

# Peddalling to prove a point

In 2009, young graduate Julian Sayerer broke the world record for fastest circumnavigation of the world by bike. It wasn't about the record — he wanted to make a stand, as he explains in his new book

Words David Bradford Photos Julian Sayerer



Soaking up the sunset over the Kazakh steppes

Julian Sayerer is grinning warmly as he finds me, eventually, in the vast meeting space upstairs in London's Southbank Centre. He looks different from how I remember him from our first meeting back in 2011: somehow less intense, less wary. He is a changed man, he admits.

"I'm nearly 29 now, whereas I'm a 23-year-old in the book. I really like that young man, even if he is an angry young man, but he's not who I am now."

The book in question is *Life Cycles*, a wonderful, vivid account of his 2009 circumnavigation of the globe (18,000 miles) in 169 days, setting what was then a new record. The angry young protagonist, Sayerer at 23, didn't particularly care about the record; he was peddalling to prove a point.

The point was that anyone can (and should) ride a very long

way without any need for big-budget backing. He was enraged by what he regarded as the tainting of long-distance cycling by the man who had set the circumnavigation world record in 2008, Mark Beaumont. Sayerer hated that Beaumont's ride was backed by large corporations, and detested its portrayal in a BBC TV documentary *The Man who Cycled the World* as a gruelling feat of heroic endurance.

## Indignant blogger

The point he wanted to prove was that riding 90 miles per day, as Beaumont had, required neither superhuman tenacity nor the backing of big business and did not warrant a media-spun

**"I'm 23 in the book. I really like that angry young man, but he's not who I am now"**

narrative of extreme hardship. Sayerer set off on June 10, 2009, averaged 110 miles a day, finished on December 4, 2009, and beat Beaumont's record by 25 days.

For many people, his record-setting ride was admirable but his anger unseemly, especially the blog he wrote in December 2009, soon after arriving back in the UK, in which he made highly derogatory remarks about Beaumont and poured scorn on his "sell-out" ride and corporate ambassador status. Is the older, calmer Sayerer inclined to distance himself from those comments made by his younger, hotter-headed self?

"A big part of it was that we [he and Beaumont] were similar



ages, both politics graduates," says Sayerer, "which meant something to me, and we were both into cycling long distances."

He defends his comments on grounds of their context: the global economic crisis was biting hard in 2009, and he was airing a sense of injustice about corporate corruption and the social ills he had witnessed during his upbringing "in a really crappy town" — formative years from which he inferred "the world is not OK".

jarringly) to Kash D'Anthe — not exactly a conciliatory gesture, but at least a laying-down of arms.

It's worth pointing out that Sayerer does not strike me as an angry or dogmatic person; he doesn't flinch when his views are challenged and happily concedes that Beaumont's accepting sponsorship from large companies did not render him personally accountable for the misconduct (alleged or proved) of those companies. And though he doesn't express regret over his now-infamous blog, he comes pretty close.

"[It was] an over-emotional rant of a blog post... it probably was more vitriolic than I meant it to be; I was probably falling victim to the internet in some ways, writing about a human being as if they weren't actually a human being — never advisable."

Enough said on the matter; I want to hear about what it's like to cycle round the world and then record it in writing — not least because *Life Cycles* is so effective in conjuring up the romance of long-distance, open-air travel.

Within a few paragraphs of reading, I was itching to jump on my bike, ride to my nearest port, catch a ferry and begin a big tour of my own. Sayerer's love of the open road and his ability to evoke the beauty of travelling by bike are a potent combination. In outlining his aims for the book, he notes his intention to avoid writing a "drab sports monologue". I tell him that I think

## How to... cycle around the world

Julian Sayerer's top tips for fuss-free and rewarding long-distance cycling

**Travel light** If you have to think twice about whether you need it, you don't.

**Start riding** The commonest reason for not finishing is never mustering the courage or confidence to begin.

**Travel cheaply** Carrying minimal cash makes you more inventive, and makes you appreciate the small things.

**Don't over-plan** Trust in yourself, the world, and the road to look out for you.

**Keep an open mind** Wherever you are, remember you're a guest in other cultures. Even when things get frustrating, you're the one who decided to travel to some far-flung corner.



