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# BACK TO THE HIGH LIFE

Recently retrenched, recovering from a freak paragliding accident, and new to mountain biking... five days riding through Lesotho proved to be just the tonic to repair all ills for Shane Quinnell and Jon Frick.

## TOURING

Lesotho

DESPITE BEING NEARLY MIDDAY, WITH THE USUALLY SCORCHING AFRICAN SUN HIGH IN THE SKY, THE SLIGHT BREEZE WAS CRISP.

A result of the 3 100m altitude we were pedalling at. Despite the chilly wind, small beads of sweat still rolled down our sticky, sunblocked faces, pushed out by the effort of pedalling up what would normally be considered a mountain. A mountain on a road where the local adventure guides enthusiastically assured us there were only "a few ups and downs".

The route up the "hill" was at least five kilometres of gruelling dirt road. Our not-yet-numb butts ached, legs suffered and lungs burned with the lack of oxygen. However, we were in our element. Or at least I was. The fact we were tired, sore and slightly grumpy was proof we were witnessing a quintessential part of adventures; type two fun – the type that is only fun later.

The reality is I couldn't have been more stoked. We were part way through a five-day, 250-ish-kilometre mountain bike adventure, legging it through the Nepal of the South, the Mountain Kingdom of Lesotho. Seeing Lesotho had been a dream of mine ever since I first heard the history of the small landlocked, mountain-infested country. I had tried to get there a few times, but the omnipresent enemy, time, always fought back. The opportunity had now finally arisen from the otherwise-undesirable depths of a retrenchment enforced on my colleague Jon and I after commencing the jobs only three months beforehand.

### The (off)road to recovery

For me though the trip had a deeper draw, one that comes from a serious need for adventure and freedom after a period of confinement. My

#### ABOVE

Jon halfway up the first of many 'hills', forced to walk by his mountains of luggage

confinement had started when I badly broke both of my legs and back in a paragliding accident nine months earlier. Fortunately my spinal cord wasn't damaged, and with difficulty I learnt how to walk. Even so, my close call with the maker left me wheelchair bound for three months and housebound for another four. The trip was the light at the end of the tunnel, a chance to escape the incarceration and get back to the high life of mountains and adventure

sports which I need almost as badly as I do water and air.

Planning was dramatically accelerated by our notice period; we had one week. It started with a rushed, excitable phone call to a friend of a friend, whose husband helps manage Afriski in Lesotho. It turned out to be one of the best decisions I made.

The rest of the week comprised of getting necessities like luggage racks, spare tyres and, in Jon's



#### RIGHT

Rope, tape and boer-maak-'n-plan repairs to Shane's rack after it broke on day three.

#### BELOW

A trial by fire, the first of many mountains on the road of hills.



should have scared us. Loaded with us and our bikes, the small car's even smaller engine screamed in indignant high-pitched tones as it struggled its way up the pass to Afriski. Somehow, we finally made it, still intact.

### A very good place to start

Our first day in Lesotho consisted of a route suggested by the Afriski guides to the Drakensberg Escarpment. The guides were amazing and from start to finish helped make the adventure awesome. They plied us with mountains of local knowledge, helped us route-plan, lent us maps and a GPS, and even fetched us at the end of the trip.

Using it both as an adventure and acclimatisation day we took only a portion of our gear and returned to Afriski for the night. The acclimatisation was well needed; we were puffing and panting like hippos in a marathon after most hills. While fairly rocky the ride was well worth it. →

## THE TRIP WAS THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL



**TOURING**  
Lesotho

FREE STATE



DAY 1  
DAY 2  
DAY 3  
DAY 4  
DAY 5



EASTERN CAPE



**LEFT**  
Quite a show as we cooked our gourmet meal on our first day on the road.

**BELOW**  
Shane's Fuji resting up after a steep climb.

**OPPOSITE**  
School kids jostle for position to both get close to us for a look and get away from the strange mzungus.

The view from the escarpment was amazing and helped us unwind. I had a minor fall catching the lip of the track near the end of the ride which injured my already sore ankle and meant it bugged me for the rest of the trip. It also made me momentarily rethink the trip but the taste of adventure soon overcame logic.

Day two arrived all too quickly after a sleep shortened by hours spent poring over maps with the ever-helpful Afriski guides and packing our bikes. We took a quick photo, did last-minute checks and we were off on the real adventure.

We started by following the main road south towards Mapholaneng for about 20km. Though a tarred

road, our extra weight made climbing much tougher and affected braking and handling. We soon got to the Butha-Buthe turnoff we were looking for which turned west across the mountains to Ha Lejone. Excitement rose as the real adventure began.

We loved this first gravel road, whooping with excitement as we followed a downward slope into the mountains. But the excitement evaporated shortly after when we saw the road we had to follow. It ran directly over a large mountain.

