

# Out of AFRICA

Nick Hare bought his Honda CB900FB new in 1981. Since then it's racked up 58,000 miles in Rhodesia and the UK, and been rebuilt and resprayed countless times. And it's still going strong

★ WORDS **GEZ KANE** PHOTOGRAPHY **RORY GAME**

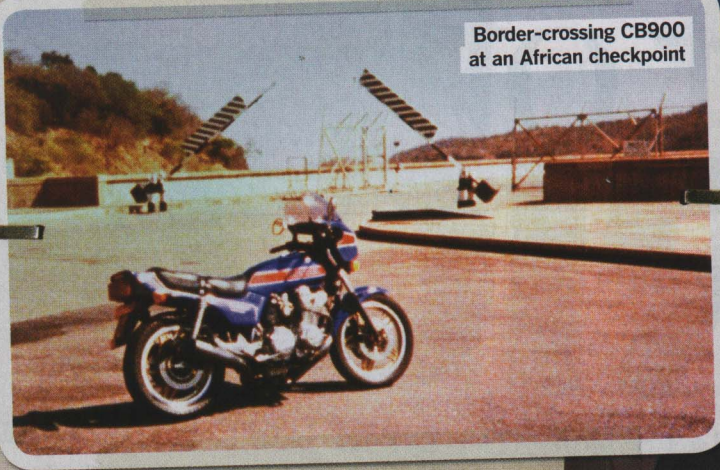


**1981**

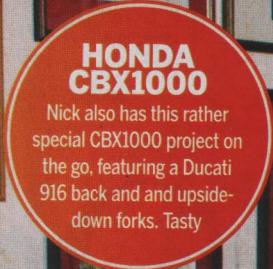
Nick Hare and his CB900F at the Tropic of Capricorn, Southern Africa







Border-crossing CB900 at an African checkpoint



**HONDA CBX1000**  
Nick also has this rather special CBX1000 project on the go, featuring a Ducati 916 back and upside-down forks. Tasty



## Thirty years. Most marriages don't last that long

and you'd have to have committed a particularly foul deed to get a stretch like that for murder. But that's how long Nick Hare has owned the first motorcycle he ever bought brand new – this 1981 Honda CB900FB. It's a machine that has travelled as many miles as cargo as it has on its wheels during that time, but it's racked up 58,000 miles on two continents. That it looks so tidy is the result of a rolling restoration that's been going on since 1988.

Owner Nick Hare was born in the UK, but went to live and work in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in the '70s. These days, Nick is a pilot for Virgin Airways, but he started his working life as an apprentice motorcycle mechanic at the Honda Centre in Salisbury (now Harare) in 1978.

"The Honda Centre was the Honda importer for Rhodesia then," Nick explains. "A mate of my dad's was a motorcycle mechanic in Rhodesia. I'd always had an interest in flying and motorcycles. I couldn't afford to fly, so I took up a motorcycle mechanic apprenticeship. Big bikes were rare – and expensive in Rhodesia. Most of the stuff I'd work on would be small-capacity farm bikes. To buy a tatty, well-

**"This CB900 has travelled as many miles as cargo as it has on its wheels"**

used CB750 or similar, you'd be looking at \$4500 (Rhodesian dollars) and the exchange rate was around \$2 to the pound."

Of course, it was no good being in the bike trade without a bike, so Nick bought a 1959 Matchless G80, which he soon

replaced with an "absolutely worn out" Honda CB350. With Nick earning \$18-20 a month and a new crank for the ailing Honda costing \$250, there didn't seem to be much hope of getting anything better for a long time. But a modest inheritance from a relative in the UK gave Nick a chance.

"I bought my CB900 abroad and brought it into Rhodesia as a private import in 1981," he says. I had to buy it with foreign (UK) currency and pay \$1400 import duty so that I'd be allowed to take it out of the country if I left. I sold the CB350 to pay the import duty and had enough left to enrol



CB900F doesn't let its width and weight get in the way of a good time

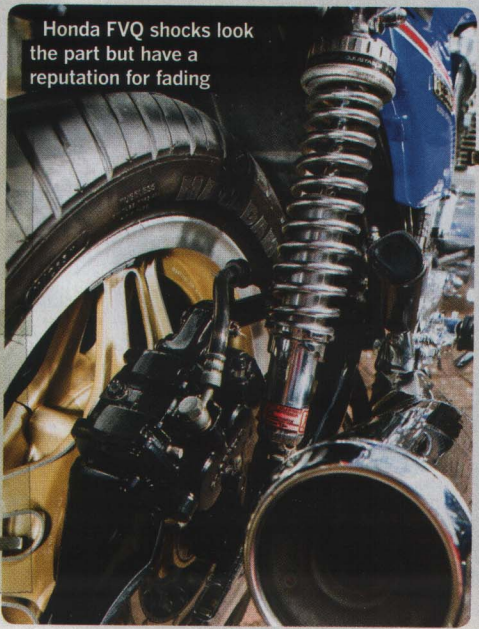


2011

Nick Hare's CB now enjoys a rather more luxurious existence than in 1981



Honda FVQ shocks look the part but have a reputation for fading



Despite its high mileage this CB900F has beaten off the model's variable reliability record



on a training course for my private pilot's licence. At last I had a big bike and a pal of my dad offered me \$12,000 for it as soon as he saw it." It wasn't for sale though – and it still isn't. And the CB900 would become part of Nick's life as he swapped the bike trade for life as a commercial pilot.

