



EWAN DID A GREAT JOB WITH A BIG TEAM, BUT WITH ONLY MY BIKE FOR COMPANY I RODE FROM KILKENNY TO AFRICA... AND BACK AGAIN

AFTER 20 months on the road in Africa, big-hearted Kilkenny man Hugh Bergin is back on home soil.

The former restaurateur spent more than a year and a half in the saddle traveling from Kilkenny through Cape Town via the west coast of the African continent and back home again along the east coast, all in aid of development agency, Self Help Africa.

Sitting in the plush Westbury Hotel, Dublin, looking very tanned from his travels, Hugh tells **SWM** about his motorbike adventure.

"The idea for my journey had started when a friend suggested visiting a desert music festival in the Sahara, near Timbuktu, the most remote music festival in the world," explains Hugh.

"From that seed a plan began to take shape – a motorbike journey from my home in Kilkenny through the dark continent right down to South Africa.

"It had always been a dream of mine to return someday to visit South Africa, the country of my birth.

"Back in the '50s my parents, like many others at the time, had taken the emigration boat there, returning to Ireland in 1971 with their family."

Hugh sold his restaurant, Café Sol in Kilkenny, and used the proceeds to fund his travels in Africa.

"Nearly a year of planning and research went into the trip, selecting a reliable bike, learning off-road skills, researching the political situation throughout the continent and deciding on the route, applying for visas...the list was mind-boggling – setting off was the easy bit," says Hugh.

But, he wanted this trip to be about more than a personal journey, the keen biker made the mammoth trip in an effort to raise awareness and funds for the charity Self Help Africa.

"I wanted to use my adventure to raise awareness and funds for a charity and after a lot of research I chose to support one of the unsung heroes of the Irish NGO

world – Self Help Africa," says Hugh.

"This organization concentrates on helping poor rural African families to help themselves – through growing enough food to feed themselves and to earn a sustainable living."

Self Help Africa implements simple and effective innovations to farming, managing natural resources and helping people access basic services like clean water, education and health, and has no expatriate staff in the field, but instead employs local staff and works through partners and communities on all its projects.

"My trip gave me an opportunity to see Self Help

Africa's work at first hand, I visited a farmer in Kenya who had applied for assistance from Self Help Africa," says Hugh.

"He was shown which seeds would work best with his soil and was taught new irrigation methods, then in turn he taught other farmers in the area, so they were no longer growing only enough maize for themselves but enough to be able to sell at market as well."

'Along with a desperate Scotsman we spent hours looking for a beer in this strictly Muslim country'

Hugh's journey took him through some of the most remote parts of Africa, from the vast Sahara desert to Timbuktu to the jungles of the Congo – with only his BMW 650 Dakar for company.

While Ewan McGregor gained fame from traveling the length of Africa with a team of doctors, engineers, and film crew, Hugh undertook the journey with no technical support or back-up – making him the first Irishman ever to achieve this.

"It could get very lonely on the roads, and it was very risky in the more remote places because if I took a tumble or my bike broke down there wouldn't be any help for miles," explains Hugh.

Leaving Kilkenny at the begin-

ning of December, Hugh spent Christmas Day in the capital of Mauritania, Nouakchott.

"Along with a desperate Scotsman we spent hours looking for a beer in this strictly Muslim country," he laughs.

"Finally a taxi driver took us to a small, very bare and seedy drinking den where we hit the jackpot: Kronenberg 1660, strong beer at €2.50 a can – and they were cold."

He then made it to the Timbuktu desert concert that had started his journey in the first place.

"It was a fantastic, unreal experience, lying in the warm sand outside Tuareg tent in the late afternoon sun, listening to Liam O'Maonlai on harp and Paddy

Keenan on low whistle playing with some superb local African musicians."

"After the Equator things got more challenging in the Congo, where I found myself at times making little progress through the mud and rains.

"Struggling through day after day of muddy tracks, fording washed-away roads and negotiating collapsing wooden bridges, I eventually made it through."

After five months of non-stop travel Hugh finally reached his destination, Cape Town where there was a group of people including his parents along with some of their old friends from previous days in South Africa and the deputy Mayor Charlotte Williams were there to welcome

the hero.

"I handed over a letter from the Mayor of Kilkenny at the foot of Table Mountain and enjoyed a well deserved beer," says Hugh who by this stage had seriously caught the travel bug.

"After two months traveling through South Africa, enjoying the soft living, and visiting my old home town I decided not to stop my journey in South Africa but to travel back to Ireland up the east coast of Africa, turning my five month journey into a 22 month adventure."

Despite the stereotypes about Africa being dangerous, Hugh encountered only goodwill and friendliness on his epic African adventure, often camping on the grounds of Catholic missions learning about each town from talkative priests.

"I met so many people who have very little but live with great joy and happiness, this trip definitely opened my eyes, it was inspirational," says Hugh.

To support Hugh Bergin's Lap of Africa please donate to Self Help Africa on line at www.lapofafrica.com.

Hugh Bergin tells SWM how a plan to go to an African gig turned into a 48,000 km trek for charity, by NIAMH BYRNE

