Last spring I decided to combine one of my ‘Hans Rey Adventure Team’ trips with a project for my charity ‘Wheels 4 Life’. Finally I had found, what seemed to be, the perfect place to start our “Wheels 4 Villages – Film Project” to document on film over two years the impact bicycles will have on communities and the lives of individuals of the Ugweno Valley in Tanzania right in the shadow of Africa’s highest mountain, Kilimanjaro (5896m/19,344ft.).

To launch this project our small team decided to first circumnavigate Kili on our own bikes, via a 220km route to eventually arrive in the remote and impoverished Ugweno Valley in the Northern Pare Mountains.
My partners were my love, Carmen, who was not only the photographer, but has also been fundamentally involved with the charity from the very beginning and plays an important role in realizing this project. Our third team member on this trip was cameraman Rob Summers, with whom I had worked on several adventures before and who represented our one-man film crew.
After I was approached by an expatriated African lady, Elvida and her husband Victor, who live in England; I prepared and researched for this trip for almost a year.

They had started the Nyota Star Community Centre on the northern base of the Pare Mountains to help the poor people and orphans from the area, where she grew up many years ago and where life has changed very little since. She sent W4L an email asking for some bikes for her people. A few emails later and after a meeting in the UK, we figured that with the help of their infrastructure, her family and the local pastors – this could be the ideal place to launch our film project.

Bicycles are recreational tools for most of us, but in the Third World, they have a completely different meaning – having one or just having access to one can make a life changing difference. For people to get to work or to the local markets, which are often too far to walk to or for children to get to school, for healthcare workers to see patients or for families to fetch their daily water supply.
Often these people have to walk for hours in extreme heat; a bike not only allows them to carry five times more cargo but also to travel up to four times the distance. A decent bike costs US$ 100 – 180 in Tanzania; an amount that many don’t earn in an entire year.

Although bicycles are not unknown in the Ugweno Valley – most families don’t have one, neither do they have access to any other form of transportation. The intention for our film is to show life before our involvement, then slowly introduce bikes and film the impact bikes will have with the hope that other aid organizations will also recognize the importance of bicycles in the Third World. We hope that they will consequently dedicate more of their aid funds towards the purchase of bikes in the future.

For this reason we shall return to the Ugweno Valley several times to document the impact and to distribute more bicycles.
Thanks to the support and sponsorship from Adidas, GT Bicycles and Ergon bike ergonomics – we are in a position to finance this film without tapping into the funds from Wheels 4 Life. Trent College’s students in Nottingham, England have been working hard to raise money specifically to buy bicycles for school children of this project. Additional supporters include Alps Tours and other generous individuals and companies.

As usual, none of my expenses were paid for by the charity or the W4V project.
Our first challenge was to cycle safely around the mountain of Kilimanjaro. My research left many questions unanswered and I received a lot of contradicting information about the route and water/food supplies along the way. As popular as Kilimanjaro is for trekkers to climb—not many tourists journey around it, to the remote backcountry of the Maasai and Chagga tribes and along the Kenyan boarder. This led us to organize a support vehicle with a local fixer/driver/cook that would liaise with us at the end of the day or be there as a back up if Carmen could go on no longer, although very athletic, she isn’t a very experienced mountain biker—by my standards. Another factor was safety for the camera equipment, we knew that their value would be a very big temptation for such poverty stricken people, also tents and water needed to be transported. The ride was a challenge for all of us, and anybody who has ever undertaken any “adventure” with their better half knows how I was treading on thin ice and what a challenge I had imposed on her, to try to follow my tire tracks and on myself to bring her back in one piece and still have her like me afterwards.

Upon arrival at Kilimanjaro International Airport we spent one day in Arusha to get ready for our ride to the valley and to shop for potential bikes that would be suitable to give away for our W4V project the following week.
In honor of the 20th anniversary of GT’s legendary Zaskar model and my long history with the brand and model, I decided to ride the carbon Zaskar hardtail. Carmen chose the plush 4-inch GT Marathon full suspension bike and Rob, our cameraman, rode his 6-inch freeride bike. After the shock of realizing that I had left my cycling shoes in England, where they were still drying near a fireplace from a last minute ride prior to departure. I mounted my rasta flat pedals from my trials bike; which I had brought for photo ops, but mainly to entertain the locals with some trials exploits. Its amazing how some simple trials tricks and front wheels hops can put smiles on everyone’s faces. It’s such a great way to break the ice with strangers – not just the kids – and giving them something that is not materialistic. Same reactions (smiles and laughter) were created for having long blond hair, being female and riding a bike. It was the funniest thing, locals would almost roll on the ground laughing upon sight of Carmen. I literally felt invisible at times.
The next day the Land Cruiser dropped us off outside the city of Arusha south-west of Kilimanjaro. By the time the cook had completed all his errands we were facing mid-day temperatures of about 100F (40C). The tape in our HD camera was so hot, that we had to cool it down before the camera could read it. The dirt road started out with stutter bumps from hell, which made me wonder if it would be like that for the next 200 plus kilometers. To everyone’s relief we soon hit the smooth and deep-red African clay and thankfully the wind was pushing us from behind. To our immediate left was Mount Meru (4566m/ 14,980ft.) and to the right, soaring above the clouds was Africa’s tallest peak, majestic Kilimanjaro, with its permanent white snowcap.

