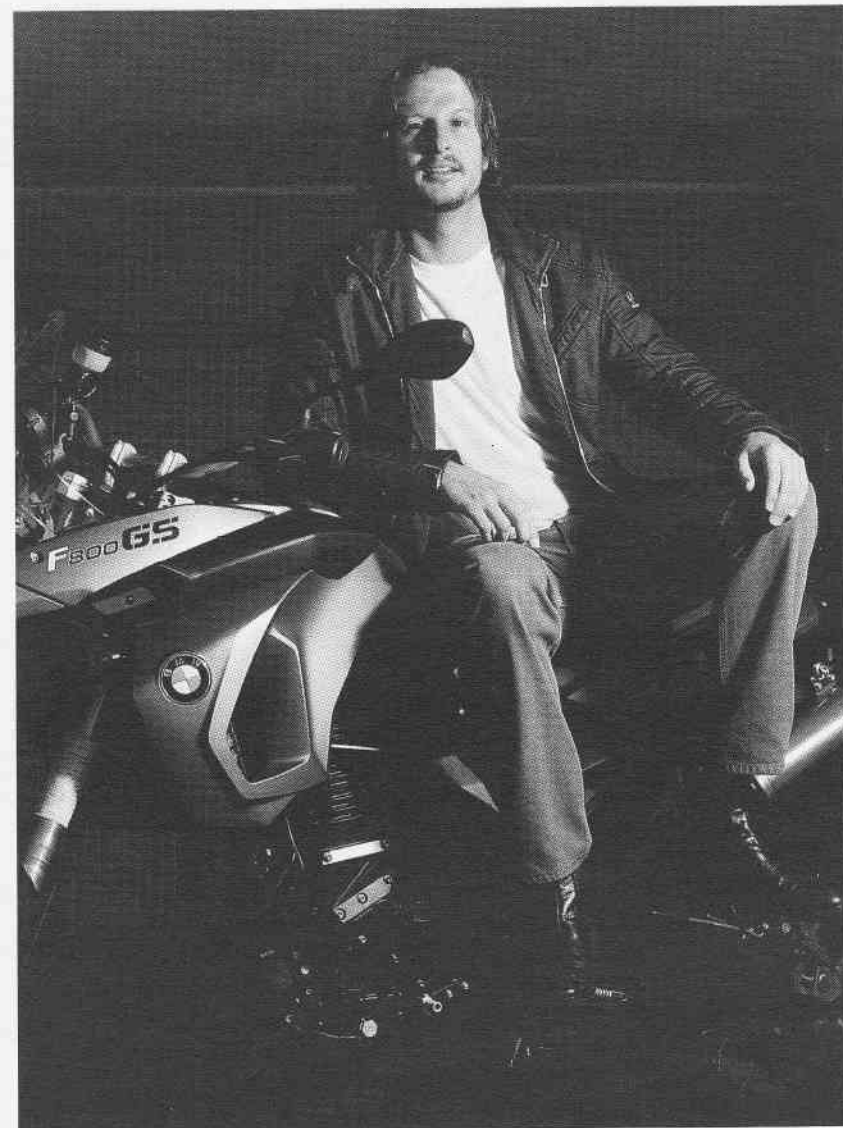


Morgan Parker

The investment banker turned charity biker is gearing up for the ride of a lifetime, writes **Yvonne Lai**.



SHOWING POTENTIAL I grew up in Brisbane, Australia. I have an older sister and brother, but it was just my mother and me from the age of 13 onwards, when they moved away and my parents divorced. I grew up pretty quickly. My mother told me I could be anything I wanted. I was a very curious and adventurous child but was viewed as being much older than my years. When I was 10 people thought I'd be the prime minister of Australia one day; thousands of people have said this to me in the past 25 years.

I went to law school on a scholarship but I decided pretty quickly that I didn't want to be someone just shuffling papers for work. My first job was in real-estate investment banking. I was attracted to the fact that you could look at the results of your efforts, be it a hotel, residence or shopping mall. Plus it was extremely lucrative. I was the first expatriate in the investment banking area

Picture: Dale de la Rey

sent by Macquarie to Asia; this was in 1996, when I was 22.

