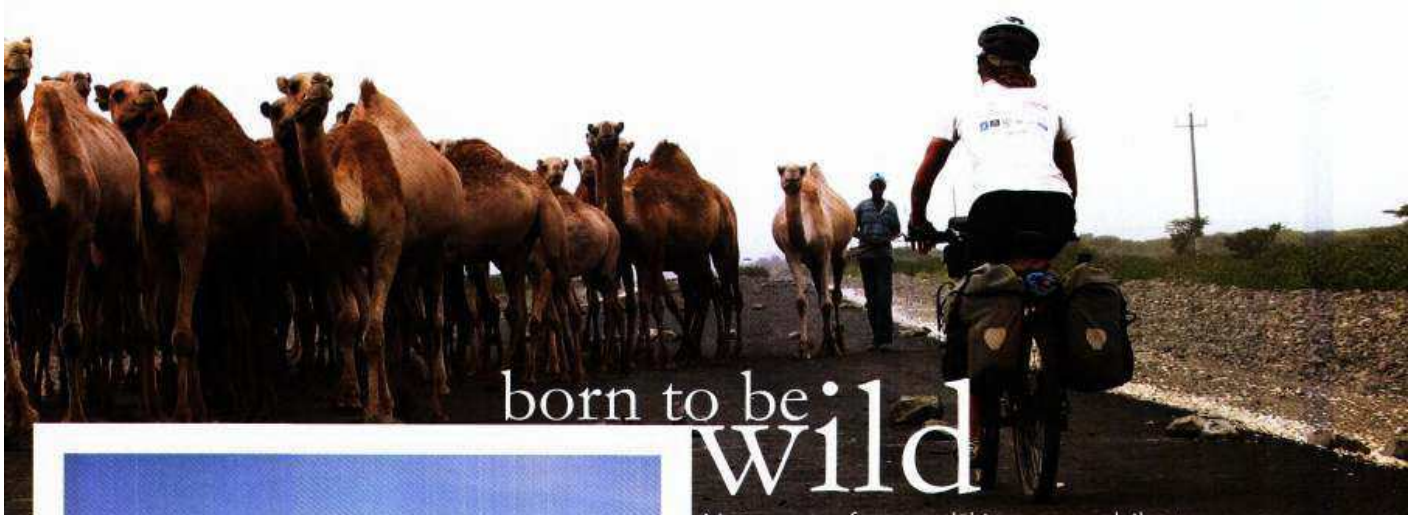




# PEOPLE

*We salute the West Australians who are working within our local communities to help shape the future of our State, plus those who are making a difference abroad*

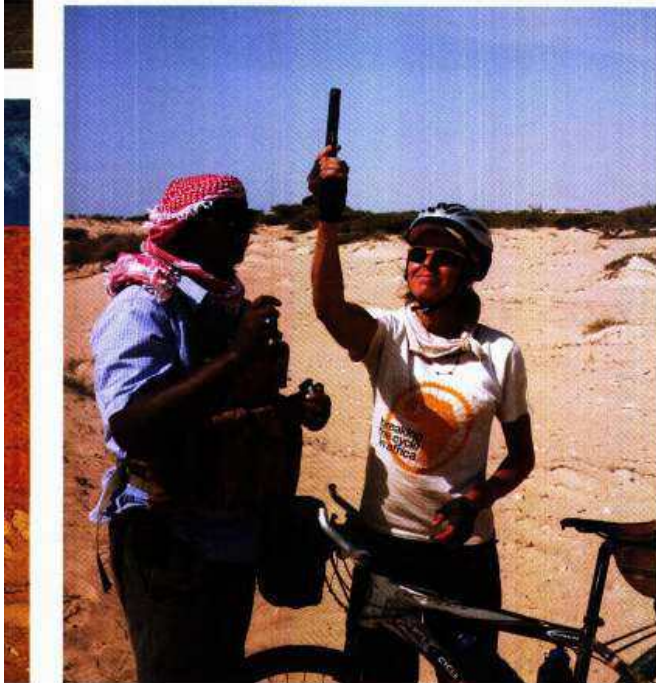
Cyclist Kate Leeming 76 | Humanitarians The Tsvetnenkos 82 | Mr Fremantle Les Lauder 86 | Filmmaker Victoria Pitt 92



## born to be wild

Not many of us would jump on a bike to ride 22,000km across Africa – but that’s just what Kate Leeming did in the name of education

WORDS Simone Hewett PHOTOGRAPHY Zdenek Kratky



**I**t was a nightmare. The dusty headwinds that blew across the Sahara were so ferocious, it felt as though she was going nowhere. Her throat was raw with the choking dust from the rough track and her chest was aching with a lingering infection from weeks of inhaling dust by day and cold air by night. Even with a scarf to protect her nose and mouth, every breath sent needles of pain through her airways while the oppressive 40-plus heat was sapping any remaining energy.

