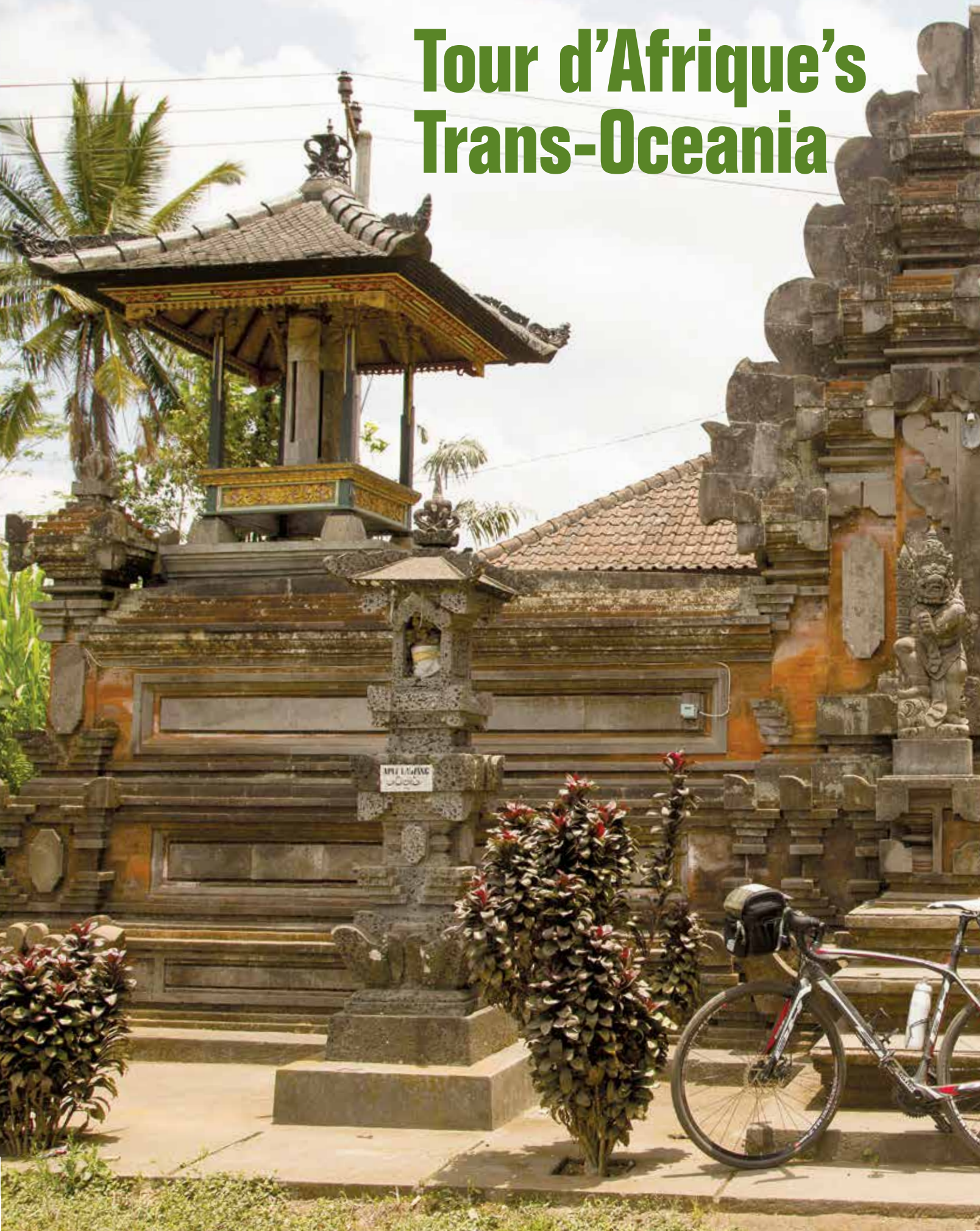


Tour d'Afrique's Trans-Oceania



A pedal through the world's most populated islands

Story by Berne Broudy

Photos by Broudy/Donohue Photography



I was fascinated by the mopeds. There were thousands of them, maybe tens of thousands. The ratio of mopeds to cars, trucks, bicycles, or any other vehicle was exponential. They were piloted by drivers ranging from eight years old to ones so ancient that it wasn't clear if the driver could even walk or see. Mopeds transport everything — bales of hay, live goats, kitchen utensils, grain sacks bursting with produce, and entire families. Java's head-scarfed Muslim women passengers seemed particularly adept at riding side-saddle on the back as the bike's tiny engine wheezed up a steep mountain-side — I saw one female passenger nursing her baby sidesaddle in the switchbacks and another texting, neither holding on.

