

Around Lesotho in 14 Days on Mountain Bike

11-26 March 2010

Introduction

What next?

This is the normal question when you complete something big and I was confronted in the recent past with exactly this question a couple of times.

After my first Cape Epic in 2007. "Two more Epics" was the easy answer. I did do a second Epic in 2008.

After the Freedom Challenge in 2008. "I will not do another one of these" was the easy answer. (www.groep7.co.za/fc/fc2008.pdf)

Then life bowls you a yorker on middle stump and it can easily be innings over, but I am lucky and have another chance.

So I started working in earnest on the idea Kevin Record (my friend that rode two Cape Epics and numerous other mountain bike stage races with me) and I came up with while riding in a race along the Drakensberg in 2005. Our idea was to see if it is possible to create a route that circumnavigates Lesotho.

Many nights were spent looking at Google Earth, 1:50 000 maps and then the weekends scouting the routes and riding sections of it.

But the route took shape and before long I discovered a real gem that I had to share.

So we started taking some friends along and pretty soon I have ridden most sections of the route at least one or two times. I got Louis Kirsten to attempt a complete unsupported circumnavigation with me in August 2009, but I was not prepared well enough and had to bail out just over halfway around. (www.groep7.co.za/fc/trip18aug09.pdf)

After a lot of training, two tours later (December and February) and with a better knowledge of my limitations I felt it was time to try again.

Why?

This is the standard question when you are busy with something big/crazy and the easy answer is normally: "Because it's there". Louis thought a good answer would be: "Don't you see the beauty in it?" and I think this comes from a movie, so it is not our creation. My answer to this circumnavigation's why question is simple: "It was not done before. Somebody have to do it, so I will."



One of the "better" less overgrown parts of the border patrol route.



I have just been soaked by the thunderstorm in the background.

Special Challenges

Unsupported

This is a very difficult word to define in the mountain biking discipline. Does it mean you carry your own clothes, food and accommodation? Well, there are those touring cyclists who do just that, but they then tend to stick to tar roads, because their bikes are loaded very heavy. A heavy bike become very difficult to handle in tight single track, free riding through the bundus and becomes impossible to carry up or down mountain footpaths or cattle tracks.

So for the purpose of this ride as well as races like the Freedom Challenge, unsupported means that there are no organised water points along the route, no support vehicle taking anything from overnight stop to overnight stop, but there are overnight stops where you can get a dinner, hot shower (most of the time), a bed and breakfast. In short it means that it is an “equal opportunity” event. Your spares, warm clothes, rain clothes, and nutrition for the day is your problem and you carry that with you. If you forget something at an overnight stop, then so be it.

Accommodation

Since there are overnight stops and the trip is divided into days and nights, you need a place to sleep every night. This was one of the

challenges in designing the route, but the accommodation is mostly sorted out and for this trip it was pre-booked. The hosts/hostesses know me by now and in general they were cool with the little bit of flexibility that they might have to endure should I run into trouble.

Start and finish

Since it is a circumnavigation it does not really matter where you start and which way round you go...

Well that is the theory. In practice it does make a difference so I chose my starting place halfway between the 4 toughest days (Mayaputi near Zastron) and I prefer the clock wise route. Maybe an anti-clock wise route is a possible answer to a “What next?” question?

Equipment

What you think you may need you must carry! So the capacity for luxuries is very limited.

What did I leave behind that I needed?

A bottle of slime... but we will get to that story.

What did I take that I didn't use?

A tube, one or two bits of extreme cold weather clothing

So I packed pretty well, but if attempted in mid winter I would add some more clothing, maybe 500g extra. As it was my pack weighed 8kg fully loaded with 3 litres of liquid capacity. Some mornings I would

start with all 11kg on my back and that is a maximum I would aim for.

Route

The route consist mainly of three parts:

The Free State Portion from the Orange River to Witsieshoek Mountain Resort. Here the challenge is to stay on the border patrol road. The terrain at times is very virgin and the jeep track hardly visible. It has not been used or repaired since independence (1994) apart from the portions that the few remaining farmers use. Portions of it is totally reclaimed by nature and every time I ride it this process is visibly ongoing. Then you ride the nearest gravel road to the border.

The KZN “Touristy” Portion from Witsieshoek Mountain Resort to Underberg. The biggest challenge is to find accommodation for only one night, especially over weekends. The roads are also busy and it is quite tricky to avoid the tar that comes with development.

The Rural Eastern Cape Portion from Underberg to the Orange River. The terrain is very hilly and quite unforgiving on equipment and body, but it is some of the most glorious mountain bike riding in the country. Accommodation, or the lack thereof is also a challenge. There are limited options. You have to make target or sleep in the veld.

The total distance is 1 260km with a 90km average per day (14 Days - accommodation is available to do it in 18 Days)

The total ascent is 21 788m, 1 560m average per day.

Health issue

Because of an operation in 2008 and radiation afterwards I have Lymph Oedema in my left leg. This means that the lymph does not drain from my left leg and I wear a very strong compression sock on the left leg 24/7. I also sleep with my feet elevated and for this purpose I carry 2 “spacers” that I put underneath the feet end legs of the bed I sleep on, to raise my feet.

Getting There

During the February tour from Mayaputi to Clarens I broke a link on the rear suspension of my Merida Mission and had to complete the tour on llette's slightly small, entry level Schwin. As Merida replaced the part with a used part (no new parts available) I was not sure if the bike would last the 14 days of punishing riding, so I took my trusty old Hard Tail along and left it near the halfway mark in Fouriesburg at my cousin's place.

This meant that I had to endure a lot of secondary roads in serious states of disrepair.

But the first obstacle is always Johannesburg's traffic. So I left

Pretoria just after 04h00 and by half past four I was already rerouted through town because of an accident under the Menlyn bridge on the N1 South.

But once I cleared Pretoria's early morning traffic it all went well until the smog slowed me down to a crawl just south of Johannesburg.

Just before six I stopped for a pepper steak pie and a coffee at the Heidelberg Ultra City and promptly got caught up in a traffic jam due to another accident on the highway between Heidelberg and Villiers.

During this time of year there are a lot of beautiful pink and white flowers (called "Kosmos" in Afrikaans) next to the roads through the Free State, and although it actually is a serious weed, it does make the roads look pretty.

After the detour to Pieter and Helena to off load the spare bike I set forth on the adventure of the obstacle course called the R26.

The rest of the trip went without incident and Just after two (14h20) I left Zastron with the Camry's and my fuel tank replenished. My tank was actually more empty than the car's, because the speed one can travel on these secondary routes is very slow due to the potholes - a good fuel saving mechanism.



