



On a mission

One Brisbane born rider has swapped suits and ties for adventure gear and is aiming to make a difference to the lives of people around the world.

The perfectly manicured surrounds of Sydney's five-star Shangri-La Hotel are a far cry from the jungles of poverty-stricken Vietnam and Cambodia. The surgically-clean lobby area is buzzing with the Qantas Wallabies scattered around, about to board the waiting bus to meet their doom on the morning of the final test against the British and Irish Lions, and I'm here interviewing one of their biggest fans – Australian philanthropist and founder of charity organisation Wheel2Wheel, Morgan Parker.

He's flown here directly from Hong Kong to watch the game later tonight at Homebush, but it's not rugby we're here to talk about.

At 38, Morgan originally hails from Brisbane – but has called Asia, and more specifically, Hong Kong, home since age 22 – and is in the fortunate position of being a genuine philanthropist, having made his not inconsiderable fortune in real estate development in one of the world's most populous cities. His occupation has led him to mix with some of the world's most influential financial decision makers, however, as his personal wealth increased in an almost parallel line to his corporate ascendancy, questions began to creep into his mind about what was really important in life.

"I arrived at a point in 2007-08 where my life was starting to become a bit one dimensional," Parker says, with the honesty of a man very comfortable in his own skin. "At that point it was about progression, and focusing on the next promotion. I began to realise success in life is more about how much of a difference you can make, than how much money you make. I found I was becoming more and more contrarian with the people around me. When you're in Hong Kong, in an investment city and you're in high stakes business, you can fall into a trap. I was listening to what people were saying and it started to repulse me. Then I thought, 'it's time to get out.'"

Interview Rennie Scaysbrook

Photography Rohan Venn, Wheel2Wheel



Far left Helping kids that have been part of cultural home-schooling get a real education is a challenge.

Centre left Morgan reckons when you pull up on a big adventure bike in remote areas you get treated like a rock star!

Main Morgan and his BMW F800GS.

Below left Wheel 2 Hoof with some outback Cowboys and Cowgirls.

Below centre The camera crew certainly adds a touch of celebrity to the adventure.

Below right Camping under stars in the outback on the final leg through Australia.



Left Our interview at the Shangri-La Hotel.

Right Gotta love beach riding!

before the project got underway in 2011, with the National Geographic channel coming on board to film a 10 episode series (called Wheel2Wheel) – one for each country and charity.

“I started talking to National Geographic about the idea – they weren’t too keen on it – but the show was not about the bike expedition, rather it was about 10 untold humanitarian stories. It was good enough to convince them to get on board, and they became fantastic supporters and the premier broadcasters. The shows became a gift we could give the charities – a moment in the spotlight to showcase what they were doing.”

As any motorcyclist knows, the best riding is not done in the city. The further you ride, the more you get to really know a country, and for Parker, seeing the world from behind a pair of goggles put a whole new perspective on life itself.

“The bike enabled me to visit communities that were living the same way for hundreds of years. When you get out of the cities, you really get the idea of what a country and its people are all about. China is full of these huge glitzy cities, but 1.5 hours out of the cities, it’s still donkeys and carts.

“Passing through these contrasts was very thought provoking. It was very emotional, seeing the work people were doing and the sacrifices people were making, and it provided me with a lot of motivation I never thought I would have.

“Every time I intersected with a charity we would spend time with them, learning what they did, meeting all their stakeholders, experiencing the charity first hand. I always wanted Wheel2Wheel to be an authentic portrayal of the work the charities were doing. The TV show has a really gritty feel to it, and it’s specifically created that way to provide the most insight we can into what the issues are. The audiences can relate to the charities and I’m delighted to say we have created a groundswell of support for them, whether it’s through donations or volunteers. Every week I receive an email from some stranger telling me they have just returned from a stint volunteering in Cambodia or Laos, because they saw the charity on W2W. So it’s enormously rewarding knowing we are having that kind of impact.

“One of the highlights of the trip was an invitation to meet East Timor’s first Prime Minister and second President, Jose Ramos Horta. When I was passing through the country, President Ramos Horta found out about Wheel2Wheel, got his people to reach out to us, and the team was

As everyone knows, the Global Financial Crisis of 2009 had a dramatic effect on the world’s perception of money and wealth. Parker was elbow deep in this, and noticed that while a select few were earning millions of dollars, many were losing their livelihoods as a result of bad corporate decisions made by a select few.

