

A Personal Perspective of the Eastern Cape - 8 Passes Trip 15 to 23 Jan 2011:

by Geoff.Edwards

I bought a 1200GS just less than two years ago. I had started riding road bikes again after a gap of about 30 years but after 2 years on tar and watching Long Way Round I felt that there must be more to motorcycling than tar.

Voila, buy a GS and all will be solved, I reasoned. I bought the GS and had my illusions shattered. The bike is big and heavy and although I do not like to admit it, I was scared of the beast. Off to Nelsons Creek for the beginners course – that should fix things, I thought. The course was very good but the bike stayed big and heavy and I stayed scared and so rode on tar for the next 18 months. It is very nice to ride a GS on the tar and as all my biking friends ride road bikes so it was easy to ignore the true purpose of the GS.

Then in September last year I went on Andy's first Tesselaarsdal run – my first run on gravel. I enjoyed it so much that I went on the second one as well this time with my wife, Jane, as pillion. I can really recommend these rides to those new to adventure riding.

My third outing on gravel was with GeoffR to Piketberg. Much more demanding but also enjoyable.

Early in November I saw the notification for the Eastern Cape ride and immediately put down my name, expecting something similar to the Piketberg run. Little did I know...

I went on one more gravel road run with Andy, put knobbles on my bike, packed according to Geoff's list and presented myself at the N2 Onestop on Saturday 15 Jan at 06:15 in all my glory. Four gravel road rides under the belt and ready to tackle whatever the Eastern Cape could throw at me.



The author

There I found 15 bikes, one backup vehicle with trailer and 17 companions. Three of the bikes had pillions (husband and wife teams) and John and Des were in the backup vehicle (also a husband and wife team).



Departure point

I discovered that I had left my Camelbak at home. I realised that this was a serious omission when Geoff asked whether I would like to go and fetch it which would have delayed the start. Gunther saved the day by offering me his Camelbak saying that he had brought it along but had never had the need to use one. I hoped that this was true and accepted his offer. I was later to discover that whenever there was a problem and Gunther was nearby he would step into the breach immediately - a staatmaaker in every sense of the word.

After a briefing by Geoff we set out for PE along the N2 – the longest trip I had ever undertaken in one day by bike.



Staggered formation to PE

We stopped for petrol (I can't remember where), ate lunch at the Wimpy in Plett, made a detour through Nature's Valley, picked up Hilton and Du Toit along the way and arrived at PE in the late afternoon around 5pm.



Knysna - Hilton joins the group

We stayed at the Town Lodge in PE and were booked in very efficiently, and learned with whom we would be sharing...did he snore?? I shared with Du Toit that night. I discovered that he had retired early and was living life to the full, riding his motorcycle around the country. In fact, he left us in Lady Grey to visit his sister in Estcourt, and then ride up Sani Pass alone. And no, he didn't snore.



PE - 780km later

After checking in and washing ourselves, we met at a pub across the road – Barney's, I think – for a drink, then moved next door to the Blue Waters restaurant, where we had an excellent meal and got to know one another.

Day 2. 16 Jan 2011

The morning began with a small but adequate breakfast. The bikes and backup vehicle were packed and we set off northward on the N2 in good weather and in high spirits.



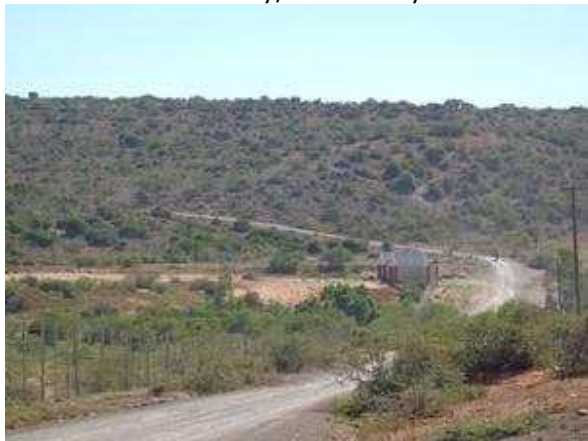
Morning briefing

I think that we turned onto the N10 and after a short distance turned onto gravel. I am not sure of the routing thereafter but we passed through Alicedale, Riebeeck-East and refuelled at Adelaide.



IDs please!

The weather was lovely, the scenery was beautiful and the road surface was easy. I was in biker's heaven.



Stunning #1



GeoffR in full flight - well sort of

This continued after Adelaide and until I had my first off. I think that it was also the first off of the tour and caused me to drink a straflop that evening.

There had been heavy rains in the area and now and then there were washaways across the road. I had already negotiated a few without a problem until I arrived at one which caused me some concern and which also caused me to forget everything I had been taught.

There was a slight drop of 300/400mm, a little bit of sand and then some small rocks to cross. I forgot to gear down and stayed in third gear, I looked at where the front wheel was going and gingerly proceeded. I made it down the drop and across the sand, but when I opened the throttle to cross the rocks, the bike stalled and over it went. Luckily I could remain on my feet and the only damage done was to my ego.

Stan who was riding behind me had the good grace not to photograph my indignity and helped me lift the bike.

The easy riding continued with beautiful scenery and only the odd wobble on a few small stretches of sand.

Then I arrived at the foot of the Katberg Pass. I had never heard of this pass and in fact didn't even know that it was on our route.



Really?



Slightly more interesting roads!





Nothing that I had learned or read prepared me for what was to come. If I had known I might have even turned around. To call it a pass is a gross exaggeration bordering on fraud. It may have been a pass some decades ago but certainly not now. It is a very steep, very rough and very uneven path littered with the debris from decades of rockfalls.

The old cliché still holds true and this fool rushed in. It took all of my limited skill to remain upright while the bike skidded on loose stones and bounced over rocks and other obstacles while the path became steeper and the bends became tighter. It became a juggling act to maintain momentum on one hand and a safe speed on the other.

I was in a sort of never-never land where I was performing way beyond my ability and somehow surviving.

