

# Cycle Touring South Africa

## Pedalling Through Kindness: The Start of a Journey Across Continents

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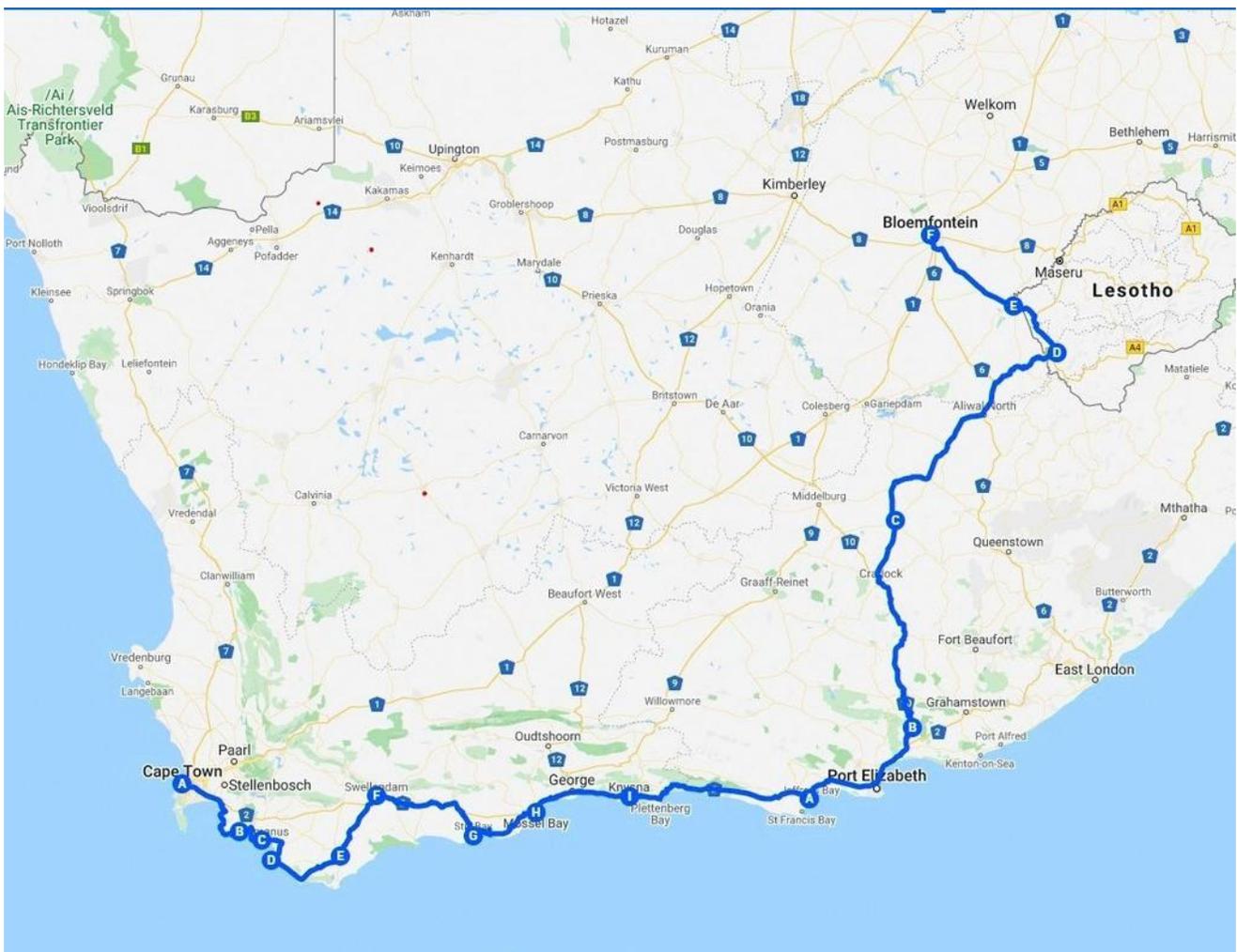


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## **Thank You**

***I am immensely grateful for the kindness of strangers and the random acts of generosity I encountered during my cycle ride in South Africa. It was truly a humbling experience.***

***My sister Amanda played a significant role in documenting my travels by keeping my journal entries and photos well-organised. Without her efforts, there would be no record of my journey.***

***I owe a great deal to my friend Val Abrahamse for managing my personal and financial matters back home while I travelled the world. Her conscientious efforts made it possible for me to pursue my dream.***

***I also want to thank Ernest Markwood for kindly granting permission to include his photographs in this book.***

***Lastly, a big shoutout to Gerda Van Der Sandt, who made my writing more coherent and patiently tolerated my use of the Oxford comma.***



# **Pedalling Through Kindness: The Start of a Journey Across Continents**

## **EPILOGUE**

*Every great adventure begins with a bold leap of faith. Mine began with a garage sale that got wildly out of hand.*

*One moment, I was selling a few things to "lighten the load." Next, I had sold my business, my house, my cars, and—judging by the state of my panniers—apparently my common sense as well. By the time 27 March 2007 rolled around, I owned little more than a bicycle, a tent, and a deeply misplaced confidence in my physical fitness.*

