

Russian OAP saddles up for tour of Scotland

A RUSSIAN pensioner who has cycled nearly 145,000km around the world started a two-wheeled tour of Scotland yesterday to mark a milestone in relations between the two countries.

Georgy Goncharov, 73, from Moscow, will pedal his way around Aberdeen, Fort William, Mull and Glasgow, on the same bicycle he has had since 1953, travelling at a rate of some 200km each day.

The highlight of his gruelling journey will be his visit to the Granite City, where he will mark the 450th anniversary of the first trade voyage from Britain to Russia in 1553.

Mr Goncharov has already warmed up for the Scottish leg of his trip by cycling from London to Edinburgh in just five days.

But the journey only got under way in earnest yesterday, when he was dropped off at the Forth Road Bridge by the family he had been staying with in Edinburgh, and from there, he headed for Dundee, his first stop-off point

The professor of Turkish has been going on endurance cycle rides around the world since he was diagnosed with a heart condition at the age of 25.

Speaking through Alexei Kovalenko, the Consulate General for the Russian Federation in Scotland, Mr Goncharov said doctors had told him to stop exercising or risk having a fatal heart attack.

"He said that he would rather die standing than lie in bed, and just got on his bicycle and went to the Ukraine," Mr Kovalenko said.

"When he had this, condition, he made this trip, which is about 900km, in about three days.

"When he came to the same doctor later on, they took another check and they couldn't find anything wrong."

Since then, - he has cycled around 36 countries in Europe, Asia and Africa during college holidays.

Mr Kovalenko added: "He is quite a unique person who travels alone. He has no mobile and isn't staying at any hotels along the way, all his equipment is carried with him.

"We didn't know he was coming. He just knocked on our door and showed us his newspaper clippings, journal and the stamps from the different countries he has visited. We were glad to be able to give him our stamp.

"For the past 12 years, he has chosen historical themes for his voyages and this is the first time that he has marked the important trade links between Russia and Britain."

Mr Goncharov is carrying out the trip on a tight budget, and will be spending his nights in a tent which he is carrying with him, along with other basic supplies.

He must complete the journey around Scotland and a planned tour of Ireland before August 6, when he has a plane ticket booked back to Russia from London.

Although he is determined to complete his quest, he said that the main aim of the trip was to highlight the historic links between Scotland and Russia.

Mr Goncharov added that he wanted to build on the good feeling generated by the recent visit of President Vladimir Putin to Scotland.

Links between Scotland and Russia go back a long way, not least because both countries count St Andrew as their patron saint.