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## GOIN' HARD



# TO RACE OR NOT TO RACE

## 120 DAYS OF PEDALLING, FROM CAIRO TO CAPE TOWN. OUTPOST CHECKS IN WITH THE FIRST-EVER TOUR D'AFRIQUE BICYCLE RACE. story and photos by steven topham

DESIGNED TO CREATE AWARENESS OF METHODS OF SUSTAINABLE transportation, and the brainchild of Toronto resident Micheal de Jong, the Tour D'Afrique team includes 30 riders who will pedal their way through 10 countries.

Canadian rider Steven Topham has been posting dispatches on the web since the beginning of the race on January 18. The Tour's progress can be followed at [www.ryanswell.ca/dafrique](http://www.ryanswell.ca/dafrique), or at the official race site, [www.tourdafrique.com](http://www.tourdafrique.com).

### Egypt

January 19, 2003

Starting at the foot of the Sphinx, with the Pyramids of Giza in the background, we ride as a pack to the edge of Cairo. A group of local riders from the Egyptian National Cycling team has joined us for our journey through Egypt. They are using this as training for the Tour Egypt, which starts next month. I wish we would have known that before we decide to ride hard with them for the first few days.

Riding in the desert, it is virtually impossible not to get sand in everything that you own.

### Egypt

January 20, 2003

After riding through what resembles the Badlands of Alberta, barren red rock that looks like an old river bed, we turn and ride

along the Red Sea — certainly one of the nicest views I have ever had while on a bike. For this stretch of deserted road we are escorted by armoured cars. The only concern is the dogs that jump out from behind bushes in the middle of nowhere and chase us, barking for more than what I feel to be a comfortable amount of time. Still, that's been the only unsettling thing about the race so far.

In the afternoon we take a dip in the Red Sea, but have to be careful not to get completely covered in oil. Such a beautiful place full of rich history, yet such a shame that it is now polluted with black pools of crude.

At night we camp by an ambulance station. When I go to use the bathroom and find it busy, I sit in with some of the medics and play dominoes. What a mistake, because by some stroke of dumb luck, I win five consecutive games and watch, as the washroom goes vacant/occupied, vacant/occupied, all the while feeling that I might explode.

### Egypt

January 23, 2003

After a great night's sleep we get up to ride into the wind. It was one of those days where the saying, "A bad day on the bike is better than a good day at the office," just barely kept me moving. Many times I just wanted to get off the bike and sit until the

# STILL EVERYTHING YOU NEED.

wind died, but I would have been sitting there until the next morning. I rolled into camp dehydrated, wind-burnt, and very weary from the mental fatigue — camp was located 12 kilometres further than it was supposed to be.

The desert plains stretched out on either side of us until we made our turn into Qena. We got our first touch of what the Nile really means to the area. The ground turned lush green and the road was bordered by palm trees and cane fields. Crowds gathered as we passed through town, offering their welcome. Children were running alongside the road, waving and shouting hello all the way into Luxor.

#### **Sudan**

**January 30, 2003**

If I can retire to a foreign land, can it please be Sudan? After a five-hour ride on a barge crossing Lake Nasser from Abu Simbel, we eventually made it to the last remaining outpost of Egypt, passed through the border and were shortly in Wadi Halfa.

There were about 20 people standing and waving as the barge came to a rest at the dock with a banner reading "Welcome Tour D'Africa." I thought that this may have been what it felt like for any explorer coming home after a long journey, with warm adoring friends happy for your safe return. After a bit of confusion, we were through customs; I must have handed my passport and photos to everyone in the building.

The roads in the desert are a meandering series of routes that seem to have been developed with a smooth ride in mind, but the wear and tear still leaves one feeling a bit roughed up. There were times when some fellow riders and I would be hundreds of metres apart on different lines only to find each other back on the primary route a kilometre down the road.

I am exposed everyday to a culture and people more sincere, genuine and hospitable than any I have encountered (although the people of Newfoundland are not far behind). Tonight, we were treated to some festivities organized in our honour: camel, horse and bike races, all of which lacked any definitive winner.

#### **Ethiopia**

**February 18, 2003**

Crossing the bridge from Gallabat, Sudan, we arrive in Metema, Ethiopia — but locally it's March 11, 1995. Ethiopia goes by the Julian calendar, which is about 7.5 years behind ours. I can deal with the fact that when it is 7:00am here, they say that it is 1:00 in the morning, and at 6:00pm, it is 12:00 in the evening. This is a small price to pay to get out of the heat of Sudan. The last two days, temperatures averaged 43 degrees Celsius in the shade and topped out at 52. I was fortunate enough to have finished the stage on both days before it ever got that hot, but many riders were not so lucky, turning to locals in villages along the way for shelter from the heat.

In Sudan, there is a prohibition on alcohol, so as soon as we crossed the border several riders made for a restaurant and found Dasha beer. The population was noticeably larger and more congested upon crossing the bridge as well. Along with these changes we were treated to the sight of mountains after so many days of flat terrain.

Travelling the roads of Ethiopia is difficult; large numbers of trucks refuse to slow down when they pass, kicking up enough dust for us to end up looking like coal miners at the end of the day. There are rough roads, cattle, and children from smaller villages who throw rocks at us as we ride by. Thankfully, no one has been seriously injured.

#### **Outside Goatsion, Ethiopia**

**February 27, 2003**

We spent the evening camped in a farmer's field surrounded by goats, cows and the local folk responsible for their care. The grass has been trimmed to a green putting surface by the free-range cattle, making for the most comfortable ground to sleep on to date. I mount my bike knowing that today is the day that I have been waiting for: a crossing of the Blue Nile Gorge that ends with our arrival at the Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief camp at Gohatsion.

As we ride up to the edge of the gorge, the road changes from tarmac to gravel with occasional spots of tar and it seems to drop off into the abyss. The descent is the most scenic and possibly one of the longest I have ever rode, taking almost 30 minutes to complete with an average speed of 43 kph. A huge rush.

After arriving at the project's camp, and taking a shower, I am given a tour of every water source available to the 8,000 people of the town. We are shown one of the three wells with a hand pump that supplies clean water. However, the well is only open from 8 to 10am and 3 to 5pm. Outside these hours, anyone in need of water must go to a nearby borehole that has been dug by locals as a way of harvesting rainwater. I meet a 16-year-old girl named Bizuneshe and help her fill her clay vessel with water. This takes about 10 minutes, but I supply a bit of entertainment for those gathered when I almost slip down the steep clay bank and into the hole. Bizuneshe speaks a little English and tells me that this collecting hole has been empty until the last five days when it finally began to rain. The water is very murky because the hole has been dug in ground with a high clay content. It's impossible not to collect grass and dead bugs at the same time. Bizuneshe then takes this water home for her family to drink and cook with.

Fortunately, the town is less than a month away from having another well. It's being dug 100-metres away from the borehole because the project determined this was the site where the water table is most easily accessed.

#### **Ethiopia**

**February 28, 2003**

What should have been a three-hour stage completed with the leaders was replaced by continuing enjoyment of Ethiopia: two tea breaks with some of the leisure riders. Hermione, Alex and Lorri, my riding partners for the day, were treated to fresh bread, great samosa and pops all consumed while surrounded by what seemed to be the entire village. This was a new experience for me and I was a little shocked, but I was informed by the frequent stoppers that it is par for the course here. This was the first time that I had really stopped to enjoy the hospitality of Africa during a stage. Maybe it's best I suppress my competitive urges. ■

**NOTHING YOU DON'T.**



**DRIVEN.**