

# OVERLAND

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## JOURNAL



Trans-Sahara

Field Kitchen Test

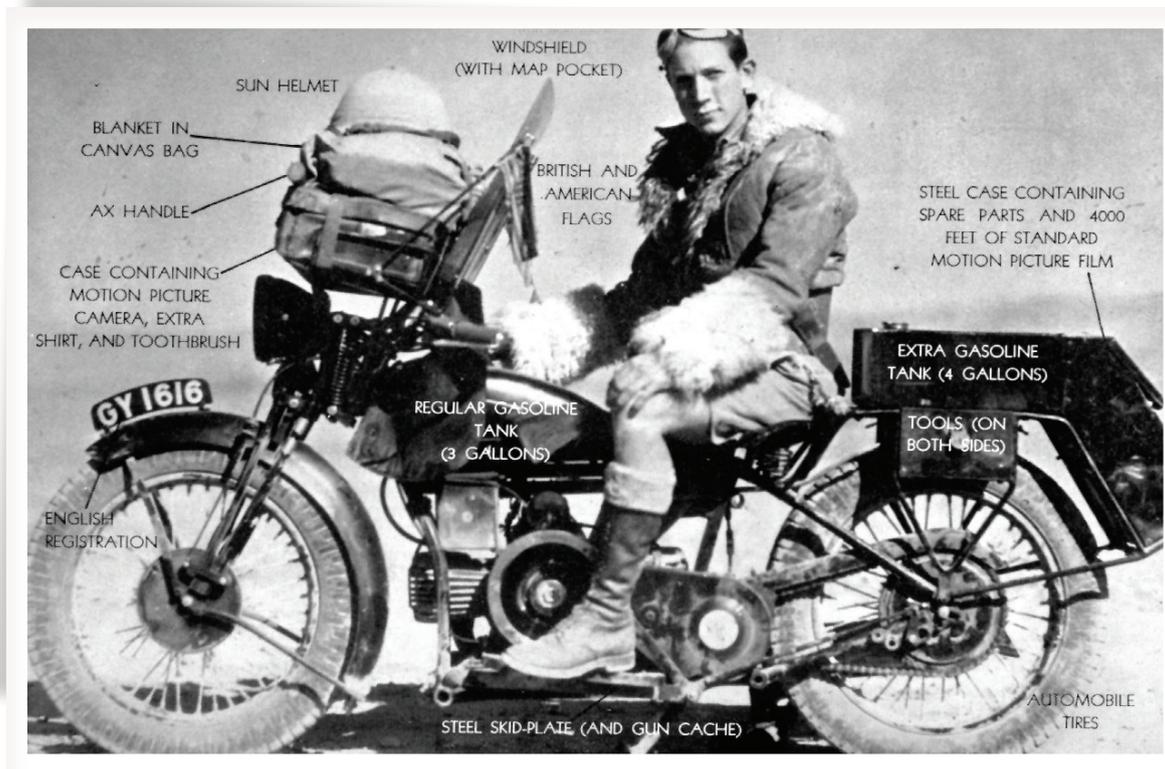
Camel Trophy Recollections

Robert Fulton's Circumnavigation

*Robert Fulton's solo motorcycle circumnavigation*

# One Man Caravan

An epic motorcycle journey was only the beginning of this life well-lived.



By Lois Pryce

To motorcycle solo around the world at age 23 would be a  
major achievement in anyone's life story—  
especially in the 1930s.

You could have dined out on that trip for years. But for Robert Fulton Jr.—adventurer, inventor, writer, photographer—his 18-month odyssey through 22 countries was merely the springboard for a life rich in accomplishment.

In 1932, Fulton was a young man fresh out of college and, like most chaps of his age, keen to make an impression on the ladies. Finding himself at a dinner party in London being asked by an attractive female guest about his plans to sail back home to New York, he announced, somewhat rashly, “Oh, no! I’m going around the world on a motorcycle!”

