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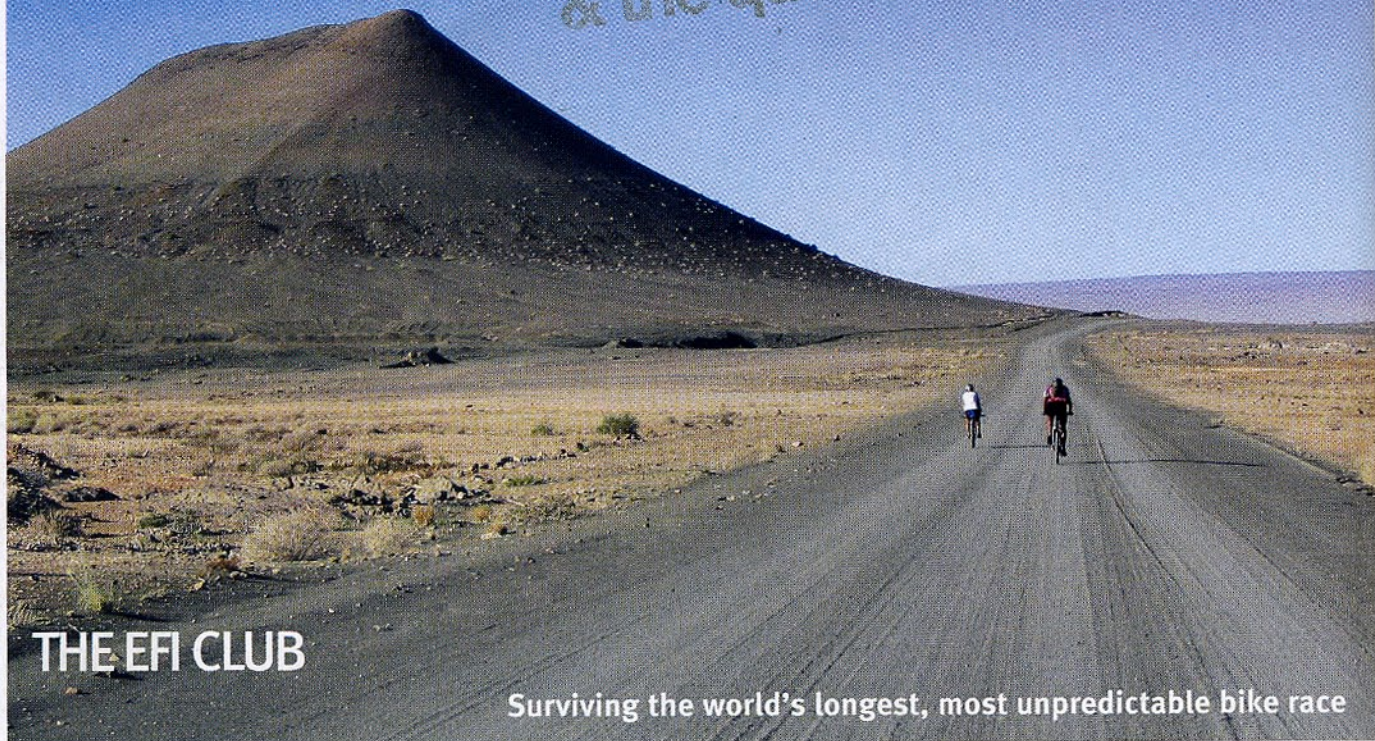
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THE EFI CLUB

Surviving the world's longest, most unpredictable bike race

In 2005, David Houghton and 31 other riders left the sun-baked sprawl of Cairo, Egypt, and began the third-annual *Tour d'Afrique*. Their journey would take them 7,000 miles through the deserts, mountains and grasslands of Africa, before finishing four months later in the coastal hills of Cape Town, South Africa. Houghton recounts the epic ride in his new book, *The EFI Club*. The passages that follow recount some of the most arduous, and memorable, stages of the ride.

Day 1 Cairo, Egypt /// We lined up our bicycles under a huge banner that read *Tour d'Afrique*. TV crews swarmed with cameras, the Sphinx and the pyramids of Giza looming behind us. The Egyptian Minister of Tourism stepped to the microphone to make his introductory speech.

"Welcome," he said. "Good luck. 3,2,1. Go."

Perhaps the shortest speech ever made by a political figure in any country. We rode off, a ragtag group of strangers with a whole continent

before us, and left the Sphinx staring forlornly toward a KFC.