Parker had already been a fan of donating to charities by this stage, but, according to the man, “I had been doing it in a reactionary way. It could be someone shaking a tin in my face on the street and I give them a dollar, to going to a charity night and bidding \$10,000 on a piece of art. I realised I was spending big money – and I didn’t resent that – but with that amount I could be proactive, and think of causes to give that money away to.”

Parker didn’t know it at the time, but the seeds for Wheel2Wheel had been sown.

“I wanted to become more strategic with my philanthropy. I started this really in-depth research project with a couple of volunteers into what were the biggest humanitarian issues throughout Australasia. We investigated 350 different charities, working across environmental issues, women’s rights, animal cruelty, education, HIV Aids, all these different issues.

“So these ideas came crashing together, and I thought, ‘I’m going to try and stage a physical challenge, or adventure, tell my friends and family about it, get them to donate and I’ll give that money to charity. I’ll spend my money on the adventure and setting it up, and if I spend one dollar, hopefully I can raise five.’”

But the question of what type of adventure Parker was to undertake was not yet answered. Eventually, he settled on the idea of a motorcycle – but it wasn’t that simple. “I’d never ridden a motorcycle before,” Parker admits. “My friends rode as kids out in the bush, and I always envied them, because they had a camaraderie I wasn’t a part of. I got my licence and started riding on the dirt because I thought that was the best way to learn to ride properly.

“I fell off a stack of times – the first time I broke my ankle – that set me back a few months. Meanwhile, I was doing the research with the end game of doing this adventure. So I pulled out the map and thought, ‘where am I going to go?’ I live in Hong Kong; I come from Brisbane – why not ride home?”

With the destination set, Parker created what is now the charity organisation, Wheel2Wheel. His adventure would take in Hong Kong, China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, East Timor and Australia, totalling 25,000km, with Parker selecting one charity in each country to work with and donate to.

“Doing all the research, deciding on what charities to work with and planning the route took 18 months in total. It became really thrilling that I was learning so much and I turned the planning into an opportunity to develop new skills. I took a photography course, an orienteering course, a first aid course, and I got a personal trainer so I could be fitter to handle the bike.”

The final piece of the puzzle was placed just

□ 15 hours later, I was hypothermic in the freezing temperatures on the mountains, with howling wind and sideways rain... and I’d only made it half way



Riding in conditions like this throughout Asia has made Morgan’s riding a steep learning curve indeed.