*I didn't know it then, but this was the beginning of a very long pattern of me making questionable decisions and the universe sending someone kind to rescue me.*

*I thought I was setting off on a long bike ride. In reality, I was pedalling straight into a two-decade masterclass in humility, wind management, and the surprising number of ways one can smell bad while still being loved by strangers.*

*This was the start. The panniers were too heavy. And I was about to discover that the world is full of people who will fill your water bottles and occasionally save you from yourself.*



## **THE START OF A LONG BIKE RIDE**

### **Packing up**

On a seemingly ordinary day, I embarked on a journey that would reshape my life and span nearly two decades. On the 27th of March in 2007, Ernest and I bid farewell to our loved ones and set off on our bicycles, venturing into the unknowns of Africa. Although unfinished business kept me from joining Ernest until later that evening in Kleinmond, a small coastal village, I set out with a sense of anticipation and adventure.

Selling my business, house, cars, and belongings was incredibly daunting and revealed just how much I had accumulated over the years. In the process, I realised my bicycle was too heavily laden and wisely discarded a few items which I believed were of utmost importance just the day prior. After signing all the necessary forms and getting a ride from my sister, I finally arrived at the campsite where Ernest was waiting for me.

During his ride, Ernest indulged in a few too many beers, which led to an unfortunate lapse in judgment. He left his backpack, which contained all his valuables, when he ordered a takeaway. In a heartwarming turn of events, the owner of the fish-and-chips shop he visited drove all the way to the campsite to return his bag. This was the first of many random acts of kindness on our journey, restoring our faith in humanity.



Our journey was a steep learning curve as we were “fresh off the boat,” so to speak, and we had no idea what was in store. It was an adventure we would remember for the rest of our lives, filled with challenges, surprises, and unforgettable experiences.

As we began packing our belongings the next morning, a surge of excitement for the journey ahead washed over me. It was the first of many packing sessions to follow, and the thrill of the unknown was tangible.

### **OVERBERG WINDS**

*Where the Southeaster tested us, and strangers filled our bottles*

We set off on a short and effortless ride to Hermanus, a charming seaside town renowned for whale-watching opportunities. Upon arrival, we were warmly welcomed by Ernest's sister, Olga, and her friend, Donovan, who treated us to lunch. Their generous gesture filled me with gratitude and appreciation.

After lunch, Ernest and I leisurely cycled to our friends, Dave and Kathy's holiday flat, which they generously offered us. The flat was a haven of luxury, and we couldn't have been more content to be there after a night of camping. It was the ideal spot to unwind and rejuvenate after a day of cycling. Kindness arrived before fatigue, reminding us that generosity would be our true compass.



Departing our luxurious abode for the short 50 km ride to Gansbaai was much later than planned, and it seemed like an eternity before we got going. Our route led directly into the notorious south-easterly wind, a fierce wind that torments the coastal regions. Stopping by the Birkenhead Brewery in Stanford proved to be a less-than-ideal decision. Upon leaving, we were met with near-gale-force winds, making it a daunting task to make our way to Gansbaai, a quaint fishing village known for its cage-diving activities. Despite the windy conditions, we decided to camp at the small campsite beside the ocean. I couldn't help but worry that my tent might take off with me inside.

Walking to a nearby restaurant required us to hold onto each other and lean heavily into the wind, using all our strength to make progress. The Southeaster can be a genuinely challenging experience, to say the least. Eish!

That night was a test of survival, but we made it. The wind, which had been relentless, subsided ever so slightly during the night. We were relieved to have a slight break from the harsh weather, and packing up was a speedy affair, so we hopped on our bikes towards Pearly Beach. However, the word "hopping" does not accurately describe my state. Despite the wind being less intense than the previous day, it was still howling, requiring all my concentration and energy to keep moving forward. It seemed determined to drive us back to where we started.



Unfortunately, the dirt track from The Dam to Bredasdorp was in poor condition, with sand and heavy corrugations. I was exhausted and struggled to climb the hills, questioning the wisdom of this trip.

We reached the campsite in Bredasdorp after biking about 100 kilometres, and I realised that embarking on a long bicycle ride without proper training was foolish. However, it was too late for second thoughts, as I had already sold all my belongings and had nothing to return to except for the two residential properties that were let. Finally, with a sore backside, I pitched the tent and turned in early.

The stretch of road between Bredasdorp and Swellendam was surprisingly hilly, and I was taken aback by the undulating hills that seemed to go on forever. The dirt road wound through vast farmlands, dotted with curious-looking sheep that watched us intently as we passed. The sweltering weather added to our challenges, leaving us, as two inexperienced travellers, in quite a predicament.

That's when Ernest, my travel companion at the time, jumped over a fence and filled our bottles from a nearby sheep trough. It was no surprise to encounter sheep in the Bredasdorp area, as the town was founded on a farm in 1838, marking the start of merino sheep farming in the region. Even today, sheep farming remains a cornerstone of the area's agricultural activities.