Travelling through the middle of the world’s poorest country, Niger, Kate Leeming was starting to wonder whether she had underestimated the challenges of riding a bicycle 22,000km through 20 countries across Africa. “It was really important for me to try and maintain an average of 100 to 120km a day to stay on schedule, but it was bloody hard work, especially knowing I still had another seven months to go. But despite all this I never considered giving up because I believed in what I was doing,” Kate reveals.

The main aim of her expedition, called *Breaking the Cycle*, was to learn about the causes and consequences of extreme poverty, and to highlight



**PEOPLE** cyclist



**ABOVE** Through the mud in Gabon. **RIGHT** Women from Djido, Niger. **BELOW RIGHT** Getting patched up after a fall.



those projects that were giving a leg up, rather than a hand out. Through the expedition, the website with its detailed diary, images and podcasts, and a pending documentary and book (which is in negotiations with television networks and publishers), the Northam-born adventurer also hoped to educate and inspire others to make a difference to the lives of many Africans.

So, how did Kate cope mentally with such a huge mission? "Rather than one-and-a-half to three hours at a time, I'd do just an hour, or even less and have a short break. I also tried to divert my mind away from the enormous 'wall' confronting me and concentrate on the beauty of my surroundings, finding a positive train of thought, or a good song. There was always something to think about or plan ahead."

The core team who supported Kate for most of the journey included Scotsman John Davidson, who drove and coordinated vehicle support, cameraman and photographer Zdenek Kratky, and Daniel Harman, who cycled (until he was injured) but continued to support the expedition. The film footage and stills are to be used for a documentary, which Kate is currently in negotiations to sell to a major commercial television network.

Averaging about 130km a day, Kate cycled from Senegal, on Africa's west coast, to Somalia on the east coast. She travelled through Angola, Malawi and Rwanda – some of the world's most remote and dangerous territory. "Of course there were some hairy moments, like when I tried to take a photo to mark passing our 10,000th kilometre in the Republic of Congo and suddenly our armed security car was being shot at by 'Ninja' assassins," she says.

The final leg of the journey was also perilous, when Kate was crossing the lawless no man's land, a buffer zone between Somaliland and Puntland. Despite travelling with a large military escort, she was given a pistol to carry in her front bar bag. "Every day brought some kind of crisis on the roads... and it can be hard going, trudging through sand corrugations, but what I found helpful was to look for something beautiful or positive in my surroundings."

Throughout the journey, they opted to camp rather than stay in expensive hotels, which were often substandard. "It just takes some experience and common sense to find safe campsites out of view of the road. Eastern Africa is well set up mostly with good camping facilities, which are much better value than hotels, and some of them even provide warm showers!"