Still smiling in Xi'an, China

## Don't be daunted by miles

When you're sitting on a bike all day, it's amazing how far you travel.

**Engage your mind** Have something to do in the non-cycling time, to give yourself a break from pedalling. Writing has always been my thing.

he wholly succeeded, and inquire as to exactly what kind of book he *did* aim to write.

"I guess I wanted the book to be what in some ways the ride wasn't — to be positive about what an amazing way [cycling] is to travel; and I wanted to communicate the warmth and

humanity of the people you come into contact with everywhere."

The kindness and generosity of the people he met is a theme Sayerer returns to again and again, and in the book he spends whole sections paying homage to characters who helped, amused and inspired him. Another message he wants to emphasise, aside from the inherent goodness of most people, is "just how do-able the whole thing is" — he wants people to feel that long-distance cycling is simple, achievable and not the preserve of heroic adventurers. But is it, really? Can someone who's not super-fit really ride all day every day and avoid injury, accidents and burn-out?

## Just do it

"Yes! I was fit but not super-fit. Knocking out 100 miles a day, when you don't have anything else to do other than sleeping — you're not watching television, you're not seeing friends — is really very do-able."

He laughs at my imagined worst-case scenarios: running out of food, fitness and the will to go on, getting stranded miles from civilisation, dying of thirst in the desert.

"Honestly, the bicycle is an incredibly efficient machine. I think not being daunted is the main thing. If you go into something already imagining your failure, not being able to



Holed up under the highway in Russia

## Around the world by bike: World record timeline

The Guinness World Record rules for fastest circumnavigation of the globe by bicycle dictate that the ride must be completed as a continuous journey by bicycle and other means, consisting of a minimum 24,900 miles (40,073km), of which at least 18,000 miles (28,968 km) must be cycled.

Feb 2005  
**Steve Strange**  
276 days 19 hours

Feb 2008  
**Mark Beaumont**  
194 days 17 hours

Sept 2009  
**James Bowthorpe**  
175 days

June 2009  
**Julian Sayerer**  
169 days

Aug 2010  
**Vin Cox**  
163 days 7 hours

Aug 2010  
**Alan Bate**  
(supported)  
106 days 10hrs

Dec 2012  
Women's record  
**Juliana Buhring**  
152 days

June 2012  
**Mike Hall**  
91 days 18 hours\*  
\*Not ratified as Guinness World Record

do it, I think that will hinder everything, whereas if you think 'I can keep turning pedals,' you probably will."

It's sound advice that subdues my visions of roadside starvation and circling vultures. Even so, I'm not quite convinced that willpower alone is enough to ensure success on a trans-continental bike trip. Surely some planning and contingencies are vital, even for the preternaturally laidback?

"Yes, and it's great to prepare, it's fun to look at maps, and it's great to think about what your kit's going to be — and it's definitely going to be better if you've got a waterproof pannier bag, which will save you some headaches."

OK, so you may not need to be incredibly fit nor have the latest SAS-spec navigation equipment at your disposal, but what about keeping your body fresh and refuelled enough to keep turning the pedals? We've all read those cautionary, if not downright scaremongering, articles about how nutrition and hydration must be scientifically measured and spot-on to avoid disaster. Did he pay special attention to these matters during his time on the road?

"Not at all," he says. "Cycling to China, doing 110 miles a day, I don't think I've ever felt so fit — eating no meat, hardly any dairy products, no refined sugars, just a good plate of rice or noodles and lots of vegetables, water and maybe some kind of soda drink for the sugar." Paradoxically, it was only when calories became easier to come by that he encountered diet-related drawbacks. "Not until New Zealand and then the States did I start eating more processed foods... confectionary, ice cream, pancakes, and at that point I really did start to feel sluggish. It'd be eating three tubs of ice cream a day sometimes!"



