

Men's Journal
EXPEDITION

TRAILBLAZING
SOUTH AFRICA'S

WILD COAST

Two fast friends — one a pro kayaker, the other a dirt devil — take on the roadless terrain of the Eastern Cape

BY MATTHEW POWER PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREG VON DOERSTEN

Near Coffee Bay, on the eastern coast of South Africa, towering cliffs plunge hundreds of feet into the Indian Ocean. Below, at the cliffs' crumbling feet, uninterrupted rollers break over treacherous reefs and limestone terraces that have been the bane of sailors for centuries. A few hundred yards offshore looms a massive doughnut-shaped hulk of rock, Hole in the Wall. Humpback whales breach on the horizon, while closer in dolphins jump from the backsides of waves. Scarcely any human development is apparent except for the few round thatched huts of the native Xhosa villagers, who dive for crayfish in the sea and tend herds of goats on the hillsides. I stand on a massive hill set back from the bluffs, surveying the scene.

Down the slope, a lone dirt biker on a mud-covered orange KTM 200 kicks his bike to life, the whining two-stroke engine not quite drowned out by the thundering surf farther below. He circles and attacks the steepest part of the hill straight on. Trying to keep his front wheel on the ground, >>

Paris-Dakar legend
Alfie Cox charges up
the coast on his
KTM 660 Rally
enduro racing bike





Clockwise from left: Tao Berman kick-starts his mud-coated KTM 200 bike; Berman, Tyko Isaacson, and the author regain strength with fried calamari and pilsner; a

village of traditional Xhosa rondavel thatched-roof earthen huts; at a general store, Berman, Isaacson, Cox, and Josh Bechtel take a break with some local kids

the rider stands on the foot pegs at a preposterous forward angle and guns up the 50-degree pitch...until a rock in the grass sends rider and bike ass-over-two-stroke down the hill. He cartwheels, lands on his feet, tries to run, cartwheels again, and tumbles 50 feet down the hill before leaping up and raising his arms in mock victory. A group of Xhosa boys point and laugh, offering commentary in a local dialect peppered with clicking sounds. Next to me, Alfie Cox, the 43-year-old three-time Paris-Dakar Rally podium finisher and dirt-biking guru, joins in the laughter, chuckling over both what's happening and to whom it's happening: Tao Berman, world-famous whitewater kayaker and someone who, to put it mildly, is not known for his ability to take no for an answer. "The hill's fucked him now," remarks Cox. "He's a throttle jockey. He's trying to climb it like a bull in a china shop. We have to do something to wear him down."

It's an interesting question: What does the extreme athlete do on vacation? One imagines him taking a break from the nonstop adrenaline surges and life-threatening stunts that color his workaday existence. Maybe trying his hand at a little bonefishing or

MATTHEW POWER wrote about skiing in Kashmir for the November 2005 issue of Men's Journal.

lying back in a hammock with an umbrella drink. Yeah, right. A guy like Tao Berman practically breaks out in hives around hammocks. At 27, he has completed more than 50 first descents and shattered many world records — his 98-foot plunge over a waterfall in Alberta, Canada, in 1999 remains the highest successful drop ever made in a kayak. But ask for his idea of a fantasy getaway and he'll tell you that what he really thinks would be a blast is doing something like that on a dirt bike. So when the opportunity came up to travel from his home near Hood River, Oregon, to South Africa to study at the feet of dirt-biking legend Alfie Cox, he jumped at the chance. It had the makings of the ultimate motocrossman's holiday, a throttle junkie's wet dream.

Before we even get out of the U.S., I get a small taste of what it will be like riding shotgun on such a testosterone fest. As we glide on the shuttle train between terminals at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson airport, Tao grabs on to the overhead handrail and begins doing rapid military-style pull-ups. "I love doing pull-ups," he tells me between reps, not even short of breath. "It's like everything in life: If it doesn't hurt, you're not pushing yourself hard

enough." Joining us in the train/ad-hoc gym are Tao's traveling companions: Josh Bechtel, a fellow Hood River kayaker, and Tyko Isaacson, a stocky smoke jumper based out of McCall, Idaho. In this group my role apparently is to be the comic relief. I've got thousands of miles of road-bike experience, two cross-country trips, and a stint as a New York City motorcycle courier to my credit. But my dirt-biking experience consists of a couple hours of tool-

As we careen off boulders or tip backward on steep hills, we can hear Alfie yelling, "Let the bike do the work!" or "More throttle!"

ing around a farm field on a 500cc Kawasaki in junior high. My only "first descents" involve some strange side streets in Brooklyn.

