What a bitter blow it is, therefore, that we must be forced from our bikes and take to the roads in the company of a bus. I cannot describe how sorely disappointed we - and specifically me, Jamie - are that this must happen. So much of the distance complete, the hard work done and just as the rewards of success are about to loom, just as we near the threshold of SE Asia, satisfaction is torn from our grasp.

We woke this morning, refreshed from our extended rest in this strange town, with all intentions of putting a fair distance under our belts. Local directions were poor, however, and after biking three miles in the wrong direction we returned to where we had started from and tucked into a lunch of noodles and chilli. Between slurps I broke my concern over the ankle to Ben and so we settled into a long discussion. It makes my blood run cold and my skin crawl to recall how serious FWE became for these moments. The bogus three miles revealed that the damage had not cleared, far from it. The swelling had returned with interest and although the burning pain was not great, it was not far off and no doubt would also return with an extra bite if pushed. The mountains in Southern Yunnan are not to be sniffed at and in the end, at the bottom of our second beer, we settled on the only viable option: with visas running to a close, we have decided that a bus to Luang Prabang, Laos, is the choice for us. Here we

shall seek fresh opinion and after some time sit down and look hard at our options once again.

We await our bus with heavy hearts, our fate laid bare before us. We hope the news is well received and understood, both here and abroad by fans, family and friends alike. We can only assure you that FWE will rise again; a fitter, stronger, happier, more productive machine than ever before.

: a thankyou, a plea

As you are probably already aware, Free Wheels East hopes to raise money for 'Practical Action', formally known as ITDG. Practical Action are a charity, who aim to use technology to challenge poverty, and are involved in some wonderful projects around the world. Have a look at their site [www.practicalaction.org](http://www.practicalaction.org) for further information.

An enormous thank you to those who have made a donation. We know there are some regular donors out there to whom Practical Action and ourselves are extremely grateful. For example Jamie's parents make a donation each time we enter a new country. These donations all add up, and remember, we're not intrepidly taking on this dangerous world for nothing!

If you really want to splash out, Jo Self, one of our patrons, has donated a painting of hers to the expedition. She has been in the Dalai Lama's garden for months now, painting hard and on her return to England will release her exhibition, at which point her work will be priceless. For her painting we are asking for 11,000 pounds. A percentage of the proceeds will be allotted to Practical Action. The painting 'Petunia' is viewable on the page 'Patrons'.

If you've not yet made a donation, please be sure to do so,

If you're an avid FWE follower, next time you click on line simply go to our 'Charity' page and follow the instructions. Once you have done that, tell your friends and family, tell everyone you know to make a donation. Thank you

### **SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 2005: IF MOUNTAINS WERE CRISPS**

A bus has been taken. There are no regrets. We feel we have done the right thing.

I am pleased to announce that we are in Luang Prabang, Laos, ready to give this ankle of Jamie's a rest. Another border has been crossed, our tenth country to date, after 6 months' travelling and 4000 miles (6000 kilometres) of cycling.

It was a bus that carried us across the border, yes, but no less triumphant are we! The bus bulleted us through Kiplingesque jungle, past thatched huts on stilts, past the tallest of palm trees and amongst the most breath-taking of mountains. Let me say that if mountains were crisps, these Laotian ones would be our favourite flavour, their limestone heads like those of wise old men wearing balding afro hair-cuts.

The joy of our arrival was no anti-climax. Somewhere on the outskirts, we found a bar, blissfully fell into a satisfied stupor with glassy eyes and stupid grins plastered across our faces. One of us said the words "We've made it to South East Asia" and we were delirious with happiness. Our path across China and all the little things that had begun to grate has fallen beneath the horizon behind us: the greasy food that tastes of wok, the manic screams of "HELLO!" from passing vehicles, the pollution that leaves you as black as

coal, the horns of trucks so loud that your ears ring and the world becomes a constant high-pitched ring, the boulder-strewn roads of deep gravel and tyre-ripping, bone-jarring rubble, the climbs lasting for days on end, meandering up, up, up, the landslides that threaten to wipe you from the road like chalk from a black board! Ah, but Laos, sweet Laos, peaceful, sit-down-loo Laos, in the nick of time you have saved us! In need of a change we were, and you have come to our rescue! Laos with your uncultivated lands, Laos with your jungle as far as eyes can behold.

This morning we ate an English breakfast, which we ordered from an English menu from people who could speak English. Tonight we will go to a club and speak English with other people who can speak English! We will exercise our tongues, practise the art of conversation we have all but lost, revel in the reality that we have made it onto the legendary backpacker trail of South East Asia, into a place where life moves at half its usual pace, a place that is peaceful, no sound of phlegm being brought forth from the depths of the throat or ear-splitting chatter or horns.

Now my friends, I think we will sit in the tropical sun and drink an ice cold, fresh fruit smoothie, for after a low, there will always come a high, and this is most very certainly one of those!

### **TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2005: TURTLE BACK TRAIL**

After a day's fishing on the banks of the Mighty Mekong in which another lure and ample amounts of line were lost, it was decided that we had overstayed our welcome in northern Luang Prabang and a change of scene was needed.

On Saturday morning the team journeyed south, via the

unmentionable mode of transport, to Vang Vieng, the town that now plays host to FWE during these glorious days. Firmly rooted to the relentless treadmill of the backpacker trail in which constant streams of 'turtle-backs' hump their packs up and down the road in either direction, we observe and slowly adapt to their familiar chat, familiar bandanas, knee-length shorts, ankle bracelets, beards and BO...life off the bikes could not be more different.

The injury has been rested for three weeks now, the swelling has all but entirely subsided and we are ready, once again, to take to the track FWE style. Ah yes, we yearn for the open road, the sun burn, hills and rain, the confused babble of strange village folk and the wonder of what lies around the next corner.

#### **SUNDAY, OCTOBER 02, 2005: BOBBING ALIENS**

There were screams of exhilaration as someone swung on a zip-wire which ran from a tall tree growing next to the Namsong river out over the fast flowing brown water. The zipper picked up pace and deposited the unfortunate dangler into the water from a height enough to make your skin sting with the impact. A rickety ladder took another victim up the tree to the highest possible point where a precarious-looking, flimsy bamboo platform was supported by branches above the water. It was there that another waited to suffer the same fate.

Jamie was the first to go after watching an Irishman land in the water with an elegant flip. He attempted a flip also but landed on his face, the crowd 'ouched' en masse. I followed soon afterwards, my heart thumping, to plop into the water in an equally uncouth manner.

After our exhilarating experience on the zip wire we resumed our jaunt of sitting on old tractor inner-tubes bobbing down the river. They call it 'Tubing'. Over the last week we've been plagued by thunderstorms of a ferocity that even Jamie -who is an experienced hand when it comes to South East Asian weather- had never seen before. As a result there were power-cuts lasting for days on end; the river was swollen, and fast!

We enjoyed the messing about on the river with a couple who were motor-cycling around the world on a bike similar to Charlie Borman and Ewan McGregor's, a BMW. We floated to a river bar where we were hoiked from the water with a bamboo pole, and enjoyed Bob Marley and Beer with the river gurgling past. Later that day we went for a curry with them at Nazim's Curry House. I believe I ordered a Tika Masala.. Our motor-cycling friends were great people, good luck to them!

On Thursday morning we loaded panniers, took the tyres up to pressure, oiled chains and tightened nuts. Then we cycled across the Vang Vieng air strip and onto the highway, happy to be reunited with our bikes. We both felt affection for our heavy, black work horses as they whirred away beneath us, in almost as good working order as they were when we left England.

Cycling seemed such a natural thing! A secret fear of losing the knack had been hanging over us for most of the three-week ankle recuperation period. We were happy that we hadn't lost the fitness of 6 months of cycling in three weeks, at least that's what we thought at first...

It was then that an un-ankle-related problem occurred;

towards the end of the day an alien took up residence inside Jamie, or that's what it looked like. The skin on his legs was moving around as though it had snakes beneath it. He began to suffer with cramps in every leg muscle and he began to sweat profusely but a good night's rest seemed to do the trick. Nevertheless the cramps returned the next day. If we had not got so close to Vientiane on the first day's ride perhaps we would not have made it there at all.

Three days of rest in Vientiane seem to have done the trick. Yesterday we saw the last of the alien-like twitches. Tomorrow we'll cross the border and enter Thailand via the Friendship Bridge from where the attempt to cycle to Bangkok will commence.

#### **SATURDAY, OCTOBER 08, 2005: GARGANTUAN RIDE**

One road, two bikes, 600 kms, four and a bit days....Bangkok

The Friendship Bridge was before us, Thailand before us. Two Thai flags fluttered in a light breeze, we cycled towards them, crossing the Mekong leaving Laos behind, a precious memory. Cycling on the left -as they do back in Great Britain- our wheels hit Thai tarmac for the first time. Nearly getting run over a few times -forgetting which way to look- we joined the vast Friendship Highway; built by the Americans, re-surfaced in 1988, the perfectly smooth and flat concrete strip runs from the Laos border all the way to Bangkok -600kms away- in more or less a straight line.

Hérons and egrets took to the wing, buffalo and the sacred, white, baggy-skinned, long-eared cow chewed the cud while we powered ourselves toward the capital through terrain similar in places to that found in East Anglia, but for the odd palm or banana plant.

Team Free Wheels East had no intention to rush the ride, but when you're on the flat after the foothills of Tibet it's incredible how fast you can turn the pedals. There are restrictions on the length of cycling days here though; we never can get up too early and the sun is gone by 6:00 which leaves - give or take, assuming we leave at 9:00 - 9 hours, one hour of which is lunch time, so 8 hours to cycle; well, not quite that much: 15 minutes every hour is spent sipping water in a roadside shack. Regardless of 35 degree heat and the sweat falling from your body as though you were a storm cloud, we still managed to cycle three 100-mile days back to back.

On the last day of the push, a storm helped us on our way and we ran at 25 mph before it until a loud bang stopped Ben dead; one of his hiking shoes, strapped to the back of the bike had caught in his wheel taking him from 25 to 0 in a second. Somehow he stayed on the bike as it swerved across the hard shoulder. Cursing hard, the shoe was extracted -without damage to the shoe or bike- and the pair were once again blown forth by the stormy gusts.

The last 30 miles of the final day's ride were just manic. Bangkok, notorious for its heavy traffic, was gridlocked. Only London on tube strike days could compare. Jamie valiantly kept the camera rolling with it strapped to a front pannier. A slow puncture on Ben's rear tyre forced frequent breaks for re-inflation; if it wasn't for those breaks perhaps we would've dropped from our saddles and fallen by the wayside! As darkness fell we found ourselves lost in the metropolis desperately seeking the infamous Khou San Road. With the occasional whimper of "I can't take much more of this" we persevered, the throb of engines and horns blowing to accompany us.



Black with settled exhaust smuts, dripping from head to foot, the physical and mental fatigue at its height, 105 miles on the speedo, we sat on the steps outside Burger King and ate our Double Whopper Meals with shaking hands. With the poor, battered bikes close at hand and Ben's kickstand -which broke on the way- lashed with a piece of string and wedged with a broken chopstick, the Khou San road twinkled in the night, its bright lights casting colour onto the drawn faces of two exhausted, ecstatic cyclists.

#### **THURSDAY, OCTOBER 13, 2005: FAREWELL FALAFEL**

Well folks, it's that time again: time to load the black Ortliebs and set to work on gaining a few more miles on our adventure through South East Asia. Bangkok, heaving and hot Bangkok serving delicious Falafels, much maligned as a place to escape ASAP, has offered the perfect remedy to all cycling ailments. Relaxing, entertaining, exhilarating, friendly; what a time, what a place.

Our friends, supporters and guides - Jayzee and Vee - have provided many an enjoyable moment and their kindness and hospitality will not be soon forgotten. Many thanks to them for making our stay so thoroughly fantastic.

Early-ish on Friday morning we'll turn our backs on new familiarities and, as Bruce Wayne becomes Batman, Parker to Spiderman, Banner to The Hulk, Jamie and Ben will once again become...Free Wheels East! Courageously scorching a line around the world, they'll thunder relentlessly on, on their sleek, black demon machines to Chumphon, Kho Tao and the paradise of life, Thai beach style.

Monday, October 17, 2005: Neon hot-dogs & Apache bliss in a boozy backstreet bar.

We left Bangkok on Saturday morning under a cloudy sky

but in hot sticky conditions. Studying maps, it seemed that exiting the city would not be too much of a problem...it wasn't. Indeed it was actually a pleasure to cycle out of the place. Bangkok, you see, is more of a massive Metropolis than a mere city, where the highways are 12 lanes wide and the traffic is thick and congested. Drivers, however, are for the most part very considerate and far from wanting to squash two 'farangs' will give over the entire road if you so desire. We followed Rama 2 to the outer limits, sweeping through the traffic and cutting across roundabouts, slowly watching as one-by-one the cars and trucks diminished. We would weave our way to the front of the lights, engines thumping, humming and revving all around us, the lights start flashing amber, the cacophony of engine noises building and building. We are in a Grand Prix at the front of the grid...3...2...1...and we're off, only our acceleration is better than everyone else's. We steam across the vast intersection, legs pumping hard, sweat flowing in torrents down our chests.

We rode due west along highway 35, a storm constantly tripping at our heels, threatening a deluge that never came. Under a falling sky of battleship grey, we were headed to a junction where we could pick up Highway 4 and so begin the slog due south towards the beaches.

By the end of the first day we had put a healthy 65 miles between us and the magnificent Capital City of Hedonism.

The following day was a FWE classic. After 6 tiring, hard months we were, at long, long last within touching distance of the coast. After passing through Phetchaburi, the signs for Cha am started appearing on the signposts. Cha am: a place that has been popular with Thai tourists since the dawn of

all creation is packed all year round with droving masses, all seeking a square inch of sand. Several km's north, however, lies a small beach that, due to its inaccessibility, has remained relatively untainted by any sort of development. It was here that we headed; 15 kms the sign said - 15 kms until the sea! We gathered pace without any extra effort, our thoughts miles away, legs spinning merrily in happy unison. The miles ticked down and still we gathered speed. By the time the 1 km marker presented itself we were cruising at 23 mph. King Fishers, neon in hue, sat on the high wires, Black Drongos flitting between the palms, Stilts and all manner of waders stalking up and down in the shallow rice paddies. Thick, thick vegetation surrounded us and the road twisted and turned so you could barely see 50 metres ahead.

Away in the distance, off in the south, a low thundering was audible. The drone grew louder and louder until over the top of the nearby palms a squadron of Apache and Chinook helicopters came rumbling tight and low, right over our heads. The down draft was immense and we faltered briefly on our course. 'Ride Of The Valkyries' rang through our minds as we awaited a blazing line of Napalm to raze the ground around us. The intensity of the moment was building...

...the road straightened...500 metres away in the distance there was an opening in the trees, palms and creepers spreading themselves, allowing a small arch of brilliant light to claw its way through the undergrowth. Eyes squinted... it couldn't be... it was...it was a horizon of blue... FWE had crossed half-way around the world, had travelled from coast-to-coast and now, for the first time since leaving Ostend in Belgium 6 months previously, could finally feast their parched eyes on the Big Blue.

We rode our bikes past the beach markers, all the way, right on to the sand. Clothes on, sweat and tears tumbling down, we marched to the shore line and waded into the water, wallowing in pride and satisfaction. Another experience, another emotion that money cannot buy, that no short cuts will provide; simply priceless and unforgettable.

We sped through Cha am, stopping only for a quick lunch; a hot-dog from a 7/11 shop on the sea-front. Hua Hin lay only 24 kms down the track and it was here that we decided to go for the night. It's the official holiday destination of the Thai Royal Family and as such is a place where one could spend a fortune if so desired. Fortunately, though, there is also some budget accommodation to be found and at 180 B a night, for a twin room with fan, we couldn't complain.

The beach here is popular and boasts its fair share of tourists and travellers; mostly aged German couples who really shouldn't be displaying as much flesh as they often do. There are palms and large rocks all along the 5km length of the beach and with them, the usual quota of Thai Massage ladies; usually very old and resembling a Gagool like figure. We, however, tend to save our money for the far younger, prettier fillies who frequent the OFFICIAL Massage houses.

At a recent board meeting in a boozy backstreet bar, it was decided that the team will aim to reach Kho Tao no later than the start of November. There is after all no rush. Instead, FWE will stop when they like and cycle no more than 30 miles a day, heading from one beach to the next.

We will do as we please and if the sun shines tomorrow then we will stay for another day but, if not, then we will pack up and move on to a secluded marine park, not far from here,

that has a white-sanded, palm-fringed beach that is hugged on three sides by towering limestone cliffs.

And then...well, who knows, but frankly, who cares... we're in Thailand!

: coastal frog

Ben's bike has taken on a whole new shape. If it ever had any symmetry, if it ever looked streamlined as though it might cut through the air like a bullet, it has lost those attributes. In fact the bike has taken on the complete opposite look, that of a cumbersome lump, something you would think would be impossible to move without the assistance of a diesel engine.

This change in the bike's appearance from sleek, practical world traveller to something like a mobile bric-a-brac shop has come at a time when the miles no longer matter, when the days no longer need to be long, as we wind our way -ever so slowly- along the tropical coastline of the Gulf of Thailand. We are in no rush to get to Australia and begin working, saving for the next leg. Yes, before this leg is through we must think of the second year of Free Wheels East, cycling the length of South America. I expect that when we put to sea and set sail for Punta Arenas the bikes will once again look like machines belonging to professionals. I digress; the major de-streamlining addition to Ben's bike is an instrument that he feels lost without - the guitar. In Bangkok a mini guitar was bought for peanuts; it adds one foot of length and half a foot of width to his bike. No longer may small gaps be negotiated with this musical load. There is more: a brown, felt hat, bought all the way back in China, sits between the guitar and a pair of smelly old hiking boots. Then, if you move forward to the handle-bars, on Ben's large, steel bell sits a small magnetic frog with arms and

feet that operate in the same way as a parcel-shelf dog's head. The purchase of the magnetic frog at Bangkok zoo was deemed essential by both members of the team, as were an assortment of international flag stickers, those of the countries we've visited, now plastered across frame and pannier. The cherries on the cakes, though, our pride, our patriotism, inexorably finding their way onto our bicycles, are two union flags; to bolster our gratitude for belonging to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland!

Jamie's bike -with the exception of flags and the odd pair of drying pants tucked under a bungee- has retained its original dimensions and sports no unsightly lumps on its rear end.

Perhaps you may have a better picture now of the real FWE vehicles in your mind. So, your image of those blemish-less, unused things, to be seen in the gallery section of this website, should stand corrected. Speaking of which, there is a vast archive of photos from Germany to date for you to see which will illustrate all that has happened to us on our trundle from the English channel to these warm, blue, lapping waters. Our pictures will be published as soon as we are stationary long enough to select the best of them. We plan to settle for a little while here in Thailand, to try to remember what stability means -for a short period that is. It will be then that you will find yourselves up to date with the images of the expedition... Something to look forward to!!

Friday, October 28, 2005: Bullet with Butterfly Wings

The time is 15:59 on Friday afternoon; in seven hours' time FWE will board the Kho Jaroen Ferry and sail for six hours, bearing south-east into the Gulf of Thailand to Kho Tao - 'Turtle Island'.

From Hua Hin we travelled south for several days, reaching Prachuap Khiri Khan late last Saturday. After a bout of violent food poisoning, contracted from a 7/11 hotdog with cheese and mustard and an inflicted three-day recovery period, we continued south, arriving a few hours ago at the coastal town of Chomphon.

We moved heaven and earth to get here for this moment; Highway 4 played host to our wheels for much of the ride but when possible we would strike away from the main drag and head east along the smaller, more beautiful and accommodating roads. Often, at their termination, we'd discover bays of pristine sand that lay entirely bereft of people; beaches of paradise all to ourselves. Coconut palms stretched endlessly in either direction, the blue sea laying ripples of pleasure on the white sand and a sprinkling of exotic shells. A dip in the warm water, then back to the saddle and the more important job of achieving Chomphon. We flew down the country's east coast, dogs chomping at thin air as they vainly chased our wheels. On and on, through Thap Sakae, Bang Saphan, Ban Thung Mala as a single machine of determination; a bullet with butterfly wings.

The time is 16:14...there are less than seven hours to go...

### **WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 02, 2005: SETTLED ON A HILL BY A BAY WITH A CAT**

The wanderers cease to wander, for a short period of time, that is. For the rest of November a small residence -a little hut (Number 27) with a balcony, on the side of a green hill, looking over a bay of long-tailed boats, boulders and beach -currently belongs to us for one month. We made payment in advance to the big boss of the family of employees at J.P Resort to secure ourselves a better than half-price deal.

Two motorbikes are ours now too, also for one month. Their price - another special deal for settled wanderers - is a little less than 1 pound sterling per day. They are called Honda Dreams, not the most masculine of vehicles, especially when their slogan is 'supreme elegance'. They serve a purpose.

One day whilst drinking a delicious beverage and looking over the gorgeous bay, a persistent, unpleasant, whining, meowing sound shattered our reverie, and there, on the top step stood a sorry bag of bones. The cat had a fine tortoise-shell coat and eyes that said "feed me now damn it, I'm famished". Jamie popped off to prepare the cat a little something, while Ben stared at the cat and the cat stared back at Ben, all the while letting out the most dreadful sounds. "It's all right," said Jamie in a cooing voice, "there you are," and he set down a travel saucepan lid full of what looked like milk. "What's that?" I asked. "Coffee Mate," said Jamie. The cat lapped it up in seconds and demanded more with its dreadful meow. "Quick, give it some more!" I yelled. From that point on we've had a furry friend to add even more to the domestic flavour of hut 27. I should expect that 'Pussy' -as we've named her- will be lying curled up in a ball on the doormat right now, as I type.

Most of our time here on Turtle Island is spent with a snorkel, underwater with thousands of beautiful, vividly-coloured, psychedelic tropical fish that surround you and nibble at your mosquito bite scabs. Outside this underwater world you may find us on the beach, absentmindedly drawing in the sand, or reading a book.

### **THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2005: THE ANTS, MOSQUITOS, PUSSY AND ME**

Time moves on and the days melt by; we are slaves to our lethargy. Ants, there are ants all over our balcony and

mosquitoes too. The ants get in our beds, in our clothes and munch on all exposed skin. A single crumb or fragment of crisp is enough for an entire army to infiltrate our hut. Column upon column of the red devils march in relentlessly until they are discovered and beaten from our home with a broom.

Pussy continues to lose weight as we maintain our strict no-feeding-of-solids policy. Every morning she mews pitifully, desperate for sustenance, something, anything. We do not relent or waver in our resolve, though; it's for her own good, you must understand. Her hips protrude like jagged mountains from her deteriorating Tortoise Shell coat, her mews growing weaker by the day. 'Poor beast' we say as we trot down to the restaurant for a slap-up meal and coconut shake.

While Ben completes his Open Water Scuba course with the Buddha View dive crew, Jamie spends his days exploring the island, zipping around on his 'Dream', prying into the smallest corners of the island. Bays of crystal blue, fringed with sweeping hills, flush with the drooping, gently swaying palms that bathe in the glory of a cloudless Thai sky. Brightly-coloured coral, Parrot Fish, Banner Fish, Angel Fish and even a Giant Turtle have all been spotted at one point or another.

Its a marvellous time for team FWE; with the bikes out of sight they really are out of mind. The days unfold, here on the rock, around a loose pattern, central to which is our date at 'Croissant' the French bakery in Mae Haad that celebrates a daily 'Happy Hour' at 5pm. Earl Grey tea, fresh pastries of the most exquisite taste and texture, toast, jam, and Ben's personal favorite, the lemon slice, are all served with a smile

and a half-price tag.

Come the evening after the sun has set, we retire to the balcony for fine whiskeys, beer, chat and music. At the summit of the hill we rule the bay, surveying our twinkling kingdom below and proclaiming ourselves to be the luckiest folk on earth. Life is just about perfect!

#### **FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2005: HUSKINSON SUBMARINE**

A friend of Jamie's, Huskinson, gave us the pleasure of his company for a little while here on Turtle Island. Huskinson relished his snippet of island life; it was a sad thing to see him leave. He left us with happy memories: he instigated the game of Misere on the balcony, he racked his brains for Charlie Chalk, Charlie Chaplain, Corey Harris and Harrison Ford.. He stayed on the pool table at A.C for 9 unbeaten games, he witnessed the playing of guitar to the bay of Chalock, he even sang the blues. He came to our night, the night hosted by FWE at Reggae Bar, "The Skilliwiglers play Bat Jazz, Folk-Mendelson Rock, Indy-Quack and Blues Cowboy at a secret location...." 400 flyers posted. It was to become an intimate evening of what we believe to be the best music in the world, unfolding on a deck before the sea, bathed in the warm light of naked flame, with laughter and merriment rolling into the dark.

Ben's Buddha View dive course is complete, he is PADI qualified to dive to 18 metres, a ticket to the sub-marine world! A video of his underwater escapade will appear - along with our two appearances on Chinese national television - as an extra on the FWE film to be edited and released on our return.

Pussy has forsaken us. I saw her last on another balcony,

curled up, content, a plate of half-eaten food close by. I quietly said goodbye to our old Tortoise shell friend, feeling warm inside, knowing that pussy will continue to give those living at J.P pleasure for the rest of her days. We were lucky enough to share her company.

#### **SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2005: MONTGOMERY NUT**

In this time of Stationary Wheels East there is a surprising volume of tasks that require attention; Ben has spent the last few days working on the second coming of, The Skillywiggles. After the success of the original evening of Skillywiggles, there is anticipation rippling through the island's people. This second performance is to be held tonight at the Prestigious Dragon Bar, one of Koh Tao's most successful venues. Today Ben will head out on his Dream with the intent to entice, handing out flyers for the ensuing musical extravaganza.

I should say, there are many people we have made envious by continually bringing up the fact that we are living in a place that is the closest thing to heaven on earth. If you are one of those people, you will be pleased to hear that Turtle Island has been awash with heavy rain, the last of the monsoon. Roads have become rivers, puddles developed quickly into lakes which almost rendered parts of the island inaccessible. The sky has been black, the sea has been murky with white horses dancing across it as far as the eye can see, the wind has lashed, nearly causing a fatality by blowing a coconut out of its palm. The coconut fell from a tremendous height and dropped like a falling cannonball onto the road, missing Jamie -who was on his motorbike- by inches. The nut fell very close to his head; he was shaken by his near nut crack; thankfully he survived to tell the tale.

Since our last entry Jamie has been on a journey. He took to the high seas to collect an old friend who recently flew into Bangkok. The age of Monty has arrived. On the 24th of November after a battle with 5-metre waves, Monty, the chum of old, joined us on Koh Tao. Montgomery currently occupies Hut 28, next door to hut 27 believe it or not, and is fitting well into FWE life. He will be part of our contingent for 3 weeks. Unfortunately the poor fellow has seen nothing of the sun; in fact, it has rained since he arrived and threatens to do so for the duration of his stay. When his time is up he will return to London. We can only hope the sun shines for him.

Monty brought with him a package from home. It contained Christmas gifts, new pants, books and lots of letters from loved ones. The appreciation we felt for all of the lovely little things we received cannot be put into words. I will say that as I read my letters alone on the balcony, a great big lump formed in my throat.

#### **MONDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2005: TURTLE HEADS**

'Kipper' is born. A modification on the popular Pool table game of 'Killer' has been created. New rules and a revised points system have thrilled and delighted the team as the rainy days on the Rock continue with ferocious intensity. Jamie has successfully scaled the rankings and currently sits proudly at the top of the listings; consistently knocking the balls about the green velvet with the skill and mastery of a seasoned pro. Does his sporting prowess have no limits, we ask?

Monty the White, grows more anxious by the day as we await our first snorkel outing and bathe on a beach. The outlook is gloomy, desperately gloomy, but Kipper has

staved off boredom. Will the sun shine? Will the Turtle head poke through once more? We hope, we pray, we wait to see.

#### **SATURDAY, DECEMBER 03, 2005: VISA NIGHTMARE**

Our sixty-day visas were about to expire; time to do a runner to Burma. While 'Monty The Pink' was left to bathe in the rain in the desperate attempt to achieve his longed-for 'healthy glow', Jamie and Ben took to the high seas once more.

A six hour boat ride, three hour bus journey, one hour wait in immigration, the discovery that we had overstayed our visa by a day, payment of a fine, severe reprimanding, thirty minute boat trip, arrival at Burma, quick coffee, boat ride, bus ride, KFC, boat ride, Koh Tao! A day of travel, discomfort and anguish but another thirty days have been granted and we are legal once more.

FWE feel desperately sorry for 'The Pink' as the rain has continued to run amok. 'The worst in forty years' the Bangkok Post read, 'It's all because of Monty' another one reported. The good news is that rumour says the inclement conditions are due to abate on the 6th December; the sad news for Monty is that this is the very day he is due to leave!

#### **WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 07, 2005: SAD DOG GOODBYE**

The bay of Chalock seemed very quiet as the sun sank behind a ridge of the hills flanking the beach. Palm trees gently swished in a light breeze, a prickly halo before the molten red glow of the setting sun. A heron, silently, majestically flew past in the half light and a tethered long-tail bobbed on the water while we three spent our last few moments on our balcony together.

'Last call; everyone for the boat to Chumphon,' the squat

man with a clipboard tucked under his arm announced. 'That's me, boys,' Monty said as he laboured to shoulder his black Karrimor rucksack. Few words were said, handshakes and manly hugs, a slap on the back and that was that. Monty turned and lumbered up the jetty like a sad dog to the waiting white catamaran. He turned, raised a clenched fist and held it aloft. Head bowed, he walked up the gangway and disappeared from view. It was the end of the 'era of Monty'.

Time has marched on at a frenetic pace here on Koh Tao. Nearly seven weeks have passed since we first arrived on the night car ferry and we took up residence in our cherished Hut 27 at the JP resort. Our attention is shifting to FWE once more; slowly we're remembering who we are and why we are here. For the first time in many weeks we viewed the bikes this very afternoon. In their dank and dark place of storage they cut an ugly sight to behold: saddles black and covered in mould, tyres limp, chains stiff and tinted with rust; they looked sad and dejected, unwanted, lonely and out-of-place in this strange and alien land.

Anticipation slowly builds once more, the thought and comforting excitement of the un-known returning daily.

#### **TUESDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2005: NEGOTIATING THE HIGH SEAS**

The day was beautiful, a light breeze played with the palm trees, holiday makers cooked gently in the sun, some looked a bit overdone, ready for turning.

"I have an idea.." said Ben; "let's kayak over to Nang Yuang island!" Jamie looked over to the deceptively close island with images of the postcards we have seen floating

between his ears; three lumps of rock protruding from the sea, joined with a bar of white sand, Thailand's answer to the Whitsundays. The thought of it was as tempting to the hot and bothered Jamie as a rump steak is to a feral hound. "Let's do it!" yelled Jamie, foaming at the mouth. A few minutes later we were paddling hard out to sea on the 'pacific cruiser', a blue, stable-looking craft.

It took some time to get out into the open water. Blisters began to form on our palms. "We forgot to bring any water!" Ben yelled aft, his voice drowned by the sound of the waves. Waves! This was an unexpected bonus. The Kayak was being tossed around like a cork. "Don't let this thing turn broadside, or we're going in!" called Jamie forward. The breeze of before had become a squall, we were half way to Nang Yuang. "Do we turn back or push on?" "I say we go for it!" The thirst was worsening, the blisters were raw, the knees ached, the spray soaked our eyes with every wave, it was becoming difficult to see anything, the waves got bigger and bigger...

Just as we could take no more we heard the reassuring thud of bow on sand. We'd made it. The island was worth every paddle. We gorged on water and took on board plentiful supplies, we frolicked in the surf, relishing every second of our stay on Nang Yuang. In the back of our minds, though, there was an irrepressible sense of foreboding; we knew that shortly we would have to use every scrap of our severely depleted energy supply to get us back to Koh Tao. A black cloud hung over the sound of water. The waves looked more ferocious than ever. Foreboding became fear as we sat ourselves down in 'Pacific Cruiser' for the second time. Just as we were about to set off there was a sudden rush of people, running around and jumping into boats like madmen.

They were yelling something in Thai and pointing out into the sound. "Look!!" shouted Jamie. There in the distance was a yellow sliver in the dark water, it was a canoe. There were three heads bobbing beside it in the water: the canoe had overturned.

Three Swedish guys had the same gung-ho attitude as us. They had not been so lucky in one respect because they had capsized; on the other hand, you could say they were the luckiest men that day on the seven seas: they had been seen by the Nang Yuang coast guard, they had not been swept out into the gulf - they had survived.

We looked at each other with 'sensible' written in our eyes for once. We hailed a Long-tail, hoisted the 'Pacific Cruiser' on board and commissioned the friendly skipper to take us safely back to Koh Tao where we would begin planning our next fraught-with-danger Kayak adventure.

There was a party, although we are finding it difficult to remember the finer details. Ben D.J'd at the Dragon to a sizeable crowd in what was perhaps to be the final night of Skillywiggler; both he and Jamie were plied with complimentary drinks for their troubles. Afterwards, at the top of a hill lies Moonlight Bar which only opens monthly. We were greeted with the kind of neon paint that only shows up under ultraviolet light, and soon the paint was on us too, primaeval patterns on the face, on the arms, chest and legs.

Tonight we put our lives in the hands of Neptune once again as we are on a short holiday. To escape the stresses of island life in the east of Thailand, we are journeying south and west to unwind on an island in the west called Koh Phi Phi. To be on the west coast, though, on Boxing Day would



be a sombre occasion, so, to keep the mood light-hearted we're only staying for 10 days before we return to Koh Tao for Christmas and New Year. Then fans, it really is the end of our holidays. You will be pleased to hear that some day in early January Free Wheels East will take to the road for the last time to complete the last little bit of our second major cycle ride of the expedition so far; Beijing to Singapore. That just leaves designated routes three, four and five to go...

#### **TUESDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2005: FIRST HAND TSUNAMI**

On Boxing day 2005 at about 10:00 in the morning the Tsunami everyone remembers only too well hit Koh Phi Phi. It wiped off the face of the earth most of the buildings, people and trees inhabiting its most densely populated central bar of sand which joins the uninhabited higher ground to the east and west of the island together. More than 1500 people died here alone. This tiny island formed just a small part of a vast break-water made up of at least one coast of every country on the Indian Ocean.

We spent a day walking through an area that looked like it had been hit by an atomic bomb. We shuddered to think of what it must've been like just under one year ago. The people here willingly give their eye-witness accounts of the moment the wave hit. One girl who could not swim was asleep when her room began to fill with water. Her boyfriend pulled her by the hair to safety just as "I was waiting for death" she said. Standing under a lone palm tree in a place that used to be covered with them, we asked her how much the government gave her in compensation for the loss of everything she had other than the boyfriend who saved her life. All together she received 2000 baht. That's less than 30 pounds.

Practical Action -the charity we hope to raise money for- (please see the tab 'Charity' in order to donate) has helped get communities in Sri Lanka also affected by the Tsunami back on their feet. It is important that we help these amazingly resilient people to live their devastatingly disrupted lives in as normal a way as it is humanly possible.

#### **FRIDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2005: LAVA LAMPS CAN BE UGLY**

Only two days to go until Christmas and the team find themselves worryingly run a-ground at Chumphon.

Having left the inspiring and beautiful Koh Phi Phi behind them off the West coast in the Andaman Sea, the cyclists travelled north to Patong in the Phuket province; a place that would appear to sum up all that can be so wrong about this part of SE Asia. Grizzled old men parade the beach in nothing more than day-glow-coloured 'ball-crushers' with slogans such as 'cockpit' emblazoned on them. Hair leaps and bounds from their expanded frames, flesh flowing, dripping and bulging bulbously about them like a lava lamp. Orange-tinted women with shrivelled, puckered faces and leathered skin lie sprawled on sun beds doing their best to frighten away the sun...and indeed, anyone with eyes. The sand long ago gave up the battle for possession of the beach, finally relenting to the constant onslaught from the blue and white 'loungers' and parasols.

FWE did not linger for long and were on a bus in moments, again heading north to Ranong. It was time for another Visa run.

Leaving Koh Phi Phi was tough. After the initial shock had been overcome, after the surface appearance had been scratched, we discovered a fantastic, often breath-taking

island still to survive. The beauty remains but in a less obvious way; the people are humble, modest and kind, a testimony to the strength of our potential nature and surely deserve so much more help than they are receiving. It is, though, worrying to see the levels of aid that have sifted through to the lower levels, to the meeker businesses, the fishermen and small shop owners. While initial efforts were effective, many of the people now feel abandoned and forgotten and for a place such as Phi Phi, that provides so many of us with so much entertainment, it's a shame and an embarrassment to witness.