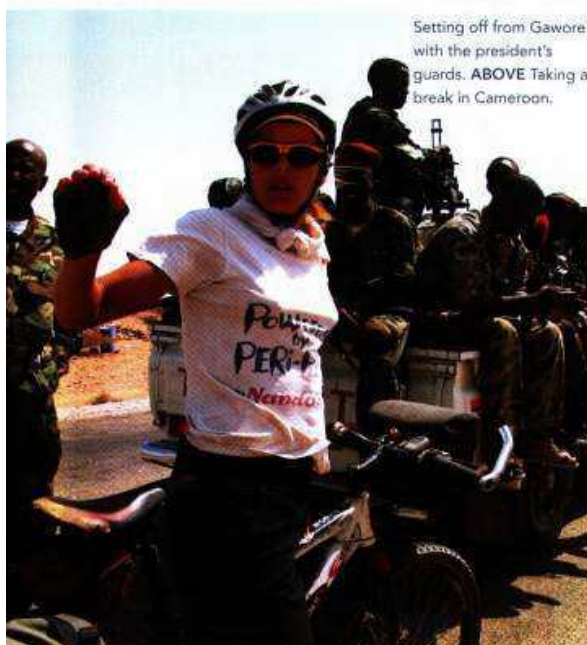
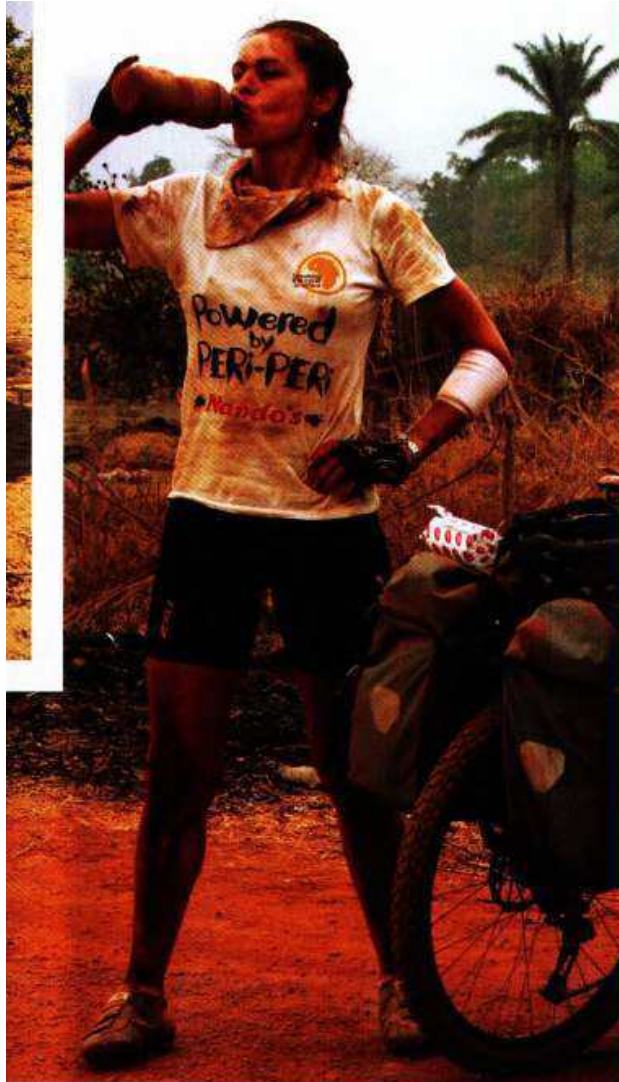
While Kate and her team tried to eat as healthily as they could, it wasn't always easy to find fresh food. "One of the best legacies of the French colonial rule is that they all know how to make decent bread," she says. "In west Africa, often lunch would be greasy omelettes with onion in a baguette."

**“Suddenly our armed security car was being shot at by ‘Ninja’ assassins”**

John did a good job of sourcing food from the markets, but it was a case of buying bits and pieces at a time – often there isn't much of the right food available for hungry cyclists. The staple meat for many of the countries we visited was boiled goat – I think I'd be quite happy never to eat goat again!"

Kate says one of the many benefits of travelling by bike is that the cyclist feels more connected to the people. And while she says she was privileged to gain an insight into so many different cultures, a few stood out.

"We met some of the Koma people who live in the Atlantika Mountains on the Cameroon-Nigerian border. They live in isolated communities on both sides of the border where they exist self-sufficiently. Traditionally, they don't wear clothes, just leaves (which are renewed daily) covering their private parts. They grow and hunt for all their food and have a vast knowledge of how to use the natural vegetation for medicines.



Setting off from Gawore with the president's guards. ABOVE Taking a break in Cameroon.

## FAMILY ADVENTURE

KATE'S NOT THE FIRST IN HER FAMILY TO SEEK TO PUSH THE BOUNDARIES.

Delving in Kate's family history reveals the spirit of adventure runs strongly through her ancestry. Her great-great uncle William Snell was the second person to cycle solo across the Nullarbor. He later led a 1929 expedition to recondition the wells along the Canning Stock Route. Her great-grandfather George Waters Leeming also surveyed extensive parts of the State during the early 20th century. This is Kate's list of achievements:

**1993** The 13,400km Trans-Siberian Cycle Expedition, which helped the 800,000 child victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster by raising money for the charity Children's Aid International/RESPONSE. This trip made her the first woman and first Australian to cycle across Russia.

