YEAR 10/06 (APRIL/MAY '07)

PROUDLY SOUTH AFRICAN®

ride mag

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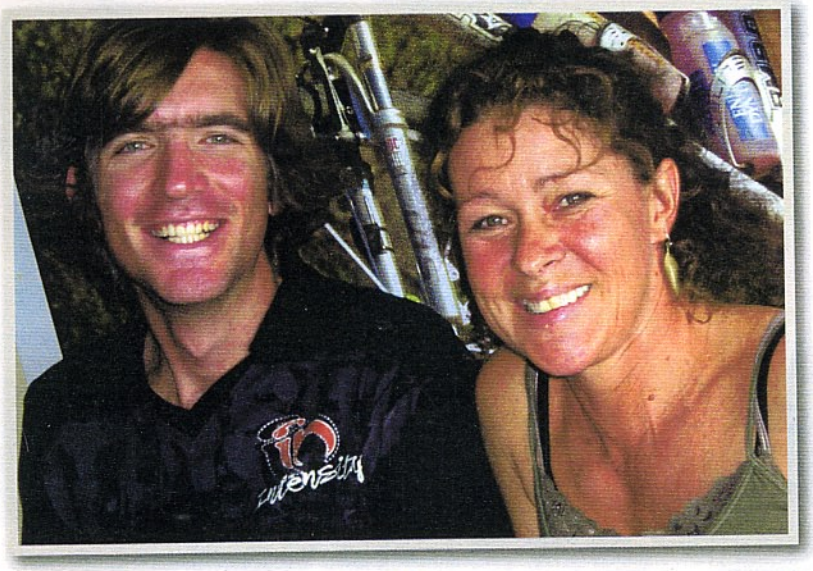

Public relations expert wanted: apply within

When I first used the opening quote from the Tour d' Afrique website in one of our Quick Releases, it was mainly to amuse my readers with a whiff from a world few of us will ever know. People with the leisure to ride a 96-stage bicycle tour are few and far between! Claude Herve writes:"To travel by bicycle is a humble, non-aggressive way to get close to people. It is a way of saying we are passing through with no thought of invasion or conquest, only the simple will to share a part of the road…"

The purpose of this charming piece of verbiage was no doubt to reassure the friends and relatives of participants in this cross-continent journey, who probably spend their time obsessing over rumours of civil war, dangerous wild animals and lycra-phobic religious zealots, while the riders worry about little more than finding the will to turn over those pedals and the wherewithal to stay upright.

Just a few days later, I find it hard to imagine how the ironies of the quotation could possibly have escaped me! Hardly a day passes without someone talking about a cyclist injured or killed on the road, and we don't have too many non-cycling sympathisers left. While we dream of road signs cautioning motorists to look out for us (as they might for pedestrians or stray animals) the real world is a much bleaker place. It would seem that the notion of the bicycle as something that signals "we come in peace" is one that has to be defended in Africa's newest democracy.

With the sun beating down on their heads through an ever-growing hole in the ozone layer, the drug dealers, child rapists and politicians on the take are having a sabbatical, while shock Jocks like Deon Maas (Beeld) and Jeremy Maggs (The Herald) take a swipe at cycling and cyclists! Hours of radio airtime are consumed by stories of motorists, pedestrians and runners who have had misadventures with cyclists, and suddenly our mere presence on the shoulder of a public road is tantamount to invasion, and we are assumed to be there with the clear intention of colonising, not sharing it.

How it happened that our pathetic helmeted and bespectacled faces, our spindly machines, our fragile bodies came to appear in this rogue's gallery is difficult to say. How does one make the step from minor curiosity to criminal? No one seems to know, but we had better start working on reversing the process. Charges of hate speech are no doubt in order, but shall we try to ride single file and stop at a few red traffic lights on our way to wherever it is that we are going to lay our complaints?

Adèle Tait
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ride mag

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Cover: Tania Raats
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going places

