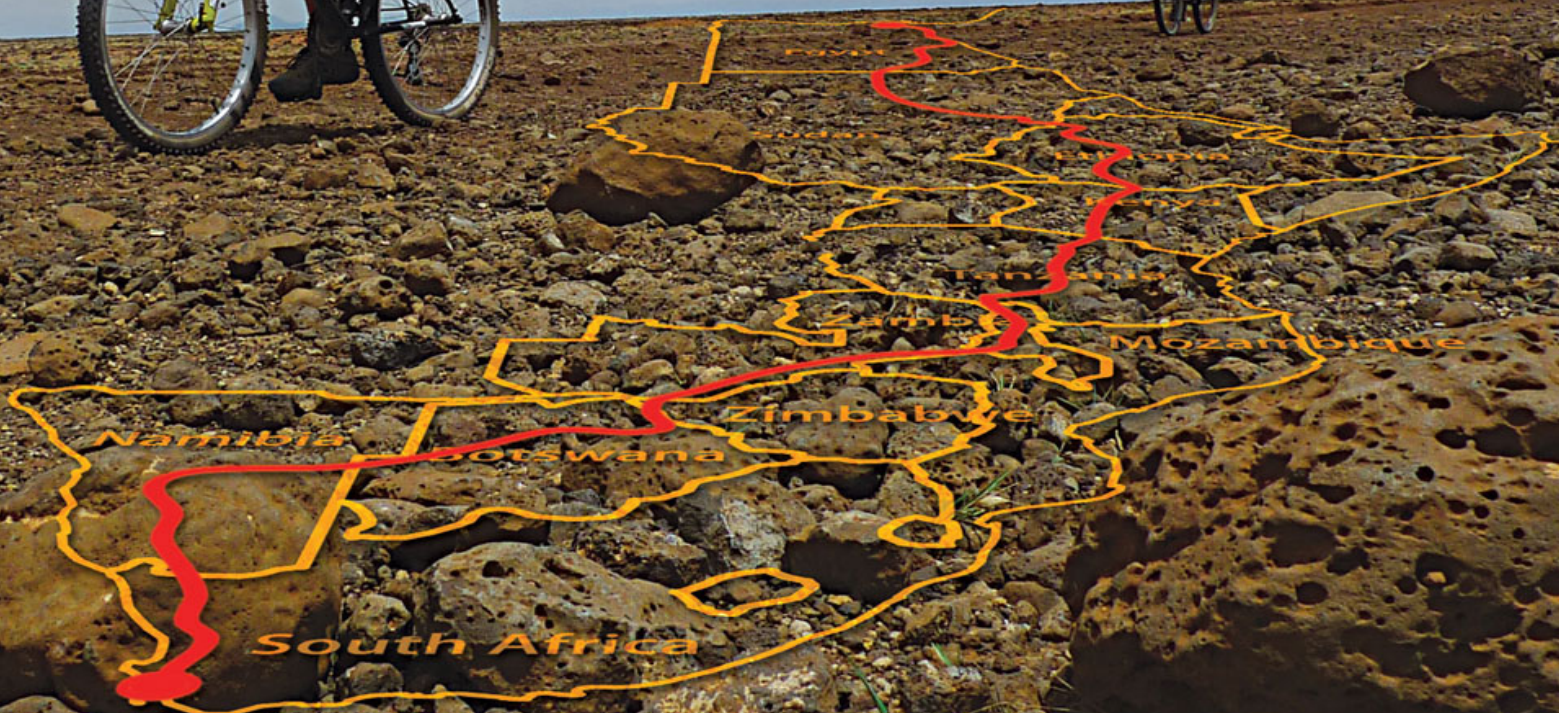


GERALD CONIEL

The Slow Way Down

RIDING THE WORLD'S LONGEST CYCLING RACE FROM CAIRO TO CAPE TOWN.