The path got worse and worse. And steeper and steeper. Around every bend I hoped to see the top but it didn't come. The path just went on and on. I was drenched in sweat and becoming increasingly worried. Disaster had to come.

Brent, who had been riding in front of me, had vanished from sight. I rounded a bend and to my horror I saw his bike standing on its tail with its nose at 90 degrees up an embankment. I was relieved to see Brent standing near the bike looking at it, apparently uninjured. Thinking back, I would love to know what was going through his mind at that moment. At the time I didn't think to ask.



Brent on Katberg

By the time I had parked the bike others arrived. We managed to get the bike down and then rode a short distance to where the others were waiting.

The backup vehicle arrived after a short while and we were treated to ice cold soft drinks from the cooler box. It is impossible to describe the pleasure of drinking an ice cold Coke in those circumstances. The break also gave me an opportunity to gather my scattered wits. Brent's fall had un-nerved me. If he had gone to the left, instead of the right, he would have gone down the side of the mountain. That would have been ugly.



Ice cold cooldrinks!

After a while we set off again. Somehow I ended up riding with no one else in sight, neither ahead nor behind. I started traversing some very rough ground – in third gear- and the bike stalled. Over it went again. I get so pissed off with myself when I fall through stupidity, and for the second time that day. I picked up the bike by myself, got started and reached the summit.



Anne and GeoffE (just after Brent's off)

My relief was short-lived when I realised that it was not a plateau and I still had to go down the other side.



Andre

I must pause here to give a very respectful salute to the riders with pillions – David, Martin and Trevor. How they managed (not just Katberg but throughout the trip) I just don't know. Very impressive. I had wanted Jane to come along but I am glad that she couldn't get leave.

Another very respectful salute to their wives – Annine, Elsa and Sian. To pillion in those conditions takes guts. I noticed that all of the women on the trip (Annie and Des too) had a similar air about them – one of tranquil serenity. I wonder whether it is caused by their husbands or the bikes. Come to think of it, Jane also has that air – it must be the husbands. Very special women, all of them.

While all this saluting is going on, on top of Katberg Pass, I must salute John and Des in the backup vehicle. For me, it was a tremendous security blanket/safety net knowing that they were not far behind should anything go wrong. And John drove that vehicle, pulling a trailer, along the same roads and tracks that the bikes used. Impressive.

Back to the riding. I found the going pretty tough at the beginning of the descent and I let the bike get the better of me. I was just sitting on it while it went down the slope. I realised that it was dangerous and came to a stop in order to try to get a handle on things. Du Toit, who had been riding behind me, noticed what had happened. He pulled up next to me and gave me a couple of useful pointers which, when put into practise, made things easier for me.



Trevor/Sian, Andre, David/Elsa

Thereafter, the going became easier and I started to enjoy the ride again. There were waterfalls and forests and it had started raining which cooled me off nicely.

Then rounding a bend, I saw two bikes down. Brent and Andy. Apparently, Brent had gone down and Andy had dropped his own bike to avoid going over him. The bikes were lifted and we rode on until we came to an intersection near a small settlement. Here we donned rain gear which frightened the rain gods away. In fact, I think it was David's yellow rain suit that did it. Even the police came to look.



Who is afraid of the rain?

A short stretch of gravel and then on tar via Queenstown, where we refuelled, and Elliot to the Mountain Shadows Hotel which is on the R58 between Elliot and Barkly-East.



Mountain Shadows

We were very well received. The owners and staff were prepared for our arrival and the checking in ran smoothly. Hilton and I shared a room. He is an accomplished rider and I was to learn a lot from him during the trip. And no, he didn't snore either.

We met in the pub for drinks and then had an excellent supper during which the strafdoppe were administered. After supper it was back to the pub. I did not stay long. I am not very sociable and, with my hearing failing, I struggle to hear in a noisy environment. In addition I was bushed from the day's riding.



Drink anyone?

I went to bed and fell asleep. During the night I woke up with cramps in both legs. The cramps wouldn't subside so I got up and walked around the car park a couple of times. When the legs felt better I went back to the room. Hilton woke when I entered the room and asked what the matter was. Upon hearing about the cramps he gave me a sachet of Rehidrat which cured the problem and I went back to sleep. Hilton advised me to drink Energade during the day in order to avoid cramps. I followed his advice and the cramping did not recur.

Day 3. 17 Jan 2011.

Mountain Shadows is an excellent establishment set in a very picturesque area in the mountains and is owned and managed by a husband and wife team. We were made to feel very welcome by them and their staff. The public area (reception, dining room, pub etc.) is in one building while the rooms are laid out in a U around the car park with the public area being in the mouth of the U.

They receive some heavy snowfalls in winter and have pictures of the hotel covered in snow hanging in the reception area.

I would like to return to the area with Jane later in the year for a leisurely tour and will base myself here for a few days.

We awoke in the morning to find a low cloud base which caused a change of plan. Geoff decided to do the Otto du Plessis during the morning and tackle the Bastervoetpad during the afternoon in the hope that the cloud would have lifted, the Bastervoetpad being higher than Otto du Plessis.



Itinerary and instructions for the day

We set off after a good breakfast and headed back to Elliot where we refuelled. Just outside Elliot we turned onto gravel and had a wonderful ride over the Otto du Plessis Pass. The road surface was good, we crossed streams and rode up hill and down dale in the most idyllic surroundings. And all in good weather. The farm animals we saw were in magnificent condition. We stopped near the summit of the pass and enjoyed the scenery which included a beautiful waterfall.

The following photos of the morning's ride really don't need captions!









The Eastern Cape is truly a place of superlatives when it comes to scenery. I get the impression that the locals are proud of their area. I don't remember seeing any litter and, although the people are poor, the settlements that dot the country side were clean and the dwellings well maintained.



Eastern Cape roadsigns sure are confusing

We eventually reached tar and headed to Barkly-East where we refuelled. Then back to Mountain Shadows for lunch. After lunch we set off via the Bastervoetpad, Ugie and Maclear for Tsitsa Fall Backpackers where we were going to spend two nights.

