

● (In the photo) Mark
near the Pyramids of Giza
in Egypt. Photo by Jeremy
Sutton-Hibbert



AFRICA SOLO

CTC MEMBER **MARK BEAUMONT** SET A NEW RECORD FOR
CYCLING FROM CAIRO TO CAPE TOWN: 6,750 MILES IN 41 DAYS





All clean-shaven photos of Mark by Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert. Others by Mark Beaumont

● Local club cyclists joined Mark at the start in Cairo

CAIRO TO CAPE TOWN is three times the distance of the Tour de France, twice the distance of the Race Across America, and has exactly 10 'Everests' of climbing. I planned to ride it alone and unsupported. After being home-schooled in rural Scotland on a fodder of Wilbur Smith adventures and David Livingstone exploration, it was only a matter of time before I turned my attention, and my bicycle, to Africa.

In 2007/08, I cycled 18,296 miles in 194 days and 17 hours. It was televised on the BBC as 'The Man who Cycled the World'. I was fresh out of university, had never raced before, and was completely amateur. But this effort took 82 days off the old world record, which had only been broken five times before and was barely known. Since then, it has been amazing to watch the circumnavigation's newfound fame, with regular attempts on it and a record that now stands at a staggering 106 days.

Ultra-endurance racing has evolved from five-pannier touring on trekking bikes to frame-bags on carbon race bikes. Mike Hall, one of the riders who led this revolution, met me at a talk I gave in 2010 in Durham and told me of his plans. He went on to cycle the world in 107 days – unsupported. So if I in some small way inspired his amazing ride, his ultra-light set-up certainly inspired me.

The wind continued to blow from the north. When it really picked up, the sand tinkled on the carbon frame and stung my legs

My route back to cycling wasn't that simple, however. I left the bike behind in 2010 after cycling from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, and committed to years of ocean rowing. I wanted to join the dots, to really complete a circumnavigation. The equator is 24,901 miles and I had only pedalled 18,296!

In early 2012, my dream of rowing the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans came to a crashing end. I capsized 500 nautical miles offshore, 28 days into an Atlantic world record attempt. I spent 14 hours fighting for my life before being rescued by a Taiwanese cargo vessel. I came home, got married, had a daughter, and put my adventuring days behind me. I became a TV presenter for BBC World and spent a few years travelling, filming athletes who were coming to compete at Glasgow 2014. It was a dream job, and yet I started to long for my fix of adventure, to push myself as an athlete.

Back on my bike

So when the Commonwealth Games came to a grand finale, I sat my family down and broke the news. I was getting back on my bike for another world record attempt. Africa Solo was born, the name marking the important distinction from team and supported rides.

On 10 April, I lined up at Cairo Tower with about 40 road cyclists from a couple

of Egyptian clubs, as well as an eccentric diplomat from the British Embassy on his Brompton. I was glad for the media buzz and the distraction of company because what lay ahead scared me: 150 miles a day for 46 days, without any rest days.

I had spent the vast majority of my logistical planning time on Egypt and its border with Sudan. It took more time to plan than the other seven countries put together. The police wanted to know my every move, and I had a strict schedule for the first five days. My fellow riders turned back at the city boundary and I was left with a camera crew until I hit the coast of the Red Sea. Then they also turned back and I was alone.

I was as high as a kite, ecstatic to be alone on the open road after eight months training and planning. The wind was behind me, the sun was shining. It was perfect.

Day one disasters

A loud hiss erupted from my front tyre and I examined with devastation the rip to my sidewall. After 100 miles, I replaced my front tyre with the only spare I carried – the spare that was meant to last until Kenya, 3,000 miles down the road.

Pedalling off, wracked with doubt, worrying again if I had made the right choices, I lifted my sunglasses off my helmet and went to put them on... accidentally driving the arm straight into my eye. It was a ridiculous accident, and sounds pathetic, but I was blinded and struggled to bring the bike to a quick stop. The pain was searing, and for the next three days I had blurred vision in my »



● Conditions were good at first. Mark never had to wild-camp either



Conditions unimaginable a week before in Sudan left me carrying my bike, using a spoon handle to clear the mud from between my fork and tyre

» right eye and an angry-looking eyeball.

Day one was 'only' 220km, a concession to the fact I had no idea how long it would take to get out of Cairo. So I headed for Hotel La Sirena in Zaafarana, which is where I had told the police I would stay. Arriving in Zaafarana, I was duly told that the hotel was actually 19km back up the road. It was a frustrating start to a world record attempt, pedalling back north. I promised myself it was the only time I would go back in Africa. And I hoped that this hat-trick of bad luck on day one was not a sign of things to come.