**The
Slow Way
Down**

by Gerald Coniel

*If you think that
adventure is
dangerous, try
routine, it is lethal.*

Paulo Coelho

Imprint

The Slow Way Down

© All rights strictly reserved

First edition 2012

Cover design by JDE Creative Communication and
Jakesdesigns

Proofreading by Libby Paterson

Text by Gerald Coniel and Libby Paterson

Epub-e-book ISBN: 978-3-86346-131-7

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including photocopying and recording, or by any other information storage or retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher.



Introduction

I feel privileged to have been asked to write the introduction for this book on behalf of Gerald. I know Gerald very well, he has been a massive positive influence in my life, an effect it has to be said he has on most people he meets. When I first met him he had just launched Junk Mail, a hugely successful classified advertising business in South Africa, that was 20 years ago.

Coming to South Africa from Europe with his wife and two children, he came to start a new business in a country whose future at that time was still uncertain. Junk Mail continues to grow today, and is now a leading media company in South Africa.

Gerald's sheer enthusiasm, tenacity, and complete embrace of life was a spirit that totally infected me. At first we were business adversaries, now we are partners and life long friends.

We've been through a lot together, personally and in business, mostly with memorable outcomes. Beyond working together, we've travelled Sub Sahara on motorbikes, icy North Eastern Europe on skidoos, and everywhere else in between. His appetite for adventure and taking on new challenges then sparked a completely new phase in his life (and mine): mastering the world of cycling.

As with all, he took on the challenge of cycling with everything he had. He got totally engrossed and before long was competing in highly challenging cycle races,

progressing to take on full-blown stage races culminating in one of the toughest races in the world, the Cape Epic. It was a life changer and set him up perfectly for the Tour D'Afrique. Not many people know that the feat of all these physical achievements is made more astounding given that as a boy Gerald was almost a cripple, with severe hip problems that had him bed ridden for over a year.

So Gerald finally faced his ultimate demon in 2010, one that would not lay to rest until he took it on. A race lasting 4 months through some of the most beautiful yet most inhospitable, most gruelling and yet most fascinating environments in the world. From the top to the bottom of the world's 2nd most populous continent. He, as usual, prepared himself with everything he had, only this time the challenge was more personal. He would be doing this on his own, not with me as his team mate, a personal journey. Physical and mental ability tested to the grandest scale, pushing his boundaries the furthest ever.

You'll understand the qualities and character of this man, and of the fascinating experience he encountered through the highly entertaining account of his epic adventure within this book. Most of all, you'll come to understand the remarkable energy and persona of this man as he is tested to the limit.

I feel very lucky and happy to say that I know Gerald, that his spirit for life, his example as a family man, and the seeming ease in which he takes things on have rubbed off

on me too. Choose your friends wisely they say, with Gerald Coniel I think I made one of the wisest choices possible.

Felix Erken

Mzungu!

Where are you go?

“You! You! You! Where are you go?” - I had heard that strangely formulated question a million times already. How could I possibly respond when I hardly knew the answer myself? Ethiopian children had never heard of Cape Town anyway!

For now it felt as if I was going nowhere, stuck in a slow motion world. Head down, all I could focus on was the sluggish rotation of my knees, and the tiny feet that bounced off the tarmac along my front wheel. I had never been so sick while cycling before and despite the 3000m altitude, it felt like I was hitting the lowest point in my life! Headache, fever, stomach cramps and fatigue were turning the climb into a survival exercise. Just as I thought that things could not get any worse a stone hit me, bringing my focus back to the real world for a few seconds. I was in fact somewhere in the Ethiopian highlands, trying to finish stage 36 of the longest bicycle race in the world. By now our starting line in Cairo was a mere souvenir.

“You! You! You! Where are you go?” More children were now joining the questioning parade, rushing towards me to ask for money. “You! Give me Bihr! You! You! You!” My desperate attempt to drop the crowd of young beggars, by launching a surprise acceleration, turned out to be pointless as more fresh legs kept on emerging around my

bike. It was hard to believe that these frail looking children dressed in dirty rags could run up the steep Ethiopian hills, bare foot, faster than me riding a carbon frame mountain bike! Even if I was struggling, the ease at which these kids could keep up with my pace was mind blowing. More than anything, it was obvious that Ethiopians would still rule the world of marathon for years to come...

