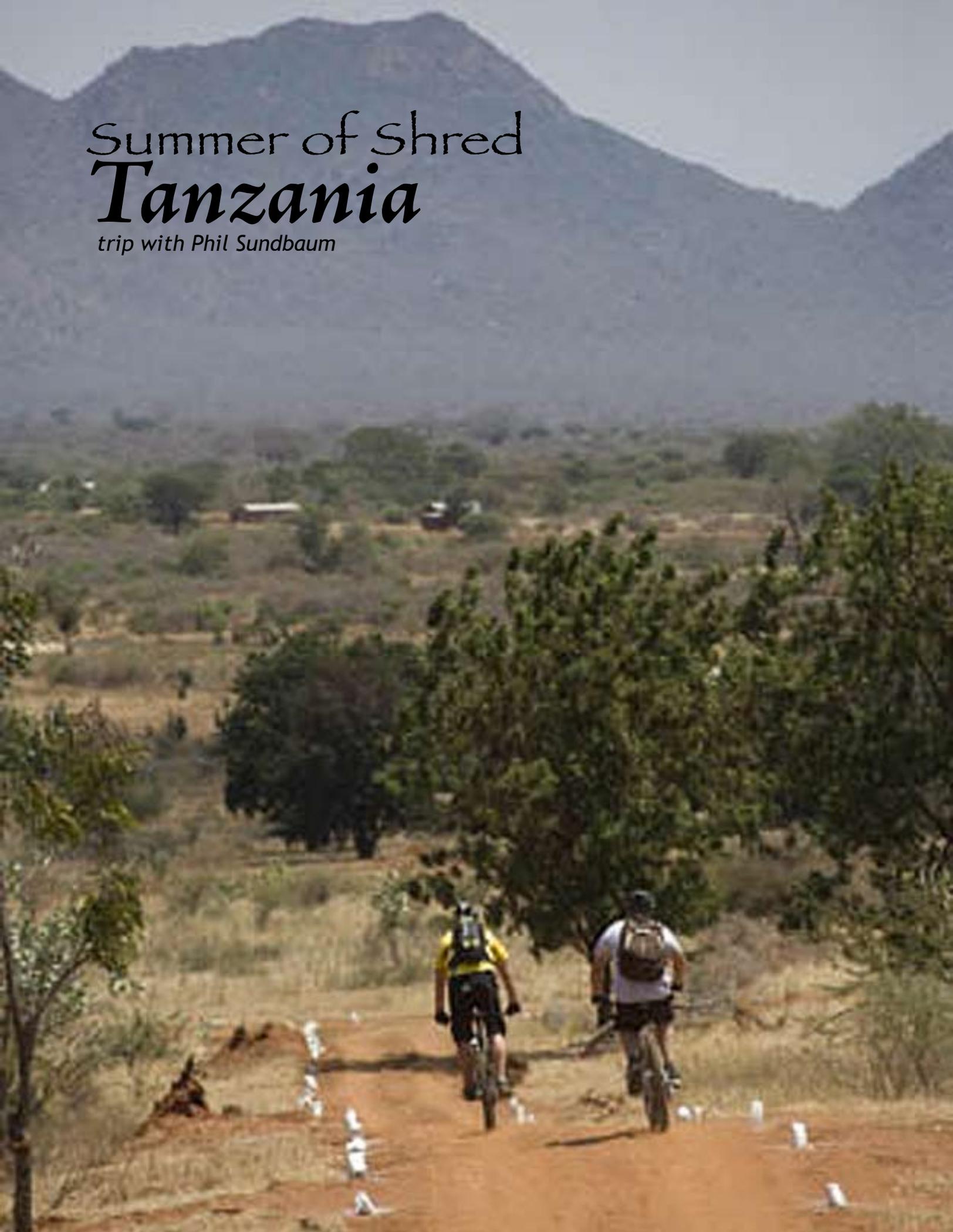


Summer of Shred *Tanzania*

trip with Phil Sundbaum



A few weeks ago I went back to Tanzania to do a follow-up trip on the Wheels 4 Life Film project and to shoot a segment for Phil Sundbaum's 'Summer of Shred' film. Along with us came producer and cameraman Aaron Lutze and New Zealand photographer Caleb Smith. We did a great adventure through the Northern Pare Mountains, we distributed more bikes to people in need and filmed some valuable footage for our film projects. Thank you to Aaron Lutze and Phil Sundbaum to let us use the footage for free for our film, which is due sometimes next year. Thanks also for their fundraising efforts with their 'Flips 4 Life' promotion and to Caleb Smith for letting us use his great photos. Aaron's and Phil's movie 'Summer of Shred' is already available now (www.summerofshred.com).

