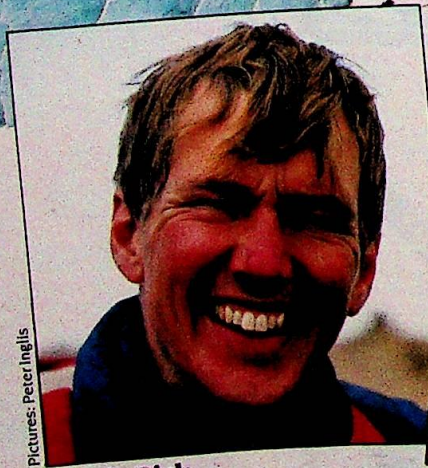


OVER THE VOLCANO

The Cranes conquer Kilimanjaro



Cousin Dick...



and cousin Nick

Pictures: Peter Inglis

It was New Year's Eve on the top of Kilimanjaro, and the party of Japanese were grimly triumphant as they trudged up the treacherously narrow ridge. They would see in the New Year's dawn from the highest point on the African continent. As they neared the summit they saw something that put them out. A neat little tent tucked into the snow and parked outside, looking as if they were sculpted from ice crystals, a couple of bikes. There could only be one answer. The Cranes. The cousins had also decided they would sing Auld Lang Syne somewhere special this year. And of course, they had done it on bikes. Nick and Dick's latest adventure has

probably made them the highest cyclists ever. At this height, over 19,000 feet, they could only ride a few yards before collapsing. There was not enough oxygen in the thin air to support their exertions. For every two minutes riding they needed ten lying on the ground sucking in oxygen.

At high altitude you can't sleep. Regularly you wake with your body screaming for air, your heart pounding in panic.

At this height the bright light is lethally loaded with Ultra Violet. Even through a thick smear of UV cream, they looked like pandas, with blackened skin and white circles where their goggles had protected them.

And it does strange things to the

appetite as well. After a while they found they could eat nothing except instant mashed potato. Dick lost a stone and a half in less than a week. Nick almost as much. No wonder that their own story of the trip seems strangely fascinated by food.

The plan for the trip was to ride and scramble the bikes to the foot of the volcanic cone of Kilimanjaro. Carry the bikes up the 3,000 feet to the lip of the cone, and return for the rest of the equipment. Then ride round the knife edge lip to the highest point—the summit—and camp there to watch 1985 into the world.

On New Year's Day they got on

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their bikes and rode straight down the mountain.

This wasn't just a gratuitous record breaking exercise. They set out to prove that mountainbikes are practical vehicles in the real mountains, and prove it they did. Provided the riders are called Crane of course. And crazy to boot...

Nick's story

'Ja, so I saw you in zer Oustrian paypers. Bicycles up zer Kilimanjaro; You must be so mad. Can I take please a picture?' And so saying the portly Austrian with a pre-war Leica and a khaki safari suit fiddled with his rangefinder, took a step backwards, and disappeared down the bank with a strangled Eeaargghh!!

It's not just humans who seem to be affected strangely by Kilimanjaro. Hemingway wrote of a leopard found frozen into the high snows several thousand feet above where any sane leopard should be. Why should Kilimanjaro attract such a bizarre collection of nutters and ecological misfits? It's a question Dick and I asked ourselves every few minutes for eight continual days.

'Dick, why are we trying to ride bicycles along this narrow, muddy, slippery, rock-strewn, root-laced excuse for a path?'

'You're not on the path, you're in the stream. Knackerhead.'

Panting conversations of this sort were often interrupted by a parabolic nosedive over the bars and into a bed of jungly squishy triffids. A Colobus monkey soared overhead, its white fan tail giving it an airborne grace my spreadeagled torso could never match. Somewhere a baboon screamed. No, it was Dick paring the flesh from his leg on a boulder.

In our guide book it had said: 'The Bongo and Giant Forest Hog are both absent from the Kilimanjaro Forest.' We didn't miss them.

For the first two day's climbing through the forest it rained, punctually, after lunch. Not just ordinary rain, but rain which fell in lumps the size of filing cabinets. The bikes would struggle on dutifully, derailleurs thick with coagulating mud and tyres flicking gunge into our faces.

Then there was the food situation. At

First test of bikes and rider came in the jungle at the foot of the mountain. Out of the trees and into the promised land. The plain was relatively flat and smooth so Dick could see the sights the leisurely way.



great expense we had brought out from England enough Mars Bars and Dairy Milks to rot every tooth in our heads. These, we reasoned, would cheer us up in times of hardship, as well as providing instant calorific energy. At least they would have done if they hadn't been left in a fridge in Nairobi.

