

Cycling the Silk Road At 70



by **Tom Perlmutter with Andrew Randell**

We were two days from Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan and our end point of the rugged Pamir Highway, one of the highest altitude highways in the world. Although much of the road was nominally paved (interwoven with long stretches of harsh gravel), it was badly damaged by erosion, earthquakes, landslides and avalanches. We had been steadily descending from the high point (4,655 m) at the

Ak-Baital Pass but the going remained rough.

I had been struggling for days, uncertain of what was going on with me. Many of the riders had been afflicted with gastro and various other ailments. There wasn't anything specific that I could put my finger on. I just knew I wasn't right. That day's ride wasn't too long, 90 km but with 1,800 m of climbing on a series of steep rolling hills culminating in a 23-km ascent.

I started out feeling sluggish. My legs were dead weights. I was beset by another of the bouts of dizziness that had been plaguing me for days.

Photos: Mats Fredrik

I was hoping that by pressing on I would find my strength and rhythm. It didn't happen. The climbs seemed to become progressively harder, and I felt myself becoming weaker. After 45 km, at the start of the long rise, I had nothing left in me. I had never felt that kind of complete and utter

Throughout numerous kilometres and days at altitude, a late-to-cycling septuagenarian finds out just what he's capable of on the bike. His tale shows the fitness heights you could reach in the eighth decade of life





depletion. I thought, this was it. I had reached my limit. What hubris to imagine that I could undertake such an arduous trek at my age. I was done, finished. All I wanted to do was to sink to the ground by the side of the road and expire. Heartsick, I clambered into a support vehicle.

Two months later, when I flew under the banner of the finish line on the outskirts of Istanbul, what came back to me was that day on the Pamir, the day when I thought I had reached my end point. I had lost perspective and let myself sink into a morass of self-flagellation. The Pamir had come to smite me, and I had almost succumbed. But almost immediately off the highway, I was fine and stronger than I had been at any previous point in our long ride across Central Asia, flying up longer and steeper climbs.

The question about the limits of age had been on my mind even before I signed up for this four-month trek across the Silk Road from Beijing to Istanbul. I had begun cycling late. I was 70 when I undertook my first continental traverse, TDA's Tour d'Afrique, from Cairo to Cape Town. With a COVID-induced

pause I picked up my cycling adventures with TDA, a ride across America and then the length of North America from Tuktoyaktuk on the Arctic Ocean to Panama. Not long before heading off to Beijing, I had completed a six-month bike journey down the Andean spine of South America.

At 76, I wondered if I could do one more arduous cross-continental biking expedition. This time I thought it would be interesting to see if I could track what was happening to me over the course of the trip.

I enlisted the aid of my cycling coach, Andrew Randell, with whom I had been training for several years. Andrew, a former pro who had ridden with Symmetrics and SpiderTech, had consistently adjusted my training based on the numbers: heart rate, cadence, power output, rate of perceived exertion and so on. Why not, I asked him, look

at the same metrics from the point of view of an ongoing endurance effort? Could we learn things that would help me as a rider and him as a coach? He was eager and willing to jump on board.

I wore a heart-rate monitor. I had installed the Favero Assioma Pro MX SPD power meter pedals on my bike, which would record cadence and power output. I had a pulse oximeter to register oxygenation at altitude. Whenever I had a signal, all the data was automatically uploaded to TrainingPeaks and the software Andrew was using to analyze the data. As well, I sent notes about terrain and how I was feeling.

"What I really wanted to see in the metrics from a trip like this were trends," Andrew said later. "In training, we might analyze a single climb for pacing. But given how big a trip like this is, I wanted to get a sense of what the training load would look like. For this, I would look at work on a given day—kilojoules, metres climbed and wattage on the climbs. Then I'd see how that played out over a week, and even a month, in TrainingPeaks' Performance Management Chart.

