

G O D O M E T E R

My wife actually said, "I think we should get a motorcycle." I couldn't believe my ears. Having explained how good bikes are on gas, and how resale values in South Africa stay very high compared to back home in the U.S., and how we needed to travel some pretty dicey roads for work (and life) here, Chrissy came through with magic words. I kissed her.

Back in the States, I put on 500 km per week commuting, along very high-speed interstate highways, in all sorts of weather. Even though I didn't have the jing for a heated vest or heated gloves or heated grips, some days I'd go 100 km one way to work when the temperature was 10 degrees below zero (Celsius). I had on so many layers I looked like a snowmobiler! I loved riding to work in North America, and I was sure I'd love it even more in Africa.

We'd been in country for about a month and gotten our legs under us a bit. Our work with a nonprofit in rural KZN had us driving a tiny Mazda Midge all over crazy dirt, gravel, washouts, rocks, ridges, and rollers. So bad was the jiggling and clunking that I thought the dash was going to pop off and crush my extremities. So a rugged bike did really make sense.

But in the States, you can pick up great Japanese bikes for spare change. My last steed was the Kawasaki Concours, the one liter sport tourer. It was already 13 years old,

but was only \$2,300, and was well-cared for, with only 17,000 miles on the clock, peanuts for a model often hitting 100,000. I'd been dreaming about having a motorcycle here and checking prices, so if those magic words came, I'd be ready. Prices for used bikes here were shocking, and I knew I wouldn't be getting anything with GS in the name in any form, since we're here for a few years as volunteers. Volunteering is not lucrative.

So we had a tight budget. I was hoping for \$2,500 or less, and a dual-sport. But the trouble was to find one low enough for my wife to handle, as she also rides, though much less than me. We wanted something that could carry stuff, too, as we'd use it for running errands and carrying things to and from work. And given our relative inexperience on dirt, we thought as many guards as possible would be good to protect our ride from tip-overs and spills.

We popped down to Pietermaritzburg one day, looked in all the shops and I ended up coming home on a 2004 Honda CTX200 Bushlander, an agricultural bike. It felt dodgy and very strained on the N3 "interstate", of course, but I was happy to know I could carry two sheep on it, one on the front rack and one on the rear. Plus, we knew that this bike would take whatever we threw at it, other than high speeds!

I couldn't wait to ride to work on

this thing. But first I had to find just how to get to work...As the crow flies, I work just five kilometers from home, in the Central Drakensberg. Between home and work, though, there's a ridge separating the Injesuthi Valley from the Champagne Valley, meaning I was actually driving about 6 miles on tar roads and then another 6 on potholed tar roads and then 3 on crummy dirt, gravel, and rock, for a total time of 35 minutes or so. With the CTX, surely I could find a way across the ridge and save myself some minutes, right?

I'd scoped out the ridge from both sides in the car and had some ideas. I talked to a knowledgeable neighbor who said it'd be possible. I took off and tried it one day.

The first stop was a sawmill on the near side of the ridge. I rolled up and chatted up the guard at the gate, which was difficult, since he didn't speak English at all and my Zulu was still only about 10 words (including, for some reason, *amajingijolo*—raspberries). But just then, a woman pulled up and asked if she could help. She told me about a walking trail just up the road that she thought vehicles used sometimes. And if not there, "Head up to the forestry road. Bakkies (pick-up trucks) go across on that all the time." Off and searching...

The trail had barbed wire across it, which didn't seem to open in any way, so I went up to the forest-

ry road. The Honda scratched up the ridge on decent rocky dirt, hitting some bumps and occasionally even spinning out the rear wheel as we caught a little air. The top of the ridge came, and the descent began, past a cowherd with his cattle, some beautiful Zulu farmers outside their homes, a school, a couple bridges with sketchy entrances, and, finally, familiar landmarks as I neared the school where I work. I only had to ask where I was in broken Zulu once, at a bar where the guys were very kind.

I did it! Made it across the ridge, not taking the tar—fantastic! I checked my watch and my sense of accomplishment fizzled. It still would take about 35 minutes to get to work, since I'd ridden along the ridge farther up the valley than I needed. There must be a better route, I told myself.

The next day, I returned to the trail with the barbed wire across it and checked if there was really no way to get it off or to go under it or something. Sure enough, I could just slip it off one of the posts to lay it down and ride through. It led past some corn, through some mud, around a corner in the fence line and to...another gate, made with posts for people to get through and not cattle (or motorbikes). Above it, I could see a foot path disappear over the ridge. So close! Argh.

In talking to everyone I could from the area, on both sides of the ridge, I heard that another path might be possible on the land of a guy who has some motocross paths on his land. I

swung in and found the guy and he agreed to show me the route the next day at 8 am. I showed up, on this ag bike, with only a fleece jacket (the leather's back in the US, since I didn't really think I'd get a scooter here, remember?), leather gloves, jeans, work boots, and a borrowed helmet. This guy—let's call him Vinnie—took me on the ride of my life, on crazier terrain than I've ever been on in my life. I had an XR80 dirtbike as a kid, but I'm from Wisconsin which is much flatter and smoother than the foothills of the Drakensberg. And here I was, making full use of my skid plate and bash bars, even scraping my leather boots up on rocks on the single track, through a stream (never had done that before), with Vinnie racing ahead of me, up out of the saddle, just torquing it. Yikes—I thought I was going to lose it and pitch down a slope to the tune of "Only the Good Die Young." Vinnie showed me to the right where the sawmill land meet his and told me there's a way up the ridge on their land. He also showed me where the school sits, down below to the left, on the other side of the ridge, again with a promise that you can pass up and down that way, "No problem."

Problem. The following day, I tried to come up from the school, only to get mired in a field of basketball-sized (and bigger) rocks, lucky to get myself extricated and turned around to go home on the usual route...And when I tried to get up from the sawmill side, I got within 40 yards of a trail I knew I could get through on, but the 40 yards was a rockslide at 60 degrees or so that might eat up a pro rider, let alone me.

One more shot at this—maybe I could come back from work on the forestry land, but cut off on the top of the ridge and come down toward the sawmill, still shaving off 10 minutes or more, depending on the route. The little Honda again used all 200cc's to pull me up to the top, but instead of entering into the trees on top, I skirted around them to the right, toward the sawmill and toward home. Eventually, they ended and I cut left along that side of the gum trees, now going down the Champagne Valley side of the ridge, all according to plan. Off in the distance below, I saw the paved road I needed to hit, and beyond that home on an opposite ridge. Sweet—this was going to make it!

I clicked up into fourth, bouncing across a pasture, detouring around grazing cattle. Up ahead, the trees seemed to be getting shorter. Suddenly, they were a lot shorter, like dwarf gum trees. "I wonder why they'd plant something that was so much smaller," I said to myself as I blundered on. I realized I couldn't see their trunks, or the ground they grew in "Unless they're actually the same size, but the ground is much, much lower...Cliff!!" I hammered with my right hand and right foot, sliding on the grass, and stopping three meters from a 20 meter drop. I released a long sigh in a whisper, "Hooooooo..."

Maybe I'll just stick to the pavement...