

PRAISE FOR  
**STEEL SUNSHINE**

An amazing adventure - a real page turner

*Josephine Quintero, travel writer, Lonely Planet*

No money, no back up, but lots of determination - I take my hat (or helmet) off to him

*Pete Townsend*

A wonderful achievement and a bloody good read.

*John Knight, motor cycle writer*

Humour, trauma, excitement - this adventure has it all.

*Sentinella Magazine*

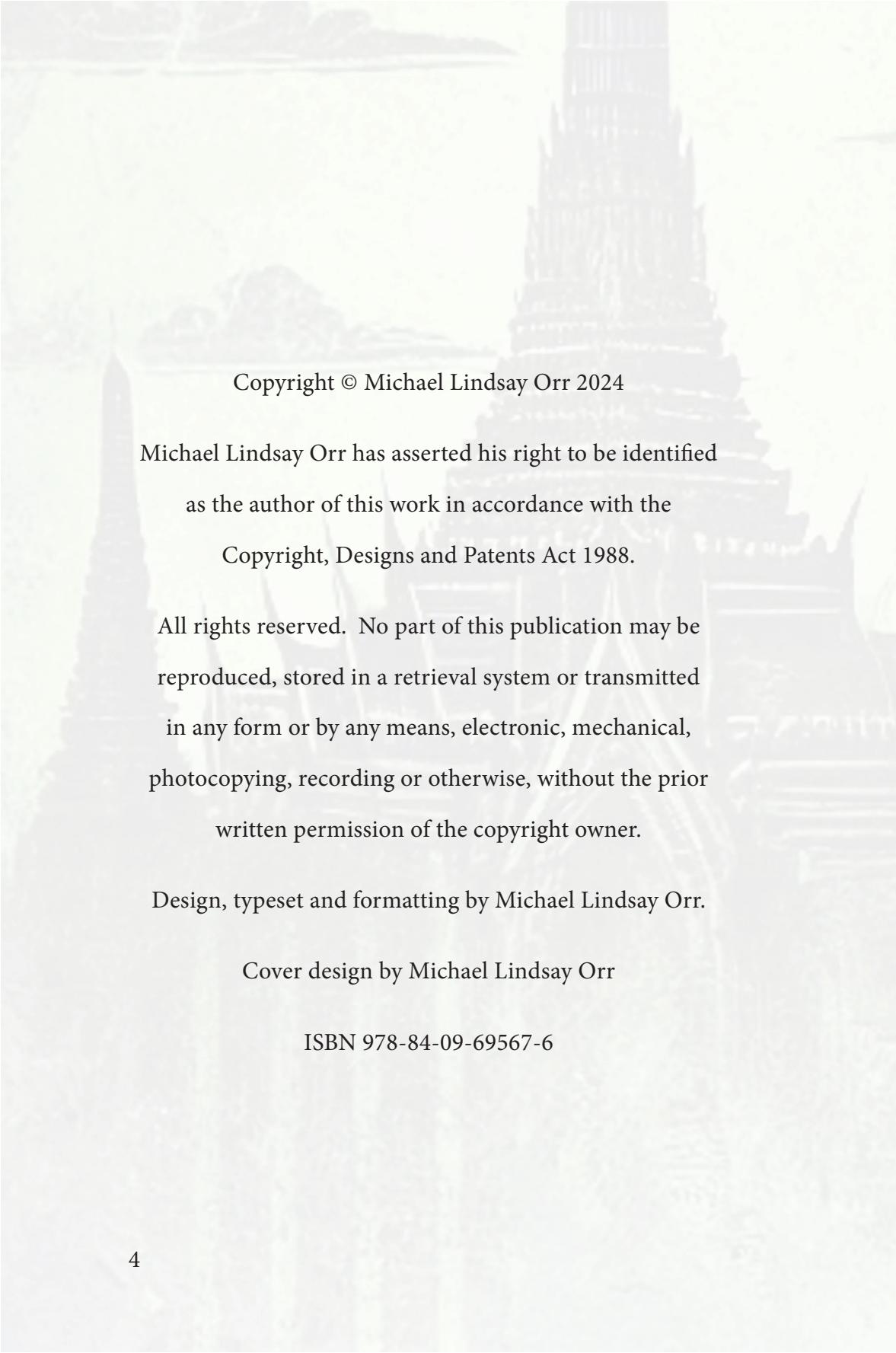


Java - Bali - Java - Sumatra - Malaysia - Thailand

# **STEEL SUNSHINE**

A ride on a Harley to Bangkok from Bali  
in 1994

Michael Lindsay Orr



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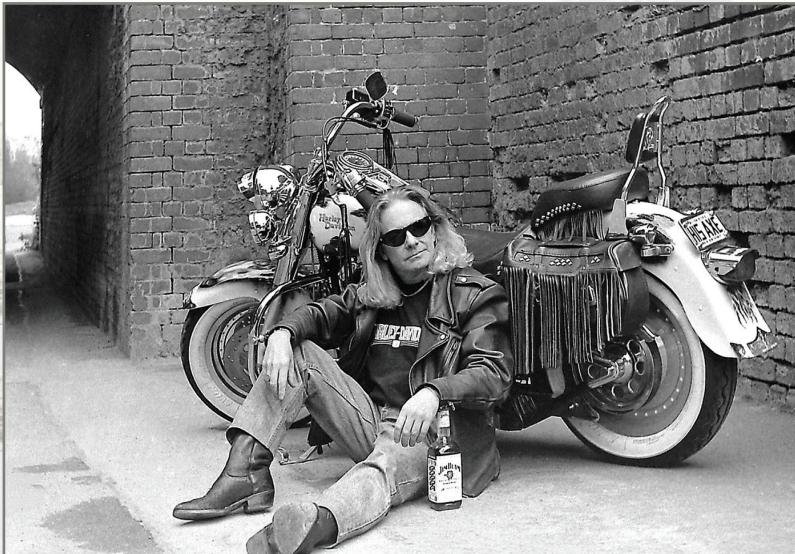
Design, typeset and formatting by Michael Lindsay Orr.

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Good Morning...  
It's just another shitty day in Paradise

*Dave Jackman  
Sunday 12 June 1994*



*After a lifetime of creating, inventing, and wandering, Michael Lindsay Orr has finally put pen to paper. A retired Chartered Designer, he now resides in rural Andalucía, where he shares a sun-soaked life with his Spanish wife and two bossy Yorkshire terriers. His career has been an eclectic mix of engineering, design, and globe-trotting—a man equally at home designing the million-selling HAWS watering can way back in 1987, inventing The Incredible Lightweight Artic for Volkswagen, creating the first bilingual audio visual board game in Irish gaelic and English and somehow bagging a Gold Disc for Rick Astley's album "FREE." One can only assume he's never going to give up... making cool things.*

*Educated in the glorious pre-university era of polytechnics, he studied engineering, plastics technology, and design, back when such things were hands-on and wonderfully unpredictable. Now, in a well-earned retirement, he spends his time writing about adventures, reliving past journeys, and possibly designing something new just for the fun of it.*

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Written in 1994;

Updated in 1995

It is now 2024 - how do I feel now?