Some of the boys were now getting impatient with me, raising their voices, obviously upset by the lack of attention I was giving them. It was time to lose my impetuous supporters. I launched a second attempt at a sudden sprint. It worked! The young crowd was now dropping behind giving me a bit of space to breathe. Unfortunately, my unexpected move hadn't done much for my popularity levels and stones started flying at me again. Infuriated by such idiotic behaviour, I slammed on my brakes turning around to chase the little pests! My surprised 'fan club' immediately ran away in every possible direction. This was the fastest and most organised dispersion I had ever witnessed - it was obviously not their first time. I knew that the sudden calm resulting from my mock charge was going to be short lived, and getting back into the climb I was already preparing myself to brave the next wave of harassing children.

Why were Ethiopian kids throwing stones at us? Was it our bright Lycra outfits? Could it be that they hated foreigners or were they simply so bored that they had nothing better to do? Racing across Africa on a bicycle was proving to be a far more complex challenge than anyone

had anticipated. Tour d'Afrique was no ordinary cycling contest and every number attached to it seemed to be disproportionate. 12 000 km, 96 stages, crossing 10 countries... When reaching Cape Town, we would have covered the equivalent of 4 Tour de France in a row. But instead of luxury hotels and massages, here participants pitched their tents themselves each night and dug a hole in the ground for their toilet. It was the 8th edition of the Cairo to Cape Town bicycle adventure, an event where 60 cyclists crossed some of the most remote and difficult terrain on the planet while racing each other. Partly an adventure, partly a race, the journey was so epic that at times, time itself didn't seem to matter anymore!

A month ago, we had gathered in front of the Giza pyramids and lined up for a photo shoot before the few family members present waved us good bye. The metallic sound from 60 pairs of cycling shoe cleats nervously locking into the pedals had officially marked the start of an adventure where physical and mental borders would be thoroughly tested. I wasn't doing this because I had lost a bet or had any particular appetite for pain. I was simply doing this because I was curious. Despite spending 10 years of my life in South Africa, I felt that I hardly knew the continent. More depicted for war, corruption and general bad news than for cycling, Africa was not the most obvious choice for racing 12,000 km on a bicycle. On the other hand, no other place offered such a diversity of cultures, landscapes and climates which made this expedition unique

and guaranteed its participants to live the adventure of a lifetime!

Having a few stones thrown at my bike wouldn't deter me from reaching my goal. All I could think about as I was struggling my way up the Ethiopian hills were three letters stuck in my mind: "E. F. I.". It meant "Every Fu*king Inch" and was the official title given to the cyclists who managed to ride every Inch between Cairo and Cape Town solely on their bicycles. 12,000 km was exactly 47.2 million inches and to join the EFI club, made up of the select few who had managed this feat before me, I had to ride every single one of them. EFI wasn't about being the fastest; it was about never giving up! Illness, injuries and other misfortunes along the African roads had already taken a heavy toll on our peloton, and a month into this off limits journey only a small bunch of us remained E.F.I. With no intention of being the next one to drop out, here in Ethiopia, I just kept going.

The children were back all around my bicycle and this time instead of throwing stones they were offering to push me up the steep hill. Because of the chaos that could follow I declined the offer, but the gesture felt good and immediately boosted my morale. Crossing Africa on a bicycle was a permanent roller coaster of emotions and experiences. This was the toughest and most intense challenge I had ever taken on. With 9,000 km to go, I knew that many surprises and difficulties still lied ahead, but it was already clear that this adventure would give me a completely new perspective on the continent.