For me it was great to be back in action after my injury and to ride the all new GT carbon Force bike, with the new Fox QR15 forks and the sweet Crank Brothers wheels.

It was truly a life changing experience, as much for us as well as for the locals. Not only for the bikes we left with them, but also for the memories of Phil's incredible tail-whip jumps. Something they will likely remember for a long to time to come. Enjoy Aaron's story ...

Hans



Summer of Shred

Tanzania trip with Phil Sundbaum

Words by Aaron Lutze

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The gears of an old Mitsubishi truck sputtered and churned as we lurched up the hill through the Northern Pare Mountains. I cringed as the driver, Pastor Barakeli, chuckled to himself as the truck bottomed out once again on the steep, rocky road. I wondered to myself, “What would Hans Rey do on an adventure like this?”

Thankfully, the answer was riding about 20 feet ahead of me, as we ascended towards the mountain city of Uwengo, nestled at the top of the Pare Mountains in the East African country of Tanzania. We were visiting the area as the final stage of our Flips 4 Life fundraiser through the Summer Of Shred project, to benefit the Wheels 4 Life charity, set forth by mountain bike legend and freeride pioneer Hans Rey.

To backfill this story, we should highlight the efforts that it took to arrive here in Tanzania -- why we came here and what we were here to do.

As mountain bikers, we grew up wearing out Hans Rey videos. When he took the initiative to promote the hardships in third world countries, and how their problems could be eased by the donation of bicycles, we listened. We were overwhelmed by the magnitude of problems all over the world, but through Hans’ charity “Wheels 4 Life”, we saw an opportunity to not only travel to a distant location with him, but also a chance to make a difference in that area of the world. Even if it was just a small contribution, we figured that any contribution would be a good one. We had no idea what we were getting ourselves into, or how it could change the world (or ourselves), but we went for it full throttle. We created “Flips 4 Life” with the encouragement of Hans, which took donations from sponsors for each backflip that the Summer Of Shred’s main athlete, Phil Sundbaum, landed during the months of July and August. A lot of sponsors were concerned with our concept, some were concerned that we would only be able to donate a few bikes: how many backflips can Phil do during two months? Others were concerned that we would go absolutely crazy and blow their entire marketing budgets in just a few short weeks.

One hundred and forty backflips later, Phil and I were exchanging nervous glances at the Portland Travel Clinic, where we would spend over a thousand dollars getting immunized with the latest vaccines for everything from Polio to Yellow Fever and everything in between. We only needed one shot to travel to Tanzania, but after the local nurse explained each shot and the potential dangers of our visit to a third world county, we accepted nearly every shot. Nothing like “well, if you don’t get this one, so-and-so will happen to you for the rest of your life” will motivate you to cough up another couple hundred bucks. Better safe than sorry, we thought. Walking out of the clinic, we were more than a bit nervous as to what we’d both gotten ourselves into. All for a good cause, right?



Shortly after our visit to the travel clinic, we were aboard a flight on Kenya Airways to Nairobi, where we would rendezvous with Hans, photographer Caleb Smith, and our driver Jasper. We would land in Kenya, then take an eight hour drive to Kivisini, a town where the Nyotastar Center was based, which was also the base for Hans' local operation. After an amazingly effortless flight to Africa, we collected our bags and loaded up the truck.

On the drive to Tanzania, we slowly adjusted to the local time as Masai villagers wandered on the roadside. We made a few stops for bathroom breaks on what would be considered a fire road at best by westerners--yet was a sturdy interstate highway to most Africans. During a few of these potty breaks, we came across some local wildlife, in the forms of giraffes and zebras! We were in awe of the creatures and did our best to get close to them for photos and video shots. It didn't take much to realize that you can't get close to the zebras without offending them, as one zebra prepared to charge us after we got just a little too close with our cameras. Nonetheless, it was a great introduction to Africa for our handful of green African travelers.

