

Wanderlust

After 22 years travelling the world on a motorcycle, Belarusian Vladimir Yarets has a special take on a life lived on the road

■ STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY KEL BUCKLEY

Every now and then, when you least expect it, you stumble across someone who smears a long-lasting, involuntary grin from one side of your face to the other.

Unexpectedly, a bit of perspective is jolted back into your cluttered and busy life. And, as you walk away, you find yourself walking a little taller and beaming smiles to random strangers.

It was a stinking hot Friday afternoon, I was tired and cranky and my working week was, thankfully, almost over.

I'd just hung up the phone after organising a few work-quenching drinks with a mate when it rang again. It was Matho. "Grab the camera and get down to Martin Place, immediately," he said.

My shoulders dropped in a deep sigh but I grabbed the camera, jumped on the scooter and fought five o'clock traffic in the searing sun.

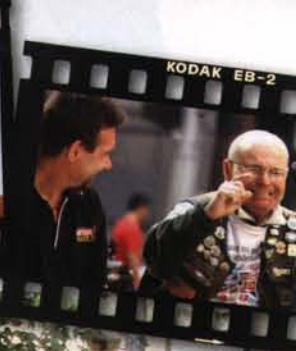
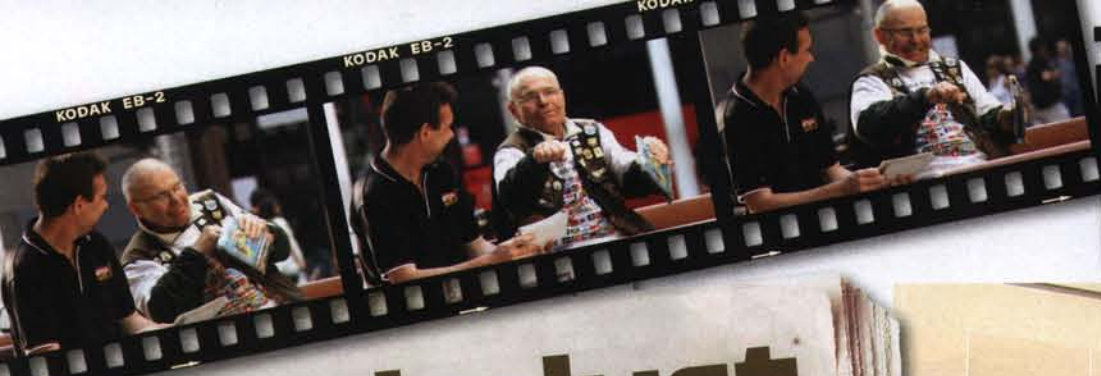
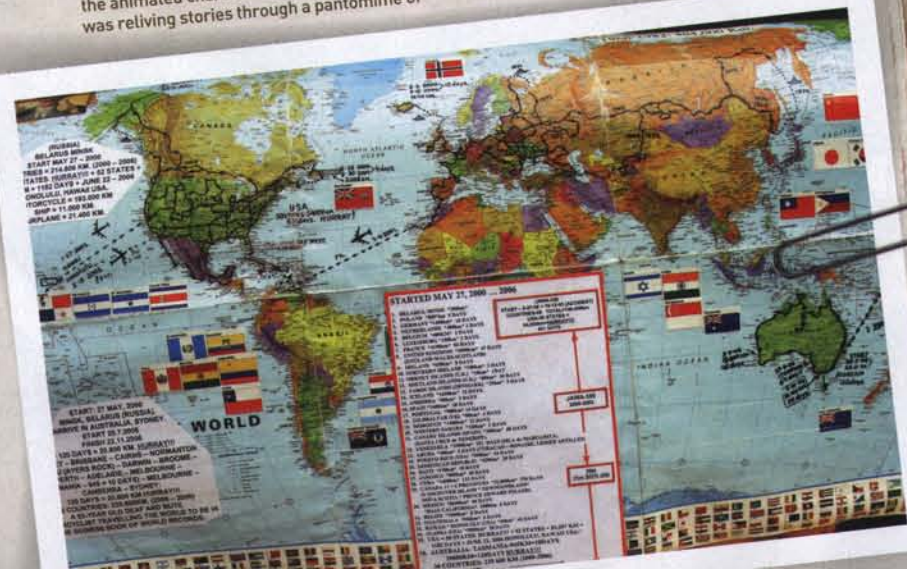
I arrived to find Matho intently watching the animated character next to him. The guy was reliving stories through a pantomime of

gestures. Neither had realised I had arrived. I took out the camera and began snapping.