With our fondly assembled multinational crew that included an Italian, a Chilean, a Welshman, an Australian, two Netherlanders and of course us two Swedes (it's a common mistake but we forgive people), we explored the smaller corners of Phi Phi and lived out a most memorable eight days.

We arrived under a cloud but left in the sunshine. All but for a few days we were blessed with scorching rays of golden shine that caressed our faded tans and charged the batteries back to near capacity. Still, when you are trading locations for somewhere like Koh Tao, there can really be very little to complain about and so it was that on Thursday morning we hopped aboard the 10am boat bound for Phuket Town, some two hours further north.

After being spat off the bus from Patong in a streetlight-lit Ranong, we checked into the Paradise Hotel for a couple of hours' rest before the run to Burma. The room provided complementary cockroaches, geckos, spiders and bed bugs and achieved the rare status of being a 'rip-off' at the paltry sum of 50 baht each.

So once again we are in Chumphon, once again waiting for a boat, once again heading for Tao. If the boats don't start running again soon then it could be a lonely Christmas, folks; a Christmas KFC is looking like a distinct possibility. We are told daily that the monsoon is over, but we are beginning to have our doubts.

Will the winds and waves abate? Will the duo reach Tao? Will they be forced to eat battered reconstituted chicken heads? We live and wait in desperate but happy hope...

#### **THURSDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2005: NEWS FLASH: CHRISTMAS ACCIDENT REPORT**

Ben was lying in the ditch of a steep slope leading down from the top of the mountain. He had his head towards the foot of the hill, partly submerged in a stream. The situation appeared grave, very grave. "Ben, Wake up!!!!" Jamie screamed frantically; Ben did not move. There was blood everywhere, seemingly coming from Ben's head. Ben stirred. "What happened?" he groaned. "You've taken a fall," replied Jamie. "I thought you were dead!" he continued with a sob. "Let's get you out of here - are you O.K to move?" "I think so.."

The accident occurred whilst Ben attempted to find his motorbike keys. It turned out they'd fallen out of his pocket at the top of the mountain. It was twilight and getting difficult to see. As he searched for the keys he lost his footing, tripped and fell, knocking himself out. This is speculation, of course; Ben can remember none of it. The pair had been up to the top of Sairee mountain to take in the spectacular views and Ben decided to go home early. The last thing he remembers is looking for his motorbike keys. This is Ben's account of events after he regained consciousness:

“The stream was trickling over my face. I remember wondering how on earth I got there. I did not realise I was bleeding; the only thing I knew at the time was that Jamie was almost out of control, yelling so loud and with so much emotion that he scared me. This gave me my first indication that something was not right. Jamie put me on the back of his bike to take me to hospital. I felt groggy and sort of passed out again with my head on his shoulders. At the hospital two nurses came to my aid. Stitches were administered to a deep gash on my temple after they cut back my hair. Another cut above my eye, bleeding a lot, required no stitches; however, it was badly swollen. Along with minor cuts and scrapes all over I had a swollen left foot, the inside of my cheek is ripped making my jaw ache and chewing difficult, and I also have the ugliest black eye I’ve ever seen; it’s the colour of blackberry juice and so swollen that my eye does not open without effort. I was most shocked to see that I had lost the white of the eye; it has been replaced with red, the result of badly burst blood vessels. Thankfully my sight is still twenty-twenty. My whole body aches. Nobody on the island can quite believe it’s me under all the bruises. Right now I feel lucky, lucky that Jamie found me when he did, that I have not got brain damage and that I did not lose my eye. I am thankful that I am still alive!”

Ben is so well bandaged up that he looks just like Wells’ Invisible Man! The accident has given both Jamie and Ben a profound appreciation of the tango we dance with death, fate and luck each day. You may be struck down at your strongest or saved at your weakest. You may take every precaution but nothing will alter the hand you are dealt.

The accident was a sorry end to what has been a wonderful Christmas here on Koh Tao. Thank you everyone for your







good wishes and gifts at this festive time. On Christmas morning conversations were made home. Jamie called his parents, Ben called his for the first time since leaving Beijing about 6 months ago. It was happy, emotional, so much better than that impersonal mode of communication that is email.

We missed the British Christmas traditions and the togetherness of Christmas, we missed the food too!! Now the duo have one more celebration, one for their departure from Turtle Island, a last goodbye, one of new beginnings, one of the new year, one of cycling onward, toward Singapore's sky-scrapers.

#### **TUESDAY, JANUARY 03, 2006: THE MAGIC OF THE DRAGON BAR CUP**

2005 was an epic year for FWE; so many highs, a few lows, countless adventures and oodles of excitement.

The festive period provided the team with the perfect conclusion to their first calendar year away from Blighty and to a fantastic stay on the magical island of Tao. With surprise special guests and old university friends Bronwen & Pat, who, to the shock and delight of all concerned, bumped into Jamie one sunny morning, and fellow established Tao-ites Ken & Barry, we have enjoyed a distinctly purple patch of merriment in recent days. The good times have rolled.

Nightly excursions to our favourite watering hole gave birth to the D.B.C. (Dragon Bar Cup): a blue plastic water bottle top with a crumpled red straw twisted and contorted and wedged inside was the nightly prize for the fierce and fiery Pool contests that took place with the dynamic Canadian duo Ken and Barry.

With our freshly--assembled gaggle of dear chums, 2006 was born in style. Resolutions were made and broken in the space of a night, predictions forecast and the single hope that the New Year should be as rewarding and grand as the old.

Much to the regret of the team, Bron & Pat departed Tao yesterday afternoon, soon to return to their life of teaching in Japan, with Ken and Barry hot on their heels on their trek back to Bangkok. We too are in the final throes of preparation for departure. On January 5th the team will bid a fond farewell to their adopted home, set sail for Surat Thani and commence the quest for Singapore.

#### **SUNDAY, JANUARY 08, 2006: MOVING ON**

FWE is on the move once more! Late in the evening of the 5th January, our packed decommissioned fishing boat departed Mae Haad pier, Koh Tao, for the nine hour crossing south to Surat Thani. Shortly after 4:30am we were dumped on the concrete quay under the lonely orange stare of a single street light. Our Black Thorns gleamed under the warm glow, basking in the pleasure and glory of the recently- received oil bath and full body wax.

It felt so strange taking to the saddles again after riding our Honda Dreams (Simply Elegant) for the past 11 weeks; very perched and somewhat hunched! We didn't see any point in delaying our departure and so with polished rims, tightened nuts and buffed...well, you get the picture, we set off once again; reading the map, taking compass bearings, asking directions from locals, travelling in circles and eventually tracking down the 401 which would take us all the way to Sichon on the east coast; a gentle 50 mile jaunt down the track. By lunch we had broken the back of it and by

the early afternoon we had arrived. The usual problems of finding accommodation ensued; jumbled messages, poor directions, false information, in-accurate distances, unreliable map depictions and of course, lots of rain, all resulted in a sorry and soggy end to our first day back.

By night-fall the clouds had parted and a brisk wind blew down from the mountain behind us. We finally came to rest in an abandoned and dilapidated resort with no running water, a creaky fan and two cockroaches. Our tumble-down temporary shelter was right on the beach, so ignoring the bite of the wind and chill of the thundering black water we went for a night swim in the ocean and washed all our woes away. It was as far from the comfort zone that we had been used to as we could ever get.

The following morning we retraced our steps through the swollen paddies, mangrove swamps and banana plantations to the town and struck out due south towards Nihorn Si Thammarat. Buddhism is gradually giving way to Islam; the cheery waves, smiles and friendly hellos that are regularly thrown in our direction are gradually, bit by bit, warming our hearts and increasing the affection that we once held for our dear old steeds.

The deplorable state of the dogs, however, is growing increasingly worse. These kind people obviously can't find it in their hearts to put some of the poor beasts out of their obvious misery. Some of the mutts are just walking bags of bones, bald and covered in sores that weep pus, blood and mucus. In some woeful cases a 12-bore shotgun would surely be their best friend. Some, however, are still well maintained by their owners and it is due to several recent scrapes with these more active ones that we have finally

bit the bullet and invested in a couple of semi-automatic hand guns...cap-guns, that is! The eight-shooter stubbies nestle in the lid of our bar bags, always at the ready and fully loaded. Ironic, that since purchasing the orange, plastic beauties, that we haven't actually had a single K9 fiend even look twice at us.

We arrived at Thammarat late yesterday evening, again in the heavy rain and soaked to the gristle. 'Come on, a nice hotel I think,' Ben said, 'we deserve it'. We checked into the fanciest one in town. Folks, you aren't gonna believe it but the room has a shower, a bath and hot water! We are in heaven. We also have a spanking new Panasonic television and in the few hours we've inhabited the room, have watched The Perfect Storm, Double Trouble, Volcano, some Morgan Freeman flick and a weird version of Dracula. We were due to leave this morning but during breakfast, shortly prior to check-out, it was decided that we needed to stay a day longer in order to consolidate, do a wash and wallow in the steel tub a jot longer.

#### **SUNDAY, JANUARY 15, 2006: MALAYSIAN SCOUT**

Farther and farther south we pedalled, our Global Positioning System giving us readings a matter of only 6 or 7 degrees north of the equator. Soon we reached Hat Yai, the last large town before the Malaysian border. Hat Yai is the gateway to that area of Thailand so well publicised around the globe for its terrorism. "Stick to the main road and you won't have a problem" was our most common piece of advice. We stopped about halfway to the border for a lunch-time bite at our first Muslim eatery. Promptly we ordered two portions of "Cow Pat Moo" (Pork fried rice). What a stupid thing to ask for in a Muslim restaurant! Cow Pat Moo became two Cow Pat Gei (Chicken). We rejoined the highway, having deviated

and survived!

As we approached the Malaysian border, memories of our time in Thailand flooded my mind. I wondered what the road ahead would bring.

The border itself was a quick, informal stamp of the passports giving us a free three-month visa, one of the perks of belonging to the United Kingdom. From then on there was but one cycling option: the main highway, again. The highway was very different to its Thai equivalent: grass verges and deciduous trees flanked the tarmac, the central reservation was a topiary display of dark green shrubs cut to look like hundreds of mushrooms stretching into the perfectly straight distance.

Road kill tarnished the pristine scene, every other revolution brought a squashed frog, a squished snake or a brained bird. If you didn't look where you were going it would be a bumpy ride. An almost undetectable tailwind set our cruising speed at 17 miles per hour. The mid-day sun beat down on the shadeless road. Our Casios registered 34 degrees.

A family sat on the veranda of their house under the shade of an awning. We noticed a hole in the wire fence and a bridge across a ditch that separated us from them. "Maybe they'll give us some water," said Jamie. We were both running dangerously low. "Good idea," said Ben. We made for the hole in the fence. They were a kindly lot, filling our water bottles and allowing us to drink as much ice cold water as we needed. We nearly drowned in five glasses each. An old lady, elder of the family, watched over us with beady eyes. She had skin like that of a naked mole rat, and in between her top lip and chin -her lips had long disappeared- she

revolved a smouldering bit of some sort of rolled up paper. We made to leave, and as we did so the old woman threw her head back and let fly a deep, hoarse, but surprisingly loud laugh. Cycling away, we could hear her cackle floating on the breeze. I wondered for a second whether she'd put a curse on us.

The Malay highway 1 engineers failed to build enough service stations, methinks. Often 30 miles separated the water, wee and eating holes. It was too much for us. At the end of our exhausting, brain-boiling, trans-national day our T-shirts were ridged with salt. As if over-starved you could've stood them upright in the Tate Modern as filthy, crinkled, contemporary works of art. "No more highway one," said Jamie. The decision was unanimous. Functional A to B-ing was over. We proclaimed that from then on we would only take easy, pleasant roads.

A new day. The call to prayer resounded in our Motel room and around the nowhere town we'd stopped in. It was time to re-mount and make for Butterworth -on the mainland- home to the largest bridge in Asia, connecting the Malay peninsula with the multicultural Pinang Island, somewhere we wished to explore.

Three boys on a motorbike followed us on a track running parallel with the highway. One of them yelled "Hello!" We called "Hello!" back. To our surprise they all stuck up their middle fingers and called in our direction a stream of well-practised expletives, with impressive pronunciation. I was wondering whether I knew such rude words at their age when I heard a shot. Jamie had drawn his cap gun and was firing madly in their direction. Flames shot from the magazine, smoke swirled around, he burnt off a whole ring of caps!



I nearly fell off my bike with fright. The boys looked taken aback, all white in the face. Then there was laughter from the motorway and the track and the boys accelerated away in a cloud of dust, swearing both physically and verbally all the way in-between raucous laughter.

Falling short of the island by about 30 kms, we once again looked for somewhere to rest our weary heads. A moment of head scratching indecision at some traffic lights resulted in our being hailed by a Malaysian fellow of tubby proportions. "You want to stay at my place?" he said. "I am a Scout leader, you can come and stay at my den." As he spoke he saluted with the famous and ubiquitous Scout salute, the three middle fingers held erect, the little one held back with the thumb. Ben said, "I used to be a scout!" while saluting back.

Following the man in his car, I studied the business card he'd presented us with. He had the most impressive credentials I've ever seen. His name: Dr. Nazri, the most highly qualified Scout Leader, Military man and intellectual in all Malaysia. The letters after his name took up two thirds of the business card.

Soon we arrived at the Den. A look-out tower dominated the Scout skyline. There was a lake with canoes, flying foxes, obstacle courses and football fields. A gaggle of young Scouts came out to see us. Each, in turn, respectfully shook our hands, touching the centre of their chest with their free hand, a custom here in Malaysia. Dr. Nazri explained that he'd set up the entire den, funded it with his own money. We were provided with all the food and drink we could eat, breakfast in the morning and a two-car escort to a press conference next to the George V monument in the nearby

town. They took photographs and we gave an interview for the local paper.

Since arriving in Malaysia we have discovered that Southern Indian food is everywhere; before arriving at Butterworth and taking the ferry to Pinang, we'd eaten a chicken and potato curry for breakfast, lunch and supper. As yet we still enjoy chicken and potato curry very, very much and have no intent to become tired of it.

We are staying in Georgetown City -as it is called- and are planning our journey south on the "easy" west coast roads. Before turning the light out to sleep, on many a night of late, we've whispered our first excited conversations concerning all the adventures of Free Wheels East so far, and of the little time there is between us and the imminent completion of our second major cycling objective, our arrival in Singapore!

#### **FRIDAY, JANUARY 20, 2006: TEAM MEMBER SURVIVES MAULING BY MAN-EATING MONSTER OF THE DEEP**

The water was warm, there was a light breeze blowing, the sun was simply radiant and there was a delicate hint of fresh mango floating in the early afternoon air; it should have been a lovely swim.

'Cor, struth, this current's a might strong, isn't it?' Ben said as he thrust out another powerful stroke towards the island that lay a kilometre offshore. 'I know, it keeps trying to push us back in,' came the reply. Suddenly, without warning, there was a frantic thrashing in the water some distance in front of Jamie...it was coming from Ben!

'Quick turn back, we must turn back...it got me.' Ben was riddled with agony, his face grim with pain, torture and

suffering. 'What is it?' asked a rather alarmed Jamie. 'Quick! Flee, swim like an eel, there isn't much time!' We turned and swam, kicking up an almighty white water as we powered through the emerald green. Jamie reached the shore first and collapsed, out of breath, on the golden sand. He turned in time to see Ben dragging his almost lifeless body through the surf, pulling himself inch by hideous inch, hand over determined hand to the safety of the beach.

'I can't...go...on...much further,' Ben whispered between gasps and gulps. 'I think this is the end...tell Mum and Dad I love...' but as his head dropped his words failed him and he sank into the sand.

Moments later he came around, blinking at the sun and wincing in pain. 'My foot, my leg, in fact my entire body is numb.' His eyes were rolling in his sockets like balls in a Camelot Lottery machine. 'Something got me out there, something menacing and terrible.' Several locals had seen the commotion and a modest-sized crowd of on-lookers had now gathered around the stricken Ben.

'I think the main assault was targeted at my left foot,' Ben said. The locals looked, the locals gasped, the locals gibbered and clucked like angry chickens in their alien tongue and eventually one said, 'What we have here is a seldom-seen act of thuggery by a Sea Urchin, or the 'Devils of the Deep' as they are known in these southern regions.' The short fellow cleared his throat and continued: 'It appears that the blighter stung you here, here, here, three times here and, wait a minute, ah yes, twice over here.'

Lemon juice was applied to the afflicted area and after five minutes the pain had subsided to a bearable level but the

damage had been done and neither Ben nor Jamie took to the water again that day.

The ghastly attack took place on Pulau Pangkor, a small island 150 kms south of Pinang. After several days biking FWE had made the island and were enjoying a day's rest before the final push to KL would begin.

Today the team are in Sabak Bernam; holed up in a musty hotel on the edge of town with straw mattresses and blood stains splattered across the walls. The toilet has a resident floater and the shower oozes orange rust. Would you believe, the place is named the 'Swan Kee Hotel'!

**MONDAY, JANUARY 23, 2006: 8000 KM BARRIER BROKEN**  
From within the Malaysian capital

Ben and Jamie cycled into Kuala Lumpur two days ago to take their odometer reading to 5400 miles (8000 km).

From the urchin-ridden Pangkor Island they set out on a Free Wheels East two-day epic. In 34-degree heat they powered towards the capital with a breeze kindly pushing at their backs, cruising at 18, 19, 20 mph. With sweat drenching burning bodies, stinging eyes, running salty from forehead to nose, from nose to lips and from lips to mouth, they saw an image of the future like a pair of needles as it pierced the horizon and began to grow taller, taller, and taller still! The mighty Petronas Towers.

No-handed, air-punching exhilaration! The towers got closer as Free Wheels East entered an urban landscape of Mono-rails, fly-overs, expensive cars, plush buildings, plastic people, the bold, bright domination and overwhelming

colours of the pristine corporate machine. Another of the world's great cities conquered.

Sadly though, not more than 30 miles from this giant Kuala Lumpur, are shacks with bridges over moats of raw sewage leading to rat-infested dwellings. Although not as great an example of the contrast between concentrated wealth and poverty as the major Chinese cities, Kuala Lumpur is the economic sponge of Malaysia, a diamond polished and re-polished by its patron -the rest of the country- to be displayed and admired by the world.

Website to be updated

Thanks to the efforts of Guy Campbell, a friend of FWE, this website will soon take on a new, more functional design. The gallery section is to be updated and a guest book added for you to give your encouragement, praise, kind words and sweet-nothings. Ladies and gentlemen, we stand poised with our mice on the edge of a new era of reality internet entertainment! Grip your keyboards, the renaissance is nigh.

### **SUNDAY, JANUARY 29, 2006: LITTLE BEN**

Full of City and looking for seaside pudding, we left Kuala Lumpur on a busting-at-the-seams-with-traffic highway for a town called Port Dixon, a little south and a little west of the capital. Our craving for the sea and its sorbet-like refreshment properties made the scorching journey pass fast.

Port Dixon threw two disappointing surprises our way. Firstly - and this nearly knocked us off our bikes with the shock - there was no beach. Secondly, the quaint- sounding Port Dixon was a nondescript pile of ugliness. The next day - when our thirst for the big undrinkable water was a tenth

of what it was - about 2 miles outside of Port Dixon, we found a stretch of white sand with mushy pea-coloured sea. The beach seemed a little odd in that there was nobody on it, not a soul; there was space for thousands. We bounded into the sea, arms swinging, dived into the mushy peas and then noticed the reason for the lack of beach goers: two sewage pipes of substantial diameter ran from a cluster of houses on a near-by hill, under the road, under the beach and into the water. Freshly doused in human excrement, we continued our journey.

Our intention was to stop for the night at Some Point. However, Some Point never appeared. Not finding a logical place to retire, we aimlessly continued on our bikes along the winding coast road all the way to Malacca, that imaginary-sounding place which conjures beautifully images of tea, spices and the great East India clippers pounding through foaming white-water seas teeming with Buccaneers. Arrh!

Our Guesthouse, Shirah's, provided the perfect bike-buffing, saddle-polishing facilities needed to get the bikes looking their Sunday best for the display ride into Singapore. By the time we had finished cleaning, it hurt the eyes to look at them, so intense was the glare from their frames. This process of making the bikes look better-than-new took an entire day, during which we lost who knows how many litres of body fluid and forgot to eat entirely. Jamie - who was visibly thinner for his efforts - took a step back and looked with affection at his handiwork. With rasping voice he said, "It is done."

Our Party numbers have increased yet again as two more visitors have joined our merry band. After Sari, brother Jack, Huskinson, Monty the White and Pat and Bron come the

great Murrell, Little Ben -actually taller than Big Ben (Ben)- and his friend Alex. Little Ben - at the beginning of his own world journey - has known Big Ben all his life. The son of Gill and Andy - friends who became family - he and Alex are welcome visitors. Little Ben's face warms the heart when you see it for he carries in it a bit of home, Friday evenings with the liquor tray, the bass guitar and a tambourine.

#### **SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 04, 2006: 'WELCOME TO SINGAPORE '**

At 11:18 on a balmy Friday morning, Jamie Mackenzie and Ben Wylson crossed the 'Second Link' bridge from Malaysia to Singapore and so completed the first year's cycling of FWE.

After a fantastically relaxing stay that included crocodile farms, helicopters, golf and magic shows, we departed Malacca early Wednesday morning and struck south along the often scenic coastal Route 5, bound for Singapore. The roads were smooth and softly undulating, legs were strong and our desire immense. Small villages and towns came and went, names on the map looming on the horizon amidst flurries of rain and sunshine, then slipping by without even leaving a trace of a memory. We ate, drank, slept and cycled the days away. By the time we arrived at Galang Phalat, late Thursday evening, there were less than 40 miles of track remaining between us and the island.

Friday morning, alarms sounded, shattering the last of our dreams; we were saddled before sunrise. As the morning glow flooded across the land like an orange river, a gentle breeze blew down from the north. We floated along the tarmac of the E3 until, by midday, we were on the threshold of our final destination.

Stamped out of Malaysia, up and over the concrete bridge that divides the two lands, FWE finally, after ten months' pedalling, passed quietly under a sign that bore the words 'Welcome to Singapore'.

We are quite convinced that more people have gone to the moon than have achieved this feat.

#### **THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 09, 2006: DOVER GARDENS**

"This ought to be it" said Jamie with a puzzled expression, peering at his map through its sun-yellowed map case, "Dover Gardens." We'd been passed on an address of an outpost of a friend of the family's family and had crossed the entire city to get there, but something had to be wrong; we couldn't be in the right place, could we? The road sign, the map and our eyes all told us that we were. This was silly, someone was having an unfair practical joke. There had to be a mistake. Before us was a house so enormous in its proportions that you could've parked a Boeing 747 in the attic. Between us and it were some ornate metal gates, the upper flourishes of which were painted in gold leaf. Ben said, "What the heck," leant out and pressed the doorbell with an oil-encrusted, filthy fingernail. There was an undramatic electronic 'ping pong' sound; within a moment or two the great big gates shuddered slightly and started to, very slowly, open up for us. We looked at each other, dumbfounded at what was going on before our eyes. As though we had cracked the code to a safe we rolled into a different world.

It was no mistake: this was the residence of the Neo family of Singapore. Our host is an eminent Doctor, president of the Ferrari Club and Porsche Club. His wife, our hostess, is also a doctor and an M.P. We have two sweet maids to

do our washing for us and make us meals, we have the use of the swimming pool and are in the perfect location from which to conduct a thorough exploration of the city. All in all we fully acknowledge that we are incredibly lucky fellows. Thank you, Rosita, for the contact and the Neo's for your kindness.

The bikes, those sleek black machines, those vehicles of glory, have a new, temporary home. They are parked in a garage alongside a spanking, sparkling, silver Mercedes Benz. Under an awning, just outside, they have a few more new friends: Another Merc, a Porsche Boxer and, the piece de resistance, the latest, fastest, biggest, baddest Ferrari in Red. The poor bikes did have a forlorn look about them standing next to their grand, engined, neighbours. It was as though they were dogs that know they are going to leave the warmth of the house to go into the kennel for the night; our faithful steel companions seemed to understand that they would not be in use for some time, perhaps until we begin our South American adventure in the Autumn.

When we are not at 'Dover Gardens' we are nosing around the city, listening to CDs in HMV or thumbing through books at Borders, doing all we can to put off important jobs like acquiring a 12-month working holiday Visa from the Australian High Commission and securing a passage by sea to Sydney, planning a hike into the Sumatran jungle and tour of the Indonesian archipelago.

#### **FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2006: SPOT THE DIFFERENCE**

New website:

You may have noticed that things are looking a bit different here on the FWE site. Our marvellous new image, the creation

of the one and only Guy Campbell, has many wonderful new features. I will point them out so that none of them go unappreciated:

Along with a general image overhaul, we have a new logo (a compass needle piercing the E of FWE); there is a bar at the bottom of every page making things look far more professional; there are a few new photos in the gallery section and loads to be added in the near future -for the time being you will see a taster of what's to come- and our favourite new feature, the guestbook. Looking forward to reading your comments.

We are overwhelmed with all the important things to do here in Singapore. It's a shock to the system having agendas, appointments and commitments. For example, tomorrow we have an interview for the Singapore Times 'Life' magazine. Never fear, all the stories of the last week or so will be published very soon...when we have a moment to think.

We hope you enjoy the new website. If any of you are in Guy's vicinity could you buy him a drink for us? We'll pay you back in a couple of years.

Ben and Jamie

(FWE)

#### **SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2006: THE LAST OF THE LUXURY 15 MEN ON A DEAD MAN'S CHEST**

On an early morning at the port of Singapore, blue, red, green and yellow containers stood behind formidable looking razor-wire-topped fences, thousands of them stacked one on top of the other. Lorries arrived with containers, lorries

departed with containers, the sounds of heavy machinery on the move echoed in the air, people milled around, armed guards stood at quay gates between me and the biggest ships I've seen outside of Felixstowe. Mission: by hook or by crook arrange a passage by sea to Australia. Do this or stay in Singapore for good.

"Do you know where I can get a ship to Australia?" I asked at a river taxi rank. "I'm sorry sir, we can only take you to the other side of the river, we have no service to Australia," replied a boatman. What a start to the day. The repetition of this question eventually turned up a lead, and then another, until, eventually we had ourselves a list of all the head offices of all the most important companies shipping freight in the world.

Every head office reception of every shipping company looks the same: wooden panelling covers every surface -even ceilings- company logos are to be found in stainless steel lettering above wooden reception desks and somewhere you will find a scale model of the company's star container ship 'The good ship Dandelion'.

"Hello, we need to take one of your ships to Australia," was my approaching line at each office on my sizeable list. Singapore and Rotterdam are the two biggest, busiest ports in the world. Ask a European seaman and he will swear blind that the largest is Rotterdam; ask anyone around here and he will say it is Singapore. Our task was daunting.

Gradually the list became smaller as more and more crosses were placed alongside addresses. Yet, at the end of a long day of talking and selling Free Wheels East, two container lines were willing to consider our case. It helps that they





are two of the largest: Maersk, a Danish company and NOL (National Oriental Lines). We are waiting to hear back from them, hoping for confirmation of a possible departure from Singapore at the end of March. With fingers tightly crossed, all we can do now is play the waiting game.

### Chinese Celebration

On the last and largest night of Chinese New Year celebrations we arrived in China Town in a limousine. Crowds were kept back as Dr. Lily, MP for China Town passed security barriers and, much to the delight of her public, waved a jolly wave at all the thousands of people eager to catch a glimpse of their political heroine. I waved with surprise from the back seat, finding that my legs had turned to jelly and my heart was beating at quite a rate. Security opened the doors for their star guest, the MP. My door was opened and I heard the noise of the exultant crowd. I felt a thousand eyes boring into me, wished I'd dressed better for the occasion, ignored T.V cameras and paparazzi flashes and walked on unsteady feet to our seats in the front row of the VIP area. Complementary Tiger beers helped ease nerves. The show began! Shaolin monks smashed metal bars over their heads, Chinese dragons danced before us. Afterwards I was given the mandatory Singapore Chinese gastronomic experience: hundred-year-old eggs soaked in horse urine and dusted with poo, Chicken's foot soup, and the delectable Durian fruit, the one that smells like rotting flesh. Our stomachs wanted to know what it was they'd done to deserve such punishment. Under my breath I made an apology to my vital organ of consumption. "You like?" asked Dr. Ben "Umm (gag), lovely (retch)" was the standard answer.

### Porsche squash

The engine hummed below. "Are you sure it's o.k if I have a go?" asked Ben sitting in the driver's seat of the Porsche Boxer. It was a bit of a struggle getting in. In fact, he got stuck. The seat was far too close to the wheel and in trying to enter the car Ben shut the door on himself, tried to stretch out but couldn't, discovered he was unable to move, trapped in such a position that to move the seat back was an impossibility. With his body packed in in the most uncomfortable-looking way, like a shut accordion, his fingers the only movable body parts, he was stuck: "Help!" he called, knowing that attempts to free himself would only make him look more stupid. Elaine, daughter of the Neo's, laughed, got out of the passenger seat and went round to the driver's side to his aid. Finally, buckled up, in position and shaking with excitement Ben put his foot down and roared onto the open road like Mr Toad. He shouted over the sound of the engine, an over-excited squeal, "This is the first time I've driven a car in 10 months! Poop-Poop! Poop-Poop!" Dead leaves fluttered in the wake of the speeding, near-to-out-of-control sports car. Elaine held onto her seat, petrified.

### In brief

If you get any problem with your debit card when abroad it is a nightmare to get a replacement. Ben waited for two weeks to get one from England only to have the blasted thing swallowed, 'retained' on its first visit to the bowels of an ATM.

The acquisition of an Australian 12-month working Holiday visa is a nightmare too. Application is electronic, an on-line process. It should be simple. Is it #@%\*. Difficulties occur in the event of needing to ask a question, something you



usually have to do when applying for a visa. Ben has his, but only after a chest x-ray - needed because we were in China for so long - and paying out about 100 quid. Jamie, on the other hand, has been left in cyber-visa-limbo land following problems with an internet cafe machine he was using at the time of his on-line application. This problem is on-going.

We have been interviewed by a freelance journalist and are to appear in the Singapore Straits Times in the 'Life' Magazine supplement soon. The journalist also wants to have our story printed in the in-flight magazines of Singapore Airlines.

Our plan is to leave for Sumatra, Indonesia tomorrow afternoon after resolving the above predicaments. At Dover Gardens, the grand gates will open for us one last time and then, readers, it's goodbye Luxury, hello cockroaches. We've missed those little blighters!

### **SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2006: ETERNAL MOTION**

Monday morning and a late change of plan; FWE were losing their heads when the rest of the world also seemed to be going bonkers. In a time when the headlines inform us that being a cartoonist is a hazardous occupation, that a duck died in France and there is a sick chicken in Turkey, Jamie and Ben discussed options at the breakfast table and by the end of the second coffee had decided, for no good reason, that FWE would later that evening head east to Borneo instead of west to Sumatra.

While Ben sought retribution with HSBC, Jamie attended a chest scan at a clinic on Orchard road as part of his on-going saga with the pitiful online visa application system for Australia. Operations in Singapore were brought to an unsatisfactory conclusion.

"Two singles to Borneo, please," said Ben. The high-speed craft with freezer-like air-conditioning and four V10 Yamaha engines thrumming in the stern, sped us over the water towards Batam Island, a transitional port for any on-going travel to Indonesian Borneo. Singapore sank into the fading remnants of day. An apocalyptic city-scape, sandwiched between blood-red clouds and midnight-black sea.

It was upon our deliverance to Batam Island that the first traces of doubt began trickling into our chilled thoughts. It was a distinctly bad sign that not one official we conversed with thought we could enter Borneo via this passage. It rapidly transpired that numerous ships would be needed, at great cost, to make the desired connection. It also appeared that the ships had no time-table, were highly unreliable and when they did decide to leave took an entire two days and nights to cross the water. The map was drawn from the canvas bag and splayed in the dust under a dim street light. The full horror of what we had intended to undertake in just under four weeks travel smacked us square in the chops. Our distinct lack of planning was biting us hard. Evidently thirty minutes in Borders Bookstore, scanning glossy pages with pretty beaches, was not going to be adequate.

The hour was growing late and we were starting to feel all at sea when a kind little chap with pygmy-like features, waddled up to us and offered us beds for the night in his modest shack on the outskirts of town. His family took us in, welcoming us warmly with beers and coffee. We received a sound, mind-clearing night's sleep and when we woke it was as if the fog had left and our brains were back to their normal capacity for reasoning.

The bullet was taken firmly between our teeth and chomped

down hard on. We were going back to the original plan: we were going to Sumatra.

After a full morning's voyage, we were deposited at Dumai, a small town somewhere on the island-riddled stretch of the east coast. The air was thick and humid, our backs streaming with greasy sweat as we made our way past the gates and into a large courtyard which led to a procession of mini-vans that waited to whisk people off to various destinations. The compound-like area closely resembled a maximum security prison. Hoards of men clung to the perimeter fencing, fingers like BBQ'd sausages squashed between the green wire as they yelled and hollered, imploring us to ride in their van, to pay them. A decision was taken and the day of relentless motion aboard public transport continued.

The day wore on, eventually being brought to a close on a luxury bus that bore us eleven hours north to Medan. With the lights out, chair reclined, blanket tucked under chin, head buried in a pillow and cool air-con blowing down from the vents, sleep was fast in coming. Tomorrow morning we will again travel north for a further six hours to Ketambe and commence an expedition into the heart of the jungle in the Aceh Region to see Tigers, Orangutans and all manner of other weird and wonderful never-before-seens.

#### **MONDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2006: SWINGING JUNGLE BOY**

There are several National Parks in relatively close proximity to Medan where seeing tame Orangutans and other exotic creatures of the jungle is quite possible; however, long ago it was decided that if they couldn't be viewed in the wild, in an untouched state and in their natural habitat, then we wouldn't see them at all.

Early on Thursday morning, shortly after sunrise, we jumped aboard a 1970's mini-van and clattered for six hours north through the Sumatran Highlands to the Aceh region and a remote mountain village called Ketambe.

It didn't take long after our arrival to track down two able & willing guides to accompany us on our intended expedition. Our enquiries at local stores and houses produced the same names over and over again; Mowgli and 'Boss'. Apparently they'd been taking treks for anyone who ventured this far north for many years and would be happy to offer their services.

For the past three years a bloody civil conflict has savaged the region, resulting in a government ban on all tourism. Jungle warfare had raged in the area and many homes, villages and towns had been destroyed. The war was unofficially ended three months ago but the ban on tourism still stands. Several Guesthouses have recently reopened in the hope that tourism might blossom but as yet not a single person has made the trip; FWE would be amongst the first to return.

Within the hour, Mowgli and Boss were located and hired at a reasonable cost for a duration of two days and a night. Our first evening in Ketambe, as the sun drifted low behind the jungle back-drop, was spent poring over maps with a beer, discussing what we wanted, how far we intended to venture and what we hoped to see and achieve. It must have come as no surprise to them that the prize we sought more than any other was, of course, the chance, slim as it might be, of glimpsing an orangutan. At this the guides looked somewhat uncomfortable and clearly thought we were asking a lot. Whether one is searching for them in Sumatra

or Borneo, the endangered primates are painfully rare and thin on the ground and to compound the problem many had been destroyed by Government troops operating in the area during the conflict. Locals could apparently pass months at a time without seeing a single ape. Loose promises were made through forced smiles but Boss's eyes told another story, somehow suggesting we had more chance of seeing Granny swooping through the treetops, nibbling at fleshy leaves and eating fruit, than an orangutan.

We started early the next morning, the sun was out and spirits were high. Our party numbered five in all: 'Boss', a 41 year-old man of slight proportions, lean & sinewy like a broad-bean who bore a heavy pack with all the cooking and eating materials; Mowgli with his tremendously adventurous teeth that jutted out of his mouth like petrified bungee jumpers' and who had scars from head to toe; Ben, myself and lastly, 'Supper', a four-month-old chicken.

Prior to departure 'Supper', as we ordained her, was yanked from the coop and stuffed into a plastic bag where she remained, very noisily, for the remainder of the day. Her treatment was repeatedly protested against and it was even suggested that she should be left behind but all was to no avail. Jamie was chaperone for Supper for the first few hours' slog but couldn't find a comfortable way of holding her without clanking her head against his legs with every step or smashing her, beak first, into every tree we happened to get too close to. By the end of the day poor old 'Supper' would have a broken wing, a shattered left foot, have her head cut off, legs pulled apart, innards ripped out and be suspended over burning coals with a sharp stick wedged up her behind. Poor old Supper, and to be truthful she even tasted a bit bland.

The sun was out and we steamed up the mountainous jungle path at a fair lick. Most of the trails had become quite overgrown in their three year neglect and at times disappeared altogether. Boss was called upon to unsheath his machete on more than one occasion and slice a way through. His blade hummed in a blur of action as decapitated greenery went flying through the air around our heads.

