



THE ROUTE LESS

Nigel Hallows and a group
of friends from South Africa dared
not only to think the unthinkable,
but to then make it a reality

TRAVELLED



Eagle® Stage IV conversion. I would be riding my Road Glide® Special with my wife, Nita, as pillion. Duncan would be following us in a Land Rover. Duncan is a BMW rider – if it wasn't for the fact that he is such a cool guy, we would probably never have been friends.

We agreed to do the trip over the first weekend in April, which also included Renee's birthday. Renee and Matt sorted all of the travelling details because they had a contact in the area, so I took to looking online to find any advice about ascending Sani Pass on a motorcycle. I concluded that our bikes were completely unsuitable and that we were terribly underprepared. This did nothing to ease the tension as our departure date came ever closer. We were committed.



It all began over a glass of Jack Daniel's. "Nige, would you and Nita like to join us for a trip to Sani Pass?"

The idea was proposed by my friend Matt – an accountant by profession, but definitely not by nature. The Sani Pass is a spectacular road through the Drakensberg Mountains, linking South Africa to the mountain kingdom of Lesotho.

I agreed without hesitation. Then Matt grinned: "Oh, I forgot to tell you: we're going to do it on the bikes."

With that, the craziest idea I've ever had the pleasure of being involved with was born. Unless you have ridden over Sani Pass, the sheer enormity of the challenge will not be evident. On paper it is easy: a 1,600km round trip – effortless stuff for hardcore bikers like us. However, while Sani Pass is just 7km long, it climbs more than 1,000 metres. It's a notoriously dangerous, rocky trail that reaches 2,876m above sea level and is only wide enough for a single vehicle. There are very few overtaking places and it is littered with loose gravel. Sani Pass is more of a track than a road.

Five of us close friends were going to take on the challenge. Renee and Matt would be riding on a Softail® Deluxe and an Ultra Classic with Screamin'



Sani Pass

HIGHWAY TO HELL?

We left Nelspruit, South Africa, just after 6.30am on Friday March 31. It was perfect riding weather and we cruised the 780 kilometres to Himeville along mostly B roads. As we arrived at the hotel, Matt put his bike down at the first sight of dirt. By the look on his face, the reality of the challenge was becoming clear. Although we made jokes and laughed a lot, we were all getting very nervous.

We again departed at 6.30am the next day, after a largely sleepless night. The morning was beautiful – the sun just poking its head over the mountains – and we rode towards the border along idyllic roads that meandered through fields. AC/DC's *Highway to Hell* was at top volume (little did I know this would be so apt).

We were all daydreaming when we saw Matt waving urgently ahead. We jammed on our brakes as the road

came to an abrupt end. The rocks and potholes ahead were what caught me by surprise. It was worse than I had imagined. Tentatively we edged onwards, but at the first little hill I stalled the bike then slid backwards, both feet down and the front wheel in full slide. When I got to a stop without dropping the Road Glide, the relief was almost nauseating.

Without missing a beat I restarted my ascent, choosing a different line.



It quickly became a battle of the obstacles, each one presenting a different challenge. Our bikes were taking a hammering and there was the possibility of seriously damaging them (or worse, injuring ourselves).

By the time we arrived at the Lesotho border, we were exhausted.

NO GOING BACK

We decided to let the tyre pressure down a bit to help with the journey. This turned out to be my saving grace. As I laid down to let the air out of my tyre, my oil cooler caught my eye. I realised how close the Road Glide's was to the ground, while Renee's Softail had the cooler above the bottom of the frame and Matt's Ultra had a cover. For the rest of the trip, my focus was choosing a line to protect the oil cooler at any cost.

Our passports were stamped and, with a smile from a bemused border guard, we took off. Duncan was on point, with Renee, myself and Matt bringing up sweep.

We progressed slowly and carefully, until we hit our next significant obstacle: the first of many 'rivers of rocks'. Renee was a little ahead and, with a bang, she went down. Her front wheel struck a rock and her jacket zip, which was loosened to let in some air, got caught. She was unable to correct the steering. We picked her bike up, did a check (unbelievably there was no damage) and she was back on without hesitation. We all checked our clothing to ensure we didn't repeat the mistake.

