

# Long ride to self discovery

Judith Woods on the motorcycle diaries of round-the-world duo Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman

To those of us unlikely ever to dine on pigs' testicles in a Mongolian *ger* or spend the night drinking vodka and firing Kalashnikovs with Ukrainian mafia, *Long Way Round*, a new travelogue by Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman, presents an entertaining window on to a reassuringly remote world.

But while this aspect of the book is fascinating, the real story is about how close friends get on when a 15-week journey forces them to get even closer.

Their unflinchingly honest, and at times unflattering, portrayal of themselves and each other – as recorded in their daily diaries – serves, at the very least, as a cautionary tale to anyone who thinks there would be nothing more marvellous than ditching our families for a few months to hang out with our best mate on a grown-up gap year.

"Ewan had a tendency to impose his moods on everyone surrounding him," wrote Boorman, 38, after a particularly tiresome day in Kazakhstan. "One minute he was up, the next he'd hit the bottom of a deep trough. The best thing was to accept it and wait for him to get over it. He could snap out of a bad mood as quickly as he entered it. But it was a pain in the arse."

In Russia, McGregor, 33, found Boorman's bossiness difficult to endure. "Charley had a tendency to want to lead," he grumbled. "I was happy with it most of the time, but there were times when I had enough of traipsing along at the back. I don't want to spend this trip being led around the world."

Before embarking on their three-month motorbike ride from London to New York, heading east, the pair received survival training from Jamie Lowther-Pinkerton, the ex-SAS expert. But while they may have been well schooled in how to avoid "scrot rot" in their underpants, deal with bear attacks and talk their way out of a kidnap attempt, they were ill prepared for sleeping side by side under canvas. By Ulaan Baatar, they were desperate to swap their joint tent for two one-man shelters.

"We'd come to realise we

couldn't be in each other's hair 24 hours a day," wrote McGregor. "It was too much. We needed some privacy if we were going to maintain our sanity."

When I met the two actors in the garage of their west London production office, there was an air of intimate – and rather exclusive – mateyness about their camaraderie. After sharing the tribulations and triumphs of a 22,345-mile round-the-world trip, it's little wonder they describe themselves as "brothers". Having spent many months planning their Boy's Own adventure, then enduring its privations together, they unconsciously echo each other's body language as they light cigarettes and share in-jokes. When they listen to each other's stories, it is with rapt attention.

They met in Ireland in 1996, on the set of a film, *The Serpent's Kiss*. A shared passion for bikes was the foundation of the friendship and they began riding together, as well as holidaying together in Cornwall with their families.

At the outset, the pair agreed that the purpose of the trek was to savour the journey, rather than hurtle blindly towards their destination. But it took many days for them to acquire the ability to slow down and live in the moment.

"We would try to reach a town by nightfall," said McGregor, "but grew to realise that, if we didn't, and something held us up, that was what would make the journey. I really believed the delays and aggravations were what made the trip interesting. It wasn't solely about sitting on the back of a motorbike. The bike was just the means by which we'd chosen to get from one experience to another."

He and Boorman felt Mongolia was the undisputed highlight of their trip; its rugged beauty created many frustrating challenges, but the rewards were rich, in terms of both scenery and people.

"Once we stopped and began to meet real people," said Boorman, "it was refreshing to realise that everybody is pretty much the same and wants the same things: a house to live in, food to eat, a better future for their children."



PICTURES: GETTY; ABBIE TRAYLER-SMITH

The odyssey couple: actors Ewan McGregor (far left) and Charley Boorman about to set off on their epic journey. Above: rider with a more traditional mount in Kazakhstan

Children – both men have two daughters – were a recurrent theme of the trip: McGregor is a goodwill ambassador for Unicef, the United Nations Children's Fund, and he and Boorman stopped at various projects, which will feature in *Long Way Round*, the television series on the trip that begins on Monday.

Again and again they marvelled at the kindness shown to them by individuals and communities with, to Western eyes, few material possessions. In every minor crisis, from repairing a damaged engine to fording a flooded river, they were invariably helped by the locals. Strangers would appear, as if from nowhere, to weld their bikes, offer a bed for the night

– with a four-hour feast and a sauna thrown in – or simply provide them with crucial information about the surrounding terrain.

