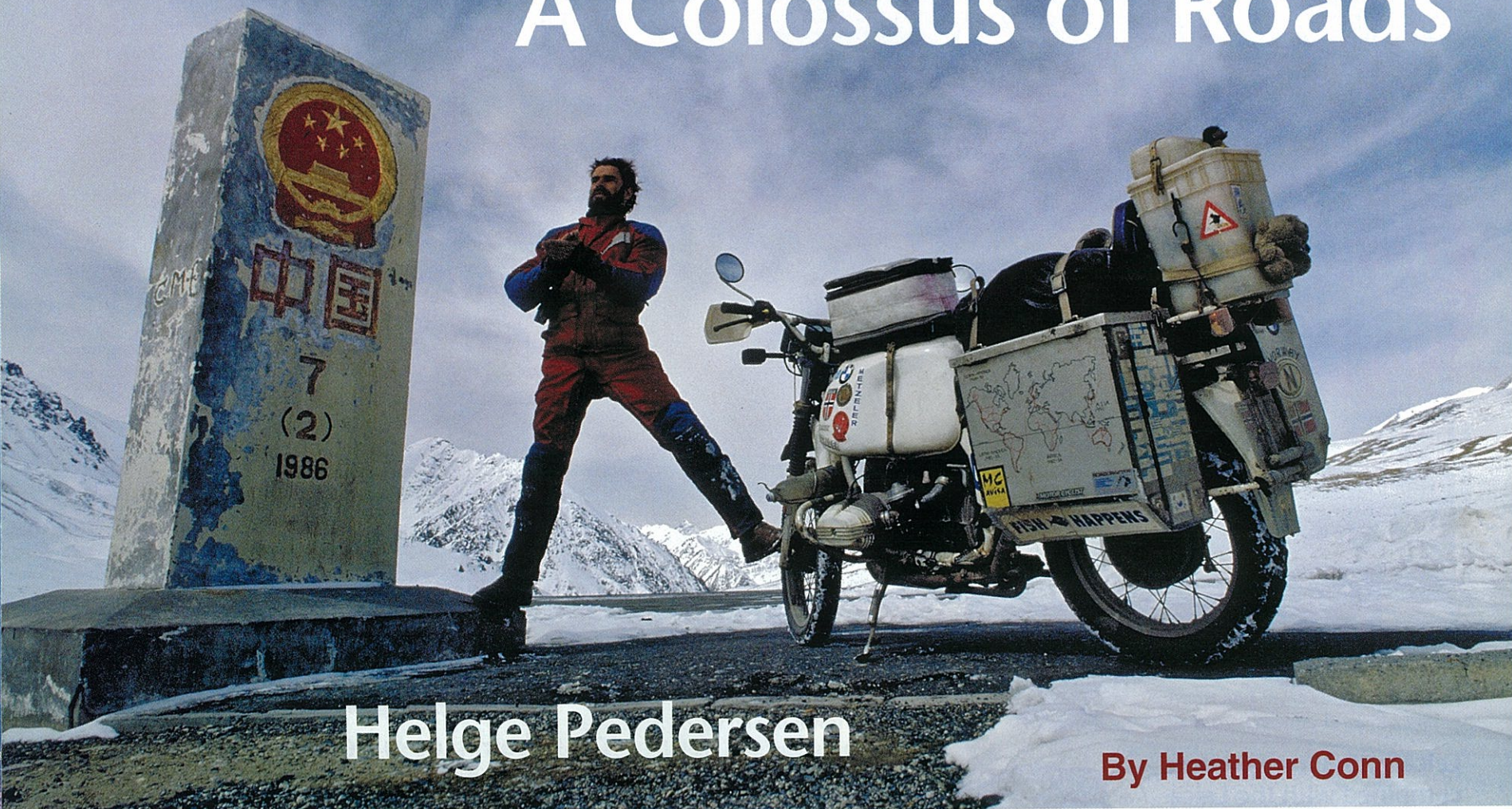


# A Colossus of Roads



## Helge Pedersen

By Heather Conn

**H**e's climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. He's been placed under house arrest in Somalia. He's crossed the Sahara Desert, circumnavigated the world and retraced the ancient Silk Road from Istanbul to China, all by motorcycle.