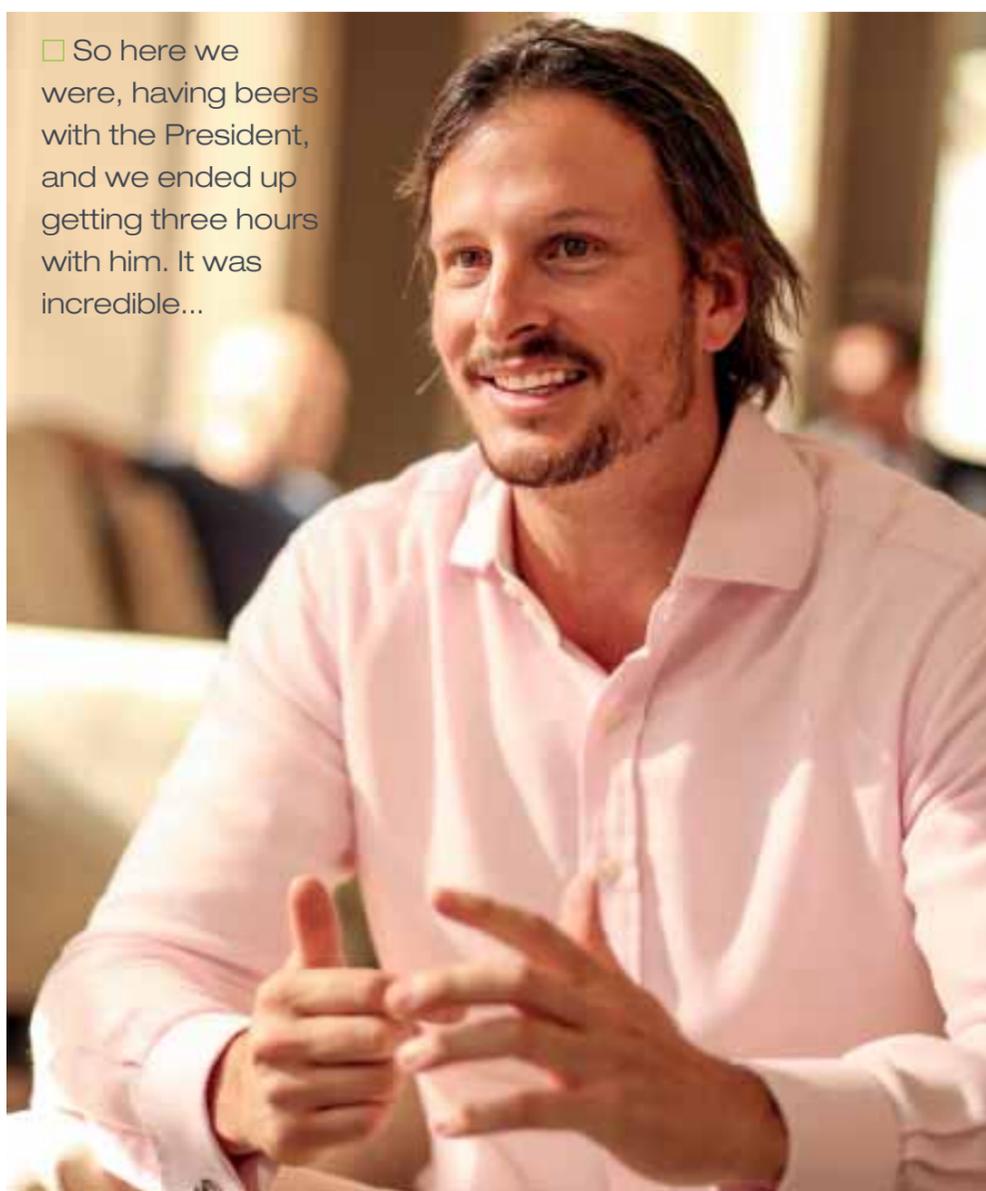
invited to the presidential residence one Sunday afternoon for beers! So here we were, having beers with the President, and we ended up getting three hours with him. It was incredible – he’s an absolutely historic figure – and he invites us to his home. The first half of the meeting was all about him wondering about the bike and the trip. He was really interested in what we were doing, what we’d seen, what I thought the issues were, and the challenges of being on a bike for that long. All I wanted to talk about was him and his life and East Timor! We eventually got to that, and through him I discovered that great leadership is through tremendous humility. In that sense it really dovetailed well into the work I saw the charities doing, through people who conduct themselves with absolute humility and sacrifice. This is true greatness.”

Of course, no adventure is a real one without some adversity, and Parker sure got a taste for real adventure just 16 days into the program.

“We were in Laos, and I was given the honour of opening up a new school from our selected charity, Child’s Dream. All I had to do was ride 150km from the town to this rural area where the school was.

“There were two ways to get there. One was a decent gravel road of 300km, or one 150km mountainous pass of dirt. It had been raining for two weeks, which was quite unseasonable. I took the mountainous route, thinking I was this great adventurer, and it was only day 16!

“Anyway, 15 hours later, I was hypothermic in the freezing temperatures on the mountains, with howling wind and sideways rain... and I’d only made it half way! I fell off 29 times, and the road was clay. It became a mud fest, and the knobby tyres became like slicks. There were huge hill climbs and descents – it was a nightmare. I eventually made it through, but missed the school opening – so that was devastating – but it was a testament of how climate is a real factor in adventure riding. You must know the weather, because it can change quickly and your progress can be significantly impeded.



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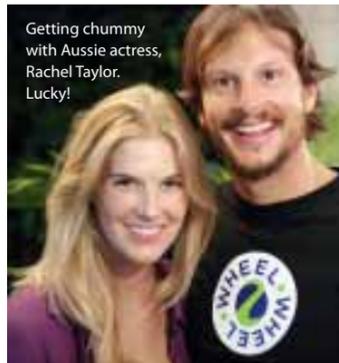
**MORGAN PARKER
ON A MISSION**



Perfect place to stop for a selfie!



The North Australian Indigenous Land & Sea Management Alliance is the Aussie charity in the W2W program.



Getting chummy with Aussie actress, Rachel Taylor. Lucky!



Handing over cheques is one thing, raising awareness is quite another.

