

BETWEEN A
ROCK
AND A **hard place**



Morgan Parker

Morgan Parker built a career as a successful finance and real estate executive but he wanted more from his life. He decided to attempt a gruelling 125-day motorbike ride across 10 countries. The 25,000km marathon raised funds for charity and challenged the limits of his own physical and mental strength.

IT'S HARD to understand the logic behind Morgan Parker's decision to walk away from a lucrative career and put his life on the line.

He had repeatedly proven his sharp intellect and astute judgement – from his days as school captain at Brisbane Boys' College, while attaining his law degree at Bond University in the early '90s, and then by carving out a rich and rewarding career in the tough finance and property markets of Australia and Asia.

Yet here was a 37-year-old, who by his own assessment was a "terrible two-wheeler", proposing to ride a powerful BMW motorcycle over 25,000km across some of the most difficult terrain on the planet. And, if he could raise any money during the trek, he would give it all away.

For most, it's a recipe for a reckless misadventure. But for someone as driven and passionate as Parker, it was the challenge he had been searching for all his life.

"The idea of roaming the world on a motorbike just seemed the right thing to do at the time," he says.

"After working for 15 years, I had developed a new perspective on life. I became very interested in philanthropy. But I knew I had to do something more than just write a cheque or make a donation.

"It is not just about handing over some cash to solve some of the world's problems. We need to recognise that these issues belong to all of us and all of us need to do something about it."

Parker says his business dealings with some of the wealthiest people in the Asia-Pacific region had opened his eyes to an enormous amount of latent capital "sitting on the sidelines".

Having been inspired by the Ewen McGregor-Charley Boorman TV documentary *Long Way Round* which featured a bike journey across eastern Europe and North America, Parker decided to ride through South-East Asian countries as a way of highlighting social issues that were desperately in need of financial support.

"I figured that if I could put a focus on some of these issues and explain them a little better, I might be able to get involved those who hold the purse strings to that latent capital," he says.

Parker says he's not suggesting that everyone should jump on a bike and do a charity ride.

"I just want to encourage others to think about ways they could leverage whatever skills and attributes they have towards some greater community good," he says.

Parker took a tough route to achieve that goal.

After nearly two years of planning and only a few months of bike-riding practice under his belt – thanks to a group of close friends who were determined to do everything

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possible to prevent the novice rider crashing and killing himself – Parker set off from Hong Kong on March 1, 2011, headed for his hometown of Brisbane.

Flying the banner of his new philanthropic entity, Wheel2Wheel, Parker navigated his way across China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and East Timor before a dusty final leg across the Australian outback and then on to a hero's welcome in Brisbane.

In each country he identified a project in need of support and gave them his time, attention and whatever financial support he could raise locally and internationally.

"We spent several years examining more than 350 charities and whittled that down to 10," says Parker.

"We went looking for grassroots organisations that with a little bit of help could do much more.

"We wanted organisations that had proven to be efficient with the support they had been given previously and organisations that had a passionate group of leaders who really connected with people.

"That was so important because at the heart of all these issues are people."

Parker decided riding through different regions would be a way to connect with communities and feel firsthand the issues that affected their lives.

"Travelling on a motorbike is so much different to travelling in a car, a bus or an aeroplane, because you viscerally connect to what you are doing and all your senses are heightened," he says.

"In a car you are sealed in, maybe listening to the radio with the air-conditioning on. I was out there feeling the climate, feeling the environment. I was feeling the people watch me as I went past.

"It was a great way to travel and really get a sense of what was going on."

That was on the good days. There were plenty of other times when Parker was far less philosophical and his life was seriously threatened on the weathered, winding and often narrow roads of South-East Asia.

"Roads through Asia are the lifeblood of their economies. People live on these roads in buses, trucks and carts. They are out there with chickens, goats, horses and anything else they own. It can be very dangerous," says Parker.

His worst day came just 16 days into the trek. Parker found himself on a steep mountain road in Laos. It had been raining for several weeks and was unseasonably cold – an ambient temperature of below zero.

The clay base road had turned into a giant glue-stick of red mud.

The plan had been to ride 150km that day. "I was on that road for 15 hours and dropped the bike more than 40 times," recalls Parker.



"One car slipped off the cliff behind me and two four-wheel drives with my film crew couldn't make it.

"I was battered and bruised, but I had to walk 2km in the end to find somewhere to sleep. By that time, I had only made it to what was originally going to be the halfway lunchtime point."

Parker says the experience helped him drill into new regions of his personality and character.

"I discovered I was capable of more than I thought. I wouldn't say it was an inner strength that kept me going but there was a determination to deliver to those other

people who had shown so much support for me," he says

Someone he thought about during those testing times was daughter Aria, now nine. Becoming a dad was one of the forces that started Parker to think about what he was getting out of – and giving back – to life.

