

A Kilimanjaro Bike Journal

-Thanksgiving 2003 -

There are several thousand villagers living in the remote mountain regions around Mt Kilimanjaro... and it seemed like every one of them was there alongside the track to greet us as we rode by on our mountain bikes! Our week-long circumnavigation of Mt Kilimanjaro on bikes was as much a cultural immersion as it was a physical adventure. Moving slowly and deliberately around the 100 mile red-dirt track that winds in and out of small farming villages, forests, hills and savannah in the shadow of the great mountain, we were in a constant conversation with fellow travelers and well wishers along the way. School children in one-room schoolhouses would abandon their studies and come running across the yard in their blue uniforms calling to us with what little English they knew - usually "Good morning teacher!" - no matter what the time of day.

One smiling Mama washing clothes in her yard looked up at us with motherly endearment and called gently, "Pole mwanangu!" – which loosely translates to, "Condolences my poor children!". Riding slowly up a long tree lined hill, I heard the melodic ding of a hammer striking metal. In the distance I saw an elderly man sitting on his porch under a spreading tree, hammering slowly at a piece of tin that curled in his lap. "Ding...ding...ding". The ringing hammer blows matched the slow cadence of my pedaling. "Ding...ding...ding". As I drew near and passed, I called to him, "Mzee, pole na kazi." (Elder gentleman, condolences for your work.) Without missing a beat he looked up, smiled back at me and replied, "Pole na wewe pia." (And condolences for your task as well). As I pedaled on, I listened to his ringing hammer blows fading behind me, but his sound and rhythm stayed with me. It seemed to me to embody the slow deliberate essence of life here, and consequently the rhythm of our journey through it.



We had come here – I and my 3 traveling companions, to complete one of the first ever circumnavigations of Mt. Kilimanjaro on mountain bikes. Many hundreds of people come to Mt Kilimanjaro every year from all over the world to climb this incredible glacier capped mountain, the highest in Africa, and at almost 20,000 ft one of the highest in the world. But there is more to Mt. Kilimanjaro than simply standing on its summit. This mountain has been the home to tribal

communities such as the Wachagga and the Maasai for generations, and their simple wholesome lifestyles have changed little over time. The regions around Kilimanjaro are also home to a diverse community of wildlife and flora, several hundred bird species, as well as classic African wildlife, such as elephants, giraffe, zebra, baboon, warthog, leopards and even lions. Our journey through these regions was not simply to conquer a peak, but rather an exploration of the culture, the wildlife, and the physical beauty of one of the most fascinating and mythical places on Earth – Mount Kilimanjaro, Tanzania.

We began our journey in late November, to coincide with the end of the short rains. My traveling companions were mostly younger than my 49 years. Steve, a Californian from Santa Rosa, had just completed an intense triathlon training program and race, and Debbie, the youngest in our group, was also an accomplished cyclist. Perhaps on par with my physical abilities was Bruce, an American who had been living in Venice, Italy for the past 23 years and who now was the co-owner of a tropical beach villa in Zanzibar. I had heard the conventional wisdom that on Safari you don't have to be able to outrun a chasing lion, you just need to be faster than your companions! So, I consoled myself that even if I wasn't the strongest rider, I needed only to stay one wild animal ahead of Bruce!



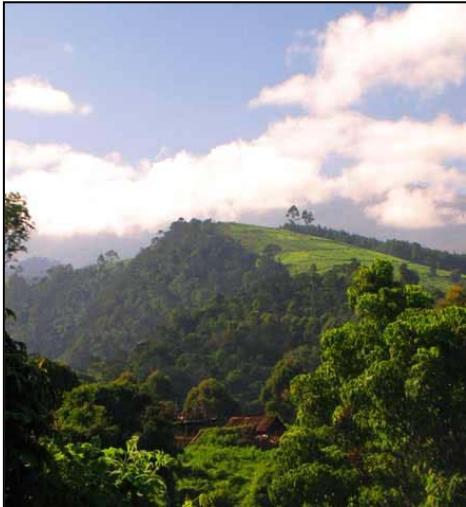
I did have other skills that would serve me well however. I was by far the most experienced with Africa. I had been living in Tanzania and leading study groups for several years. My Swahili language skills were good, and I was quite comfortable with the pace and style of the local culture. In fact, the journey had another special component for me in that my wife's family was originally descended from the Wachagga tribes that call Kilimanjaro their home. Therefore, this journey was a return of sorts to the roots of my family's history.



