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Off the Chain! A Conversation with British cyclist James Bowthorpe, who used a Gates Carbon Drive-equipped Santos to set a new record for fastest around-the-world ride

(Oct. 28, 2009) James Bowthorpe is recuperating in London after his record-setting 174-day, 18,000-mile bike ride around the world, a trip that averaged more than 100 miles per day and smashed the previous record for pedaling the globe by 20 days. We rang up the 32-year-old furniture maker, who finished on Sept. 19, to chat about his custom Santos bike, the Gates Carbon Drive that powered his chain-free journey, eating mystery meat in Asia and experiencing the fright of his life in Iran.

Q: What did you think of the Gates Carbon Drive?

JB: *When Santos approached me about using one of their bikes, they asked if I'd like to try the Gates belt drive. I said 'yes' and I'm really glad I did. I didn't have to lubricate it or do any maintenance. I didn't alter the tension on the belt for the whole 18,000 miles.*

You combined the Gates drive with a Rohloff internal hub. Was that an attention grabber?

JB: *Definitely. It got a lot of looks everywhere I went. When I was in India there were groups of men who would stand around and check it out and ask lots of questions. People are so used to seeing chains. Everyone was really curious.*

Do you foresee belt drives combined with internal hubs becoming more popular?

JB: *Definitely. Hub gearing makes sense for people who don't want to spend hours on maintenance and the belt drive is a logical step because chains are designed for derailleurs. So I reckon belts are the future. Anything that makes cycling easier and simpler is a great innovation.*

What were the worst conditions you rode in?

JB: *I encountered everything. Snow, freezing rain, wind-blown grit, extreme cold and extreme heat. I just pedaled through it all.*

Have you calculated how much time you saved not using chains?

JB: *I haven't calculated it out but I probably would have changed a chain five or six times. It probably saved me about a day. Unless of course the chain had snapped out in the middle of nowhere. Generally speaking it was nice not have to worry.*

Tell me about your custom Santos.

JB: *I put an article in bikebiz.com asking for sponsors and Santos rang me up. They are trying to break into the UK at the moment so this was a good opportunity. It was an aluminum frame, with my Brooks saddle and Schwalbe tires—the Marathon Extreme—and a dynamo hub to charge all of my electronics; my iPhone and camera.*

What was the most exciting day?

JB: *Getting to Sydney. It was just over the halfway point and I knew the hardest bits were behind me. I realized then that I could finish in my desired time. Plus the terrain in Australia was so much more predictable, and I had a tailwind across much of the desert.*

Scariest moment?

JB: *You can read all about this on my blog (www.globecycle.org). It was in Iran when a carload of young men was driving alongside me and threatening me. They were trying to nudge me with the car. I've never been so scared in my life. Maybe they wanted to rob me. They made all sorts of threatening gestures, running their fingers across their throats.*

How did you determine the route?

JB: *It was the same route as the previous recordholder although I ended up flying over Pakistan, as well as Iraq. So I made that distance up in North America by riding down the West coast from Vancouver before heading across the States.*

How much weight did you carry in gear?

JB: *It was bare bones, 15 kilos plus food and water. In Australia I had to carry 20 liters of water crossing the desert. I slept in a Golite one-man shelter and a Golite down sleeping bag.*

What was your secret weapon?

JB: *Being self-sufficient on power so that I didn't have to stay in a hotel to charge up. That's why the dynamo was great. It kept my batteries charged. To stay sane while spending 14 hours a day in the saddle and averaging 100 miles per day I listened to a lot of music and also had quite a few books downloaded: Homer's Odyssey, Henry David Thoreau. I'm a student of English literature. When I really needed a push I would listen to Demon Days by the Gorillaz.*

How many tires?

JB: *I changed the front once, the rear four times although I always changed it while it was still good just to be safe.*

How many rest days, and did you take any sick days?

JB: *I had six rest days and seven days when I was too ill to ride. I got food poisoning in India and lost 20 percent of my body weight. Pedaling across North America I did seven weeks without rest.*

Any major technicals or repairs?

JB: *My crank snapped in Kentucky. I emailed the nearest bike shops and one got back to me right away---Bull Moose Brothers. They donated a new crank. Really nice guys. I experienced friendliness like that all over the place. Turkey and Iran and the USA were really friendly. Restaurants picked up the tab for my meals. People invited me to stay with them. In Iran I slept in roadside mosques. Aside from one incident the Iranians were very generous and friendly.*

Any injuries?

JB: *I have tendonitis in both ankles. The left knee bothered me for a bit. I would also get a pain between my shoulders after 10 hours on the bike. I'm in rehab now, getting used to walking again. There are certain muscles that you use for walking and standing. I can't stand up for more than half an hour.*

What was your longest ride before this?

JB: *Anchorage to Los Angeles in 1998. I toured around the Himalayas. In 1996 I toured BC.*

Weirdest thing you ate?

JB: *I did menu lottery sometimes in Asia where you just point at an item on the menu because you can't read it. I seemed to always end up with entrails.*

Are you still riding?

JB: I ride 10 miles a day for my rehab, and I commute to work by bike on my 1984 Raleigh. Cycling is very much part of my daily existence and always will be.

Are there any more epic rides in your future?

JB: I'm thinking about doing the Race Across America. That would be lighter and faster, 250 miles per day. I would probably use a Santos racing bike with the Rohloff hub and Gates Carbon Drive.

Will anybody ever beat your record?

No doubt. Other Brits are embarking on it due to all the publicity. I've been getting emails from other cyclists who want to beat me. The race is on. I think it's great.

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