Rain had plundered the jungle through the course of the night and there was one particularly spiteful jungle creature that took especial delight in this: the leech. They were the scourge of the trek and it was our ankles that became playgrounds for these wriggling blighters. Dangling from twigs and leaves, sensing vibrations and waiting to ambush a passer-by, they would latch on then shift slightly up your leg like a 'slinky' in reverse, until they found a deliciously tender bit of flesh where they would latch on, put suckers on full throttle and start to expand like small, very bloody balloons. On numerous occasions did we find them on our arms, neck, legs and feet.

The morning wore on until by midday the expedition party were fairly exhausted and in dire need of a rest and sustenance. Just as our legs were beginning to bend and wobble as if we were a troop of rickets sufferers, the matted confusion of vine, tree and leaf parted and spat us sprawling into a sun-dappled clearing of jaw-dropping beauty. A river flowed serenely over rounded boulders and smooth rocks, tumbled over waterfalls and bubbled like a cauldron in deep pools. Clothes off and in we all piled. After lunch on the near bank 'Boss' suggested that we try a foray into the surrounding area to see if we could track down some beasts.

Full with Nasi Gorang - fried rice - we filed off at a saunter into the jungle. After an hour of hard marching, we were just beginning to long for another chance to bask in the sun back in the clearing, when Boss stopped dead in the track and cocked his head to one side. We listened intently but... nothing...What had he heard? Still nothing.

But then, ever so faintly on the breeze, there came a distant crackling as if of snapping twigs. It was far, far away on top of a heavily vegetated bank but Boss was looking, to our concern, increasingly anxious. He motioned for us to keep very still, not to make a sound or movement. The 'faint crackling' ever so slowly grew louder, soon becoming a definite crunching, then an alarmingly audible and frighteningly close crashing...and then, silence...Not a breath could be heard. The jungle was plunged into a dark silence, only the thumping of hearts beating in mouths could be heard. Boss lowered his hand, signalling for us to get down low in the undergrowth.

Then, in a sudden flurry of movement and splitting wood, in front and high, not 15 metres from where we were, a colossal shape bounded into view. Huge, menacing and orange; it was a male orangutan, one of vast proportions, bigger perhaps than some American truck drivers ever get. A booming call rang out from its trumpet-like lips that tore the stillness apart and shook the earth. We parted some fan-like palms to get a better look. Its head was as big as a medicine ball and the arms like hairy pythons. It surveyed the area for the intruders it had heard approaching, swivelling its head and scanning the jungle floor. We watched in full arrest for five minutes, stunned and amazed at what we were beholding.

Finally the magnificent creation of nature tired and with

effortless ease lifted an arm and swung off into the heart of the darkness. We were speechless. The remainder of the male's family were soon spotted in a nearby tree, a tree with a diameter of perhaps 7 or 8 metres that stretched fully 50 metres upwards from the jungle floor, possessed a layered canopy that covered an area bigger than 4 tennis courts and was home to a mother, her baby and a juvenile male. We lay in the undergrowth, forgetful of leeches and ants and watched the priceless play unfold for fully thirty minutes, before starting back to camp.

The afternoon passed and the clouds gathered. Evening came early and with it rain, light at first but after an hour of drizzle it really started to hammer down. The paths became tighter, steeper, narrower and under foot the topsoil was becoming a treacherous mulch. Visibility was down and our packs were wet through. It was a truly desperate situation. A fine mist began pouring through the undergrowth as if someone had flicked on a dry-ice machine. Our ankles disappeared first, then our knees and finally our waists.

A smell of sulphur wafted along the path and again we found ourselves approaching a river. We entered a clearing that was large and shrouded in a wispy vapour and mist. From bank to bank it measured over 60 metres but because this was the 'dry season', water levels were somewhat low and the river covered less than half the expanse. On the near shore we found a wonderful treat; hot springs.

Boiling water bubbled to the surface amongst stained white rocks that flowed down-stream parallel to the main body of ice-cold water. It flowed from one hot pool to the next, fumbling a route amongst craggy outcrops of bulbous boulders, disappearing and reappearing several metres

further along. At one point the boiling flow was met by a renegade stream that had broken off from the main river and together they flowed into one rather special pool of delight. It was the hottest, most exotic bath you could imagine; it was just on the cooler side of boiling and just manageable to climb into. The rain still belted down but we were so wet and cold that taking clothes and shoes off didn't even occur to us and in we all jumped. Heaven is to be found here!

Camp was made that night on the bank of the river a hundred metres up-stream, out of the path of the sulphurous stench. The rain and clouds cleared, revealing a night sky that looked like a black splash-sheet would after a day's painting. A fire was lit and our clothes hung to dry. 'Supper' met her woeful end under the cold steel of Boss's machete that gleamed in the moonlight as he held it aloft. Ben and Jamie folded their hands in prayer, gave thanks for her sacrifice then each tore off a wing and got eating.

Before leaving the jungle there was enough time for Jamie to have a leech suck the life out of his right buttock, leaving it like a deflated balloon, and for us to have a go at being Tarzan....

Highly dangerous and potentially fatal is the best way to describe the vine swing that was tried. Boss assured us that it had been growing since he was a small boy and was very safe. The tree was growing on the side of a steep bank that dropped several hundred metres into a gorge. On its highest bough, nearly 50 metres above, was a vine that hung out over the drop. The end was snagged by a long bit of bamboo and brought in. Gripped in hands, with nothing to hold Ben in place but his clenched fingers, he launched into thin air. The length of vine caused him to sail out over the drop and

dangle precariously over the apparently bottomless fall. The vine creaked and groaned under the strain but held fast. 'First in three years...well done,' Mowgli said; 'vine still strong,' and let out a surprised 'humph' sound. It was the final act in a fantastically rewarding couple of days in the Northern Sumatra Jungle.

The return journey to Medan was as uncomfortable and hair-raising as the one out but to our delight and great surprise, once again we were delivered in one piece.

### **MONDAY, MARCH 06, 2006: THE LAKE PEOPLE**

Year one's funds are all but depleted. There is an urgent need to bring our finances back into the realms of the living, especially after the cost of an unexpected visa run back into Malaysia across the straits of Malacca. We went on board a souped-up, turbo ferry of power from that unpleasant, full-of-con-men-capital of Sumatra, Medan. Everything's costing big right now. Swinging in the Jungle doesn't come cheap, neither do the buses on which we become nervous crazies who enjoy their existence far too much to want to pass it into the hands of a bus driver who seems bent on destroying it, disposing of it in a smashed heap of ancient automobile scrap metal. Hell's teeth! We were human cannonballs getting to and coming back from the lake known as the jewel of Sumatra; they call it Toba, a vast expanse of water up at 1000 metres above sea level in the crater of a dormant -it was meant to go off pop! 100 years ago and could go boom any time soon - volcano. Who would have thought as our river boat drifted at minus 10 knots over the bottle-green water that we were in a place due to be detonated in red seas of tectonic fire! "There's a fish!" said Jamie looking over the rail. A flash of vibrant colour caught our attention: it was a splendid kingfisher, ruler of his shore.

Our quite-different-to-the-death-bus, slender craft, 'The Queen of the Lake' dropped us on Tuk Tuk, an island close to the far western shore of Toba. We took up residence in a Battac hut -the Battacs are the indigenous people of this part of Indonesia. When you think of a hut you think of the ramshackle: on the contrary, this hut of ours was built of the finest hardwoods. It had a wonderfully impractical top-heavy sweep of a roof, adorned on its gables with painted carvings that must've taken years of skilled dedication to complete. This was our hut! By golly, it was close to the waters of Toba, so close, in fact, that Jamie, in a moment of uncontrollable affection for the place, dove the full 6 metres from our balcony, head first into the lake with whoops of joy.

The sun began to sink behind the mountains that surrounded us, the rim of the crater. A man waved from a canoe out on the water; he was bringing in his catch. Naked Battac children swam through the reeds like water babies. The evening was MAGICAL with nothing but the lapping water and the odd melancholy call of a lone water bird to break the stillness.

Zzzipp - reality. Toba's gone, we're in Bali now, spending most of our time surfing, either slicing across waves on our rented surfboards or suffering the sensation of being a pair of socks in a washing machine, caught in no-man's-land as a set of behemoths roll over you in a cauldron of white-water, trying to find the energy to swim up. Where is up? Air! Water! Gulp, choke, yuk. Oh no, here comes another one...

### **WEDNESDAY, MARCH 15, 2006: FWE TO STEAM INEXORABLY ONWARD**

It is only once every few months that a piece of news as important to the continuation of FWE as this comes along:

Our quest for a ship to take us from Singapore to Australia has come to its end. After weeks of inquiries and uncomfortable uncertainties we have found a vessel to take us.

On the 23rd March 2006 we will board -bikes and all- M.V Princess Mary V, a fine container ship under the management of Nordana-Asia, a company of Norwegian and Danish origin. Our voyage will take no less than three weeks as we battle the high seas for the port of Fremantle, Perth, Western Australia.

Let us put in a word here for the power of social conversation in such places as... pubs. Forget about formal, fruitless visits to the head offices of shipping companies. Don't bother with all that. The relaxed atmosphere of Singapore's Emerald Hill Bar Number 5 is a far more likely place to yield results. It helped us -along with a beer and Jamie's old university friend David 'the champ' Brennan (for his introductions)- to let our tongues go flapping around splattering spittle, talking their spectacular speciality subject, Free Wheels East past, present and future. We chin-wagged long and hard with aching jaw until a friendly Norwegian chap who goes by the name of Tom -upon discovering that we were desperately seeking a passage to Australia by boat- sent an email to a colleague.... Tom works for Nordana-Asia. Need we say more?

We are eternally grateful to Nordana-Asia for their help.

Our current location is Lombok, Indonesia where we are biding time in conditions considerably less financially crippling than Singapore. Singapore does not have surf or beaches either, it does not have the charm of a little Gilli island... Gilli Trawangan, the largest of the three Gilli isles,

to be found off Lombok's north west coast, has been our island home for the last week. It is a place where surfing in the territory of the tiger shark -thank goodness we never saw any- and snorkelling with giant sea Turtles is an every-day thing.

As surfers our long, blond, dry and sun-scorched mops give us problems: People just will not believe that we are a) not Scandinavian, and b) not Kelly Slater's best buddies. Correction, they do believe us when we are out on the waves: Jamie described standing on a surfboard as being like standing on a block of ice, on ice. We are far from dudes, Dude, believe me.

We might not have seen man-eating sharks, but we did see many turtles. You can spend hours swimming with those prehistoric beasts and never get sick of it. I don't think turtle sightings are down to luck these days: on Gilli Trawangan the people realise how important Turtles are for business; they have done away with turtle curries and begun a captive breeding program. Everyone you see on the beaches, in the restaurants, bars and on the dusty island tracks only used by walkers, people on BMX's and horse-drawn carts, has the happy expression of "I've-just-seen-a-Turtle" on their face.

There are no engines to be smelt or heard on the Gillies "We like the peace, we don't like pollution," says Noodle -barman at Rudy's Guesthouse- as though he were quoting the slogan of a popular Gilli t-shirt. There are few places left in the world as un-spoilt as these Gilli isles, but don't tell anyone about them, they can be our little secret.

## **SATURDAY, MARCH 18, 2006: LONE RANGERS**

Seamen Mackenzie and Wylson reporting for duty...the FWE duo are now officially classed as 'crew' aboard the Princess Mary 5 Container Ship bound for Fremantle, Australia, with the rather impressive-sounding rank of 'supernumerary' beside their names on the official listings.

Singapore immigration took an eternity to negotiate our way through upon an agonisingly late arrival on Friday night. We were ushered from one snaking queue to another before finally being shown to and seated in a separate 'Seamen's Lounge Area' that had complementary 'Fox's Glacier Mints'. While smacking our chops and sucking on the sweets we were talked through the regulations by a stern official with a balding head and bulbous eyes that drilled into us from behind his aquarium- like glasses. We just couldn't understand why he gave off the distinct impression that he wasn't entirely convinced by the nautical ability of the pair that sat before him. The talk was terminated and we were pointed in the direction of another official who, to our joy, then awarded us our confirmation papers and documentation without further ado. 'I must say,' he said shaking his head in disbelief, 'this really is most unusual...unheard of I'd say.' The chap took our passports, slapped the black ink down on the pages with a firm thump and said, 'Bravo, welcome aboard, m'hearties.'

We checked in and were received warmly at the charming Chew residence and have already settled firmly back into the air-conditioned lifestyle with maid and swimming pool. It's a home away from home and I'm not sure they will ever know how much their kindness has meant to us. A wonderful family if ever there was one.

This very morning we have been galloping around the city like headless horses in a quest to ascertain health certificates and booster hepatitis inoculations. 'This is most irregular,' said the pretty doctor to Ben while leaning forward and removing her glasses with a dramatic sweeping motion; 'you appear to have a prolapsed heart...allow me to explain.' She went on to describe how Ben had a 'lazy valve' and even demonstrated the abnormal rhythm with a surprisingly melodic beat on her knee. It sounded just like the beginning few beats to the 'Lone Ranger'.

Images of the pair of us reclining on the poop deck with a glass of whiskey and a good book, while spotting whales, manta rays, dolphins, killer sharks and eventually, after three weeks, Australia looming off the port bow, are racing through our heads...'merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, isn't life a scream'.

To Joe Matthews

We have received some awful news. One of Ben's friends, a singer from an old band 'The Valley of Ronnie' has suffered a string of major heart attacks after contracting a rare virus while studying in Santa Cruz, California. Currently he is in a coma in need of a heart transplant. Whether you know him or not, please say a prayer for Joe and his family. If anyone can pull through, you can Joe. Hang loose.

We heard this news after writing the above which refers to Ben's prolapsed heart. Ben's condition does not alter life expectancy, and is not dangerous, it just makes his heart beat sound slightly different; in short, it sounds a lot worse than it is. We thought about erasing it in light of Joe's circumstances, but decided to leave it; that's the way Joe

would want it.

### **WEDNESDAY, MARCH 22, 2006: KANGAROO BASHING IN A LAND WITHOUT ASHES**

'You leave tomorrow chaps,' Mogens Anderson -MD for Nordana Asia- said as we gulped down a beer and ate German sausage drizzled with English mustard in the Sports Lounge of the Singapore Cricket Club; 'pack your bags and be at the docks by 11 am sharp.'

For three weeks we will sail the high seas, swash-buckling our way south to the land of kangaroo steaks, camel burgers and crocodile stew, a place where 'Pommy bashing' is a national sport and where England gloriously won the World Cup.

Many, many thanks to Mogens, Olli, Sam, Christina and all the other wonderful people of the 'Nordana Asia' shipping company; our debt of gratitude is humungously enormous.

Year one of FWE now draws to a watery conclusion as we await with baited breath for the second to be unleashed. An advance 'Happy Birthday' to Ben, who on April 5th will ripen another year in age; may he be flogged, keelhailed and hung naked from the main mast.

So long for three weeks, troops...your Bonnies lie over the ocean.

### **WEDNESDAY, MARCH 29, 2006: HURRICANE FLOYD**

Weather: Winds, Force 3. Visibility: good, approx 12 miles. Wave height 0.5 metre.

Sea Life: Many flying fish and large pink jellyfish, species



unknown.

Current voyage schedule(subject to change): Singapore, Thailand, Borneo, Dampier (northwest WA), to arrive Fremantle, Perth approx 20th April. Could be delays due to ferocious seas off WA. We are headed into the eye of Hurricane Floyd and 93 kph winds. More hurricanes are forming. Captain concerned over possible damage to 6000 tonne cargo.

Current location: Gulf of Thailand

Able Seamen Wylson and Mackenzie

#### **SUNDAY, APRIL 16, 2006: CONNERY PINK CAKES**

Two boys went to sea on a beautiful pea-green boat. There was captain Antonio, the meek and humble Chief, Coke-Cola Connery (the first mate), Comrade commando Costa, Jerry the cook - 'cookie' with a pink cake and pinnie, not to mention all seven dwarfs: Smiley, Randy, Porky, Perky, Richard, Mincer and Berk. The boat did bob for 23 days from the South China Seas to the eastern Indian Ocean. Let us tell our tale.

It was a fine day when we set off, blue sky and cotton wool clouds. As we looked to the limitless ocean ahead we had no idea what to expect of this our first nautical adventure of the expedition.

Our voyage to be was by no means direct. First we steamed north a thousand or so nautical miles at a steady 13 knots, the water beneath calm, tranquil, a lapping sea like a sheet of glass. In two Thai ports we stopped to load a cargo of steel pipes with the ship's special power, her spectacular

yellow on-board cranes. The Princess Mary steamed on, past Cambodia and Vietnam, past tiny Phillipino islands to port and to starboard; true desert islands, inhabited only by sea birds and who knows what else?

From our favorite spot in the bows, wind making melody with the mast, we saw sharks: a Hammerhead and a vicious battleship-grey monster we are yet unable to identify. The hair on the back of your neck prickles when you dare to imagine yourself falling in...

Our voyage was turning us into keen naturalists. Not naturists - we know the difference. Never did we go far in those warm seas without seeing a good many flying fish, those darts of silver that took flight as we disturbed them. They really do fly as well as a bird -although they never flap- and when the time comes for them to become fish again they unceremoniously 'splat' back into the water having successfully escaped the turmoil of The Princess Mary's boiling white wake. Post flight, you can see them under the water looking just like any other fish. Who would've thought they could fly? What a marvel of evolution they are.

Then there were the Dolphins, pods of them. They came to us as the sun was setting -usually just after supper- to play in our bow wave, leaping, spiralling and flipping at breathtaking speed. Appreciating an audience, the Dolphins showed us all their most tricky tricks. The more we cheered the higher they breached. We came to call these wondrous creatures 'The Dolphiniums'. Everyone looked forward to the call of "The dolphiniums are here!". These Dolphiniums had an inexplicable way about them, something in their souls, which leaves the beholder all warm and peaceful inside. They, the bows and its joys will be missed.

Each night we had a 6:00 curfew. Pirates were about, merciless sea bandits who would slit your throat for a groat. The ship's doors were firmly closed and locked just before sundown. These modern-day Pirates of the South China Seas like to attack by night. Any odd sound, any unusual utterance from the men on board had us clutching the hilts of our leatherman knives. As if life depended on it we cringed in our cabins, ready to retaliate against a malicious boarding by the deadly Thai or Indonesian Buccaneers.

Another thousand or so nautical miles on, there had been no Pirate attack; this time we'd been going East to our next stop, a little port in the state of Sebah, Malaysian Borneo. It was only then that we began to head towards the place of all Englishman's dreams, Australia. The last threat of Pirates boarding was at the Lombok strait, the gateway to the Indian Ocean. Thankfully we passed into the open ocean without incident.

At the mercy of the Indian Ocean we ventured intrepidly south. Tropical storm Floyd was replaced with Hubert. We felt his wrath. Only a few hundred miles to the north we were exposed to the swell he sent northward: 6-metre waves turned our 100 metres- long ship into a Pooh stick in rapids. At the climax of this squall on the 6th April, when exactly one year had passed since our departure from Mother England, there came a call on the satellite phone: it was the BBC! Jamie gave an interview in which he professed that the food we missed more than any other was "sausages, beans and chips". They must've been short on terrorist attacks to broadcast that! Soon cyclone Hubert was replaced with Elayne. The sea became rougher still.

On the 15th April we arrived in Fremantle having sailed a

total of 4,500 nautical miles, nearly 9,000 kms; that's the same distance we have cycled so far.

### **SATURDAY, APRIL 22, 2006: THE DEVIL DRIVES A WHITE ROAD TRAIN**

It was a bright and breezy Western Australian day when we checked out of the 'Old Fire Station' and headed on to the Fremantle streets with our minds befuddled and boggled, mushy splats of hurly-wurly uncertainty.

Sydney was our target destination but how the devil were we to get there? Our options were being shredded and gobbled at our feet in piles of mulch as quickly as they were suggested: hire companies didn't hire, relocations didn't have any relocations, trains were too expensive and, well, we all know about the aeroplane taboo. Heads were wedged in hands in a fit of despair, like pepper ham in a sandwich, gloom & doom, lady luck had taken leave and deserted us in our hour of need.

But wait, what was this? A bright light shone and a heavenly person arrived by our sides...was it an angel? No, it was Kent from Denmark.

'Hmm, let me think,' he said in a casserole of accents. 'I know someone who might be able to help...a trucky by trade...let me call him.' We were to make our way to Midlands, a small town an hour out of Fremantle and await his call. With his family in tow, Kent doffed his hat and disappeared into the hubbly-bubbly melting pot of cafes and restaurants.

We arrived at Midlands in a storm of anxiety. Several hours dwindled by, our Casio watches munching time like a trucky at a pie-eating competition. By and by we heard a piping





of horns and were greeted by a grinning Kent, gripping the wheel of a Toyota pick-up and trailer. 'What ho, chaps!' he said. 'Good news!' We were all ears; two intense-listening receptacles as he detailed a plan that would deliver us to the Eastern shores. His buddy, sadly, was unable to help in our complicated quest but had divulged one pearly Pearl Jam of wisdom: 'If these two hero cyclists loiter at the BP petroleum station near the airport, they will surely be blessed with success and a lift to the yonder side of land Australia.'

The words were digested with relish and after a sumptuous banquet that was splendidly prepared by Elaine at the house of Kent, and an exquisitely refreshing night in a pumpkin-coloured caravan at the bottom of the 5-acre property, we journeyed to the fabled BP station. Never shall we forget Kent, Elaine, their charming daughter Pernille and son Benn for their warmth, enthusiasm for our cause and unfaltering belief in us. It's a rare day indeed when you meet such wonderful folk.

After several hours of pumping and probing late on the Tuesday night, our investigations were looking bleak and bearing about as much fruit as a banana plant in Scotland. We fell to our knees in prayer and were rewarded immediately.

A vast, gleaming white Road Train heaved into bay 5 and ground to a juddering stop. The door swung open and out popped 'Tricky'. 'Sure thing boys...meet me at the back of that warehouse down that dodgy black alley and I'll squeeze you in.' What a hero.

Tricky: a man of immensity with beard and tattoos and a Harley Davidson lover when he's not thundering down the highways in his Road Train. Tricky: a lone crusader in the

battle for safe delivery of cargo.

For three days straight we ploughed our path, day and night a blur of semi-controlled machinery that hurtled past kangaroo and camel at dizzying speed, a runaway freak of demented metal. At night we bunked in the rear trailer. Sleeping mats & bags battling the below-freezing temperatures for several hours at a time before we took to the race track once more. On the second day we discovered that our destination, although lying east, wasn't Sydney but in fact Melbourne. A meeting was held and it was decided after several moments that this was just fine and that we'd live in Melbourne instead.

On Friday morning we spilled off the clogged Melbourne artery, bid farewell to Tricky, jumped a train and headed for down-town. Our journey complete, we had arrived; from Singapore to Melbourne via the least conventional methods.

#### **THURSDAY, APRIL 27, 2006: MELBOURNE BROCHURE**

In this City of griddy-ness - main streets, little streets, back alleys, cafe culture, Victoriana (it could be England minus the chippy on the corner)- we have wandered far and ever-so wide. Every nook and every cranny has been carefully explored in search of a Melbourne we want. Frustration has dominated. The city had us in despair as we battled to become its close associates. But why should frustration play with us? Ask frustration; we could only clutch at straws and sniff our way forward with fingers twizzled. The call to escape our Youth Hostel was a strong'n and we so wanted a flat away from the sheet-hovering farts of a dormitory. It has taken one week of un-certain discomfort to clinch a deal and -we should add- a lot of initiative. Now the limbo time in which we were forced to find our footing has elapsed;

we have found an apartment. There have been hundreds of questions asked, thankfully answered in the end, as they always seem to be.

Our slices of luck were cut -we are sure of it- after an unexpected meeting with an unexpected childhood face. His name, John Meadows. Ben was with Cubs with him. He, like Ben, is a Lowestoftian. They were at the same school, they had the same teachers and are presently in Melbourne together. Ben, by one year the elder, was surprised as hell to see John, as was John to see he. This unlikely meeting came about at the viewing of another down-town Melbourne apartment at which John was a resident. Ben - upon being reunited with a childhood face he'd grown up with - went a bit nutty and bounded around in the throes of elation in John Meadows' arms as a joy which can only be brought about by a happy coincidence took him over.

The omen of Meadows brought about a new lucky spell in which we have begun to promote FWE on the streets with a brochure, taking donations for the next continent. In addition: for two months now we will be Melbourne street creatures. Melbourne is our home for now and we welcome it.

#### **THURSDAY, MAY 04, 2006: THE BROCHURE EXTRAVAGANZA!**

Talk, we talk talk talk and talk more, and some more. White flecks of spittle, some dry on the lips, others in the form of a spray hit the unfortunate FWE accostee in a blizzard of sailing, congealed saliva. For nearly every daylight hour we tell our story. Our only release -and therefore excuse- not to be on the street is the beautiful rain; there's nobody about when it's raining. That is not to say that we don't love to hit

people with the FWE phenomenon; there is a point, though, when the voice becomes a low, constant of booming, heartless words. You know you sound like you've said it a 1000 times before, and you have.

We meander the Melbourne metropolis in slow gear -on foot, that is- with side-slung bags filled with our pretty promotional campaign material, the limited edition FWE brochure. "Excuse me, sorry to bother you. My cousin and I are on a world cycle ride; so far it's been nearly 9000 ks. Here..." -at which point the brochure is pulled from the side-slung bag - "are the highlights of the first year of the adventure, we call ourselves Free Wheels East." Sometimes the acostee's face becomes a beaming sun of envious appreciation at our achievements to date, the rays of which we soak up, an enzyme to flood us with joy. Sometimes they have a sour, pinched, sneering demeanour which makes one feel as worthless as an unwanted something trodden into a new carpet. We call this sort the 'rat'. One sunbeam cancels out five rats. This is the equation. If one is forced to overcome the ordeal of experiencing 5 rats in a row, it is hard to pick oneself up, yet we always seem to summon the strength in the end.

Apologies; we are painting an inaccurate picture and over-generalising the people who are Melbournites. There are, of course, all sorts of in-betweeners who do not fit into either of these aforementioned extreme brackets; these middlers do not play with your emotions in the way that the others do. They do not slap you in the face or massage your ego; they are courteous. The courteous ones are divided into two kinds also: the ones that buy a copy of the brochure and the ones that politely say "no thanks". We call the upper-middle the 'positive courteous ones' who might not

be interested in cycling -you would never see them on a bike- but they buy a brochure because they want to be supportive of something they appreciate in terms of use of initiative, hence the encouraging reward of a purchase. It's 'the negative courteous ones' and the 'rats' who don't buy. To further generalise, the Sunbeams wear bright colours and scarves, whereas the Rats can be found in the CBD and wear white shirts, blue suits and blue ties, they walk far too fast, they are already mentally in the office getting on with the next piece of paper work. This is only in our experience, though; we know that there are some more-than-wonderful people who wear suits out there. It's only that the suits are better at making us feel like underfoot matter than anyone else!

There is a marvellous bonus in our endeavour. We have already been invited to drinks and homely meals with some Sunbeams. In the few days we have talked, there has been phenomenal interest from the media. In a nut-shell: 1 film producer, the editor of a national newspaper, a published poet, many journalists, ethnic radio stations, an ABC Ozzy rules national sports commentator, and many more. How are we going to fit it all in?!

### Practical Action

We are pleased to get feedback in the form of emails from those whom we've spoken to, many of them telling us they are making donations to Practical Action on-line. We estimate that every single interested person will tell at least three more about it. One person - a seed to shoot, sprout, blossom, pollinate, fertilise and seed again; a FWE / Practical Action forest of wonder.

Sunday, May 07, 2006: Wonderful news for FWE friend Joe

You may remember us mentioning the plight of Ben's friend Joe Matthews, who, without warning, in March this year, suffered a series of massive heart attacks, following which he went into a coma. The doctors explained to his desperate family that Joe would need to have a heart transplant to survive. The Great British Public went wild in Joe's favour after the press brought to light his plight. The exposure helped Joe raise £50,000 towards getting a new heart.

We are happy to report that Joe found a heart; he came back from the brink of death; his operation went well; his new heart has not been rejected. Joe lives on.

We have a photo of this legendary character with his new heart, holding his old heart, smiling broadly, and will send the picture to our web editor to be put in our gallery section. Don't look if you are squeamish! The image is quite remarkable. We will send a few more photos of our bike ride along with it too and will let you know when they are published.

Welcome back Joe!

### **SUNDAY, MAY 14, 2006: WELCOME TO THE PLEASURE FACTORY**

We're surrounded on all sides by lumbering buildings that scrape the sky and cloud, glowing high-rises that illuminate and dominate. The streets have become accustomed to our padding feet that trawl the concrete in search of sales from dawn to dusk; oh, what industrious beings FWE have become!

Days ebb & flow as a tide on the Cornish coast with money marching from walking wallets to our burgundy bags slung

right to left over our burly shoulders. Life has assumed a familiar path that kindles memories of a life long ago: Morning mugs of Earl Grey, lunch breaks and the customary jubilation that follows a hard day's graft. Home cooking, comfortable sofas, television, books, a bathtub, wardrobe, carpets, telephones and duvets. It's a life we had forgotten but are slowly remembering, slowly becoming acquainted with once more.

The good folk of Melbourne have forged a place in our affection, good hearts defeating the bad in a battle that was closely fought for several weeks. Meals, drinks and guided tours - we have become inundated with delightful calls of attendance from all quarters of the Victorian capital city; it's a factory of pleasure, a treadmill of sunshine. How can we express our gratitude to these wonderful people who welcome us thus: Jodie & Michael, Leanne O'Connor, Cathy-Ann, Crazy Mary and Aaleeah, beautiful Kate, Caitlin, Phil Daniels, Angela at the Spudbar in Richmond and a bunch of other sparkling characters of distinction?

Tick-tock, tick-tock, time is ticking, funds are raising, we are smiling and Melbourne is shining.

### **SUNDAY, MAY 21, 2006: NEURONS TAKE WRONG TURNS**

Do you have any idea what it is like to say the same thing on loop for more than 7 hours a day? When you begin talking the brochure-talk you have life in your voice, but by lunchtime the life has gone. By sun-down you are a ghost of the person you were at sun-up, a gibbering idiot, mad as a hatter with every wire crossed, saying incoherent, nonsensical things like "We cycled from Dover to Dunkirk, took a road train across Europe, took a ship from Moscow to Beijing and roly-pollied to Singapore". At this end of our





day we are received with bemused expressions. The public have but one agenda: to get as far away from the strange blond loonies spoiling their walk as fast they can. Husbands pull wives away protectively with one arm wrapped tightly around their shoulders, eyes wide with suspicion; "Not interested" they say, simultaneously picking up pace and quick-stepping it away to safety. Not to worry, here comes another couple.... FWE: "Excuse me, sorry to bother you.." Couple say nothing because, having seen the last couple's reaction, they think, Perhaps we'd better walk on past, too. It is a natural tendency of the human being to do exactly what every other human being does. Nobody will stop to listen for a long time now and it's all because of that first suspicious couple. Then what's this? A family from Queensland. We go through the pre-recorded spiel and the family surprisingly are sufficiently amazed by our record that they ask us to sign autographs, ring our bells and pose on the bikes for photographs with us. Before you know it, hey presto! What's this, a crowd! Even the original suspicious couple on their way back from the shops stop off and buy a brochure. People come over to us and ask us for a brochure, no spiel necessary.

Kindness triumphs over rudity every time. Vernon Reid of Living Colour, the pioneering Grammy-winning, platinum-selling rock band, stopped off to interview us for possible future sampling. Before leaving he plonked us on the guest-list for Living Colour's gig that evening. We went along to watch the Chilli Pepper inspiration but had to leave early because Phil Daniels, the Scottish comedian had invited us to a street party.

**WEDNESDAY, MAY 24, 2006: GLOBALISATION, WORD DOMINATION, MEGALOMANIA**

FWE has had their web editor, Guy Campbell, give us a run down of the FWE website statistics. We were thrilled to find out that, so far, in the month of May, we have had a phenomenal average of over 2000 hits per day from more than 60 countries around the Globe. Most of our hits came from the U.S, with the U.K close behind, followed by Australia and the EU. Free Wheels East continues to grow in popularity. This can only mean that our charity, Practical Action, will be getting more donations on-line to do more good around the world in their fight against poverty. Thousands are reading our story. We hope that -through this website- people will dare to go on an adventure of their own, realising that if we can do it, anyone can.

**SATURDAY, MAY 27, 2006: ST JEROMES CHARITY BASH**

On Monday the 5th of June, come along and help raise money for the Free Wheels East charity, Practical Action, at the famous St Jerome's cafe/bar, 7 Caledonian Lane (Off little Bourke Street). Jamie and Ben will be there from 7:00 - 1:00 resurrecting the notorious Skillywigler of Koh Tao with sounds ranging from Dog Mendelssohn Rock to Indy Quack, Crackle Blues and Raw Bat Jazz; enjoy music from Beck to Captain Beefheart, from The Black Keys to The Shins. Expect Mooney moments of masterful murmuring melody with resounding rhythms of round rhapsody rolled into crescendos of coconut cornettos and coral-coloured coals, the bucking beauty of lonely bounties.

**TUESDAY, JUNE 06, 2006: THE CONTINUING STORY OF JEROME NEIGHBOURS & WILDERNESS PIES**

The Melbourne whirl-wind has whipped up a frenzy of action in recent days. On the Wednesday just past, amidst the drooping temperatures that sag ever downwards, there was a tentative knock on the door of our suburban flat; a

knock that heralded the introduction of Murray 'The Magical' Johnson into our lives. Murray is a free-lance journalist and photographer and it was his expressed wish to interview, then shoot us in the hope of distributing our story to any number of prolific publications and so adding another sizeable brick in the publicity wall of FWE and Practical Action.

'My good fellows,' said a beaming Murray at the termination of proceedings, 'you must come to a Footy match with my family and I this coming Saturday...have you been before?' We hadn't, of course, and gratefully accepted the offer.

In the upper tier of the MCG we huddled together like Petit-Pois in a freezer and watched through chilled eyes as the Collingwood 'Pies' beat the Brisbane 'Lions' in a closely-contested, hard-hitting game of attrition. It was a wonderfully brutal introduction that curiously made us feel like baying cavemen: bloodthirsty and wild. Deep in the third quarter Ben raised a clenched fist in the air, shaking it like a club as the umpire made a decision he heartily deplored: 'Why, you blithering buffoon!' he screamed, beating his chest and stamping up and down. 'You should be ashamed of yourself, you naughty umpire.' It was a fantastic first-time experience and the pair of us are now on the hunt for official 'Pies' sticker albums and collectors' cards...'up the pies'.

With the terrace chants still sounding in our heads, we rose early the next morning and took to the throbbing 'Swanston Street' to offer our support for the splendidly organised 'Wilderness Society' (an organisation that amongst other things rallies for protection and salvation of Victoria's old growth forests and water catchment areas). At the spear-head of a 15,000 strong troop, we stood tall and proud with

our charming Neighbourly friends Dichen (Katya Kinski) & Caitlin (Rachel Kinski), bellowing and hollering our support, clapping and whistling, chanting and marching. Alongside John Butler and Jack Thompson we made our voices heard the continent over; our clamouring voices juddering and shuddering, shaking the very foundations and fabric of every Australian Premier.

We then watched from the wings as Dichen and Caitlin took to the stage with John and Jack and sang sweetly to the tunes of 'Hey Jude' and 'Every Breath You Take', applauding their commendable support and stand against the unquestionable ignorance of the powers that be and felt honoured to call them all our friends.

Last night the 'Skillywiggler' returned for the first time since Koh Tao to an appreciative backstreet hangout named 'St Jeromes'. A come back rhapsody of musical genius that echoed in the grooves of all Melbourneshire. A heavily-supported turn of chorused funk that lifted shrapnel from the pockets of the pulsing masses in support of our charity 'Practical Action'. As the music weaved a psychedelic wig-wam of faultless pleasure for the unabashed congregation, buckets were shaken by a smiling Kelly Edwards and fundage spilled forwards. Thanks to all those involved for your energy and generosity and a special thank you to Jerome on behalf of ourselves & Practical Action for dealing us the tenure of your bar for such an enjoyable and rewarding evening.

The diary is squish-packed with appointments from one day to the next; wet ink rampantly charging across the pages like,...well,...wet ink rampantly charging across the pages. Busy like bees, we fuzz around our Melbourne hive, harvesting the pocket-pollen and making our honey-money

for year two of FWE.

There is a new song that fits our bill. It's by a band known as 'The Beatles' and is called 'Two of us'. It goes a little like this:

"two of us riding nowhere, spending someone's hard earned pay...  
...on our way home...we're on our way home...we're on our way home...  
...we're going home..."

