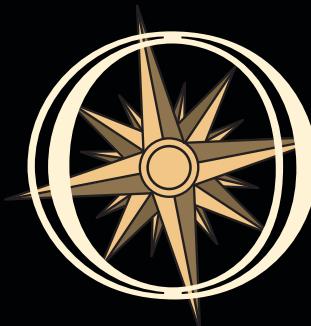


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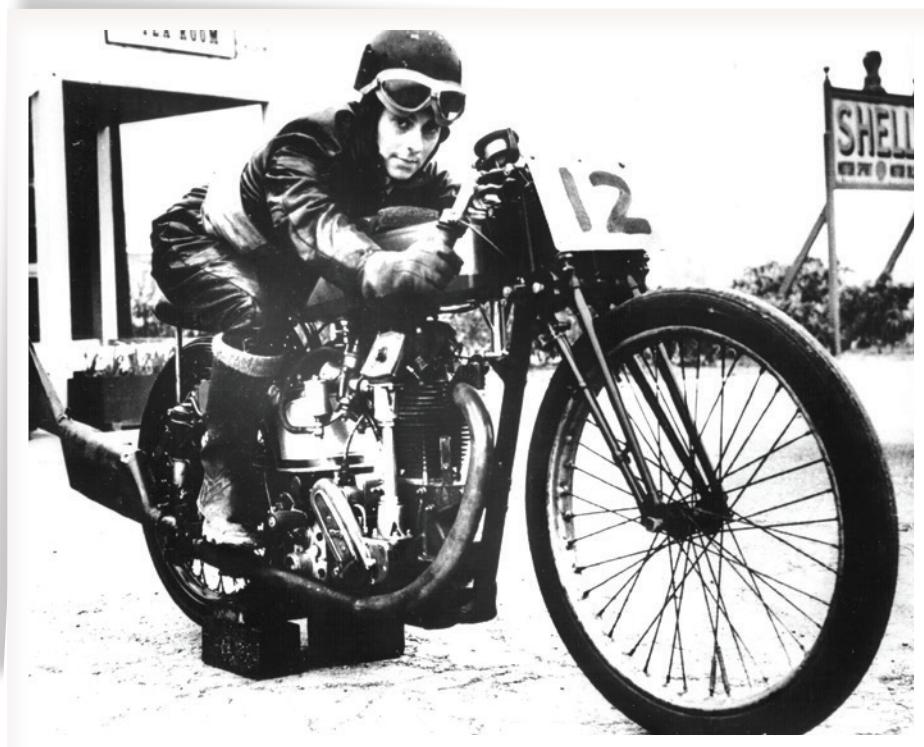
Motos Against Malaria

Daypack Review

Two women, a motorcycle, a sidecar, and a trailer, in Africa—in 1934

The Rugged Road

Lois Pryce relates the astonishing journey of
Theresa Wallach and Florence Blenkiron



By Lois Pryce

Motorcycle travel is sadly under-represented among the famous names of exploration.

Sailing aficionados can check off all the legends—Magellan, Cook, Drake, Chichester. Mountaineers get Hillary and Messner; aviation buffs get the Wright brothers and Lindbergh (although they have to share Chichester with the yachties).

But intrepid motorcyclists looking for a hero have to search a little harder. We've got Robert Fulton Jr., who rode his Douglas around the world in 1932. After that—well, it would seem all went quiet on the adventure motorcycling front until 1973, when Ted Simon set off to circumnavigate the globe on his Triumph, and went on to write the classic *Jupiter's Travels*, the book that launched a thousand trips.

But if you scratch a little bit deeper, you'll find that this is not the whole truth. For on the 11th of December, 1934, in London, England, two adventurous motorcyclists were waved off by a cheering crowd, embarking on a venture that had never before been attempted: to ride a motorcycle the length of the African continent. It was a remarkable ambition in itself, but the fact that these motorcyclists were two young women in their 20s made it all the more incredible, and one can't help but wonder why Theresa Wallach and Florence Blenkiron aren't more famous. Their 14,000-mile journey to Cape Town, as told in Theresa Wallach's book *The Rugged Road*, took them almost eight months and saw the two women tackle grueling conditions, incredible hardships, and mechanical calamities that would defeat many of today's machines—and riders.

