



Crimms *on the run*

Ronnie Biggs lived the life of Riley during his 30 years in Rio de Janeiro, but being a fugitive today is not nearly so much fun.

GREAT TRAIN ROBBER Ronnie Biggs had a simple reason for wanting to come home to Britain in 2001. After 36 years on the run, he told *The Sun*: "I'm a sick man. My last wish is to walk into a Margate pub as an Englishman and buy a pint of bitter."

This summer, the former fugitive at last got his wish. Well, almost. After first denying Biggs parole, justice secretary Jack Straw changed his mind and released the infamous robber in August, on the eve of his 80th birthday, on compassionate grounds. A few weeks later he was photographed outside his care home in Barnet, north London, riding a mobility scooter – as an Englishman – on a trip to the shops with his son.

It wasn't quite the Margate pub crawl he had dreamed of during his days in Rio de Janeiro, but the photo that appeared in everyone's morning newspaper that day showed Biggs with a big grin on his face as he trundled happily down the street. It had been a long time coming.

Police arrested Ronald Arthur Biggs in the summer of 1963 for his involvement in the Great Train Robbery. Most of the gang was caught within a matter of days but police never recovered the £2 million they stole. Biggs, who was sentenced to 30 years, escaped after serving just 15 months by climbing over the prison wall with a rope ladder. He spent the next few years on the run in Paris, Adelaide, Melbourne and, after a few close shaves, he ended up

in Rio in 1970, where he stayed until his return.

Biggs had it good in Rio. At the time, Britain refused to extradite criminals to Brazil for prosecution, which meant that Brazil refused to send them the other way, leaving Biggs free to live his life in the open. He enjoyed international infamy, recorded several pop songs and became a regular in

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Britain's tabloid press, but even freedom couldn't stop Biggs from getting homesick. In the end, it was the tabloids that brought him home – *The Sun* flew Biggs back from Rio on a private jet in exchange for the exclusive rights to his story.

Once behind bars, the crafty cockney immediately set about trying to escape – not with rope ladders this time, but by claiming to be at death's door. He first asked to be released on compassionate grounds in November 2001, just six months after returning to prison, and during the next eight years made several apparently last-ditch pleas to be allowed to die in peace with his family.

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Spain's Costa del Sol and Portugal's Algarve were once favourite hideouts for British criminals and are still home to many villains in hiding, but since the introduction of European arrest warrants in 2004 it has become easier for police to round up the bronzed hoodlums and stick them where the sun doesn't shine. And that's exactly what they have been doing.

James Hurley knows this only too well. A hardened criminal, he was convicted of murder in 1989 after he shot a policeman in the back during the armed robbery of a Barclays Bank in Hemel Hempstead. Frank Mason was off-duty at the time and trying to arrest Hurley's accomplice. He died of his injuries.

Mason's police colleagues and widow were relieved that his killer was so quickly

apprehended and sentenced, but their satisfaction was short-lived. Five years later, during a transfer to Wandsworth prison, Hurley and another convict threatened the guard with a knife and fled into the streets of south-west London. He was on the run for 13 years, though little is known of his whereabouts during that time.

For years, the investigation didn't go

anywhere. Then, on September 11 2001, the terrorist attacks in the US proved a turning point. In December that year, the EU member states met at the Laeken Summit and took the first steps towards the creation of a European arrest warrant, which was principally aimed at thwarting



cross-border terrorism but had obvious applications for police forces across the continent.

Since coming into effect, the legislation has reduced the time it takes to execute a warrant to just 43 days, down from more than nine months previously. And if the prisoner agrees to go voluntarily, it typically takes less than two weeks.

But even with EU arrest warrants it can still be tricky to catch a criminal on the run in continental Europe. "We had to bottom out every piece of intelligence to make sure his fingerprints, DNA and European arrest

warrants were lodged in all the countries he could be in, so if he got caught, the connection would be made," said Paul Maghie, then detective chief inspector of the Hertfordshire police, to reporters at the time.

And that is exactly what happened. Hurley was arrested during a drug raid on an apartment in The Hague, Holland, in 2007 and local police were immediately notified of his outstanding European arrest warrant. He was back in prison in the UK within a matter of weeks.

Even when police know roughly where a fugitive is, and file their intelligence and warrants with the local bobbies, they are still relying on that individual coming into contact with the law. If he keeps his nose clean and his head down, a hood on the run can stay out of the system for years, which is why popular British tourist spots make good hiding places – with thousands of Brits coming and going every week, it's easy to be anonymous. It's also easy to make money.

CRIMESTOPPERS

But the European arrest warrant had another side effect that has knocked the quality of life for criminals on southern European beaches. It meant that the UK's Crimestoppers – an anti-crime charity that runs an anonymous telephone tip line and website – could expand its operations to the favourite European haunts of Britain's fugitives.

A telephone line might not sound like much, but Crimestoppers has released five most wanted lists since 2007 under a programme it calls Operation Captura, targeting British criminals on the run in Spain. It has so far resulted in 24 arrests.

In association with the Serious Organised Crime Agency, Crimestoppers targets known fugitives in a particular area, with the latest operation focusing on the Costa Blanca region around Alicante. By publishing and circulating their photos and detailing their crimes, it is hoped that British holidaymakers and local residents will volunteer information that can lead to arrests.

With the British tabloids also running the photos, the pressure can be overwhelming. In some cases, fugitives simply walk into police custody as they see the net slowly closing in, which is what happened with the latest operation, launched in late September. After just one week of his photo



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appearing on the Crimestoppers website, Michael Eddlestone handed himself in to the British Consulate in Majorca to face charges of trafficking in drugs.

“To have a wanted individual hand themselves in within a week of the launch of Operation Captura is a fantastic result,” said Michael Ashcroft, Crimestoppers’ founder and chair. “It clearly shows that by publicising the faces of these men, the media can play a key role in flushing dangerous criminals out of hiding. Although criminals can run, as a result of Operation Captura, they can’t hide for long.”

Other Costa Blanca criminals on the

latest most wanted list include a jewel thief who got away with £1.6 million worth of watches, chains and ear-rings; a serial rapist; two paedophiles; and a bunch of drug traffickers.

Asia is also firmly a favourite with fugitives from British justice – mostly sex offenders, and especially paedophiles, who take advantage of the fewer extradition treaties and corrupt police, as well as the child sex industry that many Asian countries are well-known for.

However, even in this area the loopholes are closing. In September the UK and the Philippines finally signed an extradition

treaty and an agreement on legal cooperation, specifically aimed at targeting paedophiles in the country.

“Police are aware that the Philippines is a destination for alleged sex offenders,” said Alan West, the home office minister. “The crimes they commit should not go unpunished simply because they have crossed a border. It is vital that our law enforcement agencies have effective tools to bring suspected offenders to justice as quickly as possible. Today marks a vital step in making that happen.”

In the internet age, when information can travel around the world even more freely than a criminal on a dodgy passport, stories like those of Ronnie Biggs already sound like they belong to a different age – an age when violent train robbers could be lauded as working-class heroes.