

Charles grew up in Paris and Tokyo. After graduating from business school, he undertook the cycle journey described in this book with old friend Gabriel de Lépinau. His entrepreneurial skills have seen him involved in several business start-ups and he is now in charge of the international expansion of a major e-travel company. He lives with his wife and two young daughters in Provence, in the south of France.

Cycling Out of the Comfort Zone

Two boys, two bikes,
one unforgettable mission

Charles Guilhamon

Translated by Juliet McArthur



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To Gabriel, whose friendship I value enormously

*To all those who welcomed us,
our hosts for a few moments
or a few days,
each one providential*

To Manki

SERGE To be modern is to be of one's own time!

MARC As if we could belong to a time other than our own.

Yasmina Reza, *Art*

God didn't write that we were the honey of the earth, my boy, but the salt.

Georges Bernanos, *Journal of a Country Priest*

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Foreword

I want to see for myself and experience the reality of this world first hand . . . I don't want an ordinary life. There's no such thing.

So writes Charles in his mission statement for the epic journey on which he is about to embark. Charles and his childhood friend Gabriel, both in their mid-twenties, then set out to see the world first hand on their recumbent bicycles. They do not choose to see the popular cycling destinations or cross continents for the sake of it, but, rather, ride through lands and cultures that we rarely hear about.

And their adventures are daring indeed: they brave a ride through the deserts of northern Iraq; they dice with the aggressive truck drivers of Kolkata; they visit refugee camps in India and a church in Nepal that has recently been bombed; they scramble over the high passes of Tibet; they survive a wild boat trip down the Amazon; they risk kidnap in North Africa. Through testing themselves to their limits, they learn much, and grow greatly.

But more than wanting to simply grow as humans, they also want to grow as Christians. By having a rule of only one euro a day for most of the journey, and not staying in hotels, they depend on God's Providence and the hospitality of his people.

Indeed, after stepping out with such faith, they find, time after time, they are looked after and, again and again, the local churches give them shelter, food and fellowship. They are fed and cared for not just physically but also spiritually, as they witness the lives of the people in these communities and hear their stories. At times Charles is inspired, at times strengthened, at times bewildered, by the varying expressions of faith he sees. The brave church of Kurdistan. The suffering church of Orissa. The forgiving church of Nepal. The loud, dancing church of the Amazon. The quiet monks and nuns of North Africa.

And what stories he records for us.

There is the priest in Iraq who has refused to flee despite the danger. "This country has suffered much for the love of Christ. We've always responded peacefully. I can't leave this land, this soil . . . it's mixed with

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the blood of martyrs. Our country is rich. We must give all we have, even our lives, to build, here in Iraq, a people united in peace.'

The man in Nepal who lost his wife and daughter in a bomb attack, but who had forgiven their attackers. 'When we search his face,' writes Charles, 'we find neither distress nor anger, neither fatalism nor rebellion. His eyes are full of tenderness. His face shines with that same light that I've seen before in monks and devout believers.'

The priest in China who spent decades in a concentration camp, but who says to Charles, 'I'm very optimistic about the future. This is the paradox at the heart of the Christian view of suffering: suffering doesn't have the last word, it can be a trampoline to joy.'

It is not just in their response to suffering that the Christians encourage Charles, it is also in the attitudes and devotional lives of those he meets. A materially poor parishioner explains to Charles how, for his wife's birthday, he gave her 'a magnificent view of a field of cornflowers that he had recently spotted when he was out walking.'

Regarding prayer, a nun in North Africa counsels Charles, 'The important thing is to take the time to meet God. That's why, when I ask the Lord something, it would be sad if I expected him to answer my prayer immediately. Because then it wouldn't be a person to person relationship; it would just be self-interest.'

Charles is honest in his self-reflection, such as his typically Western ailment of being in a rush: 'Always the need to get there and, once we're there, to leave again as quickly as possible and go flat out to reach the next place.' As the journey progresses, however, he is taught to slow down and be still. He is teased by a Senegalese monk, 'You French people, you're always in a hurry. You're always running after time. For us it's the other way round: time pushes us along!'

It should be noted that Charles and Gabriel are both Roman Catholics and the church communities they visited are all part of the Catholic Church. This is a book that will help Catholics to understand better their truly global family. It counters well the pessimistic future of the Church we so often hear about in the West. Charles writes, 'Personally, after all I've seen, I don't believe in the catastrophe scenario at all. The church that we've met is resourceful and full of life.'

