CYCLING 7,000KM THROUGH THE HEART OF AFRICA

Promoting renewable energy and raising funds for the solarisation of schools in Zambia on a bicycle

On the 26th of August, Rick de Gaay Fortman, aerospace engineering graduate and former President of the VSV ‘Leonardo da Vinci’, set off on a 7,000km cycling journey through the heart of Africa. Rick’s mission is to raise awareness for energy poverty (one in four people on this planet do not have access to electricity), promote renewable energy and raise funds for the solarisation of twenty schools in Zambia.

DREAMING OF SOLAR AFRICA
The inspiration for Solar Africa was born over three years ago, thanks to another aerospace engineering graduate, Bogdan Dumitrescu, who set up AfricAlive and drove from Delft to Cape Town with a jeep and four motorcycles. To me it seemed like the ultimate adventure: Africa, off-road, challenging and unpredictable. Bogdan still describes it today as the experience of a lifetime.

But seeing somebody else do it is easy, doing it yourself is much harder. I had a serious career with Shell, having learned valuable project experience on large LNG (liquefied natural gas) and GTL (gas to liquids) plants in Qatar so that I could one day become a project manager. Taking time out when you’re a student is not so hard, especially not in the Netherlands, but taking time out of a fast-moving career is a different story.

In the end it worked out well. I had decided that I wanted to do an MBA, and would take unpaid leave prior to my MBA in order to embark on my Solar Africa journey. I was accepted to INSEAD to start in January 2011, and took unpaid leave from the 1st of August 2010. In order to maximize the time in Africa, I decided to buy a one-way ticket from Amsterdam to Cape Town on the 23rd of August, even though that gave me very little time to organize the whole adventure.

I didn’t want to go to Africa just for the sake of cycling through Africa. Cycling is a means to an end, and fits with the sustainable image that I am trying to evoke. How could I promote renewable energy by crossing through Africa in a car running on petrol? By cycling through Africa solo and therefore unsupported, I knew I was getting something out of the ordinary, and would give my sponsors more reasons to sponsor me. People have travelled through Africa on a bicycle before. In fact, one of my main supporters, Robert Swan, traversed Africa on a bicycle as early as 1976! In addition, the African con-
tinent has always fascinated me and I felt a strong urge to embark on an adventure. But most importantly, I wanted to give something back to the people that needed it most. I grew up in an international environment, living in various developing countries in Latin America and Africa due to my father’s work with the United Nations World Food Program. Like many of us in the Netherlands I was blessed with a fine education, intelligence, good health and plenty of opportunities. Thanks to my upbringing, I had lived in Africa and witnessed many forms of poverty, violence, refugees and other dire situations. It gave me perspective on life, and I always knew that I lead a privileged life. Solar Africa was a way for me to say: “I have been blessed with a privileged life. Now I want to give something back.”

To channel the funds that I was going to raise, I decided to work with an NGO by the name of Solar Aid, which I had heard about when I was researching solar energy. Solar Aid was the brainchild of Jeremy Leggett, a former oil consultant who joined Greenpeace and later went on to set up the UK’s fastest growing energy company, the Solar Century. His vision is that everyone should have access to clean and affordable energy. There are still some two billion people on this planet, of which 550 million Africans living mostly in rural areas, who do not have access to electricity. This is known as energy poverty. Access to electricity stimulates economic development, and it is therefore an essential tool to eradicate poverty.

HECTIC PREPARATIONS

On the 31st of July I returned to the Netherlands after 3.5 years of working for Shell in Qatar. I did not have a bicycle, the pages in my passport had run out; I had no sponsors and no media attention. All I had was a one-way ticket to Cape Town on the 23rd of August and a project that I had given the name Solar Africa.

While I had done some groundwork in Qatar, most of the work had to be done in the three weeks in the Netherlands. From 7:00 am in the morning, till 11:00 pm in the evening I was frantically trying to put Solar Africa together. Finding sponsors, alerting the media, building a website, creating a promotional video, buying bicycle gear, planning the route, booking accommodation, it all had to be done in three weeks. Lastly, I had to train for this ultra-marathon as I was about to embark on a 7,000km cycling journey in tough conditions as I was going to cycle close to 100km per day.

