



Packed and ready to go: Tom Hudson and Jodie Burton

Blazing saddles

Two adventurous Londoners are cycling 28,000km through some of rugby's smaller countries on the way to seeing the sport's giants do battle at the World Cup

WORDS: Gavin Mortimer ILLUSTRATION: Stephen Lee/NB Illustration

OKAY, SO we're in the grip of a global recession but surely cycling to this year's Rugby World Cup is taking this 'age of austerity' mindset just a wee bit too far. But Tom Hudson and Jodie Burton are determined to cover the vast distance between London and Auckland by pedal power. Of course, there's a little more to it than just cost-cutting, as they explained when *Rugby World* caught up with them en route. Up until last year Hudson and Burton held down demanding jobs in the City of London, but

one morning they realised they'd had enough of the daily grind. The catalyst was their reading of *The Crossing*, Ben Fogle and James Cracknell's account of rowing the Atlantic Ocean in 2006. "We decided that we needed a similar sort of challenge," says Burton. "Once we had decided upon a long bike ride Tom couldn't resist turning it into a pilgrimage on a gigantic rugby level." Already harbouring plans to emigrate to Australia, the duo came up with the idea of spending 400 days cycling from London to Melbourne (the

city they intend to settle in) then on to Auckland for the World Cup, and visit as many rugby clubs and meet as many rugby people as possible on the way. They are collecting signatures of rugby icons from all 28 nations they pass through on a World In Union Scroll, to show how rugby unifies people of all regions, beliefs and cultures. Hudson and Burton set out in search of 28,000km's worth of adventure but they are also raising £28,000 for two charities – Rays of Sunshine, which turns the wishes of seriously ill children into reality, and the Tag Rugby Trust, which coordinates community rugby projects around the globe. Between London and their final destination lie one or two dodgy places, countries best left alone no matter how tiresome the detour. So Burton sat down and carefully planned their route. "Obviously I had to take into account the terrain and weather of each country but >



THE PEOPLE

WHO WOULD DO A TRIP LIKE THIS?

TOM HUDSON was born in Lewisham in August 1981. He is a major sports fan, with rugby and cricket topping his list – although he is also partial to a pint of Guinness.



Jodie Burton describes herself as an exercise junkie and a chocoholic. Born in Harlow, Essex in February 1981, she celebrated

her 30th birthday on this trip. She loves chicken sandwiches but hates Marmite, while Hudson claims his favourite food is "pasta, boiled on a camp stove, with no sauce or flavour". Very appropriate!



For more information about the pair and to contact them, see www.cyclingtotherugbyworldcup.com

THE ROUTE

WHAT, WHEN AND HOW?

THE INTREPID cyclists' route takes in 11 European countries, 15 Asian nations from Turkey to Indonesia, then Australia and New Zealand. Their cycles (below) are laden with everything from a tent and sleeping bags to rolls of duct tape.



JODIE BURTON, TOM HUDSON & GETTY IMAGES

also the political situation." Afghanistan and Iraq were no-nos but Iran appeared feasible, judging by reports Burton read from travellers describing the warm welcome they'd received from Iranians. "In the end we decided to be quite open-minded about our route, accepting any invitations we got as we passed through countries, particularly those that would help develop our story," says Burton. "The aim of the trip, aside from raising money, is to boost the profile of rugby in the countries we've visited, whether at a local or national level."

But back to the start. Burton and Hudson stocked up on easy-to-carry provisions, slipped on their Lycra and set off from Twickenham on Saturday 1 May last year. It was a low-key send-off, just a few close friends plus John Owen, president of the RFU, who wished them well as they eased into their saddles and pedalled south. Their first stop was New Eltham to collect a rugby shirt from Footscray, the club Hudson has graced for many seasons as a full-back. The shirt will be presented to the Melbourne rugby club of the same name once Hudson and Burton reach Australia.

In wind and rain the pair cycled to Dover and on to Lille, where they struggled to find the Metropolitan Rugby Club. Hudson stopped to ask directions and he chuckles as he recalls the look on the Frenchman's face as he explained they were on their way to New Zealand. If the French needed any further proof that the English are lunatics then here it was, in all its sweating, smiling glory. But the Frenchman still guided them to the club and the cyclists ticked off their first country.