**"Cycling to China, doing 110 miles a day, I don't think I've ever felt so fit"**



### Heroic rednecks

Another topic conspicuous by its absence from *Life Cycles* is talk of equipment choice and bike specification, and perhaps this is an area to which Sayerer should have paid more attention — given that he had a crank snap while riding through a remote part of Texas, forcing him to pedal for 15 miles using one leg.

When he finally made it to a bike shop in Cross Plains, the proprietor confounded his expectations by welcoming him

in, shaking his hand and fixing the crank for free. The genial mechanic then assured Sayerer that the image of Texans as "nasty rednecks" is unjust, not least because the original rednecks were pre-war coalminers who wore red bandannas around their necks during their fight for better pay and conditions. If there's a lesson to be drawn, it's that the world experienced by bike can do a good job of deconstructing the world of facile stereotypes.

It wasn't only a crank that failed on Sayerer's bike; he suffered wheel trouble too. So, would he opt for better-quality components if he did the ride again?

"Not really, I wouldn't change much, except maybe the Rohloff hub, which, though I respect it as a piece of engineering and for the advantages it brings, I'd still find it difficult to justify using one again instead of a derailleur, which is just so smooth."

So it's not about the bike or the nutrition or the preparedness; it's about determination and a desire — a love of cycling so strong that it cannot be quenched by commuting and weekend sportives. Then again, even an impassioned adventurer has to stop some day; I was intrigued to read how Sayerer found it difficult to settle back into 'normal' life after his record-breaking ride.

"Yes, it was difficult," he says. "From a psychological point of view, I hadn't really interacted with anyone for longer than 24 hours, and going from this existence where people showed you great humanity and strangers looked out for you, to suddenly a city where people are constantly roaring past you, people not enjoying their jobs... it was difficult."

Understandably, London is not among Sayerer's recommended places in the world to ride a bike; he depicts

with an example the shell-shocked nature of his return to commuting in the capital: "Cycling round Hyde Park Corner and having no idea how I've just pissed off a cabbie but him yelling, 'One day you're going to die and you're going to deserve it' — it's so hard to reconcile that



Crashed out against a market sign in New Zealand

Below sea level at China's Turfan Depression

## World's best biking

Julian Sayerer picks his top three cycling destinations.

**"I'll always love the Alps. All of the baking and coffee and French culture, surrounded by wonderful silence, utter beauty, and cycling heritage."**

"Coasts are always special; Croatia's isn't as untouched as it was, but still a beautiful place to ride. When the weather's good, Oregon's Pacific Coast is beyond words."

**"I like the remoteness of deserts. Whether that be Arizona or north-west China."**

culture to the one that you experience most of the time on a long trip."

### Courier past

Before undertaking the record-breaking ride, Sayerer worked as a cycle courier; he has plenty of experience surviving the often hostile bustle of the city, yet the deplorable situation facing cyclists gets to him more nowadays. There are certain roads he won't ride on, and he is involved in campaigning for improved cycle safety.

He tells me he has no inclination to return to couriership, largely because it barely pays the bills. Even so, it has provided the topic for his

next book, a road-rash-and-all portrait of the bizarre life of a bicycle messenger. If Sayerer's depiction of making a living as a courier is half as engaging as his account of biking round the world, it will be a fascinating insight into a cycling subculture that penetrates the very veins of the city.

There is one question still nagging away at me. Has Sayerer's world-view been changed by the experience of the ride, setting the record and readjusting to life off the bike? To put it another way, is the slightly less young "angry young man" really less angry now?

"I've contextualised a lot and I can really see how bouncing-off-the-walls I was, but I think you need anger, and we need more people to be angrier about a lot of things," he said. "Yes, I've got a lot of my anger out of my system, but the record and the ride were part of that journey... Above all, it was always a great experience, and I hope that comes out in the writing."

It most certainly does. ■ *Life Cycles* is published by John Blake and available from all good bookshops for £8.99. **End**



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