The Bastervoetpad begins right over the road from the hotel and the road soon turned rocky and difficult as we climbed into the clouds. It wasn't as bad as the Katberg Pass but still tough. And guess what. While traversing a difficult patch I was too slow in third gear, the bike stalled and over I went. I kicked my butt so thoroughly before I

picked up the bike that it didn't happen again on the trip. The stalling that is, not the falling. I don't mind falling when I run out of skill but being in the wrong gear so often is just stupid. Especially when you know that you are going to fall over if you stall.



With a little help from my friend(s)



2143m - on the way to the summit (2245m)



View from just below the summit



On the way down





Fun around every corner ...



and then some more



Fantastic scenery too!

What I found incredible is that my bike suffered no damage at all during the trip and I was still to fall several times more. I had fitted Wild at Heart crash bars which might have something to do with it. The only problems that the bike gave were a blown headlight bulb (and Geoff had brought spares along) and an engine mounting bolt that vibrated out – but more of that later.

The clouds had lifted by the time I reached the summit and I joined some fellow riders enjoying the view, which was spectacular. We set off down the other side and on rounding a bend, stopped in horror. There was section of road that had been churned up beyond belief, partly mud and partly sun-baked clay. How on earth was I going to cross this? – there appeared to be no way round.



GeoffE lines up to cross the mud monster



The alternate - no mud – route

The bikes were going across one by one, some falling, some making it. And then it was my turn. I approached the obstacle with trepidation and, with Andy and Gunther giving guidance, advice and support, I made it across. I was so relieved at having made it across that I hurtled down the rocky uneven path with the clutch pulled in, to where the rest of the crew were waiting. Geoff had noticed this and advised me never to go down hill in an uncontrolled manner with the clutch pulled in as it could cause me to do funny things with the brakes. I took the advice to heart and it stood me in good stead for what lay in the days ahead, particularly on day 5.

Once everyone was across, we set off again. The surface was still rocky and uneven but not too bad. We stopped for a rest in a forest at the foot of the pass. Most of us were knackered by this time and lay on the grass drinking cold drinks from the backup vehicle.

A few more photos as we continued descending







Finally, a chance to rest

From there on it was an easy ride to the tar road which lead through Ugie and Maclear to the turnoff to Tsitsa Falls. It took a short ride on gravel to reach the backpackers. We had some rain on the way and the coolness was very welcome.

The back packers is situated on a 80 ha farm and is run by Adi and his wife Angie, who live there with their toddler daughter and three dogs. Both had previously been adventure tour guides, white water rafting and so on. They chanced upon the farm during one of their expeditions, decided to buy it and turn it into an adventure destination. The buildings were derelict when they moved in. Much has been accomplished so far and they have done well. This is still a work in progress and I hope that they succeed in their endeavors. The accommodation is rustic in the nicest sense of the word, with no electricity and water heated in a donkey.



Approaching Tsitsa Backpackers



The buildings are set on top of a hill surrounded by mowed lawns and overlooking a valley, through which a river runs, with the most beautiful views. A very peaceful place. It would be an ideal spot to chill for a few days if you were in the area.

We met Vernon Bosch when we arrived. He is a club member who has moved to Uvongo and had ridden all the way to join us for a couple of days.

Because of accommodation constraints some of the couples had to be split up during our stay. I shared a dormitory with bunk beds in an outside building with Martin, Brent, Andre and John. Yes, some of them snored but I am not sure who – it was too dark to see. But if anyone had wanted to make recordings of the full range of snoring noises, they were all present. I found myself chuckling at the whistles and grunts when I woke in the night. It wasn't disturbing and I slept well.



Accommodation – guys



Accommodation - gals



Gunther's - away from all the snoring



GeoffR's loft

We were very well looked after and the food was delicious. Adi braaied outside while Angie worked in the kitchen. I particularly liked her potbrood and salads.



pre-dinner

After supper most people sat around a fire, chatting. The group had gelled very well and fortunately there were no big egos or personality issues to disrupt the harmony which had developed.

The following day was to be a rest day should anyone wish to take a break. Geoff had organised a shortish ride for those who wanted one. I seriously considered taking the rest day because my body had taken a pounding and was feeling tired. I decided to wait for the morning to see how I felt.

Day 4. 18 Jan 2011

The next morning I felt fine and decided to go on the ride. I had come for the riding and ride I would. After a more than adequate breakfast cooked on the fire we saddled up.



Breakfast Tsitsa style

Some of the squad stayed behind to go on a walk to the waterfall with Adi. This entailed the walk itself, going across the river on a zip line then recrossing the river by walking behind the waterfall. By all accounts this was a great outing. Adi is very knowledgeable about the fauna and flora in the area and more than willing to share his knowledge, the zip line was suitably scary and the walk behind the waterfall awesome. We heard all about it from the enthusiastic adventurers when we returned from our ride.



The falls with zipline

Those of us going on the ride set out behind Geoff. The weather was magnificent – neither too hot nor too cold. We headed back to the R56, turned right towards Mount Fletcher and about 12 km from that town we turned left onto gravel which lead to the Pitseng Pass. Everything was perfect – the weather, the road, the scenery, everything – just perfect. I could ride as well as take in the scenery. On the other rides when things became technical all my concentration had to be on the road with no time to appreciate the views.

Work was being carried out on the road. It seemed to be a job creation program getting locals to do the work by hand with materials gathered in the area. They were filling potholes and fixing the approaches to some drifts. Perhaps not the most effective way, but it appears to work. The area was dotted with settlements and the people were very friendly, especially the kids. I wonder how many big groups of bikes they see. It has just occurred to me that where the roads were particularly bad, like Katberg and Bastervoetpad, there were no settlements.

About halfway up the pass there was an obstacle of mud and rocks. Mud, I hate the stuff. Neville pointed out that there are off road riding courses and sand riding courses but there are no mud riding courses because you can't ride in mud. Some guys were having difficulty crossing so Andy and Gunther dismounted to help us across. I was very nervous but made it without falling, helped by their guidance and encouragement. I have come to realise that that if your mind is right you can conquer most of these obstacles. It is the uncertainty, hesitation and indecision that very often cause you to come short. Later in the day, when I learned that we were going to do this route again the next day, I spent a lot of time worrying about this spot. But the next day when I arrived here again I had psyched myself up and went over it as if it wasn't there.