1

New Year to Cairo

Inshallah

One... two... three.... four..., it is a Spanish tradition to eat 12 raisins just before the switch over to the New Year. The final countdown for 2010 had started, and since it was supposed to bring me luck, I made sure to down the raisins as fast as I could, not missing any while people around me were counting. They were big white raisins and the task proved to be harder than I thought. As I began to wonder how many Spanish people ended up in hospital on New Year's Eve due to choking, I just managed to push the last one down my throat before a huge "2010" appeared on the TV screen. With juice still dripping from my face, I kissed Jaana, we hugged each other, both thinking the same - hopefully I would be safe and make it to Cape Town! Our children had also joined us to celebrate New Year in Andorra before I would be heading off. I was booked on a

flight to Cairo for January 11th; now the big countdown of my own had officially started. Training was over and I had decided to enjoy the last moments with my family, eating as if the end of the world had been confirmed for the next week! The 120 days ahead were going to be really hard, so this was my last chance to relax and store energy.

For Christmas, my mother-in-law had given me a bracelet with a magnet that was supposed to boost my energy levels. She also said it would protect me. Normally, I would not take this kind of thing too seriously, but in this case I was ready to accept any extra help. Jaana had also given me a small soft toy lion which I had attached to my camelback; it would travel with me all the way to Cape Town and hopefully bring me luck. There definitely was something mystical about crossing Africa, so anything that gave me extra protection was maybe a good idea after all. Later in Cairo, I actually discovered that quite a lot of participants also had a “good luck token” hanging somewhere.

On January 11th, at 9am, Jaana drove me to Andorra’s main bus station. I was getting a coach to Barcelona airport. I would meet her again in 3 months at Victoria Falls in Zambia, two thirds of our way down, where we would enjoy a 2 day break. We hugged each other for a long while, silently. The bus driver looked at me impatiently - it was time to go. As I boarded I felt bad, this would be the longest time we had ever spent apart from each other, and the real price to pay for such a long adventure.

It had all started the previous summer after completing a month long bicycle trip with Jaana. Our cycling holiday through the Spanish countryside had reminded me how much I was missing being back on the saddle. Tour d'Afrique had been on my mind ever since its first edition in 2003, but why swap a safe and comfortable life for 120 days of sweat, not to mention the potential danger of the African roads? Somehow, that all changed one late afternoon in September...

To celebrate the end of our Spanish cycling adventure we had booked ourselves into a luxury hotel in downtown Santiago de Compostelle. Jaana had gone to take a shower and as she did so, I signed up online for the Tour d'Afrique! Not that I feared her disapproval, but I knew that if I was ever going to take part it was now or never! It was one of those moments in life when decision making was driven by excitement rather than logic. I knew it was mad, but why be normal anyway? Before I had the time to have second thoughts, I was in! Funnily enough, it was not my wife but my parents who ended up questioning my impulsive behaviour the most. As one of my fellow cyclists put it later, one of the toughest things about the tour was signing up.

As a child, I used to be so inspired by the Tour de France after watching it on TV, that I would get on my bike to sprint across the hills behind our house in the French countryside. Cycling in the 70's was a very different sport and it was not until the eighties, when mountain biking had taken off, that I had really become addicted. A wife and 2 beautiful children later life had led us to South Africa, an

amazing country just coming out of the apartheid era. The incredible stimulation from the hope, the excitement and the newly found freedom that accompanied Nelson Mandela's release had inspired us to make it our home. There was no better place than the rainbow nation to practise cycling! Stunning landscapes, permanent sunshine and an expansive off road terrain made it a mountain biking heaven. As an entrepreneur in the publishing industry, I spent the next 10 years travelling the country like most South Africans have never done and I would not miss an occasion to take my bicycle with me. Soon I was taking part in every race I could enter and discovered racing was another passion of mine. Despite being a very average cyclist, my appetite for competing kept on growing leading me to participate in some of the toughest and most respected mountain bike races in the world, like the Cape Epic.

