

The Ultimate Road Trip - by Keitha Clark 21/4/2004

When I first met Chris Charlton, he didn't strike me as a bloke about to leave on a three-and-half-year-drive around the world.

When we met in Halifax for an interview (for the Halifax Daily News) the day before his departure, he wore a high necked sweater and pulled a plastic toothpick from his wallet to pick at a piece of meat.

It was hard to believe this 33-year-old had climbed over 80 mountains and was about to begin a journey that will take him through the jungles of Central America and the sands of the Sahara.

It wasn't until I saw Guinevere, Chris's customised silver land rover that I realized he was not just a dreamer, but a doer.

Guinevere, named by Chris's friend Bee, says a lot about his ambition and personality.

The rover, worth C\$130,000, comes with a queen-size roof top tent, external shower, blue tooth wireless internet access, a BBQ and enough gas to go 1000 miles before refueling.

She also holds a paragliding wing, ski boots and a stack of "how to" books on everything from learning Spanish to trekking in the Himalayas.

Even after a tour of Guinevere and a 20 minute interview, I was still intrigued.

What makes a British bachelor and businessmen sell his house, mobilize his company and decide to drive across 110 countries?

I asked Chris if I could ride along for a few days to find out more....

Friday April 9th 2004

When I arrive at the rover the next morning, back-pack and bed roll in hand, Chris is sitting in the passenger seat, typing an email on his laptop to client in England.

Chris' management consulting company, Namaste, will play a big role in his journey. The capital from the six-year-old business is funding much of the trip.

Chris clicks send and slides over to the "drivers" seat.

The diesel motor purrs and we pull out of the parking lot.

The global expedition has begun.

Guinevere is built for UK driving regulations, which means the steering wheel is on the right. I feel foolish sitting on the left, twiddling my thumbs as cars whiz by me.

I am not the only one unnerved by the sight.

When people pass us on the highway, they stare until their noses scrape on their windows.

At the McDonalds parking lot in Truro a man named Tim pulls up beside us in a green car.

"You on tour or something," Tim asks, eyeing the Namaste logo engraved on the side of the land rover.

"I'm driving around the world," Chris replies.

"Really?!" Tim exclaims, promptly introducing his wife and daughter.

Chris and Tim spend the next 10 minutes talking about the trip. Tim loves the idea of the expedition and wants to know how he can follow its progress.

Chris hands him a business card with a web site address and email.

"So if I write and say 'I'm the guy you met in the McDonald's parking lot,' you'll know who I am?"

Chris chuckles and tells Tim to stay in touch.

Tim's reaction is rewarding for Chris, who hopes his global expedition will encourage people to take off their blinkers and realize that the extraordinary is possible.

We eat lunch in the rover and swap stories about the golden arches. Chris has found memories of an especially clean McDonald's in Moscow; I recall the terrific trifle I ate at in Manchester.

We drive down the road to the Elm River Campground.

Chris parks by a creek, slips a "Love and Money" CD into the rover's stereo and starts unpacking.

The roof top tent unfolds like a fan. The awning eagerly unfurls itself. Tigger, the toy tiger from Thailand and the trip's mascot, suns himself on the picnic table.

Chris Charlton travels in style. He carries an iron, two suits, 150 DVD's (everything from "Amelie" to "Finding Nemo") and a shiny new copy of the management book he wrote in 1998.

Chris also carries a memory that is one of three main motivations for the trip.

Road trip reason #1: Carp Diem

In July 1993, Chris and four others were climbing Pik Dikiy, a mountain on the border of Kazakhstan and China. They were on the way down the mountain when they heard a loud BANG!

Chris realized the ground was beginning to move beneath him.

He was running towards the stable part of the slope when his feet were yanked out from under him.

He began tumbling down the mountainside.

Chris fell 1,500 feet before scrambling out of the roaring river of snow. Less than one second later, the avalanche ploughed into the rocks.

When Chris stood up, he experienced one of the most primal and pure emotions of mankind; the joy of just being alive.

Chris took that feeling off the mountain and incorporated it into his approach to life.