Thank you and good night, ladies and gentlemen...it's been a pleasure.

The Wilderness Society

- Protects Victoria's old growth forests & water catchments from woodchipping -

For more information please visit:

[www.wilderness.org.au/victoria](http://www.wilderness.org.au/victoria)

### **MONDAY, JUNE 12, 2006: "I'M FALLING" SEATERS**

Morning had broken on the third day of the Queen's birthday weekend. The boys had been out and about having fun in the city with Neighbours the previous night; snuggled beneath enveloping duvets there was very little movement in the FWE hibernation chamber. Jamie rubbed his nose and sighed deeply, Ben yawned cavernously and squinted at his watch which was lying not far from a lazy arm that had found its way out of the warm covers and was trailing, limp

on the carpet. Slowly, the digital digits became focusable-on and Ben saw the time. It was 9:30, the exact same time that the Free Wheels Easters were meant to be at the studio of Kiss FM for an interview set to go out to an audience of 50,000 people.

After a miniscule moment of horrific realisation the peaceful atmosphere of slumber was blasted to smithereens. "Holy moley!" yelled Ben who simultaneously jumped out of bed as though he'd been zapped with 20,000 volts. "Good Heavens, what is it?" asked Jamie who was showing signs of alarm at Ben's barmy over-activity. "The radio!!" blurted Ben, who was already throwing on clothes, cursing loud, buttoning up his shirt out of line and putting his coat on inside out. Jamie -by now sitting bolt upright in bed- was displaying similar symptoms of half-asleep shock. "I didn't hear the alarm," said he as he scratched fronds of porcupine hair.

Minutes later the pair were outside, tripping and tumbling along a dry leaf pavement looking for a taxi. "There's one!" shouted Jamie as he ran into the road with his shoelaces undone, his unkempt hair like a field of set-aside in the wind. The taxi stopped, a darkened electric window lowered slowly. The driver popped into view. "Hewow" said the driver, a little fat Chinaman who sounded like he might not have too great a grasp of the English language. "Chapel Street and step on it!" said Jamie. The taxi driver smiled in slow motion, showing a row of front teeth set at 45 degrees that snuck buck from his mouth and said confusedly, "Step on what?"

The Chinaman indicated, checked his mirrors and, like a three-toed sloth making one of its few daily movements, he joined the carriage-way. The road was open, there was

no traffic. The boys waited in anticipation for the driver to screech forward in a fog of burning rubber with the urgency of your usual cabby, but no, this taxi driver was different; he began to sing a painfully high-pitched Chinese ditty as he drove with all the pace of a first-time learner on a manoeuvre. Taking the bikes would've been faster; walking would've been faster. Ben drummed his fingers on the dashboard, Jamie grunted and oinked with the frustration. The Chinaman sang his song, his taxi snailing along. Ever-so slowly he bore his passengers on their way.

At the studio Ben and Jamie leapt out of the taxi thrusting cash and thanks. Suddenly the 45-speed record that had been playing at 33 was back at the right tempo; the interview was slotted in a little later than expected and delivered with success just after Jason Donovan's Dad (Terry) was on.

The FWE itinerary as it stands includes: ABC radio, Fox radio, filming on the Neighbours set, Yen magazine, a professional fashion shoot with 'Andre' and a possible appearance on the nation's favourite breakfast television program, 'the 9 am Show'.

Brochure sales have taken a bit of a back seat in lieu of all these media commitments. Also we have some super new chums to corrupt us whom we have already christened: Uggly Angel Bum, Enema Moon, Brains, Farty Cigar and his girlfriend Hic-cup. We do appreciate them so.

#### **MONDAY, JUNE 19, 2006: FWE ON 'NEIGHBOURS'**

On the bikes we cycled through the gates of Global Studios, the home of locations and sets used for Australia's most popular exported television program, 'Neighbours'. We had been invited by Dichen Lachman (Katya Kinski on the show)

to make FWE part of 'Neighbours' history.

Dichen greeted us with her radiant smile and to the Green Room she took us. There, Harold was asleep on the sofa, Paul was reading the Paper with Elle, Sky was eating a sandwich, Boyd, Stingray and Dylan were goofing around eating bangers and beans, Susan said a twinkling 'Hello', Carl was looking over his medical notes, Lynn passed by singing a ditty, Steph and Oscar came in playing pirates, Rachel drew in her scrapbook, Ned watched the telly, and there were we in the middle of it all wondering whether we had actually stepped into the television or not?

Later in the day Harold was shooting a scene when we were given the cue to walk into shot with our legendary bicycles. They looked fabulous. Our union flags fluttered from their bamboo poles strapped onto rear pannier racks with cable ties. "Cut!" called the director. "Good work guys, and good luck" he said to us as we walked away from Lassiters hotel. You will see us on air in 6 months time in the U.K, 4 months in Australia.

#### **International Radio**

At 2:30 Australian Eastern time we will be on the ABC Radio Australia program 'In the Loop'. Go to [www.radioaustralia.net.au/intheloop](http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/intheloop) for more information. You should be able to pick it up on the internet anywhere in the world.

#### **WEDNESDAY, JUNE 28, 2006: THE GOLDEN NUGGET CURTAIN CALL OF SADNESS**

The selling of the brochure has taken a back seat in recent weeks. It's buckled up soundly, snug & tight like a naked foot in an Ugg boot, ready to emerge again when the climate is

kinder and the time dictates it.

In the past undulation of Melbourne weeks, the FWE pair have sold in excess of 5,000 copies of the 'Golden Nugget Publication' or 'Greatest Adventure Story of our Generation', as some have dubbed it. 'Golly gosh, what an achievement!' we hear you chorus with cream-cracker delight..not so, my jolly cake-eating chums, not so. Our bank accounts for all the toil, sweat and tears are little the richer. Saving money in Melbourne is about as easy as saving money in London. Yet we consider ourselves rich: rich in memories and times past, present and future. Does that have a price?

Yesterday afternoon at precisely 12:33pm we arrived at the 'Lonely Planet' head office on the outskirts of the city beyond the lavishly unpopulated Docklands. A termite mound of activity encased in a giant red brick building of mirth that protruded from the landscaped ground as we rounded the bend of the highway. 'What ho, wonderful to see you chappies,' said Peter standing at the front door rubbing his hands together. 'So glad you could make it...cup of tea?' he said beaming down. 'Rather, old boy,' said Jamie as he heaved his mighty black biking machine through the doors of the Great Glass Elevator.

For several weeks Peter had been in contact with us imploring us to perform in front of the good workers of the Lonely Planet HQ for the entire world, with an agenda to inspire and motivate; who were we to refuse such a lofty invitation?

An endless stream of people on lunch break, filtered into the conference room brandishing steaming plates of rich and creamy lamb rogan josh that scented the air and teased our

hollow stomachs. The Thorns sat like obedient puppies at the front of the room beneath a projector and a map of the world; so the talk began.

For an hour or more we spaketh about 'the ride that follows the sun', a diatribe of immense interest and popularity that upon its completion was greeted with a resounding cacophonistic bout of applause, cheering and whistling. 'Bravo, bravo' they chanted, 'top notch' and 'quite remarkable' were but a few of the more memorable comments that were audible above the almost defining appreciation that poured forwards like a tsunami of gratitude.

We rode home happy with \$1000 (\$500 of which goes straight to Practical Action)in our back pockets, two LP books, a contact for a man who will be giving us ship passage from Brazil to South Africa, an offer to write an article for the much anticipated LP magazine and numerous numbers and invites for drinks and meals out. 'I do believe we pulled it off just fine,' Ben said...and so we had.

Our stay in Melbourne is now drawing to a close. The curtains call but they're heavy and sad, unwilling to fall in a neat and orderly fashion. Subtle changes, omens and signals announce themselves daily and unexpectedly. May it be the new twittering of a familiar bird, a previously unnoticed crack in a well-trodden pavement or the lyrical whispering of a fresh zephyr; the time is right and come Monday morning we shall no longer be able to regard Melbourne as our home.

#### **SUNDAY, JULY 02, 2006: PASTURES NEW**

Tomorrow Free Wheels East will leave Melbourne after a stay of over two months. At 10:00am we head off towards Sydney in a camper van owned by a hire company. They pay us to

relocate their vehicle. The deal is that we have to deliver their van, intact, within 3 days of leaving. In keeping with our always-in-contact-with-a-part-of-the-earth philosophy, this method of transport is a FWE first. Those who have been on, or are on the backpacker trail know this cost-effective means to a destination as a 'relocation'.

Piles of bags and clothes higgledy-piggledy all over the flat. The place reeks of Mr. Muscle - We want our deposit back. Our bikes and about half of the rest of our things will be left at Dichen's place until we return to Melbourne in some months time. It will be then that we load them for the next FWE cycling leg, the length of South America.

From Sydney we have designs to travel north to Brisbane via Byron Bay, and on the 24th of July, one of the most marvellous things that can happen to two adventuring cousins who have been away from their happy homes for so long will occur. We will -after 16 months of absence- be reunited with those people we love so much, our family. Mums and Dads, brothers and sisters. It chokes us to think of our imminent meeting at the airport.

## Media

On Saturday, the professional fashion photographer, Andre, spent an afternoon snapping at us on the streets of the Melbourne suburb, Fitzroy. The photographs will be used generically into the FWE future. They are also tipped to be the pictures used for a magazine article written by Jacqueline Donchi; a publication that is available in the U.S, the U.K and Australia. We will let you know when it is available.

On Friday we were at the Neighbours set again having our

photo taken with Dichen. The article comes out tomorrow in The Herald Sun's celebrity 'Eye' section. The Herald Sun is big here, it's the state Newspaper of the Year. The picture features us holding the leggy, horizontal, reclining Dichen in our arms.

## Other

Check out FWE on Myspace.com:

[www.myspace.com/freewheelseast](http://www.myspace.com/freewheelseast)

## **THURSDAY, JULY 06, 2006: GREAT OCEANS OF HAPPY SADNESS**

Our R.V was parked just outside reception at the hire company depot somewhere in the northern Melbourne suburbs. A highly efficient lady, dressed in black, wielding a bunch of keys, zipped around the vehicle, talking fast. She said things like "Turn on the ignition before you use the gas." We scrawled signatures somewhere. The lady disappeared in a whirlwind of efficiency, and there we were in control of a hunk of Mercedes metal complete with shower, cooker, loo, three beds and a C.D. player. The R.V. was shockingly huge, much bigger than you would imagine. It really did seem a comfortable mobile home and it was ours for a mere 1 dollar / day.

Jamie yelled "Yeaaah" as he twizzled the key in the ignition and the engine roared like a monster objecting to its awakening. With a lurch and a screech and a light banging of the head on the window glass, we were off onto the hectic city roads making for Dichen's place. We had a road trip in mind.

Dichen was packed and ready to go, her mauve Ugg boots on, a fluffy Ugg bag slung over her shoulder. In the 'roomy' four-berth camper that bragged dimensions of a sea-faring cruise liner, we drove through the early evening, gouging a line along the 'Princess Freeway' to Tourquey; the 'Gateway to the Great Ocean Road' - 'The most visually exciting driving experience in the world'.

'Pip!pip!' tooted Jamie on the horn as we sailed airily under the welcome sign that beckoned us onwards. The impossibly tight bends in the Scaletrix road higgged and jigged, zigging and zagging left and right as the high-beams fingered a route along the cliff tops in the gathering gloom. 'Fish & Chips anyone?' cried Dichen with a squeal of excitement as Jamie hurtled through another small townlet.

Down by the banks of a muddy river where bull frogs croaked, kangaroos jumped and foxes sneaked, we parked the 'Tank' and sparked a fire in a sawn-off oil drum and there devoured the battered sea article and reshaped potatoes that had been hugged in oily newspaper. No people, no stress or drama; it was what the good Dr had ordered; medicine taken with joy, washed down with a glass of ulcer wine, sneering guitar, snuggle rugs and Alchemist slumber.

The following day as crispy air bit our purple noses, we strode the moist sands of the crashing shore that cowered from the immense power of the bold and beautiful waves of emerald turquoise. An afternoon of blissful awakening that scorched our dreams and filled our stomachs with crispy calamari. Evening fell and with heavy hearts our Mercedes van sluggishly turned tail and began the trail of reflection to our once home; Melbourne.

We bade farewell to the Great Ocean Road, to Melbourne, to our new friends and lastly, of course, to Dichen. Our hearts swelled with gratitude and sad happiness as, from drawn windows, we threw our final waves, turned a corner and disappeared from sight. It was the end of Melbourne, the end of a chapter; it was the end of a cherished era in FWE history and we'll miss it dearly.

For several hours FWE drove in silence, the air punctuated only by the occasional grinding of gears and heavy sighs of pondersome thought. Life on the road: so utterly fantastic and yet so utterly painful.

Sydney has been breached and for a short while will become our surrogate home. Our ride north to Brisbane is booked via a similar R.V. van and on Tuesday the odyssey will continue.

It's swings'n roundabouts, folks. No one ever said it would be easy and it isn't. Comfort and familiarity are temptations of sugar and sweetness that one would certainly do well to steer clear from. Home is a million miles away and perhaps sometimes the danger lies in 'replication', but it's a dangerous game to dabble a toe in and ultimately will surely leave a hollow feeling. Positive minds and thoughts of projection should beam fourth; refocused meditation is now called for.

Part and parcel of all things FWE, we embrace the challenge and, as always, will prevail.

#### **THURSDAY, JULY 13, 2006: JUMPING SEA SAUSAGES**

'It's like a big sea sausage' said Ben as yet another whale breached the water and splashed back down with a crashing splash of white water. It's the breeding season

here on the Pacific coast and each year trillions of whales gather to perform and entertain with a carefully rehearsed and choreographed routine for the billions of appreciative people who gather along the shore-line.

During periods of rest from the more 'technical aspects' of the mating season, the whales like to relax and enjoy themselves by leaping out of the water, doing jig's, waving fins and posing for pictures in front of the gawping masses with each display lasting for several hours before they, rather begrudgingly, return to the other 'business' at hand. We fortunately managed to catch the matinee performance

Our Silver Nissan Automatic poked its nose over the cliff like a man about to commit suicide at Beachy Head, as we pressed our faces against the fugged glass to catch a glimpse of the spectacle. Situated just north of Sydney, sandwiched somewhere between Byron Bay and Coffs Harbor, we viewed the dancing beasts as they fox-trotted and waltzed about in the tumbling waves several hundred metres offshore. 'Ooohh, look at that one go' Jamie said, 'oohh, yes it looks just like a Cumberland' said Ben.

We departed Sydney on Wednesday and if all goes to plan, we should arrive in Brisbane in the next few days.

#### **FRIDAY, JULY 21, 2006: OLD BEN GUBB'S WOODEN HUT PHOTOS**

Cast your eye toward the gallery to view our latest piccies which include, in one of our new sections 'other', the long-awaited shot of Joe Matthews holding his old heart as his new one beats away nicely. It is remarkable to see. Also in 'other' you will see a picture by the acclaimed journalist and photographer Jacqueline Donchi. Her article entitled

'The Black Cyclists' should be published soon. Visit her website to have a look at more of her work: <http://www.jacquelinedonchi.net> There are new piccies in the Mongolia, Press, China, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand and Australia sections too.

We are well on the way to sending through to our web editor more ancient analogue, Canon Sure Shot photographs of our hike into the jungle, of our ship, The Princess Mary V and many more.

Over time we will pad out the gallery, gradually painting you a more comprehensive picture of all that has happened to us in our fifteen, actually almost sixteen months on the road.

To backtrack, fill in the gaps and pick up where 'jumping sea sausages left off':

One of the 'Neighbours' guys, a new character, Christian, gave us the keys to his harbour-side apartment in Sydney. With his old flat-mate, kindly Sam the fitness-freak we spent a few lucky days with a view over the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House before we had to leave for one of those Meccas for all pongs, a youth hostel.

Being in Sydney, having travelled over land and sea to get there, seemed to make the place all the more magical. At school we remember working on Sydney geography projects; now we were actually in that far away place of childhood fantasy. The Opera House, Harbour Bay and the bridge cannot fail to move the beholder. We boys who dreamt of Sydney all our lives, looked out over all those mind-blowing monuments to the ingenuity of our species as deserving men, rewarded for all the physical and emotional



toil invested in Free Wheels East.

Sitting on a bench at Circular Quay, our belongings spread around us, we trendy tramps received a tinkle from Dichen, whose generosity -although she was not there in person to administer it- extended into New South Wales. She organised dinner for us at Jimmy Licks, a secret restaurant, and insisted we ordered the Oysters. Although the Ugg angel was not there in person, it felt as though she was still with us; we even laid a space for her at the table and raised our glasses to the empty seat. The meal became a ceremonial marker on our FWE timeline, a celebration of all that had passed, a delectable taste of new beginnings as good as the fine food laid out before us.

Back on the road you would expect life to have become simple again: finding a bed, writing our diaries and drawing pictures as our only commitments. However, there have been some exciting developments outside of these basic road simplicities, this time in the world of publishing.

Dichen had mentioned to a friend of hers, Margaret Gee, author of several books and world-renowned literary agent, that we were in town. Promptly scheduling a meeting with this eminent literary figure, we met her and - after interrupting a call to New York- talked through our wishes to make the first year of this adventure into a book. Our urgent need for funds to help FWE sail & roll onward to South America has rather forced a pre-trip-completion push to get published and receive a much-needed advance. To cut a long story short Margaret Gee offered her services as a literary agent. We always wanted to be able to say we have an agent and, oh boy, now we can.

Two days later we held a meeting at Random House Australia -publishers of John Grisham and Dan Brown- who, as I type, are considering a book proposal. Each day begins with an eel-like spring from bed and a dash for news. There has been silence, we have heard nothing yet, but are not disheartened. At this stage we are sure that no news can only be good news. If a book deal is secured, never fear, we will be publishing an entry on this website with a title which will have warranted the rare use of bold, uppercase lettering and plenty of exclamation marks.

From Sydney we journeyed north. Our second re-location had fallen through and with impractical quantities of unnecessary junk, including balls, snorkels, and books, we loaded a hire car as a last ditch resort to get to Brisbane to meet family Wylson and family Mackenzie. As already mentioned in the previous entry, we saw some sea sausages on the way and spent three nights in a row in our hire car -a Nissan Pulsar-doubled over, cold and soaked in condensation. It is worth every second when you get to spend your days on open roads and your evenings looking over beaches with crashing white waves lit by the full moon's peaceful beams.

Please note: your sense of freedom is temporarily swapped with backache and damp claustrophobia when trying to sleep in the not entirely reclinable seats of a Nissan Pulsar.

With just the two of us and a car on a straight sliver of black road stretching on forever, the same C.D in the player just completing its 132nd loop, there comes another state of consciousness. Perhaps it is the drug which fuels our will to continue, a road meditation. That is it: There is nothing in the world but the road and what it passes through. Not to have already visualised your arrival, not to look onward

to your destination, is to absorb each and every inch of the road. This simple art of environmental absorption yields the acquisition of what we believe every one of us over-complicated human beings is hunting for. The road will tune you into yourself. Over time it forces the fast to slow down and teaches you a way which prevents that awful practice of missing the moment.

We dropped our silver car back at the depot and went off to find Old Ben Gubb, Jamie's friend who lives high in the hills above Brisbane in the suburb of Toowong with his delightful girlfriend Vic. The house is a Queenslander; a pretty, wooden, veranda-bound building with kookaburras laughing in the trees around it and bush turkeys in the garden using socks fallen from the clothes line to build their towering nest-thrones.

Old Ben Gubb is an artist; the smell of turpentine and oil paint wafts around the building from his basement studio, through the cracks in the floorboards to our noses. As Ben splodges and splurts paint onto his canvases, working day and night for his upcoming exhibition, Vic -who is a fashion designer- spends her days happily snipping away with a large pair of fabric scissors, cutting material on the kitchen table, or sowing on the sofa. She is in the process of turning rags to riches, patching each one of our impressive collection Free Wheels East holes. She even modifies our misfits, 'taking-in' here and 'hemming there.

I'm afraid we ourselves have been attempting to find the motivation to sell our home-made publication, this time on the streets of Brisbane. Playing street Hacky Sack when there is nobody around to sell to helps ease the unpredictable labour of cold selling for cash.

On the 27th we see our loved ones. It's the final countdown...

### **MONDAY, JULY 24, 2006: CASH**

We are well and truly out of cash. Our worst financial fear of failing to raise the money for the South America leg is a constant torment. Resorting to selling brochures on the streets for food while we were in Brisbane prompted long discussions concerning the grave question of how we are going to raise the money to continue on our journey. As we cut through the east coast bush at the wheel of the 12-seater mini bus with the family lolling around travel-snoozing, we invented some quite potty plans to go into the outback and erect mile upon mile of lonely fence. We've heard it pays well to go into the wilderness and indulge in basic nil-temptation living.

After the family leave, brother Jack, aka 'Old Clanky', will join us for the second time in FWE history. When we're not in the bush Jack can help out on the money- raising front through the forming of a busking band. He can perform tricks in the street pulling in the punters with his tractor beam of slapstick entertainment. Perhaps we can throw in some of the old Valley of Ronnie songs too?

Other than busking we should mention our one other cunning plan; a self--promoting push in which we will give others the chance to invest in our jolly bandwagon. That'll be an on-going project. Money really is our only concern. When we train the bikes north in South America it'll be back to basics, back to being Black Cyclists.

As always, our future is open. Anything could happen.

There are a couple of basic musts: We have to leave

ourselves one month to plan the Pacific voyage and fit out the bikes. We have to be out of OZ by mid-November to catch the South American summer.

Wish us luck, readers.

#### **THURSDAY, AUGUST 03, 2006: FAMILY BUTTERSCOTCH**

'Not this time, but good luck in the future' was the gist received in a mail from Random House. There will be no book deal just yet and to be honest we're more than slightly relieved. Backs to the wall, bank accounts in dire straits, we can now look forward to 'going down the mines' to earn the desperately-required bucks for our continuation.

We departed the Gubb residence mid-morning on the 27th July and, with welcome banner in tow, crossed the city by rail to 'Domestic Arrivals' at Brisbane airport. We arrived with five minutes to spare and the display monitor for flight J77043 already brandished, in gold letters, the word 'landed'. Realisation dawned, smacking us in the face like a bandit with a blunt instrument. Excitement and anxious palpitations of nervous intrigue and jitter raced with adrenaline-fuelled speed about our bodies - the family were here!

'Sorry mite, no can do with all that luggo you're carrying,' said Bruce Bouncer the ten ton airport security man as we attempted to broach the defense line that fed the arrival gate. 'It's all those airos, knifeos and bladeos...sorry buddo,' said Bruce. Thwarted at the last hurdle, denied access, denied entry, raped of a chance to flash our banner; we had been relegated to the luggage collection parade. I distinctly heard Bruce utter as we padded away, 'Hey, Shane, that was a close one, would have taken all day...let's get a Vegemite sarno.' That's just not cricket Bruce...not cricket at all.

As the camera rolled to capture our abject disappointment and sorrowful unfurling of a moribund banner, there was a sudden flurry of activity, a whooshing of air, a pounding of carpet and from the midst of a trundling crowd flew Midgie and Jack at full tilt like bowling balls knocking down skittles. Hot on their heels came Kate, Lizzie, Annie and bringing up the rear at a moderately speedy walk, bustled John and Michael.

Smiles, happiness and jubilation. After sixteen months families Mackenzie & Wylson were once again complete.

We ride aboard a 12-seater 'Toyota Commuter' and should you happen to pass our jolly wagon you'll do so to the tune of merry tooting that erupts almost endlessly from the windows. We're edging our way North up the east coast and for the time being at least are feasting daily on a diet of comfortable ease, laughs and merriment.

While Michael drives, swinging the jolly white van from side-to-side along the dusty roads, Kate attempts navigation, Midgie eagerly peels her eyes in search of the elusive koala, John sleepily nods his head back & forth, Jack spies birds, Annie dreams of villas with ensuite facilities, Lizzie doodles in her pad and we, well we just sit and grin, occasionally pinching ourselves.

These are balmy days of butterscotch sweetness, folks and long, long, long may they continue...all hail the magic of 'family'!

#### **THURSDAY, AUGUST 17, 2006: HOLD YOUR HORSES**

In this time of family there is little opportunity to use the internet. Campsite computers are often coin operated, slow,

extortionately priced and there is usually only one of them, which isn't terribly practical for all nine of us pencil-necked geeks to use at the same time.. So, hold your horses for our stories for they will come.

In the past few weeks we have driven in our minibus as far north as Blowin' Bowen and today are on the outskirts of Bundaberg on our way south again. Everyone but old Clanky (brother Jack) will leave us on the 22nd of August. At that frightening point we will fall from the lip of a waterfall we have long been approaching and into a plunge pool of mountainous, mind-blowingly hard work.

#### **THURSDAY, AUGUST 24, 2006: THE STORY OF OUR FAMILY VISIT**

The Toyota Commuter whistled northward, its jolly occupants observing the flashing brown scenery as it zoomed past the window, a framed picture of gum trees, open plains, dead gut-trailing kangaroos and wandering wilderness. With Brisbane now fading far behind the plump, luggaged-laden rump of our van, the traffic dwindled and soon we were running free on open highways with only ourselves as company.

With map in hand, Drill Sergeant Kate barked orders with blood-curdling volume at Private Michael who, in his tinted Ray Bans, clutched the wheel. 'Nope, that's the wrong way...again...turn around...and next time I say RIGHT, I don't mean LEFT...got it?'

Cold efficiency got the job done and each night as the waxing sliver in the sky descended, we would be delivered to a new and quaint camp-site. There were beds for the over 50's and for the rest of us it was restless, therm-a-rest

tenting. We cousins could put up the cheap 'outdoor joy' six-man tent we'd bought on the first day in 4 minutes and 59 seconds. Invariably our erection would end up next door to a four-wheel-drive attached to a white caravan, with an adjoining porch equipped with collapsible coffee table and two fisherman's chairs, into which you would more often than not find squigged an over-weight, ginger-permed, one-toothed woman clad in leggings and floral blouse, wearing a pudgy smile across a finely-bearded face. Next to Madame would be Monsieur, her equally charming husband 'Keith' who from dawn to dusk likes to 'tong' a gas-powered 'Thunder Belcher 3000' BBQ. Campsitters were a friendly bunch despite appearances and alien as that world was, we rather liked it.

However, when the caravan metropolises became claustrophobic they were easily escaped. We would take evening walks along golden beaches gingerly paddling in the sea after reading signs on the way down to the water's edge which tell you all about the wonderful marine life, predominantly jellyfish, the worst of which are completely invisible, the size of your thumb nail and will probably kill you if you 'get hit'-as the locals say- without getting to hospital within two minutes. Safer pastimes included drinking beers a-plenty, strumming guitars and gorging on sumptuous fodder.

The further north we travelled the warmer the climate became. Soon clothes were being shed and flip-flops and shorts donned. We visited Maroochydore, Mooloolaba, Yeppoon and Eungella and in the evening we checked into roadside motels, caravan parks and campsites.

Come the crisp morning and colourful dawn chorus, the van

would be loaded and the day would start again. We found that travelling with the elder generation has its drawbacks... incontinence dictating frequent pit stops for drainage, and progress at times is slow. Sometimes we could drive for an entire day and no more than 100 miles would fall beneath our wheels.

On our fourth day out we ventured off the Bruce Highway and took to the hills. 'There is a distinct and exciting possibility we'll see Platypus at the terminus of today's drive,' said Jack from the rear; 'it is, after all, regarded as the numero uno location in the entire world where one may do so.' How wonderful it was to see those surprisingly small mammals at play in the creek. We watched from the bushes as they swam and dived to feed on the bottom, regarding them with quiet awe as they went about their business. The platypus, along with the echidna, is unique in the animal kingdom in being the only mammal to lay eggs. 'Listen up troops,' Jack said, clearing his throat; 'did you know that when the first explorers returned to Mother England with a sample creature, the authorities poo-pooed it, claiming it wasn't real...yar, yar, that's right, they suspected foul play and assumed it to be a hoax...remarkable little chaps aren't they!'

After a Geetas & ham salad sandwich lunch on the sixth day of adventure, we passed a sign that read 'Welcome to Airlee'. Much vaunted as the ideal launch pad to the Whitsundays, it had for a long time been our target, the place we expected to be the highlight of the trip. That evening we found some glossy brochures in reception at our latest caravan-crammed campsite. Caravans on caravans - you see it is peak season because all the old buggers down south want to keep themselves toasty... I digress. The brochures

advertised trips into the Whitsunday archipelago. Old ones put glasses on ends of noses, younger ones played hacky sac and drank beer. Old ones decided what the heck?! and booked us a three day voyage. Excitement levels climaxed.

We put to sea and bobbed up and down aboard 'Jade', a 50ft catamaran of 20 years with crewmen Frank, Darren and Gemma. Used to a more rowdy crowd the crew welcomed their latest more sedate passengers. Seeing our parents joyfully arm in arm, eyes to the stars like teenagers gearing up for the first snog, caused our hearts to swell with compassion for Annie and Michael, and Jonnie & Midge who have been happily married for over three decades.

Seas were calm for the length of the voyage, although on the third day we did have a bit of a squall which got a few of the less seaworthy members of the family up on deck, staring at the horizon praying for calm. Jade turfed us at the Marina and for the next day we swayed like drunkards as we tried to re-find our land legs. Then, it was back to the bus...

Soon we were off again with the white minibus pointing southward. We became re-accustomed to the bus life and with lots of little stops on the way; tasting Rum at the Bundaberg distillery and watching the humpback Whales show off to us in all their glory at Hervey Bay, we returned to Brisbane. The last few days were difficult. Towards the end of our perfect journey together, affectionate shoulder rubbing, back patting and leg squeezing increased. We were clinging on to what we knew would be gone soon. Lumps built in throats and then, somehow -how could it be a month since we were last there?- we were back at Brisbane domestic airport and forced to say goodbye. Fathers gave last minute advice. Hugging mothers choked us with loving

last words. Kate and Lizzie walked away waving. Looking back over shoulders we wondered sadly when we would see them again.. perhaps another 16 months?

With Jack there to take away the full force of this separation from the family, we banished the hurt of that ordeal and began planning the immediate future. On the 'Airtrain' back to Brisbane we asked ourselves very seriously: "What the blazes do we do now?"

### **SUNDAY, AUGUST 27, 2006: WAREHOUSE X**

At a secret location, a warehouse in Fitzroy, Melbourne we are going about making our plight for funds known to the entire city. We figured that it would be stupid to waste the valuable contacts base we have in this colder part of the country, so, after the family left us we got down here as fast as we could. Already we have begun pestering the general public at that top Melbourne haunt, our Bench on Brunswick Street. We ask them to trade 5 bucks for the same little book we sold there only a few months ago. Amazingly, we rarely stop the same person twice. Jack, A.K.A 'old clanky' is doing a wonderful job busking; we have a soundtrack to our selling. Jack's playing brings a jolly atmosphere to proceedings, he makes a bit of change for himself and he adds to the family theme too - we look like triplets. I'm not sure if everyone quite believes we're actually doing, or have done, any of FWE. It looks like a scam without our trusty bikes which we must find the time to pick up - They are over at Kyal's place (Boyd, Neighbours). In amongst the graffiti we have become as much a part of the fabric as our friend Jim the tramp and a few of the other resident homeless fellows who were, incidentally, pleased to see us back in town, especially after we bought them a bottle of VB to celebrate. They will be friends for life.

Selling our book is a side-line which -it has been proven- does not reap massive cash rewards, yet it will bring in enough money to get away from instant noodles, and it will, more importantly, continue to flood the FWE hotmail account with emails offering support, suggestions, advice and media opportunities. Street brochure work is well worth doing and will take up so little of our time this time round that it will -we hope- be impossible to get sick of.

There is more to our self-promotion: soon, when a member of the public buys a book they will be advised to come to a string of events we are planning to host around the city. This is the beginning of the festival of FWE. Friends are helping us by putting us in contact with some of the best bands in Melbourne and the best D.Js who will play on our nights for our continuation. Barry and Beck -the boys down at Print Mode- are going to knock us up a batch of 500 A3 flyers which will be plastered using a homemade gloop around the city. Expect to be inundated with brash and obtrusive 'help them continue east..' posters.

I should say some more about the warehouse and how we came by it. Jac Donchi kindly offered it to us as a place to set up camp and make into some sort of H.Q from where we might conduct our operations. She said "Just as long as you do the washing-up and the weeding, you are welcome". The warehouse is vast. It will be the perfect location for one of our FWE events. We can host seminars there too. From the outside it looks fairly small but when you pass through the door you pass through a porthole to another world. One massive chamber leads on to another. We are still discovering new nooks and crannies. In the middle of the main hall -as we like to call it- is a bed and a fan and some roller skates. We only worked out what they were there

for when a voluptuous, semi-naked girl came bounding through the warehouse with Jac Donchi in hot pursuit taking photographs. When this first happened Jac asked, "You don't mind me coming in here for photo-shoots do you?" We replied gravely, "Not a bit."

What of the facilities within the warehouse? Well, we have our own microwave, a carpet which a few dry leaves have blown in on to, a sink where there lives a resident creepy crawly.. a big ugly one with hundreds of long legs, that survives, we have deduced, by eating toothpaste. There are three loos -that's one each- and two double beds. I'm sleeping with my brother. Jamie has his own bed, the lucky sod. Also we have that luxury of luxuries, a stereo. We can listen to the finest music there is so loud it hurts; something the wandering man seldom gets to do. These facilities are found in rooms which were once offices within the warehouse. Once we have given them the lick of paint they need and polly-filled all the draughty holes and have a heater and a kettle, it will almost be 5-star squatting.

Adjacent to the warehouse is a house where Jac lives with her flatmates Mikey and Hailey. Mikey is a D.J for the radio station Triple R. He swears he will plug FWE every Saturday. I think his show starts at about 6pm. Hailey is a stylist. She is going to try and help us too.

Tomorrow we're sending Old Clanky up a spindly ladder to paint our logo, web address and the words 'FWE headquarters' onto the front of the building in large bold letters visible from the road.

It is all positive now. We have some impetus and direction for the first time in a long time.

### **WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 30, 2006: HELP!**

We are over half way there, 17 months in, 9000 ks under our wheels, but we do not have the financial backing needed to go on. We have two months left to raise 8,000 pounds (19,000 Australian Dollars.) and we need a ship to South America.

If you would like to help us continue on this epic journey, please send an email to [info@freewheelseast.co.uk](mailto:info@freewheelseast.co.uk). If you can't help personally, perhaps you know of someone who can? Your suggestions would be greatly appreciated. Keep checking for our latest news below. Thank you.

### **FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 01, 2006: MELBOURNE EVENTS THIS SEPTEMBER**

St. Jerome's - Monday 11th September.

We will be there from 7:00pm onwards welcoming suggestions and answering any questions. You will be able to buy our limited edition book and if you wish you can make a donation towards the continuation of FWE.

Address: St Jerome's cafe/bar, 7 Caledonian Lane (Off little Bourke Street), Melbourne, 3000.

Loop - Wednesday 20th September

A gold coin donation will get you through the doors. The money will go towards our continuation. There will be FWE visuals and we have a Triple R D.J pencilled in. Again we will be there to take on board your ideas and you will be able to buy our book.

Address: Loop, 23 Meyers Place, Melbourne, 3000





Look out for us on the streets and **DON'T MISS OUR EVENTS!!**

Keep checking for our latest news below.

### **TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 05, 2006: GOMEZ KEYBOARD**

Make a donation

Guy has set up a 'to help us continue our journey click here:' donation button at the top of this page. If you have enjoyed reading our stories and if you are not poor, please make a donation. If you are poor and you know someone who isn't, ask them to help us. Send a mail to everyone in the office, post one around the university, publish our website in your local paper... Keep the wheels turning.

From H.Q

Computer keyboards are smoking as our fingers dance over the keys in an untrained blur of index finger peach. Firing mails to London, Singapore and Sydney, we are slowly but surely doing what is necessary to continue east. We are doggedly pestering shipping companies, all the while hounding equipment sponsors and pushing ourselves at the press. Our posters are up now along Brunswick street, the bohemian quarter. Punters without the money to buy a book are urged to take a poster and put it up in a place where everyone will see it. We day-dream of billboards the size of buildings that ask for help. For now, though, our advertisements are A3, black and white and stuck onto any available 'flying' surface with sticky tape. Our push for funding can only be successful through forcing, clawing ourselves into the public eye.

This intense work has the carrot of the Andes dangling before our hungry mouths. City living, computer life and pale, waxy, see-through skin are only bearable with such an incentive. Yet, our time has not been entirely without merriment. We were invited to meet Gomez -a band we'd last seen at London's Shepherd's Bush Empire- to enjoy two sold-out complementary gigs. Backstage The Free Wheels Easters -including Old Clanky- drank bottles of Beck's with the band and went to Cherry bar afterwards. For the second night of live Gomez we put in two requests 'Get Myself Arrested' and 'Rhythm and Blues Alibi' which were dutifully played as musical wishes of good luck from the band; those ego-free, genuine fellows who were simply interested in our ride around the world on bicycles.