We were in the midst of Maasai territory, from time to time we would pass through little villages with mud huts and thatched roofs – the landscape was dry and arid. Unlike the people on the east side of the mountain and the remainder of our trip, the Maasai people are either beggars or immediately ask for money when they see a camera, exploiting their own culture, for the later they are notorious and its quite annoying and sad.

Late afternoon we arrived at the remote village of Ol Molog, where our crew had already set up camp at the local school grounds. I joined the kids for a football match, with an improvised, stitched up bladder of a ball – on a pitch that was rough, off-camber and scattered with holes, weeds and tall grass. After dark it got quiet very quickly in the village, due to the lack of electricity.

In the morning we continued towards the north side of the mountain, paralleling the border to Kenya. We passed through farmland until we reached the wildlife corridor, that allows elephants, giraffes and other game to migrate to and from Kili without interfering and passing through farmland. Elephant dropping were as close as we gotten to spotting wildlife while pedaling up and down the slopes of the foothills. Our local fixer had advised us in the morning that today would be mainly flat roads, he couldn’t have been more wrong and I had confirmation that he was clueless, as for knowing the route. Once again my own research and knowledge proved to be more accurate.

I constantly reminded Carmen to pace herself and fed her with Clif Bloks to prevent her from dehydration – along with the occasional push on the steeper climbs. Which was probably more paranoia on my side than necessity, since she did really well on her own – she surpassed her own ability on a bike and my expectations in many aspects. Having said that, one of the scariest moments of the trip was when Carmen announced that she was cold and had goose-bumps, despite an air temperature of 106F; at which point I was convinced that a heat stroke was imminent and the rest of her ride and our photographer would have been jeopardized. Since she didn’t realize what her symptoms meant, Rob and I kept our mouth shut and slowed her down – which did the job.
With hopes to catch a glimpse of the peaks of Kili and Mawenzi in the early sunlight, we got on our bikes shortly after 6am, but Mother Nature had decided to decorate the summits in clouds. Back on dirt roads, the vegetation turned very lush with rainforest and plenty of banana trees. This area was much more populated with scattered huts of the Chagga people – many of them were on their way to and from church, since it was Sunday.

We were aware that HIV is very common in this region, however it was not until we witnessed the village of perhaps 90% children that the facts really hit us. It was so sad to see so many parentless kids, but it was also inspiring to see how the older children looked after the younger ones. Their day was sweetened by some candy Carmen handed out; plus, they too, got a kick and laugh out of the blond lady on two wheels.

Tourists were rarer than I had expected, we only saw a few once we arrived in Marangu, the gate town to Kilimanjaro, where most trekkers start their hike up the mountain.

We enjoyed a fun ride, all of us felt strong and had found a good rhythm and outwaited a furious one hour rainstorm under the shelter of a tin roof.

Once in Marangu at 1800m/5,900ft.; we rapidly passed the desperate tourist shops, which were rather empty, due to the end of the tourist season; and proceeded to a quiet and remote campground outside of town.
After dinner things turned from weird to sketchy, and all of a sudden I was reminded how potentially dangerous Africa can be and how things can turn upside down in a heartbeat. It was very scary when our guide and cook all of a sudden left camp in a hurry, after we had already retired to our tents, announcing that they would return in the morning to avoid being charged campground fees for themselves. Which in retrospect didn’t make sense, especially since they left their own tent behind. A young backpacker couple from Israel were the only other folks on the camp site, besides some shady guys behind. It was very scary when our guide and cook all of a sudden left camp in a hurry, after we had already retired to our tents, announcing that they would return in the morning to avoid being charged campground fees for themselves. Which in retrospect didn’t make sense, especially since they left their own tent behind. A young backpacker couple from Israel were the only other folks on the camp site, besides some shady guys nearby, who apparently were looking after the grounds.

It was all too weird and once our guys drove off it hit us instantly what a dangerous situation we were in, this looked like a perfect set up for a robbery. Our guides gone with an alibi, us not knowing where they were and surrounded by $25,000 worth of camera equipment and bikes, was not a comforting feeling. Call me paranoid, but it suddenly seemed all too much like one of the stories that happen in those parts of the world, when shit hits the fan. Not to mention that we all had developed a mistrust in our guide’s character over the past days.

