

Location: Cape Town, South Africa
Day 1,289
Miles on the clock: 34,370

“You! Where is your helmet?”

“I don’t have one.”

“It is law. You *must* wear a helmet.”

“Are you sure that’s the law?”

“Yes...I think so. Umm...ah ha! Your front tire is too bald. It is *illegally* bald! You must change it now.”

“Yes. I will. Thank you for your concern. Have a nice day sir.”

“Yes, yes, and you sir. Goodbye”

On my journey through Swaziland, I had been stopped by a policeman. With pride more or less intact on both sides, we parted.

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Sandwiched between Mozambique and South Africa, the tiny kingdom of Swaziland is easily overlooked. It’s smaller than Wales and has just over one million inhabitants. Through a mutual contact, I had been put in touch with Lee and Rowan who have a cattle ranch and chicken farm at the heart of the country. They welcomed me with open arms and for a couple of days I happily absorbed the rich, green surroundings in this mountainous country of one tribe under one absolute monarch (and his 15 wives in his 13 palaces). The Swazi people are kind and friendly. It is hard to make progress on a bicycle as everyone one wants you to stop and chat. Even the policemen seem to make excuses to have a conversation. The other hindrance to progress is the views. Endless panoramas of forested mountains separated by rolling, emerald farmland where simple people are working hard.

A small river marks the boundary between Swaziland and South Africa. However, the atmosphere changes pretty rapidly when one crosses it. Suddenly I am no longer a visitor or a tourist. I am a white. That is how people, both white and black, form an attitude towards me. No more African-accented shouts from the roadside of “my friend! How are you? Come, sit down, let’s talk.” Race is evidently still a huge factor in societal relationships here. The Afrikaners (modern day descendants of the 17th-century Dutch settlers) were incredibly kind and welcoming to me and, as cycling is a very popular leisure activity in the country, many were very interested in my journey. However, when conversation (as it inevitably did) turned to race, I was often shocked by the opinions and sweeping generalisations that were made. Ideas along the line of: “people call us racist but...” and “the blacks resent us but look what they’ve done to our country” etc. Also: “I hear you’ve got big problems with blacks in your country too”.

During my 1,400-mile cycle to Cape Town, I had startlingly few conversations with black people. I wasn’t approached and interactions in shops were short. There’s simply a gulf between the races. Apartheid is effectively in place just without legislation and white minority rule. People tended to loosen up a little when they learned that I was not South African but I rarely had time to slip that into the curt conversations. After 350 years of co-existence, the cultures and social spheres of the former Europeans and the indigenous Africans remain distinct and with little overlap.

There's not just white and black, but also (largely in the Western Cape and Eastern Cape provinces) distinct third and fourth groups: Indian and "Coloured". Coloured covers everything between: anyone with heritage of more than one race, and the Cape Malay subgroup. The coloureds disassociate themselves from the blacks, the whites and blacks disassociate themselves from the coloureds and the whites disassociate themselves from the blacks. In fact, everyone keeps to themselves. The divisions are sadly this clear cut. Race in South Africa is a black and white issue.

The first province on my route was Mpumalanga (formerly the southern half of the Transvaal district); a vast, hilly patchwork of farmland and tree plantations. Yawning spaces presided over alternately by stabbing sun and penetrating rain that works itself up to riotous thunder storms. Neatly arranged and spaced pine trees would strobe in and out of alignment as I rolled by; the shaded corridors between rows serving as good lunch picnic spots.

My second afternoon in the country was darkened by intensely brooding skies. The storm was evidently soon to begin and the winds had slowed me to a crawl so I heaved my bike over one of the barbed wire fences (that line all roads in South Africa) and hurriedly pitched my tired old tent. The rain soon began pounding jubilantly onto the fly sheet and the wind began twisting and bending the pole and flapping the sheets. A couple of hours of this treatment proved enough to suddenly snap the pole simultaneously in three places. For the rest of the night I cowered, windswept, waterlogged, and wrapped in the soggy skin of my shattered shelter. The elements fumed on.

Not too many miles through the following morning's chill drizzle brought Wakkerstroom in sight. The small, picturesque town (founded 1859) loomed out of the melting mist. First, just a steeple, then cottage roofs and, finally, the sprawl of budget housing set apart from the main cluster of pretty buildings. Due to the wetlands nearby, the wholly European-looking town is a hub for birders and, as I thawed my numb feet (I had recently foregone trousers and socks) by a fire in a quirky little gallery/restaurant, I got talking to a student of ornithology - on an 18-month research posting - and her elderly friends. I was told that the rain would persist until nightfall and that I should partake in their bottle of wine. I didn't need much persuading. A blurry afternoon followed and culminated with late drinks in a bar at the now defunct train station where the owners generously put me up in the old Guard's Hut.