Finally, after a mere 70-odd kilometres, we arrived at the picturesque town of Swellendam, the third-oldest European settlement in South Africa. Exhausted and drained, I collapsed at a corner store. The day proved to be far more challenging than anticipated. But after quenching my thirst with a cold Coke and replenishing our water reserves, we were back on track, heading towards the campsite.

It was a beautiful spot nestled in the shadows of the Langeberg Mountains, an ideal place to rest and recharge before embarking on the next leg of our journey.

By morning, I woke feeling refreshed and energetic, and eager to take on the challenges of the day. Though I had driven this route countless times before, I hadn't appreciated just how steep and unforgiving the terrain could be. The weight of my loaded bike, combined with gusty winds and my unfitness, made the uphill climb even more difficult. However, I was determined to push myself and keep going, admiring the breathtaking landscapes that surrounded me. The area was sparsely populated, and I could see vast expanses of wheat and sheep farms spread across the rolling hills.

As the day progressed, we made a few stops at farmstalls to refill our water bottles, taking in the peaceful solitude of the countryside. By midday, we reached the picturesque little town of Heidelberg after a short 60-kilometre ride, and I chose to stay the night at a charming Cape-Dutch-style guesthouse.



Heidelberg was one of many settlements established by European settlers around a church in the 1800s. However, it was primarily the railway line established in the early 1900s that brought growth and development to the town. In time, Heidelberg became a vital transport link for the area's wool, wheat, fruit, and tobacco industries.

### **FAMILY, FOOD AND KINDNESS**

As we departed Heidelberg, we were greeted by the locals' warm, friendly nature, which left a lasting impression. While on the road, we were approached by a kind-hearted lady who offered us accommodation at Still Bay, where our journey was headed. Her kindness made me ponder if I would ever do the same.

We thanked her for her generous offer but politely declined, as my family had a holiday house at Still Bay. However, since my mother lived in the same small seaside village, we decided to make a detour and visit her. We continued our journey down the hilly road and made our first stop at Riversdale to replenish our supplies. Noticing our fatigue, the petrol attendant jokingly asked whether our hydration backpacks were filled with oxygen, which gave us a good chuckle.



As we biked up hills with names like Skerpkoppies and Langhoogte, which mean "Steep Hill" and "Long Hill", respectively, I couldn't help but think an oxygen backpack might not be such a bad idea. Eventually, after another short 70-ish ride, we arrived at Still Bay, where my mother's house came into view. We were greeted with a delicious bowl of macaroni cheese, one of my favourite meals. My mother always accommodated my vegetarian diet, even though she thought it was silly. She never mentioned it, and for the past thirty years, she has made me a separate meal. Looking back, I realised she was used to catering to everyone's preferences, as three family members didn't eat tomatoes.

The following day was spent in Still Bay, where I tried to explain to the locals why anyone would want to bike through Africa twice. It was a day filled with reflection, good food, and the realisation that a mother's love is unconditional and irreplaceable.



## **THE GARDEN ROUTE:**

*Kindness flowed like rivers, from beers to hot cross buns.*

Tailwind-assisted, Ernest and I left Still Bay to bike the 100-kilometre gravel path past the Gourits River to Mossel Bay. This picturesque ride featured ocean vistas and pristine natural vegetation. We camped at The Point Caravan Park in the harbour town of Mossel Bay.

Fellow campers warmly greeted us and, after exchanging pleasantries, we headed into town for supper. Upon returning to camp, we noticed that our bicycle touring journey had caught the attention of fellow campers. Ernest and I were met with endless questions, such as 'Where are you from?' and 'Where are you going?' It made me realise that while I knew where I came from, I had no concrete plans for the future.

After my 2005 journey from Cairo to Cape Town, I longed for another cycling adventure and began preparing for it. I sold two of my properties, which helped pay off all outstanding debts, leaving me with two fully paid residential properties that I rented out. I then bought a new bike and ordered panniers and racks, but I still hadn't decided on a route. I was also trying to convince Ernest to join me, but he had shown no interest.

To my surprise, Ernest later presented me with a sketch of bicycle racks that he had designed for his bike. I was dumbstruck; he had never mentioned being interested in joining me or undertaking such a trip. Ernest has always been a man of few words, and it's always hard to tell what's going on in his mind.



The breath-taking Garden Route, stretching 300 kilometres along South Africa's south-eastern coast, spans from Mossel Bay to Storms River. It's a place of awe-inspiring beauty, with abundant plant life and an array of estuaries and lakes. Cycling through this picturesque area, we were captivated by the magnificent vistas.

Our journey led us to George, where we stopped at the bike shop to say hello to our good friend, Julian. After that, we continued to Wilderness, where we visited the Ebb and Flow campsite. Situated on the Touws River in the Wilderness National Park, this campsite is one of my favourite places in South Africa. Unfortunately, the camp shop was closed, but we were pleasantly surprised when a fellow camper offered us six beers, refusing any payment. It was an incredibly generous gesture that we appreciated immensely.

In the late afternoon, we cycled three kilometres to the village and enjoyed a lovely meal at a restaurant. Cycling back to the campsite in the dark after having a glass or two of wine was quite a challenge, but we managed to make it back safely and without getting drenched by any rain.