After 10 years spent in the southern hemisphere, we had moved back to Europe and lived in Andorra, a tiny country locked between France and Spain in the Pyrenees. I had just blown my 46 candles and needed a new challenge in my life. Tour d'Afrique could not have come at a better time!

To get a better idea of what I had let myself in for, I had marked the trip on the large world map in our living room. Europe looked tiny next to a Cairo to Cape Town distance. Sudan alone was nearly half the size of the old continent. I had always loved planning trips on maps, but with this one it had turned out to be a scary exercise! Even with a car

this would have been a serious undertaking, but on a bicycle it was intimidating! Remembering a line from one of my favourite songs, “Do one thing every day that scares you”, the long red line across Africa was definitely daunting!

That route map was so significant that it actually became the first item I posted online. During our Spanish expedition we had been blogging about our daily progress and shared our experience live with family and friends. Encouraged by the interest it had generated, I had decided to do the same in Africa. The plan was that Jaana would do the updates and maintenance from Andorra where she would have a much faster connection than me. I would simply e-mail her the content each night from my tent using the local cell phone networks when available.

With so many things going through my mind, I was still reliving the last few months and how I had ended up here when a man in a green uniform, carrying an automatic weapon on his shoulder, quickly brought me back to the present. “What’s in the box?” He was standing in the middle of the aisle of the bus as he repeated his intimidating question: “What’s in the box?” It took me a while before I understood that he was referring to the large cardboard box in which I had packed my bike. “Bicicleta!” I responded loudly, making sure the entire bus heard me and therefore making it clear to everyone that I wasn’t a drug dealer. Since Andorra was not part of the European Union, the borders were still heavily controlled. “Ah! Bicicleta! Ok gracias!” More used to chasing tax free cigarettes than

bicycle smugglers, the customs officer didn't feel like wasting time on my case and gestured to the bus driver that we could go.

My African trek had officially started! I nervously put in my i-pod and tried to relax for the 3 hour bus trip to Barcelona airport. My mind was going through each bag I had packed and repacked hoping not to have missed anything important. It had been such a struggle to comply to the 40 kg weight limit, plenty had to be left out, from rest day clothing to chain degreaser, weight had been a much bigger challenge than I thought. With so much electronic equipment needed to allow me to blog from my tent, extra compromises had to be made. Playing the field reporter ended up having a high price, as a result I had just one set of non cycling clothes for the next 4 months! Ripping the pages of interest out of the travel books instead of taking the full guides had saved me another few hundred grams. Even my tooth paste tube had been half emptied. I also left a large sunscreen bottle opting for a small container instead, I would buy more later. This turned out to be a big mistake, as there is no sun cream for sale in remote Africa. TDA had advised us to purchase baby wipes, a much more hygienic way to wipe than toilet paper. Unfortunately, my baby wipes became another victim of the weight restriction; I left half the packets behind, hoping to find some during the trip. Bizarrely they would prove to be easier to find than sun cream, Africa might have a lot of sun, but it also has lots of babies! Charging devices were reduced to the bare minimum as well, luckily most of my

equipment could be charged using a portable battery. Each object packed was the winner of a tough selection process.

I was booked on a KLM flight via Amsterdam. KLM's way to wish me good luck was to impose a 200 euro penalty for extra luggage; this adventure was not cheap and for the sake of my blood pressure, it was safer to stop counting. The ground staff at the airport desk got really excited about my trip, they were simply amazed about the challenge and asked more questions than I could answer. The young man who checked me in was a keen mountain biker himself. I gave him my blog details.

All the enthusiasm was truly encouraging, but each time I handed out the blog address, the pressure was mounting. So many people would follow me! What if I failed? What if I didn't make it? The excitement this crazy challenge created even before it had started was already a clear sign that our blog was going to be busy, especially if I was able to post daily updates. During our trip across Spain, we had noticed that our followers had enjoyed the "behind the scenes" feedback we shared daily about our rides. Writing another travel guide was not what I had in mind, there were enough on the library shelves already. Surely, there would be so many more interesting stories to report just by meeting people on the road.