A hundred years after the first Tour de France, Canadian cyclist and engineer Henry Gold set out to create something equally sadistic: a ride through a dangerous and unpredictable continent, from one end to the other. The distance would be covered much more slowly than the Tour de France, but with good reason: the route included the Sahara desert, the loose gravel of the Blue Nile Gorge, the volcanic rock of northern Kenya and ankle-deep Tanzanian mud. The *Tour d'Afrique* was born. Its participants were not professionals, because they were required to suffer indignities professionals likely would not: camping in the desert, often without access to water for bathing. Temperatures well into the 100-degree range. No masseuses, no personal coaches, no domestiques.

As an ultimate test, riders were challenged not only to survive the journey but to join the elusive EFI

Club. Only those riders who covered Every Fucking Inch of the *Tour d'Afrique*, despite illness, mishaps and mechanical breakdowns, qualified for membership. Although only one rider could finish the race in first place, every rider had the opportunity to finish in the EFI Club, barring unforeseen circumstances. But in Africa, we would soon learn, most circumstances are unforeseen.

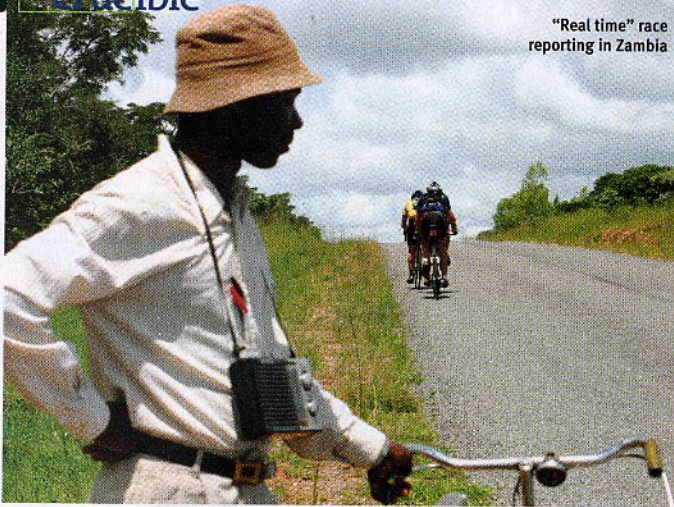
Day 18 Wadi Halfa, Sudan /// Africa has, by far, the lowest density of roads of any continent except Antarctica. In Sudan, we suddenly faced that fact head-on. Nothing could have prepared us for the few roads that ran through the country. In fact, to call them roads was a disservice to roads everywhere. They were ruts, trails, tracks, but they bore no resemblance to roads as I knew them.

Eric and Jack Attwell, the first men to cycle the length of Africa in 1936, avoided this stretch altogether. "We had naively believed we would be able to cover the next stage of

our journey by bike" Eric Attwell wrote, "but quickly dispelled the idea. The road was of the sketchiest, cutting through the desert for much of the way, and when the frequent dust storms came was completely covered with sand for long stretches." They instead caught a train from Abu Simbel to Khartoum. We chose to ride, despite the fact that the road hadn't improved since 1936.

The sand was so deep our rims often disappeared, dragging our bikes to a sudden stop. We would have to walk with them until we could get the wheels rolling again. There were also rocks. Angry, sharp, pointed rocks of every size, eager to shred bicycle tires. Then there was the washboard. The road's surface had eroded to an endless series of bumps that rattled our bikes, rattled our bones, and rattled our brains. On top of all that, there was the temperature. The desert heat climbed past 105 degrees every day and there was little shade. Any one of these elements on their own would have been

"Real time" race reporting in Zambia



across an expanse of brown water, the distant shape of the giant Kaka.

Fish eagles wheeled overhead, and huge marabou storks sat motionless in treetops. I rode beside Maarten, and he pointed out iridescent magnificent starlings, yellow masked weavers and black-headed forest orioles. Storks, herons, crakes and cormorants stood at the lake's edge. Kingfishers, darters and plovers flit-

ted from tree to tree. Vervet monkeys leapt from branch to branch.

The family is a crowd, Africans say. It was certainly true in Ethiopia. At our lunch stop outside Awassa, hundreds of kids thronged around the truck. Then, as we rode on, they ran to greet us. 'Feringi!' they would call, to us and everyone within earshot. Foreigner. It seemed to underline the difference between us.

Then I began to hear the children call me 'Father!' If *ferengi* made me feel foreign, father made me feel old. Later in the day, they began to call out 'Abba!', a reverent term for father. That I could live with.

