



WORDS **KEL BUCKLEY** + PHOTOGRAPHY **SUPPLIED**

THE IRON WILLOF *Elena Axinte*

Powered by grit and an open heart, this adventurer has ridden a stock Harley-Davidson 883 more than 220,000km across 40-something countries

She had never set foot on a sailboat, let alone crossed an ocean on one. But just over a month ago, Elena Axinte clung to the deck of a 43-foot yacht, riding out swells in the Timor Sea – all in service of becoming the first person to ride a motorcycle on all five continents without taking a single flight.

Now in Australia and reunited with her Harley-Davidson Iron 883, the Romanian-born rider is six years and more than 220,000km into a journey that's equal parts personal challenge, social experiment and inner reckoning. She's aiming to set three Guinness World Records – including the longest solo motorcycle journey by a woman touching all continents, the first to do so without any air travel and the first without commercial





accommodation – while also hoping to develop a one-woman theatrical show based on her experiences. But, more than anything, she wants to prove what's possible when you trust the road, the kindness of strangers and your own stubborn search for freedom.

Elena wasn't raised in a motorcycle-riding family, but when she fell for someone who rode bikes, something clicked.

"The first person I ever fell in love with was riding a Harley," she explains. "I fell in love with both the man and the bike. Even after he was gone, that love for the bike stayed."

Part romance, part rebellion, Elena says she was warned the 883 wasn't suitable for long-distance globetrotting. But that only made her more determined. "Everyone told me to buy something else. But I didn't want the bike that everyone said was better. I wanted the bike I felt something for."

It was 2014. Elena was 31, she was unlicensed and, unbeknownst to her, about to change her life with a motorcycle she didn't yet know how to ride.

"I didn't even have my licence when I bought the Harley," she says. "It was delivered two weeks later. I had no idea what I was doing."

After failing her first two riding tests, the examiner told her that motorcycles weren't for her. "He said, 'Miss, go home and forget about bikes'."

Elena, of course, had other ideas. She went home, practised on her newly acquired Harley, sat the test again and passed. She then began riding around her adopted home in northern Italy for longer and longer jaunts aboard the Iron 883. At first, it was just weekends. Then longer trips. But it soon became clear that it was never going to be enough.

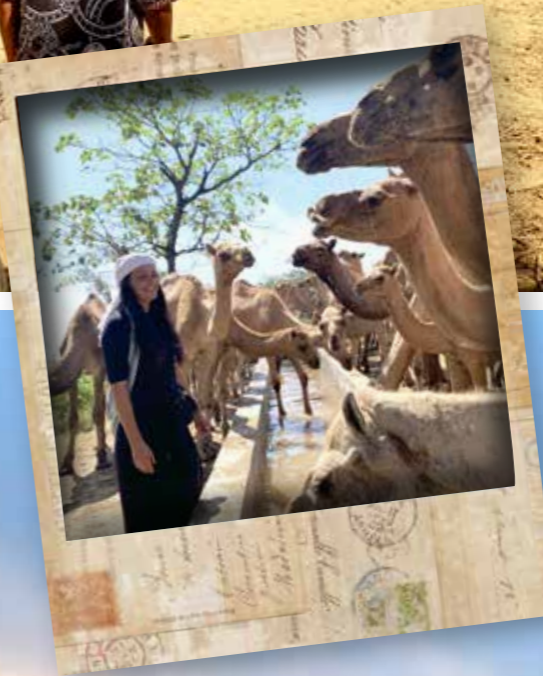
"I wanted something more," she says. "I realised this is how I want to live. I felt like this was something that I was waiting for all my life without knowing. So I just said to myself, 'Okay, in July 2018, I will be in Africa on my bike. Then I will come back, I will close my life and everything I have.'"

THE LONGEST ROAD

Since beginning the current journey, the now 40-year-old Elena has ridden through more than 40 countries across Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. She's battled 50°C heat in the Sahara and camped through -20°C nights in the Caucasus, often sleeping in her tent or wherever shelter could be



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found. She's crossed borders by land, raft and ferry, sometimes navigating through politically unstable regions and remote terrain.

She became the first woman to enter Saudi Arabia alone on a motorcycle following the lifting of visa restrictions for women, rode through Yemen during wartime, and was the first known biker to cross into Syria after the war began.

In Africa, she rode from Morocco to South Africa, passing through countries like Mauritania, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of Congo. She spent months navigating the Middle East, including Iraq and Iran, before heading farther east through Pakistan and into India. Her route took her through Nepal and into Southeast Asia, where she traversed Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia before arranging sea passage to Australia.

At one point, she waited 11 months in India for her visa to Pakistan, refusing to take a flight to bypass the delay.

The only time she paused her journey was during the Covid pandemic, when she waited out border closures in Kenya for more than a year.

And she's done it all on that bog-stock Harley-Davidson Iron 883 – no modifications to extend the range of the standard 12-litre tank, no dual-sport tyres and, just as she prefers it, nowhere to call home.

"I closed all the doors behind me. I didn't want to have a way back. It was the only way I could really commit to the journey; no return ticket, no apartment waiting, just going forward," she explains.

It begs the question: who commits to a life entirely on the road, trusting that a free place to sleep, a warm meal and a safe path forward will reveal themselves one day at a time? It's when I quiz her on deciding to live on a bike that has what must be one of the smallest fuel tank capacities of any production motorcycle, that her determination – and ultimately her success so far – becomes crystal clear.

"Actually, if you know, the Forty-Eight has a nine-litre tank, so there is a smaller one. And the consumption of my bike is very good. I can do over 200km on a tank and rarely you will ride more than 200km without finding a petrol station, so actually it was never a problem," she says. "And yes, I carry a 10-litre jerrycan with me, but I think I've used it three, maybe four times in all of this journey."





