



# WHEELS OF STEEL

What started out as a crazy scheme hatched over a few beers has turned into a global cycling odyssey. Joanne Hawkins meets the English boys pedalling around the world – and all for a good cause. Photographed by Isamu Sawa





(left) Ben Wylson and Jamie Mackenzie enter Singapore after cycling 10,000km; (above left) taking a rest in Sumatra, Wylson writes it all down; (above right) at a food stall in China.

(above right) Trekking in Indonesia; (below right) the pair have spent a lot of their Aussie time in the Victorian capital; (below left) getting some kip on a road train across the Nullarbor.

It was a drunken night in the pub that did it. Exhilarated from a cycling trip around Ireland, cousins Jamie Mackenzie and Ben Wylson ordered another pint of warm beer and started to think about where they could go next. Perhaps they could cycle around Europe? Or even Australia? But why stop there? As the evening wore on, their plans became more elaborate. “We just got more and more carried away,” remembers Mackenzie. “We thought, why don’t we make it as epic as possible? By the end of the night, or about five beers later, our plan had grown to include cycling around every continent in three years without using a single aeroplane.”

Of course, that could have been that; nothing more than an enthusiastic pipedream fuelled by too much beer. But after they’d gone home and, as they laughingly put it, “drunkenly” traced a route across a map of the world, the seed for an epic adventure was sown.

Not that they initially knew how to turn their ambitious plan into reality. Says Mackenzie, now 28, “There’s no blueprint on how to cycle around the world. It’s not like you can go and buy a book, so we had to make it up as we went along.”

Two and a half years after hatching their plan, and with 17 countries and 9000km behind them, Mackenzie and Wylson, from Kent in south-east England, are sitting in a cafe in Melbourne’s Fitzroy reflecting on their journey so far. Since they set out from Dover on April 6 last year, there have been many highs and a few lows, an attack by a rabid dog, rock falls, high-speed crashes, injuries and a near-fatal accident, plus many surreal experiences that should keep them employed on the dinner party circuit for many years to come.

Like the time they bumped into Johnny Knoxville and the *Jackass* team on a Moscow

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street. And then spent an evening with notorious Welsh drug-baron-turned-author Howard Marks, in the same city. Or the occasion they were invited to appear on a Chinese version of *Parkinson* – and the studio audience sang “Happy Birthday” to a bemused Mackenzie. “I have never had such a surreal experience in my life,” he laughs.

Since arriving in Australia in April, they’ve even appeared as extras in *Neighbours* after meeting cast member Dichen Lachman on Fitzroy’s Brunswick Street (where they were selling copies of a fundraising booklet about their adventures) – and have been invited to go fishing with actor Jack Thompson.

But ask the pair what they remember most so far about Free Wheels East – as they have officially called their expedition – and they both say it has been the generosity of strangers. “We’ve been astonished at people’s kindness from day one,” says Wylson, 25. “The support we’ve had has been fantastic. It’s unbelievable how compassionate human beings are; I reckon there are few terrible people in the world, whatever people tell you.”

Although they say they’ve undertaken their epic journey – which will eventually take them to 50 countries – “for the fun and adventure of it”, they’re also aiming to encourage people to push their boundaries as well as raise money and awareness for anti-poverty charity Practical Action.

“The world has never been more accessible, but people seem less inclined to get up and do anything,” muses Wylson. “We want to say to people who might not have the courage to do something adventurous – like a bike ride around

Victoria – that if we can do it, anyone can.”

He pauses, then laughs. “Although we’re still baffled at what we’ve actually managed to achieve so far,” he says.

Wylson pushes a stray strand of blond hair out of his eyes as Mackenzie (“The even blonder one,” he quips) nods in agreement. The boys are so similar they could be brothers, often finishing each other’s sentences as they try to sum up the experience of attempting to cycle around the world together. They’ve been close since childhood; regularly spending holidays together running around their grandparents’ farm. “We used to play Robin Hood in the woods,” smiles Wylson.

After completing “arts-based degrees”, the pair both went into care work – Mackenzie in mental health while Wylson worked with brain injury patients – before that fateful night in 2004 when their round-the-world plan was hatched.

The next year was a flurry of saving and planning as the pair sourced equipment (their bikes, complete with top-of-the-range leather saddles to prevent what Mackenzie calls “arse ache”, were hand built), sought sponsors, planned their route, and set up a website so anyone could follow their progress. (They now average more than 2000 hits a day.)

They were still furiously making last-minute phone calls as their families waved them on a ferry bound for France. “Saying goodbye was the hardest thing we’ve ever done and something I never wish to go through again,” says Mackenzie.

A desire to “get as far away from England as quickly as possible” saw the cyclists, who favour thongs and board shorts as their cycling attire,



doing 80km days on first landing in Europe, which soon led to injury. "We were using muscles that we hadn't exercised properly and, within a few days, Ben had twanged all the ligaments in his left knee, so we decided to back off a bit," says Mackenzie.