He became the first motorcyclist to ride from South America to North America through Panama's Darien Gap, a notorious 80-mile stretch of almost impenetrable trails through bug-filled jungle and swamp. After three weeks in the Gap, he arrived in Panama City with broken bones and infected legs.

He has hung out the window of a helicopter over rough Nor-

wegian seas, photographing rescues of crews on sinking ships. "We flew for four to five hours with one guy who broke his back and they couldn't give him medication — it was agonizing," remembers Helge Pedersen, a Seattle photojournalist and traveling adventurer.

He has been lowered down by Coast Guard helicopter over gale-whipped waves to snap pictures of Russian trawlers fishing illegally in the same waters; his images helped to bring convictions. "They [the Coast Guard] used me as a scout. Those were the most exciting helicopter trips," he says.

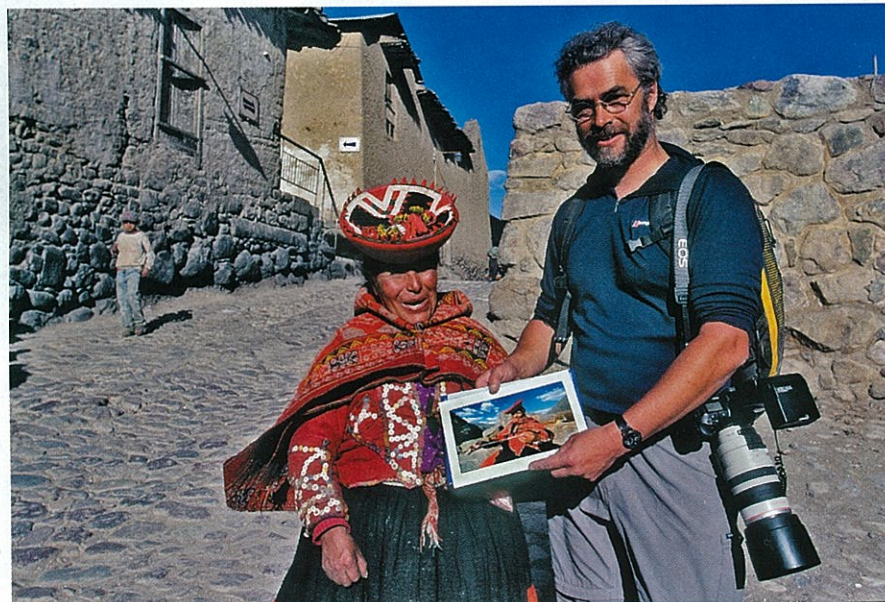
Yet, it was one excruciating day in an underground cell in North Yemen, after his abduction by gun-wielding guards at a roadblock, that left Pedersen wondering if he would escape alive or maimed. "I knew that they [local authorities] cut off your hands," he confides of his terrifying day as a

lone rider back in 1984. "It was close to the Saudi Arabian border. [The guards] took me to a police station. They were very determined. I didn't know where we were going. I was really scared.

"It was getting dark. When I tried to leave, guys with semiautomatics grabbed me. They threw me into a dark cell. A guy inside was praying to Allah. There were no toilets. It was stinking."

How did Pedersen, a highly practical problem-solver, respond to this ordeal? He matter-of-factly designed how he would live with one hand. "I was making plans for the future," he recalls. "How will I make it back home?" I thought. "With at least one hand, I can move the clutch over to one side." Fortunately, he never had to make such adjustments. The Arabic-speaking guards finally decided that he was traveling without subversive intent and released him.