"Did the power Tom could produce just go down and down across several months? Or did his body find a place where it could just keep going day after day? Key to understanding the trip was linking what we saw in the trends and metrics to his personal feedback and experience."

I arrived in Beijing with a plan of how to manage this adventure, somewhat differently from my previous rides. All my cycling expeditions have been with a group, but we never rode together. Everyone went at their own pace, alone or joining up with others, as they liked. The only rule was to arrive at camp before dark. My tendency had always been to try to avoid being the slowest or the last, the one riding with the sweep (the staff member who follows behind the last rider of the day). I wanted to project an image of capability to counter any preconceptions, others' and my own, that being an older rider meant I couldn't keep up.

I was determined to set that drive aside, to slow down deliberately, to allow myself the time to adapt and grow into the adventure. That was the theory. It worked well for the first two to three weeks. Then it changed after a while for a reason I hadn't been fully aware of. Despite all the pre-trip training, you are never fully prepared at the outset for the rigours of long days in the saddle. With time,




you become stronger and are able to push more, which creates the incentive to push even harder, at times past your limits.

I had learned early on, from my Africa trip, that given a certain base level of fitness that the real challenge of months-long cycling journeys was mental. To sit in the saddle hours at a time, day after day, week after week, you have to exist in a different head space from that of your daily realities. On a bike, your horizon is limited to the day in front of you and more often to the next kilometre or the next landmark. Paradoxically, that opens up a different kind of horizon, a limitless one, that is completely internal. It is an ethereal zone, as if you have crossed into a parallel universe where you exist as you and not you, a Zen space where your relation to the world about you is intense and immediate and visceral. So the internal and external play against each other.

We cycled north out of Beijing, past the Great Wall, through Inner Mongolia, across the Gobi Desert toward Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia. Out of China, we were off tarmac on dirt tracks through the Mongolian steppes. Along the rolling landscape we came across large flocks of cattle and goats and sheep. There was something biblical, Old Testament, about the sight. Genesis



Photos: Mats Fredrik



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repeatedly recounts the blessings bestowed on the patriarchs by their wealth in livestock.

Here, too, in Mongolia wealth is indicated by the extent of a man's herds and flocks. Unlike the biblical stories, the greatest prestige accrues to those owning massive herds of horses. Mongolia reportedly has close to 5 million horses, which outnumber the human population by more than a million. Horses are central to Mongolian identity. They speak of the freedom and independence of the culture's nomadic, martial past.

As I cycled along ancient grasslands in the early morning light, a small herd of about 20 horses, manes streaming in the breeze, came thundering by me, their pounding hoofs producing a deep, resonant percussive beat, a primal sound of unrestrained energy. There were no fences or corrals to hem them in. They roamed freely with a regal mastery of their domain. No matter how many times we came across the horses—and we did time and

Photos: Mats Fredrik

again, in smaller family groups of stallions, mares and foals or greater numbers, grazing or nuzzling each other in friendly play or racing against the horizon—I felt the thrill of their explosive strength and vitality.

One day after about 80 km at the edge of a steep gravel summit, I felt myself running on empty, my legs ready to give out. Andrew, who'd been tracking my metrics, emailed me. What happened on July 4, he wanted to know.

The numbers that day were a complete outlier with an excessively high anaerobic score. Again, I wondered if I had reached age-imposed limits.

Later, I realized the issue was not age; it was nutrition. I hadn't been fuelling properly. I simply wasn't eating enough. I'm a vegetarian, have been for more than 40 years. The standby protein for us on these treks are pulses like lentils and chickpeas. But with the rigours of camping, and particularly at altitude, they were harder to cook properly, which made them hard to digest. With age, I found my digestion had changed in other ways as well. I had to find new

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solutions to fuel my endurance efforts. It took some time working with the cook to find a diet that worked and gave me the energy I needed.