But we could survive. After all we had plenty of other food: 35 packets of Country Vegetable soup, two gallons of instant mashed potato, three litres of peanut butter, two packets of popcorn (very useful), a bottle of whisky, three bottles of tomato ketchup. The expedition's provisions were meticulously planned in a meeting which lasted 17 seconds on an escalator between the Northern and Circle lines at Kings Cross. John Blashford-Snell would not have approved.

At the end of our second day in the jungle we celebrated by eating a goat meat stew that we'd carried in a plastic bag from Nairobi, and some chapatis made on the spot. They were delicious, but it was a good job we ate them in the dark.

Day Three saw us leaving the trees to traverse around the side of Mawenzi, one of Kilimanjaro's subsidiary peaks. The path was nearly just about not quite rideable depending on how suicidal we felt. There were steep sided valleys to cross, each with a boulder-strewn stream at the bottom. If you hit it hard and fast enough you'd have a reason-



able chance of getting across and a fair way up the other side before the rear wheel lost traction or the front refused at a great hunk of granite.

At midday we pedalled over a knoll and saw the Promised Land. There before us lay mile upon mile of gently un-

dulating plateau, crossed by a *smooth* dust track. There was a river of beer, and look, in the distance: bowls of spotted dick and custard. And vegetables *fresh* vegetables. Could this be true? No.

No beer. No veg. No matron's leg. But there was a yellow dust road wind-

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SCEPTICAL people looking at these pictures of the Cranes riding mountainbikes across snowfields in the sky, may wonder: If this is the wilderness, how come the photographs? The answer is Pete Inglis.

Nick phoned Pete in Anglesay. 'You remember taking snaps on the 14 Peaks ride. Well, what about coming out to Tanzania for a pootle up a largish hill?'

'Great! When?' came the reply. Pete's quick at decision making.

Eight weeks later he found himself slithering through rain forest loaded with over a hundred films and a bag full of Nikons. Apart from being incredibly fit he shoots up a Snowdonian peak or two after work - he's also a mad keen biker.

Pete Inglis. High Altitude photographer.

Egypt's Valley of the Kings, Norway's Jostedal Bre Ice cap, Sweden, Ireland, France, Germany, Italy, Greece...He's pedalled a bit. His sitting room is walled in by little yellow Kodak boxes.

His main problem on Kilimanjaro was that 'the posers' were always moving too fast. But he got around that problem by asking Dick and Nick to turn around every few yards and 'do that bit again'.

Pete, 30, had his fair share of suffering on the mountain. Despite the freezing temperatures (minus 30C at night) he had to use the cameras with just one thin pair of gloves, and on the crater rim, up at 19,000 feet where the sun is blindingly intense, and where the reflected glare from the snow hurts your eyes even through dark goggles, Pete had to work with no eye protection because goggles got in the way. He reckoned with practice he could stop his eyes down to F22 to keep the light out.

There was, he says, only one team crisis:

'We'd just spent four or five hours taking pictures of tents, bikes and bodies at 15,000 feet. I'd got about 30 kilometres to walk before camp. It was 4pm and getting dark and I could see myself trocking through the jungle all night. Then Dick and Nick said they wanted a really good silhouette picture and they set off towards a distant ridge shouting: had I got

any good ideas for the shot. I thought 'Heck I'm exhausted of ideas now. But I'll make those bastards work if that's what they want. So I had them riding up and down that ridge till they couldn't move'.

The gear Pete used was two Nikon FM's, one Nikon FE2, plus a 24mm, 28mm, 50mm, 135mm and 75 - 210 zoom. He shot 62 rolls of Kodachrome 64 and eight Kodachrome 25, and for the Sunday times about ten rolls of black and white.

Part of the deal was to try to get pictures from the summit into the Sunday Times as quickly as possible. Nick and Dick climbed on to their bikes with the film in their pockets and rode straight down the 3,000ft of the cone. 'It was amazing', said Nick. 'But the bikes really did ride down, although in parts it was more sliding. It was so steep we were hung right off the back, so that at times we were actually touching the slope behind. More like outriggers than bikes really.'

There was a runner waiting at the foot of the scree, and another half way down. Then a truck into Nairobi.

Just a few days later, as Pete took the tube from Heathrow he spotted a lady reading the Sunday times. There right in the centre of the front page was a shot of two goggled figures holding bikes above their heads.

'Great' he said.

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ing across the 15,000 foot desert. We creamed along beneath a blue sky, laughing gaily as the million trillion watt UV seared through several layers of skin on our faces (we worked this out later that day when our heads went bright red and swelled up). It was just like being on a cycle-touring holiday in the Mediterranean. We even had a picnic: Three Ryvita each, three smears of peanut butter and 74½ cashew nuts each. We thought the Ryvita a real treat.