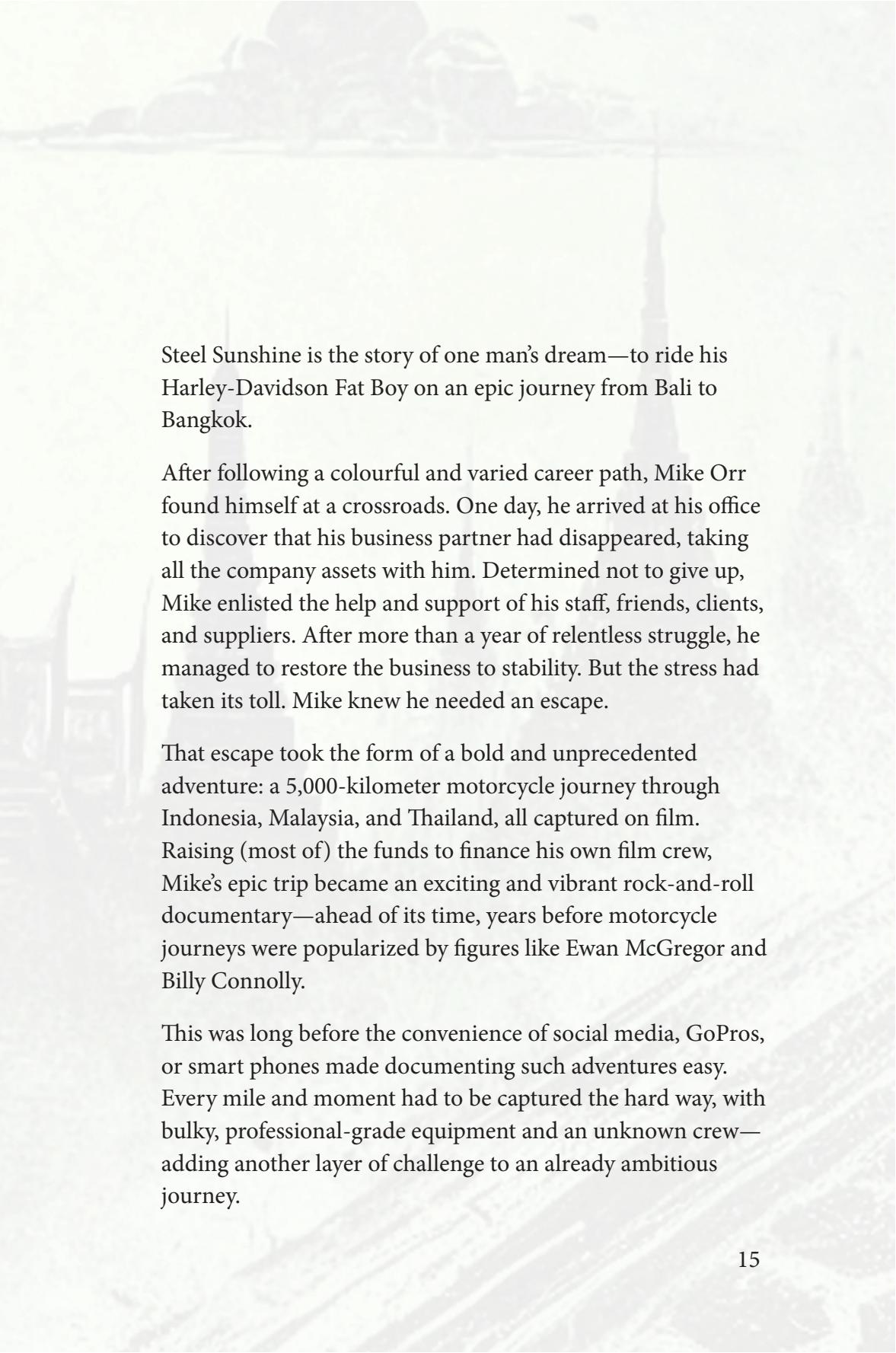
## SYNOPSIS

Steel Sunshine is a raw, adrenaline-fuelled memoir that chronicles one man's audacious journey through Southeast Asia in 1994—long before the days of YouTube, GoPros, and budget travel. Armed with nothing but grit and a Harley-Davidson Fat Boy, he rides over 5,000 kilometres through lands where carrying a camera meant navigating a quagmire of bureaucracy, corruption, suspicion, and real danger.

From the lush jungles of Sumatra to the neon-lit chaos of Bangkok, he faces mechanical breakdowns, corrupt officials, and unforgiving elements. Yet amid the madness, he discovers unexpected camaraderie in the global brotherhood of motorcycle riders—kindred spirits whose generosity and sense of adventure light the way through even the darkest moments.

This isn't just a story about the ride. It's about the untamed beauty of diverse cultures; the wild highs of rock 'n' roll parties, the sting of betrayal, and the soul-deep revelations that come from diving headfirst into the unknown.

For anyone who's ever dreamed of adventure in its rawest, most unfiltered form, Steel Sunshine will ignite your wanderlust and prove why the road less travelled is always the most rewarding.



Steel Sunshine is the story of one man's dream—to ride his Harley-Davidson Fat Boy on an epic journey from Bali to Bangkok.

After following a colourful and varied career path, Mike Orr found himself at a crossroads. One day, he arrived at his office to discover that his business partner had disappeared, taking all the company assets with him. Determined not to give up, Mike enlisted the help and support of his staff, friends, clients, and suppliers. After more than a year of relentless struggle, he managed to restore the business to stability. But the stress had taken its toll. Mike knew he needed an escape.

That escape took the form of a bold and unprecedented adventure: a 5,000-kilometer motorcycle journey through Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, all captured on film. Raising (most of) the funds to finance his own film crew, Mike's epic trip became an exciting and vibrant rock-and-roll documentary—ahead of its time, years before motorcycle journeys were popularized by figures like Ewan McGregor and Billy Connolly.

This was long before the convenience of social media, GoPros, or smart phones made documenting such adventures easy. Every mile and moment had to be captured the hard way, with bulky, professional-grade equipment and an unknown crew—adding another layer of challenge to an already ambitious journey.

As a pioneer in this genre, Mike encountered real dangers and unexpected challenges along the way. Travelling through regions marked by political unrest and cultural complexities, he had no blueprint to follow and no safety net.

This book chronicles the making of the film and the incredible journey behind it—a story of resilience, adventure, and the pursuit of freedom on two wheels.



All together for the first time - the Bangkok Immortals, Farang Angels and Siam Knights...and me!



# THE TRAVEL CREW

Michael *Rider, Writer and Producer*

Steve *Location Director / initial co-organiser*

Paul *Camera*

Chris *Assistant Camera / photographer*

Sean *Sound*



THE ADVENTURE BEGINS...



SATURDAY 4 JUNE

WE LEAVE FROM GATWICK

There we were—five pale, pink, and typically British individuals surrounded by a mountain of carrier bags stuffed with the gear too delicate or precious to entrust to baggage handlers. The concrete-and-Formica expanse of Gatwick's South Terminal hardly felt like the launch pad for the adventure of a lifetime, but here we were, waiting for the final call to board flight GA 977 to Jakarta, Indonesia.

