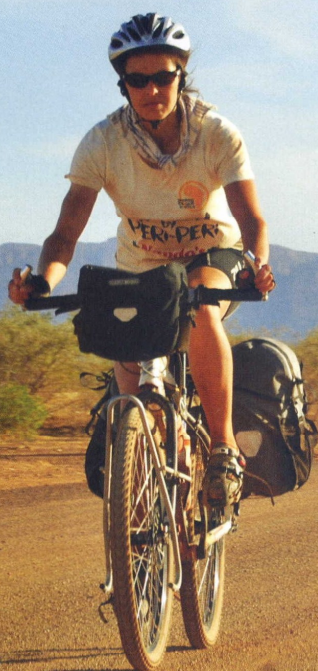


LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE CYCLIST



Kate Leeming is the first woman to ride a bike across Africa from west to east. In 10 tough months, she saw poverty and desperation, but also signs of hope and rejuvenation, writes Winnie Choo.

LEGS OF steel may help you to meet the tough physical challenges of riding a bike 22,000km across Africa – but it's nerves of steel you need when you are dodging rebel bullets or surrounded by men demanding sex, according to adventurer Kate Leeming.

She was cycling through an area of Congo controlled by so-called Ninja rebels, when the attack happened.

The rebels, angered by the presence of her heavily-armed convoy of government soldiers in their territory, opened fire from concealed positions. Most people would fall off their bike, but not Leeming, she just kept pedalling through the hail of bullets. Fortunately, no one in her team was hit, and once she realised she wasn't the target – it wasn't personal – her galloping heart rate returned to normal.

Leeming tells this story to a gathering of financial planners at a leadership conference in Sydney. It is just one of a fund of tales Leeming draws on to entertain and inspire.

Another such tale is the sex story, which also happened in the Democratic Republic of Congo. She was cycling through a town when she was stopped by a traffic policeman, who wanted to inspect her papers. A circle of 11 men materialised out of nowhere, quickly surrounding her. They began demanding sex, but she stood her ground, staring them down, making it clear she wasn't interested. It worked and they sauntered away.

It's been more than a year since Leeming finished her expedition from the west coast to the east coast of Africa, but she regularly re-lives the trek through the pictures and stories

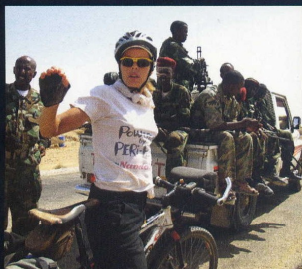
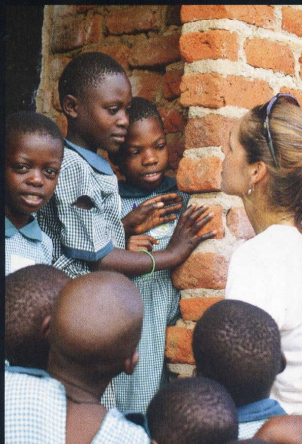
she tells on the speaking circuit.

Her adventure took her to the world's poorest countries, where she witnessed poverty and deprivation while also learning about the aid projects that help communities recover.

"Cycling is a really humble form of travel I'd say...You're melding into the landscape and the people tend to respect you travelling through," Leeming says.

She cycled through 22 countries, starting in Senegal in October 2009 and finishing in Somalia in August 2010. Cycling 130km a day on average, she traversed the range of elements Africa has to offer, from the sandy gusts of the Sahara Desert to the mosquito-infested tropics of Equatorial Guinea.

She suffered regular diarrhoea, had two chest infections, gastroenteritis five times and was injured several times



TOP – BOTTOM: Visiting the Bright Light Primary School in Uganda.

Travelling with military convoy into Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo.

Tasting wild figs with the Bikeba people in Cameroon.

in falls from her bike.

"I collect them, some from each expedition," she says showing the scars on her arms.

Leeming's Africa expedition is her third. In 1993, she was the first woman to cycle solo across the "New Russia", in the process raising money for children affected by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. In 2004, she cycled solo around Australia to promote sustainable development, chronicling the 25,000 km journey in her book *Out There and Back*.

Leeming has been fortunate to find a calling that combines her passion for cycling, exploring and raising awareness for causes like education, sustainable development and gender equality. It's a life of which the young Leeming, who watched Lawrence of Arabia repeatedly and stared longingly at the world map stuck on the kitchen wall, would frequently dream.

She has been a natural athlete since her childhood in rural WA and studied physical education. After a trip to London as part of the University of Western Australia hockey team, she started cycling around Europe.

"I did a little trip. It led to another trip and then suddenly I realised, 'hey this is quite good'."

Then she met polar explorer Robert Swan, the first man to walk to the North and South Pole, at the London gym where she was working. She approached him with her idea to bike around Russia solo. Impressed by her boldness, he advised her on how to pitch to sponsors and encouraged her to join the speaking circuit.

"He showed me how I could make something more of what I was doing," she says.

She knew she couldn't justify organising huge expeditions without a real purpose.

"I always try and make a difference in some way for the country or the place that I'm travelling through and that kind of works," she says. Leeming says she gets a lot of value out of every trip, but that's not enough on its own.

Her profile led the aid organisation Plan to invite her to become ambassador for its "Because I'm a Girl" campaign, which aims at helping young girls in the world's poorest countries to get an education. Her partnership with Plan allowed her to visit a newly-built

school in Burkina Faso and to see firsthand how education can transform a community, as well as the prospects for girls. Leeming says women tend to invest 80 percent of what they earn back into their community, while men invest about 40 percent. "So when the men understand that gender equality means that actually everybody is better off, that really works," she says.

During the 18 months it took Leeming to plan her Africa trip, she identified projects she wanted to visit that were giving communities "a leg up" instead of a handout.

"I think the handout culture is old-fashioned, but it happens unfortunately."

She prefers aid that helps the whole community. "It's all about building resilience and allowing people to have a voice, which is what getting out of poverty is all about. Poverty is about lack of empowerment."

When she was on the road in Africa, whether she was cycling or visiting projects, Leeming was always planning ahead. Not all the details could be covered from Australia. Sometimes she didn't know where her team would be sleeping that night. "I planned to have a plan that was adaptable because you expect the unexpected," she says.

She says optimism kept her and her support team going – she had a cameraman and a driver – even when they hit difficulties like uncertainty over whether they could enter Angola without a visa, which would have thrown out their carefully planned schedule.

"I'm always looking at how we are going to get through and they were always looking at what's going to stop us," she says.

Cycling can be a lonely pursuit. When your limbs are giving out and you have nothing but road stretching ahead and behind you, negative self-talk can set in.

Leeming says you have to re-frame the situation. "If you're cycling 10 hours a day on terrible road – it seems a long way at the start, but if you're negative, you'll stop. You've got to work out how to see the beauty in things."

Leeming makes it sound easy, but she has the focus of an Olympic athlete, and she says having a strong vision of what you want to do helps you go on.

"You've got to know from inside what you're doing and why you're doing it." ■