'Wow, aren't these filling,' Dick mumbled, nibbling one crumb at a time to make them last.

'Yeah, great,' I agreed, finishing my third piece, 'I'm stuffed'.

I was idly reading the Ryvita packet label. '26 calories per slice'. Knacker-eros. Read this. These are *slimming* biscuits. Whose idea was it to bring these. I'm so hungry I'm going to faint.'

After lunch we trundled on towards the main peak of Kilimanjaro, the long scree slopes and summit glaciers drawing us closer. It was an image, so long imagined but not before seen, that drew all our attention. So we didn't see the huge black shadow tobogganing down

Pedalling for a windmill

It's not just the people of the Third World who have a lot of fun. In the 1980s we discovered that the same problems in the poorer countries of the world concern a lot of people. How to plant, harvest and process food, equipment to dig and break rocks and rocks to fetch with, pumps to lift water to drink, paper and wood to learn to read and write.

Intermediate Technology was established to help improve these tools and put them in the hands of the poor, so they can use their own skills and resources to work themselves out of poverty. It's a long-term investment. When we approached IT, with a view to raising money through the bike ride, they suggested we try and fund a windmill to pump water for a TB hospital in north-east Kenya. We went there before Christmas and found 250 TB patients carrying their own water from a distant well. There is no running water in the hospital, even for medical analysis.

The windmill will cost £7,000. So far we've only gathered £2,500. If you would like to help please send any donation to:

Intermediate Technology, 9 King Street, London WC2E 8HW.

Many thanks, Dick & Nick



Picture: Peter Inglis

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the slopes of Mawenzi and racing across the plateau behind us.

Snow came from nowhere, driving into our eyes, forcing its way up cuffs and down necks. We got cosy inside balaclavas and fitted overgloves and goggles. The trail was just a vague lightness in the gloom. We rode close together, taking it in turns to shelter behind the other.

I'm not sure where we lost the track, but I can well remember that stomach dread feeling when I realised we were off course, without a decent map, at 15,000 feet in a blizzard. On bicycles!

We split up, riding parallel courses just in eyesight, tyres sinking into soft volcanic gravel, as the dusk crept over us. It seemed like hours though it was probably minutes, before we found the path.

If that wasn't enough excitement, a lone figure swayed out of the gloom towards us. Amazing. On a night like this! Two balaclavas and an enormous pair of snow glasses completely obscured his face, but from beneath came a muffled voice.

Richard Konig had a tale to tell. Three days earlier he had set out on a mountainbike to climb Kilimanjaro by the remote Shiru route. Tough going had forced him to quit at about 11,000 feet, hiding the bike and carrying on to the summit by foot. He'd been at the top in white-out conditions and was now on his way to collect an equipment dump which contained his tent, spare clothing and much needed food.

There, on the edge of a storm in

THE GEAR

HERE is the plug for our sponsors, and they really deserve it. Throughout the trip we had no problems of any kind. The bikes kept going and the clothing and high altitude kept us comfortable. Unlike the food stopping, which, as on all our previous exploits had been left until far too late, we spent a lot of time picking the equipment we would need.

The bikes were Saracen ATB's, standard production models costing around £400, fitted with the new Shimano mountainbike transmission, which worked a treat. The Florida chain and pulley housing M-Hubs' Grippa 2 1/2" tyres; we shored 33 psi into each before leaving Nairobi, and when we returned ten days later all four tyres had only lost a couple of psi each. Not a single puncture. The Brooks B66 saddles look a bit colonial but their double springs are ideal for humpy riding. We never got to sit on them much. The Saracen frames were Reynolds 601 which we didn't manage to bend despite heavy loads.

Our clothing system was based on a very effective warmer, Bergans thermal jackets, which have a Thinsulate lining and Berber over, providing ultimate insulation and wind-revered qualities; plus Bergans insulated overalls. Footwear was more lightweight Brother boots (made by 4 seasons) up to about 15,000 feet, then moved heavy-duty Snow Trainers for the ice and snow. We had plenty of all of these items. In fact, we had more gear than we could carry. The most difficult to transport was the tent, which we had to leave behind.



Picture: Peter Inglis

gathering darkness, the three of us discussed gear ratios and the merits of our mountainbikes. A week later we met up with Richard for a drink in London, and he told us that he'd missed his equipment dump in the dark, and spent the night in the open, sheltering behind a rock.

As quickly as they had blotted out the sun earlier, the skies then cleared, and by bright moonlight we rode the last 500 foot to the base of Kilimanjaro's volcanic cone and wrestled up a tent. Just pushing in a tent peg was a real effort in the thin air, and we both had the beginnings of altitude headache.