These days, Pedersen, a self-described "travel activist," may not find himself in quite as many Indiana Jones-style scenarios, but he is hardly slowing down. As founder of GlobeRiders ([www.globeriders.com](http://www.globeriders.com)), an adventure tour company for



Above: Seemingly standing astride the world, adventurer/photographer Helge Pedersen surveys the 15,000-foot Khunjerab Pass on the border between Pakistan and China. He couldn't afford the \$50,000 visa, but he "rode a few illicit yards into China just for kicks," he wrote.

Left: On a return trip to Ollantaytambo, Peru, near Machu Picchu, Pedersen surprises a villager with a portrait he had taken of her two years earlier. The 8x10 was "a thank you for her wonderful smile and great personality," he says. "She loved the gesture."

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Right: The tangle of lines on the world map show Pedersen's perambulations since 1982, including his solo journeys (in red) and guided GlobeRider tours (in blue). To date he has visited 100-plus countries and covered more than 1 million miles.

motorcyclists, Pedersen strives to expand his clients' awareness of global issues and expose them to powerful experiences, whether it's child poverty or an HIV epidemic in Botswana. "The best thing you can do for humans is introduce them to the other side of the world," he says.

### Self-made globetrotter

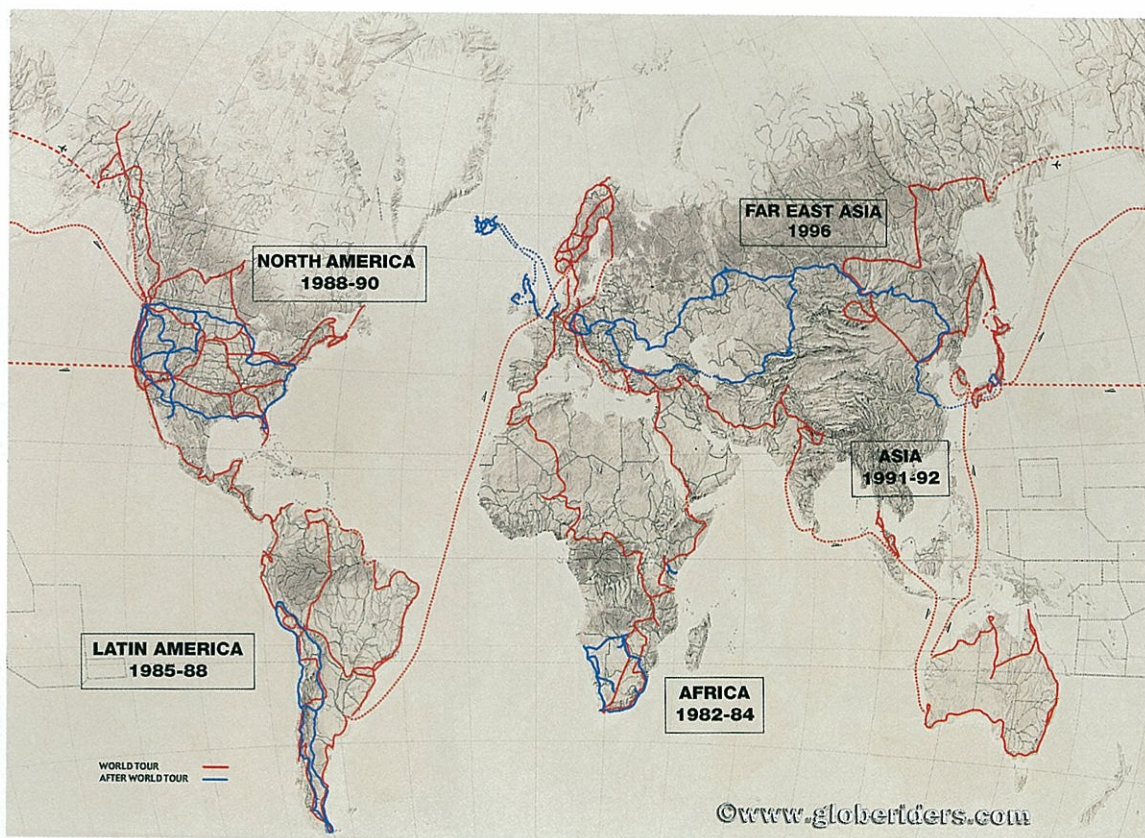
His first career-defining journey — spanning a full decade, from 1982 to 1992 — carried him for 250,000 miles through 77 countries on his beloved "Olga," a BMW R80 G/S motorcycle now on permanent display in the BMW AG Corp. museum in Munich, Germany. Why the name Olga? "It's the name of a Russian tractor manufacturer," Pedersen says. "It also makes me think of old Norwegian women with wide hips who are very hardworking and never give up."

