An Excellent African Adventure

A team of intrepid bicyclists rode the length of the continent • by Stephen Thomas

FOR TWO days Dan and Steve Buettner had been flanked by dense vegetation as they rode their mountain bikes over a rutted path. On their third day in the heart of the earth’s second-largest rain forest, they stepped into the late-afternoon light of a different world: Before them, in the middle of a glade, stood a small group of Pygmies and a dozen huts.

The men of the tribe, each dressed in a T-shirts, tried to show the Pygmies where they had started the journey that had brought them into Zaire. Even if the two parties had spoken the same language, it is doubtful the Pygmies would have understood why these two brothers from Minneapolis were riding through the rain forest.

By the time the Buettners met the Pygmies, they were almost 5,000 miles into

Mpyangu, a 29-year-old Ugandan, replaced Oduyoye for the second half of the trip.)

AfricaTrek, as the journey was known, was Dan Buettner’s idea. Dan has a strong aversion to the nine-to-five life. Rather than work at a real job, he hits the lecture circuit, speaking at schools, colleges and business conferences about his travels. That earns enough money to allow him to subject himself to the rigors of bicycle treks every few years.

The AfricaTrek riders averaged about 45 miles a day—for 272 days. Throw in the inconveniences of malaria-carrying mosquitoes (Steve Buettner, Thomas and Oduyoye all contracted the disease), large, voracious tsetse flies and of 10 months without machine-washed clothing, and it is a safe bet that Miguel Indurain won’t opt out of the 1994 Tour de France to retrace the AfricaTrek route. Some days, when the roads were good, the cyclists were able to cover roughly 100 miles. Other days, they were forced to push their bikes, each loaded with 100 pounds of supplies, up steep hills or over almost impassable terrain and were lucky to cover 25 miles.

A serious cyclist might be willing to try such a trip just once, but AfricaTrek was only one of many assaults by Dan Buettner on daunting terrain. In 1987 he led a group of four cyclists on a 15,266-mile ride from Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, to Tierra del Fuego, Argentina. Dan’s next ride, in 1990, included Steve and covered 12,888 miles across the U.S., Western Europe and what was then the Soviet Union. Given that most Americans would rather sit behind a wheel than ride on two, and that many are allergic to exertion and hardship, why does Dan Buettner pursue such an arduous calling?

One reason is curiosity. “I want to see the world—slowly,” he says. Another reason is that he enjoys the view from the edge. “There are three ways to cycle down a hill,” Buettner says. “First, you can ride the brakes. Second, you can coast. Third, you can get into a tuck and attack the hill.
**Bicycling**

Bicycle treks are the way I attack life.”

But Buettner doesn’t organize his trips purely for his own gratification. When he conceived Africa Trek, he was hoping that people who heard of the trip might be inspired to learn more about Africa and the need to protect the continent’s wildlife. By organizing a trek team of two white Americans, one African-American and two Africans, Buettner also intended to demonstrate that people of different cultures can successfully work together.

In order to promote this learning process, Africa Trek made it possible for students in 50,000 U.S. classrooms to follow the bikers by means of a video hookup and a telephone hotline. Each week, hundreds of people phoned the Africa Trek offices in Minneapolis to hear a recorded account on the cyclists’ whereabouts. Buettner estimates that at least one million students kept track of the riders as they made their way through 15 countries.

While each of Buettner’s previous trips had been difficult, Africa presented some new challenges. Border crossings were never simple. “I couldn’t believe the bureaucracy,” says Buettner. “Always made sure I had a book with me. If you’re patient, officials process your papers faster.” But perhaps the most obvious challenge was the Sahara Desert and its dearth of food and water.

PentaPure, a water-purification company based in Minneapolis and one of Africa Trek’s principal sponsors along with 3M, developed a water-purification device that guarantees potable water whether the water is taken from clear-running streams or roadside puddles. The riders attached the device to the bike frame beneath the top tube, allowing each to carry 20 liters of water in a separate container. At the end of every day, the men showered with what they hadn’t drunk.

While crossing the desert, the riders ate mostly dates and drank condensed milk. At other times, the team was able to buy rice and borrow a pot to cook it in. During one three-week stretch in Zaire, bananas were the only food, and each man ate up to 70 a day. Sometimes, local people offered the trekkers such delicacies as roasted termites. The insects, says Buettner, “tasted like crunchy butter.”

But Africa Trek was never meant to be a tour of the continent’s many cuisines. Thomas says the chance to ride across Africa was a “dream come true.” And Buettner views the trip as the sum of its parts, not as a whole. “Along the way, there are lightbulbs that get lit,” he says. “The lightbulbs—the Pygmies, for example—make it all worthwhile.”

Africa Trek had many such crystallizing moments. In Nigeria the riders were crowned honorary princes of the Mbonbe tribe. In Tanzania, while hiking up Mount Kilimanjaro, the Buettners—the others had gone on to Zanzibar—met a man who claimed to be 122 years old and to have been a guide on the first official climb up Kilimanjaro, in 1889.

And if the riders were secretly hoping for some official recognition of their efforts, they received it in South Africa a few weeks before the trip’s end. They were granted meetings with Peter Mapita, the deputy president of the African National Congress (ANC), and F.W. de Klerk, then South Africa’s president. Both men strongly supported Africa Trek’s message of interracial cooperation. Mapita was so excited by the team’s mission that the riders’ five-minute courtesy call was extended to an hour and included introductions to the heads of the ANC’s arts and youth committees.

Less than two weeks later, after a total of 386 flat tires and approximately 4.6 million pedal revolutions, the Africa Trek team arrived at Cape Agulhas, South Africa. Here, the riders dipped the front wheels of their bikes into the Atlantic.

“From Pygmies to a president,” says Dan Buettner. “Riding a mountain bike across Africa might be a strange way to make a living, but it sure can take you to some weird and extraordinary places.”

Next January, the Buettners and two others will begin a three-month Maya Quest. Dan’s goal on this trip to Central America is to try to help solve the mystery of the Mayan civilization’s ninth-century collapse.

Like Africa Trek, Maya Quest will be tracked by an on-line computer system. But this time, those following the team will be able to ask questions of archaeologists working at several Mayan sites—and the scientists will ask questions of their questioners. “What I want to do is use Maya Quest as a conduit for curious minds,” says Dan, “and to inject new life into a search for an answer to this mystery.”

Stephen Thomas, a reporter at Sports Illustrated
For Kids, claims he would join Buettner in a minute.