Our troop arrived in Arusha, one of the main northern towns in Tanzania, around mid-afternoon. We met our guide for the week, local Pastor Barakeli. Pastor is best described as a cross between Bill Cosby, a happy drunk, and Cedric Gracia. He has an unassuming air about him, and he could feed you the worst news of all time and you would still be able to stomach it based on his delivery. He is a true people-person, and you can tell that his only motivation in life is to spread goodness and laughter through the world, whether it's giving some locals a lift to the watering hole or driving a bunch of westerners around Tanzania for ten days.

Pastor took us to the market in Arusha, which was our first test in Africa. We foolishly took our expensive cameras into this crowded market which was full of locals who were hawking everything from bananas to chickens, all hustling to get money from the next visitor. Stands filled with the latest local produce were ripe for the picking, and although every stand appeared the same, each vendor was working their hardest to catch the attention of the latest customer. At one point we were ready to buy bananas from one girl, at the next, a girl who was selling bananas twice as large came up to us and undersold her. There was no mercy between vendors in Arusha, and the Pastor made sure that we scored the best deals on everything from rice to the freshest fruits.



After our adventure gathering food in Arusha, we drove for hours to Kivisini, a small town east of Arusha, which would be our base for the next two weeks. In Kivisini was the Nyotastar Center, a base for a charity organization founded by a Tanzanian woman who had moved to England, become a nurse, and sent her money back to Africa in order to help her people. The Nyotastar Center had build a school and a church, as well as a guest house that would be our home for the first night in Tanzania. We slowly acclimated to the African country as the locals warmly welcomed us with some amazingly well-articulated conversation and warm food. One thing that shocked most of the group was the ability of the African people to speak perfect English. As freeriders, we contend on a regular basis with countries through Europe that barely speak English, so it was a real surprise to everyone to come to a third world country and be greeted by a full crew of English-speaking Africans.

That night we crawled into our sleeping bags, already changed from less then twelve hours on a new continent. Even on the drive to Kivisini, we had seen the hardships and gnarliness of an unforgiving countryside that would force its inhabitants to live harsh lives that were focused on survival. Our lives were changed already, and we had yet to really dig in to what Tanzania had to offer.



The next morning came early as the Pastor burst through the door, screaming “Amka!” at the top of his lungs. Amka in Swahili means wake up, and became nearly a battle cry for everyone on the trip as the days went on. Our other favorite Swahili phrase was “twenty-two”, which means “let’s go”. I lost count of how many times it came through, but let’s just say that it was a prevalent phrase throughout the trip.

After Pastor’s rude awakening, we woke up and immediately attempted to form our routine. We ate a few Clif bars, took our malaria pills, and emerged from our rooms to see what the cooks had prepared for us. This would be our method for nearly every day of the trip, and it seemed to work out pretty well for everyone.

The first full day of our trip was all about checking out the zones in which Hans had visited on his previous trip. In February of 2008, he had visited Kivisini and the surrounding areas to hand out bikes to villagers in need. The local pastors and board of directors for the Nyotastar Center had put together a list of people who needed the bikes the most, and now it was our turn to see how the bikes had been used and how everything was holding up. It was encouraging to see the bikes in use in most cases, although in other cases it was obvious that many bikes had been in serious need of mechanical attention and spare parts. Before we arrived in Africa, Hans had already been working on a concept to bring sponsored bike shops to the Tanzanian region, and this trip reinforced his concept. It’s one thing to just show up and give away bikes, but to keep those bikes running smooth, an infrastructure needs to be built, with local mechanics to keep all of the donated bikes running smoothly.

As our trip continued, we traveled down the road to see schools and secondary schools where bikes were being used, and where they could be donated. At the secondary school, we noticed an albino girl. We asked the locals about her, and they told us that albinos were highly sought after by local witchdoctors and were protected by the government. We began to look at our own skin and wondered if we could be mistaken for albinos in the right light. Hopefully not...

