

# To Hell on Earth and other cycle tours

**Is it wanderlust, a craving for adventure or just plain curiosity that has taken Ian Hibell - and his bicycle - to 112 countries in 5 continents, and twice to the brink of death? BA visited a modest English cottage to find out what makes a globetrotter tick.**

ON ONE side of the river in the middle of Colombia's Atrato Swamp was Major John Blashford-Snell. With him were a couple of Range Rovers, a medical team, film crew, a troop of soldiers from the British Army Expeditionary Force and a gunboat from the Colombian Navy. They were attempting to make the first crossing of the Darien Gap, a 100-kilometre stretch of wilderness dividing South and North America. On the other side of the river was Ian Hibell. With him were two companions, three rucksacks, three bicycles and two machettes. For twenty-six days they had hacked their way through the swamp with their bikes; the first people to cross the dreaded Darien Gap on foot.

Hibell and his two companions had nearly died in the Gap. When they reached the river and, the safety of the island village of Traversia, they were each living on three spoonfuls of dry oats a day. They were drinking water straight from the swamp. It wasn't the first time Hibell has been close to death.

A solo crossing of the Sahara desert resulted in the closest shave - separated from his bike, with no water and no food, he was found by a passing Toureg. 'I was

prepared for death, I wasn't frightened. But I was really annoyed by the thought that when they found me, they'd think I was a fool. There's such a fine line between fools and heroes.'

Hibell has spent the majority of his adult life trying to stay on the right side of that line, pedalling his bike into some of the most remote and dangerous places on earth.

Yet, at home in Brixham in South Devon, the man who opens the door of the detached terrace looks anything but the archetypal adventurer. He is a small man, who greets you with an almost-nervous smile, offering tea and sandwiches in a quiet voice.

He talks about his adventures readily and with relish. But there is no bravado about him, no air of 'I have conquered the world'. He is not asking you to be impressed; rather a gentle and unassuming man is enjoying sharing his experiences and, by jove, he hopes you're enjoying listening to him. But if Hibell's stature and demeanour somehow don't quite square with the magnitude of his achievements, it is only one of the many paradoxes about him.

The man who has spent the majority

of his quarter-of-a-million touring miles alone says that he needs and wants company.

The man who, for thirty years, has eschewed the lifestyle of his peers - job, marriage, children - says he wanted more than anything else was to be a proper father.

The man who has seen more of the world and









**THE Huascarán National Park in the Peruvian Andes contains twenty-seven peaks over 17,000 feet. Getting to the tops meant some tough climbing. Once there though, the reward is an endless vista of downhill. Hibell and Laura (pictured left) spent almost two months exploring one of the most beautiful areas on earth.**

experienced more danger and excitement than most people ever dream of, lives quietly with his mother, tending the garden and riding his bike.

In the Hibell's small kitchen the pink wallpaper has faded unevenly. You can still see from the faded squares where the postcards were once proudly pinned. They were Mrs. Hibell's means of monitoring her son's progress around the world. 'Now', says Hibell, 'I'm tired - very tired. It's not as fresh now. Even going to a new country is getting routine.'

It is the complaint of a man whose dream is fading. On a Cyclist's Touring Club trip to Iceland while in his twenties (he is now a reluctant 51), he realised that



all five of his companions had dreams of travelling to far off places. 'I also realised that it was highly probable that none of them would do it.' Hibell was determined he would.

But, he has paid the price. He says he has no regrets about taking off ('I always knew I couldn't have done anything else') but he does regret 'blowing it at the end'. It is a reference to a sadness that hangs over his life now - the breakdown of his relationship with Laura and his estrangement from her and their son, Jamie.

The pair met at a lecture Hibell gave about his travels and, after a brief conversation, agreed to travel to South America together. You get the feeling that a permanent relationship was Hibell's idea of how his life should come full circle: he had taken off in his twenties, had spent years travelling and taking on new challenges - mostly alone - and now he was ready to share his life with someone and, importantly, to become a father. Laura was the woman he was going to do it with.

In his book, *Into the Remote Places* (Sphere £2.95), Hibell talks of the time with Laura (or 'Jean' as she is called in the book) in the Andes with a tenderness that doesn't surface in any of the other adventures: 'What did it matter, I thought, if we spend the rest of our lives in these mountains. What did anything matter except us'. Sadly it didn't work out like that. Hibell explains: 'it was one thing to live with someone in my world', quite another when back in England.

Perhaps you can be on the road for too long. The resources you muster to survive the hardship, the discomfort and the variety of emotions involved in travelling the world for years at a time, do not equip you for living a quiet life in England.