Matt and I looked at each other – should we turn back? We were attempting something seriously challenging, and we had no backup plan. The journey was only going to get harder. We agreed to make it to the viewpoint ahead, then make the call. It was 10°C with a freezing wind, and the sweat was dripping down my back. Over obstacle after obstacle we went, slowly but surely climbing the 1,000m to Sani Pass's summit. Corner after corner the road got ever steeper, with each obstacle more challenging than the one before.

We finally conquered the road,



STRIVING FOR THE SUMMIT...

I don't know if, in my 47 years, I had ever done something as physically demanding as this. By the time I got to the second of seven switchbacks, I was light-headed and out of breath. Renee got stuck in the corner and, with a brief apology, I shot past her, slipping and sliding, spinning and winding my way up what felt like a vertical cliff. The Harley kept its momentum and the pipes growled as we ascended corner after corner. Each section was harder and steeper than the last, with more rocks.

On the fourth switchback, I finally found enough level terrain to stop. Renee was two switchbacks below us, gathering her breath, but I couldn't see Matt or Duncan anywhere. I was fighting nausea, taking deep breaths, trying to stop the incessant, nervous shaking – where were they? As it was impossible to go back, the only thing we could do was get to our destination then walk back if needed.

I moved the bike into position and Nita leapt on. We weren't far now, roaring up the hill. We took a turn – rocks again, everywhere. It was impossible to choose a line. The Road Glide's back end was all over the place but we were creeping upwards. We took another right-hander, which revealed solid, firm ground. We surged forward, up through the last turn – suddenly, a river of rocks again. But this time I could see a sign saying 'Sani border 300 metres' and our hotel ahead. I opened the throttle and roared over the rocks, Nita clinging to me for dear life.

And then, just like that, we were there. The tears rolled down my cheeks as I took it all in. Soon, we heard the Softail roar around the corner and Renee arrived. It was all smiles but then, as she turned off her bike, an eerie silence descended.

It was then that we noticed the audience standing on the hotel's balcony – they had all been cheering us on. We waited what seemed like forever before we heard Matt's Ultra in the distance. One hand in the air, he crested the corner, closely followed by Duncan. The relief was incredible.

However, the highlight was entering

the hotel to meet at least 10 BMW GS riders all shaking their heads. The leader of the pack walked over and shook my hand. He said: "Yesterday, we were high fiving each other for our amazing achievement of getting up the pass. Here you guys come roaring up on Harleys – I think we need to go back to riding school!"

THE LEGENDS RETURN

After breakfast, we rode to Clarens. This time, we were relaxed with smiles on our faces. The sun was shining and the bikes were purring. Many of the roads through the mountain kingdom were breathtakingly beautiful, with some of the best scenery we had ever seen. Then there were some places where you'd turn a corner to find the road missing.

When we pulled into Clarens and refuelled for the following day, a dude with a BMW badge walked up to us and shook our hands. "Are you the crazies that just came up Sani on Harleys? You guys are legends!" Clearly, the story of our adventure had reached Clarens before we did.

We met Gavin, Renee's school friend who had helped with the travelling details, then visited a restaurant to celebrate Renee's birthday the next day. The food was exquisite, the wine excellent and the company as perfect as always.

I want to thank my friends for making all this possible – I cannot believe what we have accomplished. You typify everything that Harley stands for; your spirit of adventure is unwavering and you ride with endless jokes and smiles. There is nothing that I will not attempt with you all. Bring it on! ■



despite our unsuitable bikes, and as we arrived at the viewpoint fierce concentration turned into relief. The viewpoint provided a brilliant sight of what we had already accomplished, but unfortunately also provided a clear picture of the challenge awaiting us. We were less than 3km from the top – over half way – yet there was still 800 metres left to climb.

This was nuts. The gravity of our predicament was as clear as the blue sky above us. There was no way we could go back. We convinced ourselves we could do it. We had to do it. Harley® riders never give up.