I wanted to do something no one else had done—ride a Harley-Davidson across the equator. It was a feat possible in only a handful of places, as most of the equator lies across vast stretches of sea or tiny, inaccessible islands. Sumatra became the obvious choice, and with that, the route was set. But as I sat sipping lukewarm Ashbourne water, feigning calm for the sake of my crew, my mind churned with uncertainties.

Three of my four companions I'd only just met, and I couldn't help but wonder how they'd fare under the inevitable pressures of the journey. Would they rise to the challenge or crumble when things got tough? Every mile of our 5,000-kilometer trek through Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand would test not just our skills, but our patience, endurance, and trust in one another.

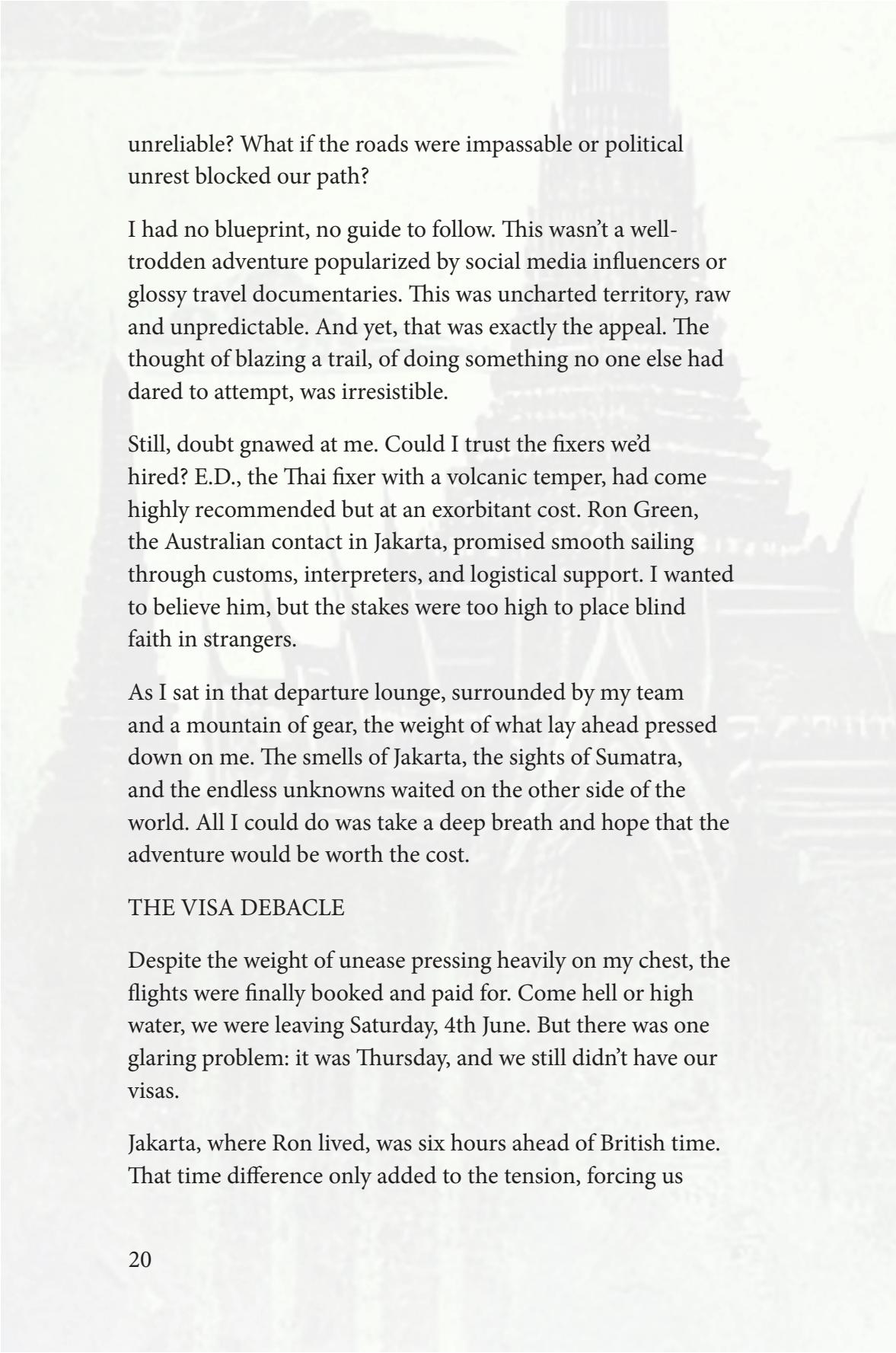
Steve, our team leader, exuded a scruffy confidence that belied his sharp eye for detail as a seasoned pop video producer. Sean, with his rugby-player build and clean-cut charm, seemed easygoing enough, but could he handle the relentless grind of sound recording in unpredictable conditions? Paul, our quiet Italian cameraman, had a steady presence, but I wondered how he'd cope when silence was no longer an option. And then there was Chris, our gofer, with his khaki-clad optimism that felt both reassuring and naive.

The sights and smells of the departure lounge—a faint scent of industrial cleaning products mixed with greasy fast food—were a far cry from the tropical humidity that would soon engulf us. I imagined the thick, sticky air of Jakarta, laced with diesel fumes and the tang of street food sizzling over open flames. The unknown loomed large. What would I find when we landed? How would the crew handle the heat, the chaos, and the inevitable challenges?

### THE COSTS AND THE CHALLENGES

The past month had been a whirlwind of frustration, with bureaucratic roadblocks threatening to derail everything. Indonesia's government was notoriously unsympathetic to its own filmmakers, let alone foreign crews lugging in piles of expensive camera equipment. Steve had spent months battling embassy staff, whose smiles masked their inability—or unwillingness—to give clear instructions. Every form, every signature, every stamp came at a cost—not just financial, but emotional.

The costs were spiralling. The budget, always precarious, stretched thinner by the day. Then there was the mental toll of uncertainty. What if the equipment was seized at customs? What if the crew we'd hired in Jakarta turned out to be



unreliable? What if the roads were impassable or political unrest blocked our path?

I had no blueprint, no guide to follow. This wasn't a well-trodden adventure popularized by social media influencers or glossy travel documentaries. This was uncharted territory, raw and unpredictable. And yet, that was exactly the appeal. The thought of blazing a trail, of doing something no one else had dared to attempt, was irresistible.

Still, doubt gnawed at me. Could I trust the fixers we'd hired? E.D., the Thai fixer with a volcanic temper, had come highly recommended but at an exorbitant cost. Ron Green, the Australian contact in Jakarta, promised smooth sailing through customs, interpreters, and logistical support. I wanted to believe him, but the stakes were too high to place blind faith in strangers.

As I sat in that departure lounge, surrounded by my team and a mountain of gear, the weight of what lay ahead pressed down on me. The smells of Jakarta, the sights of Sumatra, and the endless unknowns waited on the other side of the world. All I could do was take a deep breath and hope that the adventure would be worth the cost.

### THE VISA DEBACLE

Despite the weight of unease pressing heavily on my chest, the flights were finally booked and paid for. Come hell or high water, we were leaving Saturday, 4th June. But there was one glaring problem: it was Thursday, and we still didn't have our visas.