We stopped at Lake Jipe, where we could take a boat ride as a shortcut to the next town. The villagers pulled sketchy looking boats up to the muddy shores of Lake Jipe for us to load our bikes and expensive camera gear into. We were quite nervous to do so, but we embraced the opportunity and crawled into the shaky boats anyways. The lip of each boat hovered above the bacteria-infested water by mere inches, which kept us nervous for the entire ride, but we persevered. I think everyone on the trip was extremely happy to see the shore of the lake, and even more ecstatic to get out of the sketchy boats upon landing the shore. We met up with our caravan and headed up into the hills, where we set up our tents for the night.

In the morning, we realized that we had camped at an absolute nugget of a freeride spot. There was a smooth run-up to a decent sized landing, all we needed to do was build a lip for a jump, and Phil could work his magic on the Tanzanian soil. We recruited some villagers to help us build out the spot, which they did with serious expertise. Upon reflection, we realized that these villagers were used to building houses and bricks from this same soil, so mashing up a little dirt take off was probably child’s play for these guys. They slapped together a nice three foot lip for Phil, and after a couple hours baking in the African sun, we were good to go. Phil teed up the take off, took one test run at it (mostly to spot the landing) and then proceeded to tailwhip the jump, much to the delight of the Lake Jipe villagers. Hans set up in front of the camera as the announcer for the first ever Tanzanian National Slopestyle Championships, and a serious session got underway. Uncontested (although no one would’ve stood a chance in these conditions), Phil easily took the win and the national title as reigning slopestyle champion of Tanzania. This was definitely the first tailwhip to go down in East Africa, and probably the gnarliest riding exhibition to ever go down on this entire continent.

We cleaned up and packed up our bags, then started the second half of our journey, into the Pare Mountains. We had been skirting the mountains since our arrival, and now it was time to climb into the lush African hills to see what they had to offer. Our support vehicle lurched down the road and eventually began its ascent on a road that could hardly be ridden on a bicycle. The rusty truck was a rock crawling machine as the Pastor deftly picked lines through the absolute mess that led us to his village on the top of the mountain. Phil and Hans climbed the twisty road to the top of the mountain, where we arrived in the city at the top of the mountain, home to the Pastor and his family. The Pastor had arranged for us to stay at a large guest house in town, which would be our main headquarters for the next few days.

We unpacked our support vehicle quickly as the rain drenched the lush mountain village. After cleaning up and settling in, we rolled into the “downtown” area and visited a local pub. It was a modest building, yet we found Red Bull inside! We couldn't believe that an energy drink, which would cost about half of a month's rent for the local villagers, was readily available at a pub that has probably never seen any tourists or foreigners. Without hesitation, we ordered as much Red Bull as we could carry (and a few beers, too) and then made our way over to the plastic chairs and tables that awaited us in the dark and damp corner of the local guide's favorite pub.

The next morning, we woke up and loaded our bikes into the truck, as well as a few bikes to hand out to some villagers in need at the top of the mountain. We were going to shoot some epic trail shots among the lush and dense foliage in the Pare Mountains. Hans directed us to a local hospital where we made our first big donation of the trip, handing out bikes to doctors who travel to villages all over the mountains to do their work. After that, we went to another man's house to deliver a bike, and then we continued our scouting mission through the mountains to find some good shots. Since the main mode of transportation in this region is walking, it was easy to find small paths with epic views. We shot footage and photos until the last drop of golden light faded into the sunset, and then pedaled back to our guest house.

Sometime between sunset and sunrise, there was a loud noise growing outside our guest house. Everyone was startled from their sleep and was instantly curious about the loud chanting that appeared to be going on outside our windows. Was it the local witchdoctor putting a curse on the white people invading their village? Was there some super sweet African rave going on that we didn't know about? We never really got a straight answer from our guides, but whatever was causing the noise outside our window was certainly not going to cool down anytime soon. We all buried our heads in our pillows and did our best to block out the noise so we could salvage at least a few hours of sleep before another long day hit us like a ton of bricks.



Another day of driving was ahead of us, as we descended back out of the Pare Mountains into the valley again. Our next stop would be the home of Pastor's son Joseph, a pastor who had moved to one of the poorest areas in the Pare Mountain region to help the city of Toloha. Joseph selflessly took his wife and newborn son to a rented house in Toloha with the mission to bring religion and support to the people of Toloha. He had no means of payment, but knew that somehow things would come together. We rolled up to his place and took a quick ride around his village. The area was so poor because the dirt in the area was dusty and prevented the locals from having proper houses and schools and everything else that makes a solid community. In addition, water was far away and nothing would really grow in the local soil. This was the area in which we gave the most bikes away, so the people could get out of Toloha for water, food, work, and other important errands like visiting the hospital that would normally take about four hours (each way) to walk to.