I did not stop in the disability spot at the Heidelberg Ultra City. I am not stupid.

I unpacked and made sure the Bike was working and settled in for a good rest before the adventure. By nine I was settled in bed with a full tummy and the alarm was set for

04h00. The Idea was to get going before sunrise and hit the Quad bike track as the sun rises.

Mayaputi is the game farm of Christo and Ryna Otto, and arriving there feels like arriving at home. We have used their guest house a number of times before during scouting and with tour groups. Always just a pleasure.

Day 1

Mayaputi to Highlands Safari Lodge

12 March 2010
Distance: 89km
Trip time: 8h 57m
Total Ascent: 1216m
Total Descent: 1098
Depart: 04h54

I packed my stuff, got my water bottles from the freezer and started my adventure.

Everything started exactly according to plan, but my bag was slightly heavier than normal due

to the fact that my destination had no catering facilities and I had to make do with what I could carry. I opted for Rice and Soya, and some instant Maze Porridge.

The first slow-me-downer for the day came after about 3km. I used a quad bike track to ride over a couple of farms. The first time I rode it was just after a weekend where 150 quad bikes used the track for a race. It was clearly visible and quite easy to ride apart from a few very loose steep climbs. Now it was seriously overgrown and the light was reflecting off the grass and not of the track, so going was slow. It was like riding blind and feeling by the way the front tyre responds if you are in the track or riding through virgin veld. But the sun was soon out and by 05h47 there was enough light to switch off my home made LED jobby.



Sunrise on the overgrown quad bike track.

Because the going was a bit slow through the quad bike track, I thought the farm road I crossed



would take me to a gravel road around the hill that the quad bike track was traversing, but I was wrong. The farm road goes back to the tar road that I cut out using the quad bike track. So after the second slow-me-downer for the day it was back to the quad bike track and over the mountain.

I told myself to listen to my knowledge base and as I had far to go every day, not to do unnecessary scouting on this trip - heavy pack and all...

After two hours of quad bike track I was on the gravel road heading for Makhalleng Bridge. Riding this road during February with a group we could pick lovely yellow peaches off the trees growing wild next to the road. Now they were all gone and the first yellow leaves were visible.

A few kilometres before Makhalleng Bridge the border Patrol route is actually quite good and a pleasure to ride. So by 08h30 I was riding a lovely jeep track next to the

Makhalleng river. I was actually quite glad about this. Being Friday the border post was quite busy and the dust on the gravel road was very visible from the pristine air I was enjoying on this lovely jeep track.



Looking back on a section of border patrol road that is in use by the local farmer

By 10h00 it was quite warm and I was glad the Spaza at Makhalleng was well stocked. I ate a lovely Chelsea bun and peanuts and filled up with Coke and Stoney for the dry hot section over the mountain that awaited.

Leaving Makhalleng Bridge on the border patrol route I rode through an area where the grass was fairly short, but it was also quite overgrown with the typical four pointed thorns. My back wheel sealed easily as the thorns come out of the tyre, but the front tyre just sprayed me with liquid and did not seal. These holes are not very big, and a quick count came to seventeen holes. I brought ten thin plugs and they are actually a bit thick for this size hole. It is the typical hole that seals very easy if the latex in the tyre is fresh, but I must have had a dud or an old bottle of slime for my front wheel.

Not to far from here (half a days riding by bike) was another fresh bottle of slime in my car...

So I walked a bit and came across a shrub that is exotic, but grows in abundance in this part of the Free State. It has long straight thorns and worked very well to plug the holes as the short thorns fell out. I took a

branch and attached it to my pack. So on I battled, pumping, plugging, riding, pumping, plugging...

Fortunately I had enough to drink and I even pulled a bottle of water from my pack that was still half frozen. Since these fancy clothes are designed to keep the cold away from my body, they seem to keep the heat away from my water.

The plugs seemed to work well, but I know that the thorns become a lot more on the way to Wepener and beyond, so I had to make a plan after arriving at my overnight stop.

After some serious thinking and scratching through my bag I made a very liquid mix of instant Maize porridge and water, broke the seal of the front tyre on the rim and poured in the porridge. Unfortunately my little hand pump did not want to re-seat the tyre on the rim and now I had a bigger problem.

Looking around Highlands I realised that the gas bottle attached to the stove looked like the right tool for the job. I disconnected the pipe from the burner, turned the regulator to full blast and it worked a dream. The tyre seated and after letting most of the gas out, I pumped the tyre, changed the chain and settled in.

Highlands Safari Lodge is an old farm house and lapa that is best suited for hunting groups, but as it is right on the Lesotho border and ideally situated we use it as



an overnight stop for the tours around Lesotho. The only hassle is the self catering issue, and this is what also prompted a Mayaputi start for this adventure.

Day 2

Highlands Safari Lodge to Don Don via Wepener

13 March 2010

Distance: 127km

Trip time: 10h 20m

Total Ascent: 1463m

Total Descent: 1537m

Depart: 03h55

I had a lovely rest and looked forward to a long hard day in the saddle. On the tours we normally ride two days on the section I wanted to do in one day, but that is touring. This was a bit more... I'm not sure in what way, as this is not a race, but I have decided on a fourteen day schedule and I had to get to Don Don.

The stars were out in absolute abundance and it looked like another scorcher. No need for any of the special hi-tech warm clothes, even at four in the morning.

The porridge tyre was still full of air and it did not take long before I was over the two mountains and on my way to Wepener.



Another stunning Sunrise from the top of the mountain north of Highlands.

The clouds started gathering and I was still contemplating getting some rain gear out when the heavens opened up and soaked me

in ten seconds. Fortunately there was no lightning. But as quickly as it started it stopped and the sun came out. By the time I reached Wepener I was dry again and the shower a distant memory

Wepener is a small village very close to the border but accommodation wise it has only one place - Lord Frazer Guest House. We do not complain as it is very smart and you really get spoiled.

But I was not going to sleep there and I pulled in at a cafe in the main street and bought a huge packet of fries, fresh from the oil... mmm.

From Wepener to Don Don is another tough seventy odd kilometers with nowhere to refill your bottles, so I stocked up and got going just before nine.

The first challenge is the railway bridge over the Caledon. That negotiated, I enjoyed the jeeptrack over a private game farm and then it

was me and a border patrol road in all it's stages of use and disuse

At times it is glorious riding, and other times it is overgrown or washed away and the grass makes it quite tough to maintain a descent speed. Every type of grass and weed that grows in the Free State is ready to distribute it's seed during March and waits patiently for an innocent cyclist to ride past and then shoots the seed into your socks, pants, shirt, shoes and a couple of other places if possible.