Theresa Wallach's itchy feet struck at an early age. Inspired by her explorer father's artifacts from Africa, Asia, and the Americas, she dreamt of making her own travels to such exotic, far-away lands, but this simply wasn't "the done thing" for a young girl in the early 20th century, and her parents were quick to dissuade her from such unladylike nonsense. A few years later, while studying engineering at university, Theresa eschewed the usual student activities, preferring to

loiter around the motorcycles in the car park. One day a fellow student offered to teach her how to ride—and thus began what turned out to be a lifelong and pioneering involvement in the sport.

It was, however, the last straw for her domineering parents. When she showed up at home on her first bike, a BSA Blue Star bought without their knowledge, an almighty row ensued regarding Theresa's maverick ways. "You'll be nobody's bride!" cried her distraught mother. She was right: Theresa never did get hitched, but one can be pretty certain that a white wedding was never part of Theresa Wallach's life plan.

Theresa's traveling companion, Florence Blenkiron, or "Blenk," as she was known to Theresa, was also fanatical about motorcycles from an early age, and was racing with considerable success by her early 20s. The two women met at the famous Brooklands race-track in 1933—still very much a male preserve in those days—and quickly formed a solid friendship. Soon they were taking part in just about every motorcycle event they could find, from trials to track events and touring, including some demanding 24-hour and night-time trials, winning more and more trophies as their riding skills improved.

Maybe it was inevitable that two women so utterly enthused by motorcycling would go on to achieve what they did. But spending your weekends taking part in local amateur races is one thing, conquering the Dark Continent is quite another. Like so many great trips, Theresa's and



Blenk's African adventure was spawned by a throwaway comment. Blenk, upset at the news that a close friend was emigrating to South Africa, caused Theresa to make the flippant suggestion that she should visit her by motorcycle. "Don't be funny!" was Blenk's retort, followed by, "Well, would you come with me?" Thus their grand plan was born.

Predictably perhaps, no motorcycle manufacturer showed any interest in sponsoring our two wannabe explorers. Their detractors declared, "Preposterous, my dear!" "You're going *where?*" "You'll never make it." (Which, come to think of it, are pretty much the comments I received when I announced my intention to do the same, 70 years later.) In 1934, the idea of *anyone*, let alone two young ladies, riding a motorcycle across the Sahara Desert, and then all the way to Cape Town, was absurd verging on farcical, and their requests for assistance from the British motorcycle industry were met with derision and slamming doors. No company wanted to be associated with a project that was so obviously doomed. But as you will have no doubt gathered by now, Theresa and Blenk were no ordinary ladies, and not to be put off by a bunch of nay-saying men in suits.

Eventually, after endless persuasion, they managed to secure the sponsorship of a pioneering motorcycle manufacturer of the day, Phelon and Moore, who produced the popular 600cc single-cylinder Panther model. It was this bike, named *The Venture*, complete with sidecar, and pulling a trailer, that would take Theresa and Florence from London to Cape Town—but not without plenty of scrapes and high drama along the way.

In the mid-1930s, Africa was under the control of the European colonial powers, and the women's route took them through what was then French-controlled Algeria and Niger, followed by British Nigeria, the French equatorial colonies of Chad and Oubangui-Chari (the latter now the Central African Republic), the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), British-controlled Uganda, Kenya, Tanganyika (now Tanzania), Northern and Southern Rhodesia (now Zambia and Zimbabwe), and finally South Africa.