Last year when Chris was planning a year-long drive from Alaska to Patagonia, he said "fuck it" and decided to go "all the way."

namaste

GLOBAL EXPEDITION

With Namaste stable and Chris single, it was the perfect time for the ultimate around the world road trip.

Paul Dollin, Chris' best friend for 20 years:

"It's life, that's what you do. You enjoy yourself, you do everything, you do it 100 miles an hour. You live it to the full and this is Chris living it to the full."

Everything is new and untested as dusk descends on the Elm River Campground.

Chris pulls out the propane stove and begins boiling water for spaghetti while I peel off price tags from plates.

After supper the icy evening air chases us up the ladder to the roof top tent. Chris turns on the heater and sets up his laptop. After bundling his legs in a blanket Chris leans towards the computer screen and begins bringing up photos from past adventures.

Chris touches the mouse pad.

Click.

A picture appears of Chris on his 21st birthday, standing at the base of the Todra Gorge in Morocco.

Click.

Chris in army camouflage during a jungle combat course in Belize.

Click.

Chris in a suit, supervising the presentation preparation for one of the biggest nuclear contracts in Europe.

Click.

Chris on a pristine white beach at Christmas time in the Philippines.

It is easy to understand why James Bond is one of Chris' childhood heroes.

This is a man who has a disco ball in his lounge and once flew a girlfriend to Iceland for a birthday bash.

The silver heater suddenly dies and the tent grows quiet and cold.

"Bollocks" Chris exclaims as he heaves on his boots and steps down the ladder to check on the generator.

The heater conks out twice more before bed. Chris realizes he will have to get a more powerful generator before travelling to colder climates.

Chris calls the Canadian leg of his trip the "teething period." He hopes to have little surprises like the generator ironed out by the time he reaches Alaska in mid-May. Chris will spend a month in Alaska, training for and then climbing Mt. McKinley.

After Alaska Chris will back track to British Columbia and then spend August in Arizona getting his helicopters license. He will then drive through South America before shipping the rover to Africa.

Saturday April 11, 2004

We spend the afternoon driving along the Bay of Fundy and the night at what may be the worlds only Campground that doubles as an auction site.

It is dark and cold when we arrive at the Gateway Campground near Amherst. We forgo setting up the rover and sleep on the cement floor of the auction house Quonset. We are surrounded by dusty dishes, dolls and dressers as well as two sofas and dozen rows of stackable chairs that will be filled with eager bidders at next Saturday's sale.

Sunday April 12, 2004

We spend the day driving through the rolling rivers and hills of New Brunswick. As dusk descends, we near Riviere-Du-Loup. Chris gives me the heads up and I cruise through the "Lonely Planet" guide looking for a place to stay.

We pull into the parking lot of a centrally-located motel.

The reception area is closed but a sign says you can register at the bar. Chris opens the door into a dingy room and flashes the disillusioned young barmaid his best smile. Her blue eyes give him the cool once over as he approaches the bar.

Chris puts one elbow on the counter, leans towards the navel-baring barmaid and starts speaking French.

She smiles.

Chris slips her a business card and walks away with the key to a two-room suite.

We toss our bags in the corner of the main room.

A bottle of Jack Daniel's appears and with it a story revealing the second motivation behind the trip.

Road Trip Reason #2: Challenge

When Chris was six, his parents divorced and Chris moved with his Mom to a new town. When he was walking home from his new school one day he decided to try a short cut through an alley. He was half way down the alley when two men approached him. Chris was jumped and badly beaten.

Chris was shaken by the incident and swore he would never let himself get in a situation like that again.

Chris's independent bent led to several remarkable early adventures. When he was 14 he completed the Cotswold Way, a 100 mile trail in western England. At age 18 Charlton climbed his first major mountain in the French Alps. The year before he left for Cambridge University to complete a degree in Management Studies, he cycled 1200 miles around New Zealand.

Chris is proud of his early self-sufficiency, he says his parents worried about his ambitious adventures, but I sense their minds were focused on other things.

"They couldn't have stopped me anyway," Chris says with a chuckle.