For their part, McGregor and Boorman found themselves gradually opening up – to strangers and to each other. Although they knew each other well at the outset, it was inevitable that the pressures of the journey, both practical and psychological, would create strains.

"I learned it was very important to communicate," said McGregor. "Before we left, we made a pact to make sure we vented our grievances straight away instead of fuming about things for days on end. I would get depressed, which was caused by missing my family or feeling things weren't going the

way I wanted them to. But unless I communicated that, nobody knew what was wrong with me or why."

Boorman's communication difficulties were the polar opposite. A tendency to opine a little too frequently, and too forcefully, led to heated arguments with the cameraman who travelled with them and the back-up team with whom they liaised at potentially tricky border crossings.

"I had a lot of problems at the beginning," said Boorman. "I discovered pretty early on that I needed to stop and listen to people a bit more, and that I'm not always right – hard lessons to learn." At one point, McGregor recorded in his diary, he laid into Boorman for "throwing up too much dust, riding too fast and a dozen other things, all the criticism completely unwarranted and brought on by my bad mood".

In Slovakia, where McGregor was already desperately homesick, he was oversensitive and uptight as Boorman poked fun at him. "I'm not very good at laddish repartee at the best of times," he conceded, "but now it really seemed to land a punch and I was failing to roll with it."

On another occasion, when floods had transformed the primitive track into a mudbath in which they repeatedly skidded off their bikes, Boorman was so demoralised he burst into tears. "I was blubbing like a baby, the inside of my helmet steaming up as the tears rolled down my cheeks."

But the good times far outweighed the bad; the shared sense of purpose – and indeed, shared belongings – created an intense

bond. In *Long Way Round*, an exasperated Boorman chides McGregor for his "obsession with gear", such as a toilet-roll holder and multiple saucepans, which eventually had to be shed from their chronically overloaded 1,150cc BMW bikes.

A list of their baggage includes silk long Johns, Blu-tack, mountain whistles and dental floss. The pair are adamant, however, that their most vital pieces of kit were their global positioning systems, followed by mountain equipment sleeping bags (McGregor) and baby-wipes (Boorman).

McGregor recounted listening to Wagner on his iPod as they drove through "scrappy Czech towns, along cobbled roads and down tree-lined avenues". But as they rode further on from central Europe, and the roads became more unpredictable, they found music too great a distraction.

"We learned to be happy with our thoughts as we rode along," said Boorman. "We had the time to contemplate all sorts of things, which you don't often have when you've got a family and you're wrapped up in day-to-day life." The photographs they showed me vividly capture the realities of backpacking by bike, with the two alternately larking about and glumly waiting at border crossings as their fixers wrestle with red tape.

There were incongruous shots of them dressed in their leathers alongside Mongolian herdsman and posing dutifully with heavily-armed border police – at the policemen's insistence. Looking at a snap of his bike parked in front

of a truck that had toppled into a ditch, McGregor erupted into laughter.

"We were in Siberia and we drove past a lorry that had veered off the road and had almost overturned, which wasn't an unusual sight in Siberia," he said. "I thought I'd check there was no one inside, so I clambered up and on the front seat saw a big coat, which started moving. And this face came out and I got such a fright. I said, 'Are you OK?' And he told me to f--- off. I can only assume he was so drunk he'd crashed his lorry and was sleeping it off."

McGregor and Boorman travelled through Europe, Russia, Siberia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Alaska and then across North America to New York. Their only breaks from the road were when they went under the Channel by train and flew across the Bering Strait between Siberia and Alaska.

Gruelling as their trip was, they are already thinking about another – but on a more modest scale.

"The two obvious places are Africa and South America," said McGregor. "We agree we wouldn't do such a long journey again. I look back at the toughest times with the most fondness, but one thing we definitely learned was that three months was a long time away from our kids and our lives."

□ The first episode of *Long Way Round* will be broadcast on Sky One on Monday, at 9pm. A book with the same title is published by Time Warner at £18.99. It may be ordered through Telegraph Books Direct (0870 155 7222) at £16.99 + £2.25 p&p.