We left for the first leg of our journey with all of our gear and bikes loaded on two sturdy Land Rover safari vehicles. Our support crew consisted of a cook, three crew, two drivers, a mechanic and my long time safari companion, Emmanuel. “Emma” had been with me on almost every safari I have been on in the past 5 years, and it is difficult now for me to even think of going on safari without Emma. By now he was used to my penchant for leading groups to isolated

areas that few others visit, such as Yaida Valley where bushmen still hunt wild game with poison arrows. On safari, Emma has always been the ramrod – he checks my plans, tells me which ones are just not doable, and makes the other ones work. On this trip, his

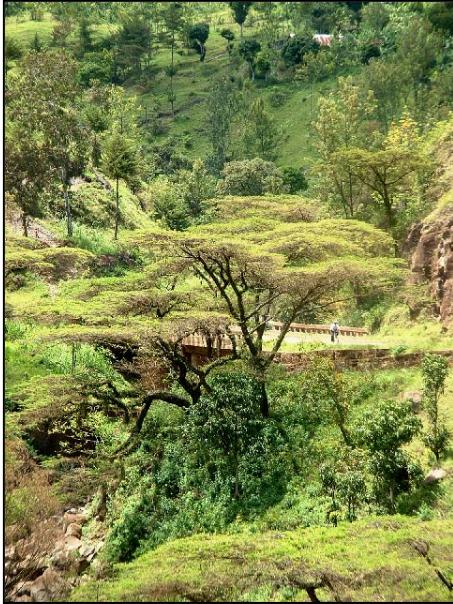
job was to smooth over any problems along the way, and see that we made our schedule. This was important, because we had little idea what we would encounter; had only a vague idea of where we were going; and no idea where we would sleep each night. Part of Emma's job was to go ahead and make arrangements with village chiefs for us to camp on their land, and to try to explain in terms they could understand, why a group of sensible adults who could easily afford the bus were instead pedaling bicycles around the mountain. Not an easy task.



There were others as well who had thought our trip was less than sensible. In planning this journey I had very limited information to go on. We had no clear idea where the road led or if it was even passable. There were no good maps of this area and what I was able to find certainly did not detail the meager path we were to follow. One fellow who had explored this area 5 years ago told me that one evening he had asked a villager's permission to camp on land near the village, however he was told to first go to the local police office to explain his purpose there. When he got to the police station he found the only jail cell empty, so he spent the night there. He had warned me that even then, the track

through this area was barely passable, and it was unlikely that we would be able to get through with any kind of motorized vehicle. This caution was echoed by another, who warned me that what little trail there could be rendered impassable due to long sections in which a fine dust was so deep that any movement or disturbance, such as a passing bike, would stir up a choking dust that was impossible to penetrate. I shared these concerns with my fellow travelers, and also warned them of my own concern that if we inadvertently strayed across the border into neighboring Kenya, we could be detained and arrested for illegal entry. Lastly, I had been cautioned by several people that due to the close proximity to the border and the wild lands beyond, that this was smugglers country, where one was prudent to guard their camps at night.

We began our ride outside of Moshi, near the Marangu Gate where climbers enter Kilimanjaro National Park to begin their quest for the summit. At 4,500 ft elevation the tarmac road that leads climbers to the gate abruptly ends, for there is not much through traffic beyond this point. The red-dirt track there is rutted and bumpy. Small shops, simple houses and family farms dot the landscape among the banana, papaya, mango and avocado trees. The area was lush, green and cool, with numerous small streams running through the valleys cut by the mountain runoff. To our left, Kili's peaks were shrouded in mist and clouds. Occasionally an overloaded bus with baskets of chickens, produce and even goats tied to the roof would come lumbering by, but most of the time we shared the road only with walking villagers carrying water buckets, bananas and other miscellaneous items on their heads. (I saw one young woman strolling by with her lunch - half a sandwich, perched on her head). We passed old men walking together, moving slowly, leaning on their staffs and canes, on paths they had walked since their childhood.