We woke to a persistent drizzle, the perfect excuse to crawl back in my sleeping bag and enjoy the symphony of louries and the chatter of other birds. My sister Amanda visited and the three of us spent a relaxing day together, enjoying each other's company without any specific itinerary.

While we were taught in school that South Africa was isolated when Europeans arrived, archaeological evidence shows that it was part of a vast region, including North and East Africa, where modern humans first evolved. For nearly two million years, thousands of generations of Stone Age hunter-gatherers called South Africa home, especially in this area. Despite this, many still hold the misconception that the region was uninhabited when the Europeans arrived in the 1600s.

The day started off promisingly as we set out for the short 50-ish kilometres ride to Knysna, but soon, we found ourselves battling a storm-strength wind. Despite the challenging conditions, we reached Knysna thanks to Amanda, who kindly transported our panniers, allowing us to cycle without added weight.

Knysna, once home to the indigenous Khoisan people, was eventually occupied by Europeans. The town's name is derived from the Khoisan language, meaning "place of wood" or "fern leaves." Today, Knysna is a popular holiday destination for tourists. It is known for its annual Oyster Festival, held from June to July. Ernest and I have been lucky enough to participate in the festival's highly popular marathon and half-marathon many times in the past.



Upon arriving in Knysna, we were immediately drawn to the bustling waterfront, which offered a variety of attractions. We joined the crowds of tourists, watching a cricket match and enjoying a delicious meal. However, as the South Africans were facing an impending defeat, we decided to head back to our campsite. Upon our return, we were surprised to find that new campers had invaded our site.

We left Knysna on a day marked by brilliant weather, though it came with its challenges. Our journey out of the valley involved a steep climb that required some effort. Thankfully, Amanda followed us in the van, carrying our panniers. This allowed Ernest and me to focus on the ride, making it more enjoyable.

We had initially planned to camp at Keurbooms River, but upon arrival, we found the prices had been raised. Disappointed but undeterred, we decided to cycle to Keurboomstrand instead.

One of the most memorable aspects of our journey was the kindness of the people we met along the way. Many of them went out of their way to make our trip more comfortable. Some offered to charge our iPods, while others even provided us with food and accommodation. It was heartening to see how welcoming and hospitable people could be to complete strangers.



About Sixty kilometres beyond Keurboom Strand was Storms River, and the road leading there was a treat, winding through the stunning Tsitsikamma National Park. The area offered an exciting array of adventure activities, ranging from bridge swings to tubing and even five-day hiking trails for the most adventurous souls.

The weather was perfect for riding, with the sun shining down and a gentle breeze pushing us forward. Along the way, we ran into my good friend Nico, who had driven from Knysna to meet us. Being an experienced cyclist, he came prepared, bringing with him a refreshing bottle of Coke and some delicious hot cross buns. Thank you, Doc! We chatted for a while, catching up on each other's lives and sharing a few laughs before continuing our journey towards Storms River Village. Rejuvenated by Nico's refreshments, we pressed on towards Storms River, with the stunning scenery heightening the excitement of the ride.

Arriving at the Backpackers, our camping spot for the night, we were greeted by a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Lush green gardens surrounded the site, and the friendly hosts made us feel right at home.

It was the perfect end to an exhilarating day of adventure and cycling.



## **EASTERN CAPE HARDSHIPS & HISTORIES**

*History weighed heavy, but kindness lightened the load we carried*

As Ernest and I cycled through the beautiful Tsitsikamma National Park, a favourable tailwind propelled us effortlessly towards Jeffreys Bay, a renowned surfing destination. The long descent and strong tailwind made it the perfect day for cycling.

Our destination for the night was the picturesque Kabbeljous Campsite, 110km down the drag. Once there, we eagerly pitched our tents before seeking out our friends Mark and Riekie. Unable to resist, we ordered pizzas, and Riekie generously offered to do our laundry. It was a much-needed gesture, as my laundry stank to high heaven — a nuisance that would become my nemesis in the years to follow.

We woke up to a tailwind and took full advantage of the favourable cycling conditions. Our destination for the day was Colchester, but the rural road via Uitenhage proved slow and challenging. Despite the obstacles, we persevered and pushed onward for 115 kilometres until finally reaching the tiny settlement of Colchester, albeit later than we had anticipated.

We had planned to cycle another five kilometres to the Sundays River campsite, but the late hour and looming rain led us to reconsider. Instead, we opted to stay in one of the village's cosy little bungalows.

Our decision turned out to be a wise one, as no sooner had we settled in than the rain came pouring down. The rain persisted all night, but we stayed snug and warm inside our little wooden abode, listening to the rhythmic tap of the raindrops on the roof.



## **THE SAD STORY OF SAARTHIE BAARDMAN**

The morning dawned clear and sunny, contrary to the weather forecast that had predicted rain, as we pointed our bikes towards nearby Paterson. Soon after, the route veered off from the N2 and onto the N10, heading inland. My legs felt too tired to continue, so I decided to call it a day at the small settlement of Paterson.

