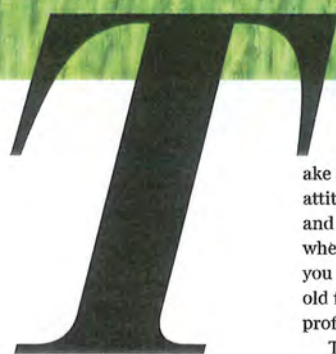


The high road



ake a sense of adventure, a philanthropic attitude and a desire to foster inspiration, and what you get is Wheel2Wheel (www.wheel2wheel.tv). Or, more precisely, you get Morgan Parker, the 37-year-old founder of the independent, non-profit organisation.

The former real-estate executive has done what many of us only dream of: having become, in his own words, "guilty of an excessive lifestyle", he put aside a stable and lucrative career to take an extended break. On March 1 last year, Parker set off from Hong Kong on a 800cc BMW motorbike on a journey that would test him physically and emotionally, take him through 10 countries and along 25,000 kilometres of roadway (some of it paved, some not), and, after 124 days, deliver him to his hometown of Brisbane, Australia.

Far from being an indulgent escapade, the journey was to be a carefully researched and highly planned mission to raise awareness on behalf of key charitable organisations in the countries through which Parker would pass. From 360 contenders, the core members of Wheel2Wheel filtered their focus down to 10 charities, all of which fulfilled the "dichotomy of a small group, led by an inspiring individual, tackling a big issue that resonates with everyone", says Parker. He says

they were alert to public criticism of the faceless and inefficient nature of some of the larger charitable organisations. It was also important to his team that they acted strategically rather than simply react to opportunities to give.

With the charities chosen, logistical preparations began in earnest.

For a start, how was Parker going to get from here to there? He didn't want to be cut off from the experience in the bubble-like interior of a car, so he decided to travel by motorbike. There was a problem, though: despite having grown up with biker friends, he didn't know how to ride. He began learning in 2007, earning a fine array of cuts and bruises along the way. Parker knew he would also have to beef up if he was to have any chance of controlling the 215kg motorcycle he chose for the journey.

It became clear after much discussion with the charities that the expedition should be televised, and the focus changed from fund-raising to awareness-raising. The support of the National Geographic Channel was vital. Siren Films, a Hong Kong-based production company, was eager to undertake the actual filming. Siren crews and Parker spent between three and five days on location with each charity, taking footage of the work being carried out and the areas in which they are based.

To cut down on filming costs during the trip, however, Parker would be equipped with several GoPro cameras for solo jaunts, some of which would last as long as two weeks.

Morgan Parker left a plum job in real estate to embark on a gruelling journey, all in the name of charity. **Hannah Hodson** finds out how he got on.



Finally, Parker set out on the ride of his life – which nearly ended on day 16. Two weeks of rain in northern Laos turned what was supposed to be a two-hour journey into “15 hours of hell” that included more than 20 falls. Parker became hypothermic in the sub-zero temperatures and only one of his three support vehicles made it to the scheduled destination.

The delay resulted in the team being unable to open a school they had funded, but a warm shower and a kind-hearted guesthouse owner – who let the crew sleep in the dining room of her fully booked property – helped put the trip back on track.

Logistical headaches and high emotion characterised the rest of the journey (see page 36). But it was never meant to be a joy ride.

Not that joy of a certain kind wasn't always around the next bend, in the form of a grateful charity worker.

“The greatest rewards in life come from helping others,” says Parker. One of the most poignant moments, he says, was when he was able to introduce the 26-year-old founder of the Action for Change Foundation in East Timor to the country's then president, Jose Ramos-Horta. In connecting a grassroots organisation with the highest official in the land, Parker knew Wheel2Wheel was on the right track.

Wheel2Wheel's first overland journey may have ended, but its mission still has some way to go.

On returning to Hong Kong, the organisation funded a new school

in Cambodia – and this time Parker and Wheel2Wheel core member Alan Ng made it to the opening. The team has also supported an online environmental learning site in the mainland, a bakery in Cambodia and several other projects linked to their chosen charities. For a day job, Parker plans to re-enter the Hong Kong property business.

As for the future, Wheel2Wheel hopes to undertake philanthropic journeys on a tri-annual basis. A new angle is being developed for the second trip, which will focus on Parker's primary concern: the environment. Collaborating with Indian students, the team aims to spotlight the environmental consequences of India's transformation from being an agricultural-based economy to one that is largely consumption-based.

In the meantime, sit back with a cup of cocoa and turn on the television to see how that first trip unfolded. A travel show *Wheel2Wheel* may be, but, says Parker, “it's really all about the charities”.