Towards the top we stopped and took a break for a while under some trees. It was very pleasant munching snacks and chatting. I had prepared mini-ration packs in plastic bags to take with me each day. They contained energy bars, dried fruit, nuts and raisins and biltong. This idea worked very well. I also had two tins of Red Bull in my pack just in case.

There was a plateau at the top of the pass and here we encountered quite a lot of mud. I negotiated the mud without problem and only had one hair-raising moment. I was standing on the pegs going through a 10m patch of mud which was covered by water. In the middle, the handle bars slowly turned to the right while the bike carried on straight. I held my breath and managed to keep my balance. When it reached firm ground, the bike gave a wiggle and the handle bars straightened themselves as if nothing strange had happened. I seem to remember that a couple of bikes were dropped in the mud that day.

There are some productive farms up there with vast fields of mielies. One farmer had a brand new combine harvester standing near his fields. I wonder what those things cost.

We stopped for another rest near Elands Heights where the Pitseng Pass road joins the road to Naudes Nek. We turned left into the Naudes Nek road and headed down towards Maclear. All went well until we met a grader which was busy levelling the road. Behind it the road was nice and level but covered in loose stones. I am not comfortable riding on loose stuff and dropped my speed by half and promptly became a pain in the neck to the riders behind me. I will need to put in a lot more practise in this scenario.

We eventually reached Maclear, refuelled and headed to the backpackers for lunch. In the afternoon Adi took the remainder of the guys to the waterfall. I decided not to go as I was feeling tired and wanted to conserve my energy for the next day. It was just as well that I did. I am planning to return to the area so I will do the walk and zip line then. The thought of staying there for a few days, sitting under a tree reading a book, dozing and generally being a sleg moer is very appealing.

We had another good supper, mainly cooked over the fire. I could see that Andy was not well and had lost his appetite as well as the colour in his face. It turned out that he had he had picked up a stomach bug and would be in no fit state to ride the next morning.

I was tired and went to bed early and slept well until the next morning.

Day 5. 19 Jan 2011

When I arose in the morning, little did I know that this would be the toughest day yet. We again had a good breakfast and packed the backup vehicle.

Vernon had decided to head back to Uvongo because from there on we would be moving further and further from his home. It was good to meet him because I had read his posts for several years before joining the club and now I could put a face to the name.

Andy was really ill and it was decided to put his bike on the trailer.

We said our goodbyes and headed once more for the Pitseng Pass. I had enjoyed the stay at Tsitsa Falls Backpackers and can recommend the place, especially if you like rustic.

The ride was as the day before – perfect. Even more perfect when I got to the difficult patch and sailed across with no problem. We got to the top of the pass and encountered the first stretch of mud. I saw Brent go though with no problem followed by Andre. When Andre reached the other side I stood on the pegs and rode through. I couldn't foresee any problem - I had got through the previous day and I had just defeated the obstacle in the pass. But one moment I was riding through the mud and the next moment I was lying on my back in it. Oh, the indignity of being brought down to earth, both literally and figuratively.

Gunther and someone else helped pick up the bike. I would never have managed on my own because the mud was much too slippery. We were sliding all over the place trying to walk on the mud. After that fall I treated mud with much more respect. I sat down and paddled through.

After a couple of kilometers I came upon a group of riders standing next a fallen bike. As I got closer, I saw that it was Martin's bike and that Annine was sitting on the ground next to the bike. Not good. It transpired that the bike had slipped in the mud and that Annine had broken three ribs in the fall. We didn't know about the broken ribs at the time but could see that Annine was in considerable discomfort, which she bore with the air of serenity that I have mentioned before. She did not ride again and did the rest of the trip in the backup vehicle.

We arrived at the Naudes Nek road, turned right and headed up the pass. As we rose higher we could see that storm clouds were building up over the mountains. The views were spectacular (I wonder how often I have used that word), this is one of the roads that has to be ridden and it is not a difficult ride. About half way up we could see that rain was imminent and donned rain suits. The rain soon started to fall and continued to do so until we got to the top of the pass. The road is cut into the slopes of the mountain and from the summit looking back it goes on as far as you can see. I don't know anything about the construction of the pass but I marvel at the tenacity of the people who built it. It can't have been an easy job.

The rain had stopped by the time we reached the summit where we met a tour group of Canadians who had come to South Africa to look at flowers. I chatted to one of them who introduced himself as Don Jones who has a company called Borealis Exploration Limited. It is a company which is busy with some interesting projects, one of them is the fitting of electric motors into the nose wheels of Boeing 737's to enable them to propel themselves around airports rather than being towed. If you are interested, google the company. It has a good website. Don said that if I ever get to Victoria, British Columbia I should look him up. If I ever get there I surely will.

After Naudes Nek we turned right on a track which would eventually lead us to the Tiffindell ski resort. The road wasn't too bad until we passed the Tenahead Resort. There were two rivers to be crossed, neither of which had concreted fords. Once again I found myself in a position where there was no one in sight, either ahead or behind. I hadn't crossed such rivers before and, because the riders ahead of me were long gone, I couldn't follow anyone else's line. I put the bike in first gear (I had learned by this time), stood up and crossed both without difficulty.

From then on the condition of the track deteriorated considerably. It became rough and rocky with steep slopes both up and down. And it started to rain again. Perversely, I started to enjoy the conditions. These bikes are incredible. No matter how impossible the uphill looks, just choose a line, look into the middle of next week and go for it. The bike will take you to the top. Down hill was a little more problematic. It wasn't easy to use the back brakes as I hadn't fitted the modified back brake pedal. This resulted in me using more front brake than was prudent. Fortunately, nothing untoward happened as a result but the modified pedal has now been fitted.