This epic voyage is documented in his first book, the self-published "10 Years on 2 Wheels," which contains more than 200 glossy photos and nine maps. To produce it in 1994, he borrowed \$64,000 from "rich friends" while his business consultant laughed in disbelief. Yet within a year, Pedersen had paid back his friends and paid himself a salary. (It sounds as if Pedersen's consultant could have used a few lessons from his client.)

It is no surprise that a photographer/writer and bike enthusiast with such wanderlust has contributed to dozens of motorcycle magazines, from *Moto Presse AG* to *Outrider*, and publications such as *Time*, *National Geographic* and *The New York Times*. His practicality shines through his writing efforts, too. He has learned to package the same articles and photos and sell them to at least five different magazines or corporations, spanning from Europe to Japan.

On the road or on the job, you'll find Pedersen behind either a digital Canon EOS 1D Mark II or a 1DS Mark II. "Canon has been in my life for many years," he says. It doesn't hurt that he received sponsorship from Canon in Norway, his native country. However, Pedersen makes photojournalism his primary source of income; his customers are mostly magazines and corporations, and some ad agencies. His numerous international clients include Pepsi, Canon, the Discovery Channel, the British Broadcasting Corp. and Speed Channel.

Astoundingly, he had never submitted images to a stock agency until recently. "I like to control



the image," he admits. But now he has changed focus and has made stock photo submissions a major project. "This is a big step," he confesses, adding that he submitted his first photos to

### Born to travel

Pedersen's own love of photography began in his teens with a home darkroom in Kristiansand, Norway. As a child, photos in *National Geographic* encouraged him to dream: "This magazine was a great inspiration to my future as an explorer and photographer." As a 17-year-old foreign exchange student with the American Field Service, Pedersen came to Los Angeles, where he met his "all-time hero and inspiration," a high school teacher named Ed Born. "He not only taught the ins and outs of photography," Pedersen says of Born, "but gave us students a deeper sense of what we could do with our creations. Ed has since passed on, but, for me, he still lives on. I cherish the opportunity I had to be his student."

While learning from Born, Pedersen met other foreign exchange students and started to wonder what their home countries were like. He decided that one day he would find out. Before he could

*"The best thing you can do for humans is introduce them to the other side of the world."*

*— Helge Pedersen*

Alamy Images in England. He's hired Seth Holton, a 24-year-old intern, to help him with the extensive sorting, scanning and cataloging of his archived images.



Right: These two Maasai friends in Kenya caught Pedersen's eye as he took pictures of kids nearby. "I could sense that they really would like to be part of the attention," he says. "I was right — they loved being photographed."

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pursue his travel dreams, however, he realized that he wanted to do more with photography. He returned to Norway and studied technical photography at college, then spent three years running the photo department for the rescue helicopter service in northern Norway.

Ultimately, even extreme helicopter shoots were too limiting for Pedersen. "I came to a crossroads. I said, 'I love this job; this is good.' But I had a strong desire to go to Africa. I decided,

'I'm going to make a choice.' I sold everything except two cardboard boxes. I remember waking up, sweating at night, wondering, 'Am I doing the right thing?' I thought, 'Yes, this is right.'"

