

ESSENTIAL TRAVEL GEAR

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OPERATE

VELO

TRAVEL GUIDE

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THE
PLACES
you have to see

THE
EVENTS
you have to ride

GIRONA

A visit to pro cycling's new hometown

PLUS
RIDE WITH THE
VELO STAFF
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ATOP THE COL DU GALBIER »

THE WORLD'S TOUGHEST BIKE TOURS



ANCIENT WONDER
TDA Global Cycling's Tour d'Afrique starts in Cairo, Egypt, beside the pyramids, and reaches Cape Town, South Africa, after five months.

USING THE WORD "EPIC" TO describe your six-hour weekend ride is hereby banned. The term shall be reserved for particularly monstrous adventures that take you places—physically, mentally, and, perhaps, spiritually—that you never thought possible.

TDA Global Cycling sells epics. From the longest stage race in the world to a spin across the coldest continent on earth, Toronto-based TDA (tdaglobalcycling.com) takes riders on the most grueling, life-changing rides anywhere. The company operates on all seven continents, through more than 60 countries, from the traditional cycling locales to the far reaches of civilization. And though TDA does have trip offerings for just about every type of touring rider, it specializes in the grueling and non-traditional.

"Lately we've been using the term 'disruptive social entrepreneurship in travel' to describe ourselves," says Shanny Hill, TDA's marketing manager. "We're not a typical cycling tour. We

offer something just slightly askew from a cycling vacation in Europe. It's pushing people a little further, it's taking them out of their comfort zone. But hopefully, as we all know, there's rewards at the other end of that."

TDA's South American Epic, which goes from Cartagena, Colombia, to Ushuaia, Chile, comprises 131 riding days and 33 rest days and covers an astounding 8,476 miles (13,641 kilometers), passing through 10 UNESCO World Heritage Sites along the way. And, yes, it's a race—if you want it to be.

Then there's the company's newest offering, the Last Degree, an 18-day bike adventure to the South Pole. The route takes cyclists 69 miles (111 kilometers) from the 89th parallel to the geographic pole. Those bold (and wealthy) enough to pay the \$70,000 fee will become part of the first group ride to take a break at the bottom of Earth.

If those two singular rides don't whet your appetite, TDA also offers tours across North America, Oceania, Europe, and Asia, including its Bamboo Road, from Shanghai to Singapore; Silk Route, from Beijing to Istanbul; and Hippie Trail, across India. From Cairo to Cape Town, the Tour d'Afrique is TDA's original trans-continental journey and the company's flagship event, now in its 14th year. For fall 2016, TDA expands its territory with the Eighth Continent, a trip around Madagascar.

Risk obviously comes with the territories, and TDA is both open and pragmatic about those concerns.

"It's a matter of dealing with people's perceptions—which are often skewed—and dealing with the real safety concerns," Hill says. For example, for the trip across Africa, TDA provides clients with a bulletin about specific risks like car accidents and people throwing stones at them as

THE LAST DEGREE

TDA Global will guide a lucky few to the South Pole by fat bike in December 2016.



they ride. More broadly, TDA depends on its friends and local partners in each country for on-the-ground logistical support, while the participants are continuously contained within a caravan of support vehicles and staff riders.

TDA encourages its riders to find their own pace. That can mean catering to the needs of amateur racers—both the South American Epic and Tour d'Afrique are timed for those who want to race—while at the same time allowing others to explore at more leisurely speeds.

Still others ride for a cause. TDA has raised over \$750,000 for various charities, through its riders, in order to support the people in the places through which their trips pass.

"That's the real joy of these trips," says Hill, who has worked for TDA for 11 years in different capacities, and led over 10 expeditions. "It's getting to places that are very obscure and to experience the cultures in these places and to have my preconceptions busted as soon as I get there. The cycling is almost secondary."

For many participants, the trip changes their life, career, or both. Some never leave the places they cycled to: Canadian Kelsey Wiens completed the Tour d'Afrique in 2009 and never left South Africa where the trip finished.

"I remember being in the middle of Botswana watching an overland truck pull out of camp and all the guests inside the truck just looked miserable, tired, and about to drive for eight hours," Wiens says. "And then I looked at our group, all in spandex, all lean from months of cycling, eating our breakfast out of random cups, and thinking 'Man, we're going to have so much more fun today riding our bikes.'

"When people ask, 'How did you end up here?' it always makes me smile to get to respond 'by bike,' and see the look of confusion and madness as I try to explain starting in Cairo, then passing through so many countries. I feel really fortunate to have seen so much of Africa and so slowly."

The Canadian is now an open access advocate for Africa based in Cape Town. Danny Gold, nephew of the tour company's founder, is now a foreign correspondent with *Vice News*, having done many in-depth reports in Africa since tackling the tour. Tim and Ronda Padmore set up a charity on Zanzibar Island. Edwina Mattinson has returned to volunteer with an elephant conservation group.

Countless participants who complete a TDA trip are transformed by what they see and do and what they learn along the way, and the experience changes who they are and how they view the world.

"It was indeed an experience of a lifetime," says Susanne Froehle, who completed the Tour d'Afrique in 2013. "For me it was important to see how close the picture I had of Africa from television and other media was to reality. And I must say that it does not correspond. Africa is not that 'hopeless place' that some people want us to believe."

Epic. ✓

FAMILLE DOMESTIQUE

Choosing between a family gathering or a bike vacation? You don't have to.

EVEN IF YOU'RE FORTUNATE ENOUGH to come from a family of cyclists, the generational gaps can mean wildly varying abilities and passions. That would seem to make bike vacations difficult. Big sis the racer will be pushing for longer rides and harder terrain, while dad will just want to do an hour loop and be back in time for a second breakfast.

Luckily, it's possible to devise family bike trips that keep everyone happy, even the in-laws. ✓



LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

While a remote Alpine ski station will be tempting, it probably won't offer enough activities for those family members who aren't hoping to knock off some bucket-list climbs. Look instead, to **CITIES LOCATED NEAR SOME CLIMBS**. Nice, France, for instance has plentiful beaches and a vibrant city. Top pros like Tejay van Garderen live here and ride the ample roads that twist into the northern hills, including the Col de la Madone, about 18 miles from Nice.



RIDE TOGETHER

Even in a family of cyclists, a Provencal death march

up Ventoux probably isn't the way to go. A place like **NAPA VALLEY**—with mellow flatlands, rolling hills, and a few steep pitches for the more adventurous among you—will result in more together time. And while one group spends extra time at that last vineyard, the others can take on mini epics like Ida Clayton, a four-mile, 1,730-foot monster north of Calistoga. Also, did we mention that there's wine?

LET SOMEONE ELSE MAKE PLANS

Most trips designed by **TREK TRAVEL** face the same challenges of a family riding vacation: a wide variety of ages, personalities, and riding abilities. Unlike you, however, Trek Travel is really good at navigating all that. On most trips, the company

offers three different ride options each day, as well as Garmin's pre-loaded with routes for argument-free way finding. Plus, there's an e-bike option for riders who need a little boost to keep up with their faster kin. And if there's no way you'll get your grumpy teen on a bike, Trek Travel organizes trips to destinations where non-riders can hike, raft, or just relax. Four-day trips to places like Zion, Utah, run around \$1,500 per person, while the six-day excursion to Cinque Terre, Italy—and other trips based in luxury hotels—is about \$4,400 per guest.