

A Journey Across Africa in Search of Hope

By Ayesha Harji



Crossing the Tropic of Capricorn in Namibia.

In January 2006, my father and I embarked on a four-month whirlwind tour of Africa on bicycle. As part of a group called *Tour D'Afrique*, comprising more than 50 riders from Canada, the United States, Holland, South Africa, New Zealand, Belgium and the United Kingdom amongst others, we crossed the continent of Africa starting in Cairo and pedalling to Cape Town. In the 120 days that we were on the road, we crossed through Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. Each country presented breathtaking sights and distinctive challenges and each day was new, different and exciting.

The Tour D'Afrique is both a bicycle race and an expedition, bringing together people who want to see how fast they can pedal across a continent with those who want to take in the unique sights, sounds, tastes and people of this continent. For me, this was an incredible physical and personal challenge that allowed me to return to the land where my parents were born and also travel and experience Africa. As a recreational but avid cyclist, I wanted to put my body through the rigours of pedalling in these extreme conditions and see how I would fare. Unfortunately, because I was in school up until the Tour started, I didn't

really have an opportunity to train. Luckily, we started in Egypt, where the road conditions were ideal for cycling and we therefore trained on the road once we began. As an International Relations student, I wanted to see the 'real' Africa, its good and bad points, and compare it to what I had learned formally during my studies. This trip tested my physical and mental strength as well as my opinions and perspectives about many global issues. As a North American Ismaili, I was also especially thrilled at the prospect of being able to see some of the work being done by my own community, under the auspices of the Aga Khan Foundation, in the developing world. I felt that although my family contributed to the Foundation regularly, I was ignorant as to where the money was really going. I had complete faith in the fact that it was being used in the most effective and efficient ways and hoped to confirm that belief by seeing some of the projects with my own eyes. Additionally, a great deal of our Ismaili history is in East Africa and I felt that experiencing this would help me feel a stronger connection to my community and to my own faith.

When we first decided to participate in the Tour D'Afrique, we were doing it because we

thought it was an exciting and innovative way to see a continent. Very soon after registering, however, we also realised that our involvement could provide an excellent opportunity to raise awareness and funds for the Aga Khan Foundation, Canada. Almost immediately, we formulated our campaign, *Pedal for Hope*, and began approaching acquaintances in our endeavour to collect funds for the Foundation. The support was overwhelming. We departed



for the Tour D'Afrique on 7 January, 2006 having already raised nearly CAD \$50 000, excited, anxious, nervous, and unsure of how we would adapt to our new environments and deal with the enormous task ahead of us.

Before the start of our riding expedition, we had a few extra days in Cairo and took advantage of this to go visit Al-Azhar Park. I was absolutely amazed by what I saw. Al-Azhar Park is a tranquil haven, a beautiful oasis filled with flowers and exotic plants in the middle of a chaotic and traffic-logged city. A few days after this, we began the Tour D'Afrique at the foot of the Pyramids at Giza. Our auspicious beginning was an indication of what was to follow, and for the next four months, we saw many more unrecognised wonders of the world. Within Egypt, we also passed through Luxor, a beautiful city that is really a living museum, as well as Aswaan, a city that was especially of interest to us because we were granted permission to visit the mausoleum of Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah. All through Egypt, our riding days were easy enough; the roads were flat and well-maintained and the wind was at our back. As a cyclist, there is really nothing better than a great tailwind and amazing scenery. Egypt provided both and it was a great way to start the Tour: At Aswaan, we crossed into Sudan by taking a 24-hour ferry ride across Lake Nasser.