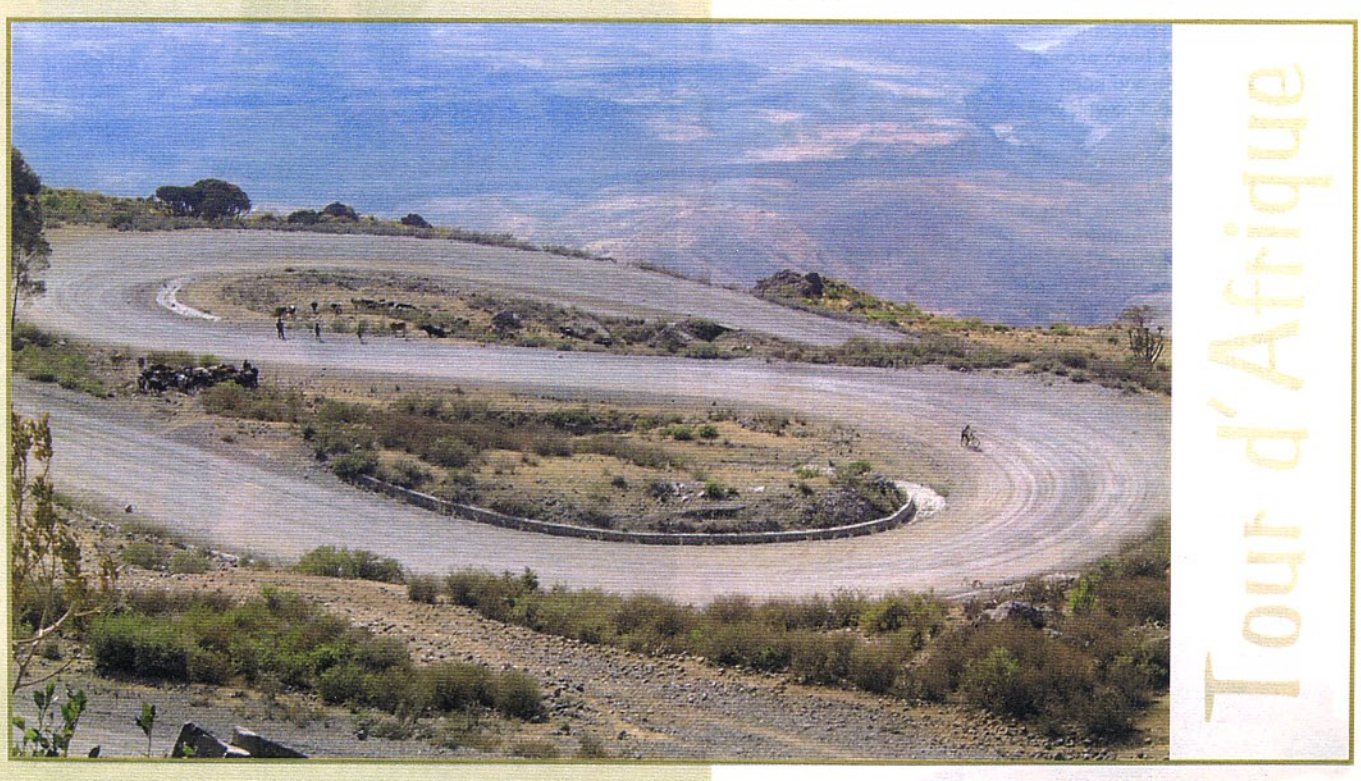
"To travel by bicycle is a humble, non-aggressive way to get close to people. It is a way of saying we are passing through with no thought of invasion or conquest, only the simple will to share a part of the road" – Claude Herve tells us on the Tour d'Afrique website.

The 2007 edition of this two-wheeled 12 000km jaunt across the continent from Cairo to Cape Town is already well under way, and a few weeks back, the riders experienced what some of them consider the highlight of their epic adventure, when they completed the 18km switchback descent on a rough gravel road into the Blue Nile gorge, losing about 1000m in altitude, before crossing the Blue Nile River and then tackling the 22km climb back out! The cyclists rode this section as a time trial, and Christopher Maund from the UK set the fastest time of 1 hour 39 minutes. Eva Nijssen of the Netherlands was the fastest female rider, and she covered the distance in 2 hours 11 minutes.

The organisers of this unique event find themselves under pressure to open admissions for the 2008 edition of the Tour d'Afrique and a few participants have already signed up! You can too, by contacting mike@tourdafrique.com or visiting the online registration page at www.tourdafrique.com

If crossing Africa seems a little too extreme, the same organisation presents the Orient Express Bike tour, which runs from Paris to Istanbul. The start of the 2007 edition is set for June 3rd! A new addition is a cycle tour along the Silk Route of old, making the journey from Istanbul to Beijing, departing on August 4th, 2007. Following in the footsteps of Marco Polo, General Zhang Qian and Genghis Khan, participants will traverse a distance of almost 10 000km as they cycle eastwards through Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China. More information is available on the website mentioned above.

This year, the activities of the Tour d'Afrique Foundation, which donates bikes to HIV/Aids health workers started with a presentation in Nairobi on 12 March. Without a bike, it is estimated that a health worker might be able to reach 60-80 individuals a month, but having a bike where there are often no facilities or roads, can improve the reach of such a worker by up to 15%. Lilongwe, Lusaka and Cape Town will also see bike presentations. If you would like more information on the Foundation or would like to make a donation yourself, please contact Mike at the email address above, or visit the Tour d'Afrique Foundation website.

Will cycling make them wash behind their ears?

Kidz on Bikes, the youth cycling participation programme presented at primary schools, is beginning to make a real difference. A total of 17 schools, primarily in Gauteng are currently involved with the programme, which has already taught about 200 kids basic bike skills, maintenance and road safety, but also enriched their lives in other ways by improving their coordination and balance, and encouraging them to enjoy a clean, healthy, outdoor lifestyle. The programme runs for ten weeks, and is presented as a weekly extramural class of about 90 minute duration. A good number of the participants have never cycled before. While some schools are now keen to promote cycling as a school sport, and the teachers at one of the participating schools have joined their pupils in embracing a more healthy lifestyle, forming a cycling team, the most intriguing changes have no direct link to sport. Feedback from children, parents and teachers indicate that the programme has had an unexpectedly profound effect on the personal development of the pupils. According to one of the school Principals: "Discipline, respect and commitment are three critical elements for the successful development of children. This programme positively encourages these key elements..." A colleague at another school also observed positive changes in the attitude of the children, saying: "Through this unique programme, teachers are reporting that students are now enjoying growth in confidence and purpose."