I arrived at Don Don and was greeted by another familiar face.

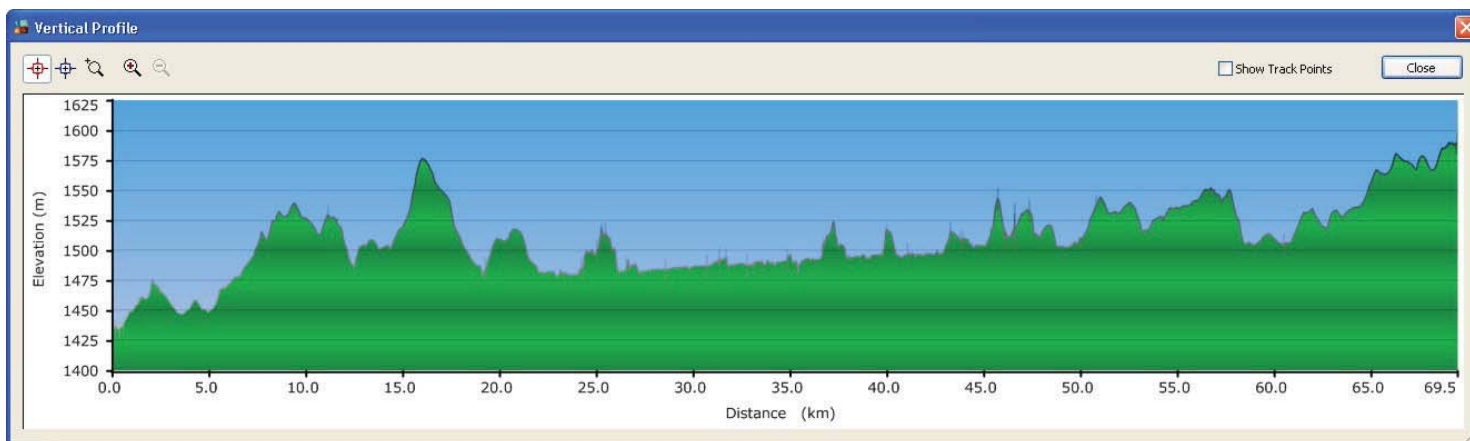
Wilma Luus is the third or fourth generation owner of the farm Don Don. This was once a busy little hub with a shop, post office, police and of course the mill that was powered by the Caledon River. It is now lovingly being restored as a guest house although the mill is still working and Wilma actually still mills the maize of the local people.

I changed my chain, and since there was nothing more to do to the bike I sank into a luxury bath. Wilma prepared a stunning supper with some lovely Rosé wine. Fortunately the ride to Ladybrand is not to hectic...

Day 3

Don Don to Ladybrand

14 March 2010



Distance: 70km
Trip time: 5h 55m
Total Ascent: 836m
Total Descent: 683m
Depart: 05h02

I had a stunning breakfast of pineapple and yoghurt and got going a bit earlier than planned.

On paper this is one of the “easy” days of this circumnavigation, but it started off with me being locked in and having to struggle to get out the gate. There goes my early start.

The route is stunning, it starts with a nice gravel section, then the border patrol route past Maseru and then a gravel road into Ladybrand.

I saw an owl, a jackal, a few rabbit, a small buck and some angry lapwings (kiewiet) before sunrise and really enjoyed the early morning freshness.



A cloudless sunrise. I am glad I started early!



This old Bedford truck makes for some nice photo opportunities. (The group photo was taken during a tour from Mayaputi to Clarens)

The first time Ilette and I rode this border patrol road was just

after winter (September) and it was grazed bare by the Lesotho cattle. This time it was seriously overgrown, and the sun was rising directly in front of me. The road is full of holes dug by squirrels and meerkat, old scraps of fence is lying around and riding is challenging.

As you get closer to Maseru Bridge the riding becomes easier and this is actually quite a stunning bit of mountain bike track.

Maseru Bridge is normally a busy place with a lot of street vendors but I was either too early or it was the wrong day, but I managed to buy 2 apples and fill my bottles with water before tackling the last section into Ladybrand.

Ladybrand is quite a busy little town and although guest houses are plentiful they are all expensive and not always available. It seems that a lot of people working in Maseru for short stretches of time prefer to

stay in Ladybrand and commute daily.

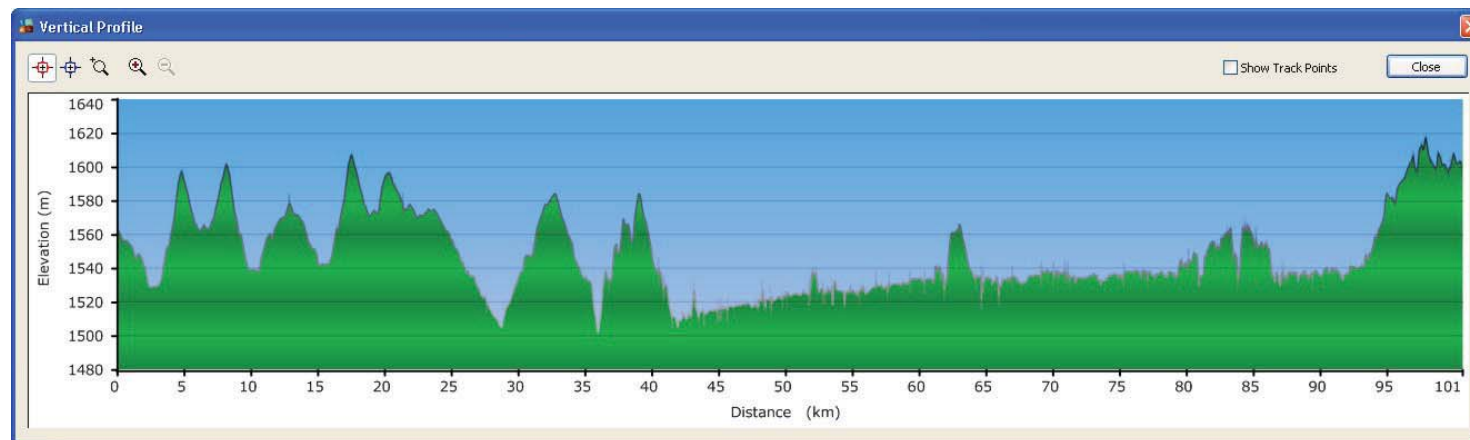
It was twenty to ten when I rode into Ladybrand and it looked like a ghost town. A bit early to stop but the next accommodation is 100km & 9 hours riding away and it is also good for my leg to have a short/rest day from time to time. It is Sunday and the town is closed, except for the SPAR that is still open. I wanted to get some slime at the sports shop (they actually have a good cycling section), but that was not to be. Thus the maize porridge had to continue to work its magic.