In Indonesia, mopeds are also used like trucks to carry furniture, lumber, and firewood. There are moped food trucks, moped hardware stores, moped Good Humor trucks. Mopeds carry sacks of live chickens in baskets, stacks of full-size propane canisters, 100 dozen eggs. Kids ride four to a moped as they head home from school in their uniforms of white shirts and blue shorts. In flat farmlands, rusty singlespeed bicycles are also ubiquitous, their wicker panniers overloaded with banana leaves, flowers, produce, or a full food stall en route to market. But it's the mopeds that dominate the landscape.

"Hey, Mister, where you go?" shouted a smiling, shirtless Indonesian boy as he gave a thumbs-up from the side of the road. "Bali!" I yelled back and kept pedaling. I am female.

Sectional rider Mike Donohue stops to cool down on the steps of a Hindu temple outside Ubud, Bali.





Roadside stalls sell a grocery store's worth of goods — fresh biscuits and cookies, toothpaste, gasoline, clothing, bird cages — in a space the size of a walk-in closet.

Bike wheels take a beating on Java's rustic back roads. Fortunately, roadside mechanics are all schooled in the art of truing.

I was a sectional rider on Tour d'Afrique's (TdA's) newest tour, Trans-Oceania, a four-month odyssey through Indonesia and Australia. My husband Mike and I joined the trip for 10 days through Java and Bali.

We were in the countryside, but it didn't feel open and spacious like our home in rural Vermont.

Java has 143 million residents, more than half of Indonesia's total population. It's the most populated island in the world. The roadside was a tapestry of tiny sawmills, convenience stores — you can literally buy everything you need at any one of them — construction sites, schools, people busy repairing mopeds, building things, making things, and just hanging out. All of them gave a thumbs-up and shouted "Hello, mister!" at me. The roadside was peppered with banana trees and teak plantations, and nothing stopped the flow of traffic, even a 20-man construction crew on a narrow street in a "fire brigade" moving baskets of stone to a wheelbarrow, then passing white buckets of mixed cement up a human ladder to the second-floor construction.

On one of the steepest parts of the climb, I passed a group of Indonesian men in Specialized logo jerseys resting in a pull-off. One yelled after me, "You are a very strong man." I laughed even as I gasped for breath. I appreciated the sentiment. Indonesians all know a few words of English, but they're linguistic gender differentiation is lacking.

TdA is known for their Seven Epics, of which TransOceania is the newest. Each is a four-month or longer trans-continental bike voyage. Cairo, Egypt,

to Cape Town, South Africa, was the first, and is a poster child for the Epics, which often roll through countries most people would never consider visiting, let alone riding through, like Sudan, Ethiopia, and Iran.

There were 20 guests and guides on this trip, including TdA founder Henry Gold, and most were in for the full monty. For most of the riders, it wasn't their first TdA Epic. I knew this from reading rider profiles online when I signed up, but when I met the group in Duta Garden Hotel's open-air breakfast room in Yogyakarta the first day of my trip, they were not what I expected.

There was only one pair of shaved legs in the group and few bulging quads. The bikes leaning on the bamboo balustrade were mostly hybrids, quite a few with stuffed animals dangling from a trunk bag or helmet. In fact a couple of riders scoffed at our carbon cyclocross

bikes. The group patiently waiting for the omelet station to open was cycling across a continent — not because they're elite athletes, but because they're adventurers, curious enough about the world to leave the comforts of family and home behind.

The through riders are pedaling 6,800 miles from Medan, Sumatra, Indonesia, to the Sydney Opera House in Australia. My slice of the tour, called Volcanoes and Temples, is 530 miles over nine days of pedaling from Yogyakarta, Java, to Ubud, Bali, Indonesia, with one rest day in the middle. It doesn't sound like much, but so far this TdA Epic offers the toughest riding of any of the company's tours, according to veteran riders and guides alike.

The Trans-Oceania riders are driven by passion and determination that outweighs age and experience.



The author pedaling through lush tropical vegetation and ornate stone walls near the eastern tip of Java.