Jakarta, where Ron lived, was six hours ahead of British time. That time difference only added to the tension, forcing us

to stay awake until the early hours of the morning to make frantic phone calls. Not that sleep was an option anyway. My mind buzzed with scenarios of what could go wrong, the domino effect of delays threatening to derail everything.

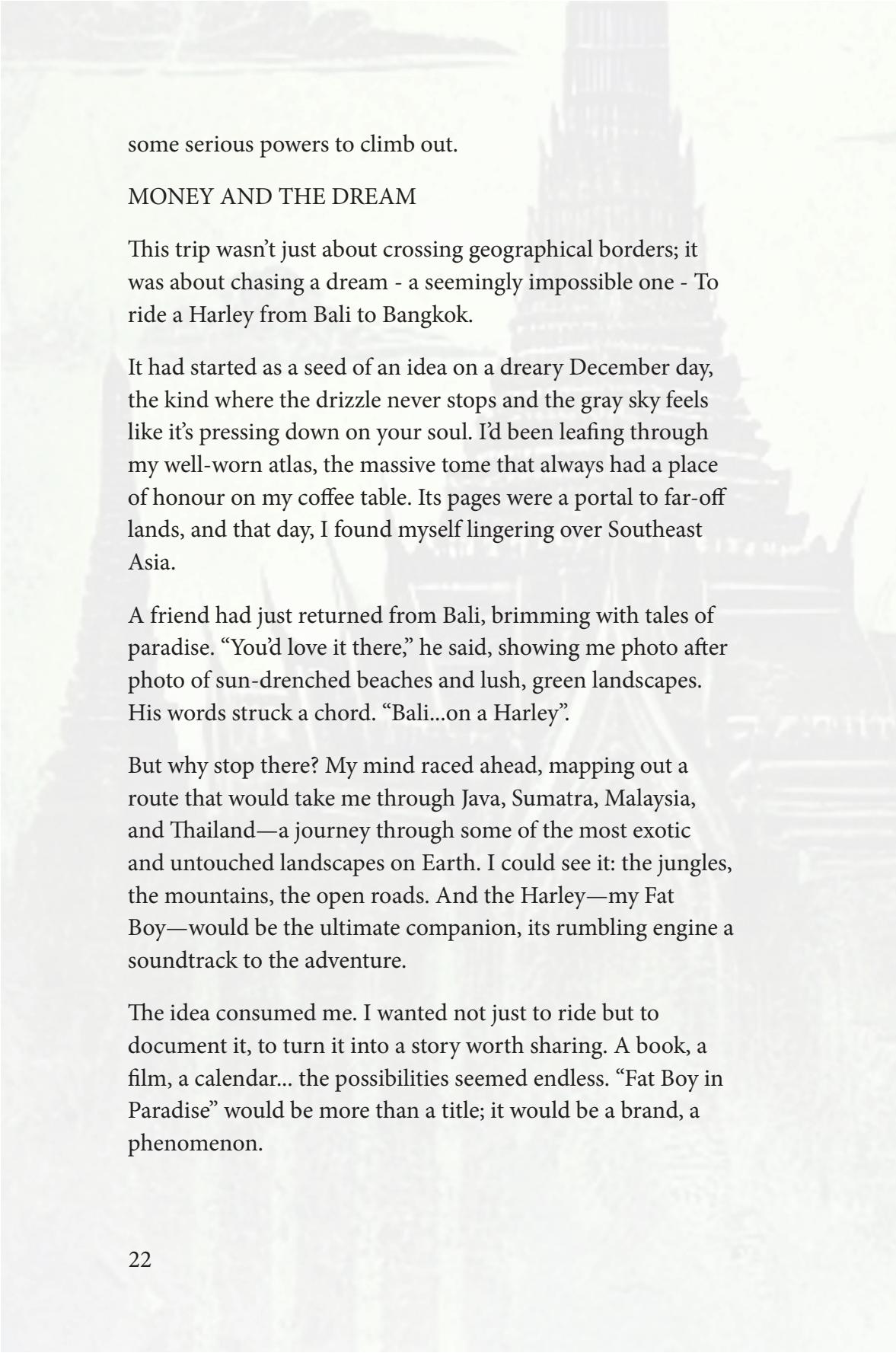
At 3:30 p.m. on Friday, just half an hour before the Embassy slammed its doors for the weekend, we got word from the courier: the visas were ready. Relief hit like a tidal wave. Around 8 p.m., the precious documents finally arrived in a humble jiffy bag, their very presence an answer to our prayers. Steve and I collapsed onto the sofa, clutching the bag as if it were a golden ticket to salvation. There were kisses, hugs, and more than a few muttered expletives of gratitude.

A bottle of whisky—saved for either celebration or commiseration—was cracked open. We poured stiff shots and toasted our miraculous escape from catastrophe. But as the high of relief settled, a creeping sense of doubt gnawed at me. Opening the passports, I carefully examined the details.

And then I saw it.

The wrong type of visa! Instead of business, they were for pleasure—and not for three weeks, but two. My stomach dropped. All that effort, the endless calls, the meticulous forms... and they still got it wrong. To make matters worse, we could've gotten these pleasure visas on arrival without even visiting the embassy.

The rest of the whisky didn't last long. Steve and I sat in stunned silence, the enormity of the situation sinking in. We were now more restricted than the average tourist. Had this been a deliberate stitch-up? I didn't know, but I did know one thing: Ron better be ready to play the superhero because we'd been dropped into a vat of kryptonite, and it was going to take



some serious powers to climb out.

## MONEY AND THE DREAM

This trip wasn't just about crossing geographical borders; it was about chasing a dream - a seemingly impossible one - To ride a Harley from Bali to Bangkok.

It had started as a seed of an idea on a dreary December day, the kind where the drizzle never stops and the gray sky feels like it's pressing down on your soul. I'd been leafing through my well-worn atlas, the massive tome that always had a place of honour on my coffee table. Its pages were a portal to far-off lands, and that day, I found myself lingering over Southeast Asia.

A friend had just returned from Bali, brimming with tales of paradise. "You'd love it there," he said, showing me photo after photo of sun-drenched beaches and lush, green landscapes. His words struck a chord. "Bali...on a Harley".

But why stop there? My mind raced ahead, mapping out a route that would take me through Java, Sumatra, Malaysia, and Thailand—a journey through some of the most exotic and untouched landscapes on Earth. I could see it: the jungles, the mountains, the open roads. And the Harley—my Fat Boy—would be the ultimate companion, its rumbling engine a soundtrack to the adventure.

The idea consumed me. I wanted not just to ride but to document it, to turn it into a story worth sharing. A book, a film, a calendar... the possibilities seemed endless. "Fat Boy in Paradise" would be more than a title; it would be a brand, a phenomenon.

## MAKING IT HAPPEN

Turning the dream into reality, however, was a different beast. There were permits to obtain, routes to plan, and, above all, money to find. Lots of it!

For months, I threw myself into research. I combed through maps, ferry schedules, and political reports to piece together a feasible route. Could we travel safely through these regions? Would we even be allowed? Every question seemed to lead to another, and the answers were rarely straightforward.