And so it continued, for weeks and months, as the pair cycled from country to country, meeting any number of weird, wacky and wonderful folk, all

united by a common bond – their love of rugby. Take Zoltan Heckel, Hungary's most-capped player who's propped for his country over 50 times. Like all bona fide front-rowers, Zoltan is at heart a frustrated fly-half, perhaps the reason why he runs the 'Jonny Wilkinson bar' in Esztergom, a town in the far north of Hungary. "Zoltan played for a while in England, first for Portsmouth and then Canterbury," explains Hudson. He had a whale of a time and returned to Hungary with plans to open a

Every kind of people: Burton meets a group of Georgian children in Ruisi (right) and stands tall next to 'Little' Mehmet, a Turkish rugby player (above right)



GEORGIA

bar dedicated to England's most famous player. "He wrote to Jonny for his permission and the reply was, 'Go for it'. It's his dream to meet Jonny!"

Zoltan's dedication to rugby pales into insignificance compared to Eldegiz Rafibeyli, the Azerbaijan No 8 who doubles as the country's rugby president. Azerbaijan, a country sandwiched between Iran to the south and Russia to the north, has few players but that's not for the want of trying on the part of Rafibeyli. The man is obsessed with rugby.

"What a man!" exclaims Hudson, gleefully describing how the hulking Rafibeyli speaks English with an Edinburgh brogue on account of his work for an oil company populated by Scots. Over a long lunch Rafibeyli told Hudson

and Burton about the history of rugby in Azerbaijan, of how some British sailors had introduced the game into the country in the 1930s and how, over the next 60 years, it had seeped into the souls of a small band of men. It wasn't until 2005 that Azerbaijan played their first Test match and they remain in Europe's bottom tier.

"When we met him they were just about to head off to play Bosnia and Slovakia in a tri-nations tournament," explains Hudson. "Rafibeyli was having trouble recruiting enough players because a lot of them couldn't take time off from work. So he was paying them out of his own pocket, sorting out all their travel visas and covering any other costs. He just can't walk away from the game he loves so much."



TURKEY

Starting blocks: Burton and Hudson pose for the camera before leaving Twickenham



UK START



CHINA

The wild east: the toughest part of the trip was the cold, lonely weeks Hudson and Burton spent cycling across the desert in China – "it was desolate"

AUSTRALIA



"THE AIM OF THE TRIP, BESIDES RAISING MONEY, IS TO BOOST THE PROFILE OF RUGBY IN THE COUNTRIES WE'VE VISITED"

Rafibeyli's altruism extends right the way down to grass-roots level where he frequently visits orphanages, just him and his rugby ball, in order to bring a little bit of fun into the tough lives of the children there.

Hudson and Burton have encountered plenty of other characters en route, from Eduard Krutzner, the Czech Republic's Mr Rugby, who has captained, coached and presided over the game in his country since swapping basketball for rugby in the 1950s, to Sarjan, the Turkish winger known as 'The Rabbit'. The 21-year-old can run 100m in 10.7s and, says Hudson, with

a few months of professional coaching he could be a star.

Someone who was never a 'rabbit', not even in his pomp, is former Samoan and Wasps hooker Trevor Leota, spotted by Hudson and Burton in Dubai. "We were invited to a pre-season tournament and from a distance I saw this huge man coaching a side, wearing Wasps colours," says Hudson. "I remarked to our host that there was a Trevor Leota lookalike on the touchline, and he replied: 'No, that is Trevor'. Apparently he lives in the

United Arab Emirates now, coaching at a sports academy."

The visit to Dubai followed a 2,000km cycle through Iran, a place with a reputation for religious intolerance and hostility to all things Western. Burton and Hudson found the reality far different. "The people we encountered were very warm and hospitable," says Hudson. "They're desperate to show Westerners that the image we have of them is inaccurate, and comes from a political standpoint. What normal Iranians want most of all is the chance to interact with the West so we see the other side of their country. In most countries we've found that our attitudes have been moulded by the people we've met but none more so than in Iran."