I pulled it off in three weeks, but I’m not sure how I did it. Considering that I had never been on a cycling journey longer than three days when I was eleven, I was a novice, and had to begin from scratch. But one thing I had learned to do well during my Shell years was project management, and Solar Africa contained all the elements of a project. A tight schedule with a firm deadline, concept development, marketing, fundraising, procurement and of course, execution. I succeeded in putting it together, but one thing I had not been able to do: training. I decided I would do that on the African roads.
CYCLING THROUGH AFRICA

I was close to a burn-out when I finally boarded the KLM flight to Cape Town, but felt extremely relieved when I was at cruise-altitude on my way to the southern tip of Africa. The only worry I had was whether the bicycle would come out in one piece at the other side. Fortunately it did, and I was picked up at Cape Town International Airport by an old friend, Gijsbert Bakker, also an aerospace engineering graduate.

The first few days in Cape Town were extremely relaxing, and far from what lay ahead of me. Gijsbert lived in a beautiful neighborhood in Cape Town named Houtbaai and for three days I lived like a king. I cherished those moments, for I knew those would be my last days of luxury before Solar Africa kicked off.

To promote renewable energy and raise awareness for energy poverty, I had planned to visit several projects on route that used renewable energy to promote standards of living. The first project that I visited was the Kuyasa CDM project in a township east of Cape Town known as Khayeselita. I visited the township to learn about the solar heaters that they had installed on the roofs of the low-cost homes to provide the residents with warm water. While I had seen videos and pictures of townships before, I was shocked by the living conditions in the township. Cape Town, a bustling wealthy modern metropolis, and Khayeselita, a run-down township with derelict homes, lay only a few kilometers apart. To promote the living conditions of the township, the city of Cape Town had decided to subsidize the cost of the solar water heaters. While the intention and the execution of the project was good, I had questions about the financial viability of the project.

A few days later, on the 26th of August, I set off on my first leg. At the bottom of Suikerbossie, a tough hill in Houtbaai, I was met by Andrew Wheelton, the founder of BEN (Bicycle Empowerment Network) Bikes, who offered to join me on my first leg to Melkbosstrand. I cycled for 50km, which at the time seemed like a reasonable distance, and when I reached my place for the night, I was exhausted. I decided to take the next day off to give my muscles time to recover, and used that day to visit the Darling Wind Farm, South Africa’s first commercial wind farm with four turbines generating 1.3MW of electricity each. The Western Cape and the Northern Cape have so much wind that they are ideal locations for wind farms. However, with the Koeberg nuclear power station generating 2GW of electricity, it was clear that the contribution of the Darling Wind Farm to the overall energy mix in South Africa was a mere drop in the ocean.

I followed the coast along the Western Cape going North, and within a week I was completely exhausted. By the time I reached Lambert’s Baai, I fell apart, and needed to take a day of rest in order not to become ill. The first few days I thought I was invincible, but soon realized that I was paying the price for not having trained in the Netherlands. My muscles were sore, my skin had a sunburn, and I was dehydrated. And I had another fifteen weeks to go.

My first mental breakdown came on a gravel road from Lutsville to Nuwerus. To protect myself from the sun, I had decided to put on long cycling clothing, but the only gear I had was a black almost thermal cycling pants and a black long sleeved cycling shirt. As a result of the warm clothing I nearly had a heat stroke on the way to Nuwerus. Over a distance of more than 30km I had to cross hills on a gravel road, and I did not have sufficient water with me. The heat was so intense that I started to feel faint, and at a certain point I saw a cross by the side of the road and began to believe a second cross would be for me. Just as my water ran out, I could see Nuwerus in the distance, where I stayed in a comfortable guest house and was able to recover.

My lack of experience with cycling adventures as well as my lack of training, meant that it took close to four weeks before I got into a routine. Sorting out my clothing, throwing away excess baggage, finding a suitable diet to speed up my recovery and learning which hours of the day to cycle in was a process of discovery. When I look back now, it all seems simple, but experience is irreplaceable.

I am writing this article for the Leonardo Times from Zambia, on Moorings campsite just South of Lusaka. Today is the 11th of October, I have been on the road for close to seven weeks and cycled more than 2500km through South Africa, Namibia, Botswana and Zambia. So far I have raised more than 30,000€, sufficient to fund ten schools in Zambia, and I am targeting twenty schools. Not one day has been the same, and the experiences have been unforgettable. What has struck me most is the kindness and the generosity of the people not only in Africa, but also in the Netherlands and around the world.

I have at least another 4,000km of cycling ahead of me, but the adventure and the mystery that comes with the discovery of Africa and its culture, combined with my mission to promote renewable energy, raise awareness for energy poverty and raise funds for the solarisation of schools in Zambia, make each day one to look forward to.

If you would like to know more or support Solar Africa please visit my website at www.solarafrica2010.org.