“I'm just the packaging.”

And like all good packages, this one arrives with a positive message: “You don't have to be trapped in what you're doing everyday endlessly,” says Parker. “We have a short time on this planet and you've really got to make the most of it.” ■

Wheel2Wheel will be aired on Nat Geo Adventure tonight at 8pm, with three repeat showings throughout the week.

Morgan Parker in West Java, through which he passed on his Hong Kong to Brisbane motorcycle trip.

Causes and effects

Morgan Parker's journal recounts the highs and lows of his 25,000-kilometre ride.



1 Hong Kong

I can't believe after two years' planning I'm finally going to get on my bike and ride to Australia. It's the weirdest feeling knowing I'll be riding in this saddle for the next four months. Will my bottom survive?

Easiest decision ever to support **Clean Air Network**, the air pollution in Hong Kong is brutal. I don't understand why the city is not more up-in-arms over the deteriorating conditions.



2 Mainland

Despite having done business in China for 13 years, I've never seen anything like this before – the countryside is like a scene out of *Mad Max* – a post-apocalyptic warzone of environmental devastation. Tough conditions for riding, finding a decent meal and somewhere to sleep.

I'm impressed with **Greenovate Environmental Challenge for Kids Outreach (Gecko)**, even though it's a long-term strategy, teaching students sustainability and environmental responsibility is the way to go. These kids are going to be the leaders of the world in 20 years.



3 Vietnam

I'm in the land of motorbikes; there are millions of them everywhere! Glad I've got the biggest bike on the road, it feels like a computer game where I'm bumping them off every few seconds.

It makes me so angry to see the way moon bears are being tortured for their gall bladder bile. So inhumane when there are plenty of alternatives available. Thank goodness for the **Animals Asia Foundation**, they are doing such a great job rescuing these bears. This is going to be an emotional episode.



4 Laos

Amazing how expensive fuel is here. This country is fascinating, sandwiched between the strong cultures of Vietnam and Thailand, and 20 years behind them in terms of development. It's nice that it hasn't been completely commercialised ... yet.

Child's Dream is so effective and incredibly well managed. They are building schools for kids that wouldn't otherwise get an education – this is what I'd love to do.



5 Thailand

So happy to be in Thailand, can't wait to eat. Team member Alan (Ng) and my family are joining for a couple of weeks – really comforting to have them with me.

It's hard to pick one cause over another but **Baan Gerda** touched me. I realised I knew nothing about HIV and Aids. I think the TV audience is going to be shocked at how infected kids can live a full life. Must change the stigma, that's the key.



7 Malaysia

What a surprise, Malaysia is the best riding so far on the expedition. Carving through the Cameron Highlands and Genting Highlands with the BMW Club was brilliant. I'm definitely coming back here.

Until now domestic violence was an alien concept to me. After studying this issue and now seeing the work of **Women's Aid Organisation**, I understand how incredibly prevalent and serious this issue is. Men have to step up and help eradicate violence against women.



8 Indonesia

Absolute chaos here in Indonesia – the most dangerous riding of my life. It'll be a miracle if I make it out of here alive. Not sure how I'll jump from island to island, guess I'll work it out when I get to the end of the road.

It's just so senseless to convert these peat swamps to palm-oil plantations. The oxidation of the peat releases cataclysmic amounts of carbon into the atmosphere. Out of sight, out of mind. I'm excited about helping **PanEco** make the world understand how bad this situation is.



9 East Timor

So many Australians here, lucky for me one of them runs a hamburger joint! Can't believe we've been invited to Sunday beers at the president's residence. My first time to meet a Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

The war for independence from Indonesia only ended 10 years ago. With so many underskilled youths out there, the work that the **Action for Change Foundation** is doing is critical. Very impressed with its founder, Jose de Jesus.

6 Cambodia

My first time in Cambodia. So popular with tourists but, wow, there is so much poverty here. Seems like the country is really struggling with limited resources. Can't believe the Khmer Rouge holocaust was only 30 years ago.

I learnt that to educate impoverished kids, **New Hope** first has to feed their families. So much need for medical care as well. People seem to be dying every day all over the place.



10 Australia

This is it, the home stretch – two weeks delay getting my bike here from Dili and through quarantine was frustrating. Great to have my family here in Darwin. My brother Tod is going to ride through the Outback with me. Would be pretty scary doing this part alone.

I've seen through the **North Australian Indigenous Land + Sea Management Alliance** that aboriginal people are unique. They experience the land and nature in a totally different way to us – somehow they are innately connected to it, very spiritual. The rest of us should listen and learn from them.