



SISTERS IN ARMS

When Kate Leeming set off to cycle across Africa, from west to east in a continuous line, she was not only on a physical quest, but also an odyssey to highlight the development needs of wartorn and poverty stricken nations. What she discovered would challenge her on every front.

WORDS & IMAGES Kate Leeming





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Kate Leeming with her trusty mountain bike; a beautiful Fulani woman; Kate and her military entourage; Kate hauls her bike across the desert sands; African farmers; cycling through a warzone.

‘M TOLD, “IF YOU HEAR A GUNSHOT, YOU must fall to the ground and the two bulletproof vehicles will form a V-shape to protect you. Someone will then drag you in to safety.”

Issa, a minister in the Puntland Government delivered this reality check in what felt like a surreal scene. This wasn't Hollywood – it was really happening.

My entourage was led by a “technical” military unit transporting eight regular soldiers, a gunner, commander and a driver. I was next and behind me were the two bulletproof vehicles carrying my sister and cameraman, two government ministers, a security advisor to the Somali President and their bodyguards. We had been careful not to disclose our planned route, assuming that even emails and phone calls were monitored. Raging north-westerly winds swept dusty trails into the sky. I hoped the dust stream didn't form a “smoke signal” for any insurgents possibly hiding in villages along our path. I didn't even want to think about the pirates stationed to the north and south of our destination, Cape Hafun, the most easterly landmark of the African continent.

But, here I was, cycling through a war zone in Puntland, Somalia, 300km from the finish of a 10-month, 22,000km journey between Africa's most westerly pile of rocks, Point Almadies, near Dakar in Senegal. The physical aim was to cross the continent from west to east in a continuous line. I wasn't feeling very physical at the start and was ill with a cough and sheer exhaustion. My intentions of being fit for the journey had been sacrificed just to get it up. Energy expended and stress endured to pull the “Breaking the Cycle” expedition together amounted to “anti-training”, which nearly broke this cyclist.

But, the moment Daniel (who cycled with me for 3000km until he was injured) and I entered the confusion of Dakar's traffic all else was forgotten as we were forced to focus on the moment. Anything goes. Rear view mirrors and indicators are considered unnecessary here. Vehicles are poorly maintained – regularly held together by wire and packing tape. Noisy exhausts spew poisonous cocktails of chemicals into the humid, smoggy atmosphere. With blackened faces and filthy clothes, we had to remain alert or not live long enough to worry about any long-term after-effects of pollution.

It helps the pace too. I had been making excellent time. During the first morning break, 67km east of Qardho, the “battle drill” was outlined. We were resting in a small village. The open-sided shack was made from sticks, brushwood and whatever secondhand building materials were available, including food aid bags. Aisha, a motherly figure with welcoming, smiling eyes, made tea. I must have seemed like an alien, but Aisha and her friends treated me like a sister and the team was respected like family.

In this sanctuary it was easy to forget that the war against the threat of terror was on their doorstep. The latest conflict, initiated by the Puntland state government three days before we arrived, was to prevent the spread of fundamentalist doctrine in a neutral part of Somalia.

We had to keep moving. I'd only known Aisha for a brief time, but the farewell hug was heartfelt. The villagers lined the path forming a loose guard of honour, singing and clapping me and the group on our way. The ambience was more suited to the Tour de France than a tour of duty.

It had taken 10 months to get here. I had set off on 21 October 2009, from Africa's most westerly pile of rocks, Point Almadies, near Dakar in Senegal. The physical aim was to cross the continent from west to east in a continuous line. I wasn't feeling very physical at the start and was ill with a cough and sheer exhaustion. My intentions of being fit for the journey had been sacrificed just to get it up. Energy expended and stress endured to pull the “Breaking the Cycle” expedition together amounted to “anti-training”, which nearly broke this cyclist.

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Away from the city we could breathe and the pace slowed. It was a chance to absorb an ever-changing countryside and bond with

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overwhelmingly friendly people. Our smile muscles ached along with our leg muscles.

But, the real purpose of this journey was to explore the causes and effects of extreme poverty, focusing on projects and ideas that give a “leg up” rather than a “hand out”. It was about shining a positive light on the issues, cultures and geography of the often-misnamed “dark continent”.

For the bulk of it, I chose to explore the Sahel region. Sahel in Arabic means the “shoreline” of the Sahara Desert. This eco region, characterised by poor and unproductive soils and sparse thorny vegetation, is also home to some of the poorest people on earth. An unreliable climate makes them vulnerable to food security and water issues. The Sahelian countries have the lowest levels of education and alarming health statistics. But, the people are incredibly rich in culture and kindness.

Close encounters

Following the route of the Senegal River from St Louis to western Mali, I passed random groups of nomadic cattle herders – the Moors and the Fulani. As we rested under a giant baobab tree for lunch, a group of stunning young Fulani women and children approached. The Fulani are known for having a huge respect for beauty. The largest nomadic group in the world has a four-tiered caste system in their proud culture; nobility, merchants, blacksmiths and the descendants of slaves. Judging by the intricate tattoos and decorative bling worn by the girls, we guessed this group were Fulani nobility.