My arrival in Cairo was set to be around midnight, apparently the hotel was organising pick up. There was going to be 3 days of race briefings and general

preparations starting on January 13th, leaving one day free to visit the capital.

During the flight, I started reading my guide book on Egypt with a cover that displayed a photo of a camel in front of the Giza pyramid. At one stage, I noticed that the passenger sitting next to me was taking an interest in my book. He was an old Egyptian man dressed in a traditional Jelabiya, the long white robe common in the Arabic world, and as soon as I took my eyes off the book he started shouting, "Propaganda! Propaganda!". Unsure if he was upset or joking, I was about to ask him what he meant but before I could he exclaimed again, "Propaganda!", pointing at the camel on the cover. His English was very basic, but he managed to make his point - Egypt was a developed country and the picture of the camel was, in his opinion, a western propaganda spreading the wrong picture of the country. After some polite words of introduction, my reply was that since I was about to cross his country on my bicycle this matter would definitely be brought to my attention. I began to think how well the incident had reflected the clash of two cultures. Surely the editor's intentions were simply to sell as many guides as possible and not to make a political statement, but the old man had a point and as we were about to discover, Egypt was a lot more than that. And as for the camels? Well, let's put it this way, while crossing Egypt we ended up seeing a lot of "propaganda".



Above: Camel for sale...

Cairo airport was complete chaos, even late at night, it was crowded, noisy, and a mess. Huge disorganised queues at passport control were just a small warning of what was to come. Being used to the ultra modern and efficient airport at Johannesburg, this was something else. As I made my way towards the immigration desk, I could see some people being turned away and looking really upset. With no information or signage anywhere, every queue looked the same. It wasn't. One queue was for purchasing the entry visa whilst other lines were for immigration only. Having joined the wrong one, guess who was the next European with an unhappy face...

This was Africa, and things worked differently here, so I quickly dropped the gloomy face and started laughing. Part of this expedition was about discovering and enjoying new cultures; it was time to drop Western behaviour. The visa processing lane was relatively fast and instead of queuing again at immigration, I just walked straight back to the officer who had turned me down shortcutting a 20 meter waiting line with my passport open and the visa payment

receipt. When in chaos, act like in chaos – this was my new approach – and it worked perfectly. People who don't respect any order are also not used to being respected. So nobody complained, the immigration officer even smiled, probably impressed by my bold move. I was now officially on African soil.

It was easy to spot that more Tour D'Afrique riders had been on that flight. On the luggage belt a few more big cardboard boxes started coming through. That's how I met, Sam, Kelsey, Erin and Dave. Coming from North America, they had flown via Amsterdam. As we headed for the exit, some local porters rushed to take over our trolleys and accompany us to our vehicle. The first Arabic word we were to learn was "baksheesh", the Persian expression for "giving" but commonly referring to tipping in this region of the globe. The shuttle bus to the hotel was tiny; I wondered where we were all going to fit. The trolley pushers had now been joined by a few more helpers loading the luggage into the vehicle. This amount of labourers would have qualified as a mid-sized company in France, and it was clear they all expected some kind of financial reward for that. The situation suddenly got out of hand as each one of them started to shout, "Baksheesh! Baksheesh!", looking increasingly angry and throwing their open palms at us. As it turned out, none of us had any Egyptian money yet, but they were happy to accept dollars. We nervously handed each one of them whatever small dollar bills we could find. Once paid, the porters and numerous helpers calmed down as fast as they seemed to have been getting irate. There

was no reason to be nervous, it was a big show, nothing more than that and it had worked for them, we had quickly plunged into our wallets to “buy” ourselves out of the situation.