I landed in Hong Kong in April 2005, after living in Singapore, Korea, Japan, Taiwan. This is the longest period of time I've lived in one place since I was a teenager. Hong Kong to me is the greatest city on Earth. It has all the sense of importance that London and Tokyo have and the excitement of being on the doorstep of China, but it's also small enough that you can have a real sense of community.

ROAD WARRIOR I only started riding a motorbike four years ago, at 32, which is rather a late start. Many of my school friends grew up riding. There was a camaraderie between these guys I often admired from the sidelines. I remain friends with many of them and as adults they've often asked me to join them. I rode a rented bike the first time. I fell off within 45 minutes and broke my ankle, despite having a motorbike boot on. I was out for months after that. The pain subsided but the enjoyment was there and I understood what these guys loved about motorbike riding, especially off-road riding. It's never too late to learn something new. I hope I'm doing that in my 70s – still learning new things.

ON YOUR BIKE [On Tuesday], I will set off on a 20,000-kilometre, 100-day motorbike journey under the banner of my charity, Wheel2Wheel, from Hong Kong to Brisbane. The inspiration for this expedition comes from what Charley Boorman and Ewan McGregor did in the television show *Long Way Round*. Planning a four-month trip that involves 10 charities, half a dozen sponsors and a television series is an enormous undertaking. I've been working 16- to 18-hour days full time since I left work two years ago. I've been working harder on this than I have on anything else.

I'm looking forward to getting on the road. I've got about 20 people joining me on different legs of the trip. Alan Ng, a Wheel2Wheel member, is the longest guest rider, joining me for 16 days from Siem Riep, in Cambodia, through Thailand and down to Kuala Lumpur, in Malaysia. He's Chinese-Malaysian so it's important for him to enter Malaysia at the end. Claudio von Planta, the cameraman who travelled with McGregor and Boorman, has given me a lot of advice over the past year. Both Charley and Claudio are great sources of advice: 'It's going to take longer than you think; don't count on meeting your schedule;

don't count on sticking to your route; you will have bike issues, border issues.'

FACING VALUES The most personal motivation for this tour came from a re-evaluation of the value system I had developed in life, one that was too concentrated on wealth creation. Retail is the biggest industry in the planet, bigger than the military, bigger than agriculture and religion. As a shopping-mall developer I saw that up close and was responsible for facilitating that. We would develop techniques to encourage people to consume more. I was in the thick of it. I had too much focus on career and not enough focus on family and self-development. I missed out on the first three years of my daughter's life because I was working so hard. I started to ask what it was all for; so one can buy one more Ferrari or chalet somewhere? Then I talked more to people outside my network, those in charity, and I started to realise that happiness was often not aligned to wealth. It would be wrong to cast me as someone who is never going to go back into that career, or make money again. I'm not some hippie who's going off the grid. I'm just hopping off the treadmill to get a bit of perspective.

FAMILY FIRST AND LAST An eight-year-old kid thinks four months is like four years. My daughter, Aria, is having spontaneous outbursts of crying at the moment, now that it's coming so close to the time of departure. While I haven't been in a formal corporate environment over the past 18 months we've built an amazing bond and I know that bond will survive. My whole family is worried about my safety. When I decided to do it alone, that fear only intensified. I've spent a lot of time with my family over the past couple of weeks, to explain the route, the precautions I'm taking and the fact that I will have guest riders parts of the way. So they've been able to take comfort from the idea that it's all under control. But I've also explained that this is something I feel I need to do, that this is the sort of role model I want to be for Aria. At the end of the day, this is what life is all about, as long as you are taking measured risks, not reckless ones.

The finish line is my hometown, Brisbane. I spoke to my 88-year-old grandma last night. She's not that mobile but she said she'd make her way to the finish line. That brought me to tears.

To find out more about the Wheel2Wheel trip, visit www.wheel2wheel.tv.