

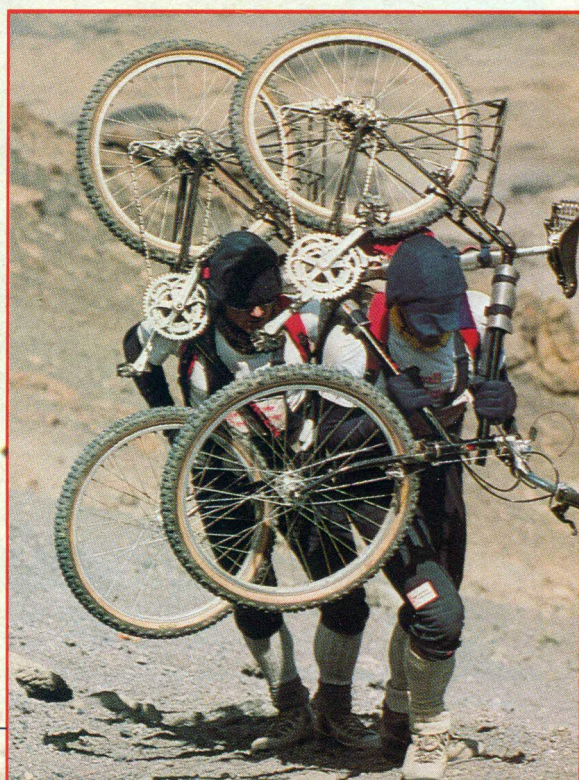
Off-Road Adventure

Klunkers up Kilimanjaro

*An expedition in the tradition of great British explorers:
"Stan Laurel, I presume?"*

by Nicholas Crane

Dick and Nick Crane—cousins, mountaineers and cyclists—began their ride up Mt. Kilimanjaro on December 27, 1984 and reached the 19,340-foot summit five days later. They describe their ride around the crater rim (only a few yards at a time before collapsing breathless in the thin air) their "ultimate bike ride." Believe it.



PHOTOGRAPHY ©1985 PETER INGLIS

Mt.
er.
ore
it.

Overhead, a Colobus monkey arced aerodynamically across the thin strip of sky and landed with a gentle swish on a convenient bunch of foliage. I lay on my back gazing idly at the rustling leaves, wondering whether the jungle air show was going to continue or whether, in the absence of anything further to occupy my mind, I was going to have to drag myself upright and continue with the numbing purgatory of our journey.

I'd fallen down a bank. The bike was entangled in my legs and a dark trickle of blood was oozing down a muddy shin. I tried to wriggle free. The teeth of the chainwheel gouged the umpteenth hole in my leg and a particularly nasty stinging shrub sent several volts of pain into my cheek. It's spiny leaves looked terrifically poisonous.

"This," I said loudly at a large triffid-like plant, "is beyond a joke." Then again, at the top of my voice:

"IT'S BEYOND A JOKE D'YOU HEAR!" Nobody answered. Not even the triffid. I felt a bit lonely, 15 feet below the path, hidden from view by a canopy of squishy

vegetation that had closed back over me as I'd cartwheeled down the slope in an avalanche of limbs, sharp metal and curses. I wondered whether those stories of Japanese soldiers being lost in the jungles of the Far East for 25 years were true. A centipede the size of a subway train crawled out of my trousers.

It took a quarter of an hour of pathetic whimpering to drag bike and body back up the bank, belaying myself on tree roots and clutching slimy fronds for handholds. The path was deserted. Just a footprint or two in the mire, and the clear impression of a bicycle tire trailing zig-zag fashion off around the next corner. Dick must have carried on, unaware of my jungle plunge.

I lifted the back wheel and spun the pedals. The chain was off and tightly jammed in the rear gears. More muted mutterings as I foul-mouthed the manufacturers of the mud-covered mechanism, the weather—it had started raining again—Dick for leaving me behind, the path for being so slippery and myself ("You stupid, STUPID, git") for going

over the edge.