Day 56 Bubisa, Kenya /// Ewald, our mechanic, was put to the test as our bikes were subjected to hours of juddering across the harsh Kenyan terrain. Chains and gears filled with sand, bearings began to grind. The most expensive full-suspension bikes were the first to go up on Ewald's bike stand for repair. Many of the older bikes stood up better, relying on fewer parts and simpler mechanisms.

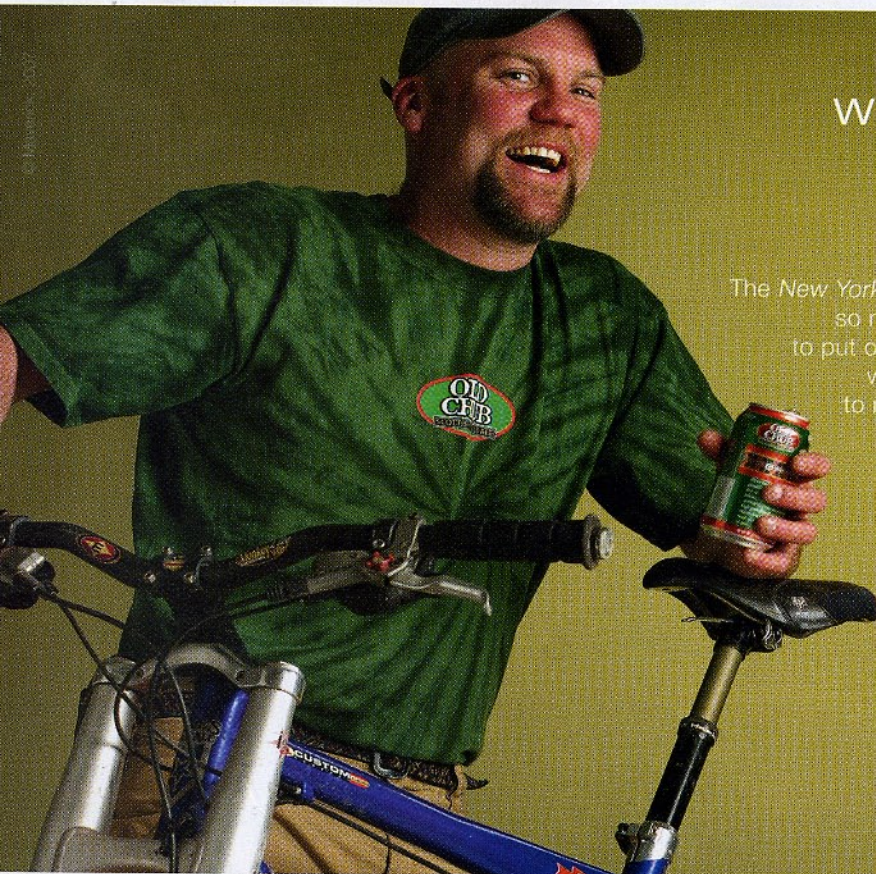
As we rode toward Marsabit, we faced a long ride on a corrugated, dusty path. The surface of the road was the color of sand and the texture of powder, and its condition continued to deteriorate throughout the day. Volcanic rock appeared,

first nestled at the sides of the road in dry yellow grass, then all over the road itself. There were no animals scuttling across the road, few birds calling, little vegetation growing. The sun glared into our eyes and wasps circled our heads. We were within three degrees of the equator.

"Do you think this road is worse than Sudan?" Maarten asked.

"It's a different kind of worse" Stefan replied, and he was right.

As I crossed the Ngaso Plain with Kim and Maarten, the conditions became increasingly barbaric. The road led straight through a world of hurt. Where there wasn't rock there was sand. Where there wasn't sand there was rock. And whether there was sand or rock, there was wind, pushing us back. We kept a punishing pace, and the road doubled the punishment. After three and a quarter hours, we stopped at a restaurant for a Fanta.



WHAT MAKES A MAVERICK?

"I don't know if I'd call myself a maverick, but The New York Times called my company an 'American revolution' so maybe I am. You see, we were the first microbrewer to put our fine product in a can. The funny part is, we didn't set out to create canned beer. We just wanted to make great beer, and the can turned out to be an important way to get there. That's the kind of stuff I love about Maverick, too. You can tell they aren't afraid to make unconventional decisions, if they improve the ride. That's all that matters after all: a great ride...well...and a great beer."

- Dale Katchis, Owner, Oskar Blues Brewery