

# African bike tour's unifying athletic bond

Kilometre after kilometre cycling across five countries, participants of Tour d'Afrique gradually become a team

**BERT ARCHER**  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

WINDHOEK, NAMIBIA—I spent 39 days cycling across five African countries with Toronto tour company TDA Global Cycling this spring, on its Tour d'Afrique tour. They were all good days — except maybe the one after the night I didn't get any sleep because of a vociferous all-night gospel session in my Lusaka, Zambia, hotel's meeting room — but let me tell you about my best one.

We woke up in what the tour staff called a bush camp, a bit of ground by the side of the road. Advance scouts had determined the area mostly flat enough and mostly unpopulated-with-deadly-things enough to pitch our tents and sleep.

By the time the sun rose, we had eaten our double or triple breakfasts of carbs, packed our stuff into the staff trucks, got on our bikes and started stage 72 of the 11,000-kilometre tour. I had been taking part in the middle 3,000 kilometres, and today consisted of 143 kilometres to Ghanzi, Botswana.

I got a late start, and because I'd roughly figured out by this late point in the ride that I needed to eat a lot of carbs in the morning and a lot of protein at night, whether I felt like it or not, I had more or less the right amount of energy.

Then I saw Emma Houterman, Rob Hart and Douwe Cunningham ahead of me. They were part of a new demographic for this annual trip, which usually attracts the sort of early retirees banks put in their RRSP ads. They were all aged 29 to 31, successful and ridiculously fit, and were using the ride to reboot their lives.

I had been riding a great bike — my favourite ever, a Cannondale Slate cyclocross that's ideal for exactly this type of trip — but it didn't actually make me a better rider. I mostly didn't see the trio until I rode into camp, sweaty and nearly defeated sometime mid-afternoon, about two hours after they'd got in, showered, had a beer, and were already playing cricket or volleyball or something.

Yet three weeks of cycling an average of about 140 kilometres a day got into my blood.

Soon we were riding in a group and the others initiated me into the rituals of the athletic elite. They sang to each other — mostly Disney songs — and if Emma thought oncoming traffic was not giving her boys a wide enough berth, she'd cycle out into the middle of the road in front of them and play chicken, middle finger raised.

About two-thirds of the way, we took a turn off where we'd heard there would be a museum of the San

people, sometimes called Bushmen, the ancient, original and current inhabitants of this part of the world.

Like most such attractions, we actually needed the store beside it. This one had the cold Cokes everyone on the tour learned have been as necessary as the water we carried (and it had to be Coke; Crush, Sprite, ginger ale — nothing else gave us the boost we needed).

The store had great ice creams on sticks, too. So we sat under an awning to get out from under the Kalahari Desert sun, about three metres from that museum. Cell service had been available and Emma checked her phone. "Prince died," she said.

We talked about Prince, and sang Prince songs to each other as we rode the last 50 kilometres to the Thakadu Bush Camp in Ghanzi. When we reached the last 20 kilometres, the group let me in on another ritual: as soon as someone called out the 20-kilometre mark, they sang a round of Europe's *The Final Countdown* to each other, complete with mock synth trumpets — and did it again at the 10-kilometre mark.

At about one kilometre remaining, the entrance to the camp and the flag the staff set out to mark the end of each day's ride came into view.

Halfway down the path to camp, sat a lodge and a bar. We stopped for beer and talked to the bartender, who told us the only way to kill the horseflies chomping on us is to decapitate them.

We went to camp briefly, just long enough to set up our tents, and then back to the lodge for sunset beers, then evening beers, then night beers as the lights illuminating the small pool and fountain turned the roaming warthogs into dramatic and vaguely demonic silhouettes.

I saw elephants and giraffes; I looked out over Lake Malawi at sunrise as the lights from the dugout boats netting the morning's usipa catch bobbed in the middle distance and, the next day, I reached the top of my first real hill after about a 1,500-metre climb without having to flag down the medic.

Yet it's the day I spent with my people, talking, singing, encouraging, checking up on each other, doing one of the hardest things I'm ever going to do among people doing one of the hardest things they're ever going to do.

When it finished a week later, I felt like I'd caught a glimmer of what athletes talk about when they talk about what they miss.

**Bert Archer** was a guest of TDA Global Cycling, and used a bike loaned to him by Cannondale. Neither reviewed or approved this story.



BERT ARCHER

Bert Archer cycled an average of about 140 kilometres a day on his three-week tour.

## > WHEN YOU GO

**Do this trip:** TDA Global Cycling ([tdaglobalcycling.com](http://tdaglobalcycling.com)), Suite 205, 1179 King St. W., Toronto, 416-364-8255. The entire tour for 2017 costs about \$22,000 (airfare not included), but you can buy individual sections. The 2017 versions of mine cost \$1,750, \$2,000, and \$2,500 respectively.

**Get there:** Ethiopian Airlines ([ethiopianairlines.com](http://ethiopianairlines.com)), flies direct from

Toronto to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where I caught a short flight to Mbeya, Tanzania, to join the group.

**Bike:** The Slate is a new bike from Cannondale, just out this year, and it's likely to become a standard on these sorts of trips (other cyclists and staffers kept asking to try it out). They come with various options, but mine costs about \$6,000.



TDA GLOBAL CYCLING

Tour leader Tallis Wessels, from South Africa, plays with a chameleon, one of many lizards riders regularly encountered on the road.



TDA GLOBAL CYCLING

Soft drinks got many riders through the day after carbs consumed at breakfast began to peter out.