They were extremely shy and particularly nervous of my team mates. When John or Dan moved, they ran off, but I wasn’t so intimidating. When I stood up they didn’t run, so I casually walked over to my bike and pulled out the camera. I first snapped a shot of Dan, to show it was a harmless process. I moved over to the nomads while pointing to the camera screen. They gathered around. It was as if they were watching magic. The most senior girl, a young

mother aged around 16, expressed that she would like her photo taken. The ice was broken and they all had pictures taken and crowded around to marvel at the images.

Some were fascinated by my skin and hair, which I allowed them to feel. The older girl was intrigued by my two-tone cycling suntan. She laughed with disbelief at the line made by cycle shorts – and the colour of my pasty white skin. She innocently lifted up my tee shirt to see the colour underneath.

It was a wonderful exchange, but we had to move on. The journey had to be timed to the seasons; passing along the base of the Sahara during the coolest time and minimising travel in rainy seasons while crossing the Equator twice.

Keeping to time was often a case of slugging it out; persevering when weakened by gastro (five times), diarrhoea (a regular occurrence) and chest infections (two), prevailing headwinds, unpredictably bad roads and visa formalities.

Inching along the only tarmac road traversing Niger, my throat felt as though I had gargled razor blades. A chest infection, a result of cold desert air, made breathing difficult. Locals call December/January, when the Harmattan trade winds blow off the Sahara Desert, the “nose-picking season” and chronic respiratory conditions are common. The road is also flanked by vast sandy expanses caused from decades of overgrazing, deforestation and desertification. The gusts sometimes knocked me down to 13kph on the flat and propelled sand horizontally across the road, lashing bare legs. I had planned to average 150km a day, but with low spirits and energy, it was a struggle to do more than 100. With three months down and seven to go, it was a difficult time mentally. To cope, I broke the day into manageable, small sessions and rested during the heat.

Into Gabon and the Republic of Congo and it was time for mud. The dry surfaces were incredibly rough. When wet, the mud was like glue, adhering to the drive train and immobilising wheels. The main road to the

capital, Brazzaville, was mostly unsealed surface - washaways, rivulets and mud.

Antiquated roads are a fallout from the previous, vicious civil war. The country is gradually finding its feet, developing its economy and rebuilding infrastructure. The Ninja rebels still control pockets of the Poole Region (just west of Brazzaville). Inspector Evariste, our accompanying policeman, reassuringly described the government’s position with the rebels by saying, “we’ve cut off their heads, but their fingers are still twitching”.

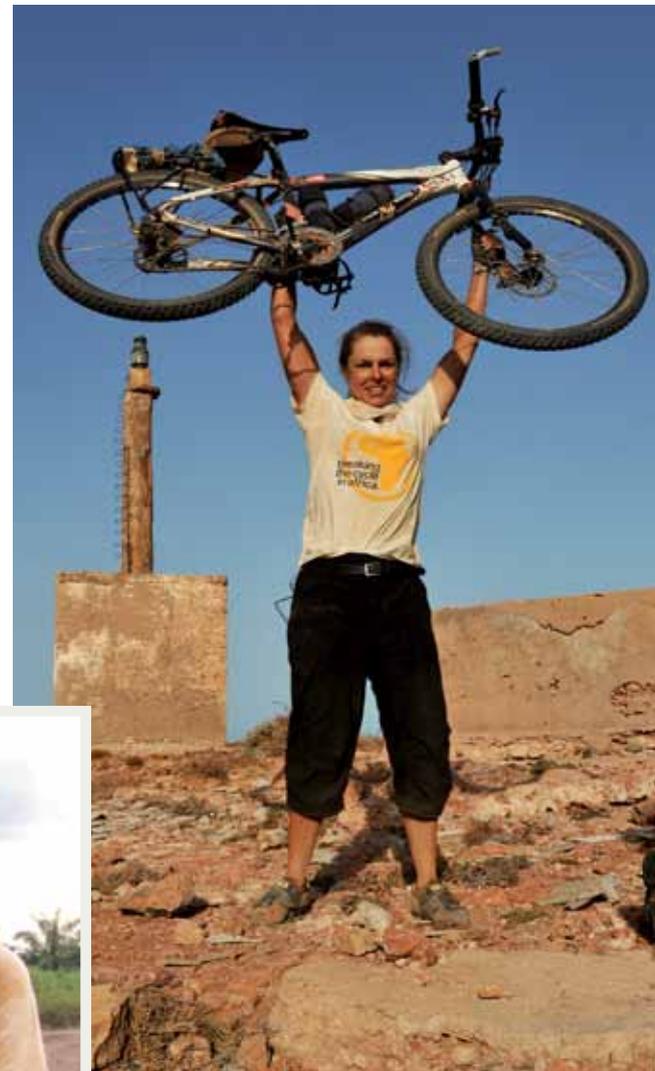
Between Mindouli and Kinkala, the military insisted on providing a separate armed escort. Instructed to cycle the 65km basically non-stop, I was led by a utility full of soldiers with AK-47s and rocket launchers. The concern was about us becoming trapped in some of the notorious quagmires in that section, a Ninja stronghold.

