



CHINA

SADDLESORE 1000

Scaling the Great Bureaucrat Wall of China to Plant the Long-Distance Seed

By Michael Kneebone

Prelude

To pay for his motorcycle habit, three-time Iron Butt Rally finisher Sean Gallagher deals in the aluminum business, which takes him to the far corners of the globe to source the right products for his customers. After 20 years of experience doing business in Asia, especially China and Taiwan, Sean asked me in 2006 about the IBA in China.

“China is one of the few countries where we have not been able to get anyone to even attempt a 1,000 mile day,” I said. “I’ve been trying since 1997 to open things up, but the long-distance message just does not translate well to the Chinese motorcycle culture.” »



A very tenacious guy, Sean Gallagher was not about to let his seven-year dream be detoured by a country mired in bureaucracy.

CHINA SADDLESORE 1000

That's all Sean needed to hear. With his head spinning in high gear, he was now on a mission to be the first to undertake a 1,000-mile day in China. In the fall of 2007, I received a late night phone call from Sean. "Boss, the only way this will happen is if you come over and ride this with me. I'll figure it all out, you just show up and I'll take care of the rest."

Who could resist an offer like that? In a split second Sean had me — hook, line and sinker. Thus began years of overcoming one obstacle after another.

The Winds of Change

Motorcycling in China provides an interesting contrast. By most estimates, there are over 35 million motorcycles on the road — second only to India. However, very few of these bikes are over 150cc, which partially explains why finding someone willing to ride a SaddleSore 1000 has been virtually impossible.

Our first hurdle was the 2008 Olympics ("You want to do what?"). Next was China's financial meltdown. You think *we* lost a lot of money? The Chinese really took a beating, and cooperation with almost anything American was in the toilet through 2010. After that it was the constant repetition of "not possible." Importing the bikes, which in 2007 would have been difficult but doable, wasn't even possible in 2011. We could import the bikes; we just couldn't get them out of port and onto the streets.

Finally, in the fall of 2013, Sean brought on some heavy hitters from China's aluminum industry, people that had a vested interest in making Sean's dream come true. In February 2014, at our final planning meeting, the stars aligned. We chose a route to the northeast of Beijing, importing the bikes was set up, and we were ready to roll. Sean even had a motorcycle journalist onboard so he could be the first Chinese citizen to ride a SaddleSore 1000 in China.

Another Brick Wall

Just as quickly as it came together, everything fell apart. Sean started receiving ridiculous demands. First the journalist helping out wanted US\$80,000 to organize the event. Then our official state licensed guide wanted a BMW GS to ride instead of the 650cc Chinese-built motorcycle Sean graciously offered to purchase for him.

The kicker was the final email about our chosen route. Instead of good news — or even any hard facts — we got: "July will be a tough time as it will be very hot, and there will be a lot of mosquitoes gathering around the lights and fly to the rider's face." This was not supposed to be a pleasure ride. Sean's response: "We clearly have a failure to communicate."

This was just the kind of thing Sean had been fighting for seven years. Now, with only five short months to go, Sean was

no farther along then he had been seven years ago. That just made him dig in more — it was now or never, no one is getting younger, and the death of his close friend John Ryan just a few months before had really taken a toll on Sean. John was one of Sean's closest motorcycle friends. Together they had planned and ridden the Chicago 1000 and the San Francisco 1000 and Sean's company had quietly helped sponsor many of Ryan's big rides. John, doing what friends do, was fond of making fun of Sean's list of bad life habits. A business owner, Sean is not only in charge of delivery, but sales too, which means plenty of drinking, smoking, eating fine foods, entertaining clients and a lot of time sitting behind a computer or on a plane. John constantly teased Sean that he would not be around much longer with his lavish lifestyle. When John passed away unexpectedly, the alarm bells went off; it did not matter what the cost, the China 1000 was going to happen in 2014. Sean was



Chinese philosopher Laozi is credited with saying, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Even the longest ventures have a starting point and for us, it became real when the bikes were palletized.

not going to let the Grim Reaper get in the way of doing this ride in memory of John Ryan.

With so much invested in the trip, Sean also invited two-time IBR finisher Roger Sinclair along. As owner of a sister machine, Roger shared the love of Sean's beloved 2002 BMW R1150GS Adventure that he had ridden in the IBR as well as countless huge IBA rides. Roger was clearly qualified — he finished the 2011 IBR with 13,195 miles in 11 days. He is an electrical engineer in his daily life and is known to be able to overcome almost any problem out on the road. If you break down, you want Roger to be by your side to help.