### **MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2006: PEOPLE OF MELBOURNE - ACCOMMODATION NEEDED**

As of Thursday 14th we are homeless. Sadly our stay at Warehouse X has come to an end. To save us from spending our hard earned FWE pennies on accommodation and help us save for South America... is there anyone out there who can offer to put us up for 3 weeks? From the 4th of October we're O.K because Kelly -a girl we sold a book to- has asked us to move in with her. Even if you can't offer the entire three weeks, any help would be greatly appreciated.

Radio

'Conversation Hour' ABC Radio Melbourne at 11:00 am

### **THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2006: TOP BRASS CONVERSATION**

COME TO LOOP, MEYERS PLACE, WED 20th SEPT, WITH BAND THE CODEBREAKERS AND TRIPLE R DJ MICHAEL KAY and enjoy an evening with FWE as we show footage, pictures, and sketches from on the road.

'Why is it so damn cold?' grumbled Clanky from under the blankets in the warehouse. 'What happened to all the sunshine?' A cold front has indeed washed in these last few days; toes & fingers have been stung blue with the bite and once again we have retreated to the comforts afforded by hat and scarf in order to keep our peckers up.

The well-oiled FWE roller coaster continues to move with predictable random abandon for all convention and protocol; pitching up & down in ever-decreasing circles, hurtling earthwards into oblivion, then gallantly rearing skywards once more. Good news follows bad news, bad news succeeded by good. With the much-anticipated arrival of the 'Make a Donation' feature on the 'news' page above, we have, in only several weeks, been utterly overwhelmed by the response of friends and strangers alike. How can we ever thank, amongst others, Alex Naesmyth and Bridget Brown for their selfless support and infectious enthusiasm towards our continuation. It is these people, not us, that provide the corner stones from which all things FWE are built. Quite simply, without such kindness we would not be here today.

In fact we have of late seen an abundance of good will fall our way; from free accommodation to half-price fry-ups and complementary internet cafe use, from where I now type this very mail, we have been on the receiving end of a particularly balmy patch of kind-heartedness, not least of all that which has been demonstrated by our most special

friend and surrogate publicist, Fran.

At 10 o'clock yesterday Melbourne mourn, we crossed the Yara River in Fran's characterful car and entered through the sliding doors of the glass-fronted HQ for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Fran has her publicist fingers in many tantalizing media pies and after several days of selfless hard graft, secured us a string of rather top-brass appointments on the media circuit; ABC was the first. It was a much-anticipated return to the spotlight after a few weeks' absence and as microphones and swivel chairs were adjusted, there was a nervous excitement in the air.

'Good morning and welcome, you're listening to the Conversation Hour with me, John Faine on 774AM...the time is approaching 11 o'clock and in a short while I'll be joined by two very special young men who are cycling around the world; that's right, cycling around the world...I feel tired just saying it...ha ha ha...join me, John Faine, with Ben Whileson & James Mackenzie after the news...'

John Faine, our bearded host on the 'Conversation Hour', was accompanied by comedian Danny -a funny Canadian fellow with swirly black hair and a keen wit- and Paula Constant -a remarkable lady who is walking the earth having already padded 7,500 km's -[www.constanttrek.com](http://www.constanttrek.com)-. After correcting our names and for the fatter part of an hour we waffled the FWE waffle and drivled the drivel. There were times when the show-man in John would creep out and dent our words of crusading hardship, but none were so harsh that we could not fight free and come through all the stronger. It was a test we enjoyed and when the big hand on the wall signalled our hour was up and the axe fell on our smoking tongues, we smiled a broad smile and felt most pleased. 'Thanks for coming in, guys,' said John, 'that was

cracking'. 'Hey, no sweat...'said Jamie; '...any time.'

Our days now have strident poise and feverish purpose once more. Our chins are raised to the bar as we yank ourselves upwards with all our might and majesty in an attempt to meet the new levels of demand that present themselves on a ceaseless conveyor of proactiveness. Our minds buzz with the hurly-burly hum-drum of well-oiled cogs finding their familiar groove once more. Marketing, phoning, mailing and media...we embrace it all.

Thanks to Jerome for the tenure of his venue once more and we look forward to seeing all those in attendance that night again at Loop on the 20th September.

We also have a special and most sincere thanks which goes to all the kind folk at 'Hack and Slash', the internet cafe that has awarded us countless airtime that reaches above and beyond all realms of good will. For all your gaming and mailing needs please visit the thoroughly decent chaps at 'Hack and Slash', 19 Nicholson Street, East Brunswick. Cheers guys, without you we'd be up a Gum Tree.

#### **FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2006: LOOPY PUFF**

Loop went down a storm. The man who hung the records from the tree- D.J Soup - kicked it off and then along came The Codebreakers -kind fellows that they are- who immersed the Loop-goers with their rock. The lights were dim, smoke wafted towards the ceiling in spirals. On a screen at the back of the bar were images of our expedition blown up to giant proportions, a 4-metre slideshow behind the band. The team's artwork -line drawings which usually cover only part of an A5 page- flitted by as wild hair and instruments crept into the frame. Then the photos came,

large as life, visions of the road sending both the throng and ourselves into a trance of longing. The slides looped, we mingled, talking five minutes here and five minutes there, connecting with those who care enough about FWE to come out on a Wednesday night to support us. The Chefs from the television show '15' turned up -with the exception of Jamie Oliver- as did Benji Rodgers-Wilson, another man who is planning an epic world circumnavigation by bike. The trip he has planned is huge, gargantuan. If Benji completes his proposed adventure -or even part of it- he will go down as one of the world cycling legends along with the likes of Edwin Tucker and Alistair Humphries. Benji's adventure will leave your jaw hanging. Take a look at his website: [www.earthodyssey.net](http://www.earthodyssey.net). In addition to this recommendation I feel we must comment on the fact that Benji -when not sounding flash- simplifies his name to plain old Ben Wilson. Sounds familiar doesn't it?

Loop made us some much-needed cash and raised our profile. Thank you to them for agreeing to lend their venue to us. Thank you, Soup. Also many thanks to 'The Codebreakers', have a listen to them on myspace.

One of the Fat Girls - it's a clothing shop, I'm not being rude- took us into her home. We lived there for a week on the dainty Greaves Street, Fitzroy and today we move again to a house under development south of the Yarra with a bloke called Matty. Every day we are flooded with generosity.

On a sad note, brother Jack (old Clanky) has flown back to England to begin his final year at Bristol University, studying Zoology. Throughout his stay Jack found, when asked what he is studying, that quite a few Australians believe Zoology to be the study of Zoo-keeping. For the record it is not. Old

Clanky is one of the best men we know. We respect him enormously and will miss him one hell of a lot. I no longer have to sleep in a double bed with him, so I suppose there is a positive side to his departure. Like a warm puff of air on a spring day in England, Jack's visit has passed, leaving us -as it did when the family flew- more appreciative than ever for all of our loved ones. So long, Brother.

#### **TUESDAY, OCTOBER 03, 2006: STALE PROGRESSION**

What is there to report? Sometimes we are concerned that we are boring you folk with our stories of Melbourne. We arrived here over 5 months ago now. A few of you must be wondering when we are going to get moving again? Five months is almost a third of our trip. On the 6th of October we will have used exactly half of our scheduled three-year time allocation to complete our journey; that is to say, we are about to cross the half-way-home point, which sounds preposterous seeing as we are still no closer to getting away from our book-selling at the burgundy bench on Brunswick Street.

Our lack of easterly motion is as frustrating for us as it must be for you. FWE is not about city living. We have a hunger for the wilderness which grows by the day. There was a time not so long ago when life was as simple as needing shelter, food and water. Staying in one place for so long has begun to get complicated. We are beginning to be recognised in cafes and on the street. "Haven't you gone yet?" they say, or "Hey, aren't you the cycling guys?" Our stories are told and re-told. Like a song on never-ending repeat, you know the words better and better with each listening, all the time becoming a little bit more sick of it.

If we dare to imagine ourselves on a ship sailing across the

Pacific Ocean a pulse of electricity shoots along the spine. Oh, to get back to the way it is meant to be; oh to escape the flickering computer screens, the bench splattered freshly with bum vomit, the dark trapping walls and the frequent obtrusive interruptions of the mobile phone. How we long for escape from the ways of the modern city.

A solid group of goodly friends -predominantly New Zealanders- whom we've made through the selling of the FWE publication part one, are still helping us with our accommodation. We have stayed in East Brunswick and in Perhan, on High street and on Malvern Road.. yes, we have ventured south of the river.... Thank you to our hosts and hostesses of the last few weeks, Sarah and Gretchen, Maurisa, Pipes, Mattie, Nick, Hutch and Jess for helping us on our quest for continuation. Tomorrow we move back towards Brunswick Street to stay with Kelly in Fitzroy. It's back to our neck of the woods!

In how many hundreds of rooms have we slept? On how many squares of grass? How many people have helped us now? Thousands, literally thousands. We've slept on a ship, in a warehouse, in a wendy house, in tents, under the stars, on trains and in cars. We thrive on uncertainty, happy to know that there is no knowing what tomorrow could bring. When will sponsorship come? When will we find our vessel to take us to Antarctica? Who knows.

#### **SATURDAY, OCTOBER 07, 2006: EMERGENCY OPERATION: SURGERY SCARE FOR BRAVE TEAM MEMBER**

See below 'Tour' for our latest blog entitled 'operation'.

**Tour**

We are assuming that you are a Sunday Magazine reader?

If this is your first visit to [www.freewheelseast.co.uk](http://www.freewheelseast.co.uk) and you are wondering how you can help us continue east, we suggest you follow this simple step-by-step, make-the-most-out-of-your-visit-tour:

1. FWE news archives are to be found by order of month to the top left of your screen. We began documenting our expedition in January 2005. In April 2005 we started cycling east and arrived in Melbourne in early May 2006 where we began fundraising for the next FWE leg (Antarctica / South America), so you know where to click for stories of the road.
2. Put an image to the story by taking a look at our gallery.
3. If you would like to support our Charity, Practical Action, you can do that online. Go to the Charity tab for more information.
4. You can make a donation and help us continue east too if you wish. Click on the make a donation button on this page and follow the instructions.
5. If you wish to sponsor or invest in us, send an email to [info@freewheelseast.co.uk](mailto:info@freewheelseast.co.uk)
6. If you know anyone with a ship going across the Pacific from Australia or going to Antarctica from Tierra Del Fuego, send an email to [info@freewheelseast.co.uk](mailto:info@freewheelseast.co.uk)
7. If you are in charge of a large website, link us.

Thank you for your help.

Ben Wylson and Jamie Mackenzie

Expedition Partners

### An operation

Ben was discharged from hospital soon after lunch this very afternoon. What had started the same as any other day ended in emergency hospitalization and a one-hour operation under the surgeon's knife at St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne. Here's the story:

'Jamie, I think those Hot Thai noodles have, er...disagreed with my internals if you know what I mean!' said Ben shortly before snooze time late on Thursday night. 'Oh dear, oh dear...all those chilies I expect...anyway ta-ra, sleep well, old chap,' replied Jamie airily before skipping off to bed to read a few pages of 'Off The Rails'.

The following morning Jamie awoke to the pip-piping from the merry song birds that had gathered for a natter on the virginia creeper-covered electricity cables outside his window. A warm wind blew through the glass slats and it felt like another typically glorious Fitzroy day as he padded across the carpeted landing to Ben's room.

'Morning lad...and how are we feeling this cheery morning?' 'Not so good I'm afraid,' Ben croaked with a wince; 'the pain you see, it got worse through the night. Three times I got up to pay a visit to old Terry Toilet and all to no avail...I feel like a sausage machine with a blocked nozzle.' 'A sausage machine, eh! Well now, that's not a good sign...and where's the pain located?' said Jamie with concern for his stricken companion. 'Right here,' said Ben pointing a finger at his

lower right stomach. 'Ah ha, the appendix area then,' Jamie surmised, stroking his chin and furrowing his brow that was smeared with ever-growing gobs of concern. 'Yes, that's right, the appendix area...that's just where it is.' Ben's face contorted with confusion. 'So, what on earth do you think it might be then?' 'Well I'm not a doctor, as you know, but perhaps...it's your appendix!' said Jamie. 'Great Scott!' Ben yelped. 'By Jove, you're right, old boy...how could I have missed the signs...it's obvious.'

The two brazen young men left the house and began the walk up Brunswick Street to the corner of Nicholson and Victoria Parade in the direction of St Vincent's Hospital. On the way they passed a 7-Eleven convenience store where Ben spied a young Paramedic on lunch break tucking into a Walnut-Whip. 'Hello there, young lad,' said Ben approaching the young medic who turned out to be a woman, 'I was wondering if you might be so kind as to help me with a small problem I seem to be encountering.' Ben went on to detail the symptoms to the girl in green and, as expected, was strongly encouraged to make haste to St Vincent's at the top of the hill.

The pains were coming thicker and faster now; more concentrated and sharper than before. 'Ohh eee, ohhh eee...' Ben uttered with each foot step as he edged courageously closer to the target destination. It didn't take the doctor, Dave, long to assess the situation and offer his professional conclusion: 'Mr Wylson, I suspect you have acute Appendicitis...we must prepare you for possible surgery immediately.'

'Give it to me like a man, I can take a little prick,' Ben championed through gritted teeth from his trolley bed as a

needle was primed and clear fluid rose like a fountain from the two-inch sliver of pointy metal. Bloods were taken and an intravenous receptor applied. An hour later the results confirmed the suspicions and operating became inevitable. 'Mr Wylson,' said Dave dramatically like he was about to announce the end of the world, 'soon you are to fall beneath my knife...I am your surgeon.'

While Ben succumbed to his ordeal Jamie took the opportunity to do something he had long been dying to do. He went to see the much-hyped Picasso exhibition at the National Gallery. An exercise, you understand, designed entirely to take his mind off the horrors that were unfolding at St Vincent's. It worked a treat and he had a fantastic afternoon perusing the delightful artwork and succeeding entirely in forgetting about the atrocities that his young cousin was being subjected to. Oh the power of the human mind!

When Jamie returned to the bedside of Ben shortly after squeezing in a quick Steak & Cheese Sandwich, he was already sitting up in bed and talking. The operation to remove the angry appendix had been a thorough success. A little lighter and a lot balder, but still the same old Ben!

Gretchen swung by in her sister Sarah's car late in the evening and together with Jamie, did a grando job of attending to the invalid's needs and desires. The nurses were fantastically kind throughout their ordeal and a large slice of gratitude must go out to them for their perseverance and warmth.

'I'm going to miss it here,' Ben said this bright Saturday afternoon having been awarded his freedom, discharge papers and an arsenal of tablets. 'How wonderful everyone

has been...ah dear...anyway, come on then, let's go home.'

In truth, the entire two days were something of a surreal shock to us and we're both just happy and glad that it didn't happen when we were in Patagonia, Antarctica or climbing a pass in the Andes. It was, I suppose, a blessing that it happened when it did and, all jokes aside, a rather nasty experience for Ben and co. Still, it adds to the story, provides yet another meander in the snaking time-line of this expedition and will doubtlessly provide for some rather entertaining bar conversation.

Free Wheels East are now back in Fitzroy in a new secret location near Brunswick Street. We're staying with the charming and beautiful Kelly, another FWE legend who will live and dance forever in our fondest memories. Here, at Kelly's wonderful home, we shall remain until the start of November whereupon we will depart this city/home of ours and relocate to Sydney; the gateway to the beginning of phase 2!

### **WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 11, 2006: FWE ON MYSPACE**

<http://www.myspace.com/freewheelseast>

Make us your friend and enjoy our musical slideshow.

### **SUNDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2006: KELLY JOE**

Oh my. What a phenomenal response to our Sunday Magazine article. Believe it or not freewheelseast.co.uk has had 70,000 hits so far this October. In FWE website history we've had 481,545 hits. We're approaching the half million mark. That's a lot of hits!! And to think, if each one of those people clicked onto a Google link below the sponsors' box on this page we'd probably have more than enough money

to go on....

Although we have such a huge following there is still dismay as the elusive sponsor we so desperately seek fails to materialise. Surely there is someone out there who would love to take advantage of our immense popularity?

Poor old Jamie has been out of action too: his complaint, a viral throat infection, an affliction which totally put out his fires of energy. Us invalids loll around in a drug-pumped stupor scribbling ideas onto note pads getting ready for being well, being ready for action; perhaps that'll be tomorrow?

Over the past week there has been a lot of frustrating sitting around post-Ben's-op and therefore an absence of the usual self-promotional-drive. Book-selling has gone on hold, but thumbs have not twiddled idly; no, this week has not been entirely fruitless, for we have had many a breakthrough in thought.

Back-tracking a little; whilst still at St. Vincent's hospital floating on high doses of Tramadol, the recently-bed-ridden-Ben had an epiphany in his close-to-delirious state. Light bulbs flashed as a fool-proof idea for a future enterprise came to him. The details of his thought are so stupidly clever that we are unfortunately unable to disclose them at this time for fear of someone ripping them off. The next day at visiting time he proclaimed to Jamie as he scratched behind his ear with the end of his black pilot pen "It'll make us 20,000,000 a year by my calculations". Surrounded by flowers and little naughties brought to his bedside by well-wishers Ben looked up from his notepad, smiled and said, "I've really enjoyed being in hospital." It seems illness has done a wonderful job of sloshing FWE with clarity. This

forced break from the high stress of self-promotion and agonising uncertainty has got the pair back to their usual motivation-soaked selves.

It has been a week of rest and thought. Now it is time for action. Armed with a portfolio of our media clippings we will begin the final push to conquer the Pacific Ocean. Turning thoughts into reality will be the order of the week. Watch out! We are full of grit! Watch out, ye wealthy ones. Free Wheels East is a deadly redback about to bite!!

Kelly Joe Phelps

We contacted Kelly Joe's record company with an email. We said 'Free Wheels East does not have a budget for such luxuries as going to watch bands' and requested to be put onto the guest list for Saturday night's gig at the Northcote Social Club. Well, we got on the guestlist, watched and listened first to the haunting melodies of David Ross Macdonald and then to Kelly Joe. The Portland, Oregon musician's music, and I quote here from Kellyjoephelps.com is "smoky, lonesome, painful - yet somehow comforting. It lets you know that you are not alone - even when you're blue". I played his banjo. He hugged us and laughed with us. Kelly filled the little backstage room with presence. The three of us talked of the future and the past. "Mine's on a piece of paper," said Kelly. "It's all bullshit," was our wise conclusion.

### **SUNDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2006: TITAN KNOG GODS**

A positive vein of mental aptitude has been carved open with a surgeon's knife in our Fitzroy home. A gush of crimson activity flows from our fertile minds, passing down phone lines and internet lines in a frenzied blur of action.

Pens & paper, ideas jotted on jotter pads; that pencil smell reminding me of school. It would seem now that all feelings of mud-stuckness have been washed clean away, an essence of condensed positivity remaining. We are the simmering sauce on the hob that has reduced to a low-boil of concentrated motivation.

From the Might of Rohloff, the Titans of Schwalbe and the Kings of Knog to the Gods of Goorin and Steve from Uni-Bicycles we have been gifted with the desire to continue, the means to continue, the will to continue.

In the back room work-shop of Uni-Bicycles, Steve has for a week slaved under yellow lamps over our precious black bikes until it became light outside. Hour after hour, hunched over double-butt metal, he's painstakingly taken on the challenge of returning the steeds to their former glory... perhaps better. A fresh oil change, new rear sprockets, new chains, cleaned and oiled cassettes, new cables, new mud guards, cable-ties, kick stands, bar-ends, tyres...the list is as expansive as is our immense gratitude for Steve and his skills.

So the bikes are done now but what of the remaining items on our four-pronged list of 'Objectives'? Well, our remaining energies, time and resources this week, have been poured into 'Shipping' and 'Sponsorship'.

Ships of any description, be it multi-purpose, cargo or freight, these days are an irksome nightmare to broach; that much, you may recall, we discovered during our Singapore adventure and at times we are made to feel like a ship without a rudder bobbing about in the ocean without a captain at the helm. Insurance reasons are the most commonly mooted



cause for anxiety over our inclusion on the ship's crew listings while some, like Gabbi at CMA-CGM, just say "two words mate...no way!" And yet, while waiting for something to break at the bottom of this dry dock of investigation, there is hope to be found: how about, for example, crewing on a yacht! A common route across the Pacific would take us from Australia to New Zealand, on to Fiji, through French Polynesia to the Galapagos Islands, to Panama from where we could transfer to another vessel and continue on to Southern Argentina. Or, what about this; a luxury cruise. A sponsored voyage of several months at sea that would take us via Japan, Hawaii and San Francisco, before plunging South to the Cape...all realistic we find, at least in our minds and all to be fully explored in due time.

Our battle with financial matters continues but in recent days even this has been reduced. At long last we have struck a wee pot of gold. Stomp Fashion, suppliers of 'Goorin', a hat brand of highly-esteemed repute, have not only given us \$1000 towards our continuation but also afforded us 18 assorted hats of varying design. We are thrilled with the advance and eager now for this rich run to continue.

We understand that in the past few months it may have been easy to lose sight of what FWE is all about...i.e. cycling around the world and that I find perfectly understandable. At times it is easy even for ourselves to get consumed by what we are doing right now, for the work we are embedded in to stop our heads and cause us to neglect the true spirit of what it was we set out to achieve in the first place, and yes, perhaps for a while we were guilty of this. We always knew that our stay in Australia would be like this, however; never for an instant did we let ourselves believe that it would be anything less than hard work. We always intended

to earn money here, to plan for South America, to prepare for the challenges of the second year. It was always part of the plan, and without the kindness of the people we have surrounded ourselves with, it wouldn't have been possible and we wouldn't be in the position that we are in now, to be looking forwards into the bright new light of promise.

Cycling our bikes along the spine of the Andes, crossing the Atacama desert, passing through Columbia and central America...this is what our dreams are now filled with, this is what has loomed on the horizon and all of a sudden has presented itself as a very realistic and exciting immediate future.

#### **SUNDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2006: FROM THE FWE OFFICE**

Keep checking for our latest news, it's on the way. For the time being...

#### **A Poem**

Dear Mr. Branson,  
Dear Mr. Gore,  
Little scraps of paper on desk,  
On floor.  
Numbers, places, names, dates,  
All scribbled and smudged,  
In a blue black,  
Mudge.  
Upside down, on the wonk,  
Addresses and numbers  
We plonk.

Dirty mugs, cold half-drunk tea,  
Breakfast crumbs, CDs, DVDs;

Memory sticks and cardboard cups,  
Snack packs,  
And stacks,  
Of colourful,  
Hats.

Tap-tap-tap,  
Fingers fly over keys,  
A pause for thought,  
with jerking knee;  
Countless words punched out and sent,  
To Rod, to Jane,  
Freddie and Kent...

With eyes a'bulge, streaked with red,  
Pulsing vein snaked  
Forehead,  
We wait for that call to say,  
It's alright boys,  
You're on your way!

### **In other news**

View our Frankie article online..

[http://www.frankie.com.au/cms/index.php?option=com\\_wrapper&Itemid=39](http://www.frankie.com.au/cms/index.php?option=com_wrapper&Itemid=39)

Don't forget to befriend us at <http://www.myspace.com/freewheelseast>

### **SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 05, 2006: DANGER**

This is a FWE warning: There could be some highly important, mind-bogglingly exciting pieces of news coming

to your screen before this week is out. There is a risk to your physical well-being in that our news -if positively confirmed- has the potential to be so thrilling that your heart could well conk out.

We are waiting to hear back from a handful of people who have an enormous power, the ability to change the course of Free Wheels East forever by either saying "yes", or "no". Let us hope for the former.... I would love to be more explicit here but we have learnt -through the writing of these updates- that it is wrong to raise the hopes of a FWE follower. Why say anything when nothing is confirmed?

For now we will have to leave you on tenterhooks, waiting in eager anticipation with us. I hope to publish some good news soon.

### **Derby Day snaps**

Go to our Myspace <http://www.myspace.com/freewheelseast> to see us at Melbourne Derby Day playing VIPs Teggelford Crump of the Wild West and Lionel Katz billionaire oil tycoon.

### **More World Cyclists**

For some amazing images of the world by bike have a look at this website <http://www.cyclingaroundtheworld.nl/>

### **SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2006: SHANE MILK**

Following our last update entitled 'Danger' there has been a huge increase in FWE hits; this is probably because we left

you dangling, poised to receive news that could change this expedition's future forever. We said that we should know 'before the week is out'. Well the week is out and we still don't know....

You may well wonder how we have spent our time between the 'Danger' update and today? Well, last weekend was an exciting one. We got dressed up in smart clobber and went to The Races, to Derby Day as guests of Lavazza coffee. Accompanied by our Stomp Fashion sponsor, Anna Kirby, we had exclusive tickets to The Birdcage, a cordoned-off area for the rich and famous. Our tickets got us free expensive Italian champagne and nibbles, our picture taken for Vogue -look out for it- and many important conversations with the rich and famous. We shared our time there with AFL superstars, billionaires and even the man who likes to flash his private parts in the well-known show 'Puppetry of the Penis'. Yes, we handed out many books and received many business cards in return. See our Myspace ([www.myspace.com/freewheelseast](http://www.myspace.com/freewheelseast)) and the link below for photographs.

Our week began with a road-trip to Sydney to see the mighty Pearl Jam. We'd decided to hitchhike there and made our way to Upfield by train to get as close as we could to the Hume Highway, the main road to Sydney and starting block of trucks embarking on the 800 and something km drive.

For the first few hours we stood at the side of the road with our thumbs out.

Nobody stopped. Perhaps they could not read the word "SYDNEY" scrawled in red marker pen onto an old piece of cardboard box held aloft. We were getting nowhere like that so we tried a new line of attack, an old hitchhiking trick

perfected by Old Clanky himself, which involves rolling up trousers and kneeling on shoes to con the on-coming traffic into believing we have shorter, half-size, dwarf-like legs.

Our ploy only made drivers laugh. They did not stop, but at least we were bringing a few smiles to a few strangers. Some drivers still ignored us, stony-faced.

Occasionally, truck drivers did not laugh or ignore, rather they pointed forward down the road and mouthed some words. We wondered if this was a secret sign, but after the seventh truck driver did it we guessed that they meant we were in the wrong place to try to thumb a lift and should move further up the road. But to what? The road was industrial, long and straight. We could not see the point in leaving our layby next to the lights. In desperation we walked with backpacks to the traffic in the direction the truckies pointed.

About 2 miles down the road we came to a service station called 'Truck world'. "That's what they mean!" said Jamie triumphantly. But alas the service station was quiet and we were told that "hitching's not allowed here" by a sullen garage worker. "Try the B.P.," said a trucky who'd overheard. Off we went again. This process of garage-hopping continued. We walked from Truck World to B.P and then a similar tip-off saw us walking in the baking sun to another garage. Flies descended on us to drink our sweat. We were getting a bit put out. The flies were beginning to irritate.

One trucky-sized roast lunch later and only another couple of miles down the road we found our last option, a Shell garage. Asking truckies for lifts at the petrol pumps as they filled up with diesel had worked pretty well in Fremantle. Now, quite a few months on, we tried again.

It was the second trucky we'd asked. His name was Shane, a huge man with a grey beard like that of an unkempt Mormon. He had three brown teeth. One on the top, two on the bottom. "I'll give you C#\*ts a ride to Sydney" he said, shaking our hands vigorously. It had taken us five hours to get our lift.

Shane was transporting 60 tons of long-life milk in his 25-metre-long road-train. He already had another passenger, his daughter's boyfriend, 17 year old, Bo, a young, trucky in the making.

We hopped up into the bed behind the wheel and squished ourselves into a very uncomfortable position, one which would not change much for 10 hours. "Keep ya heads daan" said Shane "They'll knock me for 5000 bucks if ya don't," he said laughing. It is illegal for truckies to pick up hitch-hikers.

We got talking with Shane and it came to pass that he knew Tricky -the devil himself- who brought us from Fremantle to Melbourne. "Yeah, I know Tricky," said Shane. "That c\*\*t saved me life. Had a front tyre blow out on me, truck went over, started burnin' up, I was trapped, gettin' burnt. Tricky was the first on the scene, pulled me out'a the flames." How about that? Of all the Truckies there are out there, probably tens of thousands, we travel with two that would've been one if it wasn't for the other.

Shane, like Tricky was in a bad way. He'd stopped taking speed because it, as he cheerfully put it, "Won't do me leukaemia any good, or me diabetes. Doc said I won't last long, but... I'm on the mend." We arrived in Sydney at 3:00 in the morning having slept only for a few hours in our sleeping bags on top of the long-life milk in the back trailer.

Gretchen's friend Maryka put us up in a suburb called Strathfield; Pearl Jam executed the single best live music experience of our lives; We met a channel 9 girl called Lauren who might want to join us in South America, perhaps to make a documentary on us and her.

Now we are back in Melbourne, preparing for the big week ahead. I hope for all our sakes that we will be able to have a celebration soon.

It'll cost you to get hold of an exclusive picture of FWE inside the birdcage...

Have a look at this and look out for 'Ben Wylson and Jamie Mackenzie - British cyclists':

<http://www.wireimage.com/GalleryListing.asp?navtyp=GLS====243555&qckv=y&NBC1=1>

New Front Page Design

Thanks to Guy Campbell.

Thursday, November 16, 2006: Other Sites feature added Underneath the sponsors box -on the left of this page- peruse the latest FWE feature, our 'Other Sites' section which includes the 'Climate Crisis' website and the sites of some friends and heroes of ours who are great contemporary adventurers.

**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2006: INTENSE TWILIGHT SHIP**

We had a ship to Chile! We celebrated! We waited for confirmation of dates for a week! Then without any warning

the ship was lost (I don't mean it sank). How? Because the man who had offered it to us had no idea that we would need to be travelling across the ocean with our bikes. We have a fall-back option which we are waiting on, (plan B), but it certainly doesn't look like we will be escaping our limbo, twilight zone Melbourne enclosure for a while... or does it? We all know that feeling of not knowing how the future will pan out. Here, at our office / bedroom on Westgarth Street, Fitzroy the intensity of not knowing is astonishing. We could be here for another month. Then again, there is a chance that we might get over to New Zealand for Christmas.

I won't even go into our sponsorship hunt now. Let us just say that there is a very promising lead, and not get anyone's hopes up.

One last thing: Meetings are being held with a producer based at a major Australian television channel regarding FWE. It would be a documentary within a documentary, an addition to our own film in which the viewer would have the unprecedented luxury of seeing both of us in-shot at the same time. If this goes ahead they will record on film part of the pending South American leg. So, there is a chance that our team may well swell to exceed two again; except this time it is not Old Clanky who will join us...

#### **FRIDAY, DECEMBER 01, 2006: EQUIPMENT SPONSORS! NIKE ACG**

Our clothes were worn, ripped and stained. I did not have a pair of socks without holes in both heel and toe -I will not go into the state of my underwear. With the exception of the 18 Goorin hats supplied by Stomp Fashion and my Dita

sunglasses -also supplied by Stomp- I was something of a vagabond, wearing clothes that over time have been crisped by sun and reduced to mould by monsoon. None of my dear old garments smelt pleasant and all were a long, long way off presentable. Jamie's wardrobe was in a similar state, until... Nike ACG (All Conditions Gear) decided to sponsor us cousins with over \$4000 worth of extreme-weather clothing. They gave us shoes, socks, jackets, t-shirts and trousers... My only complaint is that they failed to provide new underwear! Nevertheless, we have avalanche protection built into our jackets (sensors sewn into the garments making you locatable in the event of an avalanche or landslide) and, everything is Gortex. Our new kit is very well designed and subtle; no grotesque logos plastered anywhere. They are going for the North Face / Helly Hansen market I think. But here's the best bit -a total surprise I must say- Nike ACG actually consider the environment when manufacturing their gear! They use organic and recycled fabrics and have cut their emissions by a staggering 16%. Well done Nike!

#### **Other news in brief**

1. There are various other massive sponsorship deals in the pipe-line.
2. We are hoping to board a ship to Antarctica from Adelaide in the next few weeks but once again we are practising the art of not getting carried away with mere possibilities.
3. More meetings are being held with producers regarding the filming of the FWE second leg.

More on all this soon.

## **TUESDAY, DECEMBER 05, 2006: MACKENZIE & WYLSON OF THE ANTARCTIC**

Around 200 million years ago Australia was joined at the hip to Antarctica and getting there then, would surely not have posed too many problems; one could merely stroll onto it, supposedly. Now, of course, it's sauntered off a few thousand kilometres south and becomes the most isolated continent and a rather tricky place to get to.

They say that Antarctica is the most beautiful place on earth; they say that visiting it is like going to a different planet; they say that people in Antarctica often talk about 'when I return to the world...' On Monday, 11th December, 'Free Wheels East' will set sail aboard the 'Sarsen' on a 26-day expedition down through the Pacific and Southern Oceans to visit this remote, isolated place...to visit Antarctica.

20 months since we wheeled our bikes out the door of Brook cottage, seven months after arriving in Australia, it's the news we have been waiting to put in to print for such an agonisingly long time.

From sunny Adelaide we'll travel to Hobart, Tasmania before pushing on towards Macquarie Island -home to 100,000 seals and four million penguins- and from there on south to Commonwealth Bay, East Antarctica; 'Home of the Blizzard' and reputedly one of the windiest places on earth.

There's no masking the fact that we are thoroughly bloody chuffed and darned excited at the prospect of being in Antarctica for Christmas and the New Year and already the vocals are being charged and primed for hearty, rum-fuelled renditions of 'Silent Night' and 'Away In A Manger'. It will be a white Christmas this year, folks.

## **The Sarsen**

The 'Sarsen' was built in 1970 as an Atlantic Research Vessel, was refurbished in 1986 and most recently in 2006. She's a 63.95 metre-long ship with a gross tonnage of 1,658 and is now an 'intimate charter vessel' with an ice-strengthened hull that sails to some of the most unique, exotic and fascinating destinations around the world.

For more information on the Sarsen visit [www.sarsen.com.au](http://www.sarsen.com.au) and visit <http://www.icetrek.com/index.php?id=66> for our itinerary.

## **THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2006: SARSEN: THE JEWEL OF THE SEA**

We said a fond farewell to Fitzroy early last Saturday morning and cycled through the early morning Melbourne heat and traffic to Southern Cross Station. We passed Idibidi and the bench on Brunswick St where the toothless Jimmy and his dog Hercules were already up, staggering and floundering in the wind, being blown about on the pavement like plastic bags. Dustcarts crawled down the otherwise deserted road on either side of the street with their alien tentacles reaching out, swiping bins and swallowing the contents whole. Up past 'The Bar With No Name', over Johnson Street and through the city we went.

Journeying north west to Adelaide, we stole our way slowly for 12 hours on the 'Overland' train, through burning tinder-dry bush and scrub, on and on past Lawson Hills and Leunig Creek. At intervals we'd eagerly wrap famished mouths around scalding 'Mrs Macs' pies and swill gobsful of fizzy drinks through quivering lips. Several movies were shown but they were largely forgettable and sleep was the

order of the trip; heads bobbed and banged, necks cracked and twisted. Blinking like a blind melon, we stumbled from the dingy silver tube to see Caroline & Commander Waller waiting on the platform fringes. They were our greeting party and were due to take us for a sumptuous feast at a local eatery; however, aside from our being thoroughly choked to the gunwales with chilli-dogs and burgers, the time was getting late and we didn't want to be caught outside in this new land at witching hour.

We made strict arrangements to meet the following afternoon when time was at less of a premium, bade farewell to Caroline & the Commander and made our way north towards 'Outward Harbour' in search of Osborne Wharf where the good ship 'Sarsen' was moored. It was dark by the time we reached the docks and fingering our way through the gloom was a trifle tricky. We weren't prepared for such circumstances and really didn't have a clue where we were or where we were going. Ben stuck his arm out and flagged down several vertically challenged, extremely gormless passers-by to aid us with directions and thus, via various forms of grunting and snorting, we settled upon a route and off we trustingly trundled on the indicated bearing. After cycling for a full half-hour through the docks and burrows, where the locals presumably dwelled, in a complete circle, we eventually emerged at a crossroads. Left and right were lit by freshly-laid lamp posts but dead ahead was as dark as the black hole of Calcutta. For a moment, as we stood and scanned the area for further clues as to the whereabouts of the 1,500 ton obelisk of a ship, we cursed our luck and thought we'd never arrive that evening. In the end we decided straight over was the best bet and after a kilometre's ride we came to a slow-moving river and there, as we looked along its banks, about 1/2 km up on the near bank, we could make out

the glow of lights from the bridge of a pretty big object. The road was potted and gravelly and biking in the dark was a hazardous process, yet we still made it without incident and there in front of us, at long last, were the huge bulkheads of our latest ship...the Sarsen.

