

**I**t all started with a telephone call to South Africa: "James what are you doing to celebrate your 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday?"

"Well I am planning a cycle around Rwanda. Tom Ritchey, the bike guru from California, recommends Rwanda as a fantastic cycle destination", replied James. I voiced my concern about the recent Genocide. "That was 14 years ago and since then the country has seen rapid development and is about to become the latest tourist destination" was the reply.

After an 8 hour night flight from Heathrow and a simple transfer via Nairobi my bike and I touched down in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, just south of the equator and right in the centre of Africa. I have the day on my own while I await the arrival of my South African friends. I assembled my bike and after some initial trepidation set off into Kigali with its mixture of modern tarmac roads immediately adjacent mud huts and dusty single track. The place has a friendly feel to it and I soon relax and enjoy an afternoon of exploration.

Tom Ritchey has been instrumental in setting up a charitable organisation 'Project Rwanda' with the aim of raising the profile of the new Rwanda. Tom has also been instrumental in designing and producing a coffee bike for use by independent coffee growers to transport their product to market. (More about traditional coffee bikes later) It is through 'Team Rwanda', a young cycling team who have raced in the USA and South Africa that we have been put in touch with Vedaste, a local agent who has suggested a suitable route around Rwanda, arranged accommodation and a 4 wheel drive vehicle to support our group of 9 riders on our 10 day odyssey. Ricki, our 21 year old cycling guide, had boundless energy and enthusiasm for cycling.

Although Rwanda lies very near the equator much of the country is over 1000m high. The highest of its volcanic mountains in the north exceed an altitude of 4500m. It is not known as a land of a 1000 hills for nothing. The country is extremely hilly but fairly compact, not much larger than Wales, which makes cycling between points of interest feasible. Our trip circumnavigated the predominantly hilly western

side of the country. The roads and tracks we rode were constantly winding up and over an endless range of lush green and cultivated hills. Indeed, we seldom encountered any flat terrain.

Our journey has been planned to exploit the wonderful off-road opportunities Rwanda has to offer, however we started the trip riding between Kigali and Butari, the two major towns in Rwanda, primarily along a well maintained main tar road. Even on this principal road the traffic was light and drivers considerate of cyclists.

The next day our route took us through the virgin Nyungwe Forest, an area of dense natural forest, home of the Mountain Chimpanzee and Colobus monkeys a spectacular area for cycling. The forest is home to many indigenous birds and would make a wonderful area for hiking given more time to explore. We cycled through the mountainous centre of the forest. The years have not been kind to the road, once an engineering marvel, which is now in poor repair with really major potholes and major erosion ditches - not surprising as the area receives 70% of Rwanda's rainfall during its two annual rainy periods. The country is trying hard to protect what is left of this pristine forest. We met some very dedicated rangers in a hutted camp positioned on a mountain top who spoke enthusiastically about the reintroduction of the indigenous Mountain elephant, a tiny breed of elephant adapted to the mountainous terrain, which was hunted out of the area in the 1930's. That evening we stayed in bungalows on the edge of the forest among lush green tea plantations clinging to the impossibly steep hillsides.

The next stage of our ride followed the north shore of Lake Kivu at 1400m above sea level. Our route took us up and around the hills that slope into the lake and our view of deep inlets and small islands was constantly changing as we climbed and dropped around the edge of the lake. The Democratic Republic of the Congo occupies the western shore, The DRC capital is situated in Kinshasa far to the east. Government control is said to be non-existent and the area is currently considered lawless and best avoided. The Rwandans appear nervous of any cross border interference though we did not notice any side of

tension on the Rwandan side other than a few armed patrols whom we passed with out incident.

The roads in this area are not much more than unmade sandy tracks and very rough sections of rock and boulders. In many instances the 4 wheel drive support vehicle had difficulty travelling as fast as a mountain bike, definitely the way to travel on these roads. After a day of hard riding we cycled into the town of Kibuye and felt very deserving of an evening with cold beer of the shores of Lake Kivu. Lake Kivu certainly has the potential to become a destination of choice with its clear blue lake waters and white sandy beaches.

Rwanda has two major brands of beer, Mutzig and Primus and these together with bottles of Coke and Fanta are available throughout the country so it is always possible to find a kiosk selling drinks even in the smallest villages. None of our group felt sufficiently confident to sample the local Ugwagwa a drink fermented from bananas.

Rwanda is one of the most densely populated countries in Africa. Fortunately the land is very fertile. Every available hillside is terraced and cultivated with tea, coffee, rice, maize and a wide variety of fantastic fruits. Basic meals of pasta, chips and my favourite skewers of barbecued goat meat suitable for the hungriest cyclist are available in through the country.

Leaving Kibuye we had a wonderful day riding a road parallel to the lake that initially climbed over 2500m followed by a long a glorious decent into Gisenyi at the northern end of Lake Kivu. Passing through remote villages created huge excitement from the school children and on numerous occasions as we were spotted approaching, the entire school turned out to cheer us along. The children loved to hold out a clenched fist shouting a greeting 'Shortie-Short' (my friend) a welcoming feature throughout the trip. Despite the hilly nature of the terrain the bike is the principle mode of transport in rural areas. A standard single speed black steel bike is used to transport people and agricultural produce and we had constant companions throughout the trip. Many bikes carry a taxi registration and have a padded seat in which the pillion passenger is carried. We marvelled at the strength and

endurance of the taxi cyclists who managed to keep pace with our sophisticated western bikes. All the bikes forks are generally reinforced between hub and headset with steel bars, presumably engineering learnt the hard way. The brute pedalling force needed to drive these monster bikes is visible in the bents pedals which appear a feature of all such bikes. Everything is transported by bike: live chickens like bunches of flowers, enormous sacks of vegetables for market and gigantic containers of water and local brews. Controlling these laden bikes over such rough terrain is certainly not for the unfit nor those of nervous disposition.

