



THE PATH WELL- RIDDEN

Nick Sanders knows everything there is to know about adventure and endurance cycling. He set the original record for world bicycle circumnavigation in 1981. 40 years later and he's ready to go again, as he prepares for the first e-bike circumnavigation of the globe. **Anna Smith** caught up with him just one month before he was due to set off.

INTERVIEW: ANNA SMITH





When I spoke to Nick Sanders in August, he described adventure like a tale as old as time. “You’ve got the call to action, where you set off and you decide to go and do something, then you’ve got the dream stage in which everything kind of goes well. It’s Greek mythology, whatever you want to call it. Then you get the frustration stage, where your fortunes take a turn for the worst, you don’t know where that’s going to be. And then you descend into some sort of nightmarish conflict. Eventually, you have to find a resolution out of that. They are the ingredients of storytelling and they’re the same the world over. That’s all I’ll be doing.”

To a degree, Nick’s is a well-told story, having set the original record for world bicycle circumnavigations in 1981. He cycled around the northern hemisphere in 138 days and went on to unofficially break his own record in 1984 (79 days). He achieved many other feats in long-distance adventure cycling before making the switch to the welcome hum of an adventure motorbike.

He knows how it goes at this point, so when he told me how his latest circumnavigation would go down, I was inclined to believe him. This most recent exploit, however, is a far cry from an age-old tale. In fact, it’s a world’s first. Nick will spend seven months cycling around the world on an E-Bike, a

Yamaha RT Wabash to be specific, and will be the first person ever to do so.

By his own metric, we were in the first phase of this particular story when we had our conversation. The mood was bright and full of expectation ahead of his journey which was due to commence in just a month’s time. Though before we set off, in true story telling tradition, we must start with the anticipation stage.

Anticipation

“I’ve been a cyclist since I was 12. I just love it.”

Enter Nick Sanders, the hero of our adventure story, born in 1958 in Manchester, England.

“You’re always looking for ways to either escape, or to expand your knowledge of who you are as a person. I wanted to get away from home life very early on. In fact, when I was three, I was so disenchanted with home life, for whatever reason, I was cycling on my trike across Manchester and was brought back by the binmen. In those days, everybody knew where everybody lived, it was a different world. I couldn’t get away until I was about 14 and that was riding 100 miles a day. I had this great big wonderful geographic wilderness which I wanted to explore. As soon as I was able to leave home at 18, I went to live in France and became a racing cyclist. It opened up wonderful corridors that facilitated me to be ambitious, to be good at what I wanted to be good at. And it allowed me to travel cheaply.”

Above Right

After spending three years as a racing cyclist in France, Nick swapped the track for the trails

Above Left

Nick has been cycling hundreds of miles since he was 14

Left

Nick resting in the middle of the Nubian Desert



Below

Nick will set off from his home in Wales and spend seven months on the road

Above Left

He never took the easy route!

Below Left

Nick's dad was always there to greet him on his return



“Would it be fair to say that the cycling was a means to an end, the end being travelling?”

“Everything I do has to have a means to an end. I don’t ride a motorbike or bicycle simply for the enjoyment,” he confessed. “I do find it hugely joyful, but it’s because it has ulterior purposes.”

After three years as a racing cyclist Nick came to the realisation that it was unlikely he would reach the heights of the Tour De France, or indeed, if he did, he “wouldn’t have done much there”. As with many adventure stories, stagnation is all the inspiration a would-be hero needs to set out on his own. Nick had found his call to action.

“I had this moment, this point of epiphany, where I thought I wanted to go and visit places like Laos or Tibet, or I wanted to go and find somewhere in the world where I could discover a point of extremeness, extreme thought, madness, if you like. But that’s a bit of a cliché. Altered thinking - I was quite into that at the time. I just assumed that that would be at the other side of the world or the end of the rainbow. I thought to get to this other world... I could cycle there, I guess, or walk. And, if I go there, I’ve got to come back. So why don’t I just go around the world on the bicycle? The time I’ve told you this was the kind of time it took me to decide to do it.”

Was Nick prepared by the time he left?