Meanwhile, Tony, my friend and rock-and-roll impresario, was tapping into his vast network to assemble a team. His introduction to Steve Graham, a talented pop promo director, was a game-changer. With a portfolio boasting names like Paul McCartney and Eurythmics, Steve brought credibility to the project. His enthusiasm mirrored my own, and soon we were working side by side: Steve focusing on the filmmaking logistics while I tackled the biking elements.

The Harley-Davidson community proved invaluable. Through their network, I made connections in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand—fellow riders who could help us navigate unfamiliar terrain. Harley-Davidson UK even featured our project in their magazine, reaching thousands of enthusiasts across Europe.

Still, the financial hurdles loomed large. Traditional funding avenues—TV networks, production companies—were hesitant to commit. So, I turned to the people who shared my passion: individual Harley owners. I sold shares in the project, offering supporters the chance to be credited in the film and part of something truly unique.



*Sadly, I only have an old newspaper photo with Bill Davidson*

## THE LAUNCH

By March, the dream was taking shape. At the Harley festival in Southport, I unveiled the project. My bike stood as a centrepiece, surrounded by colourful panels explaining our plans. Enthusiasts flocked to learn more, their excitement mirroring my own. Even Bill Davidson, the great-grandson of Harley's founder, offered to help (never did though!).

It was happening. The dream was no longer just mine; it belonged to everyone who believed in the power of adventure.

But as the departure date loomed, so did the challenges. The visa debacle was only the beginning. The road ahead promised obstacles, both seen and unforeseen. Yet, the thought of giving up never crossed my mind.

This was the journey of a lifetime, and I was ready to ride.

### THE FINAL PUSH

Slowly but surely, the funds began to trickle in. It wasn't a deluge, but enough to keep the dream alive. Armed with the project report I had painstakingly crafted, I managed to secure some incredible support. The Holiday Inn hotel chain generously agreed to provide free accommodation for the crew in Bali, Phuket, Kuala Lumpur, and Bangkok. Jim Beam Whiskey came through with a few thousand pounds and promised significant marketing support if I and the bike could be part of their promotional campaigns. Avon Tyres chipped in with spare parts, while people from all over Southeast Asia and beyond offered logistical assistance.

The major motorcycling magazines threw their weight behind us, pledging to publicize our journey. Even *The Observer* ran a feature on me, bringing much-needed exposure. Each piece of the puzzle felt like a small victory, but the pressure was relentless.

I had given myself an impossible timeline: everything had to be in place by the 1st of June. Most projects of this scale take two years to organize. I had six months. It wasn't just ambition driving the deadline; it was necessity.

A major Harley festival was scheduled in Bali for the 11th and 12th of June, bringing together 300 bikes in one spectacular gathering. It felt like fate, a sign that I couldn't ignore. This was

the perfect launch pad for the film—an opportunity I could never hope to recreate. We had to be there.

Then there was the weather. Sumatra's rainforests are breathtakingly beautiful but notoriously unforgiving. The roads, primitive in many areas, become treacherous - if not entirely impassable - during the rainy season. June offered the driest conditions of the year, our best and only chance for a successful crossing.

So, it was June or never.

**THE OBSERVER MAGAZINE**

**CARS & BIKES**

**Sue Baker** reports on the enduring allure of the Harley-Davidson at the

**Hog News**  
THE OFFICIAL NATIONAL NEWSLETTER OF THE U.K. HARLEY OWNERS GROUP

**FAT BOY IN PARADISE**  
A ride on a Harley from Bangkok to Bali  
A pictorial story by Mike Orr

**GO**

**Davidson seemed like a good way of increasing my life**

**One of the most extrovert Harleys at the event was a**

**1340cc Fat Boy, lavish with chrome, with lowered suspension and its bodywork painted to look like a black and white horse, complete with tail. Its owner, commercial sign manufacturer Mike Orr, sets off next month to ride it 4,000 miles from Bali to Bangkok for the 'Fat Boy in Paradise' which is being produced by award-winning director Steve Graham and partly financed on a share basis by other HOG members.**

**'A Harley in the tropics, it's the ultimate rock 'n' roll dream,' says Mike. 'I'm obsessed by Harleys. I've wanted one since I was a boy, but thought I'd never own one. I've said, "Won't it be a lonely journey, across a part of the world where Harleys are few and far between? You must be joking. Orientals love them. I've got 300 local Harley owners meeting me in Bali!"**

**Contact the Harley Owners' Group on 0280 700101.**

## A WING AND A PRAYER

As the departure date loomed, the pressure became

unbearable. The budget was falling short—disastrously short. I had approached every potential sponsor, every possible source of funding. It wasn't enough.

Panic set in. We had come too far to turn back, with so much already committed. The money spent couldn't be unspent, and the promises made couldn't be broken. The only option left was to take a leap of faith, to go on a flier and hope for the best.

I drained every last resource: emptied savings, maxed out credit cards, applied for more credit cards, borrowed from friends, scrimped and saved in every way imaginable. It was all or nothing.

And so, on that fateful day in early June, we found ourselves standing at Gatwick Airport. Everything was on the line—our finances, our reputations, our dreams. We were holding on to sheer determination and an unshakable belief that this journey had to be a success.

As we waited to board, I couldn't shake the weight of it all. This wasn't just an adventure anymore. It was a gamble—a high-stakes, no-safety-net plunge into the unknown. But I knew one thing for sure: the dream was worth it.

With a deep breath and a racing heart, we stepped forward. The journey of a lifetime was about to begin.



## SUNDAY 5 JUNE

### ARRIVING IN JAKARTA WITH THE WRONG VISA

The flight was interminable—a 22-hour, butt-numbing odyssey of boredom punctuated by grey food on grey trays, all served with a side of stopovers in Zurich, Abu Dhabi, and Singapore. Think of it as a test flight for purgatory. My seat was designed to accommodate precisely no human spine, and the entertainment system seemed to be one long, passive-aggressive suggestion that I should've flown first class.

To be fair, even if they'd handed out champagne and foot rubs, I wouldn't have enjoyed it. My brain was too busy bubbling with stress. Would we even be allowed into Indonesia with our dodgy visas? Would customs hold the motorcycle hostage? What if Ron—the “fixer” I'd never met—turned out to be less fixer and more... fictional? His assurances, relayed via Steve in midnight phone calls, had all the credibility of a late-night infomercial. “Trust me, mate. Everything's sorted!” Yeah, right.

As we shuffled through immigration, I spotted someone waving at us from beyond passport control. “That must be Ron,” I thought. He'd managed to talk his way past customs officers, which was either a very good sign or the opening act of a disaster.

Ron turned out to be Australian, with the vibe of a scruffy, slightly sunburned Humphrey Bogart. Picture The African Queen, but swap the gin for Bintang. In his fifties, with a beard that suggested he hadn't met a razor he liked, Ron claimed to have lived in Jakarta for five years, spending that time cultivating relationships with all the right (and possibly wrong) people. Who he really was or how he paid his bills? That remained a mystery. He carried himself with the confidence of someone who could smuggle a grand piano through customs if he wanted to.

