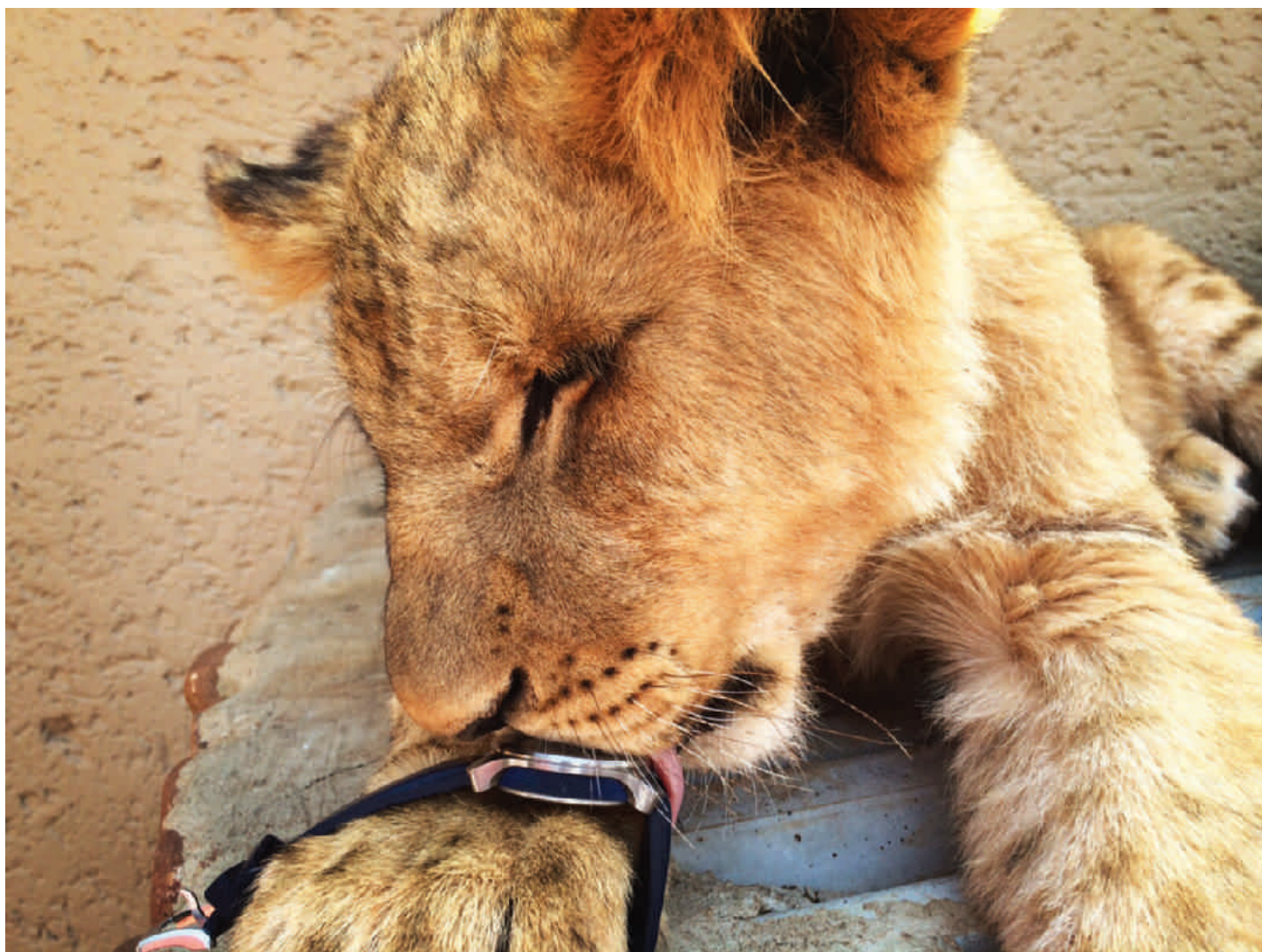


# THRILLS AND SPILLS ON TWO WHEELS

*An intrepid Revolution contributor takes on Africa with British watchmaker Bremont and motorcycle adventurer Charley Boorman, while trying to keep himself, his BMW motorcycle and his Bremont MBII alive.*

*by* **keith w. strandberg**



**R**ocketing down a dirt track in the middle of the Botswana bush, astride an amazingly capable 2014 BMW R1200GS motorcycle, I was keeping my eyes open for elephants, giraffes and other wild animals. We had been warned that very morning that there might be game on the trail and to be careful, whatever that means, so my senses were at full awareness.

The tour operator, MotoAventures, who had set up this ride with legendary motorcycle adventurer Charley Boorman and British watchmaker Bremont's co-founder Nick English, had even given us advice on what to do if we came upon lions – don't run (easier said...), don't show your fear (yeah, right) and don't climb a tree (turns out lions can climb amazingly well).

I have to say, this isn't my standard way of testing a watch, but it just might be my default in the future.

#### Long way round... *Revolution-style*

Ever since I watched Boorman's *Long Way Round* and *Long Way Down* TV shows, I have dreamed of riding a BMW GS through foreign lands. Boorman happens to be an ambassador for Bremont Watch Company, so English put the trip together to test his watches under the severest conditions. We started the trip in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, then rode across Botswana, ending up in Johannesburg, South Africa. The itinerary was a total of 2,000 miles spread over six days, with about 500 miles of it off-road.

#### Africa by bike

On the first day, 24 of us rode out of Victoria Falls, known as "the Smoke that Thunders" to the locals. As we pulled out of the hotel, I took quick note of a sign at the mouth of the drive: "Beware of Wild Animals". We cruised down the main street, passing monkeys, baboons and warthogs, through miles and miles of African bush.