As I zoomed in and watched this guy's face through the viewfinder, I began to realise he was something special and I couldn't wait to meet him.

Vladimir Yarets is a deaf mute from Minsk, Belarus. He has been travelling the world on a motorcycle for 22 years collectively. In his latest trip, now six years in, he is hoping to gain entry into the Guinness Book of Records by being the first deaf and mute person to travel solo across all five continents. And he's nearly there but, of course, the trip hasn't been without its obstacles.

Vladimir and his motorcycle are as colourful and animated as each other. The panniers on his BMW 650 GS are hard-sided Samsonite rolling suitcases. His screen, topbox and tankbag all proudly display his origin in large, white letters. Every square inch of the bike is covered in stickers; his weathered oilskin vest is similarly covered in badges — each re-telling



Main pic: Vladimir and all his worldly possessions stop by Sydney on his way around Australia. Far left: He keeps a flawless journal, which documents every step of his monumental trip

I realise the pages in his journal are as precious to him as my voice is to me

a chapter of his epic journey. The 65 year old keeps a meticulously neat journal bearing odometer readings and stamps from every town he visits. He enthusiastically thumbs through the pages, proudly pointing at memorable towns with wide eyes and he searches our faces for a response. He closes the book; closes his eyes and clutches it close to his chest. I realise the pages in this book are as precious to him as my voice is to me.

Vladimir lost his hearing as a baby; his eardrums were punctured after a Nazi bomb was dropped on his village in 1943. Not able to understand English, Vladimir communicates through animated gestures and exaggerated facial expressions.

Despite the language barrier, he easily relays his stories and experiences. He has collated a plastic-coated fold-out booklet of photographs that helps him illustrate his awe-inspiring stories.

The photographs, ranging from the mid 60s to very recently, are a mere snapshot of the high and low points of his almost, to date, 640,000km expedition.

Vladimir, a former mechanic who grew up in post-war Russia, began his latest record-setting journey on 27 May, 2000, on a 350cc Jawa — the same motorcycle that he travelled 404,000km through the then communist-controlled Soviet Union from 1966 to 1982.

Vladimir first bought a motorcycle in 1965,

however, his licence application was initially refused due to his deafness. Ten years later, after riding throughout Russia and crossing 11 time zones, Vladimir rolled back into Minsk.

His travels included the notoriously dangerous and remote Road of Bones, which stretches 1931km from Magadan to Yakutsk and was built by prisoners during Joseph Stalin's reign. Often having to drag his bike over obstacles, one particular 60km section took him 10 hours to cover.

