

Trip Report: Mountain Bike Tour Around Lesotho - 18 August 2009

The plan was to try and circumnavigate Lesotho and stay as close as possible to the border on the SA side. It was an “unsupported” ride, so we had no vehicle tagging along, but we were going to sleep mainly in D, B&B accommodation. We had support from my wife who were arranging accommodation as we went along. Although the route was planned in detail, one never know what happens when, and if all the accommodation is booked in advance it becomes very complicated to change THE PLAN. We chose a very quiet touristy time and did not foresee any problems with accommodation. We packed light and both have some experience in winter cycling in the extremes of South Africa, so we started off with about 7kg each in our backpacks and 2 litres of fluid capacity on our bicycles.

18 August 2009 - Day 0

- 12h08
- 458km

I left home with a lot of enthusiasm and quite a bit of doubt. This was it. A route that I have been working on for a while, and a body that was tested in the operating rooms and radiation rooms during the past year. Am I strong enough? Fit enough? Excited enough!

I picked up Louis at his house in Johannesburg somewhere (thank you Nokia for taking me there) and we were of on a leisurely drive down (up) to Clarens.

We arrived after dark, got the keys to our dwelling for the night and had a lovely pizza, a beer and a Don Pedro. We ordered a large take-a-way pizza for breakfast and settled in for the night.

19 August 2009 - Day 1

- 06h31
- 103km
- 8 hours 31 mins. total time
- 2033m total ascent
- 1636m total descent
- 4213 Kcal

Got up early and Louis put the pizza in the oven to heat it up. Cut in 8 pieces, ready eat. A few minutes later some of the pieces has fallen through the oven rack on the bottom of the oven. Louis’ idea was to keep the base crispy, but did not realise that the cheese was holding the things together... and then it melted. Still, we had a lovely breakfast of coffee, rusks, mangled pizza and at half past six we were on our way.



The day consist of a small piece of tar to get out of Clarens, then we used a gravel road to ride around the north of Golden Gate.

We started off with a forecast of a severe cold front, rain and snow, but fortunately missed the wrath of the Dragon and only endured a cold morning with few light showers. By ten we were seeing blue sky and enjoying a slight tailwind.





Once on the eastern side of Golden Gate we crossed over the Golden Gate - Harry Smith road and headed for Monontsha, on the western side of Phuthaditjaba. We arrived here just after twelve and bought snacks.

From here it was a tarred road that meanders through the southern parts of Phutaditjaba and eventually spits you out on the road going up to "the Sentinel" car park. This tar road is a lot of fun and speeds of 4km/h to 84km/h is the norm. *Witsieshoek Mountain Resort* is quite high up in the Drakensberg on the edge of the escarpment right next to the Free State - KZN border. So this day ends with a nasty sting in it's tail.

We arrived just in time as the wind picked up and really started howling. Soon the place was without electricity and we enjoyed a lovely dinner (steak and chips) by candle light (just the two of us) and went to bed wondering how long this blizzard would last?

20 August 2009 - Day 2

- 06h32
- 107.7km
- 11 hours 30 mins. total time

- 1945m total ascent
- 2931 total descent
- 4376 Kcal

It was absolutely freezing cold when we got up after a very restless night with the wind howling nonstop. It sounded at times as if the roof wanted to come off! We put on ALL our clothes, had a lovely breakfast and headed off down the escarpment on a hiking trail to *Royal National Park* (800m descent in 11km)



As we dropped down into the valley we were out of the wind, and soon we were quite warm from the effort of wrestling the bikes down the mountain on our backs, despite the frozen waterfalls and ice in the shade.



Soon (two and a half hours soon) we were having coke at the entrance gate shop of RNP and then we were on our bikes/way.



We were riding through rural areas along a tar road that is not too busy. Some interesting dwellings along the way made the tar bearable. After crossing over the Woodstock dam we turned off the tar and headed for the mountain.





I was glad I had scouted the route before and recorded some GPS tracks when we ended up in a Blue Gum forrest that had changed a lot since I was there four years ago. One can easily end up on the wrong side of the mountain and then you have to do it all over again. This was a long day and searching for the way would certainly not add to the splendour of this ride.

Just before closing time we pulled into *Scrumpy Jack's* and bought some supplies for the next morning. We were sleeping at a self catering cottage and had supper at *The Nest Hotel*. Our Hostess was friendly enough to take us to the hotel and fetch us again after supper. Not that it was far (2km) but on a mountain bike with a sensitive mmm... Our tender hidden parts did appreciate this!

21 August 2009 - Day 3

- 08h08
- 64.5km
- 8 hours 10 mins. total time
- 1589m total ascent

- 1193 total descent
- 2980 Kcal

There was some tar and a relative short day up ahead so we had a leisurely awakening (although Louis claimed not to have closed an eye because of some strange noises from my side of the room). We had some musely and youghurt with rusks and coffee, boiled 6 eggs, made our drinks and sandwiches and headed off to the mountains.



