

Epic Journeys in the Small Saddle

FOR THIS ADVENTUROUS RIDER CYCLING IS A LIFE-SHAPING EXPERIENCE.

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As a keen advocate of sustainable travel, Krista Bernard endeavours to see the world using mainly human power. As a result, epic journeys in the small saddle have provided her with many extraordinary experiences and connected her to alternate places – cultural, spiritual and environmental. Bernard has cycled “technically” halfway around the world twice. Her first trip occurred between 1996 and 2000 when she took three and a half years to travel from Indonesia to Egypt. Then between 2008 and 2009 she rode with her partner, Dan, from London to the Himalayas in Pakistan to raise money for Rainforest Rescue, an organisation that protects the world’s forests and helps combat climate change. “In 1996 I considered it a once-in-a-

lifetime thing. It was so huge and took so long, and everything was completely new each day,” Bernard says. “It felt like I was living life in a very condensed form.” Her first international journey was all the more remarkable as it was undertaken at a time when most of her destinations were without phone lines, let alone the internet or satellite television. It was a solo trip and she was 24. “I was very much out in the world on my own with my bike. But this added to my sense of freedom and of there being no limits or boundaries. I felt invincible,” she says. “And inevitably I pushed too far until I clearly saw that there *were* limits.” The cyclist’s wings were clipped by a series of dramatic events that included: her arrest with the threat of 60 lashes for “bad intentions” after walking in Iran

with men who were not her relatives; a serious assault against her for which the assailant received a two-year jail sentence and; her bicycle and all her possessions being stolen by an Egyptian family who had taken her in. Rather than see any of these as negative experiences, Bernard interprets them as “just some of the very different hues which make up the human experience” and is quick to talk about the wonderful things that happened every day in the course of her travels. Two of the most significant were an unplanned private audience with the Dalai Lama in his palace in Dharamsala and being part of a 300 km peace walk with monks and nuns in Cambodia. Bernard was regularly bowled over by the generosity of people who had very little, yet who readily

Far left Krista receives much hospitality from local people in Baluchistan, Pakistan, 1998.
This page Krista’s partner, Daniel Coward, enjoying the mountains of Kyrgystan, on their way to the Himalayas, 2009.





Top Camping at the high altitude Lake Karakol in the Xinjiang province of China, 2009.
Right Stopping for a break at a teahouse in the Xinjiang province of China, 2009.
Far right top Another teahouse break in Kazakhstan, 2009.
Far right bottom Camp cooking in Hungary, 2008.



opened their homes to a stranger and always found something to give. “My trips have taught me that life richly rewards you when you make the time and take the courage to fulfill your dreams,” Bernard says. When asked about a favourite bike journey, Bernard mentions her 3000 km trip across the Nullabor. This happened in 1993, before her cycling took an intercontinental turn. She set out on dirt tracks to trace the Indian Pacific train line, from Kalgoorlie to Victoria. It was her first long-distance bike ride and during the three-and-a-half-month journey Bernard experienced the “flow” of cycling, tuning into its momentum and rhythm. “It felt sustainable, comfortable and connected. I experienced how good it felt

to use human power to get somewhere,” says Bernard. “I hadn’t cheated time or used up the earth’s resources. The humble pace allowed me to take in the environment I was passing through, and to become part of that environment rather than just be an observer. I became the journey – rather than just a tourist.” Bernard was soon hooked and, perhaps critically, experienced for the first time biking as a metaphor for life. Through the uphill, downhill, rough and smooth tracks, through the headwinds and tailwinds, she began to observe the tricks the mind plays. “The soundtrack could be something like: ‘I like this, it’s easy’ or ‘When will this hill end?’ But if you change the soundtrack, the experience changes. Once you have ridden all kinds of tracks and ways, you

Right The long and dusty desert road through Kazakhstan, with storms and unrelenting headwinds, 2009.

know that no matter what the soundtrack is, you will get there. So you'd be better off enjoying the challenges you are presented with because tomorrow will be another day and you will have to face something else ... This is useful to remember in life." Bernard recounts another experience that affirms the restorative power of biking: following a long illness in Morocco that required heavy medication, she cycled through the exotic country. Once again, the pace, the rhythm, the simplicity of riding, the daily achievements, the challenges that she had to overcome, and the physical aspect of sweating and working the body in a sustainable way, saw health, mental clarity and empowerment return. Though obviously a fan of the life-shifting big ride, Bernard is quick to add that that magic feeling of connectedness is available to any cyclist, not only those who tackle the epic journey. Her four-and-a-half-year-old niece, Nuuna, has just learned to ride a bike and Bernard is delighted. "I watch the shine in her eyes as she whizzes around a corner, excited about the speed and what she is capable of," she says. "I see her stand up on her pedals, feeling the wind on her face and in her hair. I am 39 and that same childlike feeling I see in Nuuna has never left me and I don't think it will. Cycling connects me to my childhood." Bernard rides to and from work and this helps her to unwind and "defrag" at the end of a stressful day. "My breath becomes full, my heart pumps and my thoughts and feelings have time to unravel. I often feel really creative on a bike - new ideas come to me all the time while I'm riding." Most recently she coordinated a cycling





trip to Sri Lanka with nine others to raise funds and awareness for Rainforest Rescue projects in that country. Ironically, bike standards were not one of the trip’s highlights. But in the end it didn’t matter: “They lasted the distance and we all ended up really bonding with our bikes and their individual quirks.” The nine cyclists, from three different states, set their own fundraising targets to cover the cost of the trip and raise money from ventures such as corporate sponsorship, photography competitions and community film and cultural nights. In total, \$20,000 was raised. Each of the self-named “Wolf Pack” had vastly different bike histories and skills, so each experienced the trip at varying levels of difficulty. But the highlight of the journey was the final leg when they

traversed Satan’s Steps. “We were racing to get to our destination to set up camp before dark and the terrain turned into boulders, rubble and precipices,” recalls Bernard. “It was really exhilarating and for those with less experience, it was an utterly life-changing achievement.” And yet another example of the transformative power of biking.



www.ridehimalaya.com
www.rainforestrescue.org.au

Top The ancient city of Khiva, Uzbekistan, 2009.
Left Krista checking out the cycle route along the Danube River, Austria, 2008.



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