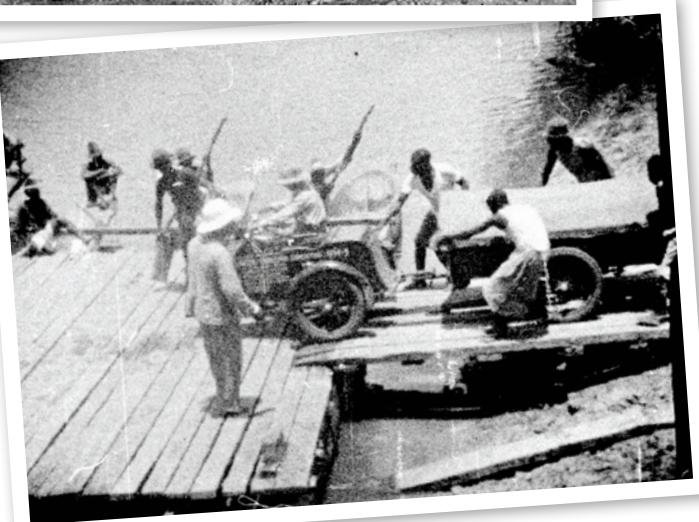
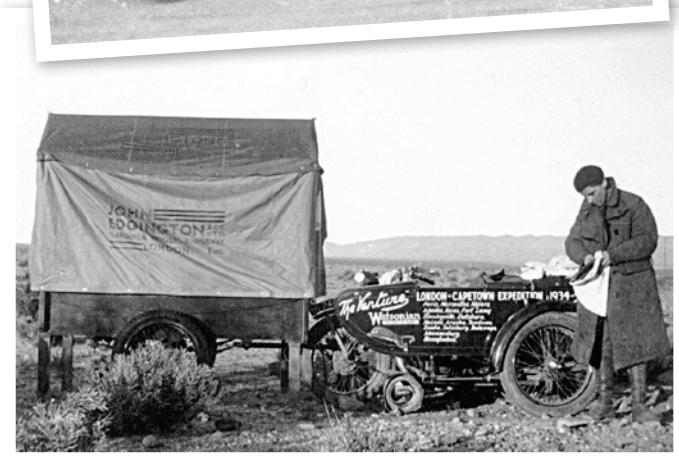
Not surprisingly, it was the crossing of the Sahara that proved to be the most demanding section of their trip. The sheer physical effort involved in motoring their rig across sand dunes, rocky plateaus, and the steep tracks of the Hoggar Mountains is exhausting just to read about. They became stuck on an alarmingly regular basis, resorting to hauling the trailer and sidecar out of endless sand drifts with a block and tackle, making progress of just 15 feet at a time, and all of this under a scorching 120°F sun in lead-lined pith helmets (it was still a common British belief that the sun's direct rays could cause madness). Then, bang in the middle of the Algerian Sahara, the trailer-hitch broke from the strain. Rather than give up, Theresa simply raided a nearby wrecked car for parts and fashioned a new coupling, working into the night, knocking back a bottle of cognac pilfered from a Christmas party while occasionally cursing the metric parts from the French wreck for not matching the Panther's Imperial fittings.

Good ol' Blighty spirit was not in short supply on this incredible venture, and the famous British stiff upper lip certainly served the two women well—after all, as it merrily declares on the back cover of the book, their journey was undertaken with "no roads, no back-up, not even a compass." It seems Theresa simply forgot to pack the latter, but nonetheless, they manage to make it across the Sahara, albeit with a complete engine rebuild along the way in Agadez, Niger, following the breakdown of the con-rod bearing, a disaster that saw them pushing their rig all night until they were rescued at dawn by a tribe of nomads, who provided a towing service with a pair of horses.

Interestingly, this is the only one of their many mishaps that provokes Theresa to show any kind of human frailty, describing it uncharacteristically as "terrifying." The women's sheer grit and hearty determination are truly awe-inspiring. If you think you have ever done anything even slightly hardcore, read *The Rugged Road* and prepare to be humbled. Yet Theresa Wallach is remarkably self-effacing about the expedition. "Our exploit was not intended to be a geographical expedition," she states in the book, "nor did we pretend to

Opposite: Theresa and Blenk with damaged sidecar. **Below:** Not satisfied with conquering Africa, Theresa later rode 32,000 miles around North America. Theresa (front on motorcycle) as a dispatch rider in WWII. **Previous page:** Theresa was the first woman motorcyclist to lap Brooklands at 100 mph.





be geologists, photographers, or journalists. Blenk and I, with a bit of true-life reality, were simply going to see Africa."

As they left the desert behind them and headed toward equatorial Africa, they were beset with yet more problems, both mechanical and climatic, as the rainy season turned dusty tracks into endless swamps. The front wheel on the bike collapsed in Chad, causing them further delay while they located a welder 450 miles away in a neighboring country. The charging system, odometer, and speedometer had all packed in by this stage, too, but none of it prevented the two ladies from soaking up the sheer exotica of Black Africa in this colonial heyday. Although European rule managed to keep a surprising amount of order in what is now such a chaotic continent, there were still vast areas of the Congo where white men had never ventured. At one point Theresa and Blenk, torn between that classic overlander's dilemma, "Shall we noodle around and explore, or should we press on?" eventually allow what Theresa calls "Vagabond" to win over "Conscience," and they set off into the deep, dark jungle to seek out the Bambuti pygmy tribe. Here they were cautiously welcomed by the village chief, his wives, a feather-clad witch-doctor, and the rest of the tiny pygmies with elongated heads "shaped like watermelons," long before the pygmies realized they could turn themselves and their daily grind into a tourist attraction. Following a tribal dance to the beat of tom-toms, Chief Bondo donated a live chicken to the women, to which Blenk responded by offering them an eight-inch chrome safety pin from their laundry bag. Now that's what I call a cultural exchange.