But it is also a book that people of any faith tradition can enjoy. I am not a Catholic. I grew up in the Anglican Church and have regularly

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attended Anglican or independent Protestant-charismatic churches for most of my life. Sadly, some Protestant circles I have spent time with are suspicious of Catholics, but in recent years I've come to believe that, for all our tragic, historical conflicts, and even ongoing areas of theological disagreement, we are all part of the same Church and we are all called to talk, work and pray towards the healing of our divisions.

The breakthrough in understanding for me came on my own bicycle trip across the world, during which I was looked after by Orthodox believers in Russia, Pentecostals in South Korea, and Catholics in Papua New Guinea and Pakistan.

Two Catholic priests I remember particularly. In a haunted gulag town in north-east Siberia, I was hosted by Father Mike of Magadan. His deep spirituality, his total commitment to his people and his endearing sense of humour made a huge impression on me. Later in the journey, I stayed with Father Lawrence of Angoram in Papua New Guinea. He was a former accountant from South India, who now devoted his life to bringing peace and love to the violent community where he was stationed. Only the week before I rode up, unannounced, to his house, someone had tried to kill him with a machete. He showed me the nick in his porch where the knife had got stuck after he sidestepped the blow.

Charles sums up my own feeling well when he writes:

Visiting church after church over the last six months, we've dined and talked with hundreds of priests, monks and lay people. We've experienced several forms of worship, some of which didn't do much for us, prayed in dozens of languages, and encountered cultural differences that have demonstrated a huge gulf between us and our hosts . . . and yet, every time we enter a church and every time we meet a priest or monk, the same minor miracle is repeated: we feel at home.

On learning of this worldwide Church, suffering, persevering, witnessing, loving, I am challenged as to how I live my own life. A life in which I often bow more to the idols of comfort, safety and vain fulfilment, than Christian love and service. One of the saddest parts of the book is when Charles and Gabriel ride the home straight through France and find that the people of the local churches, when they knock on their doors, are too pre-occupied to take an interest in them or even give them a bed for the night.

I hope that this book will help us, like Charles and Gabriel and the Christian communities they encountered, to live our lives more daringly, openly, generously and faithfully.

Rob Lilwall

1

Departure

In which we work out the whys and the wherefores

‘The Church? Nobody gives a damn. A round-the-world-tour? People go around the world all the time these days. As for going by bike – it’s hardly original.’

That morning in early June we were ensconced on the leather sofa of a Parisian apartment overlooking the trendy Canal St Martin. In three short sentences, the man sitting opposite us has just demolished the reason for our visit. Fortyish, tousled light-brown hair, V-neck black T-shirt, Pierre B. is a television producer. We’d been told he’s a risk-taker – the type who might be game for a project like ours that others would reject out of hand. So we came to him with our proposal for a documentary: around the world in one year, mostly cycling, but also some walking and canoeing, to meet Christian communities that are extremely isolated and, often, experiencing persecution.

Gabriel and I had known each other for 12 years. Sons of expats living in Tokyo, we met in Japan and had been good friends ever since. We’d travelled together many times and, over the last few years, there’d been this yearning, which never really left us, to go further afield, for longer. Gabriel had just finished his degree in agricultural engineering and was working for a company selling yogurt and biscuits. I was nearly through business school. If we didn’t make up our minds now, it would probably never happen.

All right. Decided. But where would we go? And what did we want to achieve? We needed a clear objective that would keep us on track and be achievable in a year, after which I’d return to finish my studies.

‘A beer tour of the world.’ It seemed like a great idea at first. Going to meet the brewers of today. Understanding the problems of obtaining a

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pure water supply and enjoying that delectable beverage wherever we went. No, we'd come back with beer bellies. Forget it! Perhaps a wine tour of the world? More refined. No, that wouldn't work either: if we were smashed half the time, how would we stay on our bikes? Something else then. A world tour of sustainable housing? A world tour of social enterprise? No, too clichéd, predictable. And, anyway, enough of sustainable development and the triple bottom line.

Since we were so difficult to please, our great travel plans were shelved. Nothing grabbed us enough to make us want to ride a bike for a whole year. I was within an inch of ditching the whole business when, one evening in Corsica during a weekend away, my mobile phone rang. I remember as if it was yesterday. There was a warm breeze. In the darkness I watched the distant luminous wake of a ferry on the horizon. A name came up on the screen: Gabriel.

