

RIDING THE ROOF OF AFRICA

The man who helped take *Two Wheels* to Mexico has recently completed another organised guided tour, this time of Southern Africa...

Story and photography by JOHN BENNETT



FOR YEARS I had dreamed about riding the roof of Africa, a route taken by the famous car rally, through the mountain kingdom of Lesotho, an independent country in Southern Africa. The trip was two years in the planning, would cover both Lesotho and parts of South Africa, and would be mainly across gravel roads.

In planning the trip I made use of Dirk du Plooy (a former 750cc South African racing champion). His brief was to find the best off-road tracks, spectacular scenery, top food and accommodation, so we could see the wild life and avoid the major population centres.

The 10 riders who signed up for the trip started from Johannesburg, ready to tackle the wilds of Africa. After a comprehensive briefing by Dirk, we headed off.

The group was a real mixed bag, ranging from 34 to 71, all experienced riders and with a great attitude to exploring the unknown and giving it a go.

We also had two back-up vehicles with Beverley and John driving the *bakkie* (local term for a ute) so we only needed to carry the stuff we'd need during the day on the bikes. Jennifer and Jack drove another car to carry the



excess baggage. The *bakkie* also towed a spare KLR on a trailer, as a back-up bike.

Just a couple of hours from Johannesburg is the Golden Gate National Park, part of the Drakensberg Mountains. Inside the national park we saw enormous sandstone bastions, grassy plateaus and incised valleys of red and yellow cliffs and spectacular overhangs.

At the cultural village of Besotho we listened to local musicians, watched the dancers and sampled the traditional beer. Watching the medicine man throwing bones was fascinating, but I think we will all stick to more western styles of healing...

We then moved onto the tree-fringed village of Clarens where we stayed at the Maluti Mountain Lodge, a very comfortable hotel with a quaint rustic bar filled with local artifacts. The local food and wine was a very pleasant way to finish the day.

The next morning we crossed the border into Lesotho and slowly climbed the Maluti mountains. Lesotho is the world's highest country - its average altitude even tops Tibet's. Much of Lesotho is covered by the high Maluti mountains and even the lowlands, where most of Lesotho's 1.5 million people live, only fall to 1005 metres (3,300ft) above sea level.



From the border we climbed into the mountains along the Makika Lisiu Pass, the highest we would complete at over 3000 metres (10,000ft). Peter, one of our more experienced riders and someone who has ridden every major pass in Europe, said it was the most spectacular mountain pass he had ever seen. We were then onto a well formed dirt road with long sweeping corners through and over amazingly rugged mountains. This was where Brett, our youngest (34) came to grief. He was having the ride of his life when he lost concentration and traction on a sweeping corner and slid both his bike's wheels into a stone wall. Luckily, he wasn't hurt and the damage to the bike was minimal, so we only lost an hour or so.

Next stop was the Katze Dam. Financed by South Africa, which buys its water, the 186m tall wall is a spectacular sight. Here we met an interesting Dutch guy who had ridden his Honda Fireblade through Europe, Asia and Australia for the past three years and was now on his way across Africa and onto the Americas. He was completely self-contained in that he carried all his possessions (including spares) in a lockable steel

container on the back of his bike.

After lunch we had a three-hour ride through some of the most rugged and stark but spectacular country I have ever seen. Just to make it more interesting we were hit by a tropical storm which severely reduced visibility and created an eerie feeling of being in a wild, unknown place. Just at sunset we stopped at the appropriately named "God Help Me Pass" to take photos of the awesome backdrop to our ride. Riding through these mountains in the dark made us realise the importance of a guide with good local knowledge. There were practically no road signs (the locals





use them for firewood), no-one speaks English and every mountain track looks similar.

Well after dark and feeling the cold we arrived at the rustic Molimo Nthuse Mountain Lodge, where we quickly got stuck into the rum and compared stories. Most agreed that it had been the toughest and most interesting single riding day they had ever done. Dinner was a four-course feast.

In the middle of Lesotho both John (driving the *bakkie*) and Jennifer were charged with failing to give way to a stop sign. The small stop sign was placed in the middle of the road and almost impossible to see. The fine was only \$A8 and no doubt the Lesotho police use such tactics to help fund the economy. Initially Jennifer (a lawyer) took the matter seriously and tried to tell them their placing of the sign was a danger to traffic but then saw the funny side of the episode and now has

"...she was guilty of 'failing to comply with a traffic offence' (sic)..."



Hmm. Scenery. And lots of it. Touring in Lesotho was a wonderful experience and allowed insights into another way of life unobtainable except by being there and experiencing it. But the offer of a trade of transport was a little one-sided, no matter how many donkeys were involved...



history of Lesotho, its wildlife and birds. That night he arranged for the local Basotho to put on a concert for us which included folk songs by a choir accompanied by musical instruments hand-made from local materials, such as tin cans.

The Basotho are friendly once you get past their shyness. Making the initial friendly gesture usually does the trick – especially when they see 12 bikes being ridden through their villages. Jennifer had brought

the charge framed in her office – she was guilty of “failing to comply with a traffic offence” (sic). One police officer actually asked Jennifer to marry him.

Now in the heart of the Roof of Africa country, we travelled all day through spectacular mountains over breathtaking passes to the “Gates of Paradise”. This took us into Malealea Lodge, a charming rustic lodge with stone buildings and shady gardens. The owners, Di and Mick Jones are very well-known in Lesotho, especially Di – she writes travel articles on the country. Mick is also extremely knowledgeable and offers advice on sightseeing and trekking around the lodge and the



coloured pencils and balloons for the children and it was wonderful seeing the joy on their faces when they received one. The mens' clothing is extremely colourful and individual – they wear a colourful blanket fastened with a huge safety pin at the neck, hats of all shapes and sizes, jewellery and (often white) gum boots. They travel around on Basuto ponies, horses and bullocks, often seen pulling carts. In the streets women carry everything but the kitchen



Above: More bloody scenery. Left: What happens when you concentrate on the scenery and not the road? An unexpected swim, that's what! Below: The motorcyclists attempted to blend in with the local wildlife...

sink on their head...