This was probably not the first testosterone-fueled declaration in the history of motorcycling (it certainly wasn’t the last), and if it hadn’t been overheard by a fellow dinner guest it may well have gone no further. But little did Fulton know he was sharing the table with the head of Douglas Motor Works, who interjected, “I say old chap, that sounds grand! We can furnish you with a machine for your journey.” Fulton’s fate was sealed there and then, for as any budding adventurer knows, once you’ve mouthed off to all your friends, you *have* to go.

It was thus that Fulton found himself setting off on his very own *One Man Caravan*, the title of his marvelously entertaining book recounting his 40,000-mile ride through Europe, the Middle East, India, the (then) Dutch East Indies, China, and finally Japan before taking a steamship back to his native U.S. He makes it clear from the beginning that he wasn’t entirely sure how he got swept up in the whole plan, but his bluff having been called, he had no choice but to go along with it. However, the spirit of adventure was obviously smoldering in him somewhere, as he describes how the idea of this grand expedition began to gradually fire his imagination, “The lure of travel; a different road every day, a different fireside every evening, beneath a different star every night.”

These romantic visions will resonate with anyone who has pored over a map and dreamed of a vagabonding life; they are the same urges that have inspired travelers throughout the ages

and will continue to do so. Unfortunately for Robert Fulton, the same annoyances and obstructions were also just as prevalent then as they are today, most notably the finger-wagging naysayers who enjoy nothing more than to pour water on the sparks of a young buck’s dreams. “How does one go around the world from London, heading east?” enquired Fulton to a ‘beefy-faced, hearty attaché’ of the Royal Automobile Club in London. “Too easy, my dear fellow,” came the reply, “One simply *doesn’t!*”

Fulton’s response illustrates the practical, can-do attitude that would serve him well on his adventure and indeed, throughout his life: “But surely, wherever there is man, there must be some sort of route?” he countered.

According to Rawn Fulton, the youngest of his three sons, his father was nothing if not driven. He tells of a man possessed with an immense sense of purpose and an energy that he describes as vibrating through him like a thoroughbred racehorse. Robert Fulton had been raised in a privileged family, studied in Switzerland and at Harvard, and had been bestowed with a sense of empowerment by parents who had brought him up to believe he was ca-



pable of anything to which he set his mind. This determination saw him shrug off the pessimists and the cynics, and soon enough he was heading out of London astride his six-horsepower, twin-cylinder Douglas motorcycle, modified with an extra gas tank and specially-designed luggage boxes to hold his movie camera and 4,000 feet of 35-millimetre motion picture film. Beneath the engine was a custom-made bash plate which not only protected the engine from stones and boulders, but also concealed a .32-calibre Smith & Wesson revolver wrapped in a packing of oily rags. Dressed in goggles, a sheepskin-trimmed jacket, canvas shorts, and woolen socks turned over the top of his lace-up boots, Robert Fulton was every bit the dashing young adventurer.

Establishing a tradition that has been followed by motorcycle travelers ever since, Fulton soon dispensed with swathes of gear that proved surplus to his needs. His guide books got dumped in Paris, his evening clothes were gone by Athens (the idea of embassy functions becoming less significant apparently), and if you watch the wonderful film of his journey you will notice that in the early days of his trip he had a sidecar attached to the bike. Although he admits to a certain amount of anger that his elaborate preparations were made in vain, it wasn't long before the sidecar was jettisoned also, and an altogether leaner set-up emerged. He concedes that all he really needed was an extra shirt, a toothbrush, his linen-backed map of the world, and his film camera.

His frank and honest account of his travels make Fulton's book an entertaining read. Not for him the macho posturing of the 'Adventure Rider' or the wooly pontifications of the globe-trotting philosopher. Nevertheless, it still comes as a shock to read his admission of good old-fashioned boredom as he sped along the perfectly paved routes of Europe, ignoring the scenery, counting the 'flashing kilometer stones' and finding he was of no interest to anyone he meets. How many adventure-travelers today would dare to admit that their much-lauded, grand expedition is in fact, rather dull and that their ego is suffering as a result. But of course, as any European motorcycle rider knows, the adventure starts when the EU runs out, and sure enough in Turkey the action in the book begins—and never really lets up. This is where Fulton's story comes into its own.

