

'Two Wheels to Adventure'

Alaska to Argentina by bike

► NEARLY 40 YEARS have passed since Danny Liska took one of the most adventurous motorcycle journeys of his era, riding a BMW R60 from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego.

Liska was the first, he claims, to complete this arduous ride. Today, many motorcyclists have tackled the trip from the northern tip of one continent to the southern tip of another. But back when Liska set off on his journey, it was the stuff of high drama.

I've wanted to read about Liska's travels ever since I saw pictures of him riding through deep jungle on his Beemer. BMW importers Butler and Smith featured those images on full-page ads during the '60s, so you'll see Liska straddling the equator on two wheels, or sculling along in his dugout canoe with the R60 loaded as baggage, in many old motorcycle magazines.

The few stories Liska penned back then covered only parts of his travels, but now the whole story is revealed in "Two Wheels to Adventure," Liska's account of his historic ride. An exciting read for much of its substantial heft, this two-year adventure is not chronicled with the journalistic skill of Ted Simon, whose "Jupiter's Travels" is a classic motorcycle road book. But Liska penetrates the veil of mystery hanging over unknown places.

He shares mosquito-ridden huts with Indians, chats with locals, or bunks down in a plantation as a guest of its wealthy owners. And he keeps pushing on, riding every part of the trip except the infamous Darien Gap between Panama and Colombia. The area would remain unconquered for decades more, until Ed Culbertson took another BMW through it in the '80s. As it is, the Darien is the only part of the Americas that Liska didn't cover on two wheels. He crossed it by foot and canoe; the bike flew.

Liska's most endearing quality is

straight talk. Even when the story shows him in a bad light—as when he abandons a native guide on one leg of his struggle through the Darien Gap—Liska is not afraid to tell all. And a wonderful patchwork of a story it is.

Before starting the first leg of his mammoth trip in 1959, Liska noticed the trap most road books fall into, and sought to avoid it. Rather than covering miles at any cost, Liska sought out the stories of the road. He quizzed the folk he met up with in every little flyspot on the map. His catch-phrase: "Do the bears ever get dangerous?" broke the ice in Alaskan restaurants, bars and boarding houses. Without fail, he reports, someone would always rise to the bait with a story beginning: "Let me tell you..."

Because of his interest in the people he met, this motorcycling stranger was adopted by locals everywhere he went, and his adventure is much richer for it.

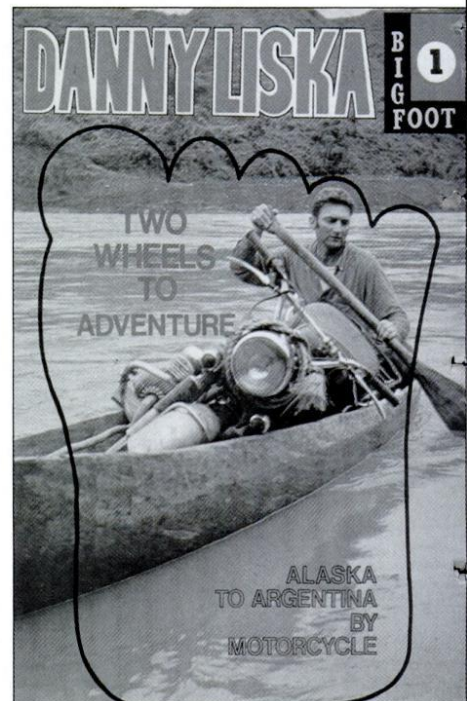
The manuscript was revised at the end of the 1980s, and edited to reflect recent history. But many critical chapters describing Central America, Liska claims, were untouched from his original '60s version. Still, it's sometimes difficult to believe that he managed to be in the right place for so much action, revolution and rebellion.

The book tells of trouble throughout Central America: murder by the police, murder and torture by hostile Indians. But there are also elements of the bizarre, including one mercifully short chapter taken up with Liska's short-lived career as a stunt double for actor Yul Brynner during the filming of the wholly forgotten "Taras Bulba."

Filming took 11 human lives and killed countless horses, according to Liska, who says he rode a heroin-doped horse throughout the filming. All this to produce what Time magazine would call: "The sort of colorful mess normally seen in a nursery-school watercolor set."

If you really want to scare yourself,

though, read Liska's eyewitness accounts of candiru, the tiny parasitic catfish that invades the bodies of swimmers in some South American rivers (but not, Liska is at pains to inform us, the Darien Gap). Or look at his extensive collection of photos showing the BMW mired in mud up to



the axles, and in one place, submerged in water up to the top of its fairing, a picture Liska admits was faked.

The text tends to lapse into homespun philosophy at times. Through these pages, you'll be yelling, "Enough, Danny, get back on the bike!" But these episodes are mercifully few, and the first-person accounts of travel through deep jungle, swamp and desert more than make up for them. You'll never be more grateful for the comfort of your armchair, or the interstate.—*Andy Saunders*

"Two Wheels to Adventure" sells for \$39.95 plus \$4 shipping and handling, and is available from Whitehorse Press, 3424 N. Main St., P.O. Box 60, Dept. AM, North Conway, NH 03860; or by calling (800) 531-1133.