



# David School Messenger

The David School

Education Changes Lives

## EXTRA

***In October 2013, Neil Thomas (44) and Nick Shuttleworth (29) embarked on the “Adventurists Mototaxi Junket” in Peru, under the guise of Team Perilous Piranha, to raise money for The David School. This, in Neil’s words, is their story***



Nick and Neil

We joined 35 or so teams from around the world to try and cover 3000 km of Peruvian mountain, jungle and desert, on a Lifan 125cc three wheeled Mototaxi, in just 2 weeks.

From the moment we signed up to the adventure there was one question that people kept asking, which was “Why?” The first reason is simple – it gave us the opportunity to support a wonderful charity called the David School which was founded in Sierra Leone by my father-in-law, David Wallwork. It is quite simply transforming lives of the people of the local community of Mile 36, near Freetown.

The second reason is more complex, but will strike a chord with many. We live in a wonderful country where we have clean water, plenty to eat, an enviable network of medical service and the padded glove of health and safety cuddles us all. While this is great, it does lead some of us to become stressed about the petty, as often there are no life and death issues to concern us. The traffic jams on the way into work. The warning light on my car dashboard telling me that my electric heated leather seat is not functioning correctly. My intermittent broadband connection. We know that on Monday to Friday we will drive to work. We know what time we will leave in the morning and we know what time we will get back. To a large degree, we know what we will be doing while we are there. We begin to live life hoping that things won’t go wrong and put us out of our comfort zone.

An adventure such as the Mototaxi Junket gives ordinary people with no real training the opportunity to break out of the predictable and do something really silly and not a little dangerous. Entrants are provided with an easy to repair and (importantly) very unreliable vehicle, a start point and a finish point. There is no fixed route and no support. You are well and truly on your own.

Between the start at Cuzco and the finish at Piura lay at 3000km of Andean mountains, Amazonian jungle and desert. It was difficult to imagine a more diverse region to traverse. To top things off, vehicle was a 125cc Chinese motorcycle with what appeared to be a sofa welded to the back. A 3-wheeler driven by a single rear wheel. What could possibly go wrong? Clearly the answer is lots, but then this is the whole point.

Like most teams we had a plan. Like most teams the plan came apart after about 4 hours.



From the moment we started it was impossible to predict exactly what was going to happen next. We hadn’t realised that when crawling up the long, winding roads we would need to rest the mototaxi every 40 minutes or so to prevent it melting its engine. As we went higher into the Andes and the air became thinner, the mototaxis became steadily more asthmatic, wheezing and coughing their way to a standstill. Sometimes we needed to walk or push them up the slopes eking out the last of the power. Too much throttle then and the engine would stall, requiring a lung-busting jump start attempt.



We were too slow and missed the first planned overnight stop by about half a day. On the second day we joined up with 4 other teams who were trying to travel a similar route. After maintenance and repairs to the bikes we were so far behind our plan that we did not even make it to a town as night fell. Faced with a 5 hour climb over a 4000m pass, and 2 mototaxis that kept cutting out, we decided to camp out by the side of the road, in a valley that was at a low enough altitude to still be warm at night.

The next morning we took a wrong turn and spent most of the morning going in the wrong direction. To try and make up time we managed to negotiate a lift in the back of a truck to our next target town. 5 mototaxis and 10 people in the back of a truck for 28 hours straight. That wasn't in the plan.

For the whole trip the scenery was simply jaw dropping. Every mountain pass lead to more scenery that was equally epic but in a different way, whether it be the colour of the mountains, the shape of the peaks, or the mad fact that the plateau of central highlands is at an altitude of 4100m, and as flat as a pancake, for miles and miles, with a pristine highway through the middle. There were a few settlements up there, cold and desolate. One, built up around a declining silver mine was now just rows of decaying shells. A group of 3 children kicked a football against the wall of a boarded up building, but that was the only sign of life. Then we slipped off the plateau towards the jungle and the temperature began to soar, the towns became more vibrant, with Salsa music on every street as if to celebrate escaping from the cold.