No matter how hard the riding, they just kept plugging away. 69-year-old John Waterhouse, a retired professor from Canada, was on his fourth TdA tour. London-based Dara Delemere is 40-something, but she'd never ridden farther than a commute to work before quitting her job and joining the tour with her husband Paul Clarke, who had only done a weekend tour before he signed up for Trans-Oceania. The Australia section would be Dara's first time camping. I hoped she took to it because that stretch is two solid months of camping. Gold's 17-year-old niece Nellie Gold Pastor was on the trip, though she'd never really ridden before. They were some of the most passionate, crazy, and committed people I've ever met, and some of the kindest.

It's Week Five for everyone else, Day 1 for my husband Mike and me, and we're nervous and excited.

We were greeted warmly by some riders. Others gave us a quick handshake that said, "You have no idea what we've already survived and what's in store for you." We were loaded with cameras and riding fancy carbon cross bikes. We got some raised eyebrows.

We ate quickly while guides Andreas Pakenham and Cristiano Werneck gave us a quick heads-up on tricky turns in the day's directions, which were scribbled on a whiteboard that riders were quickly transcribing to their own scraps of paper. I was still slathering on the sunscreen as others swung a leg over their bikes and pedaled away.

This was my first clue as to the rhythm of the trip — it was an independent group. To have a good time, you had to be self-sufficient. Tour d'Afrique shuttles luggage and provide a lift if a rider is sick, tired, too slow, or has a mechanical issue. Riders get detailed route notes every night with a quick overview of what the next day holds. But once the group gets rolling, beyond some route flagging, you're on your own.

Barely managing not to get dropped from the gate, we hopped into a peloton of some of the faster riders who typically hung back in the morning to let the rest of the group get a head start.

Yogyakarta's traffic was heavy. I'd been observing it for a day and a half before rolling into it. Rider Shirley



MARTHA BOSTWICK



Gerald Coniel takes a break from a stiff climb to help a local farmer stir his clove harvest drying on a roadside patio.

Frye, 58 years old and a former Olympic-level runner who has ridden across the U.S. and Canada and who rode Tour d'Afrique's Silk Road trip with her husband Dan, gave me sound advice: "Follow the flow, no sudden moves and you'll be fine." She was right. Traffic was controlled chaos, and we flowed like a school of fish around obstacles, changing direction with unexpected agility. In the mass of mopeds, buses, trucks, rickshaws, bicycles carrying massive sheaves of grass or wicker baskets with geese, you had to stay in the stream.

On our bikes, the thousands of mopeds and handful of trucks gave us enough space that I could talk to the rider next to me. Riri was Indonesian, riding an ancient Klein mountain bike, and decked out in jeans-print tights,

no helmet. She was with a group of Indonesians who were accompanying us out of the city by bike. A local TV crew was on hand to record it — Yogyakarta doesn't get a lot of cycle tourists. Riri was the only woman in the Yogyakarta bike club, and at 50, also a grandmother. Her other "bike" is a Harley. We snapped a selfie, waved goodbye, and Mike and I, having lost the other riders, started the first climb.

The pavement was good, but the mountain road was steep. I weaved across its full width to maintain momentum. I tackled it with full steam — not realizing that it was just a taste of what was coming over the next 10 days. The camera crew helpfully redirected me when I made a wrong turn, then cheered me on.

The encouragement kept my legs

moving in circles, although sweat was dripping off my chin and my gloves were soaked through. It was 90 degrees and barely 8:00 AM. The van was waiting somewhere up ahead with “lunch,” which riders started reaching around 9:00 AM. It was parked next to a school before a big downhill. Shirley, who taught herself basic Indonesian conversation before she left

Massachusetts for the trip, was holding court with the students, telling them that Dan is 68 and that she herself comes from the eastern U.S. Every student whipped out a cell phone for a photo with Shirley. When Mike pulled out a camera to record the moment, they all wanted an individual photo with Mike too.

Andreas and nurse Chelsea Larock

had laid out plates of pineapple, honeydew, watermelon, and mangosteen. I ate some fruit, but it was too hot to dip into the Nutella, make a tuna sandwich, or tuck into the boiled potatoes and salt. I refilled my water again and pedaled on.

We were off the main roads — spinning through curvy lanes and along agricultural roads, weaving through the countryside for the best views with the least traffic. The exceptional routing is one great reason to take TdA's tour. Every morning before riders leave, TdA's chief route setter, Cristiano, headed out in a van to flag the route and check for any problems. Inspiring people is the other.