We waited at the top of the last very rocky uphill for everyone to catch up and then set off again. I later learned that it took us 2.5 hours to cover the next 15 kilometres. I struggled so much that I lost all track of time and distance, but more of that tomorrow.

The track became a tweespoor and ran right alongside the Lesotho border fence. I don't think that it had ever been properly surfaced but had just been formed by vehicles used to patrol the border. The soil was black and reacted differently to the presence of water compared to the red mud which we had encountered lower down. Rain started to fall again when we set off. The black soil did not turn to slush but remained hard and became very slippery. Every meter that I moved forward became a struggle to keep the bike, which was slipping and sliding all over the place, upright. I didn't dare stand on the pegs and spent most of the paddling while trying to keep going in a straight line. I would try one side of the track and then the other but they were equally bad.

To compound matters, raindrops had found their way onto the inside of my visor and were obstructing my vision. I couldn't open the visor to wipe them away because I would have got drops on my specs as well. I directed some very impure thoughts at the designers of my helmet. These impure thoughts returned on day 8 when we encountered a lot of rain. I think that the droplets blow in from underneath because I could feel them on the under side of my nose. I am now in the market for a new helmet.

So there I was with obscured vision and on what I thought was an atrocious surface. There was the occasional rocky area but mainly slippery mud. Once again I was riding by myself with no one else in sight. I became exhausted. I hadn't suffered so much since the 1970's when I did my border training. I didn't fall in the mud but I fell twice on rocky up hills. Both of the falls were due to loss of concentration resulting from tiredness. On both occasions I had to pick up the bike by myself. I am thankful that I don't have any problem picking up the beast.

I don't remember too much more about that last bit. I can't remember where we regrouped, I can't even remember whether I was wearing my rain suit or not. At some point I noticed that the crash bars on the left side were loose. Investigation showed that two of the mounting bolts were loose and one bolt, which was also an engine mounting bolt, was missing. I tightened everything up and carried on.

We eventually passed Tiffendell and turned onto the Carlislehoek Pass road (I have also seen this pass called Carlisehoek, I don't know which is correct) and towards Rhodes. By this time I had recovered some of my energy, the rain had stopped and I was enjoying myself again. Brent was riding in front of me with Hilton behind.

I can't remember having been on a steeper road with sharper bends than Carlislehoek Pass. It is gravel but, thank heavens, the bends have a concrete surface. I went down in first gear with the throttle closed and still had to use brakes. The scenery was incredible on the way down. The road eventually flattened out and we arrived at Walkerbouts Inn in Rhodes.

We were very well received at Walkerbouts where we stayed for two nights. Dave, the owner, was sitting outside with a friend, Nigel, drinking beer and nursing a broken leg. His story was that he hadn't had enough to drink and as a result had fallen over on the lawn and broken the leg. His other leg had been broken in similar circumstances and had just healed. It was hilarious to see him go home in the evening, when it was dark. He was pushed in a wheelchair by the chef, both wearing headlamps. It was even more hilarious to see him arrive in the morning with the wheelchair being pushed by one employee and pulled at the end of a rope by another, Walkerbouts being at the top of a small rise.



Walkerbouts

Another remarkable person was Penny who worked behind the bar. She opened tabs for everyone and within half an hour she knew everyone by name, what they drank, whose leg she could pull and by how much.

Although we would eat all our meals there, we had to split up as there wasn't enough room at Walkerbouts for all of us. John, Des, Andre and Gunther were banished to a house at the far end of the village. The couples on bikes, Andy, Annie and Geoff stayed at Walkerbouts. The rest of us were quartered in the Bokhaus which was 5 minutes walk away.



Bokhaus

The Bokhaus is an old, well kept, comfortable house with 4 bedrooms. I shared a room with Du Toit again. Before supper we busied ourselves trying to get our clothing dry. The hair-dryers were working overtime. I had spent a lot of time looking for a compact travelling hair-dryer with a folding handle. I found one but it didn't do me much good because it melted that evening while I was drying my gloves and had to be thrown away.

We had an excellent three course supper after which we chatted for a while and then went to bed. I think that everyone was tired after the hectic ride that day. I slept well but I am not sure about Du Toit. When I woke the next day I saw that he had put in his ear plugs during the night.



The dining room at Walkerbouts



The Lounge with Sian, Trevor and Hilton



The view from the dining room at Walkerbouts

Day 6. 20 Jan 2011

I decided to take a rest day on this day. I was tired, my body had taken a hammering and my lack of fitness was taking its toll. I was to discover that about half of the team had made the same decision.

After breakfast it was time to fix punctures on Gunther's Dakar rear wheel and Annie's 1200 front wheel. I watched the proceedings with interest. Andy and Hilton took charge. Using Martin as a counter weight the 1200's wheel was removed. The Dakar was lifted onto a log and the rear wheel removed.

While I understand the theory of what was being done, I have never fixed a puncture, removed a wheel from a bike or a tyre from a rim. It all looked so easy that I am sure a lot of practice and experience was being put into action. I must lay my hands on a rim and practice removing and fitting a tyre until it becomes second nature. To my surprise both Andy and Hilton produced big bottles of soapy water from their packs. Until then I hadn't realised how important this stuff is.

To cut a long story short, the Dakar had a new tube fitted and the 1200's slow puncture was fixed. The seating of the tyre on the rim was the problem.

I looked in Geoff's toolbox and to my delight found what I thought was an engine mounting bolt. When those going on the ride had left I tried to fit this bolt without any success. because the hole for the bolt was at the end of a tube, so it was difficult to see what was going on. Martin and Trevor became aware of my struggles and came to help. They struggled for a couple of hours. We had the bike on its main stand, then the side stand. We borrowed a jack and jacked the engine up and then down. We tried to force the engine one way and then the other. We shone lights down holes to try and get everything aligned. All to no avail. In the end it was decided that we should not use force and perhaps try again after lunch. In the mean time I phoned Shane at Atlantic Motorrad for his advice. He said that as long as the other mounting bolts were tight the loss of that one was no big deal and I could carry on without it.