"If one thing caused me to change directions in my life, it would be Aria," says Parker.

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Aria joined her father on several stages of the trek. Parker believes the exposure to how other children live will help her shape her own views on life.

"The speed of information today means kids grow up very quickly without anything more than a superficial knowledge of a lot of topics. I think it was important for Aria to understand some of the obstacles other kids still have growing up in the world today," he says.

In a bid to remove some of those obstacles, Parker and Wheel2Wheel have already donated nearly \$300,000 to the 10 charities identified in his marathon trek.

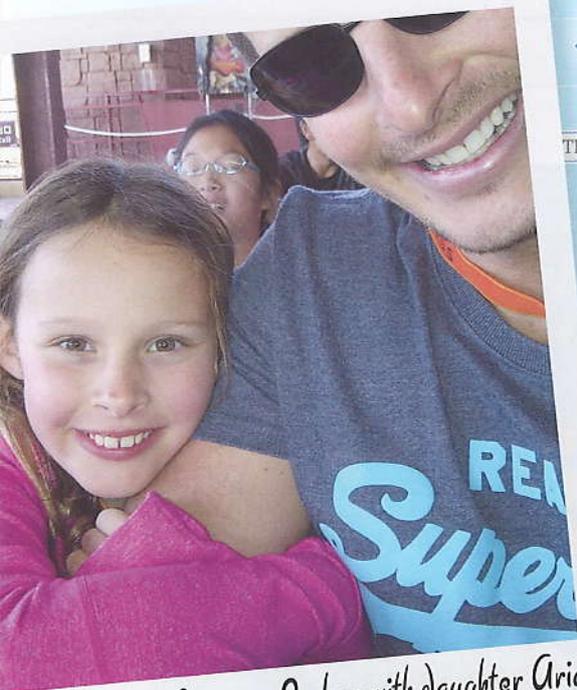
He hopes to eventually raise more than \$1 million.

Projects funded so far include a school for 300 children in Laos, an online environmental education platform in China, HIV orphanage in Thailand, and a training restaurant in Cambodia. Parker concedes that raising money was the hardest part of the project.

"I knew it was going to be difficult, and even knowing that, I still think I underestimated how difficult it was going to be," he says.

"It's difficult to raise money because there is too much noise in the world today, too much chatter online, in the media and through social networks. A lot of people have become disillusioned with charity."

As difficult as it may be, Parker is not deterred – even though he says his change of lifestyle and objectives has cost him friends.



Morgan Parker with daughter Aria



"I've lost a way of life which is terrifying to some and terrifying to me at different points, but you adjust. Humans are incredible at adjusting," he says.

"I've lost friends and people who used to be part of my life and whom I would love to continue to be part of my life.

"I was the goodtime guy whose life was a bit of party. Now I am focussed on the philanthropic side of life and that's confronting to some people who have not yet found a way to be involved in the community."

Parker says he sees his future clearly now.

"Philanthropy and adventure is at the core of who I am and who I want to be," he says.

"I want it to continue in parallel with having a professional career because after all, we all need money to survive. But when I return to work in the future, it will be with a different purpose in life.

"It won't be about accumulating possessions or increasing personal wealth. It will be very much about doing what I need to do to support my family, and what is superfluous to our needs will be given away.

"Not everyone can be a humanitarian hero, and I don't see myself as one.

"My part in this story is to help others find the spotlight and point it in their direction. I hope the challenge I put myself through will garner enough attention so people will see beyond the expedition and begin thinking about what they can do, in their own way, to help."

INDIA IS THE NEXT CHALLENGE

One thing Morgan Parker learned from riding for 125-days from Hong Kong to Australia, across 10 countries and 25,000km, was not to get ahead of himself.

He is reluctant to talk too much about his next challenge when so much work remains to be done before delivering what was promised on his current project. But he reveals he has a growing interest in India and could head there in late 2014.

"I'd like to do another motorbike journey, and I like the idea of

travelling through the very diverse landscapes of India," he says.

Parker believes an environmental issue, which he declines to identify right now, has been developing in India as a consequence of rapid economic development.

"The economic miracle of India is happening, but when you have rapid economic change there are often adverse consequences socially and environmentally. I want to focus on the environmental impact of this rapid growth and the sudden change in affluence."

TV DOCUMENTARY ON THE WAY

A ten episode TV series on Morgan Parker's ride for charity will premiere on the National Geographic Channel on Sunday 26 August 2012.

Each episode will feature one of the 10 countries and 10 charities linked to Parker's ride. He's also halfway

through a book to be launched in conjunction with the television series. But that is proving almost as challenging as the charity ride.

"I am painfully slow at writing. I may be even worse at that than I am at riding a bike."