

# Tuk-Tuk to the Road

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# chapter 1

## countdown



**Tuesday 14 March, Kelling, Norfolk, UK**



The countdown begins

When Jo returned from a holiday in Thailand a few years ago and announced that she was going to drive a tuk tuk back from Bangkok to the UK, I never thought for a second I'd be sitting here four years down the line studying maps and wondering which route we are going to take through Kazakhstan. And now here we are, with two months until Lift Off, frantically planning every aspect of our 12500-mile odyssey. Within the space of a few months I feel as if I have been transformed from an assistant TV producer to a bona fide explorer.

Until you embark on setting up a mission like this, you have no idea of the massive amount of organisation involved. Everything from which roads we are going to brave to which tent is the best has to be planned carefully. Nothing can be left to chance. Last weekend we were at the Royal Geographical Society, home of cutting-edge scientific exploration, to do a wilderness medical training course. There were scientists who study snow leopards in Siberia, biologists off to Greenland, botanists heading for Borneo... and Jo and I, the Tukkers. I think the weirdest

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thing we learnt all weekend was that the American military suggests a ‘rectal Mars Bar’ in the case of an unconscious diabetic. And that 25 000 people die in India every year from rabies. Gripping stuff.

This weekend it’s off to the wilds of Devon for more training, this time for survival skills courtesy of Intrepid Expeditions. I’m horrified to see that the kit list includes mess tins and sleeping mats. Camping was never my forte, but I had better get used to the idea if we’re going to survive in the Central Asian steppes, where there won’t be a power shower or a wi-fi connection for hundreds of miles. Let alone sushi or a black cab. Just us, a pink tuk tuk and the Great Outdoors.

People keep asking if we’re nervous, but at the moment it just doesn’t seem real. It feels as if we are planning the trip for someone else. I wonder when it will seem real? When we switch on the engine for the first time and the GPS says in that irritating voice ‘Go to the end of the road and turn left’? Or when we find ourselves stranded in a Russian pothole?



**Monday 20 March, Kelling, Norfolk, UK**



**A mild case of Stockholm syndrome**

We’re just thawing out from having spent this weekend on the aforementioned survival course in Devon, where we had to skin various animals, build our own shelter and generally behave like Neanderthals. Believe it or not, it was surprisingly fun, despite the sub-zero temperatures and disgusting army rations.

As I drove down on Friday I was overcome by a desire to spend the weekend in a swanky hotel – the type with voluminous fluffy towels and delicious cream teas – rather than a Devon wood. My initial impression of Nigel and Kim, our captors for the next few days, did nothing to alleviate my fears – hardcore ex-Marines in big boots and

army gear. Neither did the prospect of our first task, building a ‘hasty shelter’ for the night using little more than tarpaulin and rope. But things are rarely as bad as they seem, and a few hours later we were all happily hunkering down around the campfire discovering the joys of life in the woods.

On Saturday we crammed in a multitude of tasks – skinning rabbits, plucking pigeons, night navigation, building a proper shelter, purifying water, learning 101 ways to light a fire. Jo also taught Nigel and Kim a few of her own special survival skills. I think I can safely say that these were things they hadn’t come across before, and they probably won’t introduce them into subsequent courses.

All in all it was a brilliant weekend and I feel sure that if we get stranded in the middle of steppe, mountain or desert we will have Nigel – aka Uncle Nobby – and Kim’s wise words echoing in our ears. Failing that, we will certainly have their numbers on speed dial.

One final thing: Jo and I have both come back suffering from a mild case of Stockholm syndrome.



### **Saturday 25 March, Kelling, Norfolk, UK**



#### **China here we come**

It hasn’t been the most eventful week in Tukland: no more survival courses in the depths of Devon or learning how to splint fractures at the Royal Geographical Society. However, on the logistics front we have made some headway since the China Sea International Travel Service (CSITS) in Beijing has now confirmed that we can enter China on 10 June. Since it will take us about 12 days to drive north from Bangkok to China, this gives us a start date of 28 May, which means leaving England around 20 May for a final week of planning and preparation. That will give us enough time in Bangkok to become acquainted with

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Ting Tong, our supersonic tuk tuk, get some mechanical training and generally prepare ourselves for the next 12500 miles.