He is arrested and spends the night in a Turkish jail, he starves for forty-eight hours because no one will accept his travelers checks or money, he crashes on Turkey's sandy roads an average of 15 times a day and eventually goes flying off a bridge into a dry river bed, realizing too late that the span of the bridge has not yet been built. He is rescued by the local villagers but the bike has lost all its oil. Fortunately the village boys come to the rescue with a gallon of mustard oil and our intrepid adventurer is on his way again, bruised and battered and billowing clouds of mustard gas. This is adventure motorcycling at its best and we've barely got going.

Although Fulton's journey took place nearly 80 years ago, it is fascinating to see how many experiences and situations remain the same for today's overland traveler. Fulton found border guards to be either petty bureaucrats out to ruin his fun, or dreamers captivated by the romance of his adventure. He experienced kindness and hospitality wherever he went, and captured the highs and lows of motorcycle travel with insightful and amusing turns of phrase. His crossing of the desert between Syria and Iraq perfectly conveys the trials and terrors of desert travel as he ploughs through the sand, desperately seeking the next marker post and imagining all manner of unhealthy engine noises, all of which are a product of nothing but his own nerves. Alone in the huge empty expanse, the motorcycle suddenly appears small and frail and he is troubled constantly by the fear that all desert travelers know only too well: 'What would happen if something happened?'

What did actually happen, incredibly, is that he met a car full of businessmen travelling in the opposite direction—one of whom happened to be an associate of his father. Suddenly the desert seemed '... like home and even the sand has a positively friendly look.' This may seem about as unlikely a situation as

From the ten lost tribes of Israel? This photograph, as well as all others in which the author appears, was taken by the author by means of a homemade clock-work attached to his motion picture camera. Once the camera was set up, wound and focused, the timer would be released and there would be just 10 seconds to run to the motorcycle, mount, start the engine, and ride back into picture. Valley of 5,000 Shadows. **Opposite:** At Jamrud Rose, the first Khyber Barrier.



Built some 6,000 years ago, this Babylonian *Ziggurat* with its layers of straw matting between its sun-dried bricks still provides fodder for stray Baghdad camels. Only 200 Afghan miles to go. Holy man.

one can imagine, but back in the 1930s the only people who travelled the world were well-heeled society folk and businessmen, especially those involved in the booming transport and motor industry. Fulton's father was president of Mack Trucks, and the associate in question was another trucking bigwig who was in the Middle East doing business with the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. It is a comedic moment, but also a tale of the world getting smaller, a theme that is repeated throughout the book, most memorably by an Arab baker who engages Fulton in a portentous conversation about the differences between East and West. "When I was a boy, England, Europe, America, they were all an unbelievable distance away. But today it is all so different. Something happens in one corner of the world and it affects all the others. So we must change, our traditions and customs must slowly go. And it will be accomplished . . . East must meet West."

Despite the fact that this statement was delivered after the baker had explained the Moslem duty of a father to kill his daughter should she leave "the path of chastity," Fulton's response to the stranger's utterly opposing beliefs demonstrated a grace and understanding beyond his years. According to his son, Rawn, Fulton was a "philosophical explorer of everything" who approached life with a "pan-humanist" worldview and considered his time on earth to be a constant opportunity for enrichment. "He taught us to question everything," says Rawn, "we didn't have a television until I was 16; instead he used to make us draw maps of the world, and as kids, everywhere we went, everything we did, we had to think about its meaning, what was its purpose. And when you do that on a trip to Disneyland, believe me, you just want to get *out!*"