Keeping a big bike on the road in early '80s Zimbabwe (as the country had become in 1980) wasn't easy. "A few ex-pats had big bikes and we'd go anywhere for a ride – subject to fuel rationing of course," Nick continues. "But getting hold of spares and consumables to keep them going needed a bit of ingenuity – and accommodating friends. I had a mate who would ride over from South Africa with a couple of 'spare' tyres strapped to his bike. I'd get hold of spare parts, tools and so on the same way. By that time, I was flying tourists up to Lake Kariba and I'd leave the bike at the airport, then ride it round the lake shore on days off. Fuel was scarce – and usually a variable mix of petrol and ethanol – and often I'd be riding on dirt roads.

With life getting tougher in Zimbabwe, Nick decided to head back to the UK – and, naturally, his Honda had to come too. By then, it had covered 43,000 hard miles – but there was still one last drama to overcome.

"I got a puncture before setting out for Harare airport to crate the bike and ship it home to the UK," Nick recalls.

### **"Getting hold of spares and consumables needed a bit of ingenuity"**

"With no tyres available, I put a tube type patch on the inside of the tubeless tyre and rode it the 700 miles to the airport in a single day."

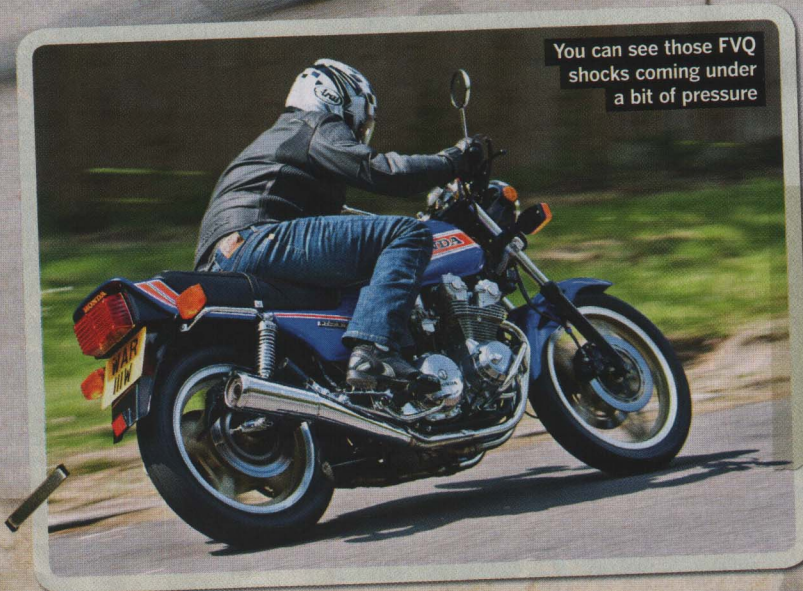
Nick and the Honda arrived back in the UK in 1988. By that time, the bike was burning a bit of oil and looked pretty tatty. "I stripped the bike to the bare frame and got that powdercoated while I cleaned seven years of African grime off the engine," Nick says. "Then, it was back on the road. Apart from routine maintenance, I never touched the engine until about eight years ago. By then, the engine was really using some oil, so I stripped it for a good look. I finished getting the bike to the condition it's in now five years ago."

Amazingly, when Nick stripped the engine eight years back, the bottom end was in perfect order. For a bike that wasn't regarded as bullet-proof back in the day, it's proved the critics wrong. "Camchain or camchain tensioner problems weren't exactly unheard of on Hondas of that era," Nick admits. "But the camchain in my bike was still fine after 43,000 miles of hard use in Africa. I fitted a new one while I had the engine apart, but only as a precaution."

In fact, all the Honda really needed was a top-end freshen-up. "I got SEP (01509 673295) to make and fit inserts for the worn valve guides," Nick says. "And I came across a set of NOS barrels at David Silver Spares (01728 833020). They only cost £100 and meant I could re-use the original pistons which were still perfect. I fitted new rings, gudgeon pins and circlips and the job was done. While I had the engine apart, I sprayed the crankcases with Sperex engine paint and polished the outer cases using Mothers Mag aluminium polish – brilliant stuff that I discovered on a stopover in the USA. It takes a bit of effort, but the results are superb. It's the best polish I've used."

After a few minor accidents during its time in Zimbabwe, the bike's paintwork was decidedly shabby too. "I'd dented the tank in Zim and had it repaired. The repair is great

PS tester Gez is only the second person other than Nick to ride his CB900FB



You can see those FVQ shocks coming under a bit of pressure





At 36mpg this carb alone has flowed 403 gallons of fuel



Mothers Mag polish has a miraculous effect on alloy



– they used lead filler, which doesn't shrink or crack like modern fillers can – but the respray wasn't up to much," Nick explains. "The current paint job originated in 1991 when I got Dream Machine (0115 973 6615) to spray the lot and repair the tank. But, for some reason, the new paintwork kept fading – it's been back to Dream Machine three times because of it. But, give them their due, they've always sorted it out without a fuss and it looks great now. The only problem is the decals on the tank and sidepanels are wrong. I didn't notice when I bought them, but the stripe fades from orange at the front, to red at the rear and it should be the other way round. You'd have to be an anorak like me to notice that, but I can live with it."