A few days later, the road left the coast after Hurgada and I realised this tourist route wasn't really Africa. The road climbed spectacularly through arid hills and then descended to meet the Nile. I had somehow picked up a police escort along the way. From the start, it was an unhappy partnership. They didn't want to be with me as much as I didn't appreciate their company. A few tried to put my bike in the back of their pickups. There were exceptions, with some friendly policemen, normally those who spoke a bit more English. A few days later with the Nile on my right, the wind at my back and fleeing along, the now familiar Toyota pickup pulled alongside me and the policeman leant out waving a packet of cigarettes at me. I declined with a smile. Lighting up at 40km/h on a bicycle would be a difficult feat.

The first Cairo to Cape Town world record

was set in 2003 by the first Tour d'Afrique group, which included a Scotsman called Michael Kennedy, who alongside Henry from Tour d'Afrique had been a great help in planning my journey. They completed the entire route. Every ride since then had been forced to miss the 300km road from Aswan to the Abu Simel and the Sudanese border. This long-standing border dispute was resolved in August 2014 and, with a fair amount of negotiating, I was able to gain access. It felt important to pedal an unbroken line, if possible. The alternative was to wait for a once-a-week ferry that takes 24 hours to transit Lake Nassir, the largest manmade lake in Africa.

South across the Sahara

Reading Michael's diaries of searing heat and the dirt roads of Sudan, I was expecting it to be tough. I knew the roads had been tarred since, but didn't fully appreciate that these would now be the best roads in Africa, if not the best roads I have ever cycled on.

I was initially lucky with the weather. The Sahara, which had hit a mind-melting 47 degrees the week before I had started, sizzled nicely around 40 degrees. The wind continued to blow from the north. I felt like I was on a giant travelator, especially in those featureless horizons of sand, with no landmarks to mark the passing kilometres. When the wind picked up, the sand tinkled on

the carbon frame and stung my legs.

A few 200km-plus days put me ahead of schedule. I started dreaming of finishing in under 40 days. But south of Khartoum, the perfect roads ended and started to climb rapidly into the Ethiopian Highlands. Some days, I struggled to cover 80 miles, riding on dirt roads that resembled a pig's field in the heavy rains. Conditions that had been unimaginable a week before in Sudan left me carrying my bike, using a spoon handle to clear the mud from between my fork and tyre.

The Blue Nile Gorge was one of the toughest but most spectacular climbs of my life. It took half an hour to descend into and two hours to climb back out. The final 300km to the Kenyan border were more challenging. The road was being rebuilt, so I found myself riding dug-up roads flooded with heavy rain.

My spirits weren't helped by the regular stone throwing by teenagers. Each village felt like running the gauntlet. Sadly, it's a regular experience for adventure cyclists in Ethiopia. Worse yet was a bout of food poisoning. A cameraman and his driver joined me for a few days and were equally ill; it didn't make for a happy band of travellers. As soon as my energy levels began to return I became ill again, this time from drinking out of my water bottles with mud on them. It was a week of weakness. I craved some smooth tar and a settled stomach.

Savannah safari

Northern Kenya was the only stretch where I chose to have a security escort. It turned out to be an expensive option for some peace of mind. There wasn't a whiff of danger on the »

ADVENTURE RACING EQUIPMENT

It took about five months to build and test my bike for Africa. I flew to Holland to oversee and film the bike build and wheel build.

Koga built custom bikes for my round-the-world and Americas rides, along the lines of their much loved and tested Koga Signature. The Africa Solo bike was a new direction for them. We took the Koga Solacio frame, thanks to its disc compatibility and quite comfortable geometry, and then turned to Wheel-Tec to build bulletproof wheels.

It seemed a risk to take Di2 and hydraulic brakes. But when hands start to numb, it is so much easier to have buttons than levers. I did break a sprocket, which left me riding a broken cassette for 1,200 miles, but that's not a Di2 issue. The system needed charging twice, so about every 15 days.