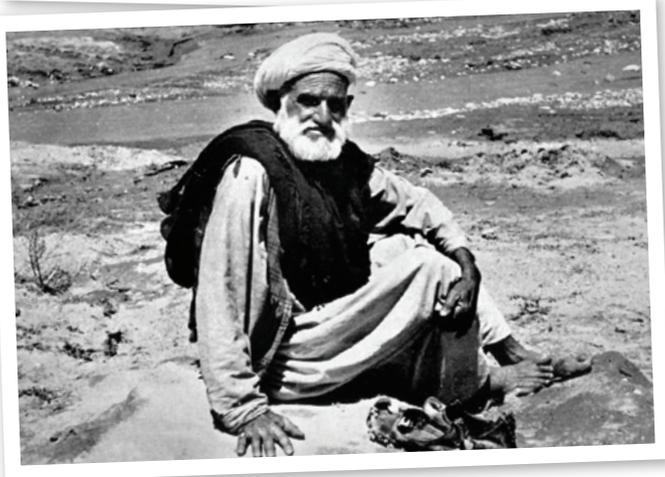
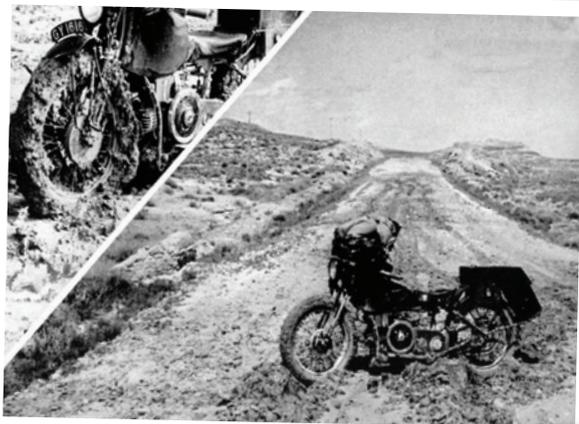
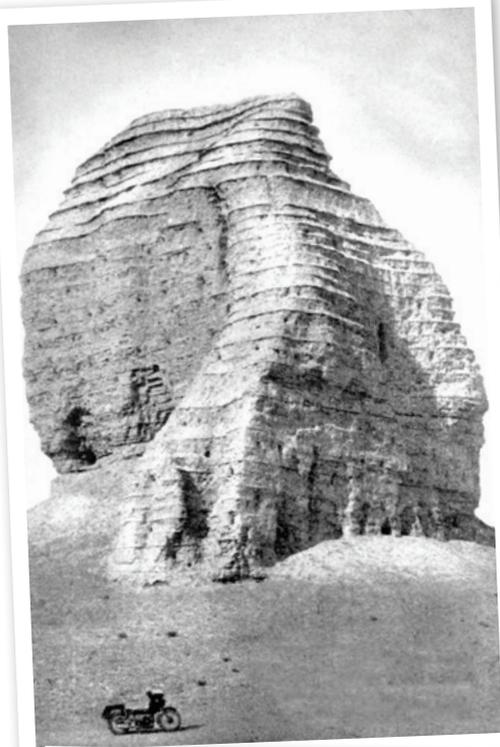
Rawn grew up with photographs of Waziri tribesmen in the hallway of the family home and the well-travelled Douglas motorcycle in the garage, not to mention his father's inventions that loomed large in his childhood. These included the renowned Skyhook, used to rescue military personnel from enemy territory with an in-flight aircraft, and the Airphibian, the first flying car to be certified by the US Civil Aeronautics Administration. "He was not what you would describe as a fun father to be around," says Rawn. "He was very serious and focused. He had this incredible sense of purpose and dedication to his work, and although we helped him after school on his projects, he never once attended any of our school events—but we didn't mind."

It is Fulton's intense curiosity and humaneness that makes *One Man Caravan* such a refreshing read. His tribulations with both man and machine are treated with warmth and wisdom, and he is not afraid to admit to his own weaknesses and misgivings. Like any weary traveler he welcomes the guilty pleasure of a comfortable bed and a good meal, and his impending arrival in Baghdad after the tortuous desert crossing will bring a smile to the face of anyone who has found themselves counting down the miles, fantasizing about the clean sheets and sumptuous meal that awaits them in civilization, 'Soup, steak (even without onions)' he daydreams. Unfortunately, he arrived in the great city only to have a collision with a pedestrian. He was promptly arrested and found himself not in the hotel of his fantasies, but behind bars for the night.