He then spent two years on his first serious adventure: a solo motorcycle trip through Africa. When he contacted magazines about publishing his photos, he remembers, "They all said, 'Send us photos.' Nobody wanted a contract." People liked his words and images, however, and he realized,

"I can make a living doing this."

Determined to see the world, Pedersen worked on a Norwegian freighter and saved money to begin his career as a bike-riding, camera-wielding professional adventurer.

### Giving back

While traveling, Pedersen likes to use his images to give back to the people he meets; he takes along prints and slides as icebreakers and gifts. "With most tourists, it's take, take, take, but this is personal. I've passed around 25 candid shots in the Darien Gap of reindeer or me cross-country skiing. It gets people to feel comfortable. I got REI to laminate them to endure the jungle humidity." Another practical tip.

After a motorcycle tour from Santiago, Chile, to Peru, he made 8x10s of various locals whom he had encountered on the trip. When he returned two years later, he distributed the prints to his photographic subjects. If someone was away, he left the photo, wrapped in a plastic bag, under a rock outside a doorway. "When I tried to find one old lady, the people told me, 'She's out in the fields. Go and meet her.' You should have seen the



Left: A bleached Inca skeleton looted hundreds of years ago by *conquistadors* in Peru's Atacama Desert is testament to the harsh conditions Pedersen often faced. "Other than the effects of the wind, the skull-littered place has changed little since that time," he wrote.

Left: On a stop through Volgograd, Russia, Pedersen found an unusual perspective of the 170-foot-tall *Rodina Mat*, or Mother Russia, statue — one of the world's tallest — at a memorial park dedicated to the 1 million soldiers killed during the Battle of Stalingrad in World War II.

Right: On a break from shooting in Mombasa, Kenya, Pedersen visited the southern coast, where he met this Somali camel owner offering rides for the occasional tourist. "A harsh way to make a living," Pedersen says, "but better than starving in his homeland."

smile on her face when I showed her the photo."

Pedersen has even rigged up a car battery to show slides on a blanket in the middle of the Amazon. Another time, he used a generator to share images on a concrete wall in Africa. He uses his own homemade one-slide projector outfitted with three different bulb adapters (12, 110 and 220 volts), each made for use in various countries. "It's fantastic to see how people respond to the images," he says. "They go up and touch them. There's so much appreciation. It's wonderful."

Back in North America, this multilingual photographer (fluent in Norwegian, English, Spanish and German) uses far more sophisticated methods in his six multimedia shows, which combine

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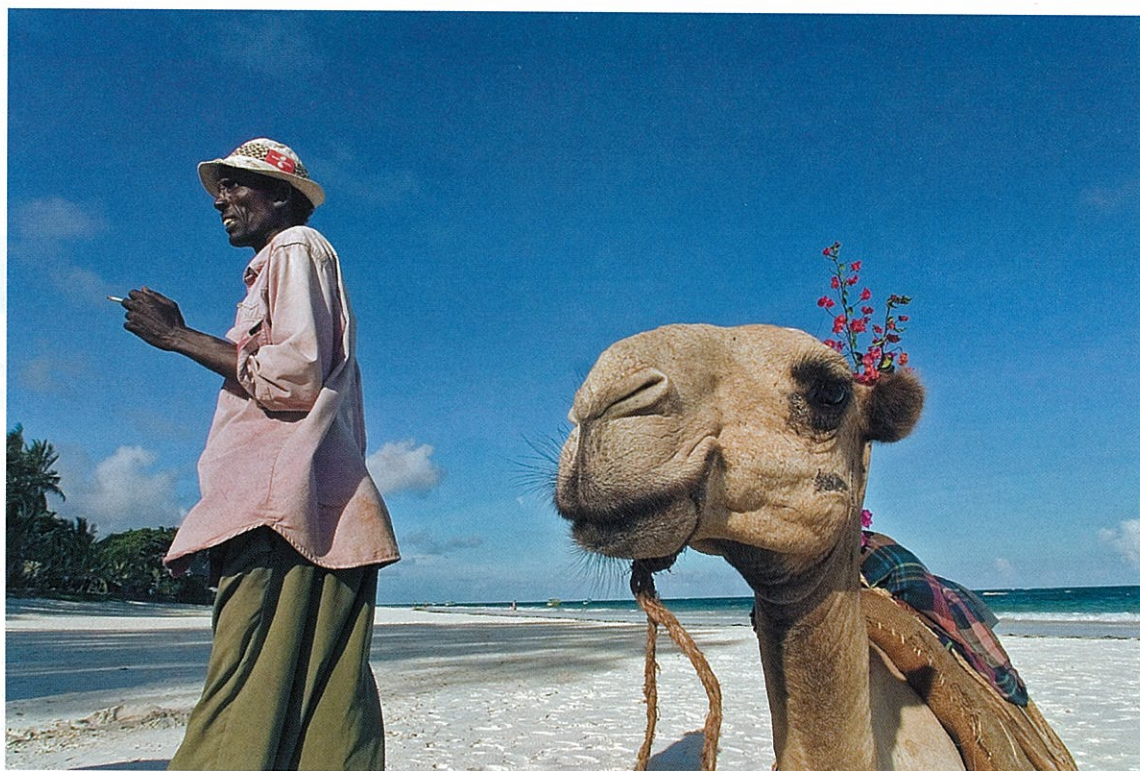
*— Helge Pedersen*