I had a lovely fish and calamari with chips from Fish Away and rushed to the SPAR before closing time to buy some food for supper and the next day and settled in.

Day 4

Ladybrand to Ficksburg

15 March 2010
Distance: 101km



Trip time: 8h 50m
Total Ascent: 970m
Total Descent: 930m
Depart: 04h07

Amazingly the front tyre was kept full of air by the porridge over night. After a nice breakfast of a cup of coffee, 2 bananas, a glass of coke and a glass of milk, I packed and just after four I was rolling out of Ladybrand. The human/bike interface was feeling good and the pack felt familiar in spite of the added water.



*Sunrise outside Ladybrand.
05h40 and no clouds...*

This day is very testing even though the ascent is not so hectic. The day starts with a gravel road section and then the border patrol route awaits. This day also have no water or spaza shops until about 30km from Ficksburg, so you have to start with what you need until you reach the border post. There is only water. Then there is more border patrol road until you have a short piece of gravel and railway service road into Ficksburg.

Just after half past four I have done nearly 7km and was feeling good about the day and my speed, when I suddenly realised that I left my helmet in Ladybrand in the guest house. The joys of riding unsupported and alone... This added 12.8km to the day, but the mistake was remedied and soon forgotten when the next challenge reared their heads.



This farmer decided the border patrol road needs to be ploughed? I am confused, but these are minor challenges that makes the route interesting. Hike-a-bike...



The border patrol road is an absolute gem at times but then one farmer decides to cut the grass. The result is another small challenge - ride until the chain starts to slip, clean the gears...

Twenty to ten I reached Peka Bridge after quite a battle with the border patrol road, the disappearing border patrol road and game fences that was erected right into the river across the border patrol road.

By 10h00 I was refilled with water and had some nice salty Doretos, The last bit of Coke and milk mix (Brown Cow) and rode off on the

next part of border patrol road with mixed anticipation...

This portion was actually a pleasure to ride and pretty soon I was in Ficksburg, being treated like a king by Non, my hostess at Gewel Gastehuis.

I swapped the chains, gave the bike a good look over and removed yet another bale of grass from the drivetrain.

Non lent me her Toyota and I went to the SPAR to buy the bits I needed for the next day's 103km to The Old Mill Guest House as well as supper and breakfast.

Day 5

Ficksburg to Old Mill

16 March 2010
Distance: 103km
Trip time: 9h 54m
Total Ascent: 1570m
Total Descent: 1410m
Depart: 04h10



Another long day with a varied terrain. Gravel road, railway sleeper riding (no service road), border patrol road (a section that I have not ridden before, since the groups veer off and go to Clarens), some tough climbs and self catering accommodation with the added weight of more food for supper and breakfast. But the body felt good and the porridge was still doing its magic.

Although there were many stars in the sky it rained quite a lot through the night and I was wondering how much mud was out there.

I missed the road around the Ficksburg cemetery in the dark but thought the road I was on would intersect with the railroad pretty soon. The route out of Ficksburg is a very nice service road all along the railway track with a number of roads crossing the track to go to farms, hence my thinking. Unfortunately this road suddenly ended in a big kraal full of cattle and I had to do a bit of the old hike-a-bike-bundu-bashing-in-the-dark thing through the tall wet grass.

Eventually I was back on track and enjoying another beautiful sunrise with lightning visible far to the north



By now it was a habit to capture the sunrise and SMS the photo to Ilette. What a great alarm clock!

As it got light there was a slight chill in the air. I could feel it in my toes, but it was not cold enough to put warm clothes on, so I endured the freshness and enjoyed the start of the pretty colours of fall in the Eastern Free State.



Fall in the Eastern Free State is quite spectacular. I was seeing the first signs.

After a good climb and equally great downhill I braved the 2km of railway track, crossed a very dry Grootspuit and headed for Sandstone City and the first border patrol road for

the day. All the rain of the previous night made the road a bit muddy and I was worried about the border patrol route from Sandstone City. In February it was very muddy, but then the Grootspuit was hip deep.



I have crossed the Grootspuit a few times in the past but this is the first time I did not get my feet wet. In February we actually waded through a hip deep torrent, and the vehicles had to drive the long way round.

I refilled my Water at Sandstone City and the mud was not to serious a problem. This border patrol road is actually in good nick and I enjoyed the riding. Going past Caledon's Poort Border Post, I

started on the "new" section of the border patrol road. It was actually in a very good condition for the first 8 or 10 kilometers, but then the road disappeared into a HUGE moon landscape of serious erosion and I had to drop down into the Caledon river and walk along the sandbanks for a bit. Fortunately this was not too far.



My pretty steed in the pretty weed while I did what I needed to do...

This area is very secluded and it looks to me as if it is exclusively used by the Lesotho shepherds to graze their cattle. One of the shepherds shouted at me and it sounded as if he wanted toll money, but I had a good stretch of road ahead of me and a bit of a head start so I did not stop and enquire as to the amount. I will have to go back there with some strong friends sometime.

The main activity on Old Mill seem to be the manufacture of Rose Hip Oil. Rose Hip is an exotic herb that grows wild but in abundance in these parts

and is harvested by the Lesotho people and brought through a drift for processing into oil.



*The view from my bed.
Later it started raining and
the fireplace come in very
handy to dry the clothes*

Arriving at Old Mill I had a bath, a rest and discovered to my delight that the chalet I was in had full DSTV. So I could catch up on the IPL cricket and watched an entertaining 20/20 cricket match. I

had rice and soya mince for supper, finished of with a lovely blue cheese and ray biscuits. But I did not feel that carrying some wine or beer with me from Ficksburg was worth it, so I just had coffee and tea to drink.

I had to sleep in the spare room on one of the single beds because the double bed is “built in” with bricks and a concrete base, so there was no way I could raise the feet side of the double bed.

Day 6

Old Mill to Witsieshoek Mountain Resort

17 March 2010
Distance: 80km
Trip time: 8h 27m
Total Ascent: 2253m
Total Descent: 1799m
Depart: 04h00

It was exactly four when I started cycling and across the “mighty” Caledon I could see a vehicle riding towards the A1. It was on a road that I was going to use to get to Monantsa pass and then into Phuthaditjhaba. At Old Mill is a drift through the Caledon and on the banks of the Caledon on the Lesotho side runs a gravel road that services a few villages and then goes nowhere else but back into South Africa. There is no border control on the Lesotho side and the SA border post did not even enquire where I came from when I road through the border post.

