

Charley Boorman
and his bikes





BACK IN THE SADDLE

After a shocking motorbike accident almost left him without a leg, Charley Boorman is now back and raring to go, says *HUGH FRANCIS ANDERSON*

In 2004, Charley Boorman embarked on his round-the-world motorcycle journey with best friend Ewan McGregor. Since then he has firmly established himself as an advocate for the petrol-fuelled world of adventure travel. From competing in the world's most dangerous motor race to crossing some of its most treacherous borders, Charley has done it all. But, in February last year, he was involved in a motorcycle accident while in Portugal for the launch of the Triumph Tiger Explorer, so severely that he almost lost his left leg. But now, only 18 months later, Charley is back in the saddle, pursuing adventure with more enthusiasm than ever before.

I meet Charley at his family home in Barnes, where his elderly spaniel greets me with a wagging tail and a few licks. 'This is Ziggy,' Charley says with a wide smile, welcoming me in. A year and a half on from his horrific crash, Charley's light limp is a welcome sight. 'The crash was savage,' he says, slumping onto the sofa, 'I've been riding for 40 years, and I've broken loads of bones in the past, especially riding off road on dirt bikes and enduro bikes, where that's just part of the cycle,' he says nonchalantly, 'but this was just brutal, the left leg

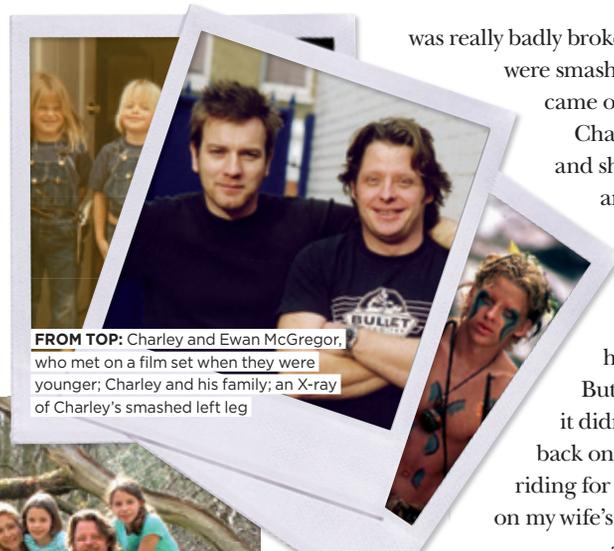
was really badly broken, the tibia and fibula were smashed to pieces and even came out of my leg.'

Charley reaches for his phone and shows me the X-rays, which are every bit as gruesome as his description.

'I remember trying to stand up and it was just this big floppy thing,' he says gesticulating wildly.

But, in true Boorman fashion, it didn't take him long to get back on two wheels. 'I've been riding for a little while now, I was on my wife's moped for a long time, and it was great because I could get the cage supporting my leg in the foot well, which, of course, I couldn't get on a normal bike,' he laughs.

The son of famed filmmaker John Boorman, renowned for movies such as *Deliverance* and *Point Blank*, Charley spent much of his younger years in County Wicklow, Ireland, when not travelling with his father. It was here that his thirst for the outdoors originated. 'My dad was quite into horses, so we had



FROM TOP: Charley and Ewan McGregor, who met on a film set when they were younger; Charley and his family; an X-ray of Charley's smashed left leg



Charley in
The Dakar Rally



we were out, we could just breathe. It took a good few weeks to get into the journey, the moment you're out of Europe and getting further east, it all starts to kick off. And then it's something new every day.'

Charley's next TV programme, *Race to Dakar*, documented his participation in the Dakar Rally, one of the world's toughest endurance motoring races. Severely breaking his hands when he crashed in the Sahara desert, Charley was forced to retire after just five days, but stayed with the team to help and support his fellow teammate, Simon Pavey, to the finish line.