The only campsite available was located in George and Helen's backyard, next to the Red House farm stall. The site was an interesting affair, as their yard was home to a variety of farm animals, including chickens, ducks, and a gaggle of geese.

While in this area, it is impossible not to mention the tragic life of Saartjie Baartman. Born in 1789, she lost both parents at a young age. She moved to Cape Town and worked as a domestic help after her partner, with whom she had a baby, was murdered by a Dutch colonist. In October 1810, despite being illiterate, Saartjie allegedly signed a contract with English ship surgeon William Dunlop, agreeing to travel to England to participate in shows. She became famous for her highly protuberant buttocks, a condition known as "steatopygia". Her appearance made her the subject of fascination in Europe, where she was exhibited at London's Piccadilly Circus venue and paraded in freak shows across London and Paris. Wealthy customers paid for private demonstrations at their homes, where guests could observe her at close range and even touch her.



Sadly, Saartjie Baartman died at the young age of 26 on December 29, 1815, most likely due to syphilis, alcoholism, and pneumonia. However, her exhibition continued even after her death. Her brain, skeleton, and sexual organs remained displayed in a Paris museum until 1974. Her remains were eventually repatriated and buried in 2002. Today, she is seen as a symbol of colonial exploitation and racism, embodying an almost unimaginable tragedy.

We began our day with freshly baked roosterkoek and steaming hot coffee at the Red House farmstall. Energised and eager to explore, we hit the road that led us over the Olifantskop Pass. The climb was steep and challenging, but the breath-taking views of rolling hills and endless natural beauty at the top made it worthwhile. We were lucky enough to spot giraffes and playful monkeys, adding to our already fantastic experience.

As we continued biking, we found ourselves in the heart of the Blue Crane Route, a birdwatcher's paradise with approximately 350 bird species in the area. Our next stop was the hamlet of Middleton, and we were pleasantly surprised to find a unique guesthouse. It was an old railway station, beautifully converted into a comfortable guesthouse with modern amenities. Our stay was even more special because enthusiastic youngsters from the Noupoot Drug Rehabilitation Centre managed the restaurant. We savoured a delicious supper, and the staff's warm hospitality made us feel right at home.

As the night drew closer, we retreated to our tents and prepared for the cold April night. However, we were not prepared for just how freezing it got. Despite the chilly weather, excitement and memories of the day kept us warm as we drifted off to sleep, eagerly anticipating the adventures that awaited us on the next day of our journey.



We left earlier than usual, planning to stop for a hearty breakfast along the way. Our first stop was the tiny settlement of Cookhouse, which, despite being smaller than our previous stop in Paterson, still offered us a much-needed meal. However, a strong headwind hindered our progress, making our journey painfully slow. As we made our way up the challenging terrain of Daggaboersnek, our pace slowed even further.

Fortunately, we stumbled upon a charming farm stall at the top of the pass, where we met a friendly couple from Cradock who recommended a cosy farm guest cottage roughly 25 kilometres before our final destination. With renewed energy and excitement, we set out towards our new resting spot, arriving just before the sun began to set.

The cabin was remarkably comfortable, and our host, Elza, went above and beyond to make us feel welcome. As soon as we had settled in, she surprised us with a delicious spread of fresh milk, bread, cheese, and fruit. It was an ideal way to end a long, exhausting day on the road.

Our late departure was due to our plans to overnight in Cradock, a charming town on the banks of the Great Fish River, located just 30 kilometres from our starting point. With no rush, we took our time exploring the area, which boasts a rich and fascinating history dating back thousands of years when the San hunter-gatherers were the earliest human inhabitants of southern Africa.

However, like many parts of South Africa, Cradock is marked by the scars of colonialism and apartheid. One of the most tragic events in the town's history is the abduction and murder of the Cradock Four. These four brave activists - Matthew Goniwe, Sparrow Mkhonto, Fort Calata, and Sicelo Mhlauli - were abducted and brutally killed in 1985.



Their bodies and the vehicle were burnt, and the incident remains a dark chapter in the town's history. The Cradock Four Memorial, honouring their sacrifice, was erected in Lingelihle, a nearby township, on 22 July 2000.

After this sobering experience, we set off towards the town centre, where a gusty breeze and a quiet atmosphere greeted us. We decided to have a quick lunch before heading to Cradock Spa, located just four kilometres outside town. Though slightly run-down, the establishment offered a relaxing spot to soak in its natural sulphur waters, which are rumoured to have therapeutic properties for rheumatism. Overall, our stay at Cradock was a mix of emotions, from learning about its rich history to experiencing its natural wonders.

The next day, we decided to take it easy and rejuvenate our senses at the spa. However, we had to step out of our tranquil setting to cycle to the nearby village to purchase a few essentials. During our visit to the village, we stumbled upon an internet café inside a hair salon. Despite the sluggish internet connection, we managed to send a few important emails.

The morning dawned clear and sunny as we biked to the subsequent settlement. The countryside was vast and extraordinary. Unfortunately, Ernest ended up with two flat tyres, but we soon came upon Hofmeyr, a small community with three dirt lanes and one paved road. Typical of a small Karoo town, Hofmeyr had tin-roofed homes, pepper willows, a church, a small shop, a school, and a police station. Hofmeyr surprisingly had a small B&B known as The Pondokkie, owned by friendly Joey and Derick. Again, the evening was spent in front of the TV. At least this time the South African cricket team won. Phew, I thought I would never see the day!