images, music and sound effects. Four projectors show 640 slides of the fjords and lava fields of breathtaking Iceland, for instance. He also offers three instructional DVDs on everything from GPS for beginners to how to change a tire on, and maintain, a BMW R1150 GS.

Pedersen continues to refine his multimedia shows and hopes eventually to publish a collection of these presentations on a DVD. Meanwhile, the proceeds from his multimedia shows, magazine contracts and sponsorships have helped fund his expeditions. Besides BMW, his ongoing sponsors include Nikwax Powersports, Touratech Motorcycle Accessory, Motorcycle Express shipping and PPS Ohlin Suspension.

Pedersen enjoys sharing his photographic expertise with GlobeRiders clients both before and during the trip. Before each expedition, he sets up

Right: These two stranded trucks on an Ecuadoran road had blocked most vehicular traffic in the area for two days. Fortunately, Pedersen's trusty Olga was able to squeeze through.



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Left: On assignment for the Hong Kong Tourism Board, Pedersen interacted onstage with a traditional dancing group. "This particular man had dressed up in several layers of masks, which he in swift moves would remove, revealing yet another personality," he says.

Below: A tight budget often led to many nights with just Olga, a fire and a hammock, but that wasn't the only reason. After all the attention the bike needed each day, Pedersen says, "the solitude and quiet evenings around the fire were a lifesaver at times."

a private Internet forum to discuss the upcoming journey with his clients. He offers purchase advice on digital cameras, then offers photo tips once the tour is under way. "Digital photography has great advantages," he says. "We can look at pictures on our laptops in the comfort of a hotel. Much can be learned from a timely review, something that the tour participants enjoy very much."

### Around the next bend

Today, Pedersen is considering a second coffee-table book based on his world adventures: "I would

love to select a wide spectrum of pictures that can reflect the diversity of cultures and geography across the globe." This year, he will lead GlobeRiders motorcycle tours to the Silk Road starting in May and Africa in the fall. Next year, he is planning a 66-day round-the-world trip from China to Germany.