After a seven-week hiatus in Baghdad with jaundice, his journey continued into India, where he was hit by a car that bent one of his rear forks. True to his usual spirit, he viewed this as a help rather than a hindrance, as the damage was on the opposite side to the front fork that got bent in his crash in Turkey—thus balancing out the handling nicely. And on he went into the northern part of the country to Waziristan, a tribal area bordering Afghanistan that was marked on his map as 'unsurveyed, unknown.' Here he spent some time with the trigger-happy tribesmen and their bloodthirsty traditions, living amongst them in their smoke-filled, mud-built dwellings where deadly feuds were fought as if for sport.

This part of the world was a source of great thrills to Fulton, and when he left Waziristan he experienced a sense of anti-climax and became determined to enter the forbidden land of Afghanistan to seek out further excitement in the rebel territories. The normally impossible-to-get visa was eventually procured only because the Afghan Consul in Peshawar spoke no English and could only communicate with Fulton in German. Fortunately, the only German word the Consul remembered was 'Ja!' Once again Robert Fulton gets his man.

Getting into Afghanistan has never been easy but Fulton defied the CID who, it turned out, had been tracking his movements in India, and made his way to the frontier. He was thwarted by a stubborn border guard who insisted that riding a motorcycle was illegal in Afghanistan. Fulton sidestepped this by liter-



# “The state of civilization of any land can be adequately gauged by the condition of its roads.”

I had looked over the collection carefully to make sure there was no monkey in the lot. I bailed out the motorcycle before Shanghai could bail out her streets. Land of pink elephants, 'round-the-world telephones, teak, and Buddhism's last stand in Malaya.

ally picking up his bike and carrying it across the border. From there he rode through the Khyber Pass, across the wild and lawless mountain country, smoked hubble-bubble pipes in tea rooms, was thrown out of Kabul for his filming exploits, and tackled endless river crossings and miles of thick mud. Exhausted, hot and filthy, he eventually left the country for the relative sanity and civilization of India. As he passed through the border post he made a gasping request for a glass of water and was handed a cup of muddy liquid, complete with tadpole. Despite his desperate thirst he could not bring himself to drink it. Needless to say, the Afghan border guard sneered at his Western prissiness before downing it in one gulp.

Fulton's journey continued ever eastwards across India, where, after the hard riding in Afghanistan, he reveled in the good roads of the Raj and 'wriggled in an ecstasy of cleanliness.' He was running low on funds and requested to travel in steerage class aboard a ship to Sumatra, but the officials refused to sell him a ticket on the grounds that travelling steerage "... lowers the prestige of the white race." In the end he coughed up for a standard ticket, and found himself on board with 1,300 water buffalo and one other white man, a Dutch prisoner—who, Fulton points out in his typically dry style, was travelling for free.

The Dutch East Indies were a tropical paradise where he enjoyed the relatively easy life—and even adopted a monkey for a while, which travelled alongside him on the motorcycle before Fulton set it free into the jungle, fearing that it was enjoying the ride so much it might eventually learn to master the controls and ride off into the night without him. But China brought harder riding with roads so awful that Fulton pauses to wonder how a nation that can construct a wall the breadth of the country cannot build a decent highway. 'The state of civilization of any land can be adequately gauged by the condition of its roads,' he rightly points out. The food wasn't much better, and after being fed stuffed monkey he vowed to eat nothing but rice until he reached Japan.

All the tough miles in China must have been worth it when he rolled off the boat in Japan to the popping flashbulbs and eager fountain pens of Japan's newspaper reporters. He was treated like a hero and escorted out of Kobe by all 33 members of the Kobe Motorcycle Club. "Japan and America will come together through the motorcycles," said the president of the club as he saw Fulton off to Tokyo and eventually Yokohama, where he boarded a liner back to the U.S.

