

WHEEL COMMITMENT

Recently a number of South Africa's corporate leaders participated in a gruelling 450 km cycle tour to raise funds for anti-crime initiatives. Sven Lunsche went along for the ride

The midday heat in Zambia had reached a blistering 40° C and there was still another 40 km to go before reaching our finish – the Victoria Falls Hotel in Zimbabwe. But all 81 participants were determined to complete the punishing 225 km last leg of the three-day Computershare Change a Life Cycle Tour. Not everyone made it though – heatstroke and mechanical failures took their toll. For many of the riders, 225 km was about as much as they had covered in preparation for the event. It was clearly not a problem for the first group of 20 riders led by SA's 'Mr Cycling', Andrew McLean (riding on a tandem with his wife Alison), and Duzi king Martin Dreyer, who dragged JCI CEO Peter Gray on his tandem for every one of the 450 km of the tour.

Even the next two groups of about 20 cyclists each – which included Torque IT CEO Mthunzi Mdwaba, Old Mutual finance director Diane Radley, Sun International CEO David Coutts-Trotter and JSE CEO Russell Loubser – finished the gruelling first day in relatively good time. Sadly, only the first half of the riders were lucky enough to manage having their photo taken on the famous Victoria Falls bridge before sunset.

But it was the last group that stole the show. Having left Katima Mulilo in Namibia just after 6 am, they finally trundled into the Victoria Falls Hotel after a staggering 15 hours in the saddle at 9 pm to a rousing welcome from the other riders.

CYCLE | RACE

The spirit of the race was best encapsulated by Old Mutual's Kevin Gleeson, who struggled through the first two days. 'After 65 km on the third day though I was still feeling strong and I realised: "Now I know what it feels like to be a real rider".'

JSE deputy CEO Nicky Newton-King showed similar grit. Originally with one of the intermediate groups, her bicycle got damaged when it blew off a support vehicle while being repaired for a puncture. Desperately wanting to complete the tour, she managed to use the bike of a rider who'd dropped out due to sunstroke.

Starting at Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, the Computershare Change a Life Tour wound its way along the Zambezi river valley for 85 km through the Zambezi National Park to the banks of the Chobe River in Botswana. On the second day the road led to Namibia's Caprivi Strip, a total distance of 124 km, which included cycling through the Chobe National Park, where riders saw elephant as well as rare roan and sable antelope.

The third day of the tour covered the 225 km killer route from Katima Mulilo through Zambia, along the north bank of the Zambezi, back to Victoria Falls. It wasn't only the heat that took its toll – strong headwinds and a number of hills in the latter stages of the day were punishing. The experience of group leaders, many of them top-class SA cyclists, made a big difference. By riding in organised pelotons, with the stronger riders up front, no riders were left behind, despite the occasional moans and groans.

The rest day at the majestic Victoria Falls Hotel was more than welcome and allowed cyclists to build up their energy reserves for the evening's official banquet. After a lot of beer and many shots of tequila, revellers only called it a night at about 4 am.

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Each cyclist made a donation of R20 000 in order to participate – an amount matched by the global head office of Computershare, the main sponsor of the event. In total, four million rand was raised which Computershare will donate to its anti-crime initiatives. CEO Stan Lorge says the funds will be used to support victims of crime and fund grass-roots crime prevention initiatives.

The project was launched last year after Computershare executive Mike Thomson was killed during an armed robbery at his home.

'Ask any company in SA how many of its employees have been affected by crime and you'll find it's a very large number,' says Lorge.

'We needed to do something and we believe this initiative will make a difference in combating crime. Already the Change A Life Tour has raised more funds for charity than other similar events in SA,' he adds, promising that the tour will be held again next year in a different part of southern Africa.

Corporations across SA were extremely generous in their support for this event. Executives from Rand Merchant Bank, Macsteel Service Centres, Toyota and Standard Bank participated, while medium-sized companies like Viva Formwork & Scaffolding and Fleet Steel sponsored their managers and customers to participate.

One of the biggest contingents was from the JSE with six participants. The JSE's involvement was motivated by the fact that Thomson had previously been employed by the JSE and his brother Allan, a senior JSE executive, is a trustee of the Mike Thomson Change a Life Trust which administers the funds raised by the event.

As Nicky Newton-King commented, 'No South African is untouched by crime and Mike's death really touched all of us at the JSE deeply. It was only natural for us to want to show strong support for the cycle tour as the primary fund-raising vehicle for the Mike Thomson Change a Life Trust and we were attracted to the causes that will be supported by the trust. We all want to do something to make a difference in this country and the cycle tour was a very creative way of demonstrating that commitment.'

Computershare itself had 10 riders on the tour, including tour director Ursula du Plooy, who put her heart and soul into the event and who directed proceedings from her tandem which was powered by beginner's group team leader Dennis Spong.

The complex logistics were flawlessly handled by staff from Computershare and Wilderness Safaris, whose experience in managing the annual Tour de Kruger paid dividends for this event. 

Sven Lunsche is the manager of corporate communications and branding for ArcelorMittal South Africa



CEOs and top executives take part in the Computershare Change a Life Cycle Tour 2008 to raise funds for the Change a Life Trust