I tried to tell myself it would be all ok, but it didn’t feel that way at all. Carmen’s and my instinct led us to act on it, instead of letting things go their own way. Thankfully we had a cell phone signal and were able to reach Elvida, who was concerned as well and who got a hold of our tour organizer who ordered his men back to the camp site. Which was a relief but still didn’t put me at ease; I didn’t get much sleep thereafter.

The next day would be our last riding day before reaching our project village. From here it was mainly downhill to the flatlands and across to the Pare Mountains in the south east, which turned out to be an extremely hot ride. Rob’s bike-computer indicated 126F/50C!!! I enjoyed this part of the trip a lot, it was even more off the beaten path than before; we crossed through areas where white people on bikes are not a common sight.

The heat took its toll and when we finally arrived in Kifaru, we knew we had almost arrived in Kivisini where the NyotaStar Center is located and where Elvida and the local pastors would wait for us. Near to heat stroke and another 12km later on a terrible dirt road we received a warm welcome at the center. It was time to get to work.
Finding suitable bikes and the right recipients was just one of the tasks. The bikes needed to be bought, delivered, assembled and distributed to the individuals. For our film we also wanted to demonstrate lives of certain individuals before they have a bike with a follow up visit later to demonstrate the difference bikes have made to the recipient, his/her family and the whole community.

The individuals, their villages as well as the way the bikes are being used, vary a lot from each other. We are also using the opportunity to expand our own experience at W4L to find out what works and what doesn’t work. From the style of bikes to the way we select recipients, to the ‘terms and conditions’, qualifications, the infrastructure, supporting network, as well as the long term success and impact of the project.

The people in the lowlands live very simple lives, much different from life in the fertile and lush mountains. The landscape in the lowlands reminded me a lot of Arizona, very dry and hot. I couldn’t help wondering why people bothered living there, since flora, fauna and life seemed so much better in the nearby mountains, which reminded me with its banana and coffee plantations of Costa Rica. The mud huts are as basic as it gets, with nothing but dirt as floors and small dark rooms, shared with chickens and goats. No running water, except a few common water pumps – miles apart and often out of order, no electricity, phones, or any sort of infrastructure. Every ten miles comes a tiny “store”, the size of a bathroom, which sells the most basic stuff and of course Coca Cola; other than that locals sell their produce in front of their huts. The only institutions in place are some medical centers, primary schools every 20 – 30 km, and sometimes a Secondary School, if not, the education will end for most kids at the age of fourteen unless they can afford school fees and find a way to get there. There is basically no transportation, not even private vans or taxis, except one big truck that serves as bus and goes once a day through the Ugweno Valley for a fee that most can’t afford.
We met one farmer who makes about 5,000 Shilling per month, which equals about US$ 5.- Most people eat their own goods and just buy essentials. In terms of possessions, most homeless people in the Western World have more things to their name or in their shopping carts. Others might make up to $ 100.- per month, if they are well off. Nonetheless, a bicycle is a huge investment, comparable to having a nice car in our society. There are no jobs or industries that offer jobs, except for the teachers and healthcare workers. There is no tourist industry that supports the region or serves as outlet for handcrafts and souvenirs. Although people are poor and live hard lives, they are not starving.

We ended up staying at a simple guest house “hotel” with cold showers in Mwanga, about an hours drive from our headquarters for this project at the NyotaStar Center.

This center proved to be crucial for our operations and so were Elvida and Victor, who usually live in the UK. Elvida grew up in these mountains, but has lived the majority of her live in England. When she came back to visit the area in 2003, she realized the need for help and started with her husband and the local pastors the NyotaStar Center, as a base for their activities of building a orphanage, getting better and more reliable water stations and building a better community and infrastructure. A few years ago she came back out of retirement to continue working as a nurse, since then she has been sending every month at least $2,000 to the center and dedicated hours of hard work to make a difference.

The Wheels 4 Villages Film Project in Ugweno Valley, Tanzania:
Our schedule allowed for another 8 days to get acquainted with the area of the Northern Pare Mountains and its surrounding villages.
In the center of those mountains are the villages of Ugweno and Usangi, surrounded by 11 mountains, its highest at 2113m/ 6930ft., the low-lands to the north and the shores of Lake Jipe the main target area for our project, is at about 800m/2600ft elevation.
We distributed 42 bicycles between Kifaru (on the main highway between Moshi and Dar Es Salaam) and Lake Jipe (which boarders Kenya), including a few bikes in the mountains near the village of Ugweno. Many more bikes shall follow on our next visits, but first it was important that our project would be launched in the right way and that everybody involved would understand our intentions, the making of the film as well as develop an appreciation for bikes.
Pastor Baraka, is the key person for us who is permanently there and who is one heck of a character, a mix between Bill Cosby and a happy drunk, who doesn’t drink. He is not only funny, but has a heart of gold and is the main person helping with the project. Even more amazing is that he and his family also adopt several orphans and other persons at their simple home in the mountains, where he serves a small local church, that he built himself. I’m not always the biggest fan of organized religion, but in the Third World, it’s a different ball game and often the best way to build structure and give people hope, if nothing else. Especially when, like here, the religious believes are not forced; and Christians and Muslims live in total harmony side by side.