By this time, we were beginning to fall into the routine of the Tour. Every day, we would



At the Pyramids in Egypt.

get up before sunrise, pack up our tents and equipment, eat a hearty breakfast and get on the road. For me, breakfast during the first part of the Tour was horrible. I have never been able to eat porridge or oats or cream of wheat, so I would start cycling with only some energy bars or bread in my stomach. As much as I tried, I just couldn't eat the breakfasts and that really took a toll on me. The further south we went, however, the more access we had to different supermarkets and products, so the

easier it got. The average daily cycling distance was about 120 km and depending on the rider, it could take anywhere from 3-4 hours to 8-10 hours. Some of the cyclists, who had trained for more than a year to come on the Tour, were racing with the goal of accomplishing the Tour within a certain time frame. I have never met more disciplined and focused people in my life. Unfortunately, because of our different motivations for undertaking this trip, we didn't always see eye to eye. My father and I were



With school children in Wadi Halfa, Sudan.

there to take in the experience, enjoy the beauty of the world around us and take our sweet time instead of racing, and many other cyclists were of our same opinion.

The terrain was new and different every day. I think that Northern Africa was the toughest because we had to endure all the extremes - heat, cold, wind, mountains and valleys. Every day posed new challenges. As we moved further south, the climate and road conditions became more temperate and manageable. We would arrive each night at our camp - which could be located anywhere from a pasture or farmland, to smack in the middle of a desert or on the side of a road - weary but thrilled about the next day.

Before we embarked on this journey, many people questioned our sanity but it was only upon entering Sudan that I myself began questioning the logic of our decision. As one of the least visited countries in Africa, Sudan has some of the most unforgiving terrain on the continent. Surprisingly enough, although we were constantly sore and tired from riding over bone-jarring roads and through deep sand in intense 40° C weather, both my father and I enjoyed this country tremendously. It is without a doubt that I can say that Sudan has some of the most generous and hospitable people in the region, perhaps in the whole of Africa. There are countless stories of us, as well as other riders, being invited into the homes of strangers for tea and biscuits, or of unparalleled random acts of generosity and kindness that we experienced while in Sudan. Everywhere we went, no matter how remote,



Riding with personal police escort in Northern Kenya.



Peddalling the Blue Nile gorge in Ethiopia.

the Sudanese people were thrilled to see us. They opened their houses and their hearts in true Islamic fashion. I often wondered, however, if Sudanese tourists would receive the same warm welcome from strangers if they arrived in the West and the answer is that most likely, they would not. It was in Sudan that I first began to realise just how different the mentalities of our societies really are.

Ethiopia was, by far, the most physically and mentally demanding country of the trip, but also one of the most beautiful. I remember thinking Ethiopia looked like what I had imagined all of Africa to look like before I set foot on the continent. With enormous mountains, deep valleys and lush vegetation, Ethiopia presented some of the greatest challenges to all of the cyclists. There were days when we would pedal uphill for hours before being able to hit a downhill. The roads there really tested my endurance and mental strength, but I kept thinking to myself that "What goes up, must come down," and this mantra helped me make it through some of the toughest days. Ethiopians are a very proud people, yet Ethiopia is one of the poorest and most drought-ridden countries in Africa. The images of destitution, famine and suffering that I saw here will plague me for a long time. It was at this point in the Tour, after nearly a month on the road, that I really started to feel saddened by what I was seeing. Some Ethiopians are enduring tremendous hunger and pain and I felt horribly ashamed that I came from a place where I could have or get anything I wanted, where I never went hungry or had to beg for money, and where I enjoy the luxuries of proper health care, education and social services.

By the time we reached the Kenyan border, I was really coming to my wit's end. I was craving basic things like a good hot shower, my mum's home cooking and my comfortable bed. I was exhausted of living with 50 other people, where privacy was non-existent and personal space a thing of the past. Seeing the desolation of the Ethiopian people, I became upset about the complete disparity of our world, and this still angers me today; I grapple with the fact that based solely on where a person is born, they can either be incredibly well-off or be suffering and hungry, regardless of their personal worth. What surprised me even more was the fact that even with all their misery, it seems to me that most Africans have made the most of their situation and are extremely proud of their heritages. It was during this period of great soul-searching and anger about the world that I really began to ask myself what I was doing in Africa. Many times, I thought to myself that what I was doing was above and beyond my capabilities and that I would be much better off at home.