Africa is unlike anywhere I have ever ridden – alternately bland and amazingly beautiful, decades behind the rest of the world but better for it, safe yet with the risk of death around every corner.

Riding a motorcycle is the perfect way to see Africa. Out of the isolation of a car and on the back of these high-tech BMW bikes, we were constantly waving at people on the road out in the middle of nowhere, and they would smile and wave back enthusiastically.

We often saw wild animals just off the road as we rode on the edges of game reserves – giraffe, elephant, impala, ostrich and more – as we were exploring one of the most remote regions on the continent. Often the only vehicles on the road, we were able to stop just about anywhere we wanted to. One evening, we were sitting in the middle of the road, engines off, watching half a herd of elephants cross the road in front of us, while the other half crossed behind us, as the sun set in the African bush.

Another afternoon during a long tarmac ride, English decided to head into a little village to explore, and a group of five of us followed him in. We rode past mud huts until the tarmac ended. As we came to a stop, deliberating about which way to turn, literally hundreds of children ran out of the school next to the road and surrounded our bikes in total excitement.

Clamouring for communication and a personal connection, the children in their uniforms took us on a tour of their school – showing us their classrooms, singing songs for us and warmly giving us a glimpse into their lives. This would never have happened if we were doing this journey in cars.

#### Conquering the bush

I'm not a particularly experienced off-road rider, but the tour was a pleasant mixture of dirt trails and tarmac. The first day of the tour, we did about 60 miles of off-road, crossing from Zimbabwe to Botswana, and I acquitted myself pretty well, if I do say so myself. I had yet to fall off my bike and was getting the hang of riding standing up, negotiating sharp corners and avoiding various pitfalls, like potholes, thorn bushes, algae-covered bridges and boulders.

Two days later, the plan was to do more than 200 miles off road, but we were warned that things could be quite sandy. Motorcycling



Left to right:  
Bremont's MBII; Supermarine S2000; U-2/BL.

through sand fills me with about as much dread as being chased up a tree by a lion, but I rode to the trailhead, where Boorman was waiting. He didn't look particularly confident that I would make it, but urged me to try and ride to the five-mile mark, then assess whether I'd like to try and continue.

I nodded, put my bike in 'Enduro' mode and headed down the track. Within 100 metres, the hard-packed dirt track turned into thick sand and I was down! Unhurt, I got back on the bike and continued to fight my way through the sand, which was now up to the rear axle and as I slipped, fishtailed and slogged through, I saw five other riders coming back the other way.

"It's a suicide mission," I heard one say and decided, after about 500 meters of sand, to turn around. Discretion, for me, was the better part of valour, and I took the tarmac alternative.

#### Trying to destroy the watch

I was wearing a Bremont MBII with the orange barrel during the entire ride. This watch had been developed and tested with the help of Martin Baker, the preeminent maker of aviation ejector seats in the world. If anything could withstand the wilds of Africa, it surely had to be the MBII. It was the ridged, uneven tracks that tested the watch the most, as the vibrations were incredible when we hit

them doing more than 90 mph.

The Bremont MBII I wore sailed through its test with flying colours, taking the extreme heat (upwards of 40°C/104°F) and rugged terrain in its stride. Boorman was wearing a Supermarine S2000 dive watch and English was wearing a U-2/BL with a blue dial, and all three watches made it through without a problem.

"I don't know how many mechanical watches would be able to survive what we did – smashing them around, falling off the bike, the extremes of heat and vibration," says Nick English. "You have to have faith in the watch when you wear it in these conditions."

Charley Boorman not only enjoys wearing his watch, but also loves being a part of the testing process for Bremont's other watches too. "When I first met the English brothers, they told me their story and their goal to bring manufacturing back to Britain, and then they asked me to try their watches on our trips, shake them up a bit on the bikes, because there's only so much testing you can do at the factory," Boorman remembers.

"What I really liked was that I was, and continue to be, part of their development, and in a tiny way I have helped them create these great watches. At the same time, I love introducing people to the real Africa, taking them out of their comfort zone. What we do here is about instilling the traveller's spirit into people."



Clockwise from top left: Strandberg (middle) waits to head off down the road in Botswana; a pitstop for the riders; the sand, tarmac and dust roads of the bush; the three amigos - Nick English, Charley Boorman and Keith W. Strandberg; the MotoAventures riders and crew.



### Trip of a lifetime

What I thought would be the trip of a lifetime never disappointed. I had the most amazing time, experiencing the grandeur of Africa, while riding motorcycles and testing watches with a truly great group of like-minded guys.

“When I came back, my head never felt clearer,” English says. “Physically, I am a bit bruised, and I still have a thorn in my ass, but while I was there I completely tuned out. You are focused on not killing yourself at 90 mph on those dirt tracks, so you can’t think about anything else. For me, riding off-road in Africa was quite a challenge and I hadn’t pushed myself like that for some time. To know that I can do that was a fantastic feeling.”

While all of us motorcyclists return to the world of tarmac, traffic lights and speed cameras, Charley Boorman remains out in the bush testing Bremont watches to the limit. It really is a hard life being a Bremont ambassador!

Many thanks to the seasoned pros at MotoAventures. This is the sixth year they have been offering tours with Boorman, and they certainly know what they are doing. They take care of all the logistics – bikes, hotels, meals, luggage transport, support and more – leaving the lucky bikers free to just concentrate on riding and enjoying the trip. ★

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