

POLAND IN BRIEF

Two Days of Mourning for Miners

For 48 hours flags flew at half mast, all concerts were cancelled, and the nation remembered 15 of its citizens that died following one of the worst mining accidents in recent history.

An explosion rocked the Wujek Śląsk coal mine, located in the southern city of Ruda Śląska, on Friday, 18 September, killing 12 that day and injuring 43, three of whom died later in hospital. The period of mourning was declared by President Lech Kaczyński. The accident has been described as "one of the darkest days in Polish mining", and an investigation is underway to determine if the explosion, which was caused by methane gas sweeping through the mine, could have been prevented.

Polish WWII Heroes Honoured in UK

It took many years, but Poles can now say they have a memorial on British soil dedicated to their compatriots who fought under British command in World War II. Unveiled on 19 September, the statue stands in the National Memorial Arboretum in Lichfield, Staffordshire. It is the first memorial solely dedicated to the Poles that were killed fighting in the Second World War. The memorial depicts four figures, each representing a branch of the Polish armed forces: a pilot from the air force, a member of the Polish navy, an infantryman who fought in the battle of Monte Cassino, and a female resistance fighter from the underground Home Army. It is adorned with a huge eagle, representing the free Polish republic.

The £300,000 for the cost of the statue was raised over the years by several charities and Polish organisations, and the figures were crafted in Poland by sculptor Robert Słodkowski. The panels that surround the figures were also engraved in Poland, and they describe the trials of the Polish units who fought all over the world in the Second World War. While for many the memorial has come too late, as more and more veterans pass away, the statue's sponsors hope that the newest generation of Poles in the UK, those who moved after 2004, will learn about their nation's heroic past thanks to this memorial.

13th Polish Soldier Lost in Afghanistan

As Americans remembered the tragedy of 11 September, Poles woke up to word of another tragedy closer to home: another Polish soldier was killed in Afghanistan. Private first class Piotr Marciniak lost his life in the district of Andar, during an exchange of fire with Afghan resistance fighters. Four other coalition soldiers were wounded, and it is estimated that more than 10 Afghan fighters were killed, including one suspected of numerous terrorist attacks in the Polish-controlled Ghazni province. That province was where a week before, another soldier, Marcin Perzba, was killed when a mine went off under his armoured vehicle.

The skirmish happened near the Four Corners military base, when the Polish regiment was called in to support a joint American-Afghan patrol. Private first class Marciniak, from the 4th Airborne Assault Brigade from Krakow, was killed on the spot by gunfire, as medical helicopters were called in to treat the other wounded troops. 30-year-old Marciniak, a veteran of the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Iraq, is the 13th Polish soldier to be killed in Afghanistan, and already the third in two months.

A Long and Winding Road Trip

Polish couple explores the world by motorbike

Wojciech Galon

In April 2008, Kamil and Izabela Gamański set out on a journey from Singapore to Poland – on the back of a motorbike. It's turned out to be a true odyssey, one that's spanned 17 months, 82,000 kilometres and 51 countries in Asia and Africa, mainly via "off-the-beaten" tracks.

After roaming vast, open Mongolian grasslands, meandering along coastal routes in Japan and embarking on hunting escapades in the Central African Republic, they expected to be home by now. That was before their compulsive wanderlust inspired the decision to extend the trip to South America.

The *Krakow Post* caught up with these globetrotters and got a unique insight into the art of around-the-world travel.

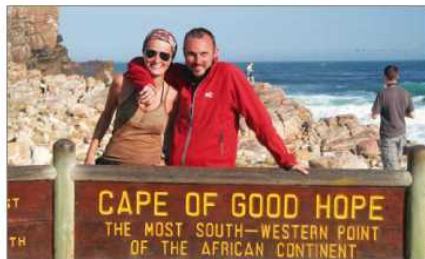
KP: First of all, tell us a bit about yourselves and why you're doing this trip.

Kamil Gamański: We were both born in Poland. It was half a world away, in Australia, that we first met. I had lived in Melbourne since I was seven and Izabela was backpacking her way around the country. We decided that our future lay in Poland and planned to return together. Before going back, we wanted to see some more of Southeast Asia and stopped over in Singapore. We liked it, so we stayed for 2.5 years. Izabela was employed in logistics while I worked in banking.

KP: Why Singapore to Poland on the back of a motorcycle?