'I've got it.'

'Uh? You've got what?'

'The reason for the trip. I want to go, provided the purpose is spiritual.'

(Eloquent silence)

'The trip . . . I'm keen as long as this year away enables us to get closer to God. What do you think?'

'The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.' (John 3.8 NIV)

I was slow to catch on. Yet Gabriel had just put his finger on what should have been blindingly obvious to us both: all these years, the thing that had kept our friendship strong was, more than anything else, the faith we both shared. Our Catholic faith.

'The Church! The Church is interesting, isn't it? We'll go and meet Christians from all over the world; Christians who are persecuted, outnumbered, isolated, worlds away from the magnificent Church of Rome! We'll meet men and women of faith, simple people, forgotten by us in the West. Some of them we've never even heard of. We'll see how they pray, what keeps them going, what difficulties they face. Ever since I was little, I've been told I have Christian brothers. Do you know your Christian brothers? We have no idea what they're like.'

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As usual Gabriel's voice was calm, measured. He never gets overexcited. He's as steady as I'm hot-headed, as easy-going as I'm enthusiastic, as blond as I'm dark: in short, as Scandinavian as I'm Mediterranean. That day, however, I could tell he felt passionate about the idea. This time we'd nailed it. We'd leave in exactly a year – enough time for me to finish my internship in Italy and for him to work for a few months. While I was studying and he was working, we'd get ourselves ready. It was an excellent plan.

'An excellent plan.' I'm repeating this little mantra to myself when our interviewer suddenly delivers us a whacking blow on the head: 'The Church? Nobody gives a damn. A round the world tour? People go off around the world all the time. As for cycling, it's hardly original.'

Yet the expression on his face belies the severity of his attack. Am I dreaming or could it be that he actually likes us? His cheeky grin can mean only one thing: he's sizing us up. I think people actually do give a damn about the Church, be they staunch believers or confirmed atheists, disillusioned doubters or faithful followers. If only through its history, and the heritage and values it has handed down to us, the Church affects far more people than we might care to admit. We try to stimulate his interest.

'Out of the 1.2 billion Catholics in the world, 200 million are unable to live out their faith freely and openly. We say the Church is one, and yet it is, by its very nature, diverse. Is it the same being a Christian in the desert, in Tibet and in the Amazon? How do Christians in the Middle East live out their faith? Where are the most recent converts? Is the Church in France representative of the Church worldwide? Is there a shortage of candidates for the priesthood in other countries? How do Catholics get on with other religious groups?'

The itinerary? It would be decided from day to day, but we envisaged stopping for three weeks at a time in seven isolated Catholic villages, in Syria, India, Tibet, Thailand, the Amazon, Senegal and Algeria. The choice was based on our research about the lives of Catholics in those areas and our own personal preferences, but also because, together, they form a great mosaic representing the Church in all its diversity. We also planned to travel through Turkey, Iraq, Nepal, Mauritania . . .

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When Pierre calls us a few days later, he's keen. And he's already found a name. Our documentary will be called *Face to Faith*.¹



One month later, in the church of St Cécile de Boulogne, we attend a special farewell Mass. At home the previous day, I made an exact inventory of what I will take in my panniers: Bible, journal, knife, two T-shirts, polar fleece, waterproof jacket, sleeping bag, three-quarter-size sleeping mat, silk sleeping-bag liner, mosquito net, pepper-spray canister, some medicines, two water bottles and our camera. Nothing superfluous because every gram counts.

Loads of friends come to see us off. My 88-year-old grandmother seizes the opportunity to clamber on to my bike, much to everyone's amazement. I feel a lump in my throat as I kiss her goodbye.

Others strum guitars and sing praise songs. Our mothers and sisters are crying bucketloads of tears. For me, the accumulated tension of the past few weeks was released last night; in my room, surrounded by stacks of cardboard boxes, all of a sudden tears streamed down my face on to the parquet floor.

Amid a round of applause and smart remarks about our incompetence, we set off. Our friend Alexandre² has come with his family and, of course, his bike – the one on which he completed his world tour in 1994. He accompanies us as far as the outskirts of Paris, thereby saving us the embarrassment of getting lost within the first few minutes of a journey that is to be thousands of kilometres long. He shares with us the wisdom of a seasoned traveller: 'You'll be drinking plenty of Coca-Cola! It's so refreshing . . . and it boosts your energy. You'll see how it gets you going!'