I nearly missed the sunrise because of thick fog and cloud cover and the daily ritual of trying to capture it and SMSing (new word that you will not find in a dictionary of even 10 years back) it to Ilette, my wife.



*The sun trying to get through
the cloud cover.*

It was quite chilly and there was very light intermittent rain that forced me to add a little bit of protective clothing.



*This public phone seemed very
deserted when I passed it on
the way to Monantsa pass.*

After 46 very tough kilometers and cresting the 2255m high Monantsa pass I was in Phuthaditjhaba and the last sting in the tail was awaiting.

But eight and a half hours and 80 kms after starting at Old Mill I reached Witsieshoek Mountain Resort at 2200m and settled down for a well earned rest.



Profile of a long hard day in the office!

Since I planned to leave long before breakfast is served, I swapped that for lunch consisting of a huge plate of fries and 2 boiled eggs.

Witsieshoek Mountain Resort is “community run” but at this stage it is actually a bit “community run down”. This is quit unfortunate as this must be one of the top five settings to have a resort of any kind. The vistas and setting is absolutely spectacular.

For interest sake I had 5 litres of fluid during the ride, mainly water and a bit of brown cow, and it was actually not quite enough. In summer I must aim for about 1 litre per hour!

My chores were done, chain swapped, bottles washed, clothes hung in the wind and body cleaned. So I settled in for a bit of a rest before supper.

Steak, chips and salad always seem to be a safe bet at Witsieshoek Mountain Resort. In the mean time the fog closed in and I could hardly

find my room. Just hope it clears before the next morning’s descent down the escarpment to Royal National Park.

Day 7

Witsieshoek Mountain Resort to Ardmore

18 March 2010

Distance: 108km

Trip time: 11h 40m

Total Ascent: 1832

Total Descent: 2780

Depart: 04h52

At 04h52 I was ready to depart, swallowed the last bit of coffee and put my bike on my back. This day starts with a 12km hike (800m drop in height) down the escarpment to the Royal National Park (RNP). A beautiful hiking trail not really suited for riding. It is narrow, full of obstacles, slippery, and then you have the growth of a good summer blocking the view of the foot path as well as soaking your legs with the precipitation from the thick mist.

But just after five I was well on my way walking at about 3.5 km/h. The mist was thick enough to rob me of a sunrise and a photo that I could MMS to The Pretty One. The shop was open and after a snack and a drink I was on my way. The first section out of RNP is on tar road and I have not found a way yet to avoid it. The sun was out and soon I was working up a healthy sweat.

The aim was Ardmore guesthouse near Monk’s Cowl. My right knee was hurting a bit, but fortunately not on the down stroke (power stroke) and it felt like something that would heal and go away. My left leg was draining satisfactory every night and the spacers for the bed certainly did the trick. But I was very aware that the 12km downhill hike was going to hurt in the next 2 days. There were a lot of muscles abused that is not normally used during cycling...

I bought some Stoney ginger beer and long life milk and mixed a

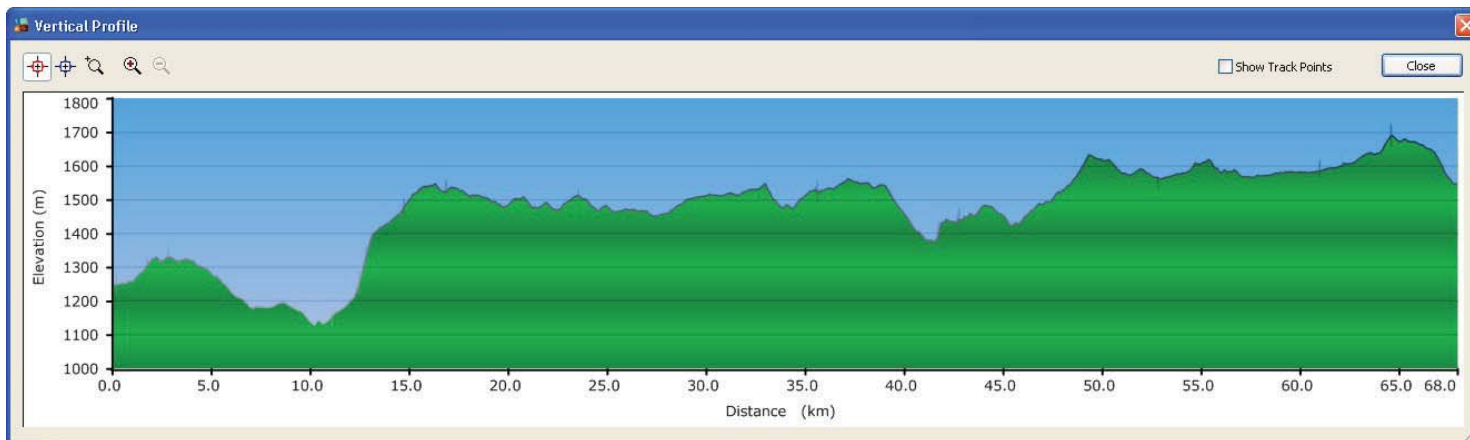
variation on the “brown cow”. It tasted quite good (I think anything will when you are thirsty) and attacked the first climb of the day. I was hoping that the Poplar plantation was dry enough to ride. In December I took a touring group through and we had serious mud to content with. I was in luck and there was a dry line through the forest. Just before 16h00 I managed to catch Scrumpy Jack open and enjoyed a Peppermint crisp ice cream, bought some biltong and nougat and cruised the last 5 km into Ardmore.

A long day in the office was suitably finished with a great place to stay and enough to eat. The bed was HUGE and too heavy to lift to put the spacers under the legs, so for the second night I had to downgrade myself to the “spare” room with the single beds.



The very heavy luxury bed that I did not sleep on. I will have to go back with The Pretty One to feel how this bed sleeps.



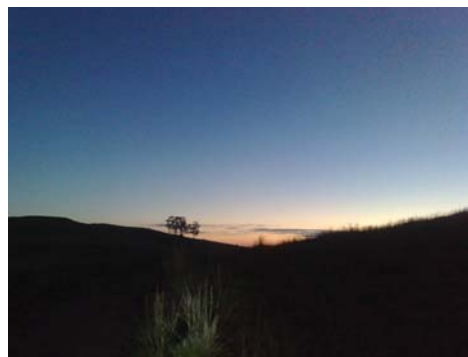


Day 8

Ardmore to Spotted Horse

19 March 2010
 Distance: 68km
 Trip time: 6h 40m
 Total Ascent: 1482
 Total Descent: 1182
 Depart: 05h10

As was my suspicion I was very sore when I got up. There certainly were many muscles used that I did not know I had, and thus they were not conditioned to carry a mountain bike down a mountain. But today was a relative short day (on paper) and the portages were uphill, so I was hoping to take it easy and recover. I had muesli, yoghurt and a banana for breakfast, packed a peach and an apple for snacks and got going just after 05h00.