The Best Laid Plans

While Sean dealt with the Chinese, I was working on a backup plan and reached out to MIR Corporation, as I had some



The roads in China were a marked improvement over those in Russia.

experience dealing with them back in 2005. MIR Corporation is a tour company that specializes in custom and private journeys along the Silk Route, the Trans-Siberian Railway, and through Russia. Coincidentally, they are the same company that has been handling logistics for Helge Pederson's Silk Road Adventure tours in China. MIR came back with many of the same problems we had found. Although they had imported motorcycles via ship a few years back, they couldn't get approval from customs to bring them into the country. They even tried piggybacking our motorcycle import with an antique car rally that was running from Beijing to Paris, but even that didn't work. Car — yes; motorcycle — no. The noose for motorcycle imports had tightened on the ocean ports.

Still, we knew we could ride the motorcycles in from the west. While motorcycle import rules by ship or plane meet a bureaucratic NO wall in Beijing, the remote frontier in the west is a bit wilder, and out there, almost anything goes. MIR confirmed that with 30 days' advance notice, they were confident they could get motorcycles imported from either Mongolia or Kazakhstan as they have done so many times before. Now things were getting complicated, though. How would we get motorcycles

from the USA into Mongolia or Kazakhstan so they could then be ridden across the Chinese border?

Since even we had doubts it could be done, our project was pretty much top secret. Fewer than six people knew we were planning to try the China 1000, so I started scouting alternative locations to our "mosquito route" north of Beijing. Jumping out at me on the globe was the Gobi Desert. Like any desert, it is not welcoming to mega-cities (although the Gobi still has several cities of over a million) and it offers some wide-open spaces, but at the expense of intense heat from May through September. That meant coming in from Kazakhstan, which would drop us at the western side of China, but give us plenty of chances to try a 1,000-mile day as we moved eastward toward the Pacific Ocean. That almost made planning the rest of the ride easy. We would cross Europe via Ukraine, then through southern Russia and into Kazakhstan and China. Short, easy and quick, right? Then the bottom fell out of Ukraine; at that point no one even blinked, it was just another challenge in a seven-year quest. This would be an easy problem compared to all we had been through. Without time to get visas for some of the alternate Middle East countries, we tacked on a 2,500 mile detour north via Moscow.



The Europe-Asia Divide

Finally on July 10, 2014, after an easy ride across Europe and a not so easy ride across Russia and Kazakhstan (that ride story could fill the magazine by itself), we crossed from the rough, backwards roads of the Russian-speaking countries and into the modern world of China with its new cross-country glass-smooth toll way. All of a sudden, our plans seemed to be coming together. »

Roger carries an impressive number of spare parts, including a complete final drive, shaft drive, GS computer, complete ignition system, fuel pump and much, much more. He only needed the fuel pump.

CHINA SADDLESORE 1000



Hazards are different in China. Trucks, for instance, use expanded upper ramps to maximize space by carrying two cars.

Riding in China takes a real commitment in time and money. The border crossing can take an entire day, and THEN you have to get a special motorcycle license — and a driver's license, too. All three took a lot of work to arrange. Once we got through customs, which included the usual import paperwork, the Chinese threw in a few interesting steps, such as walking our motorcycles through a massive X-ray machine and a photo "opportunity" with customs officials welcoming us to China. They don't get to see large motorcycles every day at the border, so half the day was spent taking photos with each and every official. One thing we realized right away is that even though we were in a communist country, everyone we met was especially helpful. Even when being detained several days later in a police station for riding motorcycles on the highway, we were offered cold sodas. I can't imagine that happening in an American police station.

Once across the border, we still had to deal with getting our motorcycle and driver's licenses. Of course, none of this happens at the border. We had to ride 100 kilometers in the wrong direction and not on the main route. Here, we had to find the DMV inspection station and even though customs demanded we obtain pre-inspection documents from the USA, the local police had to conduct their own motorcycle inspection to insure our motorcycle were safe to operate in China. With less than 24 hours in-country, it was already obvious that most Chinese motorcycles have no working headlights or taillights, so it seemed a joke to inspect any foreign motorcycles. We obviously passed, but not until after another round of photos with the inspection officials. Then we were off to the central DMV offices — but first we had to *find* the DMV.