We got through immigration with two-week tourist visas. Not great, but better than being detained. Still, two weeks wasn't enough time to ride the archipelago, meet all the Harley contacts, and film the journey. That would be another problem for Ron to sort.

"How are we doing?" I asked, my stomach somewhere near my knees.

"OK, mate," Ron said with a casual shrug. "I've arranged for the bike to go to the 'Rush-In' shed. We bung 'em seven hundred bucks, and we're good to go."

The camera equipment breezed through customs without a hitch, which felt suspiciously like winning a raffle you didn't know you entered. Meanwhile, our five luggage-laden trolleys sat outside an office where Ron was "negotiating." Five minutes later, he strolled out, grinning. No bag checks, no questions, not even a raised eyebrow. Behind us, though, a BBC film crew wasn't so lucky. Their corduroy-clad team looked professional, but they didn't have Ron. Customs officers took everything short of dental impressions. For all I know, they're still filling out forms.

Once past the chaos, we met Dave Jackman, my Harley contact for the Jakarta-to-Bali leg. A Kiwi oil man with a cowboy's swagger, Dave had spent fourteen years in Jakarta, though you'd swear he hailed from a spaghetti Western. He had neat, mousy hair styled like a fifties Tony Curtis, a bushy moustache, and a wardrobe straight out of the Harley-Davidson catalogue: black T-shirt, blue jeans, and cowboy boots. Even his slightly bow-legged walk screamed "trail boss."

Dave spoke with a drawl more Dallas than Auckland and had a penchant for pessimism that could make Eeyore look upbeat. But he was friendly, accommodating, and ready to get us rolling. Just the kind of guy we needed to kick-start this madcap adventure.

### TRAUMA AT THE CUSTOMS

There were nine of us now—five in our team, plus Ron, his pretty assistant Eka, Dave, and Ron's local driver. We crammed ourselves into two tiny white knockoff minibuses that could barely contain our hopes, fears, and luggage, and headed to the fabled 'Rush-In' shed. After Ron's Houdini-level customs magic with the camera equipment earlier, we fully expected to find the bike waiting for us, maybe even with a bow on it.

The shed turned out to be a cavernous, corrugated steel monstrosity the size of a football pitch. It was so empty you could practically hear the echo of a cockroach sneezing. To the left of the entrance was a shoebox-sized office where a few men were smoking, chatting, and generally avoiding anything resembling work. By the wide open main doors, three more men in scruffy customs uniforms lounged on a pile of wooden pallets. Their job seemed to involve perfecting the art of looking busy while doing nothing.



Ron, ever the man of action, sauntered off to “handle things.” The rest of us stood around, trying to look like we belonged, which was difficult given the fact that none of us really had a clue what was happening. Half an hour later, Ron emerged, looking less like a fixer and more like a man who’d been handed a parking ticket for a car he didn’t own. He was trailed by a group of officials armed with clipboards, stern faces, and an excessive amount of head-shaking.

One of the officials announced that the bike, by some cosmic accident—or more likely by design—had been sent to the airport cargo shed instead of the Rush-In shed. And because it was in the wrong place, it couldn’t be released. A rookie mistake, apparently.

“Bollocks!” Ron declared, with all the diplomacy of a pub bouncer ejecting someone for spilling a pint. He was convinced this was nothing more than a bureaucratic shakedown—a theatrical performance designed to loosen our

wallets.

Off he went again, this time disappearing into a gated, bonded zone that I can only describe as looking like the customs version of Mordor. Thirty minutes later, he reappeared, no bike in tow, but with even more shaking heads in his wake. This was followed by Eka heading off with two customs men, presumably to charm someone with a bigger clipboard at the import shed.

By now, we were all growing increasingly anxious. What had begun as a mildly annoying mix-up was evolving into a Kafkaesque nightmare. Another half an hour passed. No bike, no solution, but plenty of shaking heads—seriously, these guys could've powered a wind farm.

It was now 10:30 a.m., and things weren't looking good: The latest demand? - A letter from the President of the Harley-Davidson Club of Indonesia, inviting us to the Bali rally. Oh, and not just any letter. It also needed to be endorsed by I.M.I. (Ikatan Motor Indonesia), the all-powerful governing body of Indonesian motoring activities. According to Ron, once we had the I.M.I. director's signature, we'd be free to ride the bike anywhere in Indonesia. In theory, it sounded simple. In practice, it felt like being asked to retrieve the One Ring from Mount Doom, except with more paperwork.

Defeated, we did what any self-respecting group of bikers would do in a crisis: we shrugged, grumbled, and trudged off to the nearest bar to drown our sorrows. The beers were cold, the disappointment warm, and the bike? That remained firmly in the clutches of Indonesian bureaucracy.

## THE TEXAS BAR

Our first night in Jakarta found us in a peculiar yet oddly comforting spot: the Texas Bar. This wasn't just any bar; it was a painstaking replica of a small-town watering hole straight out of the Lone Star State. Picture dusty cowboy boots, vintage license plates, and enough American flags to outfit a Fourth of July parade. It was a magnet for Harley enthusiasts and English-speaking expats who, by the looks of it, had all been marinated in equal parts nostalgia and beer for decades.

Enter Bob. A tall, fifty-seven-year-old British expat with the sort of slightly frayed elegance that made him look like he belonged more at a village cricket match than a rowdy bar in Jakarta. Bob was a character straight out of a Graham Greene novel. He claimed to have arrived in Java in 1968 to manage a chocolate factory, but somewhere along the line, chocolate gave way to "agriculture." What kind of agriculture? Well, that remained one of life's great mysteries.

"Just agriculture, you know," Bob would say with a vague wave of his hand. "All over Indonesia..."

For all his evasiveness, Bob was a treasure trove of political insight, educating me over beers and chips about the turbulent history of Indonesia. Despite his refined demeanour, years of dedication to the local beer scene had left him with an impressively sizable fold over his belt—a sort of living testament to the expat lifestyle.

Around ten, the conversation with Bob meandered off (as did Bob himself, possibly to do something agricultural), and I found myself chatting with Phil. Phil was an oil company technical advisor, a tall, athletic-looking guy who somehow straddled the line between accountant and action hero. He

was polite, well-groomed, and just wild enough to make you think he'd pull an all-nighter without breaking a sweat.

As luck would have it, Phil hailed from Rochdale, a town I knew well, having lived there for a spell in the early '80s. It was a surprising commonality that quickly bridged the gap between two strangers. Phil had also organized the staff house where we were supposed to stay, and generously offered me a lift whenever I was ready to crash.

Spoiler alert: that didn't happen anytime soon. By the time I was a few cans deep into Bintang—the local beer that bore an uncanny resemblance to Becks, my drink of choice back then—our conversation had covered everything from geopolitics to, probably, why toasters always burn the last slice of bread. Not that I could recall any of it. Late-night beer-fuelled conversations have a knack for dissolving into the ether by morning.

Just as Phil and I were gearing up for a Nobel Peace Prize-worthy solution to the world's problems, Steve stumbled over to join us. Equally inebriated and brimming with the kind of camaraderie that only shared drunkenness can bring, he agreed it was time to head for the staff house—our supposed base in Jakarta, about twenty minutes away.

