

Planning the ultimate adventure

Former bomb disposal expert Lee Mears, founder of Kudu Expeditions, has seen his adventure touring company grow from strength-to-strength in recent years. Capitalising on the popularity of life-changing motorcycle tours, he has devised the firm's most ambitious project yet – an around the world adventure following in the tyre marks of Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman.



Kudu Expeditions is a British-based motorcycle tour operator that offers life-changing adventures to customers from all over the world. The company's founder, Lee Mears, has over 15 years of adventure riding experience, and his previous career as an ammunitions and bomb disposal officer in the British Army means that he is equipped to lead groups of people into some of the world's harshest terrain. Kudu is growing in stature and is already renowned for the many tours it runs, including Paris to Dakar, Trans-America and London to Kathmandu. In 2009, the company is planning to run its largest tour to date – an around the world adventure, taking in over 20 countries in an immense 32,000-kilometre, 16-week ride.

The company aims to seize on the current popularity of life-affirming trips by offering the grandest adventure available – a comprehensive global journey, complete with support crew! The trip has proved so popular that the 16 places available sold out within four weeks of going on sale and a second trip, organised to allow a further 16 people the chance to experience the adventure, has also sold out, despite the €23,000 price tag.

Lee has recently returned from a reconnaissance trip, during which he covered the route the 32 intrepid explorers will travel in June and marked the GPS points that will be visited along the way. He used the trip as an opportunity to get to know the route, so that when the first group departs the UK on 4 June, every conceivable obstacle has been addressed. His seven-week journey, covering 21,000 kilometres was in itself a huge test of endurance.

Kudu Expeditions uses a fleet of BMW F 800 GS and F 650 GS motorcycles for guests who choose not to take their own bikes. Lee opted for the latter for his recent 'dry run'. "For the reconnaissance mission, I decided to use an F 650 GS as I know it as a fantastic bike," he says. "One of our mechanics worked on the bike to prepare it for the journey, as riding hard every day for several weeks really takes its toll. Riding some of the roads in Siberia and Mongolia, you can't avoid hitting potholes, so the frame took a real battering. But the bike coped very well and was very comfortable, even after seven weeks of hard riding. In fact, of the 32 guest bikes that will undertake this adventure, 27 of them will be BMWs! "



To ensure that the route was scouted sufficiently and the journey was well planned, Lee worked tirelessly to gather as much information as possible. "I was up at first light every morning to ensure that I made full use of the day, only stopping to refuel myself and the bike," he reveals. "My normal tasks included marking waypoints on the GPS and making notes on borders and important junctions that the party will need to find. It was very hard work but after a few days on the road I became accustomed to the routine."

For most people, Lee's task was an enviable one. During the mission, he visited many countries, including Turkey, Hungary, Romania, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, Siberia and Japan to name but a few. However, with so much work to do, did he manage to stop and savour his surroundings?

"Although it might seem as though I didn't have much time to enjoy the route, I valued the time riding on my own," he responds. "During all of the trips I undertake with the guests, I need to make sure that they are safe and are enjoying themselves. As a result,

my attention is never really on experiencing the journey. This time around though, I was only responsible for myself, so had chance to do pretty much whatever I chose to do.”



Having visited so many countries on his reconnaissance trip, Lee has identified several areas that he believes are guaranteed to impress the guests on the inaugural around the world trip. “Out of all the countries I visited on the ‘recce’, I think Mongolia was everything I had hoped it to be,” he reveals. “When you cross the border, you’re just confronted with a vast wilderness, the people are absolutely fantastic and the riding is a real adventure with some stunning river crossings. Russia was also fascinating, with remnants of the Soviet era still present in many of the buildings and bureaucracy. Turkmenistan was a really bizarre country, but interesting nonetheless. Every outsider has to have a personal chaperone, who is issued to you at the border but even though the authorities are sceptical about foreigners, the locals are unbelievably friendly.”

“My initial plan for the around the world adventure was to follow the route of the Long Way Round television programme as this is what people have seen and what may have prompted them to make the trip in the first place,” he continues. “But looking at a map of the route, I soon realised that there were so many fabulous countries that would be missed out on, so I changed the route to encompass Turkey, Central Asia, Iran and even Japan.”

Despite global economic concern, companies like Kudu Expeditions continue to thrive. It seems as though the opportunity to pack your panniers and head off into the great unknown, for many people, is too good to refuse. Lee agrees that people are becoming more inclined to take a break from ‘real life’ to experience something entirely different. “I think that people are beginning to tire of the belief that you get a job when you finish school, work until you retire and then relax,” he says. “In the last 15 or 20 years, I think people want to do something different with their lives, and travelling is a popular option. Rather than sitting in the back of a cramped, humid bus with hundreds of other travellers, people are coming around to the thought of motorcycle travel and the freedom it can offer.”

With the freedom that his guests yearn for in mind, Lee has planned the around the world adventure meticulously. Every attempt has been made to ensure guests are safe and confident during the 16-week ride. However, Lee was keen to allow the group to be independent. We try to encourage people to have their own adventure,” he explains. “We will hold a briefing in the morning, and then it’s up to the guests whether they meet us for lunch or just meet us in the evening after they’ve enjoyed a full day’s riding – there will never be a line of 16 bikes following each other! On the recce I marked waypoints at every other petrol station and also at key junctions, so the guests have a good basis for creating their own life-changing adventure without us holding their hands.”

Visit www.kuduexpeditions.com for more information on Kudu Expeditions and details of the current programme of adventures.