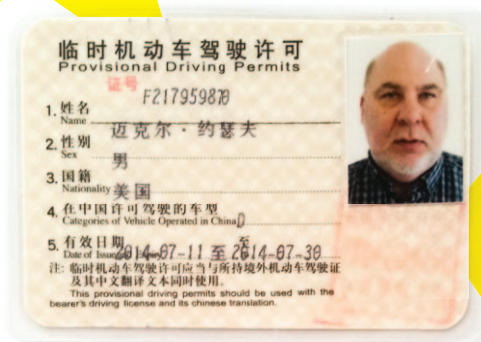


Every time we stopped we drew a crowd. This would prove to cause difficulties in the middle of our 1,000-mile day.

If you speak Chinese, getting your temporary driver's license is fairly straightforward. The tests are a bit odder than ours, though. At one station you hold out your hands, palm side up. My hands were fairly red from the heat and oppressive humidity so, naturally, I got a bit worried. It turns out that would not be a problem, because I was in the line to see if I was handicapped. If you have all your fingers, you pass. I do and I did. Five hours later, the office was closed and almost everyone had left for the weekend (2 pm on a Friday — nice government job if you can get it). Thanks to a couple of helpful DMV employees willing to stay well after closing hours, we had our motorcycle and drivers' licenses. With a breath of relief, our entry into China was complete, but China was not done with us yet.

We had to backtrack to get to G30, the main highway that runs 4,280 kilometers across China, and start the real trip east.

The first of many surprises came at our first gas stop when pulling up to the pumps. Attendants came running over waving arms and yelling at us! It was clear we were not welcome. Finally, with much finger pointing and yelling, they directed us over to a large box away from the pumps painted with a big X — as in X marks the spot where you fill up your motorcycle. Fun, special motorcycle area, that's new. They dragged out a four-liter pot with a spout — think of a large teapot and you get the basic idea. The reason we were in the dog box is so when fire breaks out from the stupid way we were forced to fill up the bikes, we wouldn't take out the entire gas station



To ride in China, you have to jump through a number of hurdles to get a drivers permit and motorcycle license.



This is the box where motorcycles are expected to fill their tanks, by hand, using tea kettles filled with gas. Safety first!



In most places in China, motorcycles cannot use the gasoline pump. As a result, they've devised an alternate method of fueling bikes. We almost called the ride the Tea Kettle 1000.

with us in the blaze. We'd heard about this in older Internet postings, but had not read about it lately, so we assumed that particular stupidity had been retired with the death of Mao Tse-tung.

After much argument, and even an offer to pay to fill up at the pump (even US\$100 would not do it), the attendant pointed up to the roof with cameras at all corners, and in probably one of a few words he knew in English, he uttered one word that told it all: "Police." Do you know how long it takes to fill three motorcycles by hand in 100 degree heat in the Gobi sun four liters at a time? If you hustle, about 40 minutes, and that is if you don't start a fire or spill gas all over yourself in stations that have no running water to wash up. You can imagine the tears rolling down my eyes as I realized we had just ridden 9,000 miles and that this could be a show stopper.

But wait! That was the good news! At our next gas stop, the police declared that motorcycles would not be allowed to fill up at all and sales to them were forbidden. OK, easy, let's get a few gas cans, fill them up and then move off site and fill the bikes, right? Nope, you need a special license to fill a gas can.

Fortunately, we had enough range to move on and crossed into the next police district, where gas could be sold to motorcycles — but only in stations inside the city, which took some effort to find in cities of a million plus. Sean had joked early on that we would figure out how to fill up and simply rename the ride the Tea Pot 1000, but this was getting insane. There was no way to spend an hour riding into crowded cities (think a detour off I-80 to downtown Chicago to get gas) and to deal with fill-ups via teapots and to do a 1,000-mile day. I was getting worried; maybe this ride was as impossible as the Chinese had insisted it was.

There was a limit to how far east we could ride and still pull off the 1,000-miler. When the G30 was built across Xinjiang, in many parts they paved over the old two-lane national road, the G312. The benefit of the G30 in the far-west was that unlike most of China, motorcycles are allowed on the toll way. We were running out of highway when we finally got a break. Outside of Hami, our MIR Chinese guides, Sim and John,



This is Roger Sinclair's scouting map showing available gas, tolls and "observation" cameras.

found a toll way plaza that would sell us gas. This was it; we went to the nicest hotel as close to the highway as possible and started working out a route.