Other main news this week is that we are getting our fundraising action plan in place and exploring security issues. As we are two girls going solo, security is something we have to consider carefully. What sort of back-up are we going to have? What methods of communication are we going to use? How do we cope if we break down in the middle of nowhere? This week I have been talking to International SOS and Control Risks Group, professional security organisations, to see what they can offer us and at what price. Option one, having a two-man back-up team with us 24/7, comes in at a hefty £600 a day – laughably beyond our budget. Option two, at around £3000 for three months, is to have a remote assistance team, whom we call every day and who will warn us of any potential security or medical risks. Option three is to go it alone and trust in the power of Ting Tong. At the moment Option three is favourite, unless some kind corporation decides to throw a wad of cash our way.

Jo's off to India next week to see her fiancé Raja. Does anyone want to look after her ferrets?



**Thursday 6 April, Kelling, Norfolk, UK**



**Skype on board**

Exciting news! Skype confirmed this week that they are going to sponsor us. We are thrilled to be in cahoots with such a well-known brand and are looking forward to calling everyone via Skype from the back of the tuk tuk. If you haven't already discovered Skype, get on to it. It's amazing. I've been having Russian lessons via Skype with my teacher Vanda, she in her house in Sweden, and I in my house in Norfolk. Technology, eh?

It sounds like Jo is having fun in India. Her last email recounted an ear-piercing festival she had been to.

My friends Bella and Ewan have just come back from three weeks in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos and said that not only was it unbearably hot but that one night it rained so much in Bangkok that the water was up to their knees. By May it'll be even hotter, and with the monsoon looming there are bound to be a few more of these flash floods. I've been caught in them before and the volume of water is astonishing, incomparable to anything you will ever experience in this country. Fingers crossed that we don't get caught in any such downpours: tuk tuks are tropical beasts and not famed for their prowess in deep water.



### **Monday 10 April, Kelling, Norfolk, UK**



So you wanna be a record breaker?

I just had lunch with Hugh Sinclair, who in 1991 broke the world record for the fastest traverse of the Americas by motorbike. Having heard about our expedition on the traveller's grapevine, he very kindly contacted us to offer advice. What a fount of information: I've come away with my brain bulging and a list of tips as long as my arm. Hugh's story is a funny one: he and a friend decided that they wanted to break a world record; they didn't know how or where, but it had to be a record. They weren't bikers but when they found out that there was no confirmed record for the fastest crossing of the Americas by bike, they decided that was what they would do. So they got their tests and set off: 35 days' riding, 40 accidents and an airlift later they did it. And Hugh has barely ridden a bike since! Glad to see that we're not the only certifiable people out there.

We just got back the results of a geopolitical security assessment we had done for the journey, looking at the potential medical and security risks we could encounter in each country. It makes nerve-wracking reading. Here are some of the highlights. Of Laos it says: 'Overland travel in general is becoming increasingly hazardous in Laos and most authorities advise foreign travellers to consider air travel between urban centres.'

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Of Kazakhstan: ‘The police and the National Guard may themselves present a threat... it is worthwhile noting that visitors are advised not to drive but to hire a driver or to take a taxi between locations.’ Of Russia: ‘The police can be particularly difficult to deal with, and the concept of corruption is endemic to the population at large.’ It’s great to have an assessment like this done and to be aware of the risks – it would be irresponsible of us not to – but it doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence. The fact is, though, that we can’t afford an expensive back-up team and are just going to have faith in the power of Ting Tong and our guardian angels.

Jo’s back from India now so we’re getting together tomorrow to work out our final plan of action. Only five more weeks to go, but so much to think about still.



**Thursday 13 April, Kelling, Norfolk, UK**



**Five weeks until Lift Off**

Gee, where do I start? So much has happened in the past few days that it’s hard to keep track of everything. Organising this venture is the ultimate emotional rollercoaster: some weeks you feel like you are trying to climb a never-ending mountain, other weeks everything goes right and you are bowled over by the kindness and generosity of people. This week has definitely fallen into the latter category.

On Tuesday Jo and I drove down to Winchester to see Brussels-based expedition guru Sam Rutherford and his wife Bea. Sam was one of a team who drove from London to Sydney in two pink Land Rovers in 1997 and since then he and Bea have set up their own company, [www.prepare2go.com](http://www.prepare2go.com), organising rallies and advising people like me and Jo on how to travel the world and make it back in one piece.

Talking to people like Sam, you pick up tips that you would never discover in a month of research. Perhaps his best pieces of advice were

to keep our sense of humour – particularly in China, which allegedly makes India seem like the proverbial stroll in the park – and to never lose sight of the fact that the main thing is to get home safe. He also allayed our fears that someone might steal Ting Tong; it seems that our decision to paint her pink is in fact a stroke of genius since it would be pretty hard for someone to steal her without being caught pink-handed. Sam and Bea also kindly offered to have two rather grubby tukkers staying with them in Brussels on the last leg of the trip.