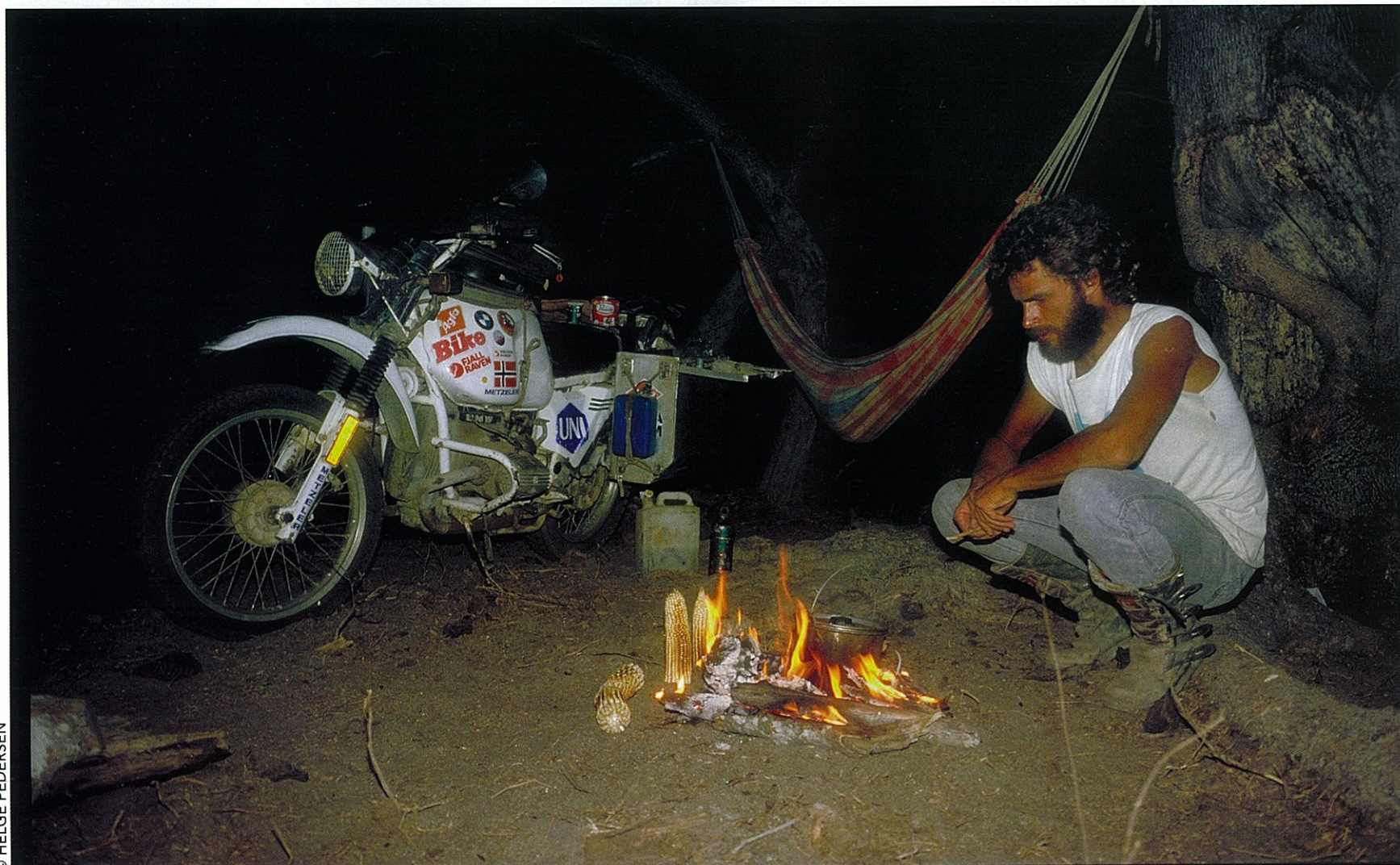
Now that he runs a bustling tour business in Seattle, does he still find time to take pictures? "Photography is such a passion for me, I keep the tours down to one or two a year," he confides. "I take breaks in between, which gives me more energy for photography." He also remembers the

advice of his father, also a motorcycle enthusiast, who told him before he died: "Don't work as hard as me."

"I started my travels seeking satisfaction in remote and spectacular natural settings," Pedersen says, "and ended up meeting fascinating people of all walks of life. That gave me hope for the future of the human race. It is my hope that more people go out and see the same for themselves and do not get confused by all the misery that we are fed every day through the media."

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