It was exactly on the 10,000th kilometre that it happened. There was a short hold up as the soldiers secured an area. I had the camera out to capture the milestone. Suddenly, two shots were fired from the forest and the soldiers sprang into action returning the fire. After a brief pause, the commander waved me through. I had to trust my protectors.

This type of expedition – crossing 20 countries – meant having to coordinate not only the complex logistics, but also the contact with different partners in order to gain insights into the issues that had spawned the journey to begin with. A number of experiences were very confronting. The plight of some Mbororo women refugees, for instance, who fled to Cameroon from the Central African Republic. Many had lost husbands and children to rebels, killed because the women were unable to pay huge ransoms. Safely resettled in Cameroon, at least their children have an opportunity to be educated and to access basic health care, clean water and sanitation.

In the remote south-east corner of Mauritania, Dan and I cycled through sandy tracks and when surfaces became too soft, trailblazed through the





grass. No road signs or village names meant we had to ask for directions from village to village. We regularly lost each other. On one such occasion, a woman told our interpreter that she had seen two people moving through the grass with their legs going round and round. She didn't know that is what you call cycling because she had never seen a bicycle.

However, in southern and eastern Africa, bikes are indispensable. They are used to transport the most ridiculous loads piled high with charcoal or wood, goats and chickens as well as being used as taxis. They are often kept on the road by resourceful bush mechanics.

In Zambia, I caught up with expedition partner, World Bicycle Relief. Founded by SRAM, they provide access to independence and livelihood through "the power of bicycles". What we take for granted as a leisure or fitness pursuit can, even in their simplest form, transform lives here. Their custom-made, purpose-built machines are making a big difference to HIV/AIDS caregivers and school children. The bikes are also made available through an ingenious microloan system, giving small business people a fresh opportunity to make a living.

Take Joe, for instance, who used his first bike to carry charcoal to Lusaka to sell. For six months he did nothing but work. Careful saving saw him buy another bike. After two years he has six businesses. Joe is planning ahead so, when he is too old to push the pedals, he maintains an income and his family has a decent inheritance. Joe showed how he attached a special goat cage to the carrier to transport his goats to market.

What I was witnessing led me to believe that education is the key to improving quality of life. While we often hear poverty defined as living on less than two dollars a day, I prefer to think of it more as a lack of empowerment (although of course they are linked). If people can't read and write they don't have a voice. If they don't learn about ethics, effective leadership is compromised. They will never be able to get ahead and will remain reliant on a hand-out culture.

As an ambassador for Plan International Australia's "Because I Am a Girl" campaign, aimed at fighting gender inequality and promoting girls' rights to lift millions of girls and women out of



poverty, one of my main goals was to investigate initiatives addressing these issues. In Burkina Faso, one of the world's poorest countries, I visited a Plan project focusing on the importance of female education.

Educated women have fewer, healthier children and are able to earn more money, which they invest back into the family. My journey taught me that women are both the cornerstones and workhorses of their communities. What I was doing was often beyond their comprehension, but I was always warmly received; the older women especially showing their caring attitude.

Flying across the Somali plains on the final push, my mind was a jumble of thoughts and emotions. The pendulum swung from a euphoric sense of achievement to extreme humility at the effort, energy and enthusiasm so many had invested to make the dream a reality.

The great adventure was served by a fitting, drama-filled finale. I set off fuelled by a huge stack of Somali pancakes produced by women from the Foor road builders' camp where we had slept. At the base of the isthmus leading out to Ras Hafun, we hit deep sand. The "technical" and heavy

bulletproof vehicles kept bogging. I had become adept at cycling through sand and finding more solid paths through the bushes. Worried about possible attacks by hyenas or leopards, or even getting lost, Issa handed me his 9mm pistol for either defence or attracting attention. After a quick lesson on how to use it, with great care it went into my barbag. But, with just 50km to go, it was the rim of my back wheel that had cracked up. I removed the panniers and simply had to nurse the bike, hoping the 10cm gash didn't run or open up.

The entourage was now being led by the Mayor and an elder of Hafun in another vehicle. They had no knowledge of any other cyclists ever having reached Cape Hafun. It would be impossible to pass by the narrow neck of land at the ancient village of Hafun and not be noticed by the locals.

We were guided up along a dry wadi. The path onto the mountain would make a great BMX course – full of sand, large gravel stones, bumps and dips. Gale force winds blew me off the track several times. The tabletop plateau was bleak. Thorn bushes little more than a foot high splayed out over the stony ground as if they were yielding to the constant battering from the elements.

Eventually the wheel track petered out and the whole party was forced to walk the last few kilometres towards a lone speck in the distance – the lighthouse. After 299 days, I had arrived four days ahead of schedule. But, rather than popping a champagne cork, the soldiers fired a few rounds out over the Indian Ocean as we all celebrated. 