

Stan The Nomadic Road Warrior: A Traveler Through The Ages

"The trick is to die young as late as possible." –Ashley Montagu

Through the years, I've hooked up with several remarkable pedal partners during my travels around the world. John Brown, a teacher from Kiama, invited me into his house late one afternoon while I pedaled down the Princess Highway south of Sidney, Australia. We became instant friends. A year later, we met in San Francisco for a coast-to-coast bicycle adventure across America. John possessed many preconceived notions about life in the USA. But he never expected to meet a man named 'Stan'.

A month into our tour, heading east on Route 64, John and I had coasted six miles off the plateau leading out of the Grand Canyon National Park. We stopped at the Mobile gas station where 64 intersects Route 89. Our water supply ran low from camping in the desert the night before, so we filled our bottles from the station spigot. I pumped air into my tires when John said, "Hey, mate, I'm ready to ride." A few seconds later, I replaced the air hose when nature called.

"Gotta' hit the bathroom," I said, as I hopped off and leaned my bike against the station wall.

When I returned, John showed a puzzled look on his face. He twisted around with one leg swung over the top tube and gazed northward at the road. He clicked his brake handles by pressing them and releasing in rapid succession.

"What are you looking at?" I asked.

“Don’t know,” he said. “I barely got a glimpse of a guy riding by on a mountain bike, at least, I think it was a mountain



bike. I don’t know because he had passed me when I looked up from my map. It was the strangest bike setup I’ve ever seen.”

“Let’s catch up to him and find out,” I said.

We headed north on Route 89 into a blustery wind. The highway swooped down a long incline into a valley. Multicolored buttes and mesas slipped by us with sand devils swirling through the sagebrush alongside the road. Minutes later, we spotted orange flags flapping from the back of what looked like a small wagon moving slowly in the breakdown lane.

Up closer, it was a bicycle loaded like a gypsy wagon. Two dark blue mountain backpacks hung vertically stacked (in place of panniers) over the back wheel like saddlebags on a horse. A tent, sleeping bag and mattress filled the middle section over the rack. A wooden stick crossed in back where two orange flags hung out on the traffic side. In the middle, like the back bumper on an old Cadillac, a spare tire hung from the stick.

Pulling alongside the rider, I saw two blue front panniers under a plastic beige milk crate, which was braced to the old-style flared Schwinn handlebars. Two one-gallon Clorox

bottles hung from the handlebars, on both sides of the gooseneck. A second set of Clorox bottles hung from backpacks behind the rider's arms. Sitting up in the milk crate and with its head poked out of a six inch round hole in the cardboard cover, was a black cat, looking like he was the navigator of this two wheeled road-ship.

I slowed to eight miles per hour—to match the speed of this wrinkled old man spinning a low gear. He wore blue work pants, high top leather work-boots, a red nylon windbreaker, leather gloves and an orange stocking cap. His weathered face and thin, wiry frame cast a long shadow under the morning sun.

John and I introduced ourselves to the fifty-nine year old man who called himself Stan. I asked him what kind of gear cluster he was cranking. He said it was a 22 front chain ring “granny” to a 34-toothed rear end low gear. That explained why he was going slowly and cranking fast. He acted reserved, but as the miles unfolded, so did his astonishing story.

“Thirteen years ago, my life lacked purpose, so I pressed the eject button on the plastic world. I sold my computer company—bid farewell to what was left of my family and took off on my bicycle. I’ve worn out three others until I came across this mountain bike. I’ll wear it out too, but so far, it’s the best of the lot. I’ve customized it over the years so it’s able to carry the 200 pounds of gear I pack on it.”

“200 pounds!” I gasped.

“That’s right,” Stan said. “This is my home. I never thought I would be on the road so long but I know I will never go home. I live on my investments. My wife died of cancer and my kids don’t give a damn about anything. If I had stayed in my job or tried to keep caring about things they didn’t care about, I’d have gone nuts. Instead, I decided to be happy.”

Our group rolled further into the desert as John and I probed Stan for more of his background. Thirteen years on the road

from Alaska, the Yukon Territory, through the USA, Mexico, Central America and deep into South America. Never the same road twice. With that many years on the road, he possessed the stuff of legends. While he shared some of his experiences, the cat issued a "Meow." Stan smiled.

"This is my best friend, 'Little Chum'. Life throws me its disappointments, but Little Chum never lets me down. He's great company and never complains. He's cycled with me from Canada to Argentina with never an argument. He sleeps during the day and prowls around my campsite at night. We communicate unlike any two creatures. Little Chum knows my mind."

"Don't you ever get homesick for friends?" I asked.

"No point in returning. Life is today. Anything else doesn't mean shit. I don't look back, nor do I have any false aspirations. I rarely think of home. They are busy with their lives. It's no longer my problem. My philosophy deals with this instant. Stan's Law states that wherever you are right now, bets are you're better off than you will be this time tomorrow."

"What about expectations?" John asked.

"No disappointments with my law," Stan replied. "You won't see me straining my neck around the next bend in the road or even talking about next week. I keep a diary, but when it's full, I throw it in the fire."

"What!" I gasped, nearly wavering into his packs.

"What's in the past is done. Besides, can you imagine carrying around 13 years of diaries? I'm already too heavy. No! I never ride the same road twice and I don't think about yesterday. I don't even care about yesterday."