It looked deserted, like a ghost ship. There was no one about and not a sound broke the air. It was really quite eerie. Jamie propped his bike up and walked up the gangway onto the deck. Moments later an Asian girl came out to see what the calling and yooooo-whooing was about. It transpired that all the officers and large parts of the crew were in town at an Elton John concert.

The granite-floored corridors of the wood-panelled interiors plunged down several decks and on the bottom level, in the bowels of the vessel, we found our quarters. We are sharing a smallish cabin that comes as standard with a couple of bunks, a table, cupboard, sink area, a bench along the back wall, a small porthole and several chairs.

Most of the crew are from Thailand, 22 in all, and we share our portion of the ship with them. The officers are largely from Russian states and a few are from Australia. The captain, Alex, is a jovial fellow and all beneath him seem equally friendly.

We set sail on Sunday afternoon with a modest fanfare of well wishers and guests and slipped out of Adelaide to begin the trip south to Tasmania.

Later that night, around 2am, we hit the Bass Strait and my, how the wind did blow and the waves did crash! The forceful swell pounded the ship broadside with bubbling white-water

and high-rollers as we ploughed a stubborn line across the current. Our porthole, although several metres above the water line, was at times thrown entirely beneath the seas as we rolled almost 45 degrees on to our side. Throughout the ship there were bangs, wallops and smashing sounds resonating about the halls and corridors. The engines were slowed to a trot and after being blown slightly off course, we already found ourselves a day behind schedule.

Over the next few days the swell backed off and although we continued to move about, it wasn't with the same violence and we were even able to fill the swimming pool up on deck with sea water.

Life aboard ship is now quickly settling into a routine. We offer our assistance with whatever we might be able to do to help Fred & Leanne, but are always told to 'relax and enjoy the ride'. We sit on deck, read our books, listen to music and at various intervals go back to bed for 2nd, 3rd and often even 4th sleeps! Breakfast at 7am, lunch at 12pm and supper at 6pm. It's spicy Thai food morning, noon and night and we wouldn't have it any other way.

We arrived this morning in Hobart and are already feeling the effects of Land sickness. The world seems to be moving in unpredictable ways and we constantly find ourselves tripping over each other and banging into things. Here we shall stay for several days, then on Saturday afternoon continue south to Macquarie Island.

This life-at-sea malarky really is all splendid fun, don't you know, and it's jewels like this that really make FWE worth fighting for...some things are just meant to be! But, for now, it's time to pluck the Christmas penguin -we've called it

Pingo- and prepare it for a basting and slow roasting.

Thank you, Fred & Chelsea, thank you, Leanne and everyone else aboard the ship...where would we be without you!

### **SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2006: HAPPY CHRISTMAS FROM THE ICEBERGS!**

A humpback whale just broke the surface of the water with its barnacled back and blew air in a steamy plume high into the morning. I can hear ice bouncing, scraping and clonking its way along the length of the hull. These chunks of ice which brush the ship are known as 'growlers' by those crew with experience of sailing in arctic seas.

We are cruising through an ice field. There is a 60-metre wall of ice on our port beam which stretches in both directions as far as the eye can see. This is not the mainland but an iceberg. Around this temporary island smaller bergs float. Fog envelops us, but on occasion the sun breaks through creating small pockets of brilliant white. Where the ice meets the sea there is a sliver of blue as though an artist has taken a brush dipped in clear summer skies and swished it across the waterline. The iceberg we are sailing parallel to is over 80 miles long, ten miles wide and 500 metres of it extends below the surface. The sea is a sloppy soup, full of fragments of ice like desiccated coconut. In places the ice has formed a blemishless, oil-slick-like membrane over the surface of the water.

Today is the day before Christmas Eve. This is the way Christmas is supposed to feel - cold and white, with warm edges. For a moment I thought I could hear the beautifully melancholy notes of 'In the bleak midwinter' sung with high, resounding melody, sailing toward our ears from King's



College Cambridge, England. It is quite a contrast to last year's Christmas when we sat on a tropical beach in Koh Tao, Thailand, drinking mango shakes in the shade of palm trees.

For all those who are attempting to contact us via e-mail, we are unable to access our FWE account on this irridian satellite system. We are sending our updates to members of the family who publish them for us. We will be dealing with the backlog when we return.

And finally... If you are an Australian, go and buy Harper's Bazaar. You will see a photograph of Ben and Anna amongst the rich and famous. We have also been photographed for Vogue. I'm not sure whether that is out now or out soon?

: Macquarie Island: home of nine million wings

At 6pm in the evening of Saturday 16th December we cast off our lines and set sail from Hobart, bearing south-east 1500 km, closing daily on latitude 55 degrees south. The weather was fair but the swell from the west was relentless and progress, slow. The temperature fell almost visibly as we parted the Southern Ocean at a steady 10 knots. Grey skies, grey seas; where did the one begin and the other end?

Wednesday morning and the call went up about the ship's decks and cabins: land had been sighted off the starboard bow. Bleak, barren and isolated, a solo entity of newly-formed rock, a lonely scrap of land amid millions of square kilometres of ocean; the one, the only, Macquarie Island. At 34 km long with a maximum altitude of 433 metres, it's a pimple on the face of an underwater platform 10 km wide and 100s of kms long. Only 700,000 years old, it's practically brand-new... blink and you'd have missed it coming. Macquarie Island, a World Heritage Site since the

1997 listings and the premier location on earth for viewing the Penguin. Macquarie Island, 'home of nine million wings'.

The higher reaches of land were draped in cloud and mist like the cloth on a table. Steep green and brown mountain sides descending with haste to the beaches of black sand and rock below. The twin anchors were dropped half a km beyond the breakwater in Buckles Bay and a landing party headed by Chief Officer Guy Manthorpe went ashore in the orange tender to collect the island's resident ranger who occupied one of the handful of ANARE scientific research huts on the isthmus.

Back up on the crowded Bridge, an hour later, we set about quizzing the bearded ranger about the island's surrounding marine life. 'So Hugh, tell us about the cetaceans that we're likely to see in these waters,' said Ben with his concentrating face on. 'Well, just several days ago we were treated to a feeding frenzy about one km offshore by several killer whales... if you're lucky you might even see some today.' The words had barely even escaped the hairy-framed lips before we grabbed a pair of the captain's binoculars and scurried off to the freshly-corked viewing deck. Scanning the area off the port side, we swept the 'nocs' back and forth across the water, pulling our gaze over the sea, searching, searching. Only three minutes passed before... 'There... over there...' said Jamie with shrill excitement. Ben followed his gaze and finger. 'I swear it, by Jove... what else has a slender black dorsal fin a metre high?' Jamie insisted as nothing appeared for several more minutes. Then, about 300 metres off the stern, not one but three fins slowly appeared, effortlessly breaching the surface like stealthy periscopes. 'Oh my goodness gracious me, do my eyes deceive me! Jamie, you're right... three *Orcinus orca*, a mother and two

calves if I'm not very much mistaken - splendid!' We stood in amazement, hardly believing what we were seeing; killer whales in the wild. Orang-utans in the Sumatran jungle were one thing but this, well...this really was something else altogether. So humbling, so emotional. We watched them all the way as they moved gracefully out of sight.

Macquarie Island has an annual average rainfall of over 900 mm that falls on more than 300 days of the year. December alone harvests from the leaden skies a whopping 77 mm of moisture from 24 days of the month. What, I therefore ask you, were the chances of us having a day that was entirely bereft of a single drop? Yet that's exactly what we got and as we moved down the coast, putting along at an even 8 knots, the sun came out, the mist vanished and the island was bathed in a halo of gold. We laid-to in Sandy Bay, completely unprepared for what we were about to see...

Once again Guy was at the helm of the Zodiac tender, grim-faced with tiller in hand, speeding us over the water towards the landing zone. Fred, Leanne and a number of the other guests that included the much-lauded and respected polar explorer Eric Phillips were already ashore. Their alien forms decked in padded clothing of thermal quality could be seen marching along the beach amidst a sea of black and white objects. We rounded a headland, kelp-covered jagged rock slipping in and out of the water as the swell eased over the top, rising and falling as one sludgy mass. As we drew closer the black and white shapes on the beach took form; penguins, hundreds of thousands of penguins.

For an hour we strolled amongst the unparalleled collection of King and Royal penguins. Untainted with a fear of humans, they waddle at one's feet, scratching, stretching, preening,

even sleeping. Indeed, if you were to sit beside a cluster, they would approach to investigate. Their pristine orange & yellow decals beautiful and pure, eyes dark, peaceful and observing. It was a BBC wildlife programme and we were in the thick of it!

Monstrous dark shapes like slugs that had taken growth hormones festooned the water's edge. Belching, farting, bulbous bags of stinking blubber and wind: the Southern elephant seal. Imagine you're the size of a pea and being thrown into a bag of putrefying Jelly Babies... look around and be amazed, that's exactly what it was like walking amongst these beasts of extreme burden.

Silently we sauntered, eyeing the wildlife, recording it, storing the sights, smells and sounds, making damn sure that not a single iota escaped our attention. Absolute amazement, complete immersion, utter fascination and total appreciation. It was the day of days.

As I sit here now, several days on in the crew's mess looking out the porthole above my head, I can see a light-mantled sooty albatross skimming the waves; wingtips inches above the swirling ice-cold waters. The ship is pitching a constant 30 degrees; our heading is 177 degrees south, destination Balleny Islands. Visibility is down to 100 metres and there are icebergs and rogue ice sheets patrolling the area. We've just passed the convergence and blue whales are reported to be in the area. It's two days before Christmas and the forecast is snow.

### **3RD ENTRY - 28TH DECEMBER 2006: SWIMMING AT MINUS 1**

The French scientists turned out not to be French, or

scientists at all, but Australians, five of them -not four!- all decent fellows and welcome fresh company. They had been working for the Australian government on the restoration of the nearly 100-year-old huts at Cape Denison. There is talk of landing again at the French base for east Antarctica, but it looks like they are going to deny us a landing... The Emperor Penguins have moved on, so there is no chance of seeing them. We could be leaving for Tasmania tonight...

One of the guys on board is a freelance journalist. He may be selling a picture of us on the ice with our bikes to the major Australian papers with our story... It could be out this weekend, or perhaps sooner.

Wait a minute, just got the call from Jamie for a swim in the sea... but it's snowing outside!

HOLY COW!! I'm back! I'm alive!! There were defibrillators handy, life rings, people waiting to haul us out should anything go wrong. It costs \$200,000 a head to call out the emergency services. Last year a 45 year old man died with the shock of the cold after jumping in.

Jamie went first, a confident jump. We'd already watched three go... I was getting nervous. Their faces -Jamie's included- showed expressions of sheer pain upon surfacing. As heads re-broke the surface I can only describe their faces as panic- stricken. Before I'd had a chance to ask my shocked-looking cousin how it was, he was off to the pool to warm up in warmer water. It was my turn! It all happened so quickly... I stood there on the wooden platform above the habitat of the deadly Leopard Seal, the southern ocean slopping beneath me. Fresh water freezes at 0 degrees, salt water freezes at minus 2 degrees. This

water was minus 1, so cold that my heart could easily have stopped. I screamed “\*&\$\*\*\*\*\*%#%INGGGG HELLLLLLLL”, at the same time jumping for the water. I don't remember exactly what it was like, must've been in shock. I think it was painful. I was underwater looking up at the people on the wooden platform. I could see everyone looking down at me, I could see the icebergs! The water was crystal clear... Then I felt an upward lift. Thai hands gripped me, lifted me to the surface and I slid onto the wooden dive platform. I got up quickly and ran, hollering with exhilaration, gasping at the icy air to the pool where there was a congregation of elated swimmers. Next stop sauna! We've done it, swum in Antarctic waters in the presence of icebergs.

#### **4TH ENTRY: 29TH DECEMBER 2006 - HOMEWARD BOUND**

We could be in Hobart on the 3rd of Jan, or maybe even a day earlier. We are already on our way home! Should the weather hold and we survive the ferocious 50's and roaring 40's a second time I estimate we'll be in Melbourne selling more books in 6 days' time.

#### **2ND ENTRY: 28TH DECEMBER 2006 - RIDING ON ICE**

We've done it, we are the first cousins to ride bikes in Antarctica and almost certainly the first round-the-world cyclists to have cycled in East Antarctica, perhaps even the first to ride on the continent. Speaking of continents, we have clocked up our fourth, there are only three to go. We have broken the back of Free Wheels East! It's all downhill from here. You should've seen it! I had to use my bell when inquisitive Adelie Penguins ran into my path. The weather was perfect and cycling wasn't too difficult, a bit like riding on crusty sand. Neither of us fell off and we even managed a bit of a down hill ride. It was so cold! I don't think it has really sunk in yet: we have been to Antarctica and ridden in

the footsteps of great explorers. It is truly one of the most marvellous things that has ever happened to us.

Friday, December 29, 2006: The Antarctic Diary

### **1ST ENTRY: 26TH DECEMBER 2006 - IN COMMONWEALTH BAY**

We have arrived at Cape Denison, East Antarctica, site of Mawson's historic huts and, 'home of the blizzard', officially the windiest place on earth. Today the wind was a katabatic, force 10, and howling down off the Antarctic plateau into Commonwealth Bay where Sarsen lies at anchor bobbing in a micro-storm of mini-giant waves and white-horses. There is a wooden cross on a grey, rock-strewn hill, a memorial to the men under Mawson's command who didn't make it home. The sun has been shining today and the skies are crystal clear. It will stay like this all night because it literally does not get dark. I went to bed at 1:00am and it was just as light then as it is now (4 o'clock in the afternoon). To starboard there are gargantuan snow cliffs. If you take a walk on the top-deck - the un-sheltered, windward deck - it is so cold that before long you can't feel your face at all and after a couple of minutes, numb lips prevent you from speaking properly, making you sound like a deaf man talking. Thankfully the winds have abated and we are waiting for a call from the second officer to lift our bikes aboard the launch to go ashore. We have successfully collected four stranded French scientists who are on board now. I've not met them yet. The men have been waiting to be collected from the ice for some time now after a fire started on board a ship which had been sent to pick them up, forcing the French to abort the mission. The relief ship limped back to Hobart leaving the scientists to endure more loneliness and extreme cold than they had bargained for. Sarsen came to the rescue.







Jamie just came into the mess and said, "We're not going ashore tonight, the wind has got up again; it's too strong for the tender." There is always tomorrow. Something to look forward to... although sometimes we worry that we will not make it ashore at all. It is gale force on five out of seven days here. When ashore, we have been told that on windy days it is impossible to walk around, you have to drag yourself on your belly with ice axes. Tomorrow will be our last chance... We simply must ride our bikes in Antarctica!

#### **THURSDAY, JANUARY 11, 2007: THE BOYS ARE BACK IN TOWN**

I am typing this from an office somewhere in Melbourne.

##### **News In Brief:**

Sarsen pulled into Hobart on Thursday the 3rd of January. We were able to get straight onto a bus, which took us to Devonport -on the north Tasmanian coast- where we boarded the trans-Bass-Straight Ferry 'The Spirit of Tasmania' and travelled over-night to Melbourne. And so, that morning, we cycled into the still of the dawn, back onto the streets we've come to know so well.

Currently we are back on our beloved bench, Brunswick Street, selling a new publication - "Free Wheels East On Ice". It summarises our Antarctica adventure. This limited edition latest- from 'FWE publications'- is only available on the streets.

When we got 'back to the world' we discovered that every major paper in Australia had published a story on our Antarctic achievement with a photo, which should be uploaded onto [freewheelseast.co.uk](http://freewheelseast.co.uk) soon, along with more

marvellous images of FWE On Ice.

If you wish to have a read of our Sydney 'Daily Telegraph' article - "Cycling duo complete Antarctic ride" - check out the following link:

<http://www.news.com.au/dailytelegraph/story/0,22049,20986500-5006506,00.html>

May the quest for Sponsorship and a ship to the Americas continue! 4 Continents down, three to go...

**WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 24, 2007: OLD MAN GUBB TO MARRY 'MOST GORGEOUS GIRL IN THE WHOLE WORLD'**  
'Obviously I'm delighted...she's the girl of my dreams,' smiled the beardy Ben Gubb while stroking the wisps on his chin and grinning. 'Every day I wake up and see her angelic face and a million fireworks explode in my heart...sometimes I reckon she's the most gorgeous girl in the whole world!' These were the words of Old Man Gubb, chum of FWE and long time university pal of Jamie, when quizzed over his decision to ask Vic to marry him.

'Yeah, he's just such a spunk and has a whopping big heart to boot...I thought I'd better say yes before he asked someone else, hahaha,' laughed the Brisbane-born girl. Congratulations to the wonderful couple, may they live long and prosper...all hail the Gubbs.

#### **THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 01, 2007: FWE TO SAIL ACROSS THE PACIFIC**

**FINALLY** we triumph! Continent number 5 is but a Greyhound bus ride to Townsville and a 35- day voyage to Iquique, Chile on the APC ship BBC Ecuador away. There was a hush

at FWE headquarters as we waited with baited breath for confirmation from the ship's owners of our passage East. At present we have no idea what cargo the ship takes, how large it is or what facilities there are aboard to relieve that claustrophobic insanity which always kicks in -we know from experience- after twenty-one and three quarter days at sea.

For thirty five days aboard the BBC Ecuador we will be at the mercy of the Pacific Ocean! Lord help us! Oh, but won't it be magical?!

Selling 8,000 books in Melbourne, speaking to an estimated 80,000 people personally has paid off (that's assuming that 1 in 10 people we speak to make a purchase). If you or your friends want to undertake such an adventure and go to every continent without using an aeroplane, I'm afraid you would probably have to talk to 80,000 people too. Imagine saying exactly the same thing, telling the same story to 80,000 people, each and every one of them asking similar, and more often than not, the same questions. Imagine all the jokes we've endured! Here are some examples: "So, do you ride across the water?", "Do you ride on the ships then?" "Where's ya scuba gear?" etc. Our reward is the inexorable continuation of FWE.

It was the kind words of thousands, encouragement beyond belief and the daily ego massages which gave us the motivation to get up in the morning, to believe in ourselves enough not to fly home to England and throw in the towel. I'm sure my hair is thinner and let's not forget that at one point I lost my appendix to the knife. It is more than likely that that infection was brought on by the stress of this uncertainty-packed stint of ours in Australia. Perhaps if we had been

in any other country it would have all got too much and we might have actually given up. But this is Australia! It is FULL of good people who want nothing more than to help two Pommy strangers hanging out next to a bench in Brunswick Street only a step away from the cider-swilling bums who prop themselves up on walls adorned with graffiti.

At first many called us an inspiration, most gave words of support from the day we arrived to the present day; but there was one torture for us, and that was when a minority of the public began saying, "Aren't you gone yet?", "You guys are STILL here!", "I don't believe you for a second! You just want to stay in Melbourne", "Some of us have to work", "Why don't you get a job?", "Enjoy your holiday", "Don't believe these scammers" and so on. There was a brief respite from this minor loss of public faith after we got back from Antarctica and began telling that story, but in the last few weeks while we waited to get final confirmation of our ship we had hearts in our boots as we cycled up to the bench.

Now it is all over! We have been rewarded for our 10-month struggle for continuation. Thank you, thank you, thank you all those who believed in us, read our little book, communicated with us either to offer advice, gratitude or financial contributions. Since we first added our 'to help us continue East' button we have had ten donations from New Zealand, England, Canada and Australia. Thank you: Bridget Brown, Alex Naesmyth, Abby Macaskill, Zena Draz, Olivia Graham, Debby Keast, Kathryn Johnstone, Ian Coristine and Richard White.

Without these people and those who bought our publications this expedition would certainly have failed. Yet now we are



about to journey in the right direction, East as it should be. But there are more to thank! What about the people with whom we have stayed at no charge for long periods of time here in Melbourne? What about Jacqueline Donchi and Kim from FAT and Gretchen and Sarah and of course, who could ever forget the Adams family who took us in as though we were their brothers / children> I am indebted to Kimba for giving me the love I needed to keep my sanity and we are both indebted to all those at the Queens Parade flat, Julia, Bryn and Courtney. It is so sad that we are leaving them, however wonderful our imminent departure may be. The relationships we have forged with these people will be with us forever and that is far from a sad thought.

### The Big Day Out

We managed, through Kimba to get back-stage tickets to The Big Day Out, a festival held here in Melbourne. It began when I went out for a meal with Kimba -who is in a band called "We Came Here to Wreck Everything"- and her promoter. She was recently commissioned to work on her first record, an e.p.

Her promoter -the Australian Promoter of the year- and the Hip-Hop legend, Lupe Fiasco, plus his two D.Js joined us. All of them were behind Free Wheels East. I learnt a lot about Lupe Fiasco that night. He is a martial arts master and is not afraid to dance around a table in the middle of a restaurant telling his animated stories. I liked the man and his entourage, they were good sorts who offered to "put us out" on Myspace. Seeing as Lupe has 400, 000 friends, that could be a really big favour.

Lupe's Performance was powerful. We saw it from his

perspective, and afterwards we chatted with the Streets -also decent sorts- who are going to advertise FWE on Myspace too.

### **SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2007: HERE WE GO AGAIN...**

Electronic confirmation flashed up in our hotmail inbox; we were cleared to board the BBC Ecuador in the northern Queensland township of Townsville. Several frantic days of dispatching parcels, packing, cleaning oil stains from carpets, calling loved ones and attending farewell meals passed; then at the eleventh hour, our jubilation was checked by some rather distressing news. The APC agent in Singapore, Mikael, hammered an 'urgent' mail to us suggesting that the ship had made surprisingly good time on its way south through the rolling China Seas and was due in ahead of schedule. If the weather remained fair and the forecast favourable, our ship would set-sail before we'd even departed Melbourne.

Deep at the back of our collective mind, wallowing in the seldom-visited vaults of thought and forged from an abundance of previous last-minute altercations, just this scenario already dwelt. With lethal efficiency and military execution, plans were changed, contingency arrangements made, refunds harvested from corporate pockets and in a blurry dash we galloped north. Late in the hour on Thursday just passed, we finally arrived.

Townsville was fast asleep, not a soul stirred, not even a mouse. It was a ghost town. On the far banks of a whispering, gurgling river inlet, the port lights still beat an orange glow on loading cranes, ship hulls, flat-deck trucks, corrugated warehouse roofs and jumbled iron cargo. Fatigued and exhausted, dishevelled and haggard, but we'd made it. We pedalled down the palm tree-lined Palmer Rd to the gates but the security lines were all dead, phone lines severed

from activity, and 10 foot barricades barred our access to dock 8 and the dozing German-owned, Chinese-built ship beyond.

We didn't have to wait long, though, until security spied us on their network of CCTV cameras and dispatched a heavy to come and assist us with our inquires and escort us to the ship.

The BBC could be the sister of the Princess Mary, such is her disposition. Two loading cranes on the port side, 100 metres in length with a removable top deck and bottom storage. You might have joined us in guessing that the crew and officers are all of Polish and Russian origin and what a friendly bunch they are, as such. Captain Alex (a man with a smile to rival a Cheshire cat's and with the looks of Matt Dillon) showed us around the tower and introduced us to our humble, en suite cabin on the 5th level. Broad bunk beds, desk, matching cupboards, padded chair and two sizable portholes, carpeted, air-conditioned and snug. It is our new home.

This very evening at 2am, when the cargo has been loaded and customs have waved their green flag, the BBC Ecuador and FWE will commence the 35-day voyage east. 'I hope you have your sea-sickness tablets,' said Alex, 'this ship... she likes to roll!' We can't wait.

Panniers have been rooted out, re-organised, shuffled and lightened. Bikes adorned with tear drop lights, symbolic offerings, Thai bugs and polished bells. Once again we're reduced to the bare essentials that are needed for life on a bike on the open road. Once again we are heading in the right direction. Here we go...

### **WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2007: WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE...**

The BBC Ecuador carried us and its cargo of valuable - if a

little rusty- industrial machinery through a channel between the Great Barrier Reef and mainland Australia. Atolls popped up here and there as we rode the waves on a South Easterly bearing into the Tasman sea where we picked up the remaining swell of a tropical cyclone, which had been playing havoc to the north around Cape York. We were on our way to the port of Marsdon Point, North Island, New Zealand, our last opportunity to fill up with the thick, gloopy, tar this ship uses as fuel; they call it bunker fuel. After 5 days we arrived in one piece, mooring in a bay, dotted with yachts and alongside an oil refinery nestled in the flooded, partly protruding craggy rim of an ancient volcano. With stomachs and legs accustomed by then to the pounding of the tumultuous sea, we took on the 'bunker' fuel to capacity - about 350 tons worth. The tar needed to be heated to over 200 degrees C to be liquefied sufficiently for piping it into the fuel tanks in the bows of ourship. As the tanks filled we had a few hours to get ashore and experience New Zealand. This experience was limited to the confines of the oil refinery for security reasons. The ship's agent, an Englishman with a fine moustache, proclaimed when he met us that "in 30 years of working in this industry, I have never heard of two civilians hitching a ride on a commercial vessel, let alone across the Pacific Ocean. How did you do it?" he asked in amazement. We felt very pleased with ourselves and dutifully explained the age-old tale of meeting the right people through social intercourse in a bar in Singapore almost 1 year ago.

On the bridge, as we pored over the ship's charts with our Polish Captain, we discovered that our route across the Pacific was not to be a straight line through the archipelagos of The Cook Islands and French Polynesia as we had imagined; rather disappointingly the plan was to head south east from North Island. Steaming in a sweeping, crescent

shaped, south-about curve around the globe - as opposed to an A-B straight line - is the quickest way to traverse the world's largest ocean. To our dismay our course was set for the roaring 40s and the deathly Southern Ocean we came to know only too well on our recent Antarctic adventure. Unfortunately - or should I say fortunately - the seas in these lower latitudes were so devilish that the Captain, fearing for his cargo, ordered a change of course to East Nor' East and we struck out lining ourselves up with one of the most remote islands in the world, the British colony and home of recent scandal, Pitcairn. As the Captain had hoped, we successfully fled the ferocity of the southern storms and found calmer waters towards the tropics.

The ocean is big and blue and that's all there is. Since leaving New Zealand we have not seen one living thing in the never-ending water, other than a few flying fish. We haven't even seen anything drifting, really; one white plastic barrel and that's about it. On our daily water watches the lack of wildlife in our ocean desert is made up for in the myriad hues the sea exhibits for us each day. We have become keen water observers, drinking in with our eyes the richest blue of blues, a royal sumptuous colour you would have to see to believe. The sea has the same effect as fire: mesmerizing, never the same. It calls at you to jump in for a quick dip as a precipice invites you to throw yourself into space. When the sun beats down upon your back and the humidity envelopes you, the tantalizing twinkles and bubbling gurgles of the sea become the mirage of an oasis to those lost in a hot, sandy desert. Day in, day out, the confines of our cabin and decks are the limits of our existence. Our thoughts have played tricks on us, teasing us with unanswerable riddles, pushing the limits of our sanity. We read, watch films and sleep - never deeply - for two times longer than usual; we write rambling

insanities into our diaries, dream of fresh fruit, vegetables and above all, chocolate: life on our steel island continues and each day we inch imperceptibly towards Callao, a port north of Lima, Peru where we will re-fuel. Then it's a stop in to another Peruvian port, Salaverry, not far from the Ecuador border to unload some of our cargo before finally steaming south towards Iquique, Chile, our port of disembarkation. ETA March 15th weather permitting. There is water watch!

#### **SATURDAY, MARCH 17, 2007: ALTITUDE SICKNESS**

It was somewhat of a consolation prize, but in the end seeing a Great White shark and numerous Boobies seemed to make up for mother nature's lack of imagination during our crossing of the Pacific Blue. Vast, menacing, hungry, razor-sharp teeth gnashing, tail swishing, cold eyes of steel glaring, a belly in need of some juicy British cyclists. It was a treat from the deep that was appreciated from the safety of our cabin. The very next afternoon as we took tea on the Poop Deck, we were treated to a flock of sparkling white boobies. They seemed to fly from the very sun above, swooping low beside us, keeping pace and effortlessly pacing about on the thermals that tickled their wing tips. Land must surely be approaching, we thought.

Several days passed, the water seemed to grow thicker, colder, the impossible blue that we'd become so accustomed to seeing finally relenting its identity to the brown, almost black waters of the Peruvian coast. We gazed down into the depths, mesmerized by the darkness, acknowledging the symbol of change that it brought. Gone were the creature comforts, logical living and safety of familiarity; here in the bleak waters below we were now confronted with the realisation of a return to life on the road.

Salaverry, Peru - or was it the moon? Mountains, rocks and sand, dry, dry, dry. Wind-swept vistas charging willy-nilly in all directions. Moody pelicans had long ago conquered the land, driving the humans away and claiming all the spoils for themselves. They numbered in their thousands, arrogantly strutting about their kingdom, dropping their pungent white guano as a sign of their defiance. It was our return to the world and what a strange world it had now become. Perhaps the Apocalypse had occurred, or maybe thirsty aliens had landed and sucked up all moisture from the land, or possibly all things 'green' had been outlawed by the powers that be. Yes indeed, it was parched!

They were largely quiet days as our thoughts struggled to escape the prison of silent contemplation that constantly reminded us of the coming thrust back into action...back to bikes. 'Were we mentally ready?...were we fit enough?...' questions, questions circling over us like vultures in the sky. The ship, like a camel's hump, took on 380 tons of Bunker fuel, a sufficient quantity for a further 20 days plodding, then continued south down the coasts of Peru and Chile, all the time pushing stubbornly against the current and head winds. Slowly we trawled on, all the while within agonizing view of the very road that we would soon return to cycle on. The Andean foothills peeled back from the sea, smashing into a layer of haze that tumbled off the peaks like a roughly-laid table cloth. Browns, yellows, oranges and grays - not a hue of each was neglected. The road bobbed and weaved along the coast, gently rising, gently falling, occasional trucks like dinky toys passing slowly along on their way to who knows where. Dolphins twisting in the bow wave, sea lions porpoising and whales spouting.

Three days on and the Pilot came alongside. Under his

guidance we motored to a standstill at our final resting place. Ropes secured, the engines at last silenced and so finished our 38-day Pacific Voyage. It had been at times exhilarating, occasionally enlightening, often frustrating, frequently boring but always necessary. Several hundred books were read and passed on to eager Polish crew members and an entire collection of DVDs was waged war against. Our captain, with his outrageously outrageous laugh and Cookie Franco with his equally amusing daily murder of edibles, had provided entertainment from the Bridge and the Galley and all the other officers, crew and deck hands, can be thanked for providing smiles and broken words of English pleasantries. Saying good-byes has become par for the course over these years and yet even to such good people as belonged to the BBC Ecuador roll call, who had only touched our travels for such a comparatively short time, it was none too easy.

Iquique; a city of remote quality which sits at the foot of surrounding mountains like a faithful dog at its master's feet. As grey as the peaks around it, the air hangs heavy with the reek of putrefying fish. Sea Lions prowl in the silky, oil-stained waters of the port, hunting for cast-offs and easy prey from the fishermen's nets. We had no intention of staying here for long.

Today we find ourselves in the arms of La Paz. The de facto Bolivian capital; a hugely impressive sprawl of red brick houses glued confidently to the steep surrounding mountain sides. Ponchos, perched hats and peaceful people, fill the rambling streets with colourful markets and good cheer. The journey by bus from Arica to the highest capital city in the world, was an awe-inspiring spectacle of splendid sights, smells and sounds. Snow-capped mountains towered over

icy lakes, chilled villages, herds of alpaca, lama, sheep and cattle. Craggy crevices disappeared from view as we clawed a path over the Andes and from my dusty window I could clearly see the tangled remains of fallen trucks and buses, hundreds of feet below splayed on jagged rocks, belly up, splintered red crates, contorted blue containers and hideously stricken yellow cabs. 'Fingers crossed' I thought as the gears ground and the brakes squealed.

At 4,450 metres ASL we crossed from Chile to Bolivia. A shower of thin snowflakes began falling the moment we got off the bus to have our passports inspected. Headaches, weak knees and dizziness...how had we ever cycled at such heights in the eastern Himalaya, we wondered...how indeed.

South America! We have arrived.

### **SUNDAY, MARCH 25, 2007: CRASHING MOUNTAIN RABBIT SAILS**

From La Paz we journeyed to the great lake Titicaca, sailed onto it, saw some floating islands made of Papyrus reeds; the boat broke down, we changed boats, went to a normal island -not floating- and made it back to our accommodation late. The next day we took a bus to Cuzco.

"It's an Andean Mountain Rabbit!" exclaimed Jamie as a little grey furry animal looked back at us from a crack in the white granite of the misty heights of Machu Picchu. We advanced upon the timid creature until we were almost within touching distance. As we looked upon the Mountain Rabbit it seemed to tremble, its nose twitched, its eyes wide. Suddenly it took fright and bounded off down a steep slope. Some Peruvians who had been watching our advance on the rabbit from a rocky outcrop not far behind began to laugh. We turned

around and smiled at them. They grinned back. We said in perfect, slow, comprehensible English whilst pointing in the direction of the grey fluffy creature "AN-DE-AN MOUN-TAIN RAB-BIT". Their expressions did not change; they smiled broadly and said softly to us, "Chinchilla."

A little later we found ourselves sitting on a wall sipping at spring water from 1.5 litre plastic bottles and eating morsels of stale white bread we'd bought at the bottom of the mountain. In front of us was the Temple of the Condor against an awe-inspiring, plummeting backdrop of green mountains. For some time we admired the scenery and marvelled at the fine stonework piled up around us. As we drank our water peacefully, a small bird flew over to us and perched itself upon the wall we were sitting on; its head twitched from side to side as it regarded us with beady eyes. It had a bluish cap of feathers on its head. Jamie looked over at the bird; the bird looked at Jamie. "It's a Temple Tit" said Jamie, decisively identifying the bird's species. As he spoke a few bread crumbs rolled from his mouth onto the stone. He went on, "Best not to feed it," as the bird pecked up another fallen crumb.

In Cuzco we bought 'baby Alpaca wool' pillow cases which we will pack with clothes and use to make tent-nights-with-rocks-under-the-head more comfortable. The pillows are Inca-redibly soft. (Apologies, this Inca pun has been a feature of our Andean journey. We used it in many other circumstances, most memorably after a small bout of food poisoning which I suffered in La Paz when I became -according to Jamie- Inca-contentant.) We made another investment in Cuzco where we purchased two versatile squares of colourful Incan material which -although usually used for wrapping babies- has no less than four other

purposes; they can be used as hold-alls for day trips away from the bikes, as ponchos, as picnic rugs or as blankets on cold nights.

With heads on Alpaca pillows another bus bore us from Cuzco back towards the bikes which were waiting for us at the Tres Soles Hostel, not far from the bus terminal in Arica, Chile. The 17-hour bus ride was beginning to drive us crazy. By 3 o'clock am our behinds ached interminably. Regardless of the un-holy hour, the driver had pressed play on a pirate DVD. It played badly at top volume and was of such poor quality that it would only play in 10 second jerky, unintelligible, distorted spurts. When motion did come to the screen, it was usually preceded by 1 minute of silence, just enough time to nearly drop off to sleep... It was in this semi-conscious-bad-quality-DVD-state in-between dreams that we co-incidentally both found ourselves staring out of the front windscreen into the pitch black of the night; it was then, sitting just behind the front seat, that we had a high speed, head on collision.

First we saw two specks of white light, that looked like headlights. The driver must have been wondering what they were too because he flicked on his full beams to get a better look. To our absolute terror we saw a car coming straight for us out of the darkness. The driver's breaks slammed on and we could hear the screeching of tyres. The car driver by now must have noticed the bus because he was trying to steer out of the way at 45 degrees, but both vehicles were going too fast. The car was coming straight for us, sideways now. There was that sickening moment of silence before impact, we were all waiting for it, ready for it, braced: was this the end? Screams filled the air! BANG! BOOOM! tthhhhhhhh plshhhh. We had hit. Surely the driver was dead. Were we

all right? We seemed to be. Yup, we were fine. But what about the others? They all seemed fine. But what about the driver?

Everyone emptied off the bus with the desperate desire to know who was injured, who was dead? How were the people in the car? In the middle of the road there was quite a scene. The car had glanced off the bus and had a stove-in side to show for it. The bus's windscreen had imploded. It must have showered the driver with glass, the bumper was dangling, but that was it, phenomenally little damage for such a smash. The crash became more of an Inca-convenience than anything. Nobody was hurt! After a few hours the driver started the engine and we limped off in the broken bus to the nearest town to get a replacement. The pirate DVD continued to play in its jerky unintelligible way as if nothing had ever happened.

