

Salt Flats, Dancing Guards & Deep-Water Crossings

Five years
around the
world on a
motorcycle.



Rene Cormier

Right, top: Crossing the shallow edges of Lake Turkana, Kenya. Right, bottom: A lunch stop with a travel companion at Lake Assal, Djibouti.





Above: The roads in Tajikistan.

Left, top: Cormier rides the twisties in South Africa. Left, middle: Don't judge a Russian military checkpoint soldier in Tajikistan by his fatigues...he may strike a pose or do a pirouette! Left, bottom: Rene Cormier before his trip talk.



It was when Rene Cormier was pulled over in Tajikistan that a man in fatigues with an assault rifle asking about official documents made a sudden move.

He threw his firearm into the hands of Cormier's travel companion, Guillaume, and started to pirouette.

Cormier had stopped his BMW F 650 GS Dakar and was offering to take photographs to ease the tension at this Russian military checkpoint on the southern border of the small country. It seemed to bring out the inner ham of an underutilized, underpaid soldier.

Let's go back to the beginning....

In 2003, Rene Cormier was the communications manager for Colorado-based RockShox when he discovered a Chicago firm was buying the bicycle suspension manufacturer. He would need to move with the company. He declined the new position and instead roared off from Colorado Springs to Alaska on a used orange BMW R 1150 GS. It would be Cormier's first big trip on a motorcycle.

Good conditions and enjoyable roads allowed Cormier to consider his future plans as a soon-to-be-unemployed communications specialist. What would he do upon his return? The answer would come to him. Two Colombians, traveling on the same model motorcycle Cormier was riding, convinced him to ride to South America. They told him Spanish was easily learned, accommodation was cheap and the women were beautiful. Cormier was in. He would ride for a year solo through South America. But first he would ride to Colorado to finish up his work with RockShox. He had an epiphany in his helmet on the way down: Why not continue past South America? Why not ride around the world?

By Trevor Marc Hughes



Mouse, Anyone?



Baobab Tree

Left: Riding the dirt and gravel of Mongolia. **Center:** Cormier contemplates some roadside cuisine (mouse, anyone?) in Malawi. **Right:** Cormier parks his F 650 GS Dakar next to a massive baobab tree in Zambia.

Time? He had plenty of that. Money? With a little research, Cormier believed he could do it for \$25/day. Fuel, food, beer, Internet café, camping. OK. He would sell everything he owned to finance the trip.

"I thought the route was going to be easy," Cormier tells me at Vancouver BMW Ducati, where he is hosting a presentation on a rainy Thursday evening. "From Canada I'd spend one year riding to South America. I'd spend year two going from Africa to Russia and year three going from Russia to Australia and New Zealand then back to Canada. What could go wrong?"

A year later he found himself riding a BMW F 650 GS Dakar with his eyes closed across the Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia, the world's largest salt flat.

"It was actually kind of terrifying," Cormier admits. "But it was a cool thing to do."

The Salar camping experience was one of the most memorable of the trip.

"You find the campsite by pulling the clutch lever in and coasting to a stop," he says. He would camp under the stars at nearly 12,000 feet, his bike covered in salt, while he played a ¾-scale guitar he bought in Mexico and bunged to the bike.

He rode Ruta 40 and made it to the southern tip of Argentina. He found himself back in Canada, in Edmonton, where he slept on his brother's couch for a year and gathered the funds to return to motorcycle travel full-time. After that time, he crated his F 650 GS Dakar and shipped it to Johannesburg, South Africa.

He would soon find himself riding on compacted sand in northern Kenya past herds of wandering camels. Standing up on the pegs, he found comparisons to skiing. But, like skiing, he found weaving his bike through sand exhausting.


One day, traveling 100 miles took seven and a half hours. Then finding a campsite on the shores of Lake Turkana proved not to be easy. The guard at Sibiloi National Park told Cormier that it was an "easy" road, which turned out to be a 12-mile dead-end road of sandy riverbed and deep water crossings. When he arrived Cormier found no other campers.

After five years of travel, Cormier returned to Vancouver, his point of origin. At the helm of his GS, no day was the same, but each was an adventure. Although he wouldn't stick to his original plan, he would ride through North, Central and South America, Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, Mongolia and Russia.

It was back in 1992, as a biology student traveling in Kenya, that he first looked on in admiration as he was passed by motorcycles packed for long-term travel: three dusty BMWs loaded with fuel containers and spare tires. Cormier still thinks motorcycle travel is the best way to journey to distant horizons.

"I think I had some pretty remarkable foresight at that time," he says with a smile. "That style of traveling...I still think it offers the best way to see a new place," Cormier tells me as we chat surrounded by adventure motorcycles on the showroom floor at Vancouver BMW Ducati. "For exploration, for smelling, for seeing...with just enough risk that makes the reward very sweet."

Cormier's background in communications served him well when he began his own motorcycle touring company, Renedian Adventures. Throughout the year, he organizes and launches guided tours of southern Africa and Mongolia. This year he'll start offering adventures through South America.

"It's a dream job," he says, smiling. 

Right: Arriving at Cape of Good Hope. **Far right:** In Namibia, Cormier reaches the Tropic of Capricorn.

