



TRANSALP

TRAVELLER

PHOTOS GIONATA NENCINI

If you were setting out on an eight-year odyssey around the world, would you trust a 20-year-old motorcycle to carry you? If it was a Honda Transalp you would - and Gionata Nencini did

Once upon a time, when men were men and the world was theirs to play with, they would set out in frail ships, dreaming of new conquests in fresh, foreign fields. Nowadays, it seems, they use motorcycles instead. They used to encounter beautiful women as well - but our modern-day Ulysses took his with him. "She's a 20-year-old beauty," he enthuses, "bought for the equivalent of \$1000, third-hand."

Fear not, our young Italian is no slave-owner: 'she' is the 1987 Honda Transalp XL600V carrying him around the world on an epic voyage of his own. "She's my baby," he smiles. "I really talk to her as if she were an old lady taking me around."

Now three years into his journey, 'Gion' has just spent a year Down Under, working here and there to augment his meagre travel budget and enjoying much of what the Outback has to offer. Born in Fiesole in 1983, Gionata has had the travel bug for quite some time. "I have been dreaming about it since I was 17," he told us before setting off for New Zealand and the next segment of what was planned as an eight-year pilgrimage. At 17 he hitchhiked all round Italy on \$150; at 18 he set off with a pushbike and a guitar and \$200.

"Travelling doesn't really have to be expensive," he explains. "There are ways round it. Be humble enough to ask for help, that has been my main motto since I set out. And after three years here I am."

Hang on, we said: 'Here I am' is all very well, but how did you get here, and how did this all come about in the first place? "Well, I had travelled twice before, in my own country. The plan now was to do it for longer, cover more kilometres, and discover more cultures. I read Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* when I was 17, and that inspired me to make my first trip around Italy."

When it came to more adventurous travel, it was not Kerouac's American classic that triggered Gionata's departure. "It was not a decision," he says firmly, "it was an inspiration, which I got from a movie." Once again the hero was a central figure in America, this time in the south, and once again his story was set in the Fifties. The movie was Walter Salles' 2004 film *The Motorcycle Diaries*.

The diaries in question are those of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, who at 23 set out to travel across South America on two wheels in search not only of adventure but of an identity and a place in the world. Asked what drives him, Guevara says: "Restlessness... impassioned spirits... and a love of the open road." Our Italian Honda rider may not be about to launch a revolution as Guevara later did, but he can certainly relate to the sentiments expressed by the young Che.

"Three years ago I sat in front of my computer and had no idea," he admits. "I followed my feeling - I thought Russia would be exciting, so I went on the Trans-Siberian, Kazakhstan, Mongolia. I had done Japanese and karate in Italy so getting to Japan was a goal in itself and they were the people who created my bike!"

If Gionata had 'no idea', his father admitted he was 'confused' about his son's departure, and his mother was literally speechless. "Unpredictability is the spice of adventure," is Gionata's way of looking at it. He's not a mechanic, not even a motorcyclist: he is a traveller, but the bike - inspired itself by adventures like the Paris-Dakar Rally and built for trail-riding as well as the open road - gives him freedom and flexibility.

His first year on the road, 2005, saw Gionata cover 13 countries and 22,000 kilometres. Camping out was his main accommodation, the campfire his main means of preparing food. He was able to celebrate his 22nd birthday on September 13 in Osaka. In all that time the bike broke down just once.

The following year found the intrepid rider and his faithful Transalp in Korea, China, Vietnam and seven more countries: an annual total of 39,000 kilometres this time, with Australia as its ultimate destination. "I can turn my hand to anything," says Gionata - in fact that's one of his key discoveries along the way "But in Australia I was able to look for jobs I am qualified in - teaching in child-care, a bit of journalism and so on. This gave me the chance to be a professional person again." One of the main reasons he needed the work was the cost of importing his bike into this country: at 885 Euros, it was more than he had spent on it in the first place!