Having had lunch with a world record holder on Monday, we were spurred into chasing up Guinness to see whether our journey would make it into the record books. The answer came back that upon completion we could well break the record for ‘the longest journey ever by auto-rickshaw’, currently held by Ken Twyford and Gerald Smewing, who drove an Indian auto-rickshaw 11 908 miles (19 165 km) between Hyderabad, India, and Great Harwood, Lancashire, England, from 17 December 1999 to 23 June 2000. The only slight caveat is that the rules stipulate that the vehicle must have ‘no modifications’. Do roll-bars, a comedy horn and shocking-pink paintwork come into this category, I wonder?

Our wonderful web designer, Brian at Indrum in Brighton, has been busy adding all sorts of gadgets behind the scenes this week. We can now see how many hits we’ve had at [www.tuktotheroad.co.uk](http://www.tuktotheroad.co.uk) and where our hits are coming from. You can imagine our excitement on seeing that in the past three days we’ve had over 3000 hits. Amazing! Who are all these people looking at our site? And no, it’s not just us, although we might have added a few to the counter.

On the press side of things, *Marie Claire* is interviewing us for a feature on 3 May, and the *Mail on Sunday* has said it wants us to write a piece on our return. And then there was the journalist (who shall remain unnamed) who, in a brilliantly camp voice, asked Jo whether our ‘luxurious’ tuk tuk was equipped with a microwave. Dream on!





**Thursday 13 April, Brighton, UK**

 Happy Easter!

Ants has really put me to shame with her blogging skills. She had to remind me yesterday how to actually use our blog. So, this is the first post from me.

It's now only 35 days until we take off for Bangkok, but still this whole trip doesn't feel real. Ants has likened it to doing all the preparation and reading for your university dissertation before having to sit down and write the bloody thing. We are so involved in all of the planning and preparation that it is difficult to comprehend that in five weeks we will be flying out to Bangkok.

I went to see the nurse at my doctor's surgery today and was informed I will need to have four jabs before I go, including a polio booster, which I was most upset to learn is no longer given on a sugar lump. I have also been advised to have a meningitis jab and to consider jabs against rabies and Japanese encephalitis. So, next Tuesday I have an appointment with the nurse and will have the pleasure of two injections and my overdue smear test. I can hardly wait.

Before that, however, it is Easter – which means a couple of things: hot cross buns and chocolate. See, being made to go to church every day at school doesn't necessarily make one a good Christian. I am totally clueless about the Bible and its contents. Not that that makes me a bad person, does it? I think I am just one of the hundreds and thousands of young people out there who are not particularly religious and God-fearing. The closest I get to God is probably uttering the phrase 'Oh my God!' on a reasonably regular basis. The god on our trip will be Ting Tong, and I hope that she can undergo a blessing before we leave Bangkok. I will kiss her every day and worship her beautifully formed three wheels and pink bodywork. Actually, that reminds me that I

probably need to read my latest purchase, *Auto Repair For Dummies*. Plus, I need to get intimate with my unloved motorbike and learn how to remove her front wheel, because on our trip we will need to change our front brake pads roughly every 2000 miles.



**Tuesday 18 April, Kelling, Norfolk, UK**



‘Prozac Nation’

This was the headline of the *Independent on (Easter) Sunday*. Not exactly uplifting or Easter-Bunnyish but an extra reason why you should all sponsor us and help Mind fight the war against the depression pandemic that seems to be sweeping our green and pleasant land.

According to the article, 3.5 million Britons are popping pills daily. Fluoxetine, citalopram, paroxetine, sertraline, mirtazapine... you name it, we’re on it. In the past decade, our collective misery has seen prescriptions of these pills rise by more than 120 per cent, costing the NHS £400 million a year. Alarming stuff. And not to mention that the World Health Organization predicts that depression will be the second biggest health problem globally by 2020. Mind and other charities campaigning for better mental health hence need all the support they can get.



**Friday 21 April, Brighton, UK**



Stress, depression and the twenty-first century

The article in the *Independent on Sunday* made quite shocking reading. Are that many people really suffering from clinical depression caused by a neurochemical imbalance? Maybe, maybe not. Unfortunately, there are no conclusive scans or blood tests that can be carried out by clinicians

to diagnose mental health problems. Diagnosis is based on reports from the patient and observations from clinicians, friends and family.