From France, it was almost smooth pedalling through Belgium, Germany, Poland and Belarus before arriving in Moscow in June last year, although they had to develop a system to avoid the trucks that would menacingly thunder past at high speeds, particularly when they crossed into eastern Europe. "The person [cycling] behind would look in their mirror and if they spotted anything that looked like it might hit us, would scream a warning so we could both swerve off the road," explains Wylson.

Despite the danger ("I did start to wonder whether I was going to get squashed, as it was quite hairy," remembers Wylson), arriving in Moscow was a magical experience for the cousins. "It was unbelievable," says Mackenzie. "There was this sense of realisation that just a few months before, we had pushed our bikes out of our front doors in England and here we were, about to cycle into Moscow. We had this enormous sense of satisfaction and achievement, which has sustained us through the more difficult times."

The silver-tongued duo also managed to blag a free room at Moscow's prestigious Royal Aurora hotel, which just happened to be a \$1300-a-night suite that had previously played host to US president George W Bush.

## "The next thing I knew, Jamie was sobbing and shouting at me to get up. It was quite disturbing"

After Moscow, and a trip on the Trans-Siberian Railway (the boys admit they occasionally hitch a lift rather than pedalling every kilometre, otherwise "it'll take 10 years"), the pair travelled on through Mongolia ("probably my favourite place so far," enthuses Mackenzie) and on to China, where they found themselves in trouble with the law. "We made the mistake of checking into a two-star hotel in one town and tourists are only allowed to stay in a hotel that's three stars or above," remembers Mackenzie. "At 1am, we were escorted from the hotel by the police, who drove us around the city trying to find a better hotel that would take us for a reduced rate because we didn't have much money. But we had no luck and, at 4am, the police had to take us back to the original hotel.

"But a TV crew heard about these two English cyclists being driven around the city at 3am and came to do a story on us. They also put us up in a five-star hotel and took us out for a fancy meal, which was nice of them, so it turned out OK in the end."

But the boys had a schedule to keep to – they're aiming to be back in England by April 6, 2008 – so it was back on their bikes and onwards through South-East Asia. It was in Thailand – where they'd decided to take a couple of months off from their cycling endeavours – that things nearly ended in tragedy.

On December 29 last year, the pair had been to a party on a mountain in Koh Tao. Mackenzie was riding a little behind Wylson and, in the dark, noticed what looked like a couple of cement bags lying in a ditch. He then realised it was his cousin, who was lying in a pool of blood, half-submerged in water.

"There was blood everywhere and I thought he was dead," says Mackenzie. "I was screaming, 'Ben, wake up, wake up,' and then eventually he stirred."

It seems that Wylson had lost his way in the dark and fallen, knocking himself out. "I can't remember what happened; the next thing I knew, Jamie was sobbing and shouting at me to get up. It was quite disturbing seeing him so emotional."

Luckily his wounds were largely superficial; he needed stitches for some deep cuts, had a badly swollen eye and had ripped the inside of his cheek. But the accident – and a couple of earlier crashes in China – gave both a fright. "When the first crash happened, a truck came down the hill just as I fell off and if I had fallen to the left instead of the right, I probably would've been flattened. And for a few days after I fell in Koh Tao, I was haunted by the thought that I might easily have not woken up. But you learn from things like this, and as long as we're sensible..."

After scoring a free passage on a cargo ship from Singapore to Fremantle, the pair have spent the past five months in Australia, predominantly in Melbourne, where they've sold a staggering 6000 copies of their booklet and have held fundraising events and speeches for Practical Action. They're currently looking for further sponsorship from companies ("Or a millionaire?" quips Wylson) – and a ship – to enable them to continue their trip in November. "We're aiming to get a boat over to Punta Arenas, which is the most southerly tip of Chile, and then hitch a ride with the Chilean navy to

Antarctica, before returning and cycling the length of South America," explains Mackenzie.

Then it will be on through Central America, the US, Africa and Southern Europe before heading home, where they have plans to write a book and release a DVD about their adventures.

They are itching to get back on their bikes but say they will be sad to leave Australia. "We love it; we always say if there's anywhere else in the world we would love to live, it would be Melbourne. The people are so welcoming," says Wylson.

They've spent the past 16 months in each other's company, but amazingly, they claim they haven't had any major arguments. "We know when to give each other space," says Wylson. "Sometimes we think that maybe we're overdoing the amount of time we spend with each other, but we regularly say we're lucky to have each other as best friends because we get along so well. If you can live with each other in such close quarters for such a long period of time, then it's a pretty strong friendship."

And, despite admitting they sometimes get overwhelmed by the enormity of their task, the boys say their trip has been everything they imagined. "It's been more than we thought it was going to be, so if we can continue in the same way, we'll be more than chuffed," says Mackenzie. "The most exciting thing is that we don't know what's going to happen; in fact we don't even know where we're going to be staying tonight!" ■

For further info, visit [www.freewheelseast.co.uk](http://www.freewheelseast.co.uk); for Practical Action, see [www.practicalaction.org](http://www.practicalaction.org)

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