Something about “energy drinks”. Due to the unsupported nature of this tour we could not carry 17 days worth of energy drinks, and had to buy along the way. KZN rural is not the best place to find “*USN Multi Chain Carbohydrate Whey Protein Secret Energy Endurance Boosting Formulations*” So we started buying Coke, and this soon turned out to be too sweet. Then Louis remembered the “Brown Cow”. Coke and milk in a roughly **exactly** 50/50 mixture turned out to

be very tasty and worked very well to keep us alive. Coke and “Long Life” can easily be purchased at most Spaza shops and those are spaced very conveniently throughout the KZN rural area.



Then from time to time you come across a place like “White Mountain Resort” where you can buy toasted Ham and Cheese sandwiches, mmm...



Yes, this is a farm house, and yes, we did get coffee, tea, rusks, biscuits and an in-depth conversation with a lovely lady called Monica.



We should have listened to the “man with the local knowledge”, Mr Dlamini and not the GPS. A small mistake that was quickly rectified. Cost us about 10 minutes and 50 meters ascent.



We soon learned that when you choose to turn in at a farm to ask for water, you are very likely to get a lot more, like coffee and rusks.



And then we arrived at our overnight stop, another lovely hostess, a hearty dinner and super breakfast.



22 August 2009 - Day 4

- 07h33
- 92.5km
- 9 hours 12 mins. total time
- 1783m total ascent
- 1761 total descent
- 3574 Kcal

It was still quite chilly when we turned the noses of our trusty steeds southwards to the mountains and valleys of Loteni on our way to Underberg.



Louis had an urgent nature call and we needed some water so we pulled in to another farm at the foot of Loteni Pass and was again treated to a lovely cup of coffee, rusks and ginger biscuits. It would have been easy to stop here for the night as Loteni was looming large. But we fought off the temptation and carried on bravely.

The reward on the other side is a downhill that seems to last forever, but that 15km is over very quickly.



Although we could see plenty snow on the mountains the day became pleasant, then it became warm and then we started experiencing something of the isolation when farmers leave their farms. Water become difficult to find and we would experience this a lot more on the Free State side of Lesotho.



We were very grateful for the QuickShop in Himeville and started stuffing our faces with energade, appletizer, chips and chocolate.





We slept at a friend's house in Underberg (thank you once again Rob, you are a star) and had a lovely dinner at Mike's Restaurant. Breakfast was self catering and very easy as there is a big SPAR right in the centre of Underberg.

23 August 2009 - Day 5

- 07h05
- 74.1km
- 9 hours 16 mins. total time
- 1635m total ascent
- 1428 total descent
- 3138 Kcal

Underberg was very chilly and we started off on a short 4km downhill tar road that certainly added to the chill factor. But soon we were on a gravel road and working up a sweat.

Snow was still very visible on the mountains and from far away one can see the ridge that must be traversed if you want to cut out many kilo's of extra tar and gravel road.

Most of the traverse is rideable though and the views certainly make up for the uphill battle.





And then we were on top...



After a lovely lunch break amongst the pine trees we headed downhill to St. Bernard's Peak Hotel where we were treated like Kings.

Boiled eggs and cheese sandwiches seemed to be the lunch of choice and whenever we could find bananas and/or oranges and or apples we would buy that and eat it right there and then.

24 August 2009 - Day 6

- 07h13
- 62.6km
- 7 hours 20 mins. total time
- 1202m total ascent
- 1465 total descent
- 2424 Kcal

From St. Bernard's Peak Hotel we were quickly confronted with a good bit of uphill and quite a technical downhill on footpats. Then we were in the rural area finding our

way through the villages and cattle tracks to Matatiele. A day that is really embracing what this whole trip is all about. You have a feeling that you are really riding free and that no other mountain bikers have been here before. There was others, but that is the feeling you get.



25 August 2009 - Day 7

- 08h15
- 60km
- 5 hours 10 mins. total time

We got off to a leisurely start and stopped at a QuickShop at the BP garage, bought milk, coke, chips and peanuts and then we headed out. For a small town Matatiele certainly had a lot of traffic and we were glad to find a footpath very soon after leaving the town. This turned out to be some glorious riding and we headed straight for the floodplain and missed out a stretch of horrible gravel road.



In winter one can be reasonably certain that the Queen's Mercy floodplain will be dry and then it is quite easy to traverse, but when it is wet...

At times the footpaths head off in the wrong direction, but it is very flat so you look for a local walking in the right direction, head that way and find the next footpath. As long as you head west you are ok.



Before we knew it we were sitting on the steps in front of the store at Queen's Mercy having pilchards and biscuits. The wind started picking up and was hitting us right in the face from the store all the way to Malekgolonyane.

At Malekgolonyane we were welcomed by our hosts and again treated like kings. Our washing was done and the bikes were washed and we enjoyed a super meal.

We headed for bed quite early and planned to leave very early the next morning. My recollection of the next day was that it was a very long, hard, but beautiful day.



26 August 2009 - Day 8

- 05h32
- 75.21km
- 10 hours 49 mins. total time
- 1780m total ascent
- 1652 total descent
- 3254 Kcal

The plan was to leave at 05h00 sharp, but nature calls had other plans. When we got away 30 minutes later it was still dark and we cruised downhill from Malekgolonyane. We were full of energy and in good spirit... and then when we started the first climb of the day disaster...