“You’re never prepared. I’m not the most prepared person. I think people think just because I’ve been around the world on a motorbike so many times I know how to pack my bags. Yeah, I guess I do. I just know what not to take.”

The Dream Phase

For 23-year-old Nick the world was calling and not much could get in his way. Four decades later, staring down the barrel of yet another world’s first, it seemed little has changed for the main character of this story. We were in the dream phase and nothing could go wrong.

“Is there anything specifically about taking an e-bike around the world that is making you particularly apprehensive?” I asked.

“No, not in the slightest,” he said without a second thought.

“I think it made Yamaha apprehensive because I was talking to other manufacturers and most of them just weren’t interested, simply because they’re nervous about taking an electric bicycle around the world. No one’s done it before. This is a first. And what happens if you take your electric bicycle around the world and it breaks down? I mean, that’s not great for the manufacturer, right? And before Yamaha would say yes to around the world I said ‘let me take it across the length of mainland Europe, from Nordkapp in north Norway, down to Tarifa in southern Spain’, which is 7000 kilometres. They agreed. So that was a road test, for their Wabash and it performed perfectly, as I assumed it would.

The bike will work just as well anywhere in the world as it will across Europe. A road’s a road, a



Photo: Abirai Rai

country's a country. The bike itself I'll be charging in small hotels or youth hostels, (we are on a budget), so we won't necessarily be staying in campsites where I can't charge. But it's not just that, I want to sleep well. I'm averaging 100 miles every single day, that is the scheduled target. Anything less than that and it's already seven months, so a long time to be away from home and to be away from my wife and family. If I were to come down to 80 miles a day then it's going to end up an extra month to six weeks. I don't want to be away for nine months."

Despite the added logistics that make planning an e-bike ride specifically complicated, Nick's experience as an adventurer has made securing the funding for this trip easier for him than most. For long-time sponsor Yamaha, he is a "safe pair of hands". Though this hasn't always been the case. It probably won't surprise you, however, that for 23-year-old Nick adventure was simply a matter of when and not if.

"I gave myself no options. Remember, in the early 80s, I was pioneering ultra-endurance at the time. That's not to say that it hadn't happened before, it had. There were many great round-the-world cyclists at the turn of the century and even during the wars, but I re-invigorated the concept, along with some very good friends of mine, Nick and Dick Crane. When they were bicycling to the top of Kilimanjaro, I would cycle to the source of the White Nile. Whilst they were going to the geographical centre of the Earth I would be cycling around the world in 79 days. So we kind of parried against each other for quite some time. We were ostensibly right at the top of it at the time."

Most importantly, this camaraderie brought in sponsors, something Nick developed quite a talent for as his career progressed.

"I think one of the things I'm good at is finding out what hasn't been done before, and what I'm capable of doing. So when I decided to motorcycle around the world faster than anybody else, it surprised me that nobody else has thought about it. But why would someone want to go around the world in 31 days as I did when you're using the same amount of money as you would need to go around the world in two years and have a really nice time?"

I remember cycling around the world from London, and I said, 'I'm not confident that the papers are going to like just me, even though it's a credible journey. but Miss World is English at the moment, so maybe we should hire her to send me off'. Now, this was the 80s. You were allowed to do that kind of stuff, we didn't know any better. As a consequence, we got into every national newspaper with Miss World setting me off."

The Frustration Stage

"When you think about it, it's a bit rough on me. When I came back, they asked me to do silly things, wear top hats and all the rest of it. So they treated this great feat in a kind of clownish manner. I went along with it. Why not? I'm not being precious about it. But I'm not quite sure whether I've ever been taken credibly by major media for the kind of stuff I do. Having said that, why should I be credible? I don't save lives. As Joey Dunlop

Above

Nick has more than four decades of experience completing circumnavigations

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Getting media attention means thinking outside the box

said, 'I just ride a bike and a bit fast like'. I ride a bike but a bit far like."

The reality of finding sponsorship and making the logistics of his far-flung adventures work never evaded Nick. The invincibility that the main character feels during the dream stage must wear off eventually as we enter the frustration stage. It's impossible to say what this phase will look like when no-one's laid the blue-print before, but the cost and effort alone would be enough to put most people off of an endurance e-bike ride.