The van passed me on a steep creep up a broken road into a dense jungle. I waved them past. I was thinking about “EFI” as I pressed up the climb. (EFI is short for a special TdA accomplishment. Learn about it at tourdafrique.com/efi-riders — warning, strong language.) The 62-year-old retired Australian shipmaster in front of me, Brett Lanham, is going for it — trying to ride every inch of every Trans-Oceania day for all 93 days of pedaling. That means no rides in the van, no sick days, and a lot of determination at moments like these when you're so hot it feels like your skin will melt off, and you want to drink your water but also pour it over your head. Part of me wanted to get in the van, to sit by an open window as the vehicle slalomed down the mountain to the air-conditioned hotel. But I decided in that moment that even though I was only cycling for nine days, I was going for an EFI too.

I focused on the road. The pavement was good; then it abruptly dropped into



Hill farms growing onions and other produce near Lawang, East Java.

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RIDING WITH TDA

Tour d'Afrique provides route marking and/or daily directions, guide, mechanic and nurse support, vans to shuttle luggage, accommodation — in Australia it's camping, BYO tent, pad, and bag — breakfast, dinner and “lunch,” which is appropriately light. Guests are responsible for all alcohol, rest-day meals, snacks, and some tolls and fees, as well

as any additional meals at hotel or camp. Guests provided their own bike, repair parts, and basic tools. We rode cross bikes. Other participants brought mountain bikes or hybrids with 32c or wider tires. Luggage is restricted to a day duffel that also holds your camping gear, and a rest-day duffel, which you have access to once a week. Riders should be independent as van

support is limited, but there is a sweep. Tour d'Afrique helps arrange visas.

COST

\$2,200-\$3,800 for two- to four-week sections. The full 124-day tour — which includes 31 rest days — is approximately \$160 per day. Final pricing has not been set. Trans-Oceania will run again in fall 2016.

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a rubbly mix of gravel and dirt. In the middle of a particularly challenging washboard section, I saw a sign indicating roadwork ahead. Around the corner, a half-dozen men were heating tar over a single-burner cookstove and drizzling it into a crack in the only block of tarmac on this dirt road.

When we finally reached Surakarta (Solo), it seemed to be rush hour, but in Java's cities it was always rush hour. We weaved through gridlock, looking for the orange flagging that Cristiano had tied to road signs and trees to mark turns. The bright streamers didn't always last long. One morning, we saw Cristiano's ribbons not on a road sign, but tied to a baby in his grandfather's arms. Both waved enthusiastically from the sidewalk as we rolled by. Another day, we saw flagging streaming from the hands of four uniformed schoolboys on a moped, delighted by their find.

When I reached the hotel, I barely managed to drag myself into a luke-warm shower — my grimy bike clothes still on. I lathered them, then me, then passed out in bed until dinner.

That night's buffet was lavish, but many of the other riders were hesitant to eat too much — most had recently had a bout with digestive problems. I tucked into the roast chicken, fried rice, and gelatinous desserts unconcerned.

My belly full, I located the white-board where Andreas had posted tomorrow's route. The line indicating our altitude gain shot abruptly to the top of the board at an impossible angle. No one else seemed to note the 8,000-foot climb. Cycling up and down volcanoes here is as ubiquitous as *nasi goreng* — the fried rice we're served every day for dinner and breakfast. There were no complaints, they're used to it.

And so it goes. The rhythm was the same every day, and I liked it. Eat, ride, eat, sleep. It was a simple existence without the stress of needing to find a hotel or campground at ride's end as you do when you're solo touring. Inevitably we woke up early. Java is predominantly Muslim, so every day started with a 4:15 AM call to prayer that was impossible to sleep through. Then it was time to pack, dress, and

eat. Despite the fact that we were on an island with a name synonymous with coffee, Nescafé was as good as we could get. We joined the mopeds and left town.

We stayed in cities each night — that's where the hotels are — but they're never the highlight of the day. Solo, Sarangan, Tulungagung, Batu, Bondowoso, Ketapang, Lovina, Ubud. We plugged along, each day as humbling as the first. One morning, we were treated to a pancake-flat 25-mile spin through

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back-alley streets and rice paddies with a backdrop of craggy 10,000-foot volcanoes. Then we started a 10-mile climb so steep that I had to lean precipitously over my bike to keep the front wheel on the road.