The following morning I made makeshift repairs on the tent pole and life was good again. Years of use have rendered all my panniers non-waterproof. Wet weather results in a general state of sogginess that can be hard to shift. Once all my kit is finally dry after a soaking, it feels like a new, brighter world and I feel like a new, lighter man. So, groggy but mentally refreshed, I rode west and onto mud tracks.

Forty miles and only two passing vehicles later, I was spilled back onto tarmac lined by an electric fence enclosing various antelope: springbok, oryx, kudu, bushbuck and waterbuck. They grazed nonchalantly by the road, unfazed by the continual swish and roar of traffic. South Africa often feels like a sanitised version of Africa and much of its "wild" life seems a tamed version of the flighty creatures that exist further north.

Several small, backward-feeling towns blurred by as I made fast progress. Mandela died but, apart from the papers and a few half-mast flags, I saw little to evidence the passing of the republic's first president. The farcical Johannesburg memorial's highlights and hiccups soon eclipsed the fact that

an icon of world peace (and South African “racial reconciliation”) had died. Obama’s rousing speech (which he seemed to be reading for the first time), current president Jacob Zuma’s boo-provoking presence, the shamefully-attempted political exploitation of a man’s death, the ANC’s sign language interpreter translating every third word as “cigarette”, and plenty of rain all contributed to make the event more akin to a circus.

Nelson Mandela had been in an irretrievable and “permanent vegetative state” since early July and it seemed evident that, rather than humanely switch the various machines off and let a body die along with its deceased mind, the decision had been made to keep artificially pumping the once-great heart and lungs. Preferably until midway into the campaigning period for the May 2014 elections so the ANC could piggyback to another term on the memory and legacy of Mandela. Given that they’d had six months to prepare for how to use the death to their political advantage, the party produced an omnishambles. The media revelled in the chaos and ordinary people, used to this kind of thing, got on with their lives. After the allotted 10 days of national mourning a newspaper headline read: “ANC encourages people to continue mourning.” Only in South Africa...

I passed into the Free State and was soon presented with a gaping valley and a storm racing towards me. Just as the first heavy raindrops began to pelt me, I spotted a small, lonely building and veered off the road to partially shelter in the lee of it. The inhabitants peeped around the wall to see who it was. I waved meekly and they wordlessly returned inside. While the rain hardened into hazelnut-sized hailstones that clattered deafeningly on the roof, I realised that nowhere else in Africa (and, indeed, the world) had I been left out in the rain when there was an indoors to be invited into. I had been enjoying the warm welcome of the white Afrikaners and this was the coldest example of the lack of welcome of the black South Africans. I watched the ricocheted balls of ice bounce off my white forearms. Skin is a funny thing.

On the outskirts of a town called Bethlehem I was contemplating where to shelter from another fast-approaching storm when a car pulled over.

“And where do you think you’re going young man?” said the grinning white lady in a strong Africkaans accent.

“Cape Town.”

“And would you like a warm bath and a bed before you get there? Follow me.”

Without waiting for a reply, Alda drove on while I rushed along behind. Soon I was freshly-showered and deeply ensconced in a leather armchair. I was in a warm home, wearing dry, clean clothes and watching rugby on the television. The kindness to an utter stranger was, as ever, overwhelming.

I spoke at length with Alda’s husband Johann about the race situation in the country. He was frank and explained his thoughts. In his words (paraphrased): “When the Dutch arrived and spread into the interior of the country they found a largely empty land (in some areas at least) and zero cultivation. There were a few nomadic pastoralist bushmen here and there who soon wandered onwards with their livestock. The new settlers – early Afrikaners – began laboriously cutting farms out of the tough bush and cultivating the land. Through hard work they prospered. In time, they found themselves competing for the land with African tribes that had migrated from the north, and the British.

“Apartheid came and tensions mounted. Apartheid went and bitterness remained...on both sides. Individual, ordinary Afrikaners did not make the legislation of Apartheid. They simply lived by the rules. Blaming an ordinary Afrikaner for apartheid is like blaming an ordinary European for slavery. Now that white minority rule is history, there is positive discrimination in our country. Rightful ownership of land is often decided on colour, not on who was actually there first. The blacks feel a sense of entitlement and expect to grow rich from the land (as they saw the whites do) but without putting in the work. Black people in this country are different to other Africans. Many are workshy and this is why so many citizens of other African nations find work here so easily. They are willing to work...and work hard. We whites are resented for success and black people who need work will often rather remain unemployed than work for us.”

I am far from well-versed on the history and the ins and outs of this minefield but it was interesting to hear Johann’s angle.

The following day I approached Lesotho. The mountain wall on the horizon loomed higher and higher as I neared the independent Kingdom nation entirely enclaved within South Africa. Almost twice the size of Swaziland, and with a mono-tribal (Basotho) population of two million, Lesotho is ringed by (and consists largely of) high mountains. The road wound up into the rock fortress and after a short pass (and quick passage through immigration) swept down and across sloping fields of wheat and maize.

The country is visibly much poorer than its sole neighbour: people using wooden ploughs pulled by patient oxen; herders with bare feet and tatty blankets for clothes; naked toddlers chasing chickens with delighted abandon; old women - who I suspected were not very old - sitting listlessly in the sun. There is roughly an 8% infant mortality rate and one of the highest HIV/AIDS rates in the world (23.6%; Swaziland, at 25.9%, has the highest). The doctors – at approximately one per 20,000 people – struggle to keep up.

However, crossing into Lesotho was to instantly feel a different atmosphere. “Hello! How are you?” shout the children. “Good afternoon mister!” should the men with an ebullient wave. “Hahahahaha, eeeeeeeeeeh!” cackle the old women with broad smiles. I was instantly back in the Africa I’d left behind at the Swazi-South Africa border. Everyone wanted to talk, to question, to touch, to shake hands. A hundred years (1868-1966) as a protectorate of the British meant that no white settlers moved onto the land and there is no black-white tension. The country, although poor, has independence, a king, and unifying ethnicity/language.

I only spent two days crossing this small, beautiful country. Everywhere was hills and grand storms were always brewing in different darkened corners of the neck-achingly vast sky. I loved the ride, the friendly shouts and the positivity despite poverty, the smiles and the odd leather caps that the farmers wear. All too soon I had passed through the capital of Maseru, crossed a bridge, and was back in the quiet, sparsely-populated farmlands of South Africa.

More dirt roads under more dramatic skies; every shape of cloud sprinting by in an unforgiving wind; a wheel-less 1950s Ford pickup, rusted all but the ornament, wallowing in long grass; small windmills endlessly drawing up water from deep boreholes and spilling it into troughs for livestock; sheltering from rain in an abandoned farm building with a Zulu man who spoke no English but happily rattled away in his language with its pleasant ‘click’ consonants; scuffling packs of rock hyraxes; huge scrub

hares that leap clean over fences and bounce lightly away when disturbed by me; a gradual descent off the Highveld and down onto the Karoo, a vast, dry semidesert that stretches all the way to Namibia.

In the quaint little town of Smithfield I stayed with a distant relation I'd been put in touch with by my genealogy-keen grandmother. Anne and Geoff lived many years in former Rhodesia and moved to Smithfield when they were forced off their land. They made me feel at home in their beautifully kept house and garden which were a slice of rural England in the heart of South Africa. I was waved off in the morning with a full stomach and a letter to deliver to friends of theirs 500 miles further along my route.

The Karoo had occasional low passes in the hills, few trees, many ostrich farms and countless bowl-like valleys carpeted with tinder-dry brown grass. I could imagine the hapless redcoats facing off massed ranks of nearly-naked warriors in these exhaustive landscapes. I could also imagine those warriors brandishing spears and singing war chants but meanwhile wondering who on earth these strange pinkish-red men in so much stifling clothing were.

The road was busy almost exclusively with white summer holiday-makers headed for the coast. They pulled trailers laden with bicycles, motorbikes, quadbikes, boats, surfboards, kiteboards and dune buggies. I spent much time dodging the literally millions of millipedes that were crossing the road. Most of the tarmac was liberally spattered with splashes that once bore many legs.

An evangelical white couple in a small town gave me coffee and told me how their respective spouses had run away together so they'd made the best of a bad deal and moved in together themselves. "Father saw fit to provide me with a new woman. Father always provides" preached the kindly man.

As I climbed a hill away from a pretty town called Graff-Reinet, I looked over my shoulder at the neat spread of well-spaced roofs punctuated by proudly-green trees in the brown surroundings. The church spire presided over the scene and the town square's manicured grass glowed in the early-afternoon sun. A little distance away from this scene was another, now-familiar one: a claustrophobic sprawl of small, metal-roofed, scrap-material-built huts huddled tightly together on a dusty plain. Piles of litter, visible from half a mile, surrounded it. The smell of sewage and the heat in those airless homes with their narrow, windless alleyways must become unbearable at times. This wealth disparity is to be seen in almost every South African town. The townships.

Sat in a café one afternoon in Aberdeen, gazing at the uneasy tilt of the tallest spire in the southern hemisphere, I was approached by an English woman in her mid-sixties. She bought me lunch and told me how her father cycled from London to Nairobi in the 1950s. She had several drinks and suddenly told me that's he lived in a nearby house. "You know, you don't have to cycle onwards today. Stay with me, there's plenty of room for you in my bed and I'll cook you breakfast afterwards..."

Five minutes later, after a hurried but polite 'thankyougoodbye', I was pedalling frantically westwards, happy to be disappearing into the setting sun.

The following day I stopped into a roadhouse on a particularly desolate stretch of dead straight tarmac across utter nothingness. I had a cold drink, chatted with the family of owners, played with

their capuchin monkey and continued down the road. An hour later a passing motorcyclist pulled over and delivered a cheese and bacon toasted sandwich from the thoughtful café owners.

That same evening, I was suddenly caught in another freak hailstorm. I was shirtless when it struck and, with the road fenced-in, I had to endure the painful blows of ice on my bare head and shoulders for a few minutes until I saw a driveway with a gate house and quickly pulled onto the porch. A minute later a car came down from the big house at the top of the driveway. Sophia, the driver, spotted me, turned around and signalled for me to follow. Up at the house she explained that she'd seen me on the road ten minutes earlier and worried about me when the storm began. She'd been heading out to rescue me when she saw me huddled by the gatehouse.

Sophia and her husband Pepe put me up in a grand room in their stunning country house B&B that night and, with plentiful food and wine, we watched South Africa's historic, tear-jerking win at the rugby 7s in Port Elizabeth's Nelson Mandela Stadium.

Leaving the Karoo behind, I turned west at Uniondale and followed a plentiful valley. On my left, thick cloud spilled incessantly over the valley wall from the Garden Route on the coast. That evening I climbed up and into that thick cloud. Visibility dropped to ten yards and, after descending, I began to begrudge the inclement weather as it completely shrouded the famously beautiful fruit plantations of the Garden Route from my view.

A one hundred mile day brought me to the recipients of the letter I was carrying. Jeanne and B showed me into the guest cottage at their farmstall and we enjoyed a very pleasant evening together with their daughter and grandson.

I was onto the final stretch now. Hills and headwinds frustrated but I forged on; first west, then south. Stubby farmland with stacked hay bales, and then a great flat expanse leading to Struis Bay where thatched, whitewashed holiday cottages with colourful doors and window frames dotted the coast. It was 8am when I arrived at Cape Agulhas. A strong easterly wind whipped and slapped my clothes. It was otherwise quiet. Nobody was there to watch as I dipped my feet in the chilly meeting point of the Indian and Atlantic oceans. The end of the African continent.

8 months had elapsed since I disembarked at midnight in Port Said on Egypt's Mediterranean coast. In that time I'd cycled 9,000 miles through 14 countries. I'd been sunburned, scorpion-stung, shouted at, stone-pelted, mob-attacked, storm-soaked and saddle sore. I'd often been physically exhausted and emotionally vulnerable. However, more than all of the above, I'd been cared for, welcomed in, fed, looked after and smiled at. Africa, as a continent, may (at times) break my heart but Africa, as a collection of peoples, has hope.

After an hour or so of staring at the lively surf, I turned and wheeled my bike the first few feet of the 12,000-mile homeward journey.

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It's now three and a half years since I began this journey that so far has taken me 36,000 miles through 50 countries on three continents by bike, foot and horse. I take this opportunity to remind readers that I do this not only for fun but also to raise money for two very worthy causes (Future Hope and the RNLI). If you are enjoying these blogs, please consider making a donation by visiting www.charliewalkerexplore.co.uk/charity. Many thanks and happy New Year!



Cape Agulhas. The southernmost tip of the African continent.