Following a wholesome breakfast, Derick sent us on our way with a copy of the paper and a packet of fudge. Fuelled by the sugar, we sailed up the hills and through the shrubby vegetation between Hofmeyr and Steynsburg. Despite the ominous dark clouds looming in the distance, we were determined to press on.

Our perseverance paid off as we finally reached the tiny town of Steynsburg, which was established around a church in 1872. As we explored the town, we were struck by its modest size and peaceful ambience. We stumbled upon the Redefin Campsite, which was a pleasant surprise. The campsite featured lush green lawns, well-maintained barbeque pits, a covered area, and well-maintained facilities. Since the storms held off, it was the perfect time to repair tubes and handle odd jobs.

The weather looked promising, and we set out to the little mini-mart to buy meat and wood for a barbecue. However, Africa's unpredictable weather had its own ideas. As we admired the extraordinary cloud formations, a sudden storm hit, and rain poured down. We scrambled for shelter and rushed to secure our tents, but it was too late. However, as quickly as the storm began, it subsided, and the stars came out, revealing a clear and cloudless sky.

Although the rain dampened our plans for a barbecue, we were grateful to have experienced the beauty and unpredictability of the African weather.



I woke to a brilliantly clear morning and could hardly believe the previous night's storm. Once packed up, our route veered towards Burgersdorp, which is only a slightly larger town than Steynsburg and dates back to 1869 when a Theological Seminary was established in the area. The people of Steynsburg were curious yet friendly—like the lady at the liquor store who gave Ernest a discount on beer, and the cyclists who stopped by our camp.

The campsite at The Dam offered serene beauty, shaded by towering, well-established trees. The recreational area must've been very popular in its heyday. Unfortunately, most of the facilities had fallen into disrepair by the time of our visit. However, Andries Pienaar, the caretaker, assured us that a hot water cylinder had arrived and only needed to be installed.

This time, we took extra precautions and pitched our tents under cover, making sure that everything was securely closed before the storm arrived. As city dwellers, we were learning fast and saw the stark difference in weather patterns between Cape Town and the Eastern Cape. Cape Town is a winter rainfall area, while the Eastern Cape enjoys summer rainfall and heavy thunderstorms, which are almost unheard of in Cape Town.



Eager to reach the hot springs in Maletswai, we set off early. I had visited the spa many years ago and remembered it as a beautiful place. The weather treated us kindly, with mild temperatures and vast blue skies, making cycling a joy.

Upon arriving in Maletswai (Aliwal), founded in 1850 and situated upon the Orange River, we headed straight to the hot springs, but we were met with disappointment. The facilities had seen better days, with dilapidated infrastructure, rusty metalwork, and peeling walls. Despite the poor condition, we managed to find pleasure in soaking in the mineral-rich water of one of the few remaining indoor pools.

After our soak, we cycled into town and searched for a place to eat. Not knowing what to expect, we were relieved to find the Spur Steak Ranch up to its usual good standard. On our way back, we reflected on how lucky we were to have avoided the storms brewing in the distance. But our luck was short-lived, as dark clouds rolled in, and we found ourselves pedalling as fast as we could to make it back before the storm hit. Just as we got inside our tents, thunder and lightning started, and the rain came gushing down.



We didn't get underway until 12:30, after soaking in 34°C water. Our next stop was to find camping gas in the nearby town, but it was a futile attempt, especially on a Sunday in this conservative part of the country, where Sundays are observed as religious holidays.

With the help of a tailwind, we leisurely made our way towards Zastron, a charming agricultural town nestled at the foothills of the stunning Aasvoelberg. This region is known for its rare Cape vultures, and we were eager to explore. Upon our arrival, we were thrilled to discover a picturesque campsite with lush green lawns shaded by massive trees and the sweet melody of chirping birds in the background. The icing on the cake were the ablution facilities with piping-hot water, making our stay even more comfortable and enjoyable.



## **LESOTHO:**

*Borders dissolved in voices calling welcome*

Ernest dragged his heels, and it was already past ten by the time we left Zastron. Our first stop was at the tourist information office, which was also a printer and bike shop. Ernest, who was tired of constantly fixing punctures, decided to buy sealant to keep the flat tyres under control.

We were only 30 kilometres from the Lesotho border, so we headed towards this tiny country on a gravel road. Lesotho, covering 30,355 km<sup>2</sup>, is the only independent state in the world entirely above 1,000 meters in elevation. Over 80% of the country lies above 1,800 meters, with its lowest point at 1,400 meters. The country is entirely surrounded by South Africa.

After crossing the border, Ernest couldn't resist stopping at a pub to sample the Maluti Beer. With heavy legs, we then continued towards Mohale's Hoek. Our dirt road took us over hills and past mountain villages with traditional mud huts under thatched roofs. The sight of us on our bikes brought joy to the children running through the fields, calling out, "Dumela, dumela!"