Remember, to the west we could not get gas, and to the east we could only ride to the border before being booted off the tollway. We began sketching out a possible multi-lap route, and while Sean and I enjoyed the air conditioned comfort of a five-star hotel

with the excuse of catching up with work, Roger went for a boiling 300-mile ride with Sim and John to test and make a detailed map of the route. It is perhaps the best ride map I have ever seen. On it, Roger recorded every camera and every possible place for fuel, even those that required crossing through a barbed wire fence off the highway. He was sure to note (hopefully legal) turn around points.

The Ride

After seven years of planning and what seemed like insurmountable obstacles, the easy part — the actual ride — was finally here. At 5:40 am, about an hour before sunrise, our witnesses signed our start forms and we were on our way.

At 5:52 am, my ride almost ended in the back of a three-wheel rickshaw (with no lights on) driving in a dark underpass. At 6:26 am, with the sun rising, we were greeted by a massive traffic jam and we threaded our way through the truck traffic

CHINA SADDLESORE 1000



A little over an hour after our official start, a fatal accident almost ended our ride before it began.

to the head of the line, where police had set up a roadblock. A fatal accident ahead blocked the highway — probably a result of two vehicles colliding in the dark, as most Chinese drivers do *not* use lights at night.

While we chatted up the police, Roger hiked back to try to find any way through the embankment and roadside fence to the frontage road. As the hot Gobi sun rose and minutes that felt like hours steadily clicked away, we were stuck. Finally, the lead officer, who was very interested in our motorcycles, took a walk to the accident scene and called back to one of the junior officers, who told us via sign language (wildly waving his arms while pointing at the motorcycles and then down the road) that we could go. As fast as our luck had failed us, it came back in spades thanks to a police officer interested in helping three clueless Americans in the Gobi. With some of our own wild yelling and shouting for Roger, who came running about as fast as you can run in motorcycle boots when it's 100 degrees outside, probably a good third of a mile in about two minutes, the game was back on.

Two hours later, on the return lap, the accident scene was finally being cleared. Seeing the looks on the officers' faces was priceless. They surely thought we were lost and coming back around the way they had let us go earlier. Ninety minutes later, we would pass them again and get the same bewildered looks at what was going on here. That is when our worry really set in, because the crash had caused something we did not want — attention.

With a multi-lap route, the gas station cameras were not the only ones giving us pause. China has cameras photographing all traffic passing through posted every few miles. In the city, it could be every few blocks. Riding large motorcycles on the highway, where there aren't any motorcycles at all, meant we stood out. Would anyone notice our multiple passes around



Sen, one of our witnesses, gets the starting odometer reading before our sunrise start.

countless cameras? We were certainly now on the cops' radar and still had four more laps to go.

With temperatures reaching 114 degrees from noon until 6 pm, the cop issue was secondary to simply surviving the ride. Roger had prepared a concoction of magnesium and electrolytes that we were choking down every lap, along with potato chips for some extra salt intake, while Sean supplied vast quantities of sunscreen. With the heat, we were stopping every 120 miles, but overall, the ride was flawless. Thanks to our MIR guides, the cops ended up hearing we were doing hot weather testing in the Gobi and were happy to give us a wave on later laps. The magic cameras cared not that we were doing laps, and the motorcycles ran flawlessly when they needed to.

A Dream Fulfilled

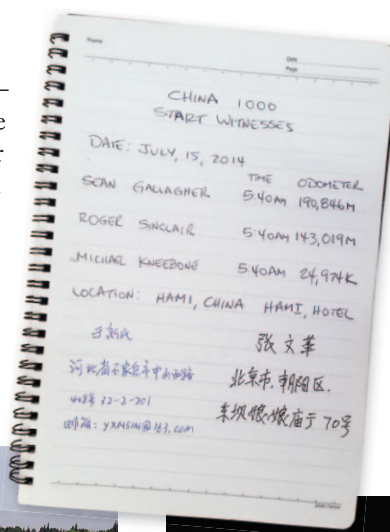
Seventeen hours and three minutes later, the lowest of our three GPS readings showed 1,013 miles. The ride so many

thought was impossible — the first China 1000 — was in the bag. With a couple of beers and a bottle of champagne to toast our success, the ride was over and the long-distance seed had been finally planted in Chinese soil. Sean's dream had been realized and we all understood that perhaps we had tested the limits of what might be required to finish a real Iron Butt ride. John Ryan would be proud.