Another stunning sunrise

It is by no means an easy day, and the day involves quite a bit of climbing as the 1480m ascent

would suggest. The highest point for the day is just before you reach Spotted Horse at 1691 meters. But by 12h00 I was pulling into Spotted Horse close to the Highmore Nature Reserve.



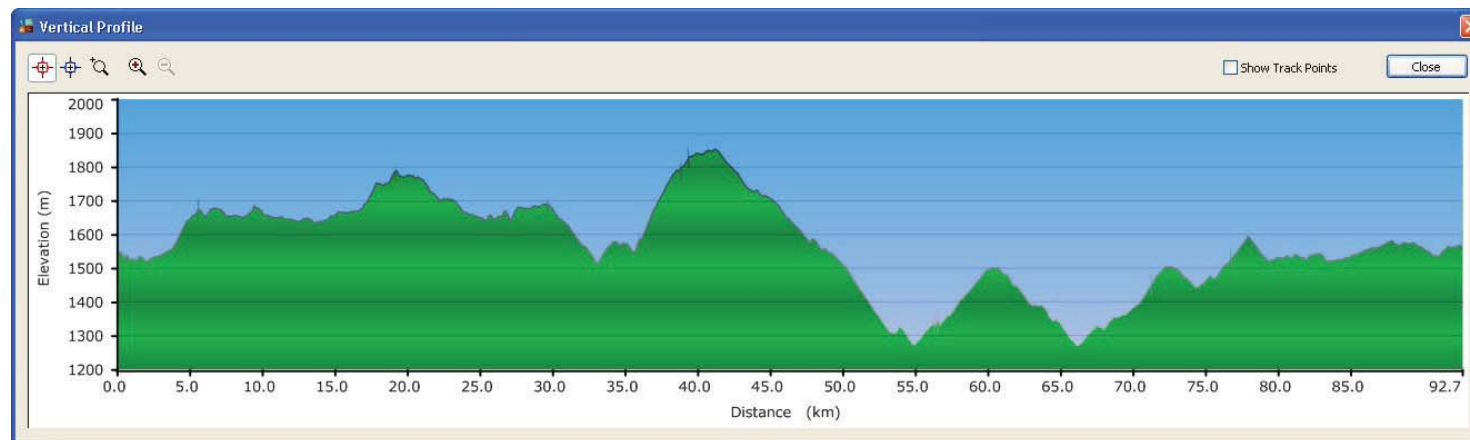
The spotted horses at Spotted Horse Country Inn

So I did my chores, washed, swap the chain, and rested before having supper. There was a big rugby match on and everybody in the valley was there watching it on the big screen. Very festive.

Day 9

Spotted Horse to Underberg

20 March 2010
 Distance: 93km
 Trip time: 7h 03m
 Total Ascent: 1734
 Total Descent: 1713



Depart: 03h59

Waking up was easy, getting out of bed was very painful. The full effect of the hike-a-bike was concentrated in all the mussels I needed to move, so any movement was pure pain. But as soon as the mussels start to warm up it goes better. On the plus side was the fact that the human-bike interface was not giving me any problems.



Sunrise on my way to Loteni Pass.

Since I had a good rest and I was heading for a self catering place (a friend's holiday cottage – thank you Rob) I did not want to arrive to

late in Underberg. You never know at what time the SPAR closes, and then I might miss out on breakfast tomorrow. I also wanted to be up Loteni pass before the sun was too high. There was also the chance of rain in the afternoon... So by 04h00 I was rolling out of Spotted Horse.

Loteni pass is one of the few passes that give a huge reward for the uphill suffering in that it has a 12km downhill after you crest the high point. After this great downhill there is some more climbs, so I stocked up on coke, stoney and salty peanuts. The spaza shop I stopped at actually had a much larger stock of Black Label & Castle, but digging deep enough into the fridge we located the “softer” drinks and I was off to Underberg.



A Spaza Shop at exactly the right place to refill the thirsty traveller on a hot and dusty trail.

By 10h00 I was sweating profusely and it felt like the middle of summer. It was easily the warmest day of the trip so far and I was going through fluids at a rate of 1 liter per hour. Himeville was still 25km and some climbing away and I had to be careful with my drinks. There was also some traffic from the local villages going to Underberg to stock up on supplies (mainly Toyota LDVs loaded with empty beer bottles) and I realized it must be Saturday. You tend to forget that there is a world

out there that carries on normally, regardless if you are part of it or not. It is just your own world that becomes timeless and days just roll into another without one day being different from the next because of its name.

I arrived in Underberg and unpacked. Then I took a stroll to the SPAR groceries shop and stocked up on supplies for dinner and breakfast. I had to hang around at the SPAR for a while since a proper thunder storm erupted and lasted quite long. That gave me the chance to have a nice long chat to Sam Knox, the owner of the SPAR and organizer of the yearly Sani Trans Frontier Mountain Bike race. Having phoned the farmer that I normally get permission from for the next day's route to St Bernard Peak he told me that the route is no longer available. He has fenced the area with electric fencing and had armed guards to protect his cattle from the Lesotho cattle thieves. I had to revise my route and this is where Sam was a great help in telling me where not to go.

Day 10

Underberg to Banchory

21 March 2010

Distance: 72km

Trip time: 5h 41m

Total Ascent: 1340

Total Descent: 1236

Depart: 05h27





These sunrise moments made this easy "rest" day very special. The weather was perfect and I felt very spoilt to be able to experience this...



I woke up at 04h00 and had a lazy breakfast of wild berry yoghurt and ice tea. Being a friend's house I had to first make my bed, wash

the dishes and throw out the trash before I could get going. I packed and set off on the revised route. Unfortunately this would involve 15km of tar towards the end of the day, but there was no time or means to search for alternatives. This is something I will have to go back for and scout a bit... By half past five I was rolling out of Underberg. There was a slight chill in the air, but nothing that warranted "extra" clothes.

The "new" route climbs out of Underberg and then heads upwards (south) and crosses the Coleford Nature Reserve before meeting the Underberg-Swartberg tar road (R617) at Kingscote. After a bit of tar it meets the Freedom Challenge route. I was heading for Banchory, an emergency support station for the Freedom Challenge Race Across South Africa. It was a long weekend and the St Bernard's Peak Hotel was full.