Upon reaching Mohale's Hoek, we were tempted to stay at the Monateng Hotel, which, although somewhat neglected, served ice-cold Maluti beers. Dinner at the hotel was an interesting affair, offering a traditional meal of pap (maize or corn porridge cooked to be either runny, soft, or stiff) served with marog (a well-known traditional food cooked and used like spinach) and beans. Eating pap with your fingers, as tradition dictates, proved quite challenging for me. Although pap and marog are not my favourite dishes, I could devour bowl after bowl of samp and beans.

The next morning, our route took us via Mafeteng and Van Rooyen's gate towards South Africa. I was sad to leave Lesotho so soon, as the people were incredibly friendly, and the country had a peaceful charm. Still, it seemed Ernest was in a hurry to get through Africa, and cracks began to appear in the partnership. Given Lesotho's mountainous location, the endless hills we encountered were no surprise. Still, children came running through the fields to see what two "whities" on bicycles were doing in their neck of the woods.

Wepener had no official campground, so we spent an additional night in a guesthouse. Though it stretched my budget, the guesthouse was exceptional, with a vast and beautiful garden, spacious, well-decorated rooms, a lively bar, and great food. I was, therefore, happy we didn't bypass Wepener.



## **THE FREE STATE PROVINCE**

### *Decisions*

As we made our way towards Dewetsdorp, I considered whether to continue on to Bloemfontein, still 70 kilometres away, or take a detour into Dewetsdorp to explore the small village. To my surprise, Dewetsdorp offered lodging, and we were lucky enough to receive a discount from the owner when he learned of our little adventure. I must admit that we looked a bit dishevelled from our journey.

Since we arrived early, we had plenty of time to do laundry and catch up on the latest cricket game. Unfortunately, the South African team had a rough day, so we decided to fill our stomachs instead. To my delight, we stumbled upon a charming little restaurant in Dewetsdorp serving delicious pizzas. It's impressive how small towns can offer such delightful surprises, and I enjoyed our unexpected discovery immensely.

We departed Dewetsdorp at the crack of dawn, anticipating another day battling a headwind which, as expected, persisted and marred our progress. Our early start made slinking into the Backpackers hostel in Bloemfontein at around lunchtime. Ernest located a bike shop to straighten his bicycle rim, indicating the beginning of his ongoing bike problems.



## **GOING SOLO**

After spending an additional day in Bloemfontein, I decided to cycle across Europe rather than stick to my original plan to explore Africa. Although Ernest and I had known each other for over 30 years, our differences had become unbearable, and I realised it was time for me to continue my journey on my own. As I booked a flight to London, where I intended to explore the UK and Europe by bike, I couldn't help but think about how little we knew about each other despite being friends for so long. That's when I realised that cycle touring, much like sailing, demands a unique set of skills and dynamics. One can work well together on a yacht but not necessarily connect on land, or vice versa. However, I was excited to embark on my solo journey, albeit on a different continent.

While in Bloemfontein, I had the opportunity to reconnect with my friend Rita, who was competing in the Master's Athletics Championship. She had competed in the 100m and 200m races and won both. I couldn't be prouder of her accomplishment. Well done, speedy Rita!

I rushed to the railway station, eager to catch the train to Cape Town, but as I stepped inside, the scene that greeted me was anything but pleasant. The station was deserted, with no staff in sight, and the floors were filthy. A sense of unease settled over me.

To make matters worse, the train was delayed by two hours. I spent my time pacing up and down the platform, staring at my watch and cursing my luck. Finally, the train arrived, and I made my way to my compartment with a sense of relief.



As I waved goodbye, a weight lifted off my shoulders, and I felt both free and content to continue my solo journey.

Unlike the station, the train was a pleasant surprise. The coaches were modern, and the staff was accommodating and friendly, making for a great experience. The next day, the train arrived at Cape Town station exactly on time. Over the following days, I spent my time boxing up my bicycle and repacking panniers for my flight to London, feeling a surge of excitement as my adventure continued.

## **ONTO THE UNITED KINGDOM**

After numerous phone calls to various SAA offices, I finally confirmed that I need to take my bicycle as luggage. However, the quoted price had me worried that the flight would end up being an expensive affair. To make matters worse, my essential items alone weighed a hefty 25kg, and the bicycle added another 25kg to the total.

When I approached the check-in counter, bank card in hand, I braced myself for the high transport fee. To my surprise, I was informed that the payment was a significantly smaller, once-off charge. My relief was immense!



## **EPILOGUE**

*I battled winds that tried to yeet me into the next province, drank water from sheep troughs like a dehydrated goat, survived thunderstorms that arrived with the subtlety of a Hollywood explosion, and watched my laundry develop a personality of its own. Children shouted "Dumela!" as if cheering on a very confused circus act wobbling past.*

*And somehow, somehow—I kept going.*

*Not because I was brave. Not because I was strong. But because the universe kept sending people who rescued me from my own questionable life choices*

*The world was still waiting. And I was pedalling straight into it—helmet askew, panniers rattling, dignity long gone, and absolutely no idea what chaos awaited me next.*



## About this Blog

This blog documents my ride in South Africa and Lesotho. There are numerous roads, and the route described in this blog is not necessarily the best. If you intend to use this blog as a guide for your own cycle tour, please bear in mind the following points:

### **The distances**

Please note that the daily distances recorded in this blog may not always be the shortest route, as we occasionally deviate from the main path. However, the daily kilometres recorded were accurate according to my odometer.