When I got back to Cape Town I discovered that the bolt I had selected from the toolbox was the wrong size. It would never have gone in. Sorry Trevor and Martin – I will drink two strafdoppe tonight.

Those who did not go on the ride wandered down to the Rhodes Hotel at lunch time in search of food and drink. We found both at the hotel and had a very nice lunch in excellent company. The hotel is a very interesting place and is as I would imagine a Victorian country hotel would have been.

We ambled back to Walkerbout brought the bikes to the village pump to refuel and generally had a lazy afternoon. It had been raining intermittently and the temperature was pleasant.

Rhodes is a very beautiful village in a stunning location. It is well worth a visit.



A wood and iron house in Rhodes



A street view in Rhodes



The church in Rhodes

A few photos from the day's outride - 150kms, almost five hours to complete. The first 32km were really snotty after overnight rain.



Slippery conditions



We soon got to some long, very steep sections on the Volonteershoek Pass - from 1900m crossing the Funnystone river to 2315m, all in about 3.5km. I was extremely glad to get up this seriously challenging (for me) section without incident. Looking at my GPS data I now see that this section only took 12 min to complete - felt like a lifetime of ascending. We continued climbing, finally "summitting" at 2688m.



Up,



up,



and up we go



Yet more stunning views

After completing the loop back to Rhodes via the Carlisle's Hoek Pass a few of us decided to ride up to Naude's Nek before returning. A beautiful road with marvellous panoramic views. Unfortunately the weather turned nasty and we were all soon riding in thick, swirling mist. Hilton hit a fist-sized rock with the front wheel resulting in an off. With the weather deteriorating rapidly we all headed back down the pass to Rhodes.



Waiting to go to Naude's Nek



The pass with approaching rain



Hilton's off



Safely back in Rhodes

Once again supper was excellent. The excellent food was a feature of the tour. I can only think of one instance where the standards slipped a little but that was still to come. After supper we sat in the lounge and chatted until bed time. It had been a good and restful day for me. Just what I needed.

Day 7. 21 Jan 2011

We were heading for Lady Grey via Lundean's Nek, Tele Bridge and Sterkspruit. I could easily have stayed in Rhodes for another couple of days, enjoying the rest and the good food at Walkerbouts.

At around 9:00 we set off in a south easterly direction (can you tell that I've been looking at a map) along the R396. It was an easy ride in beautiful weather. At Moshesh's Ford we turned north and headed for Lundean's Nek. This was biker's paradise. We stopped at Wartrail which is a gorge that was used by cattle thieves to move stolen cattle to and from Lesotho. There we saw hundreds of swallows swooping and soaring in the gorge. What an uplifting sight. Later we stopped at Lundean's Nek for photos.



Crossing the Bell River



View across the Wartrail area

The only problematic spot on the road was a very slippery drift on a sharp bend. This drift has a reputation for claiming bikers. If you attempt to turn while on the drift you are sure to fall. The trick is to ride in a straight line across and then turn sharply when you reach the other side. Someone did fall there but I can't remember who it was.



Lundean's Nek



Single file



What a road!

Not long after Lundean's Nek the road runs alongside a river which is the border between SA and Lesotho. The area was becoming more populated and we started to encounter more vehicles. With more traffic the road became more potholed and before long became very bad. I find it relatively easy to ride over a road that has deteriorated naturally over time, but a road that has become potholed due to traffic is murder.



Lesotho across the river

We made a detour of (I guess) around 10 km into a valley with the most astounding scenery, then retraced our tracks and rejoined the potholed road. Along the whole route the scenery is magnificent and has to be seen to be appreciated.



Around lunch time we stopped at a meadow next to the river. We relaxed there, lying on the grass, for about half an hour while the occupants of passing vehicles hooted and waved their greetings.



Wow!

After the rest we set off again encountering more vehicles, people and potholes. Close to Tele Bridge the road is being reconstructed, I couldn't tell whether it was going to be tarred. On reaching tar we turned left and headed for Sterkspruit.



School had just come out and the road was lined by hundreds of kids in their smart uniforms walking home, I hope. However, knowing school kids they were probably on their way to somewhere that would frighten the wits out of their parents.

Sterkspruit was a shock. I have been to India (Mumbai and Delhi) and didn't think that I would see traffic like that again. Well I have news for the Indians. I think that the inhabitants of Sterkspruit could teach them a thing or two about chaos.

We filled up at a service station in town. This became a free-for-all with taxis and cars pushing to the head of the queue. As we entered the town I saw some traffic cops were checking vehicles. They would have been much more useful in town sorting out the chaos. But perhaps they had tried before and had just given up.

I couldn't leave the place quickly enough. Just outside the town we turned onto a bumpy gravel road that eventually ended up on a tar road that led us to Lady Grey.

We passed through Lady Grey and onto the Joubert Pass, the foot of which is at the edge of town. It is a pleasant pass which is apparently maintained by local farmers. I was ambling up the pass when I rounded a corner and saw Geoff's bike down and Geoff sitting on the ground in much the same way as Annine had a day or two before. Not good. Geoff had fallen quite hard and it was later discovered that he had also broken three ribs. Such is the measure of the man that he remounted the bike and rode 40 or 50 km with three broken ribs, most of them on a bumpy road, to finish the ride. That took tremendous fortitude. He could have turned around and gone 2 or 3 km back to town.



Jouberts Pass



A little further up the pass

I have been wanting to write something about Geoff but wasn't sure at which point to do so – now seems appropriate. Elsewhere on the forum Andy has written about all the work that goes into putting a tour together and I can just echo what he has said. A good tour, such as this one, doesn't just happen. It takes meticulous planning and attention to detail, which in turn takes a lot of effort and time. But (as the TV adverts say) that's not all. To maintain discipline in a group of 20 adults, which is very important, and to be able to chide us for transgressing rules without causing offence, takes leadership, which Geoff has in abundance. The club is privileged to have as a member a person like him who is prepared to put in so much effort to the benefit of the club and its members. I am sure that I am acting for everyone when I give Geoff a big and very special salute.

