

# Meet the man who biked it to China

**T**HE surprise to me wasn't necessarily that Chris Smith chose to cycle solo from Bewdley to Beijing. People do daft and dangerous things all the time.

Rather that he didn't get saddle sore until he reached Istanbul.

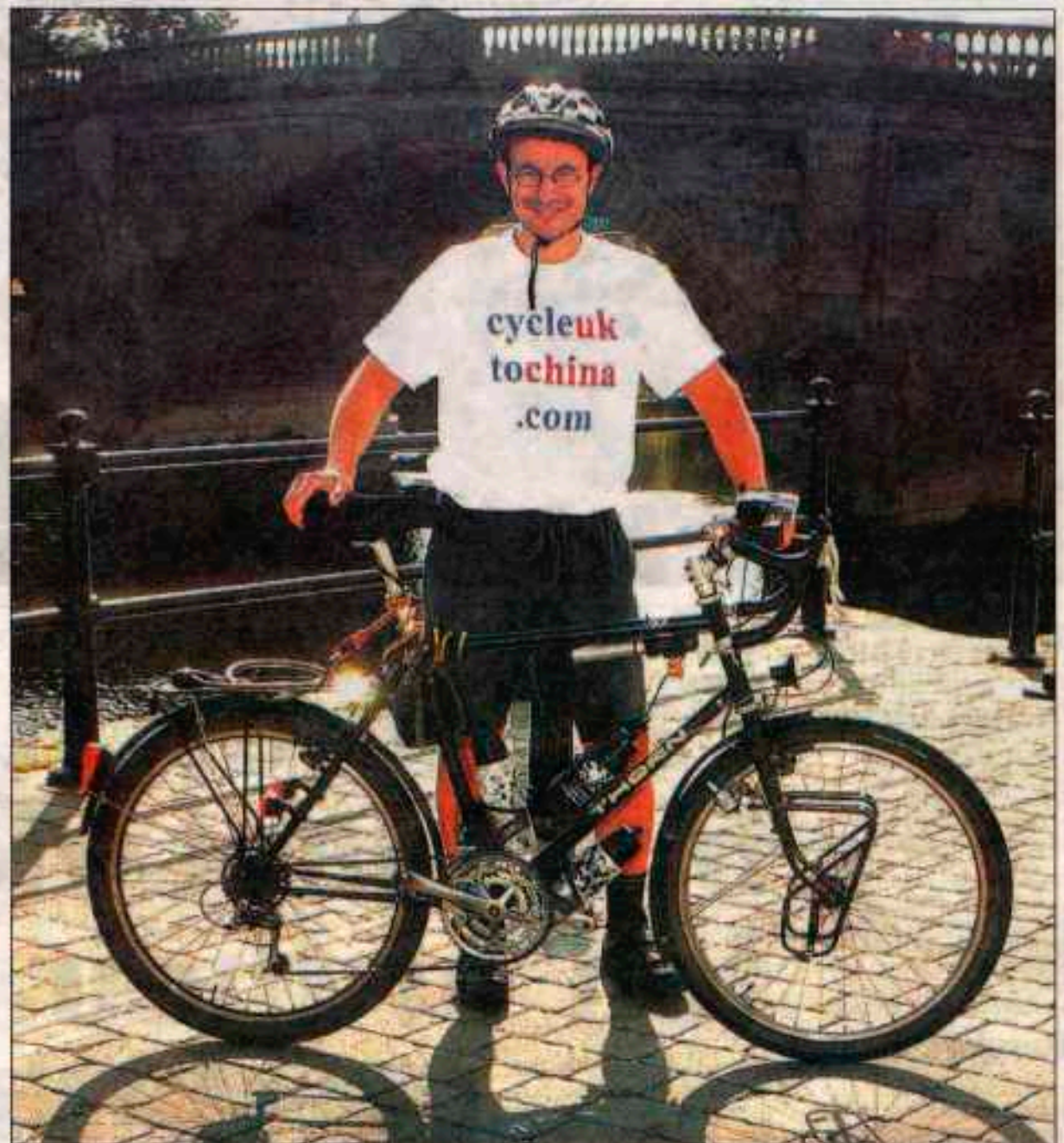
Most amateur cyclists would have been searching for the liniment long before they passed a Turkish massage parlour in the Fulham Road, London, let alone the real thing somewhere the other side of the Balkans.

Nevertheless, the purchase of a quantity of bubble-wrap and foam rubber from an obliging Istanbul retailer, which he wrapped around his bike seat, saw our hero on his way and a few months later he free wheeled into the capital of Communist China.

In May 2000 Chris Smith left his comfortable Worcestershire home, but instead of cycling the routine 12 miles to work, he kept on pedalling. He tells Mike Pryce why

old lorry driving job. Chris spent more than £1,000 on a specialist HGV course and worked for Fransen Transport in Kidderminster hauling trans-continental temperature controlled cargoes in a 55ft long, six axle juggernaut.