The pair were obliged to practise discretion as they cycled through Iran, as it was the month of Ramadan when

Muslims fast. Meal breaks were taken behind walls and if a friendly local put them up for the night, Hudson and Burton passed themselves off as a married couple. But nothing prepared them for the warmth of the welcome they received at Shiraz RFC in southern Iran. There they met Mahir, the prop and player-coach, and a mean maker of ice-cream. "By day he runs the family ice-cream business," says Hudson, "and in the evenings he runs the rugby club."

Mahir explained how rugby was introduced into Iran in the mid-1990s by a PE teacher in search of a tough sport that also required discipline. The teacher only had a rule book and a

NEW ZEALAND THE FINISH



PAKISTAN



> football to help him but one of his students, Amir Ekrami, became hooked and discovered rugby had first been played in Iran by British soldiers decades earlier. "Amir managed to contact an officer who was still living somewhere in the country and found out more information on the rules," says Hudson, adding that the game continues to grow in Iran, even though the authorities consider it to be a 'symbol of America'.

Hudson and Burton spent three weeks in Pakistan, joining the players from Beaconhouse National University who were doing their bit to help the victims of some devastating floods. The group was led by an English Literature lecturer, Jawad Haroon, who used to play fly-half for Pakistan.

The odyssey of Burton and Hudson has thrown up many unforgettable individuals and events, but there has been the odd hairy moment - literally, when a Romanian bear took an interest in their tent as they covered inside. Hudson's health also suffered. "I found the first two weeks pretty hard to deal with. I wasn't getting enough calories and shed about two kilos in a fortnight. When we hit the Romanian mountains my immune system was weak and I suffered from heat exhaustion and I was in a world of pain."

As the months went by the physical pain for the duo disappeared, but they still had mental battles to fight. One of the toughest times was the three months spent crossing China, when they were met with severe weather and frustrating bureaucracy which meant they had to waste days renewing their visas every three or four weeks. "We were



In the spotlight: the duo have been on radio and TV

"I WASN'T GETTING ENOUGH CALORIES. I WAS IN A WORLD OF PAIN"

out in the desert for six weeks or so and the winter was quite harsh, with temperatures as low as minus 25," says Hudson. "There were gale-force winds and it was desolate - one stretch of 1,500km between any real towns took about two weeks. You'd come across a petrol station every couple of days and that was it. We were really pulling each other along."

When they finally reached China's east coast they visited the Qingdao Sharks rugby club, then hopped across to Seoul by ferry to call in at an ex-pat club and add Korea to their list of countries visited. Next was Japan, where they spent a couple of weeks organising their trip through south-east Asia and celebrated Burton's 30th birthday by watching Suntory Sungoliath beat Kobe Kobelco Steelers in the national championship semi-finals.

"We've had our best day," says Hudson, when *Rugby World* calls for a progress report. "We had coffee with John Kirwan, then met George Gregan and Eddie Jones." Great signatures

to add to the famous and not-so famous names on their Scroll.

They will cycle from Vietnam to Singapore then take in parts of Indonesia before crossing to Darwin in Australia. A mere 6,000km will then lie between them and Melbourne and, after a short rest they'll fly across the Tasman Sea and cycle to Eden Park just as the World Cup kicks off on 9 September.

They are keeping to their schedule, fuelled mainly by a diet of spaghetti and tuna. They have featured on TV, radio and in the newspapers wherever they have gone and each time the publicity brings forward offers of help from destinations down the track. "We have been blown away by it all," says Hudson. "When you're being spoilt by good hosts it's like your brain is trained to forget the bad times you have had."

It would be a fitting end to an astonishing challenge if the World Cup organisers make a fuss of Burton and Hudson when they turn up with their World In Union Scroll - though perhaps at that stage nothing will fit this pair quite as well as a pair of soft cushions!

For more info, see cyclingtotherugbyworldcup.com

Familiar figure?

Burton and Hudson bumped into Trevor Leota (right) in Dubai while (above) Burton dressed appropriately for a visit to the Iran Rugby Union