"The other big adventure was the road to Finke, in the NT. I did a trail along the Finke River, and at one point in the dark of night, I had to cross a flooded river, about 50m long. I had no idea how deep it was, it was pitch black, but I had to cross it. It got so deep, and because of the floods many rocks and boulders had been dumped onto the road surface, so I was riding over them. I looked down and at one point the water was above the seat! And that BMW – despite the fact the air intakes were momentarily underwater – kept going. I don't know how to this day I made it over. I was on my own, with no TV crew or help, but it was a remarkable thing."

After setting off from Hong Kong on 11 March, 2011, 125 days later Parker cruised into his hometown of Brisbane, having achieved everything he set out to do, albeit about a month later than he planned! To date, Wheel2Wheel has raised nearly US \$3m, and provided exposure the charities could only dream of before Parker and his BMW F800GS rode through. But like any real adventurer, Parker is now looking to his next trip, one that has been the scorn of adventure riders the world over.

"I'm going to circumnavigate India!" Parker says with slight worried trepidation, the trip planned for 12 months time. "During my last trip I met two riders – both 1200GS riders, one from South Africa and one from Canada – and both told me the hardest place they have ever ridden was India. Neither had glowing reports about riding there due to how intense it is, but I want to give it a go. So when National Geographic and the production team asked me what the next destination was, almost as a knee-jerk reaction, I said India. Now it's out there, I gotta do it!

"I am going to focus on the environmental issues – a topic which is extremely close to my heart – that are special to India as it goes from a decentralised agricultural society to this urbanised, consumption-based capitalist society. I plan to showcase the issues the environment and India itself face, but also to celebrate the beauty and diversity of the country. I think we are all guilty of thinking India is just one country. But there are over 600 different dialects, 100s of religions and many different cultural behaviours. The terrain and topography is different; it has beaches, mountains, deserts – it's got everything. So we'll be showcasing Indian-based charities, organisations and their work, and try to be involved in the solutions."



A video of this interview is available on our facebook page...
www.facebook.com/freewheelingmag

WHEEL2WHEEL CHARITIES

These 10 lucky charities have benefited greatly from their association with Wheel2Wheel, you can find out more by visiting their web addresses listed. Check out www.wheel2wheel.tv for more information.

Child's Dream – Laos

Child's Dream works to improve educational infrastructures (building schools, nurseries, vocational training centers and colleges) with the aim to broaden access to education for every child in Laos.
www.childsdream.org

Clean Air Network (CAN) – Hong Kong

Clean Air Network is a Non Government Organisation, which aims to educate the public about the health impacts of air pollution in Hong Kong.
www.hongkongcan.org/eng

Baan Gerda – Thailand

Baan Gerda is a small community 230km north of Bangkok, where 85 HIV infected and affected orphans live and receive medical treatment in family houses under the care of foster parents.
www.baangerda.org

Women's Aid Organisation – Malaysia

Women's Aid Organisation is a small yet respected pioneer for women's rights in Malaysia. They have been successfully campaigning and lobbying for legislation to protect women, as well as directly supporting victims of violence, harassment and human trafficking.
www.wao.org.my

PanEco – Indonesia

PanEco and its local partner foundation YEL fight to conserve the peat swamp rainforests of Northern Sumatra.
www.paneco.ch/content-n29-sE.html

New Hope – Cambodia

The ethos of the New Hope Community Centre is 'opportunity through education'. New Hope aims to break the cycle of poverty by focusing on the chronic malnutrition, ill health and the appalling living conditions facing students and families.
www.newhopecambodia.com

Animals Asia – Vietnam

The Animals Asia Foundation, managed by professionals who reside in Asia, is committed to forging constructive solutions to the problems that the animals face in today's changing environment.
www.animalsasia.org

Gecko – China

Greenovate Environmental Challenge for Kids Outreach (GECKO) is an outreach program that aims to inspire children to become environmental ambassadors to their communities and encourage them to develop a more sustainable lifestyle.
www.greenovate.org

Action for Change Foundation – East Timor

The Action For Change Foundation is engaging vulnerable young people, whose lives have been disrupted by conflict. They promote peace and non-violence through sports; and provide job-skills training to improve employment opportunities.
www.actionforchangefoundation.info

NAILSMA – Australia

The North Australian Indigenous Land & Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) is an unincorporated bioregional forum for Indigenous land and sea managers across North Australia. It aims to support practical Indigenous land and sea management using strategic approaches to care for the country with an emphasis on practical management by Traditional Owners.
www.nailsma.org.au