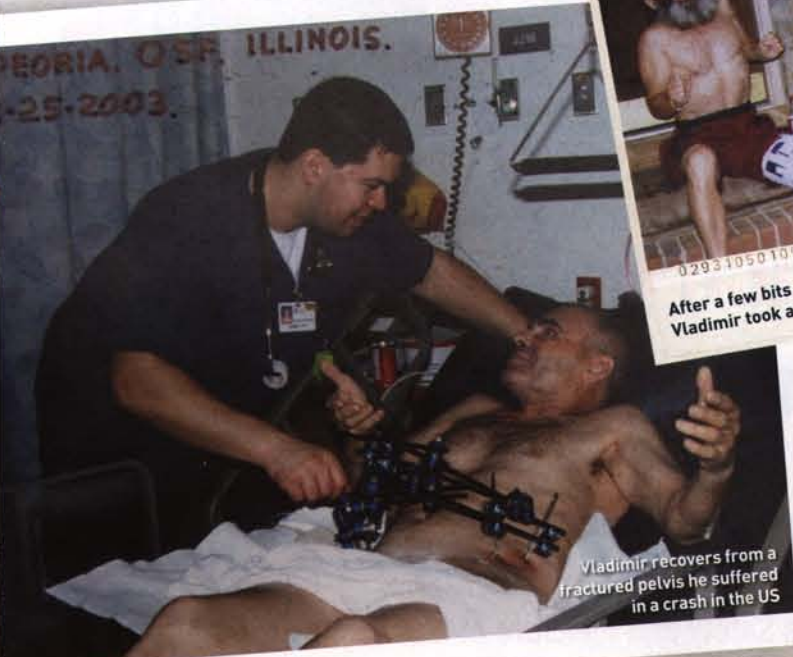
The same officials that refused his licence application 10 years earlier were so impressed by what he had achieved when he returned home, they issued him with his motorcycle licence. Sources have said that he became the first hearing-impaired person in Russia to be issued with a motor vehicle licence.

But I get the feeling that he would have embarked on this record-setting journey with or without a valid motorcycle licence. "This is a passion," said Vladimir's son recently. "This was given to him from above. It's not for money or glory, there is some little devil inside him that makes him do it."

In 2002, Vladimir spent three months in a Cuban jail for entering the country without the required documentation. And in late 2003, Vladimir was hit by a truck in Illinois, USA, while he was carrying out some roadside repairs on his motorcycle. He was thrown into the air and his 350cc Jawa ended up a



1. Vladimir's windscreen tells a thousand tales of where he's been 2/3. One of his first journeys was 1931km across the notorious Road of Bones in Russia in 1974 4. Each picture in Vladimir's journal helps unlock his interesting life on the road



Vladimir recovers from a fractured pelvis he suffered in a crash in the US

crumpled, almost unrecognisable mess. He suffered multiple breaks in his arms and legs and a shattered pelvis.

He spent 50 days in hospital — including Christmas Day — waiting for his bones to mend after being re-set. He gained support from the American Motorcyclist Association (AMA), which raised funds, collected clothing and organised hospital visits for the lone and injured adventurer. He was then transferred to a medical centre for three months of rehabilitation, which, in a gift of kindness, was provided to Vladimir free of charge.

Inspired by his story, a local motorcyclist invited to Vladimir into his home for the remainder of his recovery. For the next six weeks, aided by a walking stick, Vladimir gained strength by walking laps of the generous biker's driveway. He gained speed and mobility every day, until eventually he felt strong enough to continue his journey.

Yarets has survived on the kindness of strangers to remain safe, warm and fed. Jim Waterer, a long-distance motorcycle tourer who visited Vladimir in hospital, said: "He's just going to go out on a wing and a prayer and makes it up as he goes along."

A BMW dealership in Illinois heard of his accident and donated a near-new BMW 650 GS to him so he could continue achieving his dream. The dealership had the frame of the GS modified to suit Yarets' short stature. It also had the owner's manual translated and rewritten in Russian, threw in a tankbag and fitted a brighter tail light to increase his visibility while on his journey.

Vladimir Yarets arrived in Australia on 2 July, 2006. Starting in Sydney, he headed anti-clockwise around the country and has travelled more than 20,000km around Australia in 120 days. He left Australia just prior to Christmas and headed to New Zealand, before he plans to head to Asia — the last continent on his record-setting list.

Whether he'll head home and set his roots down once he has achieved his goal is anybody's guess. He may even embark on another world first or record-breaking adventure.

Either way, I feel honoured to have crossed paths with Vladimir, a man who has done whatever it takes to turn what most would see as an impossible daydream into an amazing life of freedom and achievement.

The panniers on his BMW 650 GS are hard-sided Samsonite rolling suitcases



Riders came out of the woodwork to help Vladimir after his accident



This is what happens when a truck hits a 350 Jawa