On the long sea journey to San Francisco, Fulton ruminated on his experiences, and how different things might have turned out had he not been offered a motorcycle at a London dinner table 18 months earlier. By no means was Fulton a die-hard motorcycle rider before he left, and although he used the Douglas as occasional transport upon his return, he didn't continue to ride for pleasure. According to Rawn, his passion for motorcycling was transferred to flying light aircraft, but nonetheless Fulton sums up eloquently why a motorcycle is the perfect way to see the world, 'The motorcycle wasn't the reason for taking the trip; rather the trip was the reason for the motorcycle. By using such a machine I could see more of the world than an automobile or a rail-and-water journey would have permitted. I had been too lazy to pump a bicycle and it would have taken too long to have walked it.'

His adventures would appear to be over—but no: The last leg from California to New York was beset with disaster when he awoke one morning in Texas to discover his faithful Douglas had been stolen from outside his lodgings. The police were called and the bike was eventually discovered abandoned in a warehouse. Thankfully the remaining miles were uneventful, and Robert Fulton Jr. arrived at his parents' house in New York, where he shed a 'surreptitious tear' that his adventure was finally over—a feeling that will strike a chord with every traveler.



## “One measure of a man is what he does when he has nothing to do.”

If Fulton had known what the rest of his life held in store for him, he would possibly have been more excited about his return home. Pan-American World Airways were so impressed with Fulton's film that they hired him as their aerial photographer, and he worked for them until the mid-1930s. In 1937, *One Man Caravan* was published when he was just 28. By the end of the decade he had designed and built the Gunnairstructor, an aircraft gunnery simulator, of which he sold 500 to the Navy. He was keen to write the Gunnairstructor manual himself, so he taught himself to fly using his wife's seaplane. It was the frustration of being able to fly around the country but having to transfer to ground transportation upon landing that inspired him to begin work on his flying car, the Airphibian. According to Rawn, the one major disappointment of his father's life was that the Airphibian was never produced commercially, although he did live long enough to see it displayed as the centerpiece at the Louis Vuitton Car Show . . . in 1998. The only remaining Airphibian now resides on permanent display at the Smithsonian Institute's National Air and Space Museum. In the 1950s Fulton produced another famous invention, the Skyhook aerial rescue system for extracting personnel from enemy territory. It was used by the U.S. military, can be seen in the James Bond movie *Thunderball*, and most recently in the Batman film, *The Dark Knight*.

Robert Fulton was the ultimate Renaissance Man, a polymath who refused to be pigeonholed. In his later years he concentrated on more artistic pursuits, including sculpture, photography, and poetry. “He was interested in everything,” says Rawn. “And there is no doubt that his motorcycle journey had a huge influence on his life.” According to Rawn, he talked often about his travels, seeing it as his equivalent of The Grand Tour, the tradition in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries for young upper-class men to travel through Europe to complete their education. “His journey provided him with an open worldview,” says Rawn. “He looked for the common thread in all cultures. But what affected him most about the experience was that at each village along his journey the people would be friendly and hospitable to him, but hostile about the neighboring village, usually with no reason; often they had not even visited the village they feared so much. This scene repeated itself time and time again, and of course it is still played out today all over the world. This is what my father wished for the human race to be able to transcend.”

Fulton alludes to this at the end of his book where he describes the ‘gears of the world being thrown into mesh.’ ‘The grinding is loud and long, and not until we get to understanding the other fellow's point of view, his picture and his problems, will the grinding cease.’ The old maxim that travel broadens the mind was certainly a truism for Robert Fulton Jr.

Robert Fulton's story is inspiring and uplifting: a life well-lived, rich in generosity and kindness and above all, a great humaneness. Unlike many adventurers, it is not just his incredibly brave travels that made his life special, but how he continued to use his time on earth until his death in 2004. As he famously said “One measure of a man is what he does when he has nothing to do.” It would appear that Robert Fulton Jr. measured up pretty well. I just wish I could have met him. 🌐

The book and DVD *One Man Caravan* are available from Whitehorse Press, who kindly provided the images for this story: [whitehorsepress.com](http://whitehorsepress.com).

76 Robert Fulton in later years, on his globe-circling Douglas motorcycle.





adventure