

Cyclists test their mettle in 120-day race from Cairo to Cape Town

BY MICHAEL POSNER

So you've trekked the mountains of Nepal, canoed the mighty Mackenzie, and braved the searing heat of the Australian Outback?

Now get ready for a real test: Tour D'Afrique, the first-ever Cairo-to-Cape-Town bicycle trip, a 10,500-kilometre, 120-day confrontation with the Dark Continent.

Brainchild of two Torontonians, Michael de Jong and Henry Gold, the event is scheduled to begin at dawn by the Great Pyramid on Egypt's Giza Plateau on Jan. 18, and roll to a stop overlooking the Cape of Good Hope on May 18.

"It seizes my imagination," said Mr. Gold, 50, who conceived the idea a decade ago while watching Russian cyclists prepare for the Olympics in the mountains of Ethiopia. "For me, the Tour D'Afrique represents a convergence of several ideas: raw athleticism and adventure, making a statement about the cult of the car, protecting the African wilderness and biodiversity."

Mr. de Jong, 38, sees the challenge as primarily mental. "Anybody who sets their mind to it can do it," he said. "For every hill to climb, there's one to coast down."

Participants will not, make no mistake, be ensconced in the lap of luxury. The \$7,000 (U.S.) price tag (not including airfare, but with siz-

able discounts for early enrolment) entitles you to all meals (dehydrated food) and accommodation (tents under the stars). You must bring your own bike and camping equipment.

There will be a van for those unable to handle the gruelling, 105-kilometre-a-day pace, and a doctor ready to administer first aid.

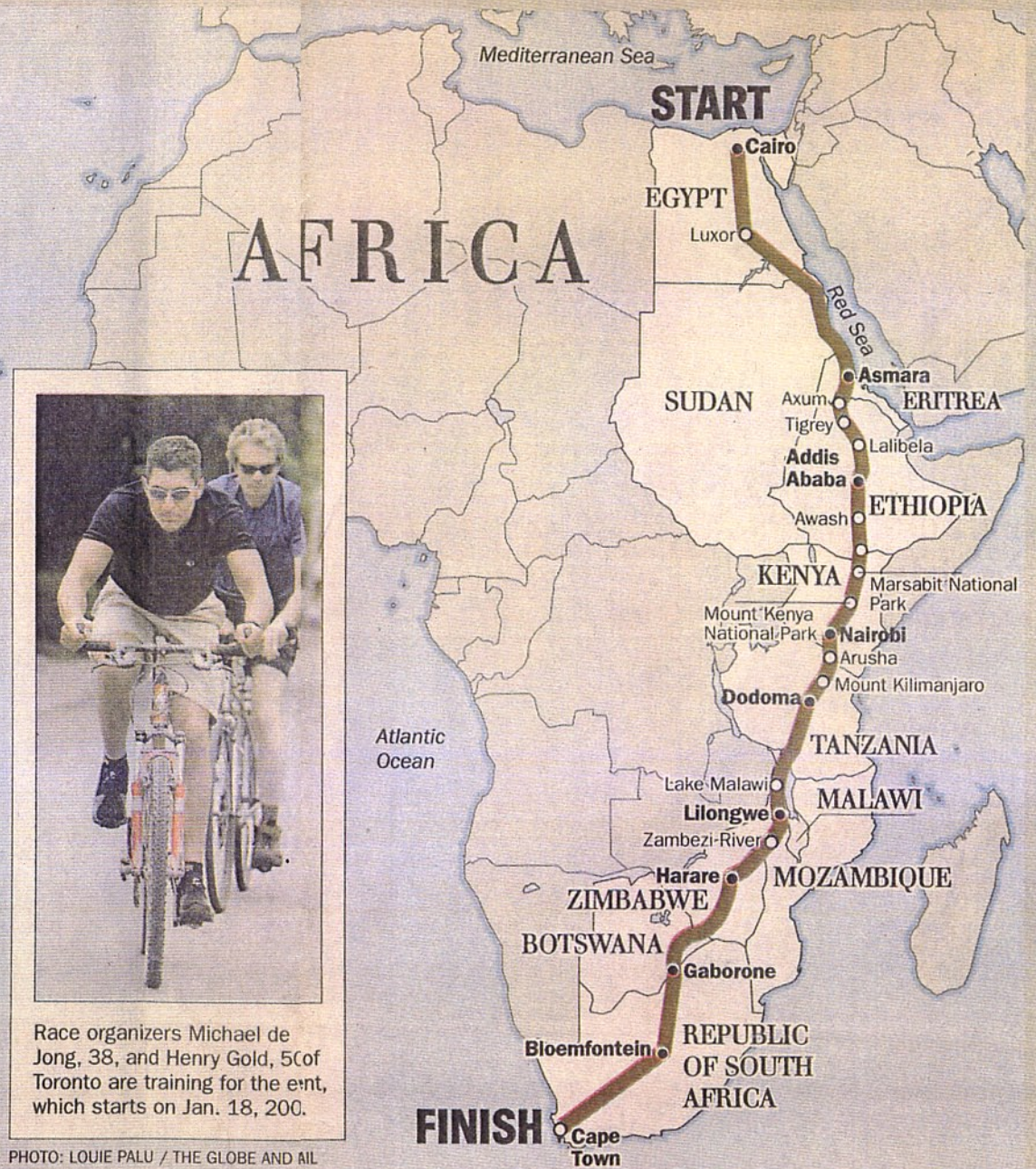
Despite the rigours — or perhaps because of them — Messrs. de Jong and Gold insist that Tour D'Afrique will be an unforgettable experience. The planned route penetrates the cradle of human civilization, traversing 11 African countries: Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa.

Along the way — 20 rest days are built into the itinerary — riders will cross the foothills of legendary Mount Kilimanjaro, break bread with Masai tribespeople, visit the Egyptian temples at Luxor and Karnak, snorkel in the Red Sea, and visit game parks teeming with elephant, white and black rhinoceros, cheetah, leopard and oryx.

Tour D'Afrique's organizers expect about 200 people to start and finish the route. Their mandate, they say, is to create an athletic event for both amateurs and professionals, to foster international goodwill, and to promote environmental, ecological and sustainable

Le Tour d'Afrique

This 10,500-km bicycle trip/race is the first Cairo-to-Cape Town trek ever organized. The course will take about 120 days to complete.



Race organizers Michael de Jong, 38, and Henry Gold, 50 of Toronto are training for the event, which starts on Jan. 18, 200.

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SOURCE: WWW.TOURDAFRIQUE.COM

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transportation charities in Africa. A portion of every dollar raised — how much hasn't been determined — is to go to a new Tour D'Afrique Foundation, which, working through recognized non-governmental organizations, is to invest in human-power transportation, wilderness and wildlife protection in Africa.

There will be four classes of participants: competitive racers; ama-

teur leisure riders riding at their own pace; relay teams, made up of corporate or club teams, who will "pass the baton" at prearranged points, and sectional cyclists, who can join any leg of the route for \$1 a kilometre. Anyone over 18 may participate, on evidence of a recent medical exam, but the tour is aimed principally at those "who want to challenge themselves, to test their abilities and endurance ... and

make a little difference in our world," says the organization's official Web site, www.tourdafrique.com.

If all goes well, the event will take place every two years.

Three-time Canadian Olympic medalist Curt Harnett says Tour D'Afrique "sounds like a daunting challenge, but I applaud it. Anything that promotes the bicycle is a good idea."