Day Four was a purgatory best not remembered. That was the day we carried the bikes up the scree to the crater rim. The lack of oxygen made breathing a desperate struggle as we shifted around 50 pounds of bike and equipment each up a slope most people find hard to walk. The thought of the summit tomorrow kept us going.

Dick's story

I TOOK a deep breath and bent over to grab the chunky black handlebar grip and the leather saddle. This was going to be a very long, arduous day of cycling. We had to ride an icy knife-edge ridge, climbing over 1000 feet to the summit of the highest mountain in Africa. No one has ever ridden bicycles this high*. At 19,347 feet we would be on top of the world.

'Come on, you Dick' shouted Nick.

* Craig Moffet's epic ride through the Himalayas took him to within sight of Everest and over many daunting snow-covered passes, including the 16,600ft Shingo-La, but he didn't reach the same altitude as Dick and Nick when they reached the summit of Kilimanjaro. Nick believes it may be impossible to take bikes any higher unless oxygen is used.

THE Cranes make themselves as comfortable as possible inside the tent.

He was already climbing on his bike. I bounced my machine to knock off the snow, then wriggled my shoulders to get the rucksack comfortable before hoisting my leg over the saddle. By the time I looked up, Nick was sprawled on the ground. Downer number one of the Bicycle Summit Bid.

We pedalled smoothly up gentle inclines, halting breathless at the crests. We descended short slopes with bums hanging out backwards and brakes squeezed on. The knobby tyres which had performed so admirably in the goopy mud 10,000 feet below, had a tenacious grip on the firm snow crust. The ultra low gear combination which Greg of Bike UK had flown out to us during our Rift Valley testing, gave us a torque to climb anything where the tyres could still find traction.

Halfway to Uhuru Peak, a short snow slope had us beaten. We collapsed exhausted and had to carry the bikes to the top of the rise. From there we gazed with excitement down an impressive 20 yard run with glistening snow slopes disappearing off both sides. 'Bicycle Action again,' we yelled and leapt on our bikes. They rolled easily for ten yards and we pedalled over a hunchback cornice. As we turned a tight left hand corner I saw Nick's back wheel hang out a drop too far. A flush of powder snow filled the air then he corrected quickly up front. His left foot went down to bring the bike upright, but the front wheel slewed off to the right and his left leg crumbled.

Before I knew it, snow was everywhere. Knobby tyres jumped in the air and then twisted and disappeared. A

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light blue anorak spun over and over. An Intermediate Technology banner stuck up momentarily and then flashed away. A hand, a boot and a yell before all rushed off spinning down the slope.

Then, too late, I saw the sheet of ice under my own wheels. My brakes were useless. In an instant I was on my knees and then I spun round, rolled over and careered into Nick.

A long drawn out moment of silence, then, from Nick: 'Bummer'. And then: 'Technical misjudgement'.


'Grade 3c veering to Grade 4b corner' I added, spitting snow and raising myself on my elbows.

A second later we exploded in laughter: a couple of fools sliding around with bicycles in the snow at 19,500 feet on New Year's Eve. We were full of ourselves, jubilant with our imminent success, bubbling over with adrenalin and excitement.

Next minute we were heaving with breathlessness, sucking at thin air, chests arching skywards. Squeezing a bellyaching laugh amongst lungstretching gasps for energy.

It took a while to calm down. The time was noon and we had another 500 feet to climb to the summit plateau before we could retreat to safety. Once we had re-established a more moderate state of breathing and calmed our heart rates to nearer normal, we could start to pick ourselves up.

I grabbed my bike firmly by the cross bar and front down tube and hoisted it vertically in the air. Gently I lowered it down over my head. Back wheel behind, front wheel dangling in front and spiky chainrings playing footsie with my ear lobe. All the anguish of yesterday's 3000 foot scree slog up the mountain from 15,500 feet to the crater rim came flooding back. Memories of slipping and sliding in the torrential rains of the first afternoon in the wallows of the rain forest. 'Once more into the breach, my friend'. Nick looked repentant as we took the first of the final few steps towards the summit plateau.

In next to no time we were pedalling jubilantly across the final two hundred yards of snow to the summit cairn. We were the first people to truly test mountainbikes at high altitude on snow and ice. All our aches and pains were swept away. We looked out from our pinnacle across the clouds for possibly hundreds of miles. The highest cyclists in the world. 

Some doubted that the bikes could be really ridden above the snowline, but they gripped well in the snow and with an ultra low gear you could ride until the grip gave out.



Picture: Peter Ingalls

BICYCLE ACTION

The Cranes on the top of Africa