The new bus was a real downgrade in quality, but at least the DVD player worked!

Total time on the two buses: 22 hours. Total loss of life: Zero. Death: Cheated. Total delay: 5 hours. The main part of the journey: Over.

We were in Tacna, Peru at a bus depot not far from the Chilean border. We -and a few others who needed to go south to Arica- commissioned a Chevrolet complete with driver and began the very last few kilometres back to base.

As we crossed back into Chile, national flags fluttered showing the wind to be South Westerly, a constant blow of some force from almost exactly the right direction for us to pick up a tail wind when we start cycling. The winds here

on the West coast of South America follow the direction of the Humboldt current, a cold body of water that has origins in the Southern Ocean. Then the idea came to me: Let 's make some sails for the bikes! Sails to harness the power of the trade winds and make the physical requirements of this South American leg of the expedition vastly less arduous. On the back sofa-seat of the Chevy we designed -using our fingers to draw imaginary blueprints- all sorts of complicated designs for a bike sail.

In the end we submitted to the fact that we are no engineers and settled for the easy option, a large bed sheet draped over our backs and stretched out as far as the grips on our handlebars. This simple idea of bed sheet sails will take full advantage of that void between the underarms and body. As caped superheroes we will fairly fly northward. Our new method of wind cycling is yet to be tested and could well not work. Whether it succeeds or fails, we will be sure to report back on the effectiveness of the bed sheet revolution.

Finally we arrived in Arica at midday, paid off the Chevy driver and re-joined the bikes at Tres Soles, still babbling to each other about sails.

Sleep that night was deep and blissful.

Inca-contrast to the cold flow of the Humboldt current, the land here in northern Chile is desert, a seemingly limitless expanse of sand, dotted with mountains. There is absolutely no green to be seen and not a drop of water. Service stations are few and far between and there is almost no traffic; only vultures, mirages and scorpions. The coastal desert continues to the north all the way to Ecuador, almost 3000 kms away. If all goes to plan we expect to have crossed the

desert by early May. We are poised to set out and in the small hours of tomorrow morning we will be in amongst the dunes with as much water as we can carry, our bed sheet sails billowing.

#### **MONDAY, APRIL 02, 2007: BOILED ALIVE**

Boiled bitter lemon sweets were sucked on a boiling Chilean day as for the first time in many moons our Thorn bikes ominously rolled into action. Our return to the leather saddle after such a lengthy lay-off was tentatively met with tight, nervous muscles that were stretched and coarse like sun dried biltong. Stringy thighs, knocking knees, quaking quads, backs, arms and chests; the creaking, crunching and cracking of un-oiled joints and hinges could be heard echoing in the sandy canyons for miles around like pistol shots at dawn.

Dusty Chile succumbed to the Clamesi Desert of Peru in the first hour of riding. Border control personnel more interested in the spectacle of our cumbersome bikes than our tatty British passports, inspecting & stamping seemingly being something of an inconvenience for them. It was a day of functional brutality, a re-awakening for the forgotten far-flung corners of the cycling mind and a none-too-surprising return to use for Ben's trusty puncture repair kit. Only a few hours down and already his front tyre was bored and fed up. It wheezed once or twice, gave a long high-pitched sigh and eventually pancaked, splaying its unsightly black rubber on the road like melted tar. Watching Ben set about rejuvenating the flaccid tyre, resuscitating it and cajoling it back into action was an all too familiar sight. "Why me, again?" Ben said despairingly as he removed panniers and began rooting around inside them for the necessary tools. "It's always me; we've pedalled 11,000 kms and you still

haven't had a SINGLE puncture. Where's the justice?"

Mirage-clad roads of endless undulation play tricks on our eyes; where do those temptresses of shimmering lake water disappear too? Rocky views of wind-lashed orange mountains like a giant's sand pit host our route north, offering endless inclines that require constant leg pressure. It's as if the entire landscape has been fed through a chewing gum machine, stretched and laid out at a funny angle that defies all laws of logic in the Universe. It's a road straight from the world of 'Ripley's Believe It or Not', where an empty coke-can placed on the tarmac actually rolls up the hill! It looks like you should be pedalling down, like the horizon is on an incline, but the altimeter says otherwise; in fact, you're going up. Speed drops, shoulders hunch, legs tighten, knees whimper and a stinging combination of suncream and sweat start balling down your face causing eyes to shrink and squint. It really is the strangest, most frustrating phenomenon. Encouragement comes from passing trucks tooting their approval as mystified looks are met with waving hands, knowing grins and raised water bottles. Onwards and upwards. Challenging but beautiful. Where else could we be privileged to such strangely arresting eye fodder?

The last week has, in truth, seen some of, if not the most demanding / rewarding cycling that we've encountered since leaving England two years ago. For sure some of the difficulties can be attributed to our obvious lack of form & fitness but the evil dictators and designers of the roads and controllers of the contours on the maps, have teamed up to serve a thorny meal that at times is almost impossible to swallow. Climbs of a steady ascent can last under torturous heat for hours on end with gears 3, 4 & 5 being paid visits that were previously so seldom seen. However, with the

slow upward struggle comes a great reward: the harder the climb, the greater and more terrifying the distance, the more protracted and drawn out it all is, the broader the smile will be at the top. When you reach the summit of your ascent and you're able to glance back on the road behind and view it simply as something that was necessary for you to do in order to get to this moment, then the mask of the monster becomes just a little easier to behold in the future. All efforts are of course repaid in kind. The internal and external battle gifts you with chocolate bars and biscuits, pilfered from their lodgings and crammed with trembling fingers into cavernous mouths, and then, ultimately, with a coasting down hill to be savoured with a grin and yelps of joy. More hills will undoubtedly loom but always you know that a down will follow, that it will get easier the further on you plug. The more accustomed to it you become, the more the benefits of your efforts will shine through and the easier it becomes to see the bigger picture once again; the ride as a whole, Free Wheels East.

Towns and even small villages are frighteningly few and far between. Shade simply doesn't exist and of course water is just a myth in these remote regions. A light green sheet was procured in Tacna from a thrift shop in the city centre that was run by a man who was most likely an escapee from the Island of Dr Moreau, with the purpose of providing midday shelter from the belting sun. With the bikes splayed in a 'V' formation and the sheet lashed to the bar ends and supported on the desert floor with large rocks, it makes for a most effective shield against the ferocious burn of the day. From 11:30am to 2:30pm we are to be found here, seated in our make-shift marquee with a cool wind blowing through the ventilation flaps that billow about our ears, as we quietly chew on the superbly named 'Sublime' chocolate bars.



Arequipa was a city we'd longed to reach. It was a self-inflicted challenge that we set ourselves; a point on the map that had long been targeted as a measuring stick for our mental & physical ability coming into year three of our adventure. We've made it and now a new surge of hope & knowing runs high. Ambitions are soaring like kites and soon we shall be reunited with the wonderfully beautiful and mystifying Pacific coastline that we once viewed from the decks of the BBC Ecuador, once again free to gaze on the secrets of its canvas and, of course, occasionally to plunge into it.

Road stomachs have announced themselves to us with renewed vigour, ceaselessly demanding sweets, peanuts, cakes, fizzy drinks, chocolate bars, fried chicken, fried chips, burgers, crisps, olives, more sweets and more chocolate. Has there ever been a better excuse to consume such filth and feel so great for doing so?

In Brief:

The much-hyped and anticipated pictures from our Christmas Antarctica expedition have now been added to the 'Gallery' section and there are also several snaps of the legendary bench in Fitzroy and the complimentary friendly bums Jimmy & Jim. Have a look at Warehouse X too. I'm sure you'll also be interested to have a look at the feature article we wrote for the Lonely Planet and have a laugh at the related debate that is subsequently raging on the 'Thorntree'.

[http://www.lonelyplanet.com/journeys/feature/pedal\\_power\\_0307.cfm](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/journeys/feature/pedal_power_0307.cfm)

**SUNDAY, APRIL 08, 2007: VIRUS OF THE SANDS**

A dark cloud loomed above our Ariquepan stronghold. Three days ago Ben was diagnosed with Meningitis.

Off the back of our desert cycling, Ben had started to get a severe headache. We thought it might be heatstroke. He had bouts of fever and lost all appetite. As he wasted away, a selection of Doctors was called out to get a diagnosis. What we at first feared to be heatstroke was diagnosed as Meningitis. The standard of Medical facilities in this hill city are poor and in Ben's condition, a walk to the loo left him exhausted and calling out in agony, therefore to transport him to a more developed country would be impossible; in fact, to transport him to the local hospital was bad enough. Wincing with the pain Ben managed to hobble to a taxi and 15 minutes later was in the hands of a German specialist.

The hospital was like a bee hive crammed with buffeting, jostling swarms of ill Peruvians waiting for medical attention. The hospital looked like it had not had a revamp since the 70s; coughs, splutters and bleeding accidentees surrounded us. I said to Ben under my breath, "If you want to pick up an illness, this is the place."

Ben's case was considered enough of an emergency to sidestep the queues and again he was examined without further ado by the German. There had been talk of a lumbar drain to determine the strain of Meningitis, a needle to the spine. Ben and I waited for the giant hypodermic to arrive. But it did not.

After being prodded and poked with a selection of Peruvian medical implements, the German specialist said, as if making conversation "You have anaemia?" Ben said, "No, that's my normal colour," as he looked down at the distinctly

yellowish chest the doctor had exposed to prod. I said, "He's right, Ben doesn't go brown in the sun, he goes yellow." The German frowned, obviously thinking us fools. There was a long pause before he spoke again. This time his words were well appreciated: "I think there has been a mis-diagnosis," he said before pausing again. We hung on his words. "In my opinion... you have Salmonella. Now, I am going to recommend you go to my friend Dr Alcazar's clinic on the other side of town for blood tests and urine samples, just to be sure." Our worries dissolved. Salmonella sounded like fun compared with Meningitis. The dark cloud had lifted. Relief was visible on every face.

Dr Alcazar was a kindly man, slightly rotund with a spark in his eye. He wore pebble spectacles on the end of his nose, spoke perfect English and was clearly a well educated man. He emanated calm and, as he methodically banged Ben with rubber hammers and prodded and poked at him in a way that Ben had become only too accustomed to, we all knew that it was going to be O.K. "Right then, Ben," said Dr Alcazar smiling, "I also believe that you have Salmonella. Now, it's time to see your blood."

Some tests later and we were back with Doc Alcazar. He had sheets and sheets of paper, computer print-outs, Ben's test results. He shuffled through the pages, looked down through his spectacles and began to absorb the results slowly and carefully. Was he TRYING to build the suspense? Eventually he began his interpretation of the hundreds of figures before him. He looked stern, serious, grave.

"Ben, your liver is in perfect condition." "Well, blow me down!" I said, jumping in surprise. "So are your kidneys," continued Alcazar. "In fact, I am pleased to report that

everything is normal.... with the exception of your white blood cell count which is high. But do not worry, that just confirms the infection. Now, I am going to prescribe an antibiotic which I want you to take for 5 days. You must not move for one week." "What about cycling?" asked Ben, looking worried. "You plan to cycle through the 3000 km coastal desert, do you not?" "Yes," said Ben quietly. "Well, in my professional opinion you must not undertake any strenuous exercise like that for at least a month. You must take it easy Ben, you have lost a lot of weight. Maybe in one week you will be well enough to take a little exercise. Go for a walk or something like that, do not ride a bicycle through a desert. Please."

Our South American mission suddenly seemed like a failure. We had given it our all, only to lose a valuable month to illness. All our plans will have to be put back, all our schedules, our deadlines, our distance goals, everything. We are trapped in Arequipa suffering a minor FWE crisis.

### **WEDNESDAY, APRIL 18, 2007: FWE ROCKED BY EARTHQUAKE**

A low rumbling woke us before sunrise. Was it my stomach? Could it really be breakfast time already, time to consume our daily quota of air-bread with fig jam and pot upon pot of steaming coffee? Or perhaps it was a delivery truck going about its early morning rounds, trying to beat the Arequipan traffic, jettisoning its load before the cobbled streets hit their usual tumultuous levels of chaos. Panes of glass began rattling in their moorings, shutters working back and forth on their hinges, screeching and wailing like the eerie music from a Hitchcock movie. The beds were humming, the heavy oak wardrobe at the far end of the room began shuffling across the polished floor boards. Half-full mugs

of water fell to the floor, lamps slipped and smashed...this wasn't a hungry tummy or a passing truck or any other such heavy vehicle rumbling by; oh no, this was an earthquake. Framed pictures on the walls tumbled, our beds were jumping and skipping violently and had now joined the wardrobe in doing a funny jig over the floor - bumper cars that vibrated like fancy massage chairs. Screams of terror broke out across the Plaza and ran through the city to a soundtrack of tumbling masonry and smashing windows. The walls seemed to bend and bow, dust cascaded down from the ceiling, plaster cracked. Louder and louder...surely this was the end...landslides, sea monsters, armed bandits, bus crashes and Meningitis had been survived but now it sadly appeared we'd at last be finished off by an earthquake. 'Shouldn't we be in the doorway or under a table?' Ben hollered above the racket, using all reserves of his dwindling and feeble strength to form the wobbling words, but even as they were spoken...silence fell and the quake passed. Several smaller after-shocks occurred during breakfast but the worst of it had passed and as a plate of pappy bread rolls was munched through and we drank freshly-squeezed orange juice, solemn thanks were given for surviving yet another brush with the Grim Reaper.

Sadly, it seems like Ben's recovery to full & glowing health and cycling capabilities is going to be a drawn-out, prolonged and painful process that cannot, must not and will not be rushed. Rest, rest and a bit more rest is the order of play. Doctor's orders. In the evenings fresh vegetables are lovingly procured, washed, chopped and lightly fried and taken to the ailing patient's bedside. Morsel by morsel the crunchy matter is consumed and met with weak smiles and soft utterances of gratitude. Grapes are peeled and brows mopped as colour creeps like a red mist into the patient's





cheeks. Good days and bad days, relapses are frequent and morale takes a daily beating.

We'd both like to say a large thank you to all the well-wishers out there and for all the notes of encouragement and optimism that have flooded our inbox. But now I must dash for in the distance I can hear the faint tinkle of a bedside bell...more grapes no doubt.

#### **THURSDAY, MAY 03, 2007: TWENTY TIMES THE SPEED OF BIKE BOING**

In Arequipa, that mountain town of bed and grapes, our friends and family flooded us with words of love and concern. The general outside consensus seemed to be that the fourth Peruvian Doctor's diagnosis of Salmonella was dubious and likely to be incorrect; symptoms just didn't match up. Once again, we found ourselves clueless as to which life-threatening illness had struck Ben down. Worried that whatever it was might come back to finish him off, the two of us stewed in our Arequipan hotel room and wrestled with various plans of action. In the end we came to a decision -one of the hardest in F.W.E history- and opted to get out of Peru, to leave South America altogether and find a western Doctor with the facilities and know-how to put all of our minds at rest once and for all. There was an obvious problem with this decision: it would mean taking an aeroplane, the ultimate FWE faux pas. However, our decision to fly is easily justifiable: 1. a plane would take us away from our unbroken line over land and sea around the world, but it would also return us to the spot we took off from. Therefore, no ground lost, no ground gained. In other words, when we start cycling again, our line will remain unbroken.

2. we needed to know whether not Ben's life was in danger. Please note: Ben's life is point number 2. May this stand as

testament to the importance of our quest.

With our decision made, the next question was, where do we go? Of course England was not an option; going back to Blighty really would feel like defeat and spoil our homecoming in 2008. That left one other option, our second home, Melbourne...

After being trapped in Australia and trying our hardest for almost a year to find a ship across the Pacific Ocean to continue FWE, we 'bike boys' -as the Melbournians came to know us- thought we had escaped when we found two spare berths aboard the BBC Ecuador. But we were wrong; just under three months later, having spent 35 days at sea going bonkers, and riding a minuscule 500 ks, we were headed back!

In Arequipa we came to see our return to Melbourne as a positive failure. It was really as though our South American attempt number one had gone a little wrong and we were popping back down under to re-group and collect our thoughts. Both of us saw the funny side of the situation and we began to look forward to getting back to see all our old friends. We even made plans to sell our publication, the highs and lows of the last three months.

Quickly we found and booked up a flight from Quito, Ecuador via Miami, La and Auckland. 50 hours of bus travel stood between us and the airport. We went into action, packing like crazy. Jamie did the heavy work and even loaded up the bikes so that all we had to do was trickle down hill to the 'Flores' bus station. When we left the Peruvian maids at our hotel were visibly moved; they'd lived through our ordeal with us, had seen the doctors coming and going, had

worried with us.

With Bikes squished into a tiny luggage compartment the first bus followed a dreadful looking barren road to Lima chock-a-block with heavy traffic. From our comfortable seats we thanked our lucky stars that we were not cycling it. We have learnt that often the worst experiences bring the best conclusions.

In Lima we waited for a day at the bus station to get another bus, this time an international service to Quito. That final jaunt was thirty hours. Bums ached after two. Slowly the desert became the tropics and all memories of our viral nightmare were left firmly behind us. Ecuador was lush, more developed than Peru, a refreshing change.

A few days of taking it easy later, we stowed the bikes and half of our gear at our hotel in Quito and took a taxi to the airport.

“Blast those hunks of metal that jet along at hundreds of miles an hour guzzling the same air a horse breathes for a lifetime in a second; bugger those expensive, noisy, functional, synthetic juggernauts of the skies...” We had made our last stand against the plane, but later we admitted -off the record- that we’d be stuffed without them and that they are one of man’s most marvellous inventions. It felt so good to sit back in a Boeing 737, to accelerate down the Quito airport runway at 20 times the speed of bike. Having cycled on and off for two years, flying took our breath away. We lifted off and began to soar higher and higher over the misty Andes until the traffic on Ecuadorian roads below became invisible and all you could see were grey lines on the landscape. Then even the lines disappeared. Our plane

gave us a beautiful bird’s eye air- perspective; dark, stark realisations of scale. The world is vast, we reveled in I’m-an-insignificant-speck sentiments.

Four hours later we touched down in Miami to pick up our connecting flight to LA. As we passed through customs, security asked us a thousand questions. Jamie nearly took a charge from a cattle prod for not being co-operative when an officer asked him “as we had our bags checked for the umpteenth time- “Where are you going, sir?” “Melbourne,” replied Jamie. “Where’s that?” asked the guard, his accent twanging. Jamie smiled and continued to walk, thinking the guard to be joking. A baton stopped him in his tracks. The guard’s eyes narrowed, he pointed his stun gun at Jamie’s chest and said, “Sir, I asked you a question. Now are you going to give me an answer?” He had a mean look about him. Jamie looked forlornly back at the guard and said, “Australia”.

By the time we got into LA we were 12 hours into the trip and were already exhausted. We still had 16 hours and another stop in Auckland ahead of us. Ironically this was to be Ben’s first-ever long-haul flight; before the L.A - Auckland flight he’d never flown out of Europe.

The first day back at OZ base saw a visit to the Doc. He confirmed straight away that Ben had had Meningitis. He advised, “I’m going to get you to relax for a month. That means no strenuous exercise! I want you to come back to me then for a blood test to check that you don’t have any organ degradation.. Ben, the decision you made to leave South America was absolutely correct. You have had a very serious illness and I can tell you that if you had been here in Australia at the time of diagnosis you would have

been rushed to hospital in an ambulance. Meningitis is not to be taken lightly. I hope that you don't have any further problems. Please rest."

For the last week we have been taking it very easy, but now is the time for a little bit of not-too-strenuous action in the form of book selling next to the bums' bench, Brunswick Street. If you are in the area, do drop by to have a chat and pick up a copy of your own.

### **MONDAY, JUNE 04, 2007: COUGHS & SPLUTTERS**

Standing on the balcony in wool-knit slippers, a fresh coffee steams in my mittened hand as I cast an eye over the autumnal Melbourne cityscape; the city grey is dark against the pale backdrop. Black crow, blue eyes screeches a melancholy cry and Sufjan Stevens sings Seven Swans from the silver stereo in the room behind me. A constant colourful collage of frail foliage bristles in the biting wind that snaps at the bowed bows of the trees below which line the gushing Queens Parade. The weatherman on the news last night promised rain but I think he must have been dreaming. There's a black cat asleep on the pavement.

Book selling on Brunswick St has been a stunted exercise that's coughed & spluttered and has never seemed to fully get going. In fact, in many ways these past few weeks have, for the first time in over two years, been a time when we have allowed ourselves to at first dangle a pointed toe and then an entire foot, in the waters outside of FWE; we've graciously welcomed and revelled in the comfort of familiarity and routine - a refreshing novelty indeed after two years of always moving on, of always saying goodbye to people just met. We've begun to "belong" to a community again and not only do we scribble shopping

lists, trawl the aisles of Safeway, eat Turkish bread & Spicy African dip, enjoy drinks in the evenings with friends, pay bills and watch the hallowed box, but we also live as two individuals. We reside in separate apartments that are divided by several kilometres of leafy suburban streetage, shops, parks and even a river; we meet different people, eat in different cafes and stroll daily down a different path. For better, for worse we are clawing at separate identities. It's living in a fashion which we both agree is becoming increasingly attractive; a fashion which shows us a world away from the road, away from the bikes. Like navigating a rocket through a field of tightly clustered stars, we're choosing a course which will best suit our evolving vision. Time marches on as priorities shift and shuffle their order.

"Where are we going...what do we want?" we ask the wind as it licks our faces. "Well..." it replies in a lyrical whisper, but the words are never heard; they're lost and grow fainter as it skips around our feet and dances away.

More than a year has passed since we first arrived on these shores, these streets. So much has happened...so much. Our return to Melbourne from Ecuador at the end of April was a convenient inconvenience that to us spelt "relief". A mixed emotion salad, lightly tossed, heavily seasoned and drizzled with a guilty delight dressing. Recuperation and restoration of energy and well-being has been a drawn out process with no corners cut. Only time will tell if the body has again fallen in line with the mind's desire. In two weeks we will return to Quito, retrieve our bikes and test the mettle of bike & bone; once again gather up the frayed threads of our trail around the globe and by all available means, whatever they may be, continue on towards northern Columbia.

## **WEDNESDAY, JUNE 13, 2007: DESPAIR AND RECONCILIATION**

Wrench! and that was it, we left Australian shores for the third time. Again we accelerated to 20 times the speed of bike and flew. Green Victorian grass disappeared from view beneath low clouds which spluttered driving drizzle onto the rounded portholes of the 747. The gloomy weather mirrored dismal emotions. We said little, the odd tear clambered to our tear ducts and jumped.

The last year has really taken it out of us. On the blackest of days we wondered what on earth we are doing and frequently found ourselves questioning our sanity. We are from a respectable, large family, yet rather than working the 9-5 and building a secure career as the generations before us have done we brought upon ourselves an enormous struggle: FWE. At our lowest point we were homeless with nobody but each other to turn to, and for what end? So that we can finish what we set out to do. Our hearts scream for us to return to our lives and our loved ones, but whatever it takes we will finish FWE. We will grind our teeth away and go bald if that is what it takes, but there is no way we are giving up now. That said, our FWE motivation has certainly taken a few too many knocks; no longer do we exude enthusiasm for our journey. In this latter year frustration has dominated and we have learnt, through painful trial and error, that completing this challenge takes a lot more than riding a bike. It has involved being bogged down and stuck in time-wasting traps while we rely on the help of others to get us on to the next continent. Our year-long struggle to get to the Americas gave us both some of the most soul-destroying depressions of our lives, yet determination saw us through, only to be struck down again with illness early in the South American leg. With finances

already stretched, the flight for health wasted more time and money which we did not have, also it further scuppered our cycling plans. In fact, cycling has become something that we can barely afford to do. As the last of our money evaporates, footing bills for unfortunate situations which are outside of our control, we are forced to concentrate less on cycling and more on keeping the over-land-and-sea task going in whatever way we can. Our challenge to go to and cycle in every continent without using aeroplanes is still very achievable but undesirable concessions will have to be made to ensure success.

Since the despair we felt on the plane at the thought of returning to our losing battle we have held long, painstaking discussions and given ourselves various formulae for completing FWE on a non-existent budget.

No money = no time, therefore we have to speed things up... a lot.

Our latest lickety-split FWE travel solution has given us a new immediate plan and an injection of fresh motivation for our journey north from the Ecuadorian capital. You see, we are both totally unfit -yet again- after completing the necessary, prescribed Meningitis recuperation period, and as our cycling attempts in South America didn't go so well the last time, we have decided to opt for a fresh start -a new beginning- and take a bus to the Caribbean coast through Colombia and ride from Panama through to the states, building fitness as we go, a tried and tested FWE training method.

Now to project even further ahead; the long term lickety-split plan destroys our dream of cycling the length of Africa



but it increases our chances of success 10 fold. It 's a long way off, but we might as well mention it; we do have a ship in the pipeline which will take us to Africa; however, we have no idea which port we will be dropped in. Our final inter-continental voyage could take us to the Cape of Good Hope or to West Africa, perhaps even Gibraltar? In an ideal world we would be dropped in Senegal and cycle home. If the ship goes to South Africa what would we do?! Hitch I suppose? If the ship goes to Gibraltar we 'd have to nip across the strait to cycle in Morocco. No matter what fate throws our way -however ugly it might be- we will claim our last two continents. Wish us luck.

#### **TUESDAY, JUNE 19, 2007: THE TALE OF THE LOST PANNIER, THE GREAT COLOMBIAN DOWNS AND THE GOOD SHIP COMET**

Today we are in northern Colombia. Buses got us here over 52 hours of excruciatingly uncomfortable, bouncing, beeping, throw-around travel. From base Quito we kicked about a plastic bottle on a litter-strewn street at the crack of dawn as we waited for the express to Bogota to arrive. The bikes were ready for the bus, perched on the pavement on kickstands, their handlebars folded in and panniers piled in neat stacks against the shuttered-up windows of a shop next to the stop. The sun rose over the mountains as early morning Ecuadorian fitness sorts jogged laps around a park opposite the road.

By and by our bus arrived. We watched it speed towards us from the traffic-free end of the very long straight road we waited on. We had been a little concerned that the bus driver might refuse to take the bikes out of policy, or not be able to take them at all due to a lack of space. In the end there were no problems and in a few hours we were well on

our way to that country with the most fearsome reputation, perhaps of all, Colombia.

The country is stable at the moment, so the locals say. Never-the-less we expected to be shot at least once as we crossed the border. A dot matrix printer had made marks in our passports to allow us a 30-day stay.

Colombia turned out to be an unexpected pleasure. Where we had expected to see bullet- battered buildings and bearded men with intent to kidnap, we encountered rolling fields and spectacular mountains that reminded us of Kent in South East England. It was as though the south downs had been dug up and layed over the Colombian mountains. Unlike other South American countries -even at 3,000 m 's above sea level- there were meadows where Daisy could be found grazing contentedly. Our only reminder of the civil war which has been raging in Colombia for years has been the frequent Policia stop checks which were in actuality quite pleasant, missing the bayonet prods and the beatings-for-banal-amusement that we had been expecting.

And so, we arrived in Bogota, the capital city.

We had expected to have a bit of time to explore, but a bus was leaving in 5 minutes for the place we needed to get to oh, so urgently, the northern Colombian coastal city of Cartagena -on the Caribbean coast- the city considered to be the best port from which to find yachts to Central America.

Travellers hoping to get to Central America without flying have to take a boat because the only other way to get to Panama is overland by way of a track through a guerilla-

ruled zone and hundreds of kilometres of dense jungle. It is considered to be a suicidal trip which nobody -even the most loco travellers- dare take. That includes us. We have been known to be gung ho, but that would be just too crazy.

So in Bogota bus depot, without opportunity for refreshment or a much-longed-for leg stretch, we jumped aboard our second Colombian bus to experience even more of the lofty, South American Kent. Eventually we arrived -almost without incident- in Cartagena. There was one hiccup which got our adrenalin flowing soon after the bus had come to a stop at the out-of-town Cartagena bus depot...

Our bus had driven off, probably on its way back to Bogota. As we loaded the bikes on the concrete under the blistering sun, with sweat trickling into our eyes, Ben realised he was missing a front pannier. He yelled "Banditos!!" and began to run around the loading zone looking for the lost article like a mad goat. "The book Mum made me! My vitamins!" he whimpered. " My Head and Shoulders Sensitive Skin!"

"Maybe it ´s still on the bus?" called Jamie after a frantic Ben whose blond mop bobbed off towards the terminal building looking for the Policia to help him find the culprit. Jamie stood guard over the gear while Ben found himself with a bunch of cool cucumbers armed with Glock automatics. The Policia had the situation under control in moments. First they located the bus by making a few phone calls. It turned out the bus had not gone back to Bogota... in fact it had not left the terminal at all and was parked just around the corner in bay 24.

The driver was questioned by the Policia. Had he seen any suspicious persons snooping around? Without answering,

the driver pulled open one of the luggage compartments. There, nestled amongst some other pieces of misplaced luggage was... Ben ´s lost pannier.

With the pannier held high over his head Ben returned to Jamie as if his prize were the FA cup. Jamie looked up from the luggage which he had been keeping such a close eye on, like a dog distracted for a moment whilst waiting patiently for a rat to flee its hiding place. "You found it!" exclaimed Jamie as he saw the missing pannier. "Did you find the culprit?"

The final leg of the journey took 22 hours, giving us a total-time-on-bus tally of 52 and a half hours. The South American bus adventure had unfolded soon after an exhausting 65-hour flight from Melbourne which included crossing the international dateline for the third time and spending a day and a night at LAX. Sleep has been a rare commodity of late. Some can sleep sitting up; we -after all our worldly experience of travel- still find that impossible, and so in four days of almost back-to-back international movement we have had precious few hours sleep.

It was worth it, though, and when we arrived we had a beer to celebrate and checked into a dirty grease-pit of a youth hostel to enjoy the first sound night's sleep we ´d had in ages.

The new invigorated us woke up early this morning, got organised and ate some very greasy breakfast. It was deliciously bad for the bowels and heart. We washed it down with a fine brew of the most wonderful Colombian coffee. The day was looking good already.

As I have already mentioned, Colombia is nothing like you would expect. The people are friendly and there seems to be zero hostility. The only reminder of our bad-ass location are the army helicopters which patrol the skies and the armed guards, with vicious-looking bayonets mounted on the barrels of M-16 assault rifles, who seem to be everywhere. There are five of them on every street corner. Locals sit in Cafes drinking coffee and chatting alongside these formidable soldiers as if it were perfectly normal. I suppose to them, it is. Incidentally, we heard from one traveller that the country really is exceptionally stable at the moment, the best it has been for 50 years. We could not have hoped to have been here at a better time.

Back to our sweat-pit and today...

The heat was uncomfortable, but as soon as we were outside, the sun hit our faces and warmed our souls. We both had the feeling that something amazing was going to happen to us.

Yesterday we had been a little disappointed with Cartegina because I think we'd both been expecting it to be a Caribbean Paradise.. That it is not. However, we did find a spectacular old colonial walled city to walk around; outside of that, though, it is a bit of a poor man's Miami. Anyway, today we had one objective: to find a ship to Panama, and with fingers crossed we went to the near-by marina.

Straight away we found a beat fellow, a living Hunter S. Thompson, a man who surely has affiliations with those legends of his generation, who goes by the name of Captain Carlos, to take us to Costa Rica on his yacht, The Comet, for little more than our fuel and food expenses.. I should say,

our Captain is Portuguese -a handsome old sea dog- who was in the US Navy and speaks perfect American English with a Boston accent. The weather is set to be fine for the duration of our voyage and there is no need to worry about Hurricanes. "You find them further to the north..." says Carlos.

Tonight we will take our new-found skipper to dinner to buy him a Rum. We are so excited and completely over the moon. This is a gift from on high. We are lucky men!

The Comet turned out to be a seaworthy Italian-built yacht, 11 metres in length and in ship shape condition. It is to take us via a chain of islands in Panamanian waters known as The San Blas Archipelago where we will snorkel coral reefs and go spear fishing for supper every evening. Upon arrival at a Port called Limon in Costa Rica we will begin the ride north, all the way to the United States of America.

Finding this ship has been the dream beginning / head start and we couldn't have wished for better. We will be on the boat for about 11 days and Captain Carlos is going to teach us to sail as well. To say we are excited about all this would be an understatement; VERY few of us have the privilege of taking a yacht from Colombia via Panama through the Caribbean to Costa Rica. We are eternally grateful.

After the elation of the marina visit, we went for a dip in the Caribbean for an exhilarating body surf. The waves were just the right size and the water was as warm as any we have yet had the pleasure of bathing in. To dry out we drank a fresh tropical fruit smoothie in one of those chipped-paint shacks by the beach whilst a Colombian band played grin-bringing music right next to us.

#### **THURSDAY, JULY 05, 2007: A DANCE WITH THE DEVIL**

'...and if you all look up here you can see where the bullet went after blowing his brains over the wall,' exclaimed our Captain in his deep American drawl. He wiped a drip of salty sweat from the tip of his dagger nose with a gnarly knuckled finger and continued: 'I still find his crispies over the boat from time to time...always make sure I eat them up...keeps his soul alive I reckon.' Captain Carlos growled a pirate's growl and imitated popping a piece of dried brain in his mouth and chewing it around. He squinted through his fiery eyes and swallowed hard. Captain Canniba was describing the demise of his good chum Ziggy, the man whom he inherited the Comet from several years ago.

It was late in the day of the 22nd June when a motorcycle, a Yamaha 650, two Thorn Ravens, three Englishmen, one German and a Portuguese-American took to the blue seas of the Caribbean just off the Colombian coast and struck out west towards Panama in an 11-metre boat. The painted sea-horses on the sides of our fibre-glass vessel snapped at the sea and pranced in the wind as the anchor was lifted, the main-sail was set and the jib raised. Our leaping bows were turned to the wind as light of heart and full of voice, we were spirited away.

The last couple of days on land had allowed the chinkiest of small chinks of disquiet to appear in the smiley, easy-going exterior of our Captain. The polite veneer of his polished leather finish had shown occasional signs of cracking and of a quick temper that simmered in the depths beneath. It was also noted that our man had a certain affection and fondness for the gravelly rasp in his own vocals...in fact there was no quietening him once the string in his back had been pulled. Still, these were early days indeed and we figured

it was just a slightly irritating teething problem that would soon settle down once we got under the calming influence of the ocean's swell. Besides, cash at this late hour had exchanged hands & hooks and there was no going back.

The tall buildings of Cartagena slipped from view; falling into the trap of darkness that swamped the watery world behind us. A starry night sky soon fell over the Comet and a few wisps of wind blew up and a swell began to roll. The following morning arrived and we'd already removed 30 miles from the bank of 250 between us and our Central American destination off the Panamanian coast. A watery sun fizzled above, burning off the dregs of night and all seemed well. We had been at sea for all of 13 hours and it was the last time that all would seem 'well' for quite a few days.

The low thrumming noise that had already become like a companion to our ears, a sort of soothing whisper that reassured us that all was good & well, suddenly died. The engine was dead. Silence fell over The Comet as all heads turned and all eyes fell on the plastic housing that hid the now defunct engine. We all stared at the blank plastic, no one saying a word...surely the Captain had the situation under control and we'd be underway again in a jiffy; surely he'd leap to action with a can of oil, a rag and screw-driver and get the metal hunk to breathe life again. 'Looks like we'll be sailing the remainder of the way,' said Carlos with a perplexed look splashed over his face that perfectly mirrored the gormless looks of the sailors gathered about him. Dealing with dodgy engines, it seemed, was not his strong point. I'm certain that it was no coincidence that the demise of our engine came at just the same time as a switch of character came about in the Captain's. From this moment on the man in charge became a true tyrant. The throttle to his mouth

slid into overdrive and from it spewed endless monologues of abuse directed at his shocked and floundering crew. No word of callous description, nor profanity or insult was left unattended for more than a few moments. Woe betide the poor soul who was asked to pull on a rope or twiddle a dial. Repulsive comments were bandied around willy-nilly like a mis-firing canon that threatened to explode in all directions at the same time...wherever you stood a shell of abuse was liable to land at your feet. Verbal shrapnel of armour-piercing brutality slashed away at the crew's morale from dawn to dusk. Vicious attacks that slashed and cut us down to our wicks. You could attempt to use a deflective smile or shrug of the shoulder against the harsh barrage but this was state-of-the-art weaponry being deployed and damage-limitation was only a fruitless exercise.

The wind dabbled in our sails but for the most part of the remainder of this second day, it left our fluttering canvas alone. The captain cursed and moaned, muttering under his breath that 'there be a Jonah aboard', then he went below to get some sleep and left the four of us in charge to 'do what we will'. With the peace and quiet still ringing in our ears, we set about lounging around on the cramped decks and one by one all fell asleep in the warm sun.