Kenya held by far the most significance for me on the Tour, both because of the warm welcome we received by the Kenyan Ismailis, and also because we were able to learn more about the important projects that the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is undertaking. From the minute we entered Kenya, we were able to see the signs of their involvement in the improvement and development of the country, and in Nairobi, the AKDN's incredible work was even more evident with hospitals, schools and other projects. I was really proud of what I saw and realised that Pedal for Hope was really going to help make a worthwhile difference in many lives.

A special surprise arrived for us in Nairobi: my mum! Concerned with the disillusionment I had expressed in my emails and my unhappiness about the cruel fate of some of the marginalised populations we encountered, she decided that she could stay away no longer. Reduced to finding out about our well-being or progress solely through our increasingly sporadic and despondent emails, her anxiety had finally worn her down, and seeing us in Nairobi did all our spirits and motivation immeasurable good.

In Tanzania, we continued to see the amazing, well-thought out and effective projects that the Aga Khan Foundation was supporting. One project I saw on the island of Zanzibar especially impressed me. This project brought teachers from many of the most remote villages of the island and helped train them so that they could return home and help to bring education into areas where it had been neglected for many years. The point that I found particularly remarkable was that these teachers were not only taught the curriculum to pass on, but also innovative ways of teaching it, as well as the accounting and book-keeping needed to effectively run a school. This attention to detail and to the overall undertaking of a school showed me that the AKF runs projects that are well developed as well as sustainable in the long-term.

Following Tanzania, we covered the next five countries - Malawi, Zambia, Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa - at a tremendously fast pace. The road conditions improved dramatically and I continued to be amazed by the openness of the African people, their warmth and generosity, and the beauty of this continent. By now we were accustomed to the rigours and knew better what to expect, although there was still so much that was unexpected. Towards the last weeks as we left Namibia and entered South Africa, after more than four months of being away from home, there was much anxiety among members of the group to finally get back to our own lives at home. Although we were enjoying every moment of the Tour, there is only so much one can take. Once we entered South Africa, more and more people expressed their excitement about the fast-approaching end, not because the Tour had been so bad but because they were looking forward to returning to their families, friends and jobs. It was at this point that I began to really reflect on the experience that I was living.

The weekend before I returned to Montreal from Cape Town, while we were still on the road, anxiously counting the days until we arrived at the finish line, I graduated (in absentia), along with hundreds of other students at Mount Allison University, my alma mater. I remember being in Springbok, South Africa, thinking about how I was thousands of miles away, missing the ceremony that would



Difficult road conditions in Northern Kenya.



A meal we were invited to share in a Sudanese home.

bring my time at Mount Allison to an end. It's funny, but now, as I think back to the myriad of experiences that I have lived through over these past four months, I believe I can safely say that one of, if not the most important parts of my education so far in life took place after I left in December. This trip has changed me more than just physically. I have lost 20 pounds and gained some muscle, but most importantly, I have also acquired a wealth of insight: the people I have met, the incidents I have witnessed, the alternate universe I was allowed to step in to, if only for a brief time, has taught me life lessons that have altered the person I was irrevocably.

We arrived in Cape Town on one of the foggiest days I have ever seen. The air was so thick with condensation that our clothes were covered in droplets of water; almost as if it had been raining. The fog that hung over Cape Town was so heavy that we couldn't see the Atlantic Ocean, although we were biking along the coastline. It was like biking in the dark because we really couldn't see very much of the city we were entering. The riders were simultaneously nervous and excited, happy and sad, looking forward to the Tour's conclusion but also gloomy that it was coming to an end. It is hard to fathom how so many contrary emotions could be running



Sitting with children along the road in Malawi.

through us at the same time. About 20 km before we crossed the finish line, we had our last moments together as a group before we were joined by media and a handful of other riders who had come to join us on our final stretch.