Cross-continental biking, even supported, is a huge undertaking, and it takes a special person to be up for four months of daily riding, even with ample rest days. Gold, an expat Czech relocated to Toronto, came up with the idea for TdA 12 years ago. He was 50, disenchanted with the non-governmental organization (NGO) work he had been doing for decades in Africa, and looking for something new. He noticed a Russian Olympic team training in Ethiopia's mountains and was struck by the insane idea of running a bike trip from Cape Town to Cairo, 12,000 kilometers through 10 countries. Despite the route's danger and the loose level of organization Gold gave the trip — he wasn't convinced that riders needed a sweep — 33 people signed up for the inaugural tour in 2003, some racing, some riding. All, including Gold, crossed the



The author hiking around the crater of 7,641 foot Mount Bromo, an active volcano in Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park, East Java.

African continent by bike.

Cross-continental touring is a visceral experience that reminds you you're alive at every turn. "Signing up the first time is the hardest part," said French businessman Gerald Coniel. He registered for Tour d'Afrique after coming home from a long ride before his wife was even out of the shower. "I just did

it," said Coniel. "If I waited, I would have talked myself out of it."

And then the tour is over. You go home, you eat a lot, and once you're rested, it's hard not to sign up for another. "It's addictive," said Latham. "There are no work pressures — you've stepped out of the daily grind, trading it for grinding pedals." It's a simple rou-

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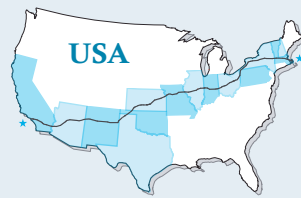
tine, with hours each day to wonder at new places and people and to be at one with the world, strangely vulnerable to the surroundings, but also at one with them. You are part of the landscape, the smells, the sights, the traffic. In his rider profile, Coniel, who wrote a book about riding across Africa, *The Slow Way Down*, said, "I have been missing the camaraderie and the extraordinary excitement of discovering new countries and cultures from the top of my saddle."

The next day, the smells were intense: a mix of clove cigarettes, exhaust, burning trash, lemongrass, coconut, and sizzling satay chicken. I was riding up a steep dirt track with Coniel, and the clove smell was becoming overwhelming. The tennis court-sized cement patio next to us was covered with short brown sticks — drying cloves. Fresh ones are green with red tips, whereas others had baked to a rich bark brown. Gerald lent a hand stirring the spices, then we rode on, climbing through jungle and up mountains. Later in the trip, I passed hundreds of woven mats propped up with a stick to face the sun. The mats were carpeted with shredded yellowish leaves of tobacco. I passed women plucking brilliant red coffee beans from the bush, a man high in a tree gingerly dropping avocados onto a pile of grain sacks so they wouldn't bruise, massive swaths of garlic drying roadside on a steep hill in the middle of a busy town, and piles of *bok choy*, potatoes, onions, cauliflower, and cabbages waiting to be loaded onto a moped or truck to be brought to market.

Java, and the rest of the Indonesian archipelago, was formed by volcanoes. And the country still has quite a few active ones. Pedaling through farmlands, we saw the faint outline of craggy mountaintops behind the fields. Soon after, we were deep in them, chests low to the bars as we struggled uphill picking a line through blocks of eroded cement. "I've never had to get off my bike before today," admitted Coniel. I passed up a ride in the van, even though I knew I might end up walking five miles through a volcanic sand desert that Cristiano hadn't been able to scout.

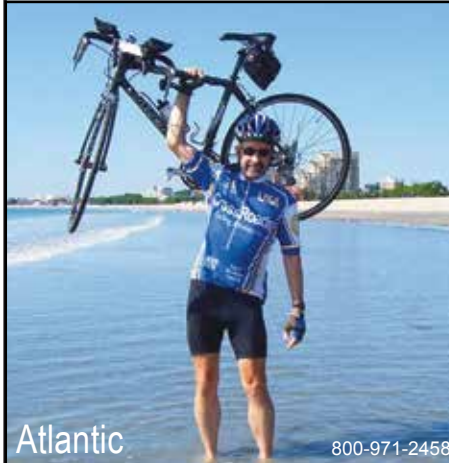
We pedaled out of one busy town into another. Eric Beurton, a French rider who plans to be the first to com-

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plete all seven Epics, got clipped by a motorcycle and thrown over his handlebars. He was scraped and bruised, but in the big picture, unscathed. For the first time since we landed at Yogyakarta airport, there was a McDonalds, a Starbucks, and a Toyota dealership. We passed an Adidas store in a wooden shack, and I realized that what I've loved most about Java is its rawness. We hadn't seen other tourists or any international commerce at all.

