

MOTORING THROUGH THE HEART OF AFRICA

By John Gunnell

Every person has his own unique way to look at the world. For world traveler and author Jerry Smith, that way is from the seat of a motorcycle. Whether competing in endurance races around the United States or traveling through an exotic foreign land, Smith has witnessed more of what the world has to offer than the average person; and he did it all from the saddle of his two-wheeled travel companion.

The trip Smith refers to as "the greatest motorcycle adventure of all time" became the basis for his novel, Into The Heart of Africa (first published in 2000 and currently in its fifth printing by Morris Publishing), documenting the 87-day, 8,756-mile trek across the Dark Continent that he and 17 other riders experienced in late 1974 and early 1975.

Starting in Morocco, on November 20, 1974, Smith and his fellow African trekkers mounted their XL250 Honda motorcycles and began a three-month adventure full of wondrous sights, interesting people and plenty of dangerous situations. The Hondas allowed the Americans to get off the beaten path and explore parts of the African continent that most tourists never get a chance to see. They also brought plenty of attention from the natives who had had very few dealings with motorized vehicles in their lifetimes.

Africa in the 70s was a land full of danger, corruption, poverty and despair. Smith and his fellow riders got to see all of this first hand.

"God did but few people favors when he created Africa," wrote Smith. "The inhabitants have had to either succumb to or endure atrocities from within and those brought by others to their continent, enduring diseases and an unforgiving climate."

However, Smith also had the opportunity to discover the beauty of Africa's natural world and gain insights into the human condition during his encounters with its inhabitants.

With a wide variety of terrain to cover and not many paved roads along the way, the 248-cc motorcycle proved to be the perfect vehicle for the riders for their journey. The XL250s were the first four-stroke enduro motorcycle to be mass-produced. The bikes' reliability, both on and off the roads, was an important component for the riders, especially considering the lack of service stations in the heart of Africa.

One of the biggest worries with the motorcycles on the trip was the fear of running out of gas. This happened to Smith when he wandered away from the group for a solo excursion into the Sahara Desert. If a member of his party had not found him during the night, who knows if he would have made it home alive to tell his tale.

As durable as the workhorse XL250s were, accidents were hard to avoid in such a harsh environment. By the end of the trip, each rider had been involved in one or two scrap-ups. In fact, a couple of bad accidents ended the tour early for a few of Smith's traveling companions.



Today Jerry is proud of the Honda he rides to shows where he sells his book.

Whether riding through the unfriendly desert, rigid mountains, lush valleys or thick jungles, danger lurked with each revolution of the tires. One of the tensest — and at the same time most exhilarating — experiences for Smith was making hammerhead stalls on the wall of a sand dune that was 60 miles wide and 400 miles long.

"Sand riding is one-third psychological, one-third skill and one-third internal fortitude to turn on the throttle and let the motorcycle skim the top of the sand where a good bike loves to fly," he wrote.

The rugged paths were not the only dangers the riders faced in their day-to-day travels. Sometimes it was the people and animals that stepped in front of them on the path that proved to be more dangerous.

Before the trip even started, Smith was thrust into a life-or-death situation. While exploring in Ceuta, he took a wrong turn on his bike and found himself in a ghetto surrounded by a mob of young thieves. Things didn't get much easier for Smith over the next three months.

By the end of his ride, Smith had faced down the tip of a spear held by a native, the tip of a bayonet held by a soldier and a couple more angry mobs. In a Zairian village, Smith and the group got a close-up look at jungle justice when one of the riders, Dick Bettencourt of West Bridgewater, Mass., decided to borrow a bolt from an old, rusted-out truck frame to fix the grab handle on his bike. In another village, the simple act of taking a picture incited another angry confrontation with the natives.

As dangerous as the trip was at times, not everything experienced by Smith and the African trekkers turned out bad. There were also plenty of exhilarating adventures along the way. Smith describes all these experiences, in great detail, with the wit and perception of a stranger in a foreign land.

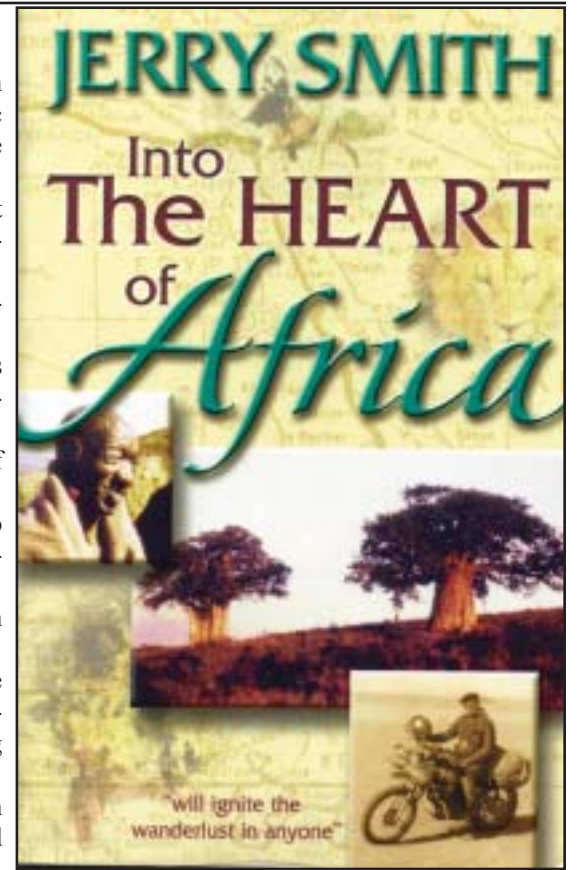
The exploration of a facility in the Sahara Desert where the French tested atomic weapons provided Smith a "once in a lifetime opportunity to view the aftermath of a weapon that changed the political structure of the planet Earth for generations to come", while a visit to an isolated Pygmy village deep in the Congo jungle brought him face-to-face with a group of people who Smith felt could "enrich one's life just by meeting them."

Other positive experiences included witnessing a Christmas Day parade made up of the area's territorial chiefs in Cameroon, performing a motorcycle thrill show for a group of natives in the Zairian jungle and escaping from mad elephant who did not want Smith to take his picture.

One animal that Smith did snap a picture of during his trip was the okapi, a rare relative of the giraffe with a smaller neck and legs like a zebra. And, as it turns out, Smith's picture of the animal- known as the African unicorn due to its rare sightings- may be the first photograph of the okapi in the wild.

In an Yahoo news article in September 2008, a team from the Zoological Society of London claims to have published the first-ever pictures of the okapi. However, Smith's pictures were taken over three decades ago and published in his book in 2000.

Smith's African crossing ended in Mombasa in February, 1975, but the memories and friendships gained along the way has lasted him



The book was printed by Morris Publishing of Kearny, Neb. Jerry Smith told Walneck's Classic Cycle Trader that he does very well selling the book himself at shows. The book entered its fifth printing in 2007.



This is how Jerry Smith looks today, almost four decades after the adventure of his lifetime. Jerry rode a BMW R75/5 in the old days. He is a member of the Iowa Motorcycle Dealers Hall of Fame.

a lifetime. Jerry Smith of Hendrick, Iowa, was a motorcycle dealer in Ottumawa, Iowa, for 48 years and is a member of the Iowa Motorcycle Dealers Hall of Fame. Smith is also an avid competitive motorcycle racer and a world traveler. He can be contacted at: Jerry Smith, 102 West 5th St., Hedrick, IA 52563 or by phone at (641) 653-4436. www.theheartofAfrica.com.

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