"It's going to cost about £6000 in dispensing and regaining batteries because I can't fly the bike with batteries. Every time we get to the edge of a continent I've got to fly the bike. There'll be a lot of lot of boats and ferries but there'll be several flights unfortunately, so I have to dump them. I'll give them to a Yamaha dealership, they'll recycle them, and I'll pick up new batteries wherever I start the journey again. Why would a young person want to spend £6000 on batteries? You need a manufacturer behind you, and that's just a part of the cost issues. Unless you're a phenomena or a prodigy or whatever, or you have a great deal of experience, and I'm afraid to say that can take a long time to get - I've been adventuring for six months, every single year, for 40 years. And every single day of each of those six months I've travelled hard, I don't just go to a beach and hang around, have a good time and then move on. I'm constantly looking for data, constantly looking to fill my assets, looking for people to interview and so forth - It's quite a demanding situation."

It's also a situation that has far reaching implications. For the would-be adventurer this stage of their story isn't simply about logistics or language barriers, as Nick knows well.

"Think very carefully about how far you want to go. Think about who you're leaving behind. You've got to come back to the pros and cons, what you're going to lose. What are the pluses? What are the losses? When I hear of adventure families and couples selling their house to go around the world, I think, 'be very careful about that', because there's no money out there. There's no sponsorship, hardly. Why should anybody give you money to go on holiday? Let's be real about it. If you've got a unique view that you think we all want to watch, read or listen to, then great, go for it. But otherwise, you're going to get swamped in the white noise out there."

The Nightmare Phase

By framing his adventure as this tale as old as time, Nick did not shy away from the nightmare stage - the moments of extreme danger and high drama where all hope is lost. Whether you think it's a pessimistic or realistic outlook for his world e-bike ride, he has stared the nightmare phase in the face on more than one occasion and developed a helpful habit of coming out the other side. Like when he cycled across the front lines of the Ugandan civil war...

"I didn't even know Uganda was having a civil war. So when I crossed the South Sudan border I suddenly

saw burned out trucks and tanks and things and it dawned upon me that the Civil War was absolutely full on. The Bomba road from the Gulu district in the north down to Kampala was the most dangerous road in Africa, but I was committed and naive and a little bombastic. It's not my war, they're not going to bother me, and also, I've got nothing to lose. The guys there got ahold of me and put a gun to my head. I don't know whether they were serious about it but it seemed very serious at the time.

Then there was an incident in Mexico when my driver was kidnapped by cartel members. He took my vehicle, the trailer, two of my client's bikes, and a lot of money in the van and we didn't see the driver, Jim, again for several days. I had to go and get a taxi ride for 300 kilometres to go and find the man. We sent a notice to all the local police officers around Mexico and eventually we found him. I don't know why they didn't kill him but they didn't. He was traumatised, we sent him home. I didn't get the van back, but we carried on with the journey."

Resolutions

"Chances are you'll be fine. The world is a very fine place. And the majority of people are absolutely beautiful and will look after you. You very rarely hear of adventurers coming to a sticky end. Sure, they occasionally get killed by trucks and so forth. That is the biggest issue, but it's not a people problem."

It's an age old tale. The adventurer overcomes his adversities and lives to tell the tale. Despite his past misadventures, Nick hasn't been put off bicycle circumnavigations at all.

"I'm excited about all of it. I'm not at all complacent about it, every single day will be wonderful. As soon as you slow down, and as soon as you get away from the way the world is constructing itself - or destroying itself - and you get back to nature, you suddenly find that everything is magnified, you start to see things in a different way."

I couldn't help but wonder if he already had some more adventures up his sleeve.

"I think nobody else is going to be able to ride an electric bicycle around the world before me. I'm leaving very shortly. So let's assume that I do it, and I accomplish it, then I've done it. That's it. I'll be the first and I'm happy with that. But there will be other journeys I want to do on it. I'll stick with it for a while."

Something tells me Nick will find another world first to sink his teeth into soon, just as he has been doing since he was 23. Suddenly, we're back at the anticipation stage. Another adventure is calling. 

Hear Nick tell this story on the Wired For Adventure Podcast at www.bit.ly/NickSandersWFA.