FRAME: Koga Solacio, 60cm

WHEELS: Schwalbe Marathon Supreme tyres (28mm front, 32mm rear), Pacenti SL25 (tubeless) rims, Schmidt SON28 front hub, White Industries CLD rear hub, 32 Sapim CX Ray & CX Sprint spokes, Sapim brass polyax nipples

GEARING: Shimano Dura-Ace Di2 with bar-end shifters, 50-34T chainset, 12-28T 11-speed cassette

BRAKING: Shimano ST-R785 Di2 levers for Shimano BR-R785 hydraulic callipers

STEERING & SEATING: FSA K-Force drop bar with Pro Missile Ski-Bend tri-bars. Selle SMP Pro saddle

LIGHTING: Exposure Race Mk9

LUGGAGE: Apidura frame bags (35 litres). For emergencies, I carried a Nordisk tent, Haglofs sleeping bag and Thermarest micro-mat but I never needed them.

CAIRO TO CAPE TOWN



The ubiquitous wildlife meant wild-camping was impossible. I had a giraffe cantering alongside, and passed many elephants on the roadside

» tough stretch between Moyale and Isiola. Still, it was great to have some company, especially as I racked up a puncture a day on the unpaved, broken roads.

Through Tanzania and Zambia, I felt progressively stronger. I tried to stretch my daily mileage beyond 150 miles a day. Tanzanian roads weren't easy; whilst tarred, they were narrow, without a hard shoulder, and the regular crashed and broken-down trucks reminded me of the danger. I had some very near misses and was run off the road a few times a day. It made me very wary. There is no road sharing in Tanzania, and cyclists are terrorized. Every Tanzanian rides their bike on the dirt tracks at the roadside!

Riding into Zambia, Botswana and South Africa, that all changed. The luxury of a hard shoulder, no matter how small, meant that I felt confident to ride on into the night for the first time.

I began the first of my really long days in Livingstone, southern Zambia. I left at 5am and cycled 50km to the Zambezi River and the border with Botswana. Safely across, it was then 300km to the next place I could stay. There was an option at 150km but it would mean an unacceptably short day, and the ubiquitous wildlife meant that wild camping was impossible. During daylight, I had a giraffe cantering alongside, and passed many elephants on the roadside.

As darkness fell, this natural beauty became a bit daunting. I shifted the front light from my handlebar to my helmet so I could scan the roadside for eyes. My imagination ran wild, especially when the bushes grew

close to the roadside. Cycling past elephants in the dark is exhilarating, and inspired some of my fastest intervals! I had heard scare stories of them trying to tip cars, so had no idea what they would do to a cyclist.

41 days 10 hours 22 minutes

By this stage, I was flying. My new routine was: alarm at 4am, cycling by 4:30am, and try to get off the bike as little as possible before 9pm. Being winter in the south, it was remarkably cold in those pre-dawn hours, hovering around six degrees. I would shiver in my lycra shorts, wishing I had acknowledged my research that showed that Africa wasn't all scorching hot!

As I crossed into South Africa, I felt strong enough to average well over 200 miles a day in the last week. I crossed the epic landscapes of the Great Karoo, which reminded me of the vast horizons of the Midwest, and then finally came down off the high plateau into the vast wine-growing valleys of the West Cape.

Cape Town, a place I had never visited, put out the red carpet for my arrival, despite the fact that I was on track to take the Cairo to Cape Town record from a local rider, Keegan Longuiera. There was a full police escort and a welcome from the Mayor's office and the British Ambassador. I arrived at Mouillie Point on the Atlantic coast at sunset, just as the clouds parted to show off Table Mountain.

The greatest welcome of all was meeting my wife and daughter on the finish line, 41 days, 10 hours and 22 minutes after I had started. I had expected to reach the finish



and fly home to see them, but my sponsors stepped up in the final weeks and flew them out. It was a wonderful finale to a whirlwind journey down Africa: 439 hours in the saddle, a lot of pain and mental torment, but a trip I'll remember for its wonder, its awe-inspiring sights, and the friendship of strangers.

Now home in Scotland, I look forward to reliving the whole journey in the coming months as I write the book – after which I'll be back on the bike. ●

Many thanks to LDC, Drum Property Group, Martin Currie, the Weir Group, the Wood Foundation, Endura and Koga for all their support. I was riding in support of Orkidstudio, a small humanitarian architecture charity that I am proud to be Patron for. So far, Africa Solo has raised about £35,000. You can follow my adventures at markbeaumontonline.com and @MrMarkBeaumont

● **Opposite**

Almost at journey's end, after 41 days on the bike

● **Top**

When roads were good, Mark averaged over 200 miles a day

● **Bottom**

Mark's wife and daughter met him in Cape Town

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