

METROPOLIS

TOMORROW
SHOWER OR TWO.
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CYCLING

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WHEEL
LIFE

Former real tennis champion Kate Leeming is undertaking a trip to help shine the light on the causes and consequences of poverty in Africa.

PICTURE: SIMON SCHLUTER

Cycling across Russia was not enough for Kate Leeming, who is preparing to pedal from one side of Africa to the other, writes **Lawrence Money**.

IT MUST be something in the genes. Kate Leeming's great-great uncle William Snell cycled from the West Australian goldfields to Melbourne in 1897. He was "looking for pastoral land" and covered 3200 kilometres on his Rover road racer. Now Leeming is preparing to leave Melbourne to cycle the width of Africa, west to east, a 10-month trip that will cover 24,000 kilometre and 20 countries. No one has done it before.

"I've been up until 2 o'clock most mornings plotting the journey, lining up sponsors, working on the logistics, the communications," she says. "I'm taking a camera crew to make a documentary so we will have a support vehicle. This is probably the hardest part, getting it up and running."

Leeming has thrown everything she has into the

expedition. A former Australian champion at royal tennis (also known as real tennis), she is leaving her job as professional coach at the Royal Melbourne Tennis Club in Richmond; subletting her flat in Kew. The budget for the adventure is \$200,000 and she is still raising funds.

It sounds intimidating but Kate Leeming already has some impressive travel stamps on her bicycle saddle. In 1993 she became the first woman to cycle unsupported across Russia, a project she dubbed the Trans-Siberian Cycle Expedition. The physical challenge was only part of it. There was political and economic upheaval at the time. "It was in incredible times," she says. "This was when Boris Yeltsin was trying to blow up parliament in an attempted coup. We were trying to get from Vladivostok to Moscow at that point."

She travelled with two other cyclists, one who was a Russian. Adventurer Robert Swan, the first man to walk to the North and South Poles, acted as patron of her expedition. It eventually raised enough money to fund an English-Russian computer translation system for her charity, the children of Chernobyl.

In 2004 she became the first woman to cycle the 2000 kilometre Canning Stock Route, the world's longest (with 1000 sand dunes) and one that had been travelled years ago by ancestor Willy Snell. "He reconditioned the wells over two-thirds of the route in 1929," says Leeming. "The wells had been built in 1906 and were falling apart. Willy was a pioneer. He was the first mayor of Leonora in WA." Leeming's conquest of the stock route was part of a 25,000-kilometre cycling trip around Australia, 7000 kilometres of that being on remote out-back tracks.

In 2007 she produced a 348-page book, *Out There and Back*, covering her cycling exploits and touching on her earlier upbringing on a farm in

FIGURING IT OUT

- Distance cycled on trips so far: 55,000 kilometres
- Kilometres planned across Africa: 24,000
- Budget for African expedition: \$200,000
- Operations on leg after tennis injury: seven

- Number of times won Australian singles championship in real tennis: four (1996, 2005, 2007, 2008)
- World ranking after comeback: three.
- Amount still sought to fund her trip: \$30,000

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Western Australia. The book tells of how she saved for her first Malvern Star bike when eight by collecting dried cow pats from the paddocks. "I earned \$7 a load," she wrote. "My second-hand dragster, with plastic flower power seat, was worth four loads."

Her first taste of long-distance cycling was in 1990 when she was part of a hockey tour of Great Britain. Leeming and two friends bought three rusty mountain bikes from a fishermen in Crosshaven and rode to Killarney, Ireland.

"Every memory, good and bad, of that five-day trip is still etched in my mind," she says. "I was hooked from then on."

Now it's Africa and this time Leeming is using the trip to learn firsthand about the causes and consequences of extreme poverty. "I'm creating a whole education program with the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Every part of this journey has been carefully researched to feature a specific cause and what is being done to give a leg up rather than a hand out, whether we are talking about reforestation in Niger or HIV/Aids in Zambia."

Leeming will ride from Senegal in the west to the Horn of Africa in the east, exploring Sahel, Central Africa and the Rift Valley regions. "People say we'll

get into trouble but I've got pretty good at the risk-mitigation bit. I've got eight different partners I'm working with within Africa. And with different mining companies, not only with sponsorship but with security."

And the African roads? Touch wood, she has avoided any collision with motor vehicles on her journeys thus far, although she did break a rib falling off her bike in Russia.

Leeming says that a cyclist has to be cautious: "I've had to avoid vehicles many times. If a motorist arrives at a side road, you make eye contact and ease up. With vehicles behind, you listen. We developed a technique in Australia with the 50-metre road trains. You would hear them coming miles away and we would pull out towards the centre of the road. The bags on our bikes would make us look bigger. Then we would pull in as they got close because if they don't see you and have to move suddenly it is the third trailer that whips around and takes you out. They wouldn't even know."