I definitely prefer the gravel above the tar, but if the tar cannot be avoided then it is good if there is a wide shoulder. This stretch of tar started off brutally steep and then just flattens out once you are on top. No reward for the climb...



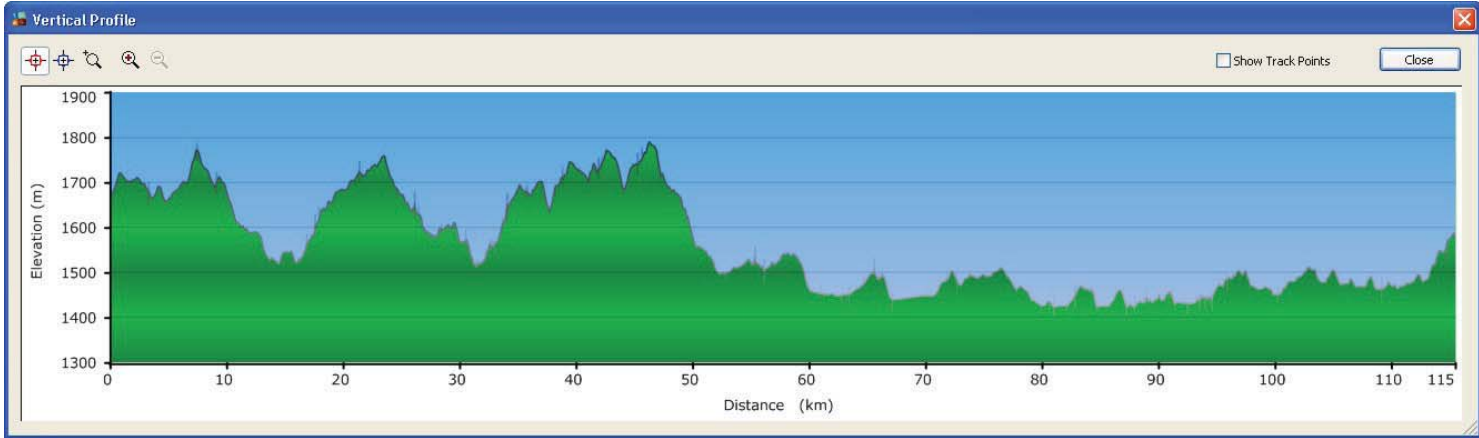
I arrived at Banchory and was treated like royalty by Marge and Martin, and had a proper rest. The plan for the next day was to start early and push through Taylerville, Masakala and Queen's Mercy to Malekholonyane. The next 2 days will have no electricity to charge phones and lights, so communication will be limited and tracking will be mainly switched off.

Day 11

Banchory to Malekholonyane

22 March 2010
Distance: 114km
Trip time: 11h 12m
Total Ascent: 1980
Total Descent: 2084
Depart: 04h21

After an untimely nature call I got away 20 minutes later than planned. It was quite warm and there was a good cloud cover insulating the earth. Breakfast was a feast of cantaloupe and yoghurt. My body felt rested and ready for



the next couple of hard days that was ahead. The maize porridge in my front tire was still doing its job and the human-bike interface was feeling good.



Sunrise...

Just before Taylerville it was still dark and I got sprayed by water in my face. I thought it was strange but continued riding when suddenly I was sprayed again with water. It smelled very sour and I realized it must be a puncture in my front wheel. I stopped and after careful scrutiny I found the cut, typical of glass. It sealed (maize porridge) and then would open up as the wheel rotated. Normally the liquid latex will build up and if you are lucky the seal would become permanent, but the porridge kept coming out of the cut and I had to plug the hole. I plugged it with a thicker tubeless plug and that was the end of the sour spray in my face.

By mid-morning I bought milk and coke for a brown cow and headed for Masakala. Just past Masakala I

ended up in a mud marsh and had to take quite a bit of a detour to get around it. The previous time I rode this section was just after winter and it was dry. I was wondering how much rain the Kinira river flood plain had. That can be a real mess if it is flooded, and it does not take much to flood.



This is what cattle do a very nice single track

The floodplain did not give too much trouble, but just before Queen's Mercy there was some clay and it was trampled by cattle to a proper quagmire. Approaching from the

west was a serious looking black cloud and the race for Queen's Mercy was on. I just did not make it and got soaked about 3 minutes ride from the shop at Queen's Mercy. I raced for the protection of the shop and had something to eat and drink while I was sitting out the storm.



These clouds looked very threatening... and delivered on their threat...

After half an hour the initial fury of the storm was over and I put on my blue rain jacket (first time I took it out of my pack on this trip!) and

headed off to Malekholonyane. Now it became a yo-yo game between being too warm, taking off the rain gear, getting wet, putting on the rain gear and being too warm... You get the picture? I was glad to arrive and as soon as I arrived the last part of the day turned out to be beautiful and the setting of the Malekholonyane guest house is something so stunning that I cannot do justice to try and describe it.

Mathlanthla as usual was looking after me splendidly and treated me like a king.

Day 12

Malekholonyane to Vuvu

23 March 2010

Distance: 74km

Trip time: 10h 38m

Total Ascent: 1745

Total Descent: 1604

Depart: 05h20

This 74 km is a very tough, technical day with a number of short steep



portages. Definitely not a easy day in the office. I have done this ride a couple of times and does not have any navigational issues, but it rained all night and the streams would be full, the portages slippery and the roads muddy. But the sky was clear and I got going to Vuvu.