Hibell thought he could, and indeed, spends his time back in Devon riding in the countryside and tending the quarter-acre garden at the rear of the cottage. But he has a wanderlust he doesn't properly understand: 'Every so often a bird gets up and flies some place that it's drawn to. I don't suppose it could tell you why, but it does it anyway'.

It has been like that ever since he can first remember. He blames his father for the fact that a bicycle accompanies him on these strange trips. It was a precedent established when the family couldn't afford the combined rail fare from Brixham to Hove for the annual holiday. While Mrs. Hibell and Ian's brother took the train, Ian and his father set off on bikes.

They went at an easy pace; whenever Hibell senior needed to change gear, he would get off and make Ian walk. Arriving in Slough in the afternoon, they headed to a cinema where they 'sat through five or six performances; the idea being to make me go to sleep. Then we started riding through the night and ended up sleeping on some park bench - he lying one way, me the other, both of us in our cycling capes.' He was eleven years old.

Father and son trips continued for the

next three or four summers. 'What happened then, though was that we started talking in terms of riding from England down to Capetown. In fact it was one of those fantasy games that father used to encourage me in. I thought he was deadly serious. The irony is of course, I did do the journey, but it took me another thirty years.'

The RAF finished what Hibell senior started. Ian was in the Air Force for four years. He took full advantage of the free transport provided. He got stuck in Kenya during the Suez crisis; visited Ceylon, India, Pakistan and the Middle East; overstayed his leave; wrangled



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more leave than entitled to and was officially declared AWOL. He decided the RAF wasn't for him.

Two and half years as an inspector with Standard Telegraph and Cable convinced him that it, too, wasn't for him. He took off to Iceland with a small CTC group, returned 'disgusted' with the state of his fitness, did something about it and took off. Initially, the plan was to take two years, see some of the world and return to England and a job. He arrived back ten years later.

He hasn't stopped since. The major Hibell journeys have a wonderful symmetry about them; they're always going from somewhere to somewhere: Tierra del Fuego to Alaska; North Cape of Norway to the Cape of Good Hope; East to West across the widest point in South America.

They also take in a variety of interesting and, well, challenging terrain. Like

the Darien Gap. And the Sahara. And the Andes. Of course, there's always a jungle or two, or a wild animal, or a ten week detention by the police or an epidemic - something to keep the interest bubbling.

The truth is, when those sort of experiences become the norm, you can't fit within other people's norms. You are someone strangely at odds with others around you. While they seem content to lead 'ordinary' kinds of lives, something they don't feel (or which they hide) stirs within people like Hibell. And the love and loyalty normally reserved for family and close friends gets dissipated - left in bundles around the world.

Hibell has felt it. In Mexico, cycling with an abscess which needed immediate hospital treatment he couldn't afford, he was taken in hand by a couple, his hospitalisation paid for, and food and lodging provided for three months. Or in Indonesia - Hibell's favourite country - where he was forced to sit out the Monsoons and spent the time learning the language and became part of a family.

And the Sudan where Hibell was quarantined and 'John', who looked after him, became 'more like a brother than my own brother back home'. The traveller leaves all these people behind and in the end, Hibell admits, 'you begin to feel like a bit of a fraud'.

Back in 'Devon, in the cosy sitting room that looks out onto the street, Hibell is surrounded by only three reminders of nearly thirty years on the road. There is a framed picture from the Saharan crossing; a certificate from the League of American Wheelman 'saluting the extraordinary accomplishment of Ian Hibell and his 18,244 mile, 2 year, 9 month and 16 day bicycle trip from Tierra del Fuego to Alaska...and his ten year journey around the world by bicycle...'; and a special award from the CTC in commemoration of his 'services to cycling'.

When Major Blashford-Snell crossed the Darien Gap, he received a letter from the Queen, and the plaudits of the British public. When they screened the documentary about his journey on British television, Hibell and his two companions were edited out. He says he is not bitter and you believe him. Equally though, you know that as he sits in Devon, without an income, contemplating what he will do next, he feels just a little cheated.

Hibell is unsure what he'll do next. He knows he's unemployable in the conventional sense: 'I've moved too far away from that - I think I'd probably bungle an ordinary job'. If the book is successful, he will write another: 'There's plenty left to tell'.

Hibell will undoubtedly go on travelling. Always lurking however is what all travellers discover. It is something Hibell quotes his Sudanese friend 'John' telling him in his book. A Masai saying: 'Epwo m-baa pokin ingitin'got'. It means, 'everything must come to an end.'

*Ian Hibell's book, 'Into the Remote Places', written with Clinton Trowbridge is published by Sphere Books, priced £2.95.*