Our group meets up with Alfie after our twin-prop plane lands at the tiny airport in Umtata, the main city in an eastern region known as the Transkei. He is a compact man with a burst of auburn hair and a neatly clipped moustache who chats us up in a rapid South African brogue while tossing our gear into his cargo van. We pile into the back and dig into a cooler of ice-cold Windhoek Lagers. A trailer hitched to the rear

groans with a half-dozen KTM 200cc two- and 400cc four-strokes.

Half an hour into our drive through the Transkei countryside, the sawtoothed Drakensberg Mountains recede as we turn onto rougher and rougher dirt roads nearer the coast. We arrive after dark at our simple lodge overlooking Hole in the Wall. The black ocean roars beneath a sky of southern constellations uninterrupted by lights. Tao is like a kid on Christmas Eve. He admits that one of his favorite dirt-biking fantasies, which he's disappointed to learn would surely violate several wildlife-protection laws, is to race against lions. "You'd get eaten while you were trying to start the bike," says Alfie. "Now get a good night's sleep, boys, 'cause you're going to go all-out tomorrow."

The Hollywood trope of the kung fu master and his acolyte involves the student being shaken awake in the predawn darkness. The next morning, Tao turns the cliché on its head, springing out of bed at 4 AM to do push-ups and go for a run. By the time Alfie wakes up, Tao has dragged us out of bed and gotten us suited up in motocross gear: chest protectors, knee and elbow pads, knee-high boots. "You're mad, getting up at four in the morning!" protests Alfie. Tao is unfazed: "Sleep's a waste of time."

With the sun just breaking the horizon, we mount up and follow Alfie on a dirt road paralleling the shoreline. We ride single file up and down

through muddy singletrack by thorny fences surrounding Xhosa farms, through vine-hung patches of jungle, and along the bluffs above the ocean. As we careen off boulders or tip backward on steep hills, we can hear Alfie yelling, "Let the bike do the work!" or "More throttle!" Josh stops dead on a boulder and pogos off into the thorn bushes. Tyko gets thrown off his bike, snapping the mudguard clean off. Only Tao, it seems, can manage to keep pace with Alfie without wiping out.

At a stretch of beach, we stop to catch our breath. Alfie shows off his drifting skills — leaning the bike far to one side in the wet sand — tossing up a plume of sand for a group of cheering local youngsters. Then it's Tao's turn. Leaving his helmet behind, he blows donuts below the tide line while a group of South African bikers look on. "He won't be so pretty with a foot peg through his brain," one says.

It's a study in contrasts. Both Tao and Alfie are self-made successes from families of modest means, men of short stature and determined, pit-bullish bearing. (Alfie, in fact, can only touch one foot to the ground at a time on his high-suspended race bike.) Alfie is the basis for a character in a Paris-Dakar Rally video game, while HuckDoll is coming out with a Tao Berman action figure this summer. But with a much longer and just as dangerous career, Alfie possesses a restraint and sense

of perspective that so far seems to have eluded the younger athlete. Tao's credo is "Never doubt yourself." His approach to driving himself and others is heavy on motivational-speaker catchphrases. He revels in playing the sheepdog with us, rooster-tailing gravel in our chests as he races back to the front. Alfie, on the other hand, is encouraging and joking as he picks us out from under our bikes. It's a natural leadership style that makes it easy to follow him (quite literally) to the edge of the earth.

There's a Zen to dirt biking, a counter-intuitive sensibility that you would not expect from one of the world's noisiest and muddiest sports. When instinct tells you to breakneck it — as on a climb — it's actually the time for steady gas. On downhills, when your every inch is aching to lean back, you need to keep your weight over the front tire. Alfie is such a careful and patient teacher of this Jedi training that we've taken to calling him Alfie-Wan Kenobi.

At our lodge at Hole in the Wall, we get cleaned up and limp to the only restaurant in town, comparing our various contusions, burns, gouges, and bruises en route. Then over seared steaks and Windhoeks and Bell's Scotch, Alfie regales us with stories about the great Dakar.