'It was really hard work,' says Charley, 'but by breaking my hands, and then staying and filming what was going on in the back end, I got a much better perspective on everything.' Would he tackle it again? 'I loved doing it, and I'd love another opportunity to do it again. I'm a much better rider now and more confident.'

After such incredible adventures, I wonder what Charley likes most about riding motorcycles. 'I like the freedom of it. You have to drive a car, but you choose to ride a motorbike. I love the fact that when you travel somewhere, the experience is completely different. When you arrive somewhere and you're all dusty, you're part of the environment, so there's

an immediate connection. When you're in a vehicle, people step out of their environment and into yours, so you're disconnected, I like the immediateness of riding a motorbike.'

After *Race to Dakar*, Charley went on to film *The Long Way Down*, in which he rode from John O'Groats to Cape Agulhas, the southernmost tip of Africa, once again with Ewan. The Long Way Round, The Long Way Down... is there ever going to be The Long Way Up? 'There has been talk of it, and Ewan and I like the idea of doing it when we're older so we can be two grumpy old men reminiscing on how it was back in "our" day,' he chuckles. 'The obvious spot would be South America, from the southern tip up, that would be incredible, and maybe we could finish in LA with a huge ride out.'

Alongside his adventuring exploits, Charley is a busy man.

He spends his time working with UNICEF, a partnership first explored during *The Long Way Round*, as well as Dyslexia Action, due to his own severe dyslexia. He has written a new book, *Long Way Back*, which is part autobiography, part recovery story from the crash in Portugal. He also runs motorcycle tours through Africa. 'It's really important to me, and I love introducing people to Africa,' he says. 'Most people don't remember that Africa is a continent not a country, so the idea is to get people down there.'

So what's next? 'I'm doing a lot of work for Triumph at the moment, and there are some big plans for the next couple of years. I need to be busy now as I lost all of last year, and the year before I was prepping for a TV show, which I had to stop because of breaking my leg, so I'm itching to get out now.'

There's no quelling an adventurous spirit and with that I take my leave. ■

'I realised with a bike you didn't have to muck it out or brush it down, you could abuse it, then lean it against a wall and head home'

a few, and as we lived in the middle of nowhere, I used to do quite a lot of riding and hunting,' he reminisces. 'What I loved about hunting was that you never knew where you were going, and if there was suddenly a fence or a hedge, you'd be over it; it was so exciting.'

So when did motorcycles come into the picture? 'I must have only been about ten, and I went around a field on a Maico 400 owned by a guy who lived in the village. Unable to touch the pegs, I promptly fell off, and that was it.' In a household of horse riders, and with five sisters, it must have been an interesting transition from horseback to motorcycles. 'I realised that with a bike you didn't have to muck it out, brush it down, clean the tack, etc, you could just abuse it, then lean it against a wall and head home,' he says. 'I used to head off into the Wicklow Mountains with a friend, strap some petrol in a jerry can to the back of the bike, ride until I ran out of fuel, fill it up and head back home. It was brilliant.'

Which no doubt, years later, led him to *The Long Way Round*, a motorbike trip from London to New York, with Ewan McGregor. 'Ewan and I met a long time ago on a film, and we both loved bikes, we did track days together and helped run a team,' says Charley. 'We then did weekend rides, but always looked to go further and further. We first wanted to ride to the south of Spain, then to China. Ewan rang me up and said, "If we go to China, we may as well cross the Bering Strait and ride over to New York," and it went from there.'

The journey, which covered some 20,000 miles, across 12 countries in 115 days, was an enormous feat to undertake, and one that must have come with many difficulties. 'I remember putting all my gear on and saying goodbye to everyone, and the temperature just getting hotter and hotter. You think you'll never get out of London, let alone survive the trip,' he says with a grin, 'But, once





ABOVE: Charley and his dad, the film director John Boorman



ABOVE: Charley with his beloved bikes
BELOW: Charley on the road to Anchorage in Alaska



Charley's leg cage



ABOVE: Charley with his sister Daisy and a Yamaha DT100
RIGHT: Charley leading a ride through Australia