As we headed out of the delightfully named Tingo Maria, things changed again. We were heading into the jungle and entering drug country. The guide books give vague warnings of this region, citing being mistaken for Drug Enforcement Agency operatives as one of the dangers. Luckily, the DEA has yet to come up with the cunning idea of sending its operatives out in mototaxis, so the locals simply regarded us with bemusement. Oh, except for the Aussies. They had an inflatable kangaroo, called 'Baz', duck-taped to the top of their mototaxi. This made them an instant magnet to any children in the area, and they would drive down the main street of a small town, with a wake of laughing kids pointing at and chasing the strange animal stuck to their roof.



The police stations started to become more fortified, first sand bags, then blast screens, finally armoured cars. We also met the local militia called the Ronderos. The first time we met them it was a bit unnerving. Guys with shot guns stand by a roadblock, flag you down and start to talk quickly to you in Spanish. You listen hard (they have guns...). Eventually you realise that they are just asking for a toll (about 50p) to let you through, are genuinely nice guys and very happy to have their photos taken with you.

On the final push for the finish, up over the Northern Highlands, we crossed a pass and suddenly the vegetation turned to scrub. In crossing that one pass the climate had become arid, the sparse population becoming even more sparse, as we headed across the Sechura desert

The roads throughout the trip were a joy unto themselves, sometimes pristine tarmac, sometimes dirt, sometimes rubble, sometimes a cunning combination such that you may round a corner on a velodrome smooth surface only to be met with a hole that you could drop a fridge into, a ravine on one side and a cliff face on the other. Occasionally, when we crossed a mountain pass, we would enter a "cloud zone", where the road could disappear into a cold, billowing fog that appeared to tumble and roll across the road.



Strangely, the other road users were very considerate most of the time – this is very important when you are at the bottom of the vehicle food chain. The hooter of vehicles was used to advise other road users that a manoeuvre was about to be performed, or was being performed. Lorries (and these were BIG transcontinental transporters) normally gave space. Much of this may have been because we were a big novelty to the locals. Even so Team EnviroBren, the



delightful Australian couple, almost collided head on with a juggernaut. I think that the inflatable Wallaby duck taped to the roof of their mototaxi may have saved them. No driver, however big his truck, wants a face full of Kangaroo.

The locals were delightful, never wanting to say “no” to anything. They would smile, nod and point in response to a request for directions. As often as not they would point back to the last person we had asked the same question.



Our mototaxi caught fire due to an electrical fault (the flames doused with the local “Inca Cola” before it reached the fuel tank, leaving a beautiful caramelised smell, but no electrics), the chassis sheared, we ended up in a long unlit tunnel with just head torches after our lights had burnt out and suffered numerous other more minor issues. Eventually it began to dawn on us that the key strength of the Chinese motorcycle engine was precisely that it was so rubbish, and, of course, that the Chinese motorcycle was the vehicle of choice in Peru. They need so much maintenance and suffer breakdowns so often that you can

buy spare parts almost anywhere and most people you meet will have a pretty good idea of how to fit them. Even when part of our chassis sheared and we slewed to a halt in a spray of sparks we were able to take the broken bit off, then get a ride to the next town, where a chap with a welder repaired the break in less than 20 minutes, and we were back on the road an hour or so later. There is no denying that the mototaxis were rubbish, but they were brilliant rubbish.

So after all is done, what do we take away from the trip? There is the camaraderie of other saddle-sore Junketeers, all of whom know what it is like to get to the middle of yet another nowhere and have their trusty steed splutter to a halt due to the failure of a part that didn't make it into the spare parts box. There is the certain knowledge that in a stable, safe country, with a great standard of living, it is good escape the safety net and to inject a period of danger and unpredictability, secure in the knowledge that, barring serious injury, we can return to safety and security when that period is up. But most importantly is the satisfaction of having done something that was very hard, but great fun and really, really silly, while supporting charities that help people whose lives truly are unpredictable, but not unpredictable in a good way.

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