

## **Honey, Kalashnikovs and the international language of selfies**

I wasn't sure which was worse, the Kalashnikov pointed at the back of my head, or the freshly healed wounds in my left knee being ripped open as I knelt on the sharp gravel track, my hands held in surrender. Well, we'd been warned. It was illegal for women to ride motorcycles in Iran.

We'd started in London, our goal Mongolia, our transport two Honda 110 Australian Postie bikes, and were about 9,500km into what was to be a 19,000km trip. We'd had some misadventure along the way – like the phone lost to the pools in Pamukkule, and my inexperience riding motorcycles evidenced by my various falls from grace and some serious wounds.

Iran was by far our favourite of the fourteen countries we'd traversed so far. The hospitality was incredible, and the Iranian people won our hearts. And *oh*, the Iranian honey! In a country where women were forbidden to ride motorcycles, I had become somewhat of a curiosity, learning to replace my helmet with a head scarf with speed and agility.

Making our way to the Turkmenistan border, we realised we'd become horribly lost. We first admired what we viewed as 'untouched landscape'. When the road became gravel, and then a path, and then nothing more than a goat-track, we were not overly concerned. After all, the border crossing at Bājgirān wasn't exactly a main route, so goat-tracks were to be expected.

Exhaustion and hunger set in. With only enough room for an emergency tin of baked beans, we'd been stopping for local cuisine each time we filled our tiny fuel tanks. But as the sun moved across the sky, the tell-tale signs of a border crossing - throngs of people selling food, exchanging currency, or making their way by vehicle, mule or foot across the border - were notably absent. All was quiet. Not a soul in sight.

Do we continue, or turn back? Finally, in the distance, we miraculously spotted three men with two large trucks, ostensibly building a road in the middle of nowhere. We stopped for some directions, but after the obligatory Chai, a crude map and no English, it was apparent to our rescuers that it was hopeless. One of the men jumped in his truck and indicated for us to follow. We would be led to civilisation, oh the relief!

The truck had gone about 500 meters when it came to a sudden halt, and out of the blue a soldier rounded the vehicle, ordered us off our bikes, confiscated our passports, keys and one remaining mobile phone, and forced us to our knees. He banished our Samaritan, and it was

just the three of us. No English made it impossible for us to explain that far from Mr Bond and Ms Croft, we were lost Australian tourists. Clearly agitated, he rambled into his radio, and about an hour later reinforcements arrived, one of whom wore a bandanna around his head. *This, I thought, is the man who is going to behead us on YouTube.* Two soldiers took off on our bikes, and we were driven to a military base seething with armed soldiers. We were held under guard for what seemed like hours, until our bikes were wheeled out with a third military scrambler. Through the international language of hand signals, we were instructed to follow the soldier on the bike. We mounted our mighty steeds and set off. Were we heading to freedom, or death by firing squad?

We made our way down a gravel path when suddenly our guide came to a screeching halt. Then, an English word I knew – *Selfie?* He held up his phone and we forced smiles to our faces as he snapped off a few shots. *Is this the remote spot where he shoots us?* I wondered. But no, we began moving and soon arrived at another military base. Here, the details of our bikes and passports were registered on a scrap of paper, and our phone and passports returned to us. It appeared our quest for the border had taken us into a restricted military zone. Then the second English word was spoken – *Instagram?* Our captor became our most avid follower for the remainder of our journey.

Back in town we treated ourselves to a hotel where we collapsed in relief as the stress of the day caught up with us. The next day we again set out on the four hour journey to Bājgirān, this time using the new route. Arriving at noon, smiling and congratulating ourselves at having finally made it, we parked our bikes, I swapped my helmet for my headscarf one final time, and we unlocked our boxes for our passports. Which, with a sinking feeling, we realised we'd left back at the hotel.