"I travelled all over Western Europe, the Communist Bloc, Scandinavia and the Soviet Union," he told. "After the USSR's break-up



Chris Smith pedalled 16,500 miles across mountains, cities and rivers. Picture by Richard Eaton. 29667401



way and a few months later he freewheeled into the capital of Communist China.

There are two ironies to this story. Firstly, Chris hadn't wanted to stop at Beijing. He really intended to end his marathon cycle ride in Vladivostok. But while the Chinese, for all their notorious secrecy and security, were happy to let him pass through their country, the Russians, despite the much vaunted policy of glasnost, didn't want him in theirs.

After weeks unsuccessfully wrangling for a visa on the China-Russian border, Chris gave up and came home. Which is where irony number two occurred.

Having pedalled 16,500 miles across mountain passes, through chaotic cities and over mighty rivers without serious injury, he was hit by a truck and hospitalised about two miles from his house while cycling to work.

Fortunately it didn't stop him writing his book. *Why don't you fly?* (Pen Press £9.99) is the story of Chris's epic trip, which he undertook, as the flyleaf says with "no accomplice, no support crew".

Just carrying a few spares for his bike and £8,000, mostly in travellers' cheques, in a money belt around his waist.

Chris Smith is one of those maverick characters who add colour to the world. He didn't cycle to China for charity, merely because he fancied the jaunt.

Which was par for the course for a student who studied French at university and then promptly got a job as a lorry driver because he wanted to travel. But not just any

Europe, the Communist Bloc, Scandinavia and the Soviet Union," he said. "After the USSR's break-up in 1991, I went to Russia, Lithuania, Latvia and Kazakhstan.

"The roads would be under sheet-ice a foot thick during Russian winters and from Moscow to Kazakhstan armed Russian police guarded the vehicle - and me - against attacks by bandits.

"Fortunately I was never threatened, but you heard many stories of other lorry drivers who were.

"In a way, these were ground-breaking journeys and I thought of writing a book about them. After all, as a university-educated lorry driver I was in a better position than most."

However, for a variety of reasons, the plan didn't happen.

Putting it all together was rather more difficult than Chris imagined and the break-up with a long-term girlfriend didn't help either.

By then he had moved to an office

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management job and after years on the road, didn't take to it much.

"I felt trapped. I wanted to do something different. Something that would challenge me physically."

While at university he had hitchhiked all over Europe and into Africa and Asia. He was used to travelling on his own. He also liked cycling and regularly rode 26 miles a day to and from work.

Putting two and two together, he went out, spent £1,500 on a new bike, to which he added £300 worth of extras and announced to his family he was off to cycle across Asia.

"It seems a very Chris Smith type of thing to do," announced his brother, summing up everyone's thoughts.

"When I started, I wasn't really sure where I was going," said Chris in the off-hand sort of way a shopper might choose between the local

branches of Tesco or Sainsburys.

"I just wanted to go as far as I could. I had thought of cycling to Australia, but that would have meant a substantial sea journey. And then I'd always wanted to go to Vladivostok.

"I thought I wouldn't have to make my mind up until I got to India."

As it turned out, the trip was the reverse, in many ways, of what had been expected. His physical condition - apart from the chaffing around the saddle area - actually improved.

"Not long after I set out, I began to get pains in my right knee," he said.

"I had no idea what they were and why I should get them, but by the time I reached Calais I was in agony. I thought I'd have to pack up. That would have been really embarrassing.

"So I called at a chemist and they gave me some pills and ointment and the pain gradually got better. Eventually it wore off completely."

In Iran, a country not known for its love of the West, he was welcomed.

"The people were fine. They might not like the Government of a country, but on a one to one level, as an individual, they were not hostile at all. Of course, wherever you went you had to take sensible precautions like not travelling at night and not camping out, but sleeping in a hotel or hostel. Apart from that it was OK."

Christmas 2000 he spent at a roadside stop in south west India eating curried shark cooked in a tandoor.

"They also produced a teapot full of beer, which I had to pour into a teacup and drink from that. I gather there were some local laws banning alcohol, but they managed to get round them by using the teaset. It was quite funny and I was most appreciative of the gesture."

Altogether, Chris fell off his bike six times, wore out three sets of tyres - he had the foresight to have some spares sent ahead and he collected them from a company in Islamabad - three chains and two pairs of boots.

The only country where his pidgin English met a blank was in China.

"I couldn't make myself understood at all," he laughed. "If I went into an eating house, I had to point to my mouth to indicate I wanted some food."

All in all, the bike ride to Beijing took him 13 months.

"Why don't you fly", the title of his book, was the immediate reaction of his family when he told them where he was going. "If I had," he said. "I'd have missed a lot of fun."

## HERE'S CHRIS IN SOME OF HIS FAR-OFF DESTINATIONS



From left: Chris Smith on the road in China, in Baluchistan (right) and on the Karakoram Highway, Pakistan.