By the time I was sorted out, the path had turned into a stream.

This was Day Two of our trip. We'd been calling it an "expedition," though since this conjures up images of prior planning, logistical support and a general awareness of what you're letting yourself in for, it wasn't an accurate tag. Dick had suggested it was more of a "jape." The Blashford-Snells and Jacques Cousteaus of the world would have belly-laughed at our "organization": we'd left our entire supply of chocolate behind in a refrigerator in Nairobi; our map was more useful as a tablecloth than as a route-finding aid, and with two of us trying to be leaders, decisions could only be reached after debates of epic proportion.

"We're going cycle-touring in the southern hemisphere" is what we'd said to enquirers in England, and that normally circumvented the knotty problem of trying to explain just *why* two apparently sane fully-employed adults should want to ride bicycles up one of the highest volcanoes in the world.

"It's because you like a challenge," Dick had said when explaining to me why I should participate in a four-mile high cycle-ride from which I might never return. "It'll be tough, exciting, difficult, dangerous . . ."

"But why?" I was desperately searching for a reason not to involve myself. None came, and in the absence of no excuse more valid than that I'd like to spend Christmas and New Year enjoying myself, I became a signed-up member of "Bicycles up Kilimanjaro."

To Dick, this was little more than a lighthearted follow-on to his brother Ado's macro-challenge of two years earlier when they'd run the length of the Himalayas existing on a diet of bread and luck. In my cousins' eyes, anything that meant less suffering than 101 days of crippling blisters, continual dysentery, scalp-tickling hazard and constant malnutrition could be classed as a holiday. "Running the Himalayas" raised £50,000 for the charity "Intermediate

Technology." The plan with "Bicycles up Kilimanjaro" was to raise enough money to buy a windmill to pump water in a drought-stricken village in northern Kenya.

That we got to the mountain at all was something of a miracle. Two days before flying out of Heathrow, we still had no bicycles, and Dick's tiny room in London's Smithfield was thigh-deep in unsorted equipment: puncture repair kits balanced on backpacks leaning on mounds of stoves, bottles, sleeping bags and tents. Bags spewing trousers, jerseys and jackets; ice-axes and ropes on the table and carrier-bags of instant soup in the doorway. It looked like an Indian bazaar after an earthquake.

At the airport, the man at the check-in said we could pay him \$1400 for our excess luggage. At Nairobi Airport a customs official in a white, gold-braided uniform invited us to pay \$2000 import duty. At the Tanzanian border they said we didn't have enough money to enter

the country. And when we finally made it to the Kilimanjaro Park entrance they told us that since we had not obtained permission in advance, we could not go.

After that lot, we told ourselves, riding up a volcano will be a piece of cake.

Late in the afternoon of that second day we came out of the jungle. It wasn't a sorry farewell. Although the tiny red flowers with their curving translucent petals and bright yellow tongues had enchanted, and although the lush spectrum of jungle greens had shone in the late afternoon sun like deep dappled water, the hooting, booming and screeching of invisible death-dealing wildlife had—to someone who doesn't expect to meet anything more ferocious than a pheasant—been a touch nerve-wracking. When a family of baboons ambled across the path ahead of us I rode past the gap into which they'd disappeared with hunched shoulders and a prickly neck, waiting for a hundredweight of red-bottomed mammalia to hurl itself lethally at





The Cranes are famous in England for their exploits. Dick Crane (right) may be the maddest of the lot. In 1982 he and his brother Adrian spent 101 days running over the Himalayas.

plateau known as "The Saddle."

Our way lay up. Steeply. We spent all morning scaling stony slopes split by tumbling streams. At each stream we'd have to trickle the front wheel gingerly down the bank—some of them 50 feet high—then stamp on the pedals, splash through the water and rush the following climb with demonic intent. Normally we could get about 20 feet up the slope before the gradient or a particularly enormous boulder toppled us sideways, where we'd lie panting till one of us made a move, and the other, lest he be seen to be "copping out," would have to follow.

