

# HENRY GOLD

## BIKE TOUR NEOTERIC



STORY BY BERNE BROUDY

In 2002, at the age of 50, Henry Gold, a Jewish Slovakian with Canadian citizenship who rode bikes to run errands as a child — but who never toured, trained, or raced — wanted to have a great adventure.

A documentary filmmaker, bikes-not-cars evangelist, and founder of Canada-based, Africa-focused Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief — a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that worked all over Africa — Gold's harebrained idea was to organize a bike race from Cairo, Egypt, to Capetown, South Africa, across the African continent. It's an idea he first came up with when he was trying to manufacture ultra-affordable bicycles for farmers in Ethiopia, a project that never reached fruition. Within six months, he had recruited 31 people to join him. Gold and his partner charged \$6,000 for a four-month trip. Participants who paid six months in advance got a 25 percent discount.

"My friends said, 'Henry, you've flipped. How are you taking people across Africa? It's a war zone. There's no infrastructure. The only transportation is convoys. It's horrendous roads for days. How are you doing this?' People thought I was insane," said Gold.

Gold's friends didn't have faith, but after a decade in Africa with his NGO, Gold had the unique connections that allowed him to envision the audacious project of cycling across Africa in the early 2000s. By the time he ran a non-racing bike tour there, he had lots of local support from people in the government. For years before he ran the first trans-Africa tour, he was involved in conversations at the local level and he wrote a proposal for the International Monetary Fund on how tourism could help local African economies.

"Two or three days out of Nairobi, I lay in my tent thinking, 'What is wrong with these people?' We were hungry, thirsty, dirty like hell," Gold said. "We spent every day in a tent, and some of the people on the trip had never spent time in nature. People weren't sleeping well. Some days, nobody got washed. Most of them thought they were coming to die. People we met thought we were nuts, though most of them couldn't really conceive of what we were doing.



Henry Gold and crew camped under a baobab tree in 2003.

The riders whined, they were exhausted ... and they were happy. One guy kept asking how we were doing financially. He wanted to go home but wouldn't quit. He wanted us to quit."

"We put ourselves on a limb," said Gold. "We had no background in any of this."

That didn't keep Gold from approaching Guinness for the record of the fastest human-powered crossing of Africa, a proposal they accepted. Eight out of 31 people reached the end, riding "EFL," or "every f#@king inch," a term Gold's company, Tour D'Afrique (now TDA), coined on that trip. Twenty-nine of the 31 participants finished the ride. In the final days of the trip, Gold was riding sweep as usual. Giddy with the immersive adventure of a long trip — the bonding, the struggle, the unexpected joy — a guest at the back of the pack asked, now that they'd made it, what's next?

"My instant response was, 'Silk Road.'" And TDA was born.

What Gold discovered on his first trans-African bike ride was the almost addictive appeal of checking out.

"With big, immersive bike trips, we are approaching a hunter-gatherer state of mind; we're tapping into a part of the brain not used in modern society. I don't know why these trips make us feel unique, how they touch us. But I know that's something that deep down

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we're hungry for," Gold said. "Being a person who disconnects from modern society is harder and harder as the years go by. But when you do, as your day-to-day worry goes away, you cross from modern existence into caring less and less about what's happening around the world. You're dealing with your own safety, hunger, the joy of being in a group. It's a very primitive and very appealing existence."

Lucky for Gold, crossing from modern existence didn't mean leaving behind modern amenities like medical services.

On a tour in India, Gold was riding at the back of the pack when an elephant and its calves crossed the road. There was no reason to be nervous. The elephant hadn't flapped its ears.

As he was pedaling uphill to the point where the elephant had entered the bush, he heard something breaking through the trees. "The elephant was speeding at me. I tried to turn. I fell. I ran."

Gold heard the elephant step on his bicycle. He felt something grab him by the ankle. He was in the air, then on the ground in a fetal position. His helmet cracked. The elephant had stepped on Gold's head. He lost consciousness, but his helmet saved his life. When he came to, he was lying on his back and a bone was sticking out of his arm.

"I come from a screaming family," laughed Gold. "I yelled and luckily another rider heard me."

Gold doesn't hold a grudge or fear wildlife.

"Things happen in life, you deal with it," said Gold. "I wrote a blog from my hospital bed. The irony is that I always tell guests not to worry about wild elephants, snakes, or terrorism, but to worry about drivers."

It took Gold 18 months before he was back on his bike and back to bike touring as usual.

Now 69 years old, Gold is still going strong. He continues to ride around the world and to be an evangelist for cycling.

"I'm still a do-gooder in some way. I'm still trying to repair the world in small ways. These tours, which change how people see the world, give me meaning. They keep me in good shape, they stimulate me, they keep me going. These days, a lot of people are demanding more and more 'adventure lite,' soft experiences," said Gold. "That's not us."

In June, Gold headed out to scout TDA's newest itinerary: across the southern U.S. from Santa Monica, California, to Savannah, Georgia.

"Southern culture will be a revelation," said Gold. "I think I am more apprehensive about this trip than many of the international trips we've run due to Southern U.S. gun culture. But as in other trips, I anticipate my preconceptions will change."

After COVID closures and 18 months without tours, Gold said he just can't wait to be back on the road. **AG**

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