Over the years, Nick has tackled other minor legacies of the bike's time in Zimbabwe. Another little tumble wrote off the original Hondastyle crash bars, so the ones fitted now are modern pattern items. "The crash bar had hit the alternator cover too," Nick recalls. "After a couple of days, the battery had gone flat. The case had moved a fraction and just hit the alternator, so I had to have that rebuilt. The original mirrors rotted out too and I learnt a big lesson – never throw things away. I binned the old mirrors and ordered a new pair, but when they arrived, they were pattern parts without the adjuster 'acorns' the Honda mirrors had."

The exhausts may look original, but they're not. "I've been through a few exhaust systems," Nick admits. The Honda original system fell to bits after 15,000 miles and I got hold of a Bassani pipe in South Africa. It was great but noisy, so I bought a pattern system for a CB1100 – also in South Africa. Of course, that rotted away too, so I replaced that with another pattern system – that also rusted away in no time. When I got back to the UK, I bought a Motad, but it just didn't look right, so I bought a Supertrapp stainless system on a trip to America. That started to look very tatty in no time, but I found a nearly new CB750 system in a shop in San Francisco for just \$100. That came back in a bunk in the crew rest area on my flight back to the UK. There are a few perks to my job, I'll admit. When that rots, I'll get the downpipes re-chromed and get some stainless steel silencers made."

But if the exhaust system has been troublesome, that's about all that has been. "Other than replacing the seals in the front brake master cylinder, the top-end rebuild and the cosmetic stuff, all I've done is keep on top of routine maintenance," Nick insists. But what about the infamous Honda camchain tensioner? "It's been no problem," Nick says. "I change the oil every 1000 miles and adjust the cam chain tensioner at the same time."

Nick very obviously still thinks the world of his CB900 after 30 years and nearly 60,000 – often hard – miles. And Honda's new generation four-valve dohc engine was highly rated on its launch (in the CB900FZ) in 1979. ↻



Spruced up and ready to face the next three decades – wherever they take it








But does it still make the grade today? With Nick's revelation that I'm only the second person apart from him ever to have ridden the bike keeping my enthusiasm in check, I head off to find out.

The CB900 feels like a big lump as I manoeuvre it in Nick's drive. There's a top-heavy feel to the bike and the engine seems a mile wide. But once I'm on the move, there's a transformation. Once it's warm, the engine is super smooth and there's a turbine-like delivery of the claimed 95bhp. Tricking through Kentish villages, the bike behaves perfectly and the steering feels light. Get out of town and the big Honda really comes into its own. There's a stable, neutral feel to the handling and there's more cornering clearance than seems possible from such a big, wide machine.

Despite Nick's work on the front brake, it's little more than adequate for the bike's still impressive performance. And the original Honda FVQ rear shocks have done just what the alternative reading of the acronym suggests – faded very quickly. But they are the only two areas where I feel the bike shows its age. The engine still feels fast when I wind it on – but I have to remember to back off early to give that brake a fighting chance of hauling up more than 500lb.

But for Nick, his bike is more than just a fine example of a late '70s sportsbike. It represents part of his life. "It's comfortable, handles reasonably well and is still pretty fast," he says. "Anyone can pitch up on a new bike, but I enjoy the challenge of keeping older bikes like this up to scratch. I've had it for 30 years now. I might as well stick with it." 



## 1981 HONDA CB900FB

### SPECIFICATION

#### ENGINE

Type	air-cooled, dohc, 16v in-line four
Capacity	901cc
Bore and stroke	64.5 x 69mm
Compression ratio	8.8:1
Ignition	transistorised electronic
Fuel system	4 x 32mm Keihin CV carburettors

#### TRANSMISSION

Primary/final drive	chain/chain
Clutch	wet, multiplate
Gearbox	5-speed

#### CHASSIS

Frame	tubular steel double cradle
Front suspension	37mm air-assisted forks
Rear suspension	twinshock with preload, compression and rebound adjustment
Front brake	2 x 280mm discs, 2-piston calipers
Rear brake	1 x 297mm disc, single-piston caliper
Wheels	5-spoke reverse Comstar fabricated
Front tyre	100/90 18
Rear tyre	130/80 18

#### DIMENSIONS

Dry weight	233kg (510lb)
Wheelbase	1515mm (59.6in)
Seat Height	815mm (32.1in)
Fuel capacity	20 litres (5.28 gallons)

#### PERFORMANCE

Top speed	125mph
Claimed power	95bhp @ 9000rpm
Claimed torque	56.3 lb.ft @ 7500rpm
Fuel consumption	36mpg
Estimated value	£2000-£2500