Stan sat erect in the saddle. His smooth cadence complimented

the millions of pedal strokes his legs had pounded out over the years. Deep lines in his face showed a comfortable acceptance of life—as he knew it. Stan proved himself a road warrior.

“Twenty-five miles is my daily target,” he continued. “If I don’t make it, so what? On the flats, I average 8 to 10 miles an hour. I figure I do a million foot pounds of work a year. But I’m in no hurry. Isn’t that right, Little Chum?”

A faint meow came from inside the crate as Stan’s legs spun their way through time. I thought about my load of 70 pounds and my own travels that paled in contrast to Stan’s. What single event sent that intriguing human being toward his extraordinary destiny? My amazement increased as Stan revealed a few episodes from his bicycle sojourn.

“Hell, I’ve got enough roads to keep me busy ’til I die. I never think about how far I’ve gone or how far I’ll go. I stay in the Americas because there are sufficient experiences here.”

“Any funny ones?” I asked.

“Hundreds,” he said. “The one I cherish the most happened a few years back in the Yucatan of Mexico. I was camped out one night in a stand of scrub trees. As usual, I put Little Chum out for his nightly prowl. I put my dentures in my coffee cup outside the tent. I got tired of knocking them over at night and getting water on the floor. Next morning, my teeth were missing, so I called to Little Chum. He sniffed the cup and followed his nose to a burrow about 20 feet away from camp and started digging. I helped him pull out sticks, fur balls and rodent skeletons before I got a foot into a pack rat’s den. Wouldn’t you know it, there were my teeth, smiling up at me. I rinsed ’em off and popped ’em back in my mouth. I tell you breakfast wouldn’t have been the same that day without my teeth.”

We laughed before John said, "Any dangerous times?"

"My worst experience was in the Peruvian Andes when soldiers slashed through my tent with their bayonets cutting my shoulder at the same time. They hauled me away to jail. They interrogated me just like you see in the movies. Bastards anyway! I wrote letters to the U.S. Embassy until I got some attention. My educational background and innocence got through to them. A sergeant befriended me and even discussed Mark Twain while my tent was being repaired. Two weeks later, I was released on a weekend, but since I didn't have any money until the banks opened on Monday, they let me stay in prison two more days. I can tell you that Americans don't have any idea of how lucky they are living in a free country. The kids growing up today take too much for granted.

"Another time I camped out in a bad spot, but it was my fault. I was tired and didn't think about where I set the tent down. It was in a dry wash. That night, a desert rainstorm drenched the area. I woke up to water seeping into my tent. I kept picking the floor up until a flood of water was pulling at every corner of my tent. I looked out the flaps to see Little Chum standing on high ground with each lightning flash. I was in the middle of a flood. I leaped out of the tent as a wave of water swept it downstream. For the next couple of hours, I sat in the rain, talking to myself on how stupid I was to set up the tent in such a bad place. Little Chum was soaked to the bone and shivering. In the morning, I tracked downstream and found my tent snagged on a stump. I was lucky to recover everything."

John and I kept trading places in order to query Stan. He proved a remarkable character. I felt like a polliwog and he was the big daddy, the one who had gone before, who knew the ways of the world. His philosophy intrigued me even though I couldn't begin to live like that. I carried great expectations for each new day on a bicycle adventure.

But that provided the key to his unusual life path. "You ever see anyone happy most of the time?" Stan asked. "That's the one thing about living and being human. Life's a miracle on this single green planet somewhere out in the black void of space. It gives a beginning and a lifetime later—it ends. When it's over, man, it's over! What we do in the interim is our choice. We're given certain abilities and intelligence, but for those of us born in a free country—we can decide our life choices. We can change our decisions at any time. If we don't move on choices, those choices vanish and we are left with what Thoreau said, "The masses of men live lives of quiet desperation."

"You got that right," I said.

"It may be true, but it is not necessary," Stan said.

"I am a professional cloud watcher," Stan said. "Clouds are not in a hurry. They change so slowly that most people never notice, never look up. But each of us CAN look."

"You ever hear what the Swiss psychologist Paul Tournier said," Stan asked.

"Haven't read him," John said.

"Most people spend their entire lives indefinitely preparing to live," Stan said. "They put off joy until their circumstances improve. They work and save for their retirement. Is someone to blame? No. None of us can change our family or growing up circumstances, but we can choose to change our attitudes and our actions."

Ahead of us in the afternoon a crossroads appeared. Stan pedaled through it without looking back as we turned east.

"Take care guys," he said.

"Where you headed next?" John yelled after him.

“I’m headed for grizzly country in Alaska,” he yelled back.
“I’m in need of a little excitement.”

We watched his orange flags vanish over the hill. John and I continued our transcontinental trek with new ideas about life. The one thing that dismayed us most was Stan’s disregard for the diaries he had thrown into the fire. But that was Stan. If it weren’t for the way he lived, we would never have known about his teeth smiling up from the bottom of a pack rat’s hideout.

What’s more, he’s out there tonight under the stars, filling his days with living. Stan doesn’t complain, nor does he live in desperation. The wind caresses his cheeks and shoulders. Its stormy fingers play in his hair, and the rain cleanses his spirit. The stars, moon and sun have shared sweet secrets with him in the morning dew. He makes love with nature on his bicycle. Stan celebrates the moment.

For John and me, it provided one hell of a moment with one of the most remarkable bicyclists we had ever met—Stan the nomadic road warrior.

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