Cycle racing is one of the most popular sports in Rwanda. our cycling guide, Ricki, had recently returned from racing in America with 'Team Rwanda' and was instantly recognised and constantly mobbed. He carried signed post cards of himself to hand to fans along the route!

We encountered numerous traditional coffee bikes along the route. These amazing lumbering timber monsters are load carrying scooters, constructed from substantial timber posts, piloted by small boys and are used to deliver produce down from the hill side farms. The riders of these beasts show genuine courage to stay on board down vertiginous paths with nothing more than a rear friction brake for comfort.

Leaving the lakeside town of Gesenyi, the land rises steeply into an area of volcanic mountains. The red glow of volcanic activity is still visible on some of the peaks. Our ride up to the town of Ruhengeri presented a worthy challenge as we encountered a 40km climb which we rode in a torrential downpour. The temperature dropped dramatically with the rise in altitude something of a surprise being right on the equator.

The town of Ruhengeri is situated among the high volcanic peaks and is famous as the base for accessing the home of the mountain gorillas of which there are less than 800 left. The region was for many years home to Diane Fossey, made famous by the film 'Gorillas in the Mist'. Visiting these incredible animals is tightly controlled and daily visits are restricted by a permit system. On arrival we were introduced to our guide and briefed on our trek to see the Hirwa group of gorillas. Each group has a tight family identity

and the guides are familiar with the personalities of all the members of the group. The hike in through thick bamboo and dense fern forests in the company of a guide and two soldiers from the Rwandan army took about two hours before we reached the location where the Gorillas were feeding. We were extremely lucky in that it remained relatively dry while we sat among these fantastic animals. Gorillas display such human characteristics and much like cyclists resent the rain during which they abandon feeding and snuggle down into a nest of thick undergrowth until it passes. It is an amazing experience to sit a few meters from a huge 200kg Silver Back who watches you with an air of disdain, picking his nose and periodically lifting a cheek to fart. We all agreed it was a fantastic experience, making it hard to believe that people still wish to harm these wonderful animals. Rwanda has a very strict policy of controlling and protecting these marvellous animals however their future is not nearly as secure in neighbouring Uganda and the DRC.

That evening as we savoured bottles of cold Primus enjoying the passing parade of cycles in the company of local town dignitaries followed by a meal in the company of Tom Ritchey and Jacque Boyer, veteran of numerous Tours de France in the eighties, who were leading a ride of Americans through Rwanda in the opposite direction to our trip.

We set off from Ruhengeri under the impression of an easy day riding through the Rwandan Lake District, a notion which was quickly dispelled. Passing to the east of the rain shadow created by the enormous volcanoes, we travelled through a wonderful cycling area between the high ridges of the Ugandan border and fertile Rwandan lakesides. The entire area is intensively farmed with paddy fields in the low lying valleys and extending through maize, fruit, and vegetables up the hillside into the tea plantations. As the day progressed the terrain became a sterner test that included a number of serious climbs as we slowly made our way up to the hill top town of Byumba which proved the least attractive of the places we visited. Before the day ended our engineering ingenuity was put to the test. Failure of the hydraulic disc braking system was repaired with cables ties and cooking oil purchased from a local household.

I had the interesting experience with a broken chain and without access to my chain breaker was forced to request assistance from a roadside mechanic who was rebuilding a car with the aid of a few spanners and a hammer on the roadside. In basic communication he was confident he could fix a chain but I become somewhat alarmed when the bike was upended and with the use of only a large hammer and star screw driver the chain was rejoined through the application of considerable force. The major lesson of Africa I reminded myself was that once you have made a decision to request assistance it is best to stand back and resist the temptation to interfere and risk confusion and stress. The result was perfectly satisfactory albeit the chain was shortened by some ½ dozen links but was sufficient for me to cycle back to base and replace the chain from our strategic spares.

Our next day was spent exploring the city of Kigali. The majority of city dwellers utilise a system of small motor bike taxi, each driver must be registered and wears a distinctive yellow jacket and carries a spare helmet offering access across the city for around 600 Rwandan francs (50p) a journey. It is suggested that visitors may wish to use some form of head sock before placing these well used helmets on your head.

The visit to the Genocide museum in the afternoon was a sobering experience. Throughout our journey in Rwanda we had come across genocide Memorials in every town which all seemed to offer the same key message – ‘Never Again’. The museum in Kigali offered a brief history of the Rwandan history and attempted to explain the issues and reasons that lead up to the genocide. In certain respects the experience seemed somewhat surreal as one viewed images of terrible slaughter occurring in places that had changed very little in outward appearance and yet felt so comfortable now.

A barbecue at the home of the agent who organised the trip was a wonderful insight into the contrasting life of people in Rwanda and offered examples of excellent African cuisine. It also offered a chance meeting with a South African pilot who was training the Rwandan air force helicopter pilots and the offer of trip for 3 of our party in a little 4 seat helicopter (without doors) across the Akagera National game park in