Geoff remounted his bike and led us to the summit of the pass. It is the second or third highest pass in SA and has a small monument to the builders, mainly from the Joubert family, to one side. While we were stopped at the summit a passing farmer stopped. He was Dick Isted whose family has been farming in the area for four or five generations. He gave us a short history of the area, for which he has much enthusiasm. His farm is a nature reserve on which they run adventure trails. Check out their website at <http://www.adventuretrails.co.za/> .



History lessons



The view

The view from the top was very beautiful, looking down into a valley with mountains in the background. I found it to be a very pleasant ride (with all my ribs intact) through farmland. I didn't see this, but Andy and some of the group saw over 70 lammergeiers at a carcass. That must have been a marvellous sight. The gravel road linked up to tar and we headed back to Lady Grey.



Lammergeiers or Cape Vultures?



After refuelling we arrived at our accommodation for the night, which shall remain nameless. It is a double storey building with the reception and dining room downstairs on the left. There are rooms both on the ground floor and upstairs. The rooms facing the road on both floors look onto big verandahs which run the length of the building. There is an adjoining pub in a single storey building on the left.



View from the nameless establishment

We parked the bikes in the yard and went to check in. They were completely unprepared for us, with the barman also acting as the receptionist. He ran in square circles between the bar and the reception trying to serve the patrons in the bar and check in 20 tired bikers. It didn't work well. The hotel didn't score at all when compared to the other places we had visited.

Neville, Du Toit and I were to share a room on the first floor overlooking the road. Neville and I arrived at the room together. Actually it was two rooms with a big opening in the wall between the two. There was a double bed in the one room and two singles in the other. With his engineer's eye, Neville detected that the double bed had a negative camber and graciously decided to let someone else sleep in it. He chose one of the single beds. I chose the other, but without having seen the negative camber of the double bed. Du Toit did not have a good night in the double bed, which we heard a lot about the next morning.

The shower and toilet were in a cubicle which had been put in as an afterthought. The cubicle did not have a ceiling and was closed by means of a curtain. The curtain went off its rails almost immediately and could not be fixed even by the two engineers who shared with me. I spent some time wondering about how I was going to maintain some decorum while I engaged in my ritual on the loo the next morning.

We cleaned up and went downstairs for a drink on the verandah. I could see that Geoff was in a lot of pain. We had to buy our drinks in the bar and then carry them outside to the verandah where we chatted until supper.



Dinner

If I had to hazard a guess, the hotel keeps going on the proceeds of the bar. They are not really geared for guests and definitely not for 20 at one shot. I found the bar to be a very sad place. Some bars are lively places where people go to socialise whereas in this one, people come here to get drunk. And the drunks were not happy about 20 visitors disrupting their drinking and eating routine. One of them was quite vocal about it. A picture which is etched into my mind is that of a grey haired, alcohol-sodden oomie groping a rotund lady of the night who was upholstered in someone's kitchen curtains. If she had decided to accept his coin, he was both too drunk and too old to get value for his money. Very sad sight indeed.

We were called to supper which was very nice and tasty after which I went to bed. The bed was comfortable and I slept well.

Day 8. 22 Jan 2011

I awoke well rested. I solved the problem of the morning ritual by letting the shower run while I did the deed. I had no qualms about wasting water because the room had a notice which stated that the hot tap must be run for 10 minutes before hot water would appear. I completed my ritual, had a shower and then dressed.

Neville entered the cubicle after me and did not think about the masking effects of running water. The noises that emanated from the cubicle frightened Du Toit to such an extent that he felt compelled to jump through the window onto the verandah. A number of comfortable-looking armchairs were placed on the verandah under the room's windows. What was not immediately apparent was that the armchairs were mounted on wheels – very efficient wheels. Du Toit landed on one of these armchairs which went careering across the verandah, narrowly missing Andre who happened to be walking by. Du Toit valiantly tried to control the uncontrollable armchair (GS se moer!) but inevitably the laws of physics prevailed and the chair overturned, throwing Du Toit to the ground.

This was one of those occasions where I wanted to howl with laughter at the comedy in the situation but could not, because Du Toit had hurt himself in the fall.

We packed and went down to breakfast. As I mentioned earlier they are not geared for 20 guests and things were a bit shambolic. Luckily I was not hungry and made do with toast and coffee but some went hungry.

I heard that those who slept on the ground floor did not have a restful night because of noisy patrons from the bar and an amorous couple who made a noise near the bedrooms. One of those who had had a bad night was Geoff. In addition to a lack of sleep, he was in enormous discomfort from the broken ribs. He decided to ride in the backup vehicle and let Andy take up the lead.

Andy had a quiet word with the owners during which he, very politely but firmly, expressed our dissatisfaction. I believe that they subsequently sent an email of apology to Geoff. I agree with him that, because they put their pride in their pocket and apologised, they deserve a break. For this reason I have not put the hotel's name in my story.

As heavy rains were forecast and as, I think, everyone was tired, it was decided that we would ride to Graaf Reinet on tar via Aliwal North, Burgersdorp, Steynsburg and Middelburg.



Rainsuits required



Rain in the distance

Shortly after leaving Lady Grey we donned rain suits and the heavens opened. After Aliwal North the rain was still very heavy. Unbeknown to us, Andy was on his cell phone trying to find a place to have hot chocolate. He had no luck with directory inquiries but eventually got onto the Spur in Aliwal North. These guys were great. They told Andy which restaurant to visit in Burgersdorp and phoned ahead to warn of our imminent arrival. For the life of me I cannot remember the restaurant's name – if anyone can remember please put it up.



NuNu's, Burgersdorp



Lappa at NuNu's

We arrived in the pouring rain - the owner of the restaurant had prepared the lapa for us and in no time there were glasses of old brown sherry and mugs of steaming hot chocolate being handed out. It was heaven. Five stars to the owner of the restaurant and five stars to Andy.