"I spent the first five months in Sydney, as that was where the bike arrived; then five months in Brisbane. I was in Darwin 25 days - I ran out of money, did labouring with a gang of Greeks, came to Melbourne to finish the tour and get the bike fixed and crated by Honda Australia." In between, he omits to say, he had travelled to Cape York, to Uluru, across to Perth and a great many points in between. Honda also gave him a VFR800 on which he spent some happy time cruising in Tasmania.



THE PERFECT COMPANION

Gionata's Honda is a 1987 Transalp XL600V, a liquid-cooled six-valve 52-degree V-twin that gives around 50 bhp at 8000 rpm. Drawing inspiration from the feats of the machinery on the infamous Paris-Dakar Rally, Honda came up with something seen as a new departure, a road-going, trail-going bike that was comfortable and utterly dependable. Modestly powered - 34.7kW at 7500 revs - it was still capable of over 170 km/h. Its spirit was a perfect match for adventuresome individuals - like Gionata Nencini, some 20 years on. "I was advised I should travel on the Transalp because it is so reliable," Gionata explains, "and it has not let me down regardless of the conditions I have put it through." When you plan on 150,000 kilometres through 80 countries, it sounds like the perfect companion.

Just before Christmas, Gionata was off again. "I drew a line south-east - I abandoned the plan to go to India and Africa at this stage. I will go to Chile after New Zealand then do the Pan-American Way. I am trying to be individualistic but practical."

Half a century after Kerouac and Guevara, is the youthful Nencini a changed man? "Not changed at all, I sometimes think. Of course there have been some misadventures, some moments of tiredness, even depression mainly caused by bureaucracy over the bike. But that's all part of the game. I didn't dream about easy travel, I was looking for a challenge. The mistakes, the mishaps - that's the challenge."

Australian Customs apart, China was a bit of a nightmare. "I thought it would be an easy part of the trip, that I would be able to charm them and take the Transalp in. But they told me if I didn't take the bike out of there they would keep it. I had to talk to the embassy, send a formal letter of apology, and ship it out. It went on a ferry from South Korea. They kept it for several months in the Chinese port and said I needed a local licence and plates." So in the end he did his China leg of the tour on a small scooter supplied to him by a reader of his website who flew to China to meet him!

Gionata arrived in Japan with just \$200, reached Australia with just \$200 again, and left for the land of the long white cloud with \$300 in his pocket. "But that's not discouraging, it's exciting," he insists. "I'm on the edge the whole time, and

about. The professional experience I have had on my travels may actually be helpful when I go home and look for work. I may do a photography diploma, go into journalism, go back to teaching, develop my languages, try my hand at movie-making, tourism..." The possibilities, you sense, are as endless as his travels themselves.

And that's the whole point, neatly summed up in the name of Gionata's website: partireper.it. 'Partire', of course, is Italian for 'to leave, to travel', while 'per' means simply 'to' or 'for'. For what? "For the sake of doing it," he shrugs. "I want it to last as long as it can because it's enriching me," he adds. "The time factor is not important any more."

So what has this remarkable 23-year-old learned in all those kilometres? "So many things! I'm really ambitious, that's one. If I want to do something I will do it. It doesn't have to be easy. I can be humble, flexible, deal with situations, have empathy with people. There is good and bad in everything - and in me. I am proud of my adaptability, and I'm not scared about the future. I'll manage. The world offers a lot of chances to achieve happiness." ■

the most beautiful journey is the one that leads us to ourselves



it's exciting to improvise." His improvising has encompassed teaching in China and Japan ("a beautiful 26-year-old girl"), volunteer work in a Cambodian orphanage where he used his China savings to buy materials and equipment for the kids, modelling wedding clothes in China, hotel work and simple labouring here in Australia.

It's not the travel that people can't grasp, nor the reasons for it, says Gionata, it's the sheer time-scale of his modern odyssey - planned as an eight-year segment of his young life. "Yes, the time factor is the most misunderstood thing. It seems strange, until people see what it's all

Back in the Fifties men like Che Guevara had to use diaries to record their experiences. Our modern motorcyclist, of course, has his own website: check out www.partireper.it and watch for further instalments of this remarkable voyage of self-discovery in your Honda magazine.