Bechtel (left) and Berman cut through the desolate landscape of the Transkei's 300-mile wild coast, which remains one of the least-developed regions in South Africa

"It's the most soul-destroying thing you could ever do," he says about the brutal 17-day slog from Europe to West Africa, which is widely considered the world's most challenging motor race. "Grown men cry. The course is scientifically designed to see how far it can push people." One of Alfie's closest friends, Fabrizio Meone, a two-time winner, wrecked in Mauritania in the 2005 race. Alfie arrived on the scene four minutes after the wreck to find that his friend's jugular vein had been cut by the navigation equipment on his handlebars. Alfie watched him dying while waiting for the rescue helicopter to arrive.

For Alfie the race is still like a drug, but the 2006 Dakar will be his first in a BMW — a BMW X3 SUV. "I've got a lot of mileage on me," he reasons with a sigh.

Tao takes in Alfie's story, including the gruesome and tragic parts, and has an announcement to make: He has decided he wants to ride in an insane Austrian enduro called the Erzberg, a race that culminates in a three-hour mountain climb that fewer than 20 bikes in roughly 500 finish. Alfie can't resist the odds in betting against him: "You'd like a challenge, and I'd like to take your hundred dollars."

We go out again at sunrise the next morning — and the next, and the next — following steep tracks along the coast, dragging the bikes under fallen trees, and racing in a line through villages as flocks of kids reach out for high fives. At one point I get split off from the group and find myself negotiating a narrow trail above a creek. I hit a rock in the path and tumble 10 feet down through bushes into the mud. Nobody knows where I am, and there's no way I can get the bike up the embankment on my own. Suddenly, I have a schoolkid's fright of Alfie catching me stuck down a ravine with his bike — or even worse, having to spend the night down there. I climb out sans bike and flag down a group of local farmers, who find the whole matter exceedingly funny. They produce a rope and tie it around the front fork, then haul the bike up above the bank as I push from behind. Near dark, I make it back to the lodge covered in mud and soaked in sweat. It's a small measure of the travails extreme athletes face every day. Alfie just looks at me and laughs, "Where's the mad professor got off to now?"

On our last day Alfie takes us to our hardest hill yet. He calls it the Hill of Death. It is a monster, slick and steep as hell. It requires a fine bal-

ance of enough speed to take it and enough control to clear the boulders and ditches that thread its face. After Alfie masterfully shows us the way it's done, one by one the Hill of Death picks us off, and we circle around an easier way to wind up to the top, leaving Tao alone at the bottom. Tao attacks it, and again the hill tosses him off. "He just won't quit, will he?" says Alfie. "I was just like that when I was 25. Wide open all day."

Giving one final push, and leaning so far forward that his hips are practically up against the

handlebars, Tao opens it up, but a little more under control this time, and bucks through the rocks like a mule until he bursts up to the top with a two-stroke scream and a cloud of exhaust smoke. He pulls off his mud-covered helmet. "Gosh, that was fun!" he shouts.

Alfie, just a couple months from his first Dakar bid in the relative safety of an SUV, chuckles at Tao's unflappable gameness. "That's the spirit!" he says.

Tao smiles at the compliment. "What's next?"

HOW TO DO IT

GOING WILD ON THE EASTERN CAPE

>GETTING THERE South African Airways provides the only direct service from the U.S. to Johannesburg and Cape Town, with departures from New York, Atlanta, and Washington Dulles. (Consider splurging on the comfy lie-flat seats in business class. It's a 17-hour flight.) SAA serves more than 20 airports within South Africa, including Umtata, the gateway to the Wild Coast (*roundtrip fares from the U.S. start at \$1,140; flysa.com*).

>DIRT BIKING Paris-Dakar Rally racer Alfie Cox customizes and leads dirt-bike tours in his homeland. In its 10th year, **Alfie Cox Adventure Tours** guides riders along the Transkei coast from March through October. Riders are equipped with two- and four-stroke KTM motorbikes and stay in a 10-room lodge on a bluff above the Indian Ocean, near Hole in the Wall (*from \$1,700 for eight days, all-inclusive; 27-82-781-2508, alfiecox.co.za*).

>SAFARI You can't take a trip to South Africa and not go looking for big game. North of the Wild Coast, the **Gwahumbe Private Game Reserve** (*gwahumbe.co.za*) takes visitors on 4x4 rides to scout out wildebeest, zebra, jackal, and white rhino. Africa's most diverse concentration of wildlife resides in **Kruger National Park** (*krugerpark.co.za*), northeast of Johannesburg. This wilderness area the size of Israel presents the best chance to spot Africa's Big Five: lions, elephants, buffalo, leopards, and rhinos.

—GWEN KILVERT



The zebra remains one of the wildlife superstars in South Africa's many game reserves