It did not take long before we got our next surprise. The driver of the mini bus had ordered the porters to pile the bikes on the roof. There was no other choice, 5 bikes still packed in large cardboard boxes would have filled the tiny bus. We started wondering how they were going to tie the boxes on the vehicle. Easy, they wouldn't. Now we were about to learn our second, and most used word in the Arabic world, “Insha Allah”, which means “God's willing”. The driver told us that the bikes would hold on the roof, but when he added “insha Allah”, which I personally translated as “hopefully”, I was more than a little scared! If any of these bikes fell off the roof at speed they would be badly damaged, if not destroyed - how ridiculous would that be, so close to the start! Having learnt from the porters' behaviour, I shouted in disapproval supporting my case with wide arm gestures. It worked! The driver was now shouting at somebody else who quickly ran across the street. It was midnight here, but finding rope was no problem. Within a few minutes the bikes were well secured and I felt a lot safer. “Baksheesh, baksheesh” screamed the three guys who had just done the job. Having run out of 1 dollar bills, I handed the rope finder a 5 dollar note to share with his two newly appointed associates. It is not mathematically easy to divide five into three, but when I saw the large smile on his face and the lack of enthusiasm

of the other two, I understood, he had already done his own maths. The two helpers tried their luck one last time coming back towards me looking especially angry, shouting something I could not understand and gesticulating like irate puppets, to which I responded with a similar angry look showing them that they should spend their efforts negotiating with their associate. The shouting suddenly escalated, but at least I was out of it.

As a war was about to break out, it was time to leave and get to our hotel. During the ride I realised that was the best 5 dollars I had ever spent. Taxi drivers are usually bad news in any big city and Cairo was no exception, just a bit worst. The road was full of huge pot holes and nasty speed bumps. African drivers are so used to speed bumps and pot holes they don't really slow down, they just drive around the holes with aggressive steering. As for the speed bumps, in most cases they avoid them by driving next to the road if possible. When this technique proves to be inadequate, they tackle them at an angle making it possible to cross over faster. Safe to say, I was very relieved that the bikes were tied.

More surprises were to come before reaching the hotel. A man had been sitting silently next to the driver without saying a word. We thought he was his assistant, but as soon as we got moving, he turned around and asked us to pay our hotel bill! We all looked at each other, a bit concerned, but he had documents with detailed information about each one of us. He was simply a middle man from the agency that had booked the hotel. Now this was taking pre-

payment to new levels! Obviously things worked differently in this part of the world. We knew we were liable to pay for our accommodation pre-race, it wasn't part of our package, but this was really quick follow up. Middle men were everywhere in northern Africa. Sometimes even in places like restaurants, you would go through two or three people before you could order anything, making it complicated, slow and inefficient. As a European, I saw this as a real pest and a nuisance, but it certainly created a lot of jobs. Unfortunately, it also leads to corruption, with many people wanting their baksheesh on the way.

It was almost two o'clock in the morning when I got to bed, tired, still nervous from having left my routine life behind, but looking forward to embracing a new one for the next four months. The hotel looked nice with huge gardens filled with tropical flowers, and lines of palm trees reminding us that we were in Africa! It might have been winter, but it was a nice sunny day in Cairo next morning. As I made my way to breakfast, I immediately started to recognise other Tour D'Afrique participants. The faces were familiar for some, having read a number of participant profiles on the TDA website, which I had found really useful. Overall there were 62 participants who would leave from Cairo of which 15 were female riders.



Above: The 62 riders ready to tackle Africa

The hotel lobby was already filled with half built bicycles, spares and people trying to put their bikes together. A pile of cardboard bike box carnage littered half of the hall. It was now clear that the Tour D'Afrique 2010 had arrived in Cairo.

One guy was looking very unhappy. He explained that his bike had fallen off the taxi roof on the way from the airport! If I had any doubt left about forcing our driver to tie the bikes, I now knew for sure what a wise move this had been. His bike was damaged but not beyond repair, he was looking for the tour bike mechanic. TDA provided us with a professional bike mechanic service, but we had been told that we should only use him for serious problems. Riders were expected to fix all minor issues themselves. During the following days, we were fortunately going to receive some valuable bike maintenance training from Chris, the mechanic.