Heading ever southwards on yet more appalling roads, the women managed to have a head-on collision in Tanganyika (Tanzania) with the only car they had seen in days. The driver of the car, "a good-natured gentleman," spent a day with Theresa and Blenk at the side of the road waiting for someone to turn up to rescue them, while the three of them debated what day of the week it was. The rest of the trip was plagued with yet more breakdowns and disasters, but of course none of this perturbed our can-do heroines. By the time they arrived in Rhodesia they were patching up the bike on a regular basis, and in the true style of the seasoned overland traveler were becoming quite ingenious with their bodge, using chewing gum to fix leaks in the fuel tank, and cutting up old inner tubes for rubber bands to hold a broken battery case in place. Some things never change . . .

Whether some of this gung-ho attitude is a result of rose-tinted spectacles, we will never know. Theresa published her account of the journey many years after the event, and both women have now passed away—but there does seem to be some suggestion of a falling-out between the two of them at the end of the trip. They ap-

proached Cape Town with a distinct sense of triumph tinged with weariness, something with which all overland motorcyclists will empathize. "There were occasions for despair," Theresa admitted while reflecting on their adventure, "but with our self-reliance and clear objective we never lost enthusiasm."

But Theresa had viewed the journey as an experience of a lifetime, while to Blenk it was simply a means to visit friends and family in South Africa. Theresa, "emotionally drained" by

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the experience, was frustrated by Blenk's nonchalant attitude and apparent lack of exhilaration about what they had achieved. Anyone who has made a long, taxing overland journey with a traveling companion will know the strain it can put on any relationship, so maybe it was only to be expected that Theresa and Blenk would come to blows once the pressure was off—after all, they were only human, despite ample evidence to the contrary.

What happened next is lost in history. The British motorcycle press of the time reported a variety of different events, but it did seem that the women's plan had been to ride back to London together by the same route. However, Theresa was advised by a doctor to make the return trip by sea due to ill health, so it appears that Blenk made the trip home alone—a tale that, sadly, she took to her grave.

Reading their story, it's quite obvious that compared to crossing Africa today, modern-day motorcyclists have the clear advantage when it comes to the equipment and the machine itself. As an ex-BSA rider, I can't begin to imagine the dramas involved in crossing the Sahara on vintage Brit-Iron, but, if it's all you've got, then as Theresa and Blenk so ably demonstrated, you just get on with it. Environmentally, not much has changed for the motorcycle traveler in Africa: It's still insufferably hot and physically grueling, but dragging a lightweight dirt-bike out of a Saharan sand drift in 120° heat is one thing; the thought of hauling out a sinking trailer and sidecar outfit is something else. Somehow Theresa and Blenk managed this time and time again.

The most interesting difference that comes across in their story is that from a cultural and logistical point of view, African travel actually seemed like an easier business back in the colonial era of the 1930s. Their route through the European-controlled continent, where safari-suited colonels saluted them at every border post and every British embassy was a home-away-from-home, is a far cry from the interminable delays, intimidation, and palm-greasing that overland travelers can expect at a 21st century African frontier. The fact they were two women traveling alone appears to be more a source of pleasant surprise to the people they encountered rather than a cause for concern, although they did have to argue long and hard with the French Foreign Legion for permission to venture across the Sahara. On the whole, their female novelty value barely merited a mention, and Theresa's story is full of tales of assistance, kindness, and generosity from colonialists and natives alike—something most female travelers will still attest to today.

A lifetime has passed since Theresa and Blenk set out on their journey, but despite the demise of the British Empire and the improvements in motorcycle design, there still remains one enduring theme that unites the present-day motorcycle traveler with this trailblazing expedition, as relevant now as when it was written by Theresa Wallach on New Year's Eve 1934, as she listened to the chimes of Big Ben resonating from a Foreign Legion wireless post in Algeria:

"In my mind I could picture the crowds, culture, cuisine, concrete and the folk at home, secure in a challenging world... I would rather grapple with the sands of the Sahara than the sands of contemporary society."

More than 70 years on it is still this very sentiment that continues to inspire "normal" people to jettison all in and hit the road—so maybe not that much has changed after all.

Long may it continue! ☺

Opposite, top to bottom: Riding in the desert. The 600cc Panther motorcycle and sidecar, with tent deployed. Crossing a river by ferry. **Top to bottom:** Blenk in the Sahara with camels. The departure in London. A Tuareg tries out the sidecar.



Africa Trip Route

Cartography by David Medeiros (mapbliss.com)

