

TOP CHEF:
Menu creator
Mitch Tonks



FINE FOOD, FAST TRACKS

Julie Cook enjoys fine dining at 125mph on the high-speed First Great Western Pullman as she heads for Devon...

TREES, houses and office blocks whizzed past my train window as an immaculately dressed waiter popped open a half bottle of crisp Chablis and poured it into my glass.

Then my starter arrived – reserve smoked salmon with capers, cornichons, Blackmore cream cheese and rye bread.

I tried to eat slowly, which was difficult as it tasted superb! I reflected on the irony of eating 'slow' food while travelling at 125mph from London Paddington to the West Country.

The First Great Western Pullman is the only high speed dining car in the UK.

Despite the train having every mod-con you'd expect – wi-fi, sockets to plug in your gadgets, ergonomic leather seats – I felt I had been transported back to an age of glamour, luxury and sheer class.

When the main course arrived – from a menu all created by award-winning chef Mitch Tonks – I was surprised. This was no tiny nouveau cuisine dollop in the centre of the plate. I was met with a huge portion of roasted monkfish and pesto dressing with seasonal vegetables.

As a mum-of-two whose idea of lunch

is usually a cracker and a banana as I hold the baby on one arm, this was pure heaven.

Pudding was a pine nut and olive oil cake. As a devoted chocoholic, I'll admit I had my doubts, but as I took a spoonful of the warm, gooey gorgeousness any doubts evaporated.

This was posh cuisine meets the comfort of granny's home cooking.

As we passed Exeter St Davids the view changed to vast seascapes and the waiter handed me a Pullman chocolate – divine! – I wished I could be a stowaway and do the whole thing again.

I disembarked feeling like a 1930s' film siren with assistance from a chivalrous waiter.

"It was a pleasure, Madam," he said.

That's the only thing I'd disagree with. The pleasure was most definitely mine.



LUXURY: Julie eats in style

The Pullman can be taken from Plymouth, Swansea and Paddington, and dining is available to all ticket holders. First class booking is available and you can enjoy the First Great Western First Class lounge before embarking.

firstgreatwestern.co.uk/pullman

First Great Western



John Barrett meeting scouts in Ghana

10,000 MILES AND A MARRIAGE PROPOSAL

LIZ DAY

Reporter

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JOHAN BARRETT is a busy man – in the past three months, he has ridden 10,000 miles to Ghana and back on his motorbike... and got engaged.

The 51-year-old from Ceredigion was just over halfway into his ambitious journey when he decided he couldn't wait any longer to pop the question to his partner Amy Thomas.

"While I was driving down through Africa, I decided to propose, so I hatched a plan to fly back and surprise her," he said. During his journey, John – a former Scout leader – set out to meet as many Scout groups as possible and asked for a little help from the Ghana Scout Association.

The youngsters helped him to print a T-shirt saying "Amy, will you marry me?" and also looked after his bike while he flew back to Wales.

Amy's mum Christine and her sons Rhydian, six, and Trystan, 10, met John at Cardiff Airport and drove him to Aberaeron to meet her after work.

"When she saw the T-shirt, her face absolutely lit up and she said 'yes' straight away," he said.

The couple are now planning a small church ceremony with their family in August, followed by a big party.

After five days back in Wales, John had to tear himself away from his fiancée to finish his journey, which took a total of 82 days.

The couple are now planning to go to Cape Town for their honeymoon, which was John's original destination. He decided to change his route, due to safety concerns.

"There were a couple of countries I was not comfortable riding through," he said. "I'd heard stories of bandits on the road and lots of robberies.



John's selfie in the Sahara

"While I was in Guinea, I was riding on a jungle track in the middle of nowhere, when a man with a submachine gun stopped me.

"There were about 20 lads behind him and they pulled me over, while he waved the gun at me.

"I thought I was going to be robbed or abducted, but in the end, he looked at my passport and let me go."

John also changed his itinerary so he could go to Sierra Leone to visit Street Child projects set up to care for orphans in wake of the Ebola crisis.

One of the goals of his trip was to raise money for the charity, but due to quarantine rules, he would not have been able to visit Sierra Leone and then continue on the route he originally intended.

"I'm so glad I changed my plans," he said.

He spent three days visiting Street Child projects and met a woman called Dora, who is 102. She lost her children to Ebola and now cares for her four grandchildren.

"At her stage in life, other people should be looking after her, but she was so matter of fact about everything and so resilient," said John, a grandad himself, who decided to name his bike after Dora.

After covering more than 10,000 miles, driving instructor John is now giving his



The T-shirt John used to propose



John and Amy on the day they got engaged

bike some TLC. His speedometer, fuel gauge and steering are a bit the worse for wear after a couple of mishaps.

"I managed to fall into the river twice," he laughed.

"When I was crossing the river, there was just a canoe with a thin, wooden platform. I had to ride up it, but I did not have enough momentum.

"I went to put my foot down, but there was nothing there and I tipped over."

After driving through countries including Morocco, Mauritania, Gambia, Guinea and Ghana, John says his favourite road was in Sierra Leone.

"I was riding along a jungle track when I noticed baboons playing in the trees over my head and bright blue butterflies – it was so pretty."

As well as raising money for Street Child, John is also collecting instruments to donate to the Gambia National Scout Band, who gave him an impromptu concert.

"They have no sheet music, their instruments are dented or broken, they play in a sandy yard and have no professional instruction, but I was literally moved to tears by their performance," he said.

Once he finishes repairing his bike, John is planning to continue working as a driving instructor.

■ To make a donation to Street Child or to donate a musical instrument, visit John's website: www.john-barrett.uk/africa