It was hot, or maybe the days of riding were just catching up with us. Mike and I stopped at least three times for drinks and snacks. We slurped mango pudding, chugged cloyingly sweet bottled green jasmine tea, and crunched on taro chips. We were headed for Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park, home to the active Bromo Volcano. Every few years it erupts, and the nearby town has to be evacuated. At the height of land, I followed the arrow toward Bromo, and the pavement turned to a red dirt the consistency of talcum powder that sucked in my wheels.

The steep downhill cobbles were

rideable, thanks to my ninja-like mountain biker skills. In the flats, I picked a line where the dirt seemed compacted, eventually sinking into soft sand, falling off, and repeating. There were desert mountain views all around when smoking Bromo popped into view. I walked across the volcanic ash plain — it was too soft to ride — for hours, peaceful and content in the first silence since the beginning of the trip.

We were wrapping up our tour of Java and heading to Bali. Our last day on the island, we rode on a highway all afternoon to reach the ferry. When we paused at Indomaret — a reliable stop for ice cream and cold drinks — a young man left his moped and sat on the cool tiled steps with us. He introduced himself as a schoolteacher and asked us where we came from today. We told him “Bromo,” 70 miles away.

“Bromo?” He looked confused. “Bromo *two day*,” he said smiling and holding up two fingers.

“No,” countered Mike. “Bromo *today*.”

The teacher still looked confused. “By moto?” He pointed at his moped.

We were leaning on our bicycles.

“No, by bicycle,” Mike responded.

“Ah, by bicycle. By bicycle, Bromo *two day*!” he confidently repeated.

When we traded mostly Muslim Java with its frequent mosques for the omnipresent ornate temples of Hindu Bali, it was as if we had entered another country. We rode off the ferry and through an elaborate stone archway welcoming us to the island. The roadside was peppered with fierce-looking cement gargoyles tied with gold silk scarves. Offerings of flowers and bits of rice were scattered at their bases. Where the road touched the sea, hundreds of monkeys picked shellfish from the low tide rocks and cracked them open. Monkeys were climbing on the “monkey temple” across the street, despite being screened with heavy wire mesh to keep them out. The road was busy, and drivers who gave me space and kept their distance in Java skimmed past me at high speed. It was nerve-racking. I pedaled past 30 dive shops in a row, gated resorts, and the Hindu Home

CONTINUED ON PAGE 58



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Depot, which I dubbed the ancient temple supply store. You could buy pre-aged stone archways and statues of the god of your choice.

In the two days I was in Bali, I fell in and out of love with it 20 times. I pedaled to the top of a big hill, thirsty for a Coke before winding down the other side. There was no drink shack, just a leather store and an art gallery. When I did roll into a town, it was clear that the pricing would be different — moped gas was displayed out front in Absolut Vodka and Bombay Sapphire Gin bottles — and drink prices had quadrupled. Bleached blond tourists awkwardly piloted their mopeds along the rice paddies, and the second I stepped onto the beach in Lovina, I was accosted by peddlers, masseuses, and boat captains who all wanted to sell me something.

But it was breathtakingly beautiful along TdA's routes through the coun-



A resident monkey snacks on crustaceans on a seaside wall near Bandjargondol, Bali.

tryside. The roads were walled with intricate temple gates, and even though on one descent I had to weave my way through 50 downhill mountain biking tourists wearing flip flops (but not helmets), my route quickly turned off.

On my last day of riding, I sank as deeply as I could into the serenity

To see a roundup of the bikes and key pieces of gear used on this trip, visit adventurecycling.org/java

of the moment. Just before I hit the frenetic flurry of Ubud, and the reality of packing bikes and airport shuttles — I hoped for a van shuttle instead of a moped — I pedaled a stretch of road that felt like a rite of passage. Flowers formed brilliant dense walls on either side of a narrow lane. Near the end, leaves that looked like the hands of a giant reached out from the wall. They seemed to be gently waving goodbye. It was a fitting sendoff from a country that had surprised me and delighted me with every hill, at every turn. **AC**

Berne Broudy is a Vermont-based writer and photographer. She frequently travels on assignment and for fun to far flung destinations, most recently Namibia, Indonesia and Ecuador. Find her on twitter @berneab and on instagram @bernebroudy.

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