After leaving Burgersdorp it rained intermittently. By the time we reached Middelburg the rain had stopped. I removed my rain suit at the service station, where we refuelled, upon which Andre said that I was making a mistake. He was right.

Between Middelburg and Graaf Reinet the rain came bucketing down. I cannot remember when I last saw such heavy rain. Those of us without rain suits got absolutely soaked.



Some only got soaked later!



Out of the rain at last

I had enjoyed the day. I don't mind riding in the rain and I have a good rain suit. The temperature was not cold, so even when I got soaked it was not unpleasant. The only downside was the rain getting onto the inside of the visor. As I mentioned earlier, I am sure that it was blowing in from underneath. I have since bought another helmet, the price of

which made my eyes water – even without the rain! But I am told that it is a good helmet and that it will last. It is a Shoei Raid II for those who might be interested.

Andy led us to Camdaboo Cottages where we were staying the night. We parked the bikes in the courtyard and received a most hearty welcome from the owner's daughter and a helper. These were two of the most lovely and delightful girls you could wish to meet – and I have forgotten their names. A failing memory is a downside of advancing years. You can be sure that when I was young and handsome I would not have forgotten, plus I would have ensured that they remembered mine.



Camdeboo Cottages



My abode with Tony in foreground

There is a pool at the reception area. Annie was one of those who was soaked through. Still in her riding gear, she stepped onto the first step of the pool, up to her shins in the water. She took another step then launched herself into the pool. Air was trapped inside her riding clothes and she floated around the pool as if she was wearing a survival suit. The looks on the faces of our hosts were priceless. I hope that there are photos available.

Annie was the only lady rider in the group – and she was riding a 1200GS. I enjoyed riding behind her because although her riding skills are greater than mine, they are not so much greater that I could get into trouble trying keeping up with her. Annie rode that big bike through all the difficult stretches in a calm unflappable manner. In fact, I never saw her fazed at all. Annie gets a big salute for the way she handled her bike and for floating in the pool.

The great welcome was exactly what we needed. We were given complimentary glasses of sherry and then escorted to our quarters.

Camdaboo Cottages is a cluster of old cottages, as the name suggests, that have been beautifully restored and which offer very comfortable accommodation. Stay here when in Graaf Reinet, you won't be sorry.

I was shown to a cottage with two bedrooms. I was due to share with Du Toit again but, as he had left us at Lady Grey, I had the place to myself. I showered and then set about trying to get my gear dry. I used a big standing fan to blow air onto my gear and by morning everything was dry.

After a short while we met at the reception area where our hosts were making toasted sandwiches and coffee. The bar had been opened, the rain had stopped and people were chatting. Life was good.

After eating and drinking I went for a snooze. When I resurfaced I went to the reception area where the owner was preparing a braai fire. He was an expert. It was a pleasure to watch him get everything ready and then braai for 20 people with no fuss whatsoever.



The Braai Master

While we were waiting for supper, we sat around and chatted. As I mentioned before, the group had gelled very well. An easy atmosphere had developed amongst us. I have worked with groups of people my whole life and it is very unusual to put 20 people together and find that there are no issues which cause friction.

Geoff called us together and gave a short talk about the tour, seeing that it was our last night. He then had something very perceptive to say about each of us, after which we had to down a shooter. I was very pleased when he remarked that my riding skills had improved a lot.



The Pillions' Award - Sian, Elsa, Annine

We then sat down to a delicious supper. Before dessert the owner's daughter (oh, my memory) gave us a story about a tradition that had developed. A shooter had to be downed before the guests would receive pudding. The shooter was called *Withond op Hitte*. It was *witblits* made from the fruit of a single very old vine which grows at the parsonage and to which a few chillis had been added. It knocked my breath away, but I ate the pudding – I deserved it.



Des and John



Hilton



David



GeoffR



Annie and Andy



Gunther



(L to R) Sian, Tony, Trevor, Brent, Neville, Martin, Annine



Not a good pic, but because Elsa looks so pretty I put it in



Elsa, Stan. Andre

Day 9. 23 Jan 2011

And so the final day of the tour dawned. We had breakfast and packed the backup vehicle. Geoff had decided not to ride and Andy led the pack once more. The route was to be Graaf Reinet, Willowmore, de Rust, Oudtshoorn, R62 to Worcester, du Toits Kloof Pass and ending at Geoff's house.

We headed down the N9 towards in in good weather. Shortly before the turn off to de Rust we stopped and said our goodbyes to Hilton. I hope that our paths will cross again.





Until next time

We refuelled in Oudtshoorn and then set out along the R62 heading for the Country Pumpkin and lunch at Barrydale. The ride was uneventful and we arrived in Barrydale, shortly after 13:00, where we refuelled while waiting for our lunch. As usual, we were very well received at the Country Pumpkin – both the service and food was excellent.



Lunch anyone?

It was another uneventful ride from there to Geoff's house where we said our goodbyes.

The first and last days were uneventful – just many km to get out of the way. The first day was full of anticipation of the things to come but the last day was a bit of an anti climax – I suppose it couldn't have been anything else. All the other days were filled with drama of varying degrees.

I had wanted an adventure and I got a BIG adventure. A HUGE one. Much bigger than I anticipated. I visited a most beautiful part of the country for the first time. I did a lot of technical riding. All with the most brilliant bunch of people. A big salute to all of them – they deserve it.

At times I was stretched to the limit of my abilities and beyond – but I coped and feel that I have grown substantially as a rider. Some people wear their bikes, the bikes and the riders are one. I am not there yet but will keep on gaining experience and maybe, one day.....

I have learned a lot about adventure riding and realise that there is lots more to learn. I plan to mingle with the experts and go on as many rides as I can. I will also practise a lot – Bob Goode and I try to do cones a couple of times a week. We started a couple of months ago and this most definitely helped me on the tour.

I am going back to the Eastern Cape with Geoff in October. Jane will be on the pillion – a whole new ball game. I can't wait to see how I will experience it then. I wonder if it will be as scary as I remember.

If you are thinking of going on one of these tours, don't hesitate – you will have the time of your life.



The Eastern Cape