On the first evening of scouting and meeting local villagers, one lady approached us as we were riding through and doing a bit of filming. She had no idea what we were doing in the village, but the fact that nearly every white person that comes to the area is there for some sort of aid. We weren't passing out bikes at that point, just rolling through, but she stopped us and through the translator thanked us for visiting her city and bringing aid to Toloha. We asked her a few questions about her situation and the surrounding area. She was raising two children on her own, and most of the time she couldn't feed her children because she would be out past dark gathering water for the family. She took us to her mud hut and showed us around the unlit interior, complete with chickens scurrying from room to room.

When we stepped back out of the hut, we immediately made the decision to share a bicycle with this woman. She was certainly in need, and although the pastors didn't select her as a recipient of one of the bikes we brought with us, we called an audible on the program and found a way to free up a bike for her (without inconveniencing anyone else--there were three bikes set aside as community bikes for Toloha, so we just repurposed one of them).

The woman's reaction drew something out of all of us. She began to cry and rapidly started praying and blessing us in Swahili. We hadn't seen a reaction this severe yet, but later that night when I had time to digest it, I realized that while a bike is a pretty simple thing to anyone that we know, the equivalent to what we are doing is showing up to a farmer's ranch who is struggling to survive and handing over a big F-350 truck with a free gas card. We are enabling these African people to help themselves survive and prosper as the gift of mobility is giving them an opportunity to have access to more food, work, water and education.

All of those months of raising money for the Tanzanian effort suddenly took on a totally new angle. Of course we were raising money for "charity", but now that charity had a face in our minds. This wasn't going to be a one-time mission for us, and the experience we had with that woman was a large reason why. We realized how easily we could impact people's lives through even the smallest bit of help, and that anything we do from here on out--no matter how big or small--is going to significantly improve the life of another human being.

This experience in Toloha was an obvious high point of the trip, and it energized everyone in our group to put in 110 percent for the remaining few days. We slowly made our way back to the Nyotastar Center, where we left our bike boxes and some other material for the return trip. We left Toloha after distributing the rest of the bikes, nearly all of our clothes, and anything else that wasn't absolutely necessary for the flight home. Once you get over to Africa and experience the feeling of helping the people in need, its hard to stop. We were literally digging through our pockets to give the people of Toloha everything that we could. Even the smallest things like ball-point pens can make a massive difference for a child (some schools won't allow children without writing utensils to attend).

We spent a night at the Nyotastar Center, packed our bikes and repacked what was left of our gear into our bags, and then woke up early the next morning to the eager smile of Jasper, our driver from Kivisini to Nairobi. Bikes and bags were loaded onto the Landcruiser with the help of nearly everyone in the surrounding village, and we made sure to thank everyone for their incredible hospitality that they'd shown us in the past twelve days.

The last goodbye to be said was to our guide, the Pastor. He was an unbelievable guide, who was incredibly patient with our group of mizungus. Even though he was driving us from point to point, he would frequently stop in random towns to make small deliveries or help people in need. There was no front to his program, he was a man of the people and he would be the first to reach out to his fellow Tanzanians in need. We were constantly impressed by him over the past two weeks, and even after we said our goodbyes and hucked my sleeping bag into the back of his truck for him, he continued to impress. Shortly after we climbed about Jasper's Landcruiser, we saw a white truck parked on the side of the road about a mile away, loading up some locals to take them into town on his way back up to the top of the mountain. I thought to myself: "his work is never done".

Neither is ours. Even though we flew to Africa and delivered bicycles to people in need, it was only just a drop in the bucket. Hans has done an incredible thing with his charity, and we've seen it firsthand. Coming back from Africa, we are even more motivated to help him out, and hope that the stories that we are sharing will motivate others to contribute to charities like Wheels4Life. Charities like his are taking all of our drops in the bucket and pouring it out for the people who need it the most.

More info:

www.hansrey.com

www.wheels4life.org

www.summerofshred.com