The next day we then attempted to find a 4WD track but ended up crossing numerous gorges and creeks and rough open country before we eventually found the dirt road. That afternoon we crossed the border back into South Africa and enjoyed a relaxing ride along the river before tackling the rough and

stony Lundins Nek Pass. Our oasis that night was the beautiful historic Rhodes Hotel, built about 1850 and now restored to its early splendour.

The drinks in the bar after a hard day's ride were great unwinding sessions where everyone had a story to tell and an opportunity to relive. Another highlight was the awarding of the Safari monkey T-shirt after dinner each evening to the person voted by the group as the monkey of the day. Each proposer presented his/her story, usually with great relish and embellishment as to why the miscreant should be awarded the Safari





Top: Nice roads, but look out for the single horsepower vehicles.
Opposite: Nice pussy, good pussy, nice pussy...
Below: Cape Town, final destination and a great location.

Monkey shirt, then the group voted on who should win.

We were now in the Eastern Cape after a rugged climb over Naudes Nek (2500m/8,300 ft) with a series of hairpin bends and huge views before the country flattened out a little. We passed Tiffendell, South Africa's only ski resort in an area known as "Little Switzerland" and full of Sand rock paintings, sandstone caves and craggy sheep farms. That night we enjoyed cordon bleu cooking and delicious Cape wines in a bed and breakfast outside Stutterheim.

Shamwari Game Reserve was the next highlight where we saw elephant, rhino, lion, numerous buck and where an enormous giraffe circled our vehicle as we sat stunned. The guides in the Reserve are very knowledgeable not only on the animals but also on the birds and flora and consequently

the safari is a very enlightening experience. I have never seen animals come so close to a vehicle and I have visited many game reserves in Africa. Our first sign of "civilisation" was a night on the beachfront of Port Elizabeth, mainly to restock spares and fix the *bakkie*.

The next night we were guests at the Patensie Country Club in a rich farming valley, where we enjoyed a *braai-vleis* (barbeque) with our Afrikaans hosts and then were taken in groups of two and three to the farmer's homes for the night where lively discussion and many night caps followed. All the riders especially enjoyed this night as they experienced wonderful local hospitality and came away with more understanding of the country and its people.

Then through the rugged Baviaanskloof where we crossed and re-crossed the river 25 times and then climbed out the valley onto the semi-desert plateau of the Klein Karoo. While I was cruising along at about 60km/h on a rough dirt track a large male baboon came charging out of the scrub, heading straight for me. Just as I could clearly see canine teeth (bared) and the whites of his eyes (his enormous head was level with my petrol tank) he propped on all fours and skidded to a halt as I missed him by about 10cm. It took about half an hour before my heart stopped pounding.

We were all fairly exhausted by now so two nights at a scenic resort hotel right on the beach at Brenton-on-Sea near Knysna was a great relief. The next day was spent swimming, sightseeing, shopping, cruising on the lake or taking the scenic railway to George.

Then along the scenic Garden Route, over the Outeniqua Pass to Oudtshoorn where we visited a cheetah farm, played with a tame cheetah and then visited the wondrous Congo Caves. We then rode

up the awesome Swatberg Pass well above the clouds and took some amazing photos. The more adventurous of the group then rode down into a forgotten valley called "Die Hel" (Hell), where families lived in isolation for centuries before the road opened it up to the world.

That night was spent in the Mimosa Lodge, a double story Edwardian house (built in 1861) exuding charm, warmth and European hospitality (it is owned by the Austrian chef and his lovely wife). Our garden suite opened onto an oasis-like garden and dinner that night was a gourmet experience, again with excellent Cape wines followed by liqueurs in the lounge.

The beautiful Breede Valley was next, an incredible place where mountains give way to a jigsaw of valleys, each quite distinct in character. After crossing four mountain passes we arrived at the famous university city of Stellenbosch and South Africa's second oldest city (1681). It is filled with dappled avenues of three-century-old oaks. We picnicked at Boschendal estate under the beautiful oak trees and then visited the wine estate and

museum. Then a short ride into Cape Town, past the shanty towns of the Cape Flats where the poor just survive. It was welcoming to see the awesome Table Mountain rising in its splendour from the mist. Cape Town is Southern Africa's most beautiful city, set along the Cape peninsula spine dropping down to beautiful beaches along the Atlantic seaboard.

After checking into our hotel in Sea Point, Dirk took us all down to a great seafood restaurant in the very impressive Victoria and Alfred Waterfront where Cape Town's original Victorian harbour has been redeveloped. After a great evening of frivolity the highlight was the awarding of the Safari Monkey shirt for the whole trip. After much discussion it came down to a close tie between the youngest, Brett, and the oldest, Ken, both who had committed numerous indiscretions and fallen off their bikes

many times. After a very close vote it went to Brett, who wore it with pride after it was signed by all participants.

We had finished a fantastic ride over spectacular mountains, valleys, unspoiled beaches and deserts, got a great feel for the local culture and inhabitants and indulged in numerous gourmet experiences with a great bunch of fellow travellers. A wonderful experience which will live with me for many, many years.



He liked it so much he bought the company...

John Bennett is the Australian representative of

Pancho Villa Moto Tours, and the organiser of this tour. He is currently organising tours to South America (the Andes), Mexico and other adventure destinations. Contact him at of PVMT on (02) 6687 1512 or Fax (02) 6687 1760 for more information, or visit <www.panchovilla.com>.



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