The first any of us realised that we'd been doing circles in the sea was when 'The Cannibal' woke up and came back on deck. 'The German' had knocked the tiller hard to port with a stretched limb in his slumber and as a result we'd been doing 1/2 mile donuts for over two hours and ended up going back some 7 miles towards Cartagena. Sadly, it seemed, we weren't doing ourselves any favours with the Captain's notion that we were a bunch of half-wits. With the tiller straightened and a new course set, the wind eventually

gathered itself together in the evening and mustered a puff to get us going forward again. Through the night we continued to make head-way but come morning as the sun came up, the wind again died and we were set to bobbing about without conviction and no forward progress. In fact, during this third day at sea, not only did we NOT move forwards but we actually managed to once again drift backwards...this time nearly 20 miles! All we could do was sit in silence and watch as a piece of bamboo floated past us in the opposite direction that we'd overtaken 5 hours previously. The current in the water was such that the puff of wind we held in our sails, merely slowed our rate of progress. AGONY!!!

The looks on the faces of my fellow crewmen said it all. We were struggling to raise a forced smile or see the funny side of the situation. Water was running low, batteries on MP3 players had long ago withered, the bananas had all turned putrid, the tin was empty and the Captain was seemingly reluctant to feed us. It seemed only a matter of time before we were all going to be fed one by one to the sharks and our Captain to eventually turn the way of Ziggy. Our trip would make all sorts of news items around the world and professionals would be left to psychoanalyse exactly where it all went wrong and why, for the most part, the satellite navigation records showed our course to run in large circles.

For five days we sailed on under the close attention of Captain Carlos, his hounding words of putridness, battering us with spat-evils from his hell-mouth like a broken record. We sailed in circles, we sailed backwards and on occasion we even managed to sail forwards. How we clocked up 250 miles I shall never understand. On the sixth day at sea when we had all just finished putting the finishing touches to our personal 'notes', we sighted land and lo and behold, later

that same evening we finally touched foot on dry land once again and found ourselves eating fresh fish and drinking cold cans of Coke.

The San Blas islands. Some describe them as being the finest island chain in the whole of the Caribbean and that after seeing them everything else is just a bit of a let-down. There are 400 individual islands to be explored but for the time being at least we were chuffed to discover just one of them. We rested for several days on El Pourvenir, drinking, sleeping, avoiding the Captain, dangling about in string hammocks over cool water, swimming and scribbling pictures in the sand with sticks. On the third day of rest the call to arms went up once again...it was time to get back on the boat. Our new destination was Porto Bello, mainland Panama, a further two days up the coast. With the engine still unwilling to purr, however, we all felt a sense of pending doom about the ensuing mission and all agreed that it'd be quite nice to just stay on the island.

Disaster struck the second leg of the voyage after only 10 minutes of our anchor being lifted. Under the watchful eye of our Captain, who by now must surely have been considering a return to his previous life of booze, we were making a steady bee-line for a rather nasty looking coral reef. White water crashed over the jagged rocks and it was all the Captain could do to get on the VF radio and issue an immediate mayday. Within moments a motor-powered skiff came whisking around the corner with a bare-skinned Indian at the tiller and towed us to safety. The Captain stood in the cockpit in his yellow underpants while the four of us stood in the bows trying to appear perplexed by our consistent run of bad luck and in no way insinuating that it was perhaps our Captain's own poor lack of judgement.

There was no wind whatsoever on the first day of sailing but come the evening at about 5:30pm, the wind dutifully picked up and moved us along at a steady 5 knots. Sleeping out under the stars was a lottery as breakers would frequently come over the bows and soak the victims who sought sleep on the bench in the cockpit but it was always a preferred option to that of sleeping below where the air was dank and funky. Many a cough and a splutter was heard through the night as sea water was taken down into the lungs via snoring portholes! The following day after making 28 miles through the night, the wind dropped and slowly at first we began to once again saunter backwards in the direction from whence we had come. By lunch we had lost 15 miles, by tea we'd dropped 23 miles and by the time the sun was starting to sink we'd gone back past the start line and were a few miles back extra on top of that. We'd been at sea since leaving El Porvenir for nearly two days and were less advanced than when we'd set out. Something had to change. The captain suggested that instead of us all pulling long faces and glum looks about the decks that we try some positive thinking and concentrate on summoning some much needed wind from somewhere. We all closed our eyes and began concentrating, the captain, standing in the cock-pit with no more than a pair of skin-tight yellow underpants on, held his arms in the air and swung his head back and shook it from side to side, his wild hair flowing out behind him. We all began massaging our temples and concentrating as the Captain started prancing up and down and chanting to the wind gods...nothing happened...30 minutes passed and all us crew were just starting to wonder about the worth of the exercise when I struck upon an idea. A light bulb flashed in my head...who's the one person I could call on to get the wind blowing again, get the boat moving...Grampa of course. The mightiest wind blower ever...5 minutes passed

and gradually a light wind blew up...it got stronger and stronger until the wind generator began to spin, the flag perked up and the weather vane began to show signs of life. It worked! The wind blew for 30 hours straight after that and all in the right direction as well. The Comet flew through the waters, the Captain still barked orders and insulted everyone, but little did it matter: we were sailing again and as chance would have it...in the right direction. Later the next day we arrived at Porto Bello some 12 days after we first set out from Columbia.

However, such was the loss of time on The Comet, that time was now a pressing issue. We made a few enquiries around the town and within only a few hours found another Captain who would take us further north to Bocos Del Torro.

We arrived yesterday lunchtime after doing battle for a further four days at sea. The progress was painfully slow all the way and there were times when we both seriously wondered if we were ever going to make it or whether this was all just a sick joke and there were secret cameras filming us as we gradually fell apart at the seams. It has been the better part of 2 weeks on small boats now. Peeing into buckets, sleeping in sweat-soaked sheets, eating tinned beans & tuna, drinking water that has been filtered through a swimming pool and wearily watching wind markers.

Here in Chirqui Grande near the Costa Rica border we have patched the bikes back together, fixed up cuts, bruised limbs and battered shins and are readying to push off north towards the border. At times these past few weeks it seemed like we would never make it thus far. Through those long afternoons spent bobbing about on the ocean as we listened to new slang from our Captain, eating lemon







jelly again with our hearts' captors in beloved Melbourne seeming like an impossible daydream away. It was all we could do to hang on to the thought that if we could just get back to land, then we'd be back on the bikes again and free to ride, ride, ride...free to point our wheels in the right direction and chase down our hearts' desires once more...

### **MONDAY, JULY 16, 2007: CHAIN BRAKES**

After disembarking in Panama we turned our backs to the Ocean and to every little boat on it. Still relishing everything land, we were finally presented with an open road almost devoid of traffic which cut through a lush land of banana plants, palm trees and dripping rain forest, a place where leopards prowl, monkeys chatter and birds of paradise sing, all to the constant comforting cacophony of the cicada and the rhythmical croak of the toad and frog. With bikes beneath us whirring away nicely over smooth tarmac we rode through a thousand shades of lush green, land cultivated by Panamanians who have lived in the same thatched, stilted huts for generations. A scent of fresh pineapple filled the air and the sun shone overhead, radiating a pleasant heat while the fresh breeze of motion cooled our skin. The bikes seemed to move on their own momentum as our effortless jaunt took us closer to Costa Rica. Ahhh, it was the perfect day to ride; invigorating, enlightening, full of clean- slate hope and light-hearted simplicity. Short, dark skinned Indian people smiled and waved as they saw us. Much to their delight we rang our silver bells vigorously in response. Goats bleated, cattle mooed and hundreds of butterflies of every colour fluttered by; some found their way across our path into the forest, others lived their last moments in our spokes: crunch! there goes another one.

By midday on this first day's ride the sun had become too

hot and the high humidity seemed to summon the sweat hiding beneath our skin. Soon our clothes were sodden and a suncream /sweat solution trickled into our eyes. Energy levels began to dwindle just as the beautifully flat road decided to undulate -but not gently at all- at such severe gradients that only the roads in the mountains of central China could compare, each undulation a mini-mountain. At first we merely widened our eyes and muttered "Blimey" as the road showed us its darker side. Later on it was an out and out "\$u%\* that, you 've gotta be %\*\*\$ing joking!" Our poor, ill-prepared chicken-stick legs wondered what they had done to deserve such punishment. Our lungs burned, lactic acid built up in our mouths like chewing gum and newly-formed bottom blisters popped and oozed onto our shorts. Here and there we found thatched shelters in which we sprawled to escape the sun, only to be plagued by troops of red ants, each igniting its own fire, our skin the kindling. Between ant brush-offs we distributed sweets for short-lived pleasure and energy.

The tropical heat, the shockingly steep hillocks and the fire ants should perhaps have been our only torments, yet our first day back on the bikes had one more inconvenience in store for us.

'Vrrrrrr, Grrrrr, Grrrrr, Grrrrr' , that dreaded sound! The chain brakes of one of those foul, snorting demons of the road, a truck. No hard-shoulder. Here it comes. "Brace!" 'Grrrrr, Shummmmm' and it had gone, vegetation flailing in its wake, a great white monster, moving at top speed on roads only wide enough for two small cars to overtake. The behemoth had passed as if it had never been, the sounds of the jungle returned and we were white with fear.

With the heat, the drastic undulations and now a death truck, our great big morning bubble had reduced in size considerably; five trucks later our bubble had burst. We were irritable, exhausted and our necks burnt with tension, yet before the mosquitoes came out to sup on our savoury blood we had covered a very respectable 100 ks and were only about another 100 ks' ride from the Costa Rican border. Our first day had been long but satisfaction and achievement reigned supreme and we remembered that tortures of the mind outweigh tortures of the body tenfold. We had got back to the essence of FWE.

#### **SUNDAY, JULY 22, 2007: EATING ICE CREAM IN THE PLAYBOY MANSION**

As Pink Floyd once wrote ...'is there anybody out there?' Slightly rhetorical I suppose as yes, we know there is; after all, our web-stats tell us so. But here we are entrenched in another Internet cafe with the bill racking up smartly, surrounded by porky, fizzy-pop-guzzling, crisp- munching kids screaming as they blast away furiously on the latest cyber war game, slapping the 'space' key as fast as their chubby little fingers can, death screams and death groans escaping their slobbering gobs as they kill and are killed yet again. But lately we've started wondering just who does read what we write? Who are the people who sit down and plod through these little black symbols which we place so diligently on LCD screens for the world to view? The 'Awstats' tell us that the good folk of the USA fly the flag as our chief readers, Australia is close up behind them, followed by the mysterious sounding country of 'Others' (still searching on our map). We're slightly perturbed by the Brits only making a weak entry at 7th in the rankings! But who is it in Afghanistan that's following us buffoons about the globe? Who are the people in Iraq or Ghana that are

tracing the trials & tribulations of the bozo-biking cousins and who on earth in Latvia is monitoring our progress? I guess we'll never find out, will we? And after all, imagination is far more interesting, you may say. The thought of a goat herder in Azerbaijan picking his nose and scratching his mosquito bites, or the girls of the Playboy mansion lying by the pool with cocktail in hand, dreamily twiddling with their thumbs as they eagerly await our next update, is far more romantic than the image of a bored office worker logging on to see 'what those two twerps are up to now'. Certainly, though, there are people 'out there' who write to us and tell us that they enjoy our antics & charades, even that they look forward to the next one. These people can count themselves as part of the engine that drives us on ...part of the motivational task force assigned to keep us pumping. Then there are the people who we hope check in on us from time to time: the girlfriends, the family, the friends, you know, the 'nearest & dearest' sort and then there are the people who we meet along the way: the people who hear the words 'actually we have a web-site, we'll have to give it to you' and then receive a scribbled, near illegible splodge of ink that crudely identifies the location of this, our web-site, on an oil-stained paper scrap. Perhaps one day we'll host a 'web-site readers party', an open invitation to all those who shared in our meanderings.

On with the bike ride...On day two we passed the border guards of the banana-loving nation of Costa Rica and from there galloped up the black-sanded coast towards Puerto Limon, the main port for the entire East coast of Central America and a hive of truck activity. It was like seeing the 'Mother Nest' for our evil, arch-enemy, the breeding ground where the death-munching truck monsters are spawned and receive orders to search out and destroy the blond

cycling wallies. The Spanish graffiti was often difficult to decipher but translating 'deatho to el bicycletto boyos', as we saw down one side street, was roughly translated and, we thought, to be particularly 'anti-us'. We imagined an ugly Volvo lorry stirring in the dead of night, trawling through the side-streets and dark alley ways, armed with spray cans and tins of red paint, then tagging signs of harmful intent towards our final destruction on the breeze-block walls. They hold secret meetings, you know; truck gatherings where they draw designs on how to 'get us'!

Well, the blighters gave it a damn good shot as we departed the Port of Lemons and on several occasions our chips were nearly up. 'This is worse than anything before...worse than Moscow even!' yelled Ben as another beast tore past, grazing our elbows. Was it worth the risk, was it really worth dying for, being maimed or seriously disfigured for...absolutely, and on we went, only this time we put our helmets on!

The days passed with frequent skirmishes and ambushes, a running battle that shook us to our gristle as we struck north-west, skirting the mountains and volcanoes. No casualties were taken but what, we asked, is the unseen damage...the mental scarring that is yet to present itself? Doubtlessly we'll be suffering in years to come with PFWEDTS (Post Free Wheels East Death Truck Syndrome). We did, however, have an ally against the terror bearers: 'Helado' or Ice cream. Reputed as being the finest in all the world and now confirmed by us as indeed being so, we'd gobble down tub after delightful tub of choc-chip, vanilla & vanilla choc-chip ice cream. Boosting the soul, drawing out our reserves, lining the belly with grit & fire and giving us a reason to continue...motivation to plug on and find the next creamy tub.

The scenery was an artist's palette of green and the wheels were a constant blur. Through Guapiles, San Miguel, San Rafael, Upala & Cecilia we pedalled the bikes. On the third day we swung off highway 32 and took to the more sedate tarmac of highway 4. The San Jose traffic was syphoned off, the sweet twittering of birds and lowing of cattle now replacing the roaring met menaces. The relief was palpable.

Rain fell from the skies in the late afternoon and evening, tumbling down from on high with metronomic timing. Just as our town, our target and final destination for the day was in our sights, just as the fresh hotel linen could be whiffed on the breeze and as the smell of fried chicken flavoured the air about us, the first fat drops would fall and by the time we arrived two minutes later we would be soaked to the bone.

Since our return, 600 kms have fallen under the sword... Nicaragua looms large and if we're to believe fresh reports, the ice cream is to get even tastier.

#### **THURSDAY, AUGUST 02, 2007: HYPER-SPEED**

They have such delicious sounding, exotic names; Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico... so pleasing to say, so satisfying to roll about the mouth. In truth, however, we didn't afford much time to these fairytale lands of pastures green and faces brown. No...regrettably not much time at all actually.

It was a deservedly proud moment when we rode the border line from Costa Rica to Nicaragua. Seldom do we grant ourselves the luxury of a slap on the back and a moment of self-congratulation...but these were extenuating circumstances that begged for hearty applause. Chins held aloft, bells chiming and mouths grinning, we raised our

water bottles and saluted our effort. Crossing the country had been no mean feat, no easy achievement. At no point did Costa Rica roll on to its back like a playful puppy dog and submit to the bite of our grim wheels. The bigger they are...the harder they fall.

Once again the red-shepard-sky was salivating with ferocious venom. Customs, tedious customs...we queue up, we get stamped, we're told we must pay to leave, we queue up, we get stamped, we're told we must pay to enter. The time was marching up to 1800 hrs, the light was as watery as Australian wine and fading fast and 'In a world where death is the hunter there is no time for regrets or doubts. There is only time for decisions' (Don Juan, the Yaqui Indian)...decide we did, regret it we did not and on a bus we did jump.

The blue & white bannered 'Tica Bus' company runs a VIP service from tip to toe of the linear Central American land space. Seats of squishy comfort that reclined like beds and air conditioning that froze us rigid. We hopped aboard for a portion, a slice, a slither, a mere fraction in fact of the distance and watched from hazy window as the rivers, lakes, volcanoes, mountains, villages, towns, cities and countries sidled by. I've never found a way to stop time, despite how I might try and actually at the moment I don't think I want to...in fact it's quite the opposite. It's a strange thing though and to an extent we all live our lives by the digital display (or double handed orb if you're a clever person) on our wrists. So many 24 hour slots fell in joggling darkness...outside in the night another country coming and going, inside another glance at the neon watch face and a scornful scowl as you see that only 5 minutes have elapsed since the last time you checked. Undoubtedly we want to return to this place, these places, these countries to explore the richness and

mystery that they boast in such abundance and so you find yourself wishing time to pass just a smidgen faster so as not to spoil the future flavour. In an effort to reach Piedras Negras, Mexico and Eagle Pass, Maverick County at the USA border by early August, we'd pressed fast-forward, hit the hyper-speed button and once again were square on target.

Have we mentioned that there is some rather exciting news regarding our Atlantic ship brewing? Initial contact has been made with our friends Mogens (Uncle Mogey) and Olli Anderson at Nordana Asia and the feedback has been more than a trifle pleasing. To be told that the shipping world is your 'oyster' is a wonderfully liberating thing. Viewing the shipping schedules has become like reading a menu at your local 'Soul Foods' restaurant.

Change comes around at a frenetic pace on this crazy adventure and it seems like another is just around the corner.

Six continents have now been plundered by FWE...only one remains...Africa!

#### **FRIDAY, AUGUST 24, 2007: TEX-MEX**

One family has been responsible for the well-being of FWE since our arrival in the United States: The Bolings of Eagle Pass. This great family who were complete strangers a few weeks ago took us in and made us honorary Bolings. Just before crossing the border, Ben had asked a Texan fellow for some advice. The advice was gladly given with a bonus as the man we were talking to was none other than the legendary Rob Bowling, head of the Bowling family, who immediately offered us his advice for riding in Texas: "The weather is bad ahead, there's flooding," he warned. "But it's

o.k for the time being. You can camp just fine by the side of the road and you'll find yourself a great big hard shoulder to keep you safe from the traffic, which there isn't too much of around here as long as you stay off the Interstate. If you want somewhere to stay here in Piedras Negras, there is a hotel just around the corner." At the time we thought this was the last we would see of Rob Bowling as he drove off in his truck with his wife Patty.

Outside the hotel Rob had recommended, we were planning our next move as the hotel was not only very expensive, but it was full too. There was a screech of tyres and round the corner came Rob Bowling and Patty in the truck! One of the electric windows lowered and Rob said in his mild Texan accent, "Why don't you boys come and stay with us?" This was perfect! "I live just across the border in Eagle Pass." He gave us an address in the Land of the Free, a couple of telephone numbers and we arranged to meet in half an hour for a Tex Mex BBQ! Neither of us could believe our luck. All we had to do was get into the USA, a task easier said than done. For no less than three hours we struggled with US customs who asked us every conceivable question before not stamping our passports. After both our personal, probing, booth interviews were over, we were eventually given the all-clear to cross into the States, "But you haven't stamped our passports," Jamie reminded the thorough officials. "Saary, I forgot," said the lady in charge who promptly added the stamps. That came just after nearly being sent down the big snake with its head at the top of the board for not having US currency to pay a \$12 entry tax. "We only have Pesos!" we'd explained, fully expecting that there would be some facility to change our money on 'the other side', but no: "Sarry sir, you're going to have to go back to Mexico." We managed not to lose it -although we were boiling inside- and used our

one phone call to call Rob Bowling, not only to apologise for our being three hours late, but also to ask him if we could borrow 12 bucks, and would he mind nipping down to the border to bail us out? "Sure!" said Rob who later apologised on behalf of his country for our being messed around in customs. "It's post-9/11 security gone crazy," he explained. The amusing thing is that we have never had our panniers checked in all the time that we have been on the road, not even at US customs. We could quite easily have filled our panniers with TNT. I guess the rule is that English fellows who look Swedish are unlikely to be deadly bike-bound suicide bombers.

Soon the border was behind us and we were good to go for three months in the U S of A. The Bolings' house was in a leafy suburb not far from the border, the perfect retreat. For 2 days we ate the finest food and drank the finest Whisky, we told stories in Rob's company and with our batteries topped to the brim we rang our bells in honour of the Bolings who stood outside their house waving good-bye with white handkerchiefs. We rode into the State of Texas where heat, trucks, ranches and chewin' tobacco rule.

In a small town in the middle of nowhere called Charlotte, at a crossroads in a gas station, the first theft of FWE history occurred. We had 140 bucks stolen along with our kitty made of Bolivian knitwear; we have passed through some of the 'most dangerous' countries in the world only to have our money stolen in Texas! As I'm sure you can imagine, that sort of money is a small fortune to us, perhaps a week's budget.

Contrary to our expectations, Texas is lush and humid with absolutely no tumbleweed and very few cacti. The Texan

ride has followed a road which stretches into the distance as far as the eye can see. Chunky farm pick-up trucks pass us as we pass entrances of ranches with names like 'Bob's Farm' and 'The Big Beef' carved out of steel and hung above gates, creaking in the wind.

Our cycling in the States has been a big game of cat and mouse played with thunderstorms; the last element you would have thought we would have to battle against in Texas was rain. Our arrival was timed pretty badly. Floods have been wreaking havoc across the state, some of the worst for decades. On one occasion -feeling quite miserable- we rode through a downpour to a service station where we stopped for a snack. Next to the counter was a stack of local newspapers; the front page of one showed a photograph of two men sitting on inner tubes floating down their street. Our bad luck was almost funny.

Another thing, we thought the States would be the one place where we would not have a problem finding supplies... Well, in the Texan countryside it is often no less than 40 miles between service stations and when it is not raining it is brain-boilingly hot: 40 miles without shade or refreshment and no emergency bedsheet like the one we used in the Peruvian desert is a recipe for disaster and on more than one occasion we came dangerously close to heatstroke.

Flash flood warnings dominated the news, hurricanes brewed in the gulf of Mexico. The cycling became more and more demoralising, time seemed to stop in its tracks. Ben got bitten on the toe by a spider which a few people thought might be deadly, but aside from the pain he was fine, thankfully it was not a rattlesnake. Rob had warned us to watch out for those. Then Ben's tent pole broke which

would have left us unable to camp with no escape from the rain or the mosquitos if we had not been able to fix it with gaffer tape. Then Ben's tent zip broke and the rain started coming in, but he managed to use his sewing kit to close out most of the rain. Jamie's tent did not break at all; it kept the weather out admirably.

The high humidity made us unbearably greasy and on our third day with no shower, soaked to the bone, unable to dry out our gear and feeling even more miserable we knew it was time for us to improvise a new plan...

#### **FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 07, 2007: CASTLES SEEN THROUGH A SPYGLASS**

After our weather-beaten arrival in the USA, Corpus Christi became our improvised destination. It's a small city on the Gulf of Mexico with a port.... and a Condo owned by none other than Rob Boling. "Take the keys and stay as long as you like," said the kindly Rob over the telephone. This was a Godsend, a golden chance for us to set up a FWE operations base for finding a ship across the pond without having to camp in the path of any hurricanes.

At the Corpus Condo we have all the facilities necessary for a fine HeadQuarters. Our final hurdle of almost three years -to cross the Atlantic by sea and ride on African soil- should be easy now that we have the very bare essentials, i.e access to the internet, a supermarket where we can buy budget ingredients for home-cooked meals, 2 swimming pools, an always-hot hot tub, sea views from a balcony from which we may be spectators to the sunrise and a beach to play on when we are not working hard. The water is as warm as tepid tea, and a marvellously refreshing escape from the Texan blast furnace. I should also mention that we are both

big fans of building sandcastles and pride ourselves on attention to detail; our ramparts, towers and turrets are built with unparalleled sandsmanship.

By and by, a few weeks of ship hunting and sandcastle construction later, we received one rather vital piece of shipping news from our friends at Nordana, this time the USA branch: "Dogger, moderate, Tyne, squalls; Free Wheels East you may board a vessel which will take you to your destination of primary preference, Northern Morocco. You will depart from Houston Texas. Bring sea sickness pills, you are going to be crossing the Gulf of Mexico in the middle of Hurricane season. This message will self-destruct when you are 40 feet west of Spyglass Hill. Good luck."

Our golden ticket home has been delivered to our trembling paws. Not only do we have the last piece of the puzzle, we know where it goes. Every continent and the history books are only one month away. Electric shocks of elation and disbelief ride the spine. This is such a vast piece of news that we cousins are left dumbstruck, incontinent and dripping with disbelief in its wake. The challenge in which we invested our lives over four years ago is soon to conclude. Can you believe that?

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2007: M/V FREDERIKSBORG**  
'M/V Frederiksborg' is the name of the steel cork which will float us across the Atlantic Ocean. Heavy lifts, break bulk cargo, project cargo, containers, yachts, planes, houses... the list of oddities which will accompany us goes on and on. We board in Houston on the 13th, set sail on the 14th and arrive in Africa on the 4th October. It will be the shortest of our four voyages, yet by the time we disembark in Casablanca it will have stretched our tally of sea kilometres and time-

at-sea to 50,000kms and four months...and still, all for the grand sum of zero pounds.

Corpus Christi has a strangely familiar feel this morning. An end-of-an-era touch about it. The streets all seem a bit quieter, the sun has lost its verve, the clouds are grey and heavy with moisture and yet there is an undertow of expectation and anticipation which permeates through from an unknown source.

Yesterday we filled our panniers with vital provisions that would sustain us for the journey ahead. On our last outing we'd seriously underestimated the required quantities to keep us going for the duration and on day three, after leaving Townsville, the chocolate eclairs were already extinct, the fizzy worms were dangerously depleted and the sour skittles were only marginally better off than the Werthers Originals.

So long Land Lubbers and fare thee well...

### **WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2007: THE FINAL COUNTDOWN**

It was on the 17th September that the Frederiksborg pushed off from a privately-owned port in Houston and began a 22-day voyage via Jacksonville and Baltimore to Casablanca.

Preparations were hampered by delays and stow-aways. Several desperate men had jumped aboard in the Dominican Republic and successfully hidden themselves for nearly three weeks amidst bundles of ropes, before finally being caught out in Texas and throwing the trans-Atlantic operation under the weight of yet more paperwork and protocol.

The kindness of Chris, our friend within the ranks of Nordana

USA, was extended beyond just passes to board the vessel and went on to encompass an evening, prior to departure, of sumptuous food, beers, whiskey, double-barrelled shot-guns and a night time session with an AR15 assault rifle. It was as surreal and fun as it sounds.

We arrived in Casablanca with the customary bouts of cabin fever and nervous anticipation of the road ahead. After the securing lines were cast down, we salute our Captain and his humble crew, waved a fond farewell and rode the bikes onto African soil. Continent seven had been achieved and with it came the completion of our challenge. All we had to do now was get back to England.

Today we are in northern Spain, tomorrow we'll be in France and the day after that in England...two years and seven months on from when we departed. For now we're focusing firmly on getting home in one piece...recent events, including our Atlantic crossing, the ride through Africa and the final leg through Europe will be revisited and detailed upon our return, but for now our minds seem preoccupied with a few other pressing matters.

These are magic days and yet, although the ride is coming to a close, perhaps the toughest challenge of all still remains.

#### **MONDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2007: STRIKE**

'The bloody French are on strike again' we were told by a family of Geordies at the train station; a father and two teenage sons. They had been holidaying in Malaga when the younger and skinnier of the two kids had got up in the night having had a few beers, sleep-walked onto the balcony of the apartment, thought he was in a hurdle race, vaulted the low railing and fell a full 5 storeys to the ground below. The next

thing he knew he was in hospital and in pain having broken just about everything there is to break in the human body. They were now desperately trying to get back to Newcastle with a son in a wheelchair on a non-existent French public transport system. All rail, bus and metro services were affected and through the great glass entrance doors that led to the platform area we could see a lifeless TGV train. Ah the French...how strange that an entire nation can be compared to a jar of malt extract. It all seemed somewhat symptomatic of our luck over the past few days. Everything we'd turned our attention to since leaving Anna Pretty's house in La Coruna had a hidden clause, a stumbling block waiting in the shadows to trip us up, a certain annoyance attached to it. Staying at Anna's house had been a relaxing time, a time to gather our thoughts and contemplate the next few days...the final few days.

In the evenings we ate Tapas in smoke-filled restaurants, drank beers, wine and coffee in the sun, then walked back to the flat in the old city along the cobbled streets, full with tiredness and ready for sleep. Since our days aboard ship, sleep had all but deserted us. At sea, tiredness, although it would always come eventually, liked to come along at an inconvenient moment which required you to push it aside, and after that it seemed never to stay long enough to take you away. Night times were spent staring at the ceiling, thinking, thinking, thinking. The mind was wired and charged, it would be bolt upright in your head knocking out thoughts, stirring anxiety and creating riddles of phantom emotion that simply had no answer, no remedy. Eyes became sunken and hollow while the body was plagued with lethargy.

Our days in Deportivo La Coruna provided a chance to change the cycle. For three days straight at Anna's flat we



caught up with the lost hours. Sleeping in until past midday, eating salami, cheese and chunks of bread then sleeping some more...just because we could. The bus from La Coruna took over 12 hours to work its way east over the top of Spain to the French border town of Irun. We slept all the way then cycled to the train station.

Now, however, we were utterly stuck. We spread a map of France on a bench and ran a finger over our intended route north. By the end of the day we somehow had to get from this nowhere town on the Spanish border to Dunkirk, a town just about on the Belgium border. It was nearly a thousand kilometres away and already it was fast approaching mid-morning.

A squat middle-aged woman who was dressed in a black headscarf was looking frantic. She wore dirty clothes and had eye brows which met in the middle. It turned out she was from a Baltic country and didn't speak any English. Her nightmare of getting to Paris was compounded further by her autistic daughter who was becoming more and more anxious with every passing moment. Another woman, a plump French lady, strode into the train station and immediately began shouting at the one man who was on duty; a volunteer who had come along to direct, advise and help people in any way he could. His information was limited of course, yet most who understood him were grateful for the slivers of insight that he was able to provide, but for this lady...who walked straight up to him and unleashed a barrage of abuse in an almost hysterical manner. Our French is only marginally better than our appalling Spanish, so the content of the rant was lost, but the tone of it certainly wasn't...and neither were the well-aimed gobs of green spit she was launching at his face. The raised voices and tension

were too much for the young autistic girl who reacted loudly to the erratic noises and chaos, sending her mother into an even deeper frenzy. It was a surreal and helpless scene that lasted for five minutes before the police arrived to calm everyone down and cart away the plump lady.

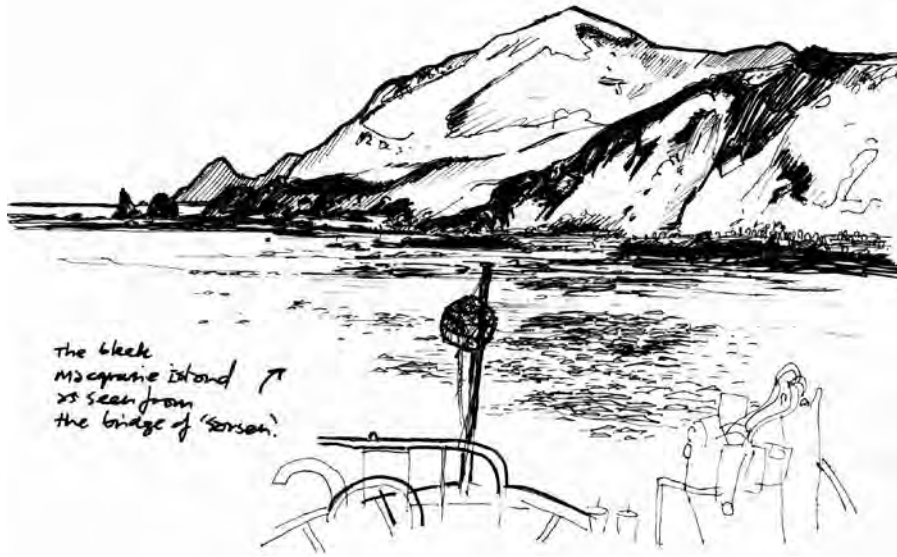
We had one option remaining and that was to hire a car from the Biarritz airport. Ideally we would have liked to have taken everyone with us, helped them all out if we could but the last, very last car the rental company had was a fairly small vehicle and it was all we could do to fit in the two bikes and a young American couple who needed to get to Paris.

We drove for nearly 9 hours almost without rest. The countryside became greener and greener and altogether more English looking the further north we went...there was even a chill in the air. The longer the day went on and the closer we got to Dunkirk, the quieter we became as a sort of recognition and realisation began to sink in with ominous weight. Through the centre of Paris we went, dropping Katie & Dan off at the door of their hotel and continuing on, straight out the other side. The first sign for Dunkirk loomed in the headlights; 250 kilometres still to go and it was now past midnight. The roads were quiet, the stereo only picked up a French fuzz and so the only sound in the car was the annoying clatter of a leaf that had got itself stuck in the air vents. I can't remember what time it was when we finally arrived in Dunkirk. Tired and unsettled by the emotion of the day, we found a dark car park by the water's edge, down near the back of the university, turned the engine off and slept upright in the car for the remainder of the night.

The following day, having collected our thoughts and

aimlessly walked the streets, we set our alarms for 5am and on Saturday morning crept quietly out of the hotel room and into the dark of Dunkirk. The ferry was due to leave at 8am so we had plenty of time. The previous evening we'd found time to set up at a bar and have a few beers. They were all of local import, just across the border in Belgium and with a reminiscing chat had washed away the entrenched anxiety that had been building over the past few days. That morning, though, as we pedalled the final few miles of Free Wheels East and with our heads now fuelled with a hangover, we felt utterly spun around and bewildered with everything that was, and soon would be, taking place.

**With eight diaries each, containing over a million words, with thousands of pieces of artwork - one each for every day - plus a vast collection of unpublished photography, not to mention the film narrated by Peter Coyote and the rest footage that never saw the light of day; the blogs really are the tip-of an iceberg, part of an enormous body of material... But even with this journey so well documented, as the physical expedition concluded, neither Jamie nor Ben wrote a single word in their diaries or typed a final blog; having diligently kept such a detailed account for so long, neither know why the end of this three year odyssey was never told? But perhaps that's it? Maybe there is no end to the adventure - by never finishing the story, Free Wheels East would never conclude, it would live on, forever.**

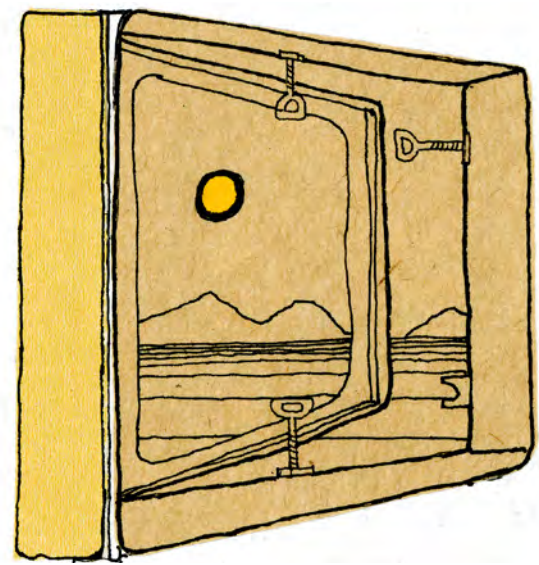


The Greek  
Mycenaean island  
as seen from  
the bridge of "sonen."



word: gallery.

counting the  
days  
proceeds.



Jouie and I ~~needed~~ a more anthropological ~~approach~~ to historic approach to taking pt dumps. There was no argument, we simply threw stones, targets; a boy mistaking the channel for slipping; no archer of even Jouie with his most powerful arm, a can; missed by 10, a white log and another can, both hit. Along the beach others were trying to hit the boy too with no luck. "They throw like girls" said Jouie - easy for the physically superior to say I thought, but then agreed with Jouie as she said with barely made a 5th of the distance Jouie'd made 5 times earlier. A coffee helped me write this.



Jack (my brother)  
as he writes  
his diary.

word: Lake Bykyl  
G.P.S: ~~15.250' E 10~~ NS2°17.020 E/104°15.554'  
25.06.05

I woke with the sound of Jack leaving the room to go on his early

23.03.07.



path in  
road  
looking

A day of travel and a night  
too for first winter. Lost



petronas towers  
city <sup>scorpe</sup> from head!

23.1.06.

Damn it, no loo-roll. At reception, no loo-roll, at 7/11 no loo-roll, only a box of tissues, that'll do. 2 <sup>hot</sup> coffees, tissues in hand I head back to the room. "Is that for me?" asked Joanie rhetorically as I gave him a coffee. "yup." ~~now~~, I've got to go." I grabbed the tissues, headed to the loo, did what I had to do, walked out <sup>scudmanish</sup> ~~hit smoothly~~ to find a ~~person~~ <sup>man</sup> cleaning his.



Self portrait.