For me, the last leg was surreal. I couldn't stop smiling but I also knew that something really important was coming to an end. Finally, when it began to feel like the last 20 km couldn't be stretched out any longer, the finish line came into view. When I saw it, I actually slowed

down, as if pedalling slower would make the experience last longer. All my anticipation to return home dissipated. Seeing the finish banner brought a certain sad finality to the Tour and it was a bittersweet moment for me. As we crossed the line, people were cheering and clapping and holding up signs and flowers. We were showered in champagne and a band played African drums for our arrival. It was completely chaotic: people were hugging each other, crying and screaming for joy, everyone reacting in their own way to the end of this overwhelming expedition. To our great surprise, there were Ismailis from Cape Town there to greet us and it was wonderful to have someone there for us to share the moment with. That day will remain a blur in my mind because there were so many things going on. Even though we were done, there was still so much going on – banquets, packing, and goodbyes – and still so much to do. It was a triumphant day that brought an amazing adventure to its end.

It is clichéd to say that Tour D'Afrique will remain with me forever, but it's a cliché that honestly rings true. This experience has taught me things that you can't be taught in school and things that you really need to become conscious of on your own. The presence of Ismailis at the finish reinforced one of the



Lunch on the road.

facts that I have come to realise over these last four months. All along this trip, I have been completely amazed by the continuous support and hospitality of Ismailis. When I have least expected it, people have come out to show that they are behind us in this endeavour, and bearing witness to the beauty of the fraternity that I belong to has been one of the most important lessons for me.

Beyond the Ismaili brotherhood, I have also felt the kindness of complete strangers. If I compare the way I was treated with the way that these people would likely be treated if they came to Canada, it's incredible to realise just how stark this contrast is. People throughout our expedition were naturally friendly, not motivated by personal gain or underlying agendas, and actually took the time to greet us and learn about what we were doing. I find that in the West, we have no time for anyone but ourselves. We are constantly weary of people and things that we don't know or understand, we are never satisfied with what we have, and our focus is a lot more individualistic, constantly centred on self-preservation above all things else. My experiences in Africa have really made me envious of the lifestyles, outlooks on life and general attitude of people there. It is clear that we have so much to learn.

It has become one of my traditions that when I return from travelling, I write a long "we-have-it-all-wrong-in-the-West" email. Perhaps it will become a trend in my life to travel and gripe about how off-course we are in our lifestyles and general mentalities here, but I really have seen things in other countries that we need to apply in our own lives. Some of the lessons I have learned in discipline, facing and overcoming challenges, dealing with other people and upholding one's self-worth are invaluable. Of course, I'm sure the more time I reflect on these last four months, the more lessons I will glean out of my time with Pedal for Hope. It will take a lot more distance from the Tour to really be able to comprehend and understand the enormity of what I have just accomplished, and more likely, even longer for me to be able to verbalise it.

As for where to go from here, I have decided to employ a technique that I learned when I participated in an Outward Bound expedition several years ago. When I finished that expedition, I wrote a letter to myself which I mailed and received six months later. In the letter, I was honest with myself about my life and about things I needed to do and change. I reminded myself about things that I had learned during the trip, I outlined my plans, goals and dreams and also warned myself about all sorts of pitfalls, especially those that I had created within my own mind, that would arise along the way. This letter was sort of a way of talking to myself in the future and receiving it was a moment to really reflect



A warm welcome by the Cape Town Jamat.



A bittersweet arrival at the finish line in Cape Town.

on what I had accomplished since writing it. I think that undertaking this exercise once again will be an excellent way for me to ensure that I don't forget the lessons I have learned and will allow me to gain some perspective about and direction for my future.

As I bring this writing to its conclusion, I want to thank all of you for supporting my father and I and the Pedal for Hope. Thank you for sending us emails full of positive messages, for your financial contributions, for donations that came in other forms, and really, for taking the time to stand behind us in this (I can

say retrospectively) very crazy adventure. It would have been very difficult, if not impossible, for us to achieve this without the help and encouragement of each and every one of you. None of us ever imagined such an outpouring of generosity. Thanks to your efforts, Pedal for Hope was a tremendously successful campaign, not only as a fundraiser but also in terms of raising awareness about the plight of people in less-fortunate areas of the world. 100% of your contributions went towards the Aga Khan Foundation, Canada, an incredibly worthy cause, and will really help to make a difference to thousands of lives.*