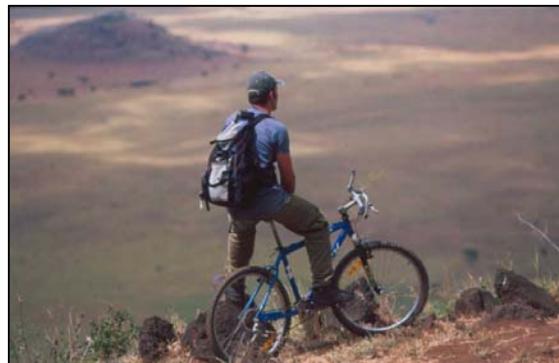
Young children played on the road with homemade toy cars made of cans and wire, villagers rode alongside of us on ancient Chinese bicycles and occasional chickens that strayed too far from the courtyard darted in front of our tires.

It was impossible not to be conspicuous in this environment, and as obvious visitors we were treated according to the dictates of African hospitality, which requires one's hosts to greet and welcome their guests. By the time we had made our first camp that evening, we had been well greeted and welcomed by the local population, and word of our presence had traveled ahead even faster than our bikes had carried us.

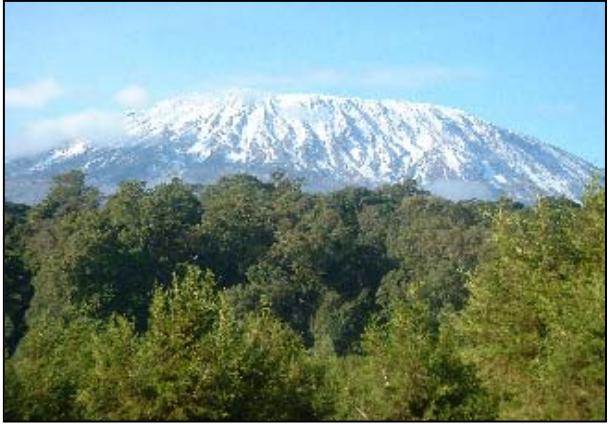
We made our first camp near a small school near the sleepy village of Machame Alen. As the sun set behind the mountain and darkness fell around our tents, we toasted the day with a bottle of red wine, enjoyed our first of our cook's excellent campfire fare, and all too soon crawled off to our beds with the African night all around us.

In the morning, we woke to the sounds of curious school children and the smell of coffee beans roasted on the campfire. The air was fresh and clear, and the sun was shining through the trees in the forest around us. It was a beautiful day for our 20 mile ride to our next camp somewhere near the village of Useri. We did not suspect though that our good weather was not to last. We left camp fairly early, just as a couple of fellows arrived with a very large tortoise, which they had brought with the hopes of selling to us.

As we rode, the plains of Kenya spread out below us to the East, while the peaks of Kili remained hidden behind the clouds. Steve and Debbie continued their mobile Swahili lessons with the locals. We arrived at Useri just as the sky began to darken with small rain clouds in the East. We had just enough time to finish dinner, and a gin and tonic, before the sky opened up and the hardest rainstorm I had ever felt, began. I dove into my tent as the thunder cracked down from the mountain. The rain fell in waves that rattled against the tents. I lay in my sleeping bag and counted the time between the lightning flashes and the crack of thunder that followed. The center of the storm was somewhere above us. Some African Zeus was throwing lightning bolts down on us mortals below, but I was too tired to fight back. As I drifted off, I heard the crew splashing through the rain outside throwing plastic sheets over the tents and trying to anchor them against the wind. It was



a valiant effort, but my lightweight tent was no match for the storm and by dawn I was squishing on a wet mattress. Fortunately the morning after the storm was as clear and sunny as a day could be. The plains of Kenya spread out before us 5,000 ft below, and fluffy white clouds dappled the sun light. The only sign of the violent downpour in the night was the saturated ground and the rivulets cut from the rain that all seemed to lead to my soggy tent.