My chain climbed over the big ring on my cassette at the back wheel, lodged itself very firmly in between the cassette and the spokes and the momentum tore the derailleur hanger of the frame. This is good, as that is what the hanger is supposed to do. So we changed the hanger, but the derailleur was also bent in the process and from this point onward I had to stay out of granny, and I could not shift into the two smallest rings on the back, thus reducing the 9 gears to 6. Not a huge problem, but a lot of frustration.

I am not sure why this happened, but I think the washing had something to do with it. The lesson? If somebody else washes your bike, don't just get on it and ride! Enough said...

Now we lost another thirty minutes but we headed off once more with a song in the heart and a noise in the gearbox.

I deviated a bit from the route I took a year ago during the Freedom Challenge and it turned out to be two good and spectacular choices.

This day must be one of the highlights of the whole tour. Pictures speak a thousand words...





And then Vuvu... I am not saying anything more... it need to be experienced.

27 August 2009 - Day 9

- 06h35
- 73.9km
- 10 hours total time
- 2350m total ascent

Without doubt the most demanding day of the tour. You start with a nice early morning cycle from the Vuvu school and then...
LEHANA



Only 1000 metres ascent in 8 kilometres. A daunting task indeed. But you tackle it the same way that you eat an elephant. One spoon full at a time - one step at a time. But this time we had no more than 20 metres sight due to thick mist. The second time on this tour when I was very glad I had a GPS to rely on. Without it we might still have been up there!

Once on top the weather really turned nasty. It was windy with an icy rain keeping us chilly and there was still plenty snow around from previous days. You also ride over the highest point of the entire tour and at 2600 metres the wind can really cut through a lot of layers. The road was soggy, sticky, slippery, and at times all three at once.

The weather did clear up in the afternoon, but it remained cold.



We also ran out of sustenance and Louis decided to pull into Tiffendell Ski Resort for a bite. I decided to push through to our overnight stop. At R16.00 for a coke...

I still don't know if my decision to ride the toughest day of the tour on 1.5 litres of brown cow did not come back to bite me the next two days?

But we had a super overnight stop and a lovely hostess.



28 August 2009 - Day 10

- 08h06
- 89.5km
- 7 hours 59 mins. total time
- 1313m total ascent
- 1688 total descent
- 3128 Kcal

The day started Cold and very misty, so we were in no great hurry to get going. Breakfast was absolutely stunning and eventually we had to cut the cord.

I was very worried that the mist was going to spoil a super ride down Lundean's Neck, But as we got to the top the mist fell away below us and there was not a cloud in the sky.



And then... Lundean's Neck Pass. If you have not ridden it in your lifetime, you will have missed out. Nothing more can be said...



But to soon it is all over and the bulk of the day is spent riding along the banks of the Tele River and the Orange River.



The Tele River actually serves no purpose at all with regards to its job as international border. There are numerous places where the river is easily and regularly crossed.



This is also the first day we came across the problem of everybody, but especially the children, begging and demanding sweets, "chokkolats", money, even a "give me your bicycle!"

But our overnight stay was again spectacular. I developed a very sore right knee (the back of the knee), and could hardly walk that evening. The next morning I was in serious pain, but once on the bike the knee warmed up and was not to bad.

29 August 2009 - Day 11

- 07h23
- 68.2km
- 8 hours 59 mins. total time
- 929m total ascent
- 815 total descent
- 2487 Kcal

After another overpowering breakfast we got on our bikes and had a very enthusiastic Christo on his quad bike showing us the way across his farms so as to miss the nasty tar

road. It is quite a little tester of a track, but very enjoyable all the same.



It was very clear to me from early on that my left leg was the one that was not going to do well today.

I have a condition called lymph edema in the left leg and have to manually and with the aid of a compression sock drain the lymph from the leg. If the lymph does not drain it start swelling and become very painful.

Eventually I decided to end the trip after this day and rather get the leg back to normal, than do permanent harm to my leg. We had very limited Cell reception which made arrangements for transport also difficult, but eventually our ticket back home was arranged and we could complete the rest of the day slowly.

This is a very uninhabited part of the Free State and the only logical accommodation is a self catering hunters camp. This meant that we had to get some food along the way and with the sore leg we decided to take a short cut and miss the Makaleng Bridge border post. There is a Spaza shop for supplies, but...



The next option was at Trollip's Gate, which is not a border post, but there is a Spaza about 100 metres inside Lesotho. I climbed through the fence and was joined by a drunk man wanting to "show me the shop" that was clearly visible. No amount of telling him I will find my own way was going to persuade him otherwise and eventually the situation turned nasty when we wanted to get going again. He demanded payment for services rendered and was willing to fight me if I did not pay up. I ended up giving him a packet of cookies to get him out of our hair.



We had a lovely evening in front of a fire, just the two of us, and was picked up the next day by my wife.

A few days later the leg was back to normal, and I could resume training. So there is another 6 days worth of riding left, and I will be back... Wanna come along?