By the time he was 12 Chris realized that if he wanted to go anywhere in life he would have to "get his shit together" and do it himself.

Ask any of his family or close friends why they think Chris is going on a global expedition and they will say it boils down to one thing: Challenge.

Chris has an unquenchable love of learning and a thirst for testing his limits.

Chris's mother, Ann Sachs:

"Chris has always wanted a challenge. He has to do all these things that challenge him. He might as well get it out of his system while he's got no family. I hope he just gets it out of his system and comes home and settles down."

As we drain the bottle of JD, Chris's mind fills with more memories from childhood.

When Chris was 12, Ann married Peter Sachs, then managing director of Marconi Europe. They shared a love of the outdoors and Chris has fond memories of the walks they took together. It was Peter that took Chris on one of his first major hikes.

Another early influence was Gerry Spencer, the father of a school chum.

Chris spent many hours talking with the older man over a tumbler of whiskey. The two talked of many things, including the aftermath of a major car crash that would confine his wife to a mental institution and ultimately the stress of it all killed him too.

Chris calls Gerry a true British gentleman who "played the piano and watched the news."

What Chris admired most about Gerry was his dignity.

Chris says that while opening a door or offering a light are nice gestures, being able to offer a calm mind and comforting hand in any situation are the characteristics that make a true gentleman and values Chris strives to live to.

Monday April 12, 2004

We arrive in Quebec City in late afternoon and weave our way through the narrow stony streets that belong more to medieval than contemporary Canada.

We decide to dine at aux Anciens Canadiens, one of the oldest cottages in the city and home to traditional Quebecois cuisine.

Chris orders a \$70 bottle of Bordeaux to accompany our meal of caribou, buffalo and pheasant.

After swirling the wine before the waiting waitress, Chris smiles and turns his attention to me.

"There is something behind your eyes, something that happened in your past.....?"

Chris drifts off like a skilled fortune-teller.

I chuckle.

"I should be asking you that question," I say, but it is too late. The tables have turned.

I have become the interview.

After three courses and a half-eaten slice of maple

sugar pie, Chris is grinning like a Cheshire cat. He has just illuminated the third motivation for the expedition.

Road trip reason #3: Namaste.

Namaste can mean simply "hello/welcome" in Nepalese. It also has a much deeper meaning: "pay homage to the spirit within", a philosophy that is equally respectful of others and oneself. It is a word that has a special place in Chris's heart.

On September 26, 1992 Chris set out alone to climb Chulu West, a 6,000 meter peak in western Nepal. He had been walking for nearly 20 hours when he saw an old man and a little boy standing outside a small mud hut.

"Namaste" the little boy said with a becoming smile.

"Namaste," the older man echoed.

The two Nepalese welcomed Chris into their hut and offered him half of everything they had, including their supper meal. Chris brought in his gas stove and boiled tea. The trio sat by the open fire in the center of the hut and talked for hours.

"I knew 12 words of Nepalese and he (the grandfather) knew three words of English," Chris smiles, remembering.

"We understood each other perfectly." Chris says fondly.

The night Chris spent with the man and his grandson was an important milestone in his life. Chris was inspired by the generosity of the two Nepalese and wanted to bring that sense of sharing to a broader audience.

When Chris left the hut the next morning, the idea of Namaste went with him.

Sharing what you have, whether it is knowledge, adventure or a simple meal is the fundamental philosophy behind the global expedition.

Chris says that while it "may sound cheesy," the most exciting thing about the expedition is the opportunity it gives him to meet new people and perhaps make some small difference in their lives.

"I hope to have an enormous amount of fun and make a little bit of a difference."

Thursday, April 16, 2004

When I leave Chris in Montreal he is mapping his route to Toronto. His blue eyes scan the glossy World Atlas that is his constant companion.

Chris says if he doesn't make it all the way, that's okay. He says he has "nothing to prove and everything to gain."

Chris says he will be satisfied if he can look back and say:

"Yeah, I've had a go."

[Keitha became the first Namaste Global Expedition "Adventurer", joining the expedition from Halifax to Montreal from 9-16 April 2004.]