HARD AND FAST

Elena's rules are simple: no flights and no commercial accommodation. For the past seven years she's slept in a tent (finding free campsites online), in strangers' homes, in mosques, hospitals, even on the floor of border stations. She cooks her own meals, carries a water filter and rarely plans more than a few days ahead. "I go where I'm invited," she says. "That's how it works."

In terms of circumnavigation of the globe, Africa, Europe and Asia are relatively easy to traverse within her self-imposed rules, but starting her two-wheel journey on Aussie shores took some organising.

She didn't fly here, of course. Instead, she crossed the Timor Sea on the deck of a yacht that was being transported from Jakarta to Darwin, which to many sounds delightful. But the reality was very different. "We had three-metre waves," she says "I was just holding the railings, barefoot, saying to myself, 'What am I doing here? I can't even swim!'"

Her bike, shipped separately by sea, was waiting for her in Sydney. And after traversing the challenges of Southeast Asia, she admits she made the naive assumption that travel between two major cities in Australia would be a simple one-step process.

"But I did research and saw there was no train from Darwin, no direct bus, and I saw the distances..." she explains. "Anyway, I found a van that needed relocating to Adelaide, so I drove the Outback in this very old manual van; driving, camping, driving, camping, and I reached Adelaide in four days. Then I took a bus to Melbourne, and from there a train to Sydney, and finally, I reached my motorcycle."

HARLEY HOMECOMING

By the time Elena arrived in Sydney, Harley-Davidson Australia had stepped in, collected the bike from the docks and had started to rebuild the engine, which included replacing the crankshaft, in the company's Lane Cove-based training centre.

"And when I talked with the technicians at Harley in Sydney, they were amazed when they opened (the engine) to find it in such a good condition after all these kilometres and all the conditions that I used it," she says. "I'm very proud



I'M VERY PROUD OF THIS BIKE. I REALLY FEEL THAT IT DESERVES THIS NAME OF 'IRON'

of this bike. I really feel that it deserves this name of 'Iron'. Literally, I feel it's a tank."

Her plan for Australia largely revolves around the limitations of her visa, but as someone who's long since made peace with uncertainty, Elena is going to take it one day at a time.

"Everything now depends on my visa. Unfortunately, I entered with a three-month visa and I can renew it only if I exit from Australia, and it's not easy to exit without flying," she concedes. "When I picked up my bike, already one month had passed but I'm willing to apply for a different type of visa and hopefully they will give it to me."

Despite the short visa and the long list of places she hopes to reach, Elena isn't rushing. In fact, the pace of her journey has always been dictated by connection rather than schedule. "I will just take it easy and try to cover as much as possible," she says. Whether that means visiting Harley-Davidson dealerships, speaking with local rider groups or simply saying yes to a stranger's offer of a spare room, her time in Australia – like it has been in every one of the other 40-plus countries – is being shaped by people, not plans.

"I want to go up north because I want to go to warmer places," she says. "But I'll go wherever people call me. Even if I don't have anything to visit in that place, if someone contacts me from a certain area that is not on my interest and invites me, I will just go."

Elena says the journey has shifted her in ways she never expected. Not because of the miles or the danger, but because of the generosity she's encountered. "I was invited into people's homes,





life will end only when I don't want to do it anymore, not when I reach a point."

By the time Elena reunited with family in Europe, she hopes to have fulfilled the criteria for all three of the world records she's pursuing through Guinness: the longest solo motorcycle journey by a woman touching all continents, the first to do so without flying, and the first global ride completed without paid accommodation.

"I will continue travelling, but in different ways. Maybe spending more time in a place, maybe stopping for some work projects. But this circle has to be closed first. It's limiting now; if I'm invited somewhere for a project, I can't accept it if it means flying. Or I can't take a flight and go and see my family."

And if you're wondering what advice she'd give to anyone thinking of doing the same, forget about must-have gear or border-crossing tips. It's all about your frame of mind.

"First, be sure it's what you really want; you shouldn't question the decision once you begin. Follow your deepest goal," she says. "Then go into the world with an open heart and open arms. Don't go to judge the world. Just embrace it, take what suits you and make treasure of that."

"One of my mottos, my philosophies in this journey, has been: Go where you are loved, and love where you go." 🏍️



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handed from one person to another through what I call a universal network of souls," she says. "It was generosity in all its shapes, and it changed me completely."

"People told me I'd never find that again outside Africa – but I found it everywhere. Absolutely everywhere," she says. "For me, that's more important than any validated world record."

QUEEN OF CLUTCHES

Of course, Elena's journey hasn't come without challenges. She has had more than her share of falls, which is unsurprising when you look at what she has strapped to her 883 and the places she's taken it.

"I drop it many times, tens, hundreds, maybe," she laughs. "Every time I drop it, it's mostly off-road and from when I brake, I stop, I brake. And then I, I just drop it. Many, many times, but no major (crashes)."

"I have burned so many clutches," she says, again perhaps unsurprisingly. "I used to call myself the queen of clutches because I was taking the bike in tough conditions; stuck in the sand, in the mud and of course you will crash, you will burn the clutch."

From here, the goal is to work out how her and her bike can reach the Americas, which she understands will be difficult: "The biggest challenge will be to cross the next ocean and to reach the next continent, yes."

After that, she then returns to Africa before re-entering Europe, where this remarkable journey began.

"It won't be a sad day," she says of the eventual homecoming. "Of course not. It will be just a closure of a circle, not the end of my nomadic life. My nomadic



WANT TO HELP?

If you can offer safe shelter or a warm meal, and your motive is kindness, Elena is open to hearing from you. Get in touch via her @helebiker handle on the socials.