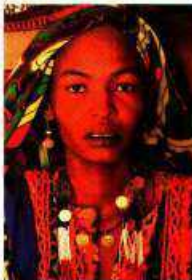
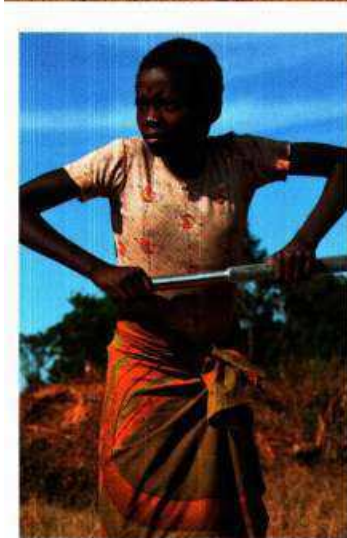
**1994** She picked up the ancient game of real tennis – the original indoor racquet sport from which the modern game of lawn tennis evolved – and became one of the world's top players.

**2004-05** Became the first woman to ride a bike along the Canning Stock Route (over 900 sand dunes, from Wiluna to Halls Creek) as part of a cycle expedition around Australia – the 25,000km Great Australian Cycle Expedition (GRACE). This trip was to educate Australians about sustainability and Kate self-published a book on the nine-month journey, *Out There and Back* (\$49.95, self published, available from [gracexpedition.org](http://gracexpedition.org)).



PEOPLE cyclist

CLOCKWISE from left Pushing on through Niger; journey's end; a Tubu woman; an African woman using a pump donated by an Australian mining company.



"Also in Cameroon, we discovered that the Baka pygmy people were being forced by the government to give up their traditional nomadic lifestyle and settle in small villages in the forest. The Baka people belong to the ethnic and linguistic group of the pygmies with about 75,000 Baka living in isolated communities throughout the rainforest in south-east Cameroon. Not surprisingly, they are having great difficulties assimilating to a sedentary lifestyle."

Kate says she was moved to tears after hearing the story of the plight of the Mbororo women refugees who have fled to Cameroon from the Central African Republic. Many had lost their husbands and children to rebels after they had been kidnapped and killed because the women were unable to pay the huge ransom being demanded.

Having seen firsthand the issues facing many African families, Kate believes education is the key to improving their quality of life. "It's not really about money, it's more about a lack of empowerment. If people can't read, then they don't have a voice, then they'll never get ahead and it will always be hand to mouth.

"Awareness fosters empathy, so I really set out with the aim of wanting to help dispel some of the misconceptions that Australians have about Africa. When I explain what I have done, people are surprised that I have made it through alive – their images of Africa are of a dark continent, full of dangers, war and corruption."

As an ambassador for Plan International Australia's 'Because I Am a Girl' campaign, which aims to fight gender inequality, promote girls' rights and lift millions of girls out of poverty, one of Kate's main aims was to investigate programs addressing these issues. In Burkina Faso, the world's second poorest country, she visited a Plan project focusing on the importance of women's and girls' education.

"Educated girls have fewer, healthier children, are able to earn more money of which they will invest a greater percentage back into the family. An important part of making a change in culture is through educating the men, especially village leaders. Once they understand the importance of education, sustainable change is more likely to occur."

Amazingly, Kate used the same bike all the way, although she had to change the drive train a couple of times. She also changed tyres depending on whether she was riding on tarmac or rough track. And while she split her rear rim with just 50km to go, it didn't stop her from finishing.

Kate arrived at Cape Hafun on August 16, four days ahead of schedule and 10 months after leaving Senegal. She is the first person to cross the African continent by bicycle from west to east in an unbroken line. For most of us, the idea of cycling 22,000km across Africa is not just beyond our comfort zone – it's beyond our comprehension and ability. For Kate though, it was, in many ways, the culmination of many years of seeking new challenges – and many years of pushing her body to its limits. However, we get the feeling that this won't be her last journey. 🚴

**WANT TO HELP?**

"There are many ways people can make a difference," Kate says. "I can recommend supporting any of my partner organisations."

They include: Plan International Australia [plan.org.au](http://plan.org.au); Millennium Promise [millenniumpromise.org](http://millenniumpromise.org); EdunLive [edun.com](http://edun.com); Afar Pastoralist Development Association [apdaethiopia.org](http://apdaethiopia.org); World Bicycle Relief [worldbicyclerelief.org](http://worldbicyclerelief.org); HUG [hug.org.au](http://hug.org.au); Farm Africa [farmafrica.org.uk/](http://farmafrica.org.uk/); The 500 Supporters Club [the500supportersgroup.org](http://the500supportersgroup.org). "At the very least, I'd recommend doing your homework – look for those organisations that give effective development aid; are community centred, transparent; avoid giving gifts (hand outs), and which develop initiatives that focus on skills transfer (eg business development, health, education, infrastructure).

For more information on Kate or how to get involved, email [kate@btcycle.com](mailto:kate@btcycle.com).