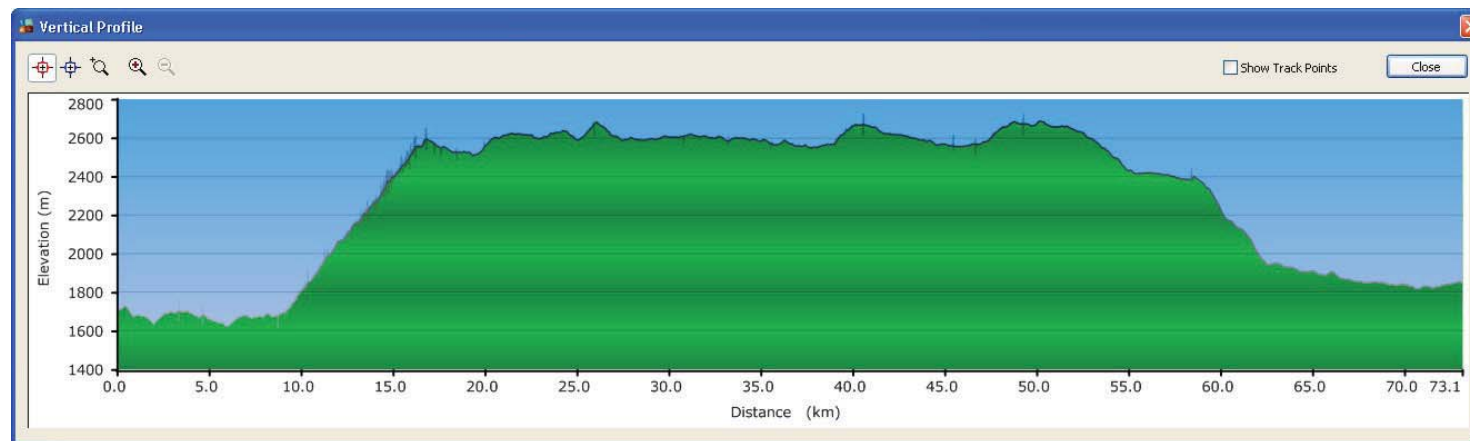


Absolute indulgence

The first portage at Thaba Chitja was very slippery and hazardous but it went without incident and soon I was on my way to Black Fountain. For the first time I saw where its name came from... Black clay and little streams everywhere...



The stunning views from Black Fountain towards the Drakensberg escarpment



Then it was time for a break at the spaza shop just before reaching Tinana Mission. I had a nice chat with the owner of this spaza. He used to have a good job in Johannesburg, but after he was hijacked the second time he came back to where he grew up and started this shop. His customers are mainly the local pensioners and he told me he runs it like Edgars. The people buy on the book and pay their accounts when they get their pension money.

Now it was time to head for the Vuvu river valley. This valley turned out to be so overgrown that I could not make any decent progress, so I looked for a footpath higher up on the south bank of the valley. I actually found a good footpath and made some good time. I normally get out of the valley and climb to the Vuvu plateau as soon as I cross the confluence of the Vuvu- and Thina rivers, but decided to explore the Vuvu river valley. It was not a good idea and added about an hour to

the day... As if the day is not hard enough.

At Vuvu there is no formal accommodation, so there is an initiative that involves the Vuvu school and some of the local villagers. They feed you at the school and then you sleep with the locals in their huts. Quite an unique experience. As this was my fifth visit to Vuvu we followed the normal "procedure" to alert them of my visit, but the message did not reach Vuvu. Fortunately the head mistress of the school was quite good and soon she had the sick bay converted in a guest house and shortly after I was enjoying a large plate of putu and marog, lekker. (*Stiff maize porridge and wild spinach, yummy*). The sick bay bed had a new mattress and pillow, still in its plastic covering, so any movement was quite a noisy story. But I was forced to lie very still as this bed was on four large wheels. The spacers I've put under feet end

made for a rickety sleeping place to say the least...



A wholesome meal. The chicken was very tough unfortunately, but the putu and marog was excellent!

It did not rain during the day but while all this was happening at Vuvu school it started raining and I was wondering about Leana pass and the long trek along the Lesotho border passing Tiffendel...

Day 13

Vuvu to Reedsdel

24 March 2010

Distance: 74km
 Trip time: 10h 24m
 Total Ascent: 2028
 Total Descent: 1888
 Depart: 03h40

Another arduous day, short in distance, long in effort. As I am quite comfortable with Leana pass (been up there 3 times before) I was happy to start up it in the dark with only my Petzl head light. (No moon.) The rain has stopped and the early morning was pleasant. When I wanted to leave the school the gate was locked and the night watchmen was nowhere to be seen. He assured me he guards the place all night and he will be around, but it was time so climb the gate.



*Sunrise on Lehana.
 What a privilege.*

By eight I was nearing the top of Leana and although the sun was shining there was a very cold wind blowing. The pass started of very muddy, but soon the going got good and Leana was as spectacular as always.



Lehana Pass. A spectacular hike, even with a 12kg mountain bike on your back...



The highest point of the route, right next to the delapidated fence that is the RSA/Lesotho border.



Riding past Tiffendell I started playing yo-yo again with the cold, rain, overheating, cold, rain...

Catherine arrived and we had a super dinner. I am amazed at how capable these hostesses are and Catherine is no exception. She has a baby on the hip, another one holding her hand and she still has about 2 hands free to put a feast together. Amazing...

Day 14

Reedsdel to Mayaputi

25 March 2010
 Distance: 89km
 Trip time: 6h 28m
 Total Ascent: 1321
 Total Descent: 1637
 Depart: 05h38

By 14h00 I rode into Reedsdel and was greeted only by the dog. Fortunately he is friendly, because he is huge. Catherine was busy elsewhere but her staff soon arrived and had me purring like a kitten with lovely toasted sandwiches. I swapped the chain, made sure I had clean dry clothes for the last day and got down to the serious business of resting...

I thought of getting away early, ride to Mayaputi and head for Pretoria, but I had a big reluctance to get going. I did not have to think long for the reason, as it was pouring outside. But soon the rain eased off and I got going.



My last sunrise of this trip nearly did not happen, as the cloud cover gave me a moment... and then it was light.

So what is next?

Why?



These socks went straight into the dustbin.

An hour later I crested Lundean's Nek (2162m) and the next 13kms was all downhill. The road surface was not good due to the rain so I descended quite gingerly. At Tele Bridge border post I bought a snack and a drink and headed for the undulations next to the Orange River. Just after Twelve I stopped at Mayaputi and after 14 days and 1400kms I finished this trip quietly and alone. Just me, my bike and my backpack...

14 Days Around Lesotho					
	Day	Dist	Time	Asc	Avg Speed
1	12-Mar-10	88.4	08:57:00	1216	9.9
2	13-Mar-10	126.7	10:20:00	1463	12.3
3	14-Mar-10	69.4	05:55:00	836	11.7
4	15-Mar-10	100.6	08:50:00	970	11.4
5	16-Mar-10	102.7	09:54:00	1570	10.4
6	17-Mar-10	79.9	08:27:00	2253	9.5
7	18-Mar-10	107.6	11:40:00	1832	9.2
8	19-Mar-10	68	06:39:00	1482	10.2
9	20-Mar-10	92.6	07:04:00	1734	13.1
10	21-Mar-10	71.2	05:41:00	1340	12.5
11	22-Mar-10	117.9	11:47:00	1998	10
12	23-Mar-10	73.3	10:38:00	1745	6.9
13	24-Mar-10	73.1	10:24:00	2028	7
14	25-Mar-10	88.5	06:28:00	1321	13.7
Tot		1259.9		21788	
Avg		89.99		1556	