KG: Well, on the one hand we love to travel. The allure of a new border crossing and the adventures that lay beyond it is just too good to pass up. On the other hand is the fact that our main form of transport in Singapore was the motorcycle.

The sense of freedom that the bike affords is unparalleled in our opinion. It's versatile, relatively easy to transport, goes practically anywhere and gives you an unrestricted 360-degree view of the world. You smell, feel and hear every



Top: Izabela and Kamil at the Cape of Good Hope, Cape Town, South Africa
Bottom: Improvised bridge, northern Pakistan / photos Izabela Gamańska

kilometre travelled.

KP: What have been some of the high-lights of the trip so far?

KG: The freedom of Mongolia's "nothingness". The land and the lives of the people haven't changed since Genghis Khan roamed and conquered. And, although some of the poorest people we've met, the Mongolian nomads' hospitality is boundless.

The Karakorum Highway from China to Pakistan. The most dramatic scenery we've seen so far. The "highway" is a gravel road etched into the vertical faces of 7,000- and 8,000-metre mountains.

Ethiopia's Omo Valley and the crossing into Kenya via Lake Turkana. After being dumbstruck by a Hamar coming of age ceremony known as "bull jumping", we continued south along Lake Turkana and crossed into Kenya via an unofficial border crossing. The route –



Fun in the dunes in Namibia / photo Izabela Gamańska

long, tough, very remote – rewarded us with unique encounters at Turkana villages.

Desert crossing around Lake Chad. Some of the toughest riding and harshest conditions we've experienced. Batting through deep sand and temperatures of over +40C, our perseverance was rewarded with incredible desert scenery and a unique insight into the lives of Chad's Saharan inhabitants.

KP: You don't hesitate to veer off-road and embark on challenging routes and stunning side trips. Have your most colourful adventures come by accident?

Izabela Gamańska: Almost all of them! Unless we were recommended an interesting route by a fellow overlander, most "side trips" are spontaneous and more often than not end up being memorable adventures. One memorable episode occurred in Kyrgyzstan when we decided to leave the tarmac south of Lake Issyk-Kul and take a "shortcut" up a mountain pass and across a high plateau. There were a number of river crossings and we got stuck in one of them. It was deeper than we anticipated and the strong current prevented us from pushing the bike out ourselves. Luckily there were some local herders on hand to help wrench the bike out using their horses.

KP: An aspect that stands out about your trip is just how raw of an experience this is. You're infatuated with off-road riding, determined to avoid tour-

ist-infested areas, dependent on maps, a compass and the locals, as opposed to GPS. How much has this enhanced your trip?

KG: We definitely cannot imagine travelling any other way. Once in a while we meet overlanders over-dependent on technology and preoccupied with finding the best and quickest route to their destination. We can't help but feel that they are missing out on the best bit about overland travel, which is to meet the real locals, unaffected by tourism and unbiased in their views, to support yourself and discover your mental as well as physical limits, and to see the countryside at 30km/h, rather than whizzing by at 100km/h.

KP: Flirting with danger must be part-and-parcel of travelling across the world on the back of a motorbike. Travelling through Pakistan seemed a particularly serene experience. Where else have you encountered some nerve-racking moments?

IG: The other country that comes to mind is Yemen. Although we had an amazing time there and it ranks highly on our list of favourite countries so far, we couldn't help but feel the need to remain alert and vigilant at all times.

On one occasion we were stopped at a police roadblock and told that we must continue with an escort for the next 400km. It was late in the day and by the time we had covered 200km it was getting dark. We try not to travel after dark

and asked the police officers escorting us whether we could camp behind the police compound at the next checkpoint. In reply one officer shook his head gravely, pointed at us and then made a sign as if he was slitting his throat! We got the message and spent the remaining 200km looking into the darkness on both sides of the road for any sign of an ambush. To say we were a little freaked out would be an understatement.

KP: Are you afraid of having to adjust – one day – to the "real" world?

KG: The thought of returning to the "real world" terrifies us! We often talk about whether we'll be able to adjust

and console ourselves with the fact that it all depends on us.

The trip will surely have to come to an end one day, but it doesn't mean the adventure has to. We both quit office jobs back in Singapore and don't plan to return to a desk job. I plan to pursue my aviation career while Izabela is looking at travel photography and tourism. I don't think our travelling days are numbered just yet.

Read the full interview at

www.krakowpost.com

To follow the adventure, check out:

www.singapore2poland.com

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