But as the saying goes, "Plans are optional; beer is mandatory."

Phil, with the casual air of a man who knew his priorities, suggested a detour. "My wife and kid are back in the UK," he said, his voice tinged with opportunity. "I've got a big empty house. Why not have drinks there instead?"

And just like that, the staff house was forgotten, and the adventure was to be continued elsewhere!



# MONDAY 6 JUNE

## BACK TO RON'S

After our marathon drinking session the night before, I woke up around eleven to a house so silent it could've been hosting a yoga retreat for mimes. Staggering out of bed, still feeling like I'd been hit by a small truck, I began to explore.

Phil's house was one of those spacious, corporate-rented places designed for function over personality. Everything was magnolia, as if the decorator's motto had been, "Let's not excite anyone." The living room featured two enormous black leather sofas that looked like they had been stolen from a Bond villain's lair, a glass-topped coffee table, and a TV big enough to double as a drive-in cinema.

Downstairs, the kitchen was gleaming and well-equipped but very much a bachelor's domain. His fridge contained the essentials of the single man's diet: beer, margarine, bread, and a Tupperware container of something so unidentifiable it could have been a biology experiment. I managed to scrape together some toast and a cup of Nescafé, but it wasn't the hearty breakfast I'd been dreaming of.

The estate outside was eerily pristine, like Milton Keynes had been transplanted to the tropics and decorated with palm trees. The sun was shining, but the dark wood and marble

floors inside kept the house cool—perfect for the climate, but my England-acclimatized self was yearning to feel the full heat of Jakarta.

Finding myself alone in a stranger's house in a foreign city, with no idea where I was or how to find anyone was an experience somewhere between thrilling and terrifying. Fortunately, Phil had left his business card on the coffee table, so I called his office. The response was as casual as could be: "Oh, they left around eight. Said you looked like you needed the sleep. Good luck!"

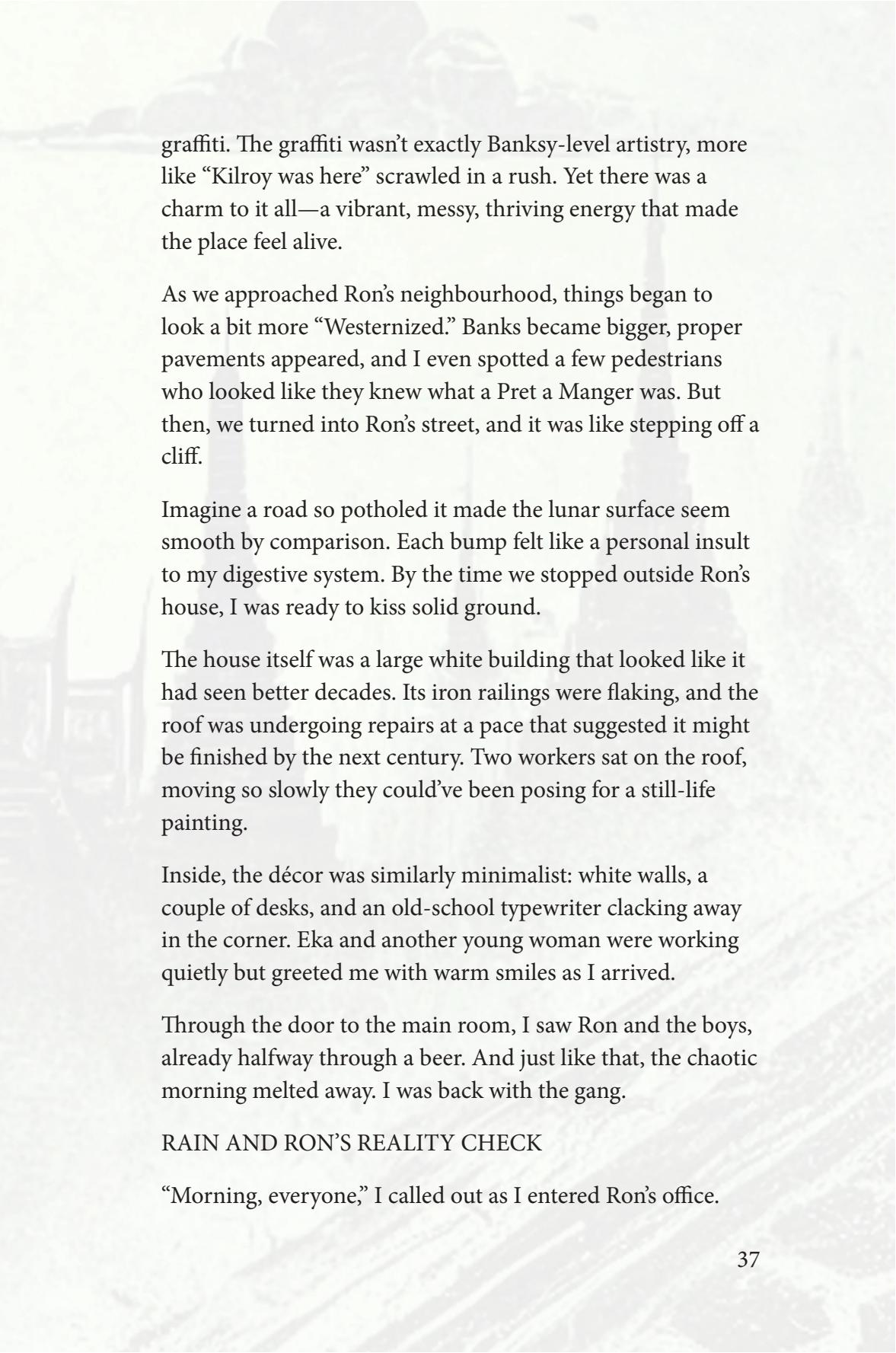
Luck?! I didn't need luck. I needed aspirin, directions, and a new liver.

I called Ron, who promised to send his driver. "It's not far," he said, "but Jakarta traffic is, well, Jakarta traffic." Which is to say, a swirling, honking, snarling chaos that made London rush hour look like a gentle Sunday drive.

By one o'clock, a white Kejang—a cross between a van and a car that seemed to have inherited the worst traits of both—pulled up outside. The ride to Ron's was my first proper daylight look at Jakarta. What a city! It was a magnificent jumble of "nearly falling apart" and "hanging on by a thread."

The skyline was dominated by a tangle of wires that seemed to exist for no other purpose than to perplex electricians. Thick black cables sagged between wooden poles like hammocks for particularly lazy birds, while others dangled ominously close to the ground. During the rainy season, I imagined, walking the streets would be like playing Russian roulette with a live wire.

The streets themselves were a patchwork of potholes and



graffiti. The graffiti wasn't exactly Banksy-level artistry, more like "Kilroy was here" scrawled in a rush. Yet there was a charm to it all—a vibrant, messy, thriving energy that made the place feel alive.

As we approached Ron's neighbourhood, things began to look a bit more "Westernized." Banks became bigger, proper pavements appeared, and I even spotted a few pedestrians who looked like they knew what a Pret a Manger was. But then, we turned into Ron's street, and it was like stepping off a cliff.