After a few weeks, Andrew looked at the numbers. "The most interesting part we saw in the trends was how big the training load was as Tom jumped into this trip," Andrew said. "In preparing for the trip, Tom was limited to 10 to 15 hours of training each week. Then, he was doing massive loads of 35 and 37 hours each week. We did see that, with the massive hours, the rides became much more aerobic. Power and time have an inverse relationship, so that part made sense. My question was how sustainable was this going to be?"



"The answer was not straightforward. The metrics (see the graph opposite) show that his fitness steadily built throughout July and August, with only one five-day spell of rest. Then around Aug. 8, the training load starts to fall. That week Tom only did three days of riding for a total of 10 hours, as compared with the previous seven weeks.

"The further the bars are below zero the more fatigue is being modelled. The green indicates an optimal training range, red overload generally meaning deep fatigue is imminent, and yellow is rested. We can see the undulation as fatigue builds and falls away across the trip, with a more sustainable pattern emerging in the second half."

It was that August week when my legs and body gave out and I had the crushing sense that I had reached the limits of my long-distance cycling. I was wrong. The pressure of two months of intense workload combined with the high altitude and fuelling that hadn't yet been fully resolved finally took its toll, particularly during the most demanding and challenging part of the trek.

What surprised me was how quickly I rebounded. By the time we cycled out of Dushanbe, I was stronger and faster than I had been at any previous point on the trip. I started to ride regularly with Ellen and Kenny, both more than 15 years younger than me and strong cyclists. In the first two months, I had tried a couple of times to keep pace with them but couldn't keep up. Suddenly, not only was it possible, it didn't take an extraordinary effort on my part.

As I stood for photos under the finish line banner, proud of what I had achieved—doubly so as that day I had pulled

Photos: Mats Fredrik

out all stops and for the first time on our Silk Road journey I was the first to reach the end of the day's ride—I knew I wasn't done. I was still on track for my goal of crossing all the continents (save Antarctica) before I hit 80. Europe and Australia are waiting for me with their own marvels.

For what the numbers can't speak to is the sense of wonder that comes with exploring new vistas on two wheels. Age sets no boundaries to curiosity, engagement, or openness to others.

There is no quantifying the speechless awe of cycling alongside galloping horses on the Mongolian steppes or turning a corner to behold the majestic sight of the snow-capped Pamir Mountains. The hardships of a day in the saddle on remote, harsh roads dissolved in the delights of an evening camp with a nomadic family on their summer pasture or by the serenades of Kyrgyz musicians at a lakeside yurt camp at sunset. What a scarcely imaginable thrill it was to cycle into the storied Silk Road cities of Samarqand, Bukhara and Khiva, past soaring exquisite mosques and madrassahs. Many were the days we waited into other worlds on the haunting call of the muezzin drifting over our tents in the pre-dawn hours.

There was a singularity about this trek, unlike any of the other ones I had undertaken. I call it linguistic blindness, a form of illiteracy. None of the languages I speak held sway there. Neither the written or spoken word was fathomable to me. The logic language imposes falls away. It forced one out of habitual modes of being, a western instrumental rationalism, into engaging with that world with other senses. Language reduced to gesture created different realities.

In Türkiye, on the crest of a long, hard climb, a young, rangy man in a battered red pickup stopped. With a series of hand motions and facial expressions, he offered me and my bike a ride. I was content to carry on but as he left, I changed my mind. I have been given an opening and I must step into it. We wrestled my bike into the bed of the pickup. I clambered in. He handed me water, a hunk of bread still steaming from the bakery. I made gasping, guttural sounds to convey the tough demands of the road.

We nodded and smiled and a space of connection was given to us. I was only with him for 2 or 3 km. As I was about to mount my bike he thrust the full loaf of warm bread into my hands. We waved farewell to each other, companions of the road.

To spend months on the road like this is to enter a dream world. Arriving in Istanbul, the bike boxed, sitting at a rooftop bar nursing a beer, I couldn't help wondering—was it all a hallucination?



Tom Perlmutter
TrainingPeaks | Performance Management Chart