From Useri the road starts to climb for what would be the most challenging leg of our ride. We would gain almost 2,000 ft in elevation, following a little used narrow dirt track, ending in the wooded alpine forests of Rongai. We had been in communication with the outside world with short wave radio and Emmanuel's cell phone, but now we were entering Kili's "Dark Side of the Moon"; about as far away from it all as you can ever get - tucked away in forests

and bush on the back slopes of Kili, on a narrow perch of land between the high mountain summit and the wildlands of Kenya. We would have no radio or phone contact with the rest of the world until we emerged from the other side of the mountain 3 days later – if all went well.

Rongai has a surreal beauty and tranquility that only high mountain forests seem to possess. In the forests, the mountain air is crisp and fresh, and the quality of light seems more intense. We made our highest camp there at an altitude of almost 7,000 ft. In the morning, the twin peaks of Kilimanjaro, Mwenzi and Kibo, emerged in the direct rays of the morning sunshine, and stood majestic above the pine trees and forests of the sleepy village. This could have been Switzerland, except that Kili dwarfs any peak in Europe.

As we began our ride, a farmer came down the path from his house and called to Steve to take his picture. Almost before Steve could reply, the fellow reached down and took his own right leg, and pulling it in the air, miraculously tucked it firmly behind his head. As he hopped around on one leg to keep his balance, inviting Steve to take his picture, Steve fumbled through his pack to get his camera. A small group of passers-byers had gathered by the time Steve finally found his camera and our new friend was able to stop hopping and retrieve his foot from behind his head. It was a tough act to follow, but I guess that's the way they make new friends in Rongai.



Over the next few days we continued our journey through the small villages, forests and farmlands that flanked the mountain, and passed into the land of the Maasai, where umbrella acacias dot the landscape and tall red-robed warriors graze their cattle with spears in hand. We had survived the dreaded man-eating dust pits (actually we didn't even see any); avoided the nefarious smugglers; and we were able to keep from illegally drifting into Kenya and being arrested and thrown in underutilized jails by the police. Aside from being rained on, attacked by thousands of dung beetles, and suffering one minor skinned knee, we had made it through relatively unscathed.



As we began to emerge from the shadow of the mountain, I wanted to make contact with my wife to let her know our position and to invite her and our kids to join us for our end of journey Thanksgiving celebration at Ndarakwai Wildlife Reserve, our final destination. Some local Maasai had told us there was a certain hill, some distance away, from which the radio signals of our phone could reach the communication grid. How they had discovered this I haven't a clue, but we followed their directions, and as the sun began to set in the west, we arrived at a small group of thatched huts at the base of a hillock. After inquiries there, a tall Maasai wrapped in a red robe confirmed we had indeed found "phone call hill", and led us from his hut up the hill along a faint path.



The sky was shot through with the red and gold colors of the setting sun, and distant clouds wrapped the peak of 14,000 ft Mt Meru, 100 kilometers to the west. A panorama of vastness and beauty spread all around us. Not a sign of civilization or human habitation, could be seen in any direction as far as the eye could see, but we watched the flickering reception level meter on the phone, like Mr. Spock and Kirk checking their life form detectors upon arrival on a new planet, as it led us atop a little pimple of red dirt,

high above the plains below. The freshening wind pulled at our wraps, and the sun dipped into the horizon to the west, as we perched there punching buttons on our cell phone. In a way, it was hard to believe that there was anyone or anything else out there, and even more hard to believe that this puny phone could bridge the vastness of the infinite panorama around us. But there it was on the display – a flickering meter level that confirmed that civilization was detected. Emma smiled, handed me his phone, and my wife's familiar voice tickled in my ear. "Hi, Honey! We made it!"



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