Imagine a road so potholed it made the lunar surface seem smooth by comparison. Each bump felt like a personal insult to my digestive system. By the time we stopped outside Ron's house, I was ready to kiss solid ground.

The house itself was a large white building that looked like it had seen better decades. Its iron railings were flaking, and the roof was undergoing repairs at a pace that suggested it might be finished by the next century. Two workers sat on the roof, moving so slowly they could've been posing for a still-life painting.

Inside, the décor was similarly minimalist: white walls, a couple of desks, and an old-school typewriter clacking away in the corner. Eka and another young woman were working quietly but greeted me with warm smiles as I arrived.

Through the door to the main room, I saw Ron and the boys, already halfway through a beer. And just like that, the chaotic morning melted away. I was back with the gang.

#### RAIN AND RON'S REALITY CHECK

"Morning, everyone," I called out as I entered Ron's office.

They glanced up, waved, and Ron greeted me with the standard antipodean salutation: “G’day, mate.”

“Any luck?” I asked, trying to sound optimistic.



“Eka’s on it now. Should have some information soon,” Ron replied, taking a leisurely sip of his beer.

What was my initial impression of Ron’s setup? Let’s just say “professional” wasn’t the first word that sprang to mind. The office had the aura of a space that had given up on itself. Paint was peeling, desks were mismatched, and the typewriter in the corner could have been considered an antique even then. Ron himself seemed more invested in his drink than my plight. Was it confidence-inspiring? Not exactly! I was beginning to doubt whether Ron could retrieve a stuck umbrella, let alone my bike.

I consoled myself with the thought that I'd see Dave Jackman later. If Ron was the laid-back beer guy, Dave was supposed to be the organized fixer. Fingers crossed.

At 4:30, I left Ron's office to head to Dave's place in Cinere, about 15 kilometres away. Acef, my driver, was a cheerful, compact man in his mid-forties who seemed to see honking the horn as an art form. He'd beep with abandon, whether or not there was anything in his path, adding a sort of rhythmic charm to the chaos outside.

The day had started sunny, but the skies had clouded over. I paid no mind—until the rain came. And when it came, it came. One moment, dry roads, and the next? Instant flood! Within minutes, streets turned into rivers deep enough to float a canoe. Jakarta's drainage system, if it existed, was clearly taking a sabbatical.

Acef, unfazed, wove the Isuzu Panther minibus through the watery chaos like a man who'd done this a thousand times. Meanwhile, I sat back in awe, marvelling at how a city could transform so quickly and dramatically.

#### CINERE: GARDEN SUBURBS AND SOMBRERO PHONE BOXES

Cinere was a fascinating place. It reminded me, oddly enough, of Stevenage—if Stevenage had been plonked in the tropics and given a Latin American twist. There were two sides to it: the old and the new.

The old part was all ramshackle stalls and wooden shops, selling everything from cigarettes to knockoff toys. It felt like something out of a dusty Western, complete with a layer of grit and charm. The new part, though, was unexpectedly

modern and tidy.

In the middle of this suburban dichotomy, I spotted one of the most peculiar phone boxes I'd ever seen. It had the usual phones-on-a-post setup, but the roof—a giant yellow straw sombrero—was utterly incongruous. Practical, sure, but it looked like it belonged in a theme park rather than a suburban street.

The main drag of Cinere's new town was lined with colourful flower beds that wouldn't have looked out of place in a botanical garden. The tarmacked roads were smooth, a rarity in Jakarta, and the shops, though ordinary, were neatly maintained. At one end of the street loomed an American-style mall, complete with McDonald's, KFC, and even Arby's. Their largest advertisement? - They home delivered. In 1994, in a small town Java, my mind was blown.

#### DAVE'S HOUSE AND BLACK CURRENCY

Dave Jackman's house was a charming mix of colonial and suburban styles. Thick, dark wood beams contrasted with cool white marble floors, and the décor was a curious blend of modern gadgets and comfortable Western furniture. The house wasn't massive, but it felt grand by English standards, with a veranda that made me long for a climate that didn't turn sitting outside into a frostbite hazard.

I was there to collect four cases of Jim Beam whiskey, courtesy of Remy Indonesia. These weren't for personal indulgence but rather a form of "black currency"—a sweetener for smoothing over bureaucratic hurdles. Whiskey diplomacy, as it were! As we quickly found out, though – alcohol has very little value in a strict Muslim country!

As I sat on the veranda with a beer in hand, the call to prayer echoed through the neighbourhood. Amplified and melodic, it brought a timeless romance to the evening. Moments later, the spell was humorously broken by a vendor on a bicycle, blasting his air trumpet to sell snacks of dubious origin. The sound was reminiscent of a souped-up horn on a boy racer's car—a mix of charm and absurdity.

### SERVANTS AND A DIFFERENT WAY OF LIFE

Dave, ever the modest host, casually mentioned the woman pottering about inside was one of his live-in servants. This was an eye-opener. Dave's house was a spacious three-bedroom bungalow, not a sprawling estate, yet he had a full staff: a maid, a gardener, a car cleaner, and a babysitter.

“It's just how things are here,” Dave explained, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The maid, Kus, was a Christian from rural Java who had asked to live with the family in exchange for work. Dave gave her \$25 a month—paltry by Western standards but a fortune compared to what the gardener earned. It was a system so foreign to my English sensibilities that I couldn't help but marvel.

### DINNER AND FAMILY LIFE

At 8:00, Dave's wife Jen arrived home from work with their seven-year-old daughter in tow. Jen was tall, elegant, and clearly formidable. From what I gathered, she ran their oil company as effectively as a general commands an army. Despite her busy schedule, she changed into casual clothes, organized the household staff with military precision, and had us out the door in no time for dinner.

We ended the evening at a newly opened Indian restaurant,

enjoying great food and even better company. Jakarta, for all its quirks and challenges, was proving to be full of surprises.

## PHIL

As we ate, the crew and I began speculating about our sleeping arrangements. Ron's house had some space, but not enough for everyone. Chris, the photographer, and I volunteered to find somewhere else. Honestly, I was relieved. A bit of space from the rest of the crew sounded like a blessing. Chris seemed to feel the same.

The truth is, I didn't quite click with the rest of the team. It wasn't animosity—just different wavelengths. Chris, though, was all right. This seemed to be his first professional assignment, and he had an understated sharpness I liked. Standing about 1.7 meters tall with pale skin that turned pink at the mere suggestion of sun, Chris in his khaki shorts was the image of a classic English colonial civil servant. He was a bit of a loner, or maybe an individualist, but quick-witted and amusing; the rest of the crew? - not so much.

Luckily, Dave Jackman's friend Phil offered a solution: a room in a staff house belonging to an oil company. Staff houses, I learned, were used by long-term contract employees or specialists passing through on their way to oil fields. I imagined something practical—an apartment or, if luck was on my side, a cosy detached house for managers.

We left the restaurant around 11:00 PM armed with detailed directions to the staff house. Detailed, yes, but useless to our taxi driver, who seemed to view them as an elaborate joke. He stopped at least a dozen times to consult passers-by, none of whom seemed any more informed than he was.