Is the fact that modern life is so stressful the cause of so much unhappiness? A recent report in a scientific journal demonstrated that animals exposed to high levels of stress can exhibit depressed behaviours. This is not exactly a new finding, and extreme stress can lead to the development of a state called 'learned helplessness', characterised by apathetic behaviour.

I often feel stressed, but I usually feel stressed because I choose (or have learnt) to interpret situations as stressful. For example, when I am stuck in traffic and am going to be late for an appointment, there is little point getting stressed, as me being pissed off and uptight will not clear the motorway of traffic. I am sure that there are a lot of people out there who get stressed about things that they cannot alter. Over long periods of time, high levels of stress can eat away at one's physical and mental health. But are our lives today really more stressful and harder than those of people growing up 50 years ago? Are the causes of stress in modern society really the end of the world? No, they are not. I think in many cases we all need to re-evaluate our lives and work out what is important and what is not. Also, we need to remember that being a stress-head is generally not helpful and conducive to being a contented individual.

Another problem is that GPs are under huge pressure to treat patients within a finite period of time; it takes more than a ten-minute consultation to diagnose and treat mental health problems correctly. Unfortunately, the waiting times for non-drug therapies can be far too long – often months. While a patient waits for a referral for a talking therapy, is it better to just prescribe them antidepressants? Many people may be better suited to a talking treatment rather than medication, but what can GPs do with such long waiting lists for these psychological treatments? It also very much depends on the individual patient: some respond brilliantly to medication alone, some to psychological therapy alone, and some to a combination of both.

From personal experience, I honestly believe that antidepressants saved my life, although it took a while to find the one that worked best for me. I think the government needs to invest a huge amount of funds into NHS mental healthcare, because the problem is only going to get worse. It has been predicted that the cost of mental health problems to the country's economy already runs into billions of pounds. Surely that in itself is reason enough to increase funding?

I also believe that we need some kind of social revolution in this country. What has life come to when the majority of assaults are drink-related and 30-year-olds are being treated for cirrhosis? I think the media need to become more responsible to the young people in today's society, because many popular media aimed at young people are promoting superficial ideals. The majority of women are now dissatisfied with at least one part of their body, and many are just too caught up in our ever-expanding consumer society. We need to wake up to what is really important in life and get real.



**Wednesday 26 April, Kelling, Norfolk, UK**



### Meetings with remarkable people

Aside from raising money and awareness for Mind, one of the best things about doing a trip like this is the people you meet. In the past few weeks we've met and spoken with a plethora of explorers, world record holders and all-round expedition gurus. Each of them has been truly inspirational. We've already recounted our meetings with Sam Rutherford and Hugh Sinclair, but since then we've had the pleasure of speaking with two more remarkable individuals, Simon Wilson-Stephens and Olly Hicks.

First up was Olly. Olly is younger than Jo and I – 23, I believe. On 28 September 2005, after four months at sea, he arrived at Falmouth having rowed solo across the Atlantic, the youngest person ever to do

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so. Mind-boggling: just him, the ocean and a pair of oars. And not a lot of food by the sound of things. My great-uncle won a bronze medal in the Olympics for rowing, and I was always pretty good on the rowing machine at the gym, but the thought of rowing all that way – on my own – defies imagination. Even more remarkable is Olly's next project – rowing around the world solo, due to lift off at the end of 2007.

Next in the line of remarkable people is Simon Wilson-Stephens. Simon had suffered from depression since the age of 15 or 16. His depression came to a head after the turn of the new millennium, when, as Simon says, his 'wheels came flying off' and he had a breakdown, his foundations crumbling as he tried to settle back into life in the UK after a stint in Africa organising safaris. Simon recovered and decided to go back to East Africa and follow one of Henry Morton Stanley's expedition routes by bicycle and kayak. He, with new friend Stanley the dog, completed the trip and in the process raised £16 000 for the Charlie Waller Memorial Trust. When I spoke to Simon a few days ago, he had just run the London Marathon and Stanley the dog was off for a walk.

It's Simon's fault that we're now booked in to give a talk at the Royal Geographical Society on 12 December. The prospect fills me with more horror than a wrestle with a Ukrainian gangster.

And finally, Jimmy Goddard. I haven't actually met or spoken to Jimmy, but my friend Tom Townshend is in training for not one but two triathlons this year in order to raise money for Jimmy's Trust. Jimmy is in his late twenties and was paralysed from the chest down by a horrific climbing accident in 2004. Jimmy refuses to be beaten by his disability and is about to be the first paraplegic person to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. Hearing about people like this is a humbling experience and makes you regret those times you whinged about your own petty problems.