I am only half listening, the months of preparation passing through my mind. I think of all the providential events that have brought us to this point: Pierre, who agreed to produce a film about our expedition when we didn't even know how to hold a camera; the 20 young people, friends or friends of friends, who helped us because they were touched by our project; and the more or less kind and friendly

¹ French title: *Il était une foi*.

² Alexandre Poussin is a travel writer. He has written several books, including *Africa Trek*, co-authored with his wife Sonia.

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reception of the Church of France clergy. I think of Frank, a sound engineer, who managed to find us top-quality microphones in the nick of time, and the priest from Rocamadour, the town in south-western France famous for its shrine of the Black Virgin. We met Frank by chance in Paris and promised we would visit the shrine in the rock on our way home to give thanks. And then there were the grants we were repeatedly refused, but also, and most amazing of all, the anonymous donors who sent us a combined cheque for €3,000 one week before our departure, when we still didn't have the funds to cover our costs. I think of all those in the schools with whom we will be in contact, the friends who have been unable to come to see us off and the superb Mass we've just attended.

Several months ago, we each wrote a 'personal statement' for this trip – a way of expressing what it meant to each of us and checking we were both on the same wavelength. Mine went:

Milan, 15 September 2008

This project is a dream I have nourished for years. A dream of adventure, discovering the world, facing the unknown, the unexpected. I want to see for myself and experience the reality of this world first hand. I want to understand what makes the world go round.

I don't want an ordinary life. There's no such thing. . . I want to put God at the centre of my life and for him to be my guiding light always.

I love the idea of heading off into the unknown, with no idea of where we'll sleep or who we'll meet. I love the prospect of trusting myself totally to God and his Providence, no matter what happens. We'll rely on our own resources for transport, since we'll be cycling, but in other ways we'll be depending totally on the people we meet!

I choose to go with Gabriel. I couldn't imagine doing this expedition with anyone else; it's the result of many years' friendship, knowing each other, our strengths and also our weaknesses. We're very complementary and, under normal circumstances, we encourage each other's growth. Supporting each other for a whole year will be part of the challenge. We'll have to work at it but, united with a common purpose, I think we'll make it.

We're going to accomplish a very special project, not one that will necessarily look good on our CVs but one that has a greater significance. We want to be a reminder to people today that we all belong to one Body.

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Alexandre leaves us at Porte de Bagnolet after offering us a Coca-Cola – according to him, the first of many. We ride for another hour and, finally on our own, we pitch our tent in an empty field. We discover the comments that our friends and family wrote on our bikes earlier. F-X., the youngest in Gabriel's family, hit the nail on the head: 'Don't push your luck too far!'

If only he knew . . .

2

Europe

In which we realize the virtues of a gammy knee

10 JULY, 5 DAYS AFTER DEPARTURE

Only five days since we left and we've already been welcomed by Marie-André, who opened his front door and fridge door to us, and Georges and Davila, who put us up in their grown-up son's bedroom. Who says the French only look after number one?

Joy of joys! We've finally been able to try out our bikes. And they work! We took possession of them three days before D-day and only just had time to assemble them before we left. Now, in the running-in period, bolts are coming undone with monotonous regularity. The novel feature of our trusty bikes is their recumbent design. You ride with the handlebars beneath your backside and your legs parallel to the ground, sitting back into a supportive, foam-padded seat. They're the perfect cross between a deckchair and a bicycle, providing the ultimate in comfort cycling, although they're not the ultimate in cool. Recumbents were Gabriel's idea. Right from the start we discovered they're no magic cure for sore thighs – inevitable with any kind of bike – but I had to admit, they provided a considerable degree of comfort.

Anyway, everything seemed to be going well, incredibly well, but, as of yesterday, it's all over.

We left in a headlong rush to get away, as you might race down a staircase, missing most of the steps. Desperate to leave France as quickly as possible, we needed to get cracking and cross the border, which was, for us, synonymous with passing a point of no return. The road was ours; we were unstoppable. But we had barely reached Strasbourg when I developed a painful tendonitis in my left knee, which

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the blood of martyrs. Our country is rich. We must give all we have, even our lives, to build, here in Iraq, a people united in peace.'

The man in Nepal who lost his wife and daughter in a bomb attack, but who had forgiven their attackers. 'When we search his face,' writes Charles, 'we find neither distress nor anger, neither fatalism nor rebellion. His eyes are full of tenderness. His face shines with that same light that I've seen before in monks and devout believers.'

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