### **Time of year and date**

This blog accounts for my ride in South Africa during April and May 2007. It's important to note that many things may have changed since then. The roads may have been improved or fallen into disrepair, and the places we stayed might have been upgraded or demolished.

### **Insurance**

A travel insurance policy is essential to cover loss, theft, and medical expenses. However, some policies might not cover certain activities, such as scuba diving, motorcycling, and trekking. It's important to carefully read the policy to make sure it covers the activities you plan to do.

### **Clothing**

During a cycling holiday, we spend most of our time riding bicycles, so having high-quality, padded cycling shorts is essential. You can wear any comfortable footwear while cycling, but I suggest sandals for more casual riders. Summers in South Africa can be sweltering, but winters can be downright freezing, so pack accordingly. Don't forget to include personal toiletries such as insect repellent and anti-chafe cream. Lastly, I strongly recommend wearing a cycling helmet for safety purposes.

### **The bicycle and equipment**

When choosing a bicycle for your needs, comfort is the most important factor. I use a mountain bike with a Merida frame, Shimano Deore parts, Alex wheel rims, and Schwalbe tyres. To carry my belongings during the ride, I use Tubus bicycle racks and Ortlieb panniers, which can be a bit pricey, but are worth it in the long run. It's essential to know how to fix a punctured tube, and it's also convenient to have a phone holder on the handlebars for navigation purposes. I use Organic Maps or Google Maps for this. A handlebar bag is also a must-have for carrying a camera and other items you may need throughout the day.

### **Recommended further reading**

Lonely Planet: The e-book is less expensive and a handy guide.



# Discovering South Africa: A Land of Diversity and Beauty

## Capital City Highlights

When it comes to governance, South Africa is unique: it boasts not one but three capital cities! Each city serves a distinct purpose: Pretoria is the heart of the executive branch, Bloemfontein holds the judicial power, and Cape Town is where legislative discussions thrive. And then there's Johannesburg, the vibrant heartbeat of the nation and its largest city, bursting with life, culture, and opportunities.

## Currency: The Rand

Travelling around South Africa? You'll be using the South African rand (ZAR), symbolised by an R. It's a currency rich in history and value, divided into 100 cents, making it easy to navigate your purchases, from local crafts to exquisite dining experiences!

## A Tapestry of Languages

South Africa is often referred to as the "Rainbow Nation," and for good reason! With at least 35 indigenous languages spoken, it reflects the country's vibrant cultural heritage. Among these, eleven languages hold official status, including Ndebele, Pedi, Swati, Xhosa, Zulu, Afrikaans, and English, which serves as the principal language in government. No matter where you go, you'll hear a symphony of tongues, each telling its own unique story.

## A Rich Religious Landscape

Diversity extends into the spiritual realm as well. Approximately 80% of the population identifies as Christian, 15% as secular, and about 5% as adherents of other faiths, including Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism. With freedom of religion enshrined in the Constitution, South Africa celebrates a beautiful range of beliefs.

## A Geographic Marvel

Positioned at the southern tip of Africa, South Africa boasts a stunning coastline of over 2,500 kilometres along the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Spanning an area of 1,219,912 square kilometres, it's the 24th-largest country globally, nestled between latitudes 22 and 35 degrees South—making it a true geographic wonder!

## Population Dynamics

Home to approximately 60 million people, South Africa is a tapestry of cultures and traditions. With a population density of around 50 residents per square kilometre, there's plenty of room to explore the diverse landscapes, from bustling urban centres to serene rural areas.

## Digital Connectivity

In today's tech-savvy world, South Africa keeps pace with a robust internet infrastructure, particularly in urban areas. Whether you're sharing your latest adventure on social media or looking up travel tips on the go, you'll find connectivity to be widespread, making your travel experience even more enjoyable!

Immerse yourself in this incredible country where adventure, culture, and history await at every turn!



## **About the Author**

Originally from Cape Town, South Africa, Leana was never much of a cyclist. Her passion for cycle touring started in 2005 when she participated in the Tour D'Afrique - a MTB race from Cairo to Cape Town. She bought a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and embarked on a journey that took her all the way to Cape Town. Upon returning, she found adjusting to her regular life surprisingly difficult and decided to continue her travels on two wheels.

In March 2007, Leana and her companion Ernest Markwood began a bike ride that turned into an around-the-world cycle ride. They started cycling together but eventually found their own pace and direction in life and on the road.

Leana has cycled across Africa twice, the Middle East, Europe, the UK, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. After Australia, she flew to Ushuaia, Argentina, and cycled through South, Central, and North America for several years. She then visited many larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

As of now, Leana finds herself back in Southeast Asia.













**There's nothing more exciting than being on my way to a place I've never been before.**