The pastor used to walk up to 4 hours to get to the center, before he got access to a old beat up Toyota 4WD truck, which brings him daily to the valley below, where he helps the people who don’t belong to his church. He and the other pastors were instrumental in showing us around and introducing us to the community. The construction of the center was nearly completed and was actually a proper building made out of bricks - not a mud hut - where our cook served us meals everyday (there are no restaurants within at least one hour) and where we assembled the bikes. There is a beautiful view of Kilimanjaro and the Kenyan boarder was as close as 3 miles away, only separated by a small river from Lake Jipe that was home to crocodiles and hippos.

We had ordered 20 Phoenix Bikes at a local bike shop in Moshi. The Phoenix Bikes are the typical bikes of the Third World, with 28” singlespeed wheels and curved back handlebars. The bikes are very basic, known as work horses. The bikes we had ordered were terrible assembled, and most parts, including the spokes, were still loose, missing or not adjusted properly. Rob and myself all of a sudden found ourselves with a new job, tuning bikes. Luckily, we were also able to hire a boy from the bike shop for two days, who proofed to be of great help and who helped us train the janitor of the center into a bike mechanic. Along with the bikes we bought a bunch of tools and spare-parts.

We also ordered two extra strong versions of the Phoenix bike, with stronger rims, spokes, chains and a heavy duty rack to transport more cargo. One thing we learned already is that from now on we will only buy the heavy duty versions. At the same time we awaited delivery of 20 California Bikes which are sold by our friends from BEN (Bicycle Empowerment Network) and ITDP (Institute for Transportation & Development Policy) and which are mountain bikes specially designed for Africa, with 6 gears, a rack, reliable brakes and a colorful paintjob. Those bikes are nice, but their recent price increase makes them almost twice as expensive as a Phoenix bike, at US$ 180.-
Word about our visit and mission, as well as some crazy guy doing bike tricks spread like wildfire. The trials show at the local school became the talk of the valley, and Saturday, 5 days after our arrival, was supposed to be another big trials show at the center and the presentation of several bikes.

It is not easy choosing the people who would receive a bike, especially considering that practically everybody could need one. Which ultimately could lead to resentment and jealousy. Therefore we decided to set up some community bikes, that can be used by more than one person. Those bikes shall be based at the center and shall be available for day usage for a small fee or exchange of services/produce.

These bikes, as well as the others we are going to give out, will be maintained by our janitor friend from the center. Wheels 4 Life has hired him as our first ever mechanic. For a wage of $ 5.- per week, he will look after all the bikes, to ensure our efforts don’t end with a flat tire.

www.wheels4life.org
Below is a rough breakdown of individuals and families who received a bike:

- 11 bikes to students from the Primary School who walk up to 10km/6 miles to school every day, often one bike is shared by two or three kids who sit on the rack.

- 3 bikes went to schools for community bikes for the students and school use.

- 3 bikes went to Medical Centers for the doctor and nurses, to get to work or to see patients. Often they carry vaccinations in cool boxes, which loose temperature quickly in the heat, a bike is very supportive.

- 5 bikes went to the fishing village near Lake Jipe, where farmers and fishers use the bikes to bring the fish to the market, get to the lake and fields and get to town to buy supplies.

- 5 bikes went to the mountains to farmers and students

- 2 bikes went to handicapped persons, whose families use the bikes to support them and to transport them.

- 7 bikes went to various other farmers, brick makers and secondary school students.

- 6 bikes went to our community center.

Overall it was hard work by everybody to get this project successfully on its feet. It was very rewarding and often overwhelming to present the bikes and see the faces of the people and a glow of hope and happiness shining through their eyes. The Valley we have chosen for our ‘Wheels 4 Villages – Film Project’ turned out to be perfect and just what we had in mind.

The need for bikes is tremendous, we shall return several times, before finishing this film, as for the project it might go on for much longer. In the next round we want to deliver more bikes to the mountains and to the villages on the southern side of the Northern Pare Mountains. We are also planning on opening a proper bike shop, maybe with the help of a US or European based Bike shop as a partner/sponsor as well as some more repair stations along the valley. We might also organize another bike ride to take sponsors and supporters along in 2009, either around Kili or more likely through and around the Pare Mountains.

Trent College is actively raising money for this project and considers sending a group of students on a field trip to the Ugweno Valley.

This is just the beginning, “Asante Sana”

Hans Rey

P.S.: She still likes me.

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