Kilimanjaro came into view slowly, tantalizingly out of reach and sitting snowcapped and rounded like a giant cream-topped Christmas pudding. Beyond the last rocky gully we came upon a still pool whose edges dribbled silently into the surrounding peat. A broken wooden sign on which some long gone traveller had etched "Last Water" hung crookedly over a grass tussock.

We filled our two plastic water bottles, reckoning we were no more than a couple of hours from the final climbing hut. Rumor had it that there was ice close to the hut which could be melted for drinking. From this point on there would be no more running water.

We reached "The Saddle" with yelps of success. For the first time we could see virtually the whole of our remaining

route. We were in the finishing straight. Across on the other side of the broad dusty plateau was the steep-sided cone of Kilimanjaro, and lining its rim the great ice cliffs and glaciers that lead to the highest point: Uhuru Peak.

"Cracked the knacker!" said Dick.

We bowled across "The Saddle," passing between huge boulders and small volcanic cones, stopping for lunch in the shelter of a reef of sharp rock. A chill wind hummed morosely over our heads. We were at 15,000 feet. We ate three Ryvita biscuits each, layered with peanut butter and sprinkled with cashew nuts. It made us hungrier.

Behind our backs a huge grey cloud was tobogganning down the slopes of Mawenzi towards us, its dark shadow chasing across the plateau towards Kibo. There was a sharp gust of wind, the light went and before we could zip up our jackets we were in the midst of a full-scale blizzard. We rode closer together, taking turns to shelter behind each other.

I was deep in a daydream, thinking of steam pudding and custard, pints of tea and warm beds, when through the layers of balaclava and windproof hood I heard Dick shout:

"We're lost. The path's gone!" It took a few moments to sink in.

"Lost?" I shouted back, wondering if I'd heard him correctly.

We stopped and looked around. It was a near white-out, with snow sweeping horizontally through soup-thick cloud.

"We were on the path, then it kind of went faint, and now it's gone altogether. Have you got the map, or have I?"

Some wretched fumbling in rucksacks produced a sodden peanut-butter-stained piece of paper. It was marked with indeterminate pecked lines which could have been contours or paths. Or streams. The

my head.

The third day began with an equipment conference. We were carrying far too much luggage to make the top, and the bikes needed padding so that we could carry them on our shoulders without being crippled by the angular metal. A backpack full of superfluous items was left in the corner of a climbing hut, while one of our sleeping mats was ceremoniously sliced up with a knife, and taped on the bike frames. Fortified by this unusually perceptive piece of forward planning, we set off.

Fifty yards from the hut the path forked, and we took the left prong. After 10 minutes of fast optimistic cycling (the path was nice and level and we were making encouraging comments like, "At this rate we can reach the top tomorrow") we met a climbing party coming up who said we'd taken the wrong turn at the fork. Back at the junction we glared insinuation at each other, and pedaled off again in a somewhat mellow fashion up a very steep and boulder-strewn track. Thirty seconds later Dick hit a boulder, went over the handlebars—and we were laughing again.

Above our right shoulders we could occasionally glimpse the serrated ridge of Mawenzi, whose granite ramparts are only accessible to seasoned rock climbers, and which faces the main peak of Kilimanjaro across a broad desert-like



"We're lost! The path's gone! Have you got the map, or have I?"

winter. Feeling very small, very lonesome, we met with Uhuru.

Reaching the top of a mountain is something of an emotional cocktail: there's the sweetness of success, tang of tiredness, and, when you've drunk the moment to its last drop, the emptiness that comes with the realization that it's all over; that now there's nothing but downwards; that the adventure (or at least the difficult part) is now over, and that the obsession that's been ruling your life for weeks is now no more. When you turn your back on a mountaintop, you leave behind not an adversary, but your latest and most passionate acquaintance.