With only one free day available before the official briefings would start, I opted to join a few riders who were heading for the National museum. Nine tourists were just

enough to fill one Peugeot 404 taxi. This French-made car is by far the most popular vehicle in North Africa. I knew it well; my father had many of them. For a family with five children, this was the perfect large family car of the seventies. The long wheel based version with three rows of seats, a large boot, a cheap price and a relatively simple engine had since made it the car of choice for North Africa. You could find spares anywhere across the region and everybody could fix a Peugeot 404. As they started to disappear from the French roads, they had all made their way to North African countries for a second life. The old Peugeot had seen better days, but it could take nine adults plus driver. The idiom 'packed like sardines' took on new meaning as we squashed into our 404, the North African tin box of choice!

Cairo was one of the most polluted cities I had ever seen. The air was filled with a thick grey smoke, while the streets were dirty and littered with plastic bags, animal dung, and all sorts of rubbish. As for the numerous adjacent water canals, they looked so filthy that they made the streets look good. Maintenance was definitely not part of the local vocabulary! The city was a big mess, but despite this, there was something I liked about it. Unlike most big oversized metropolises, there was a soul here. Streets were filled with life; hawkers were everywhere, and shops had their own canvassers to invite you in, while smells of grilled chicken from outdoor restaurants contributed to the bucolic atmosphere. Cairo was a busy place; people, cars,

trucks, rickshaws, pedestrians, donkeys, horses, all fighting for some space on the run down pavements.

The taxi dropped us right in front of the national museum, where herds of tourists could be seen queuing whilst a similar amount of street vendors and beggars were preying on the opportunity. It reminded me of the principle of the stock market - offer and demand always seemed to regulate each other. Since every guide book mentioned this place as a "must see", I decided to ignore my museum allergy. A disease I had contracted as a teenager, the result of a severe museum overdose transmitted by a mother who defined the quality of a holiday according to the amount of national monuments visited. However Tutankhamun's room was definitely a highlight, and seeing that alone made the visit worthwhile. Three hours and a mummy overdose later, we agreed that it was time to head for lunch. It was our first chance to get to know each other better. With 62 individuals from 20 countries having nothing in common other than being stupid enough to sign up for a trip like this, it felt like day one of a bad reality show. Though in signing up we did have a sense of commonality, after all it was the fact that each one of us had taken a huge step in their lives for this adventure. Some had quit their jobs, or sold their cars, one had even sold his flat. Before heading back to the hotel, we thought that our last hours of freedom could be spent browsing around the city centre. The narrow streets filled with tiny shops with dusty old fashioned frontage made us feel like we'd been thrown back in time. Keeping a group of people together in the

busy streets of Cairo quickly proved to be an impossible task and we soon lost track of each other.

With fellow participants Tim and Catherine, I had stopped in front of a perfume shop. Large dusty glass containers tagged with hand written exotic labels, displayed on old shelves, gave the small boutique a mystic appeal. It did not take long before one “friendly” sales man had us sitting inside, offering tea and insisting it was all absolutely free. Anyone who has visited North Africa will know that by then, getting out without buying something would have been suicidal. Our new friend was putting on an incredible show for the three of us. Since we were such a sympathetic bunch, he was inviting us to spend the next weekend on his flower farm where, according to him, all these essential oils were produced. We were technically hostages by now, as he had us sitting inside a tiny room, the door locked while two gorilla looking “assistants” were making sure none of us would get the silly idea of trying to leave without buying any perfume. He kept on handing us more essential oil samples, but never took the previous one back. The price? It finally came out in the most askew way, just like every bit of his sales pitch. In the middle of a sentence and at full speed, he mentioned two dollars. The “per gram” was almost inaudible, like a whisper hidden between the word “dollar” and “bargain”. Having good hearing and a sense for maths, I instantly worked out that the price was in fact two thousand dollars per litre. Technically, what I was holding in my hands was almost worth a thousand dollars, I noticed that Tim had also done his maths and looked