As word spreads about the first 1,000 miler completed in China, it may just be a matter of time

before someone takes on our newest ride — the Beijing 6th Ring Road 1000 — eight laps around the city. The route is tested and pre-approved. The only question is, will you be the one to ride it first? We are now accepting applications for the first president of China IBA, but you have to do that pesky China thousand-miler first. 🍷

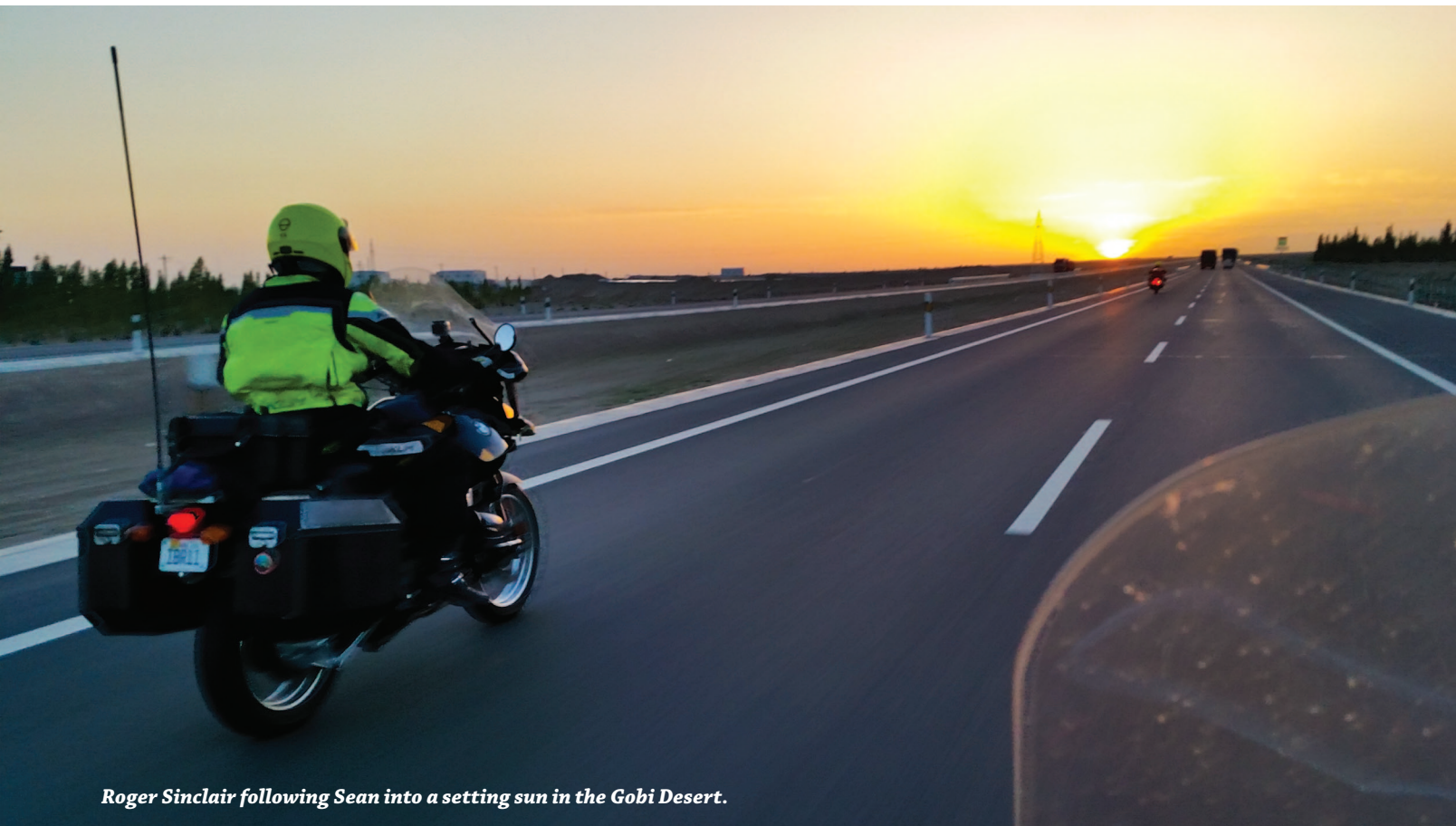
Documentation and validation are the cornerstones to every IBA challenge, regardless of where it takes place.



The intense Gobi heat took its toll on Sean's GS. Only 50 miles after finishing, it took us five hours in 100°+ temps to fix his bike.



Tired but elated, we were left with one final decision at the finish — whether to celebrate by having a beer or glass of Champaign.



Roger Sinclair following Sean into a setting sun in the Gobi Desert.