We stayed there an hour, riding to and fro. On the snow, at 19,340 feet. Not wanting to leave. Gentle rolling clouds breaking like surf against the volcanic cliffs below us. We were the highest people in Africa.

Far away to the northeast, the other side of all that fluffy stuff and desert haze was Wajir, where every day 250 TB patients in a grass-hut hospital have no running water. Intermediate Technology needs just £7000 to buy the windmill to pump the water.

We flew down, letting gravity do all the work, stones spitting from spinning tires and brakes jammed on knuckle-tight. With every thousand feet we felt stronger and stronger. The air started to taste wholesome, our appetites came back and headaches disappeared. For three days we ricocheted down the mountain, bouncing off rocks and careening down the dusty way. It was the ultimate bike ride: 15,000 feet of continuous downhill slalom.

Back in the jungle, we met a Frenchman. When he saw us coming he began to laugh, and by the time we reached him he had doubled over and was guffawing hysterically:

"Why," he spluttered "are you riding bicycles on Kilimanjaro? You must be English. Now I know what I must do next year: carry a refrigerator to the top!" ■

At last count, the Cranes had raised £17,000 for Intermediate Technology. The excess, over that needed to buy the windmill, will be used to help people in poor countries learn to make tools and acquire the skills to use them. Intermediate Technology is located at 9 King Street, London, WC2E 8HW, England.

surveyor must have been catastrophically myopic or else he muddled up Kilimanjaro with the flower-bed plan for his own back garden. The squiggly lines bore no relation at all to the slopes that we knew existed out there in the murk.

"Let's split up. Ride parallel courses just in sight of each other and keep heading north west. That way we must hit the path sometime." It was an idea the great explorer, Sir Ranulph Twistleton-Wykeham-Fiennes, would have been proud of. And it worked, eventually.

We reached Kibo Hut an hour after dark, pedaling tentatively by the light of head-torches and a wan moon, and feeling a little weary. The altitude was beginning to tell, and the effort of putting the tent up (you pay to sleep in the hut) gave us both headaches and inspired a further bout of competitive whining:

"I've got a bit of a headache . . ."

"Yes, my head's a touch sore . . ."

"In fact it's quite painful really . . ."

"Like a severe migraine . . ."

"Could hemorrhage soon . . ."

"Might even die . . ."

"I knew someone who had cerebral edema once . . ."

Next day we carried the bikes for five hours up one continuous scree slope. It was excruciatingly exerting, and the lack of oxygen forced us to stop every 15 paces, doubling over and sucking in great draughts of thin air. Dick, who lives in an office, was in his element:

"Great stuff this. Really relaxing. No

telephones up here!"

Adjusting my snow goggles for the thousandth time I wondered whether there weren't easier ways of "getting away from it all." Like sitting on the beach at Brighton. I launched into progressive coughs till Dick turned around. It was my speciality for the trip.

"You OK?"

"Yes, just a tickle in my throat." I gasped dramatically through a saliva speckled contorted face. Dick had a particularly noticeable limp that he was working on.

We reached the crater rim at 18,500 feet looking—for brave adventurers—pretty ragged. We dumped the bikes and flopped to the ground.

New Year's Eve, our fifth day out. Dawn was filling the crater, two miles wide at this point, with a tangerine light. Mawenzi, once a towering mountain, was now below us looking insignificant among a bed of clouds.

The temperature was minus 15 degrees centigrade. Ahead, the icy arete of the crater rim climbed in a gentle curve up to Uhuru Peak, clearly visible from where we were standing. A narrow trail through the deep snow looked just wide enough to ride the bikes. It took three hours to pedal that final 800 feet.

From the deepest cleanest blue sky a burning sun cast our slow-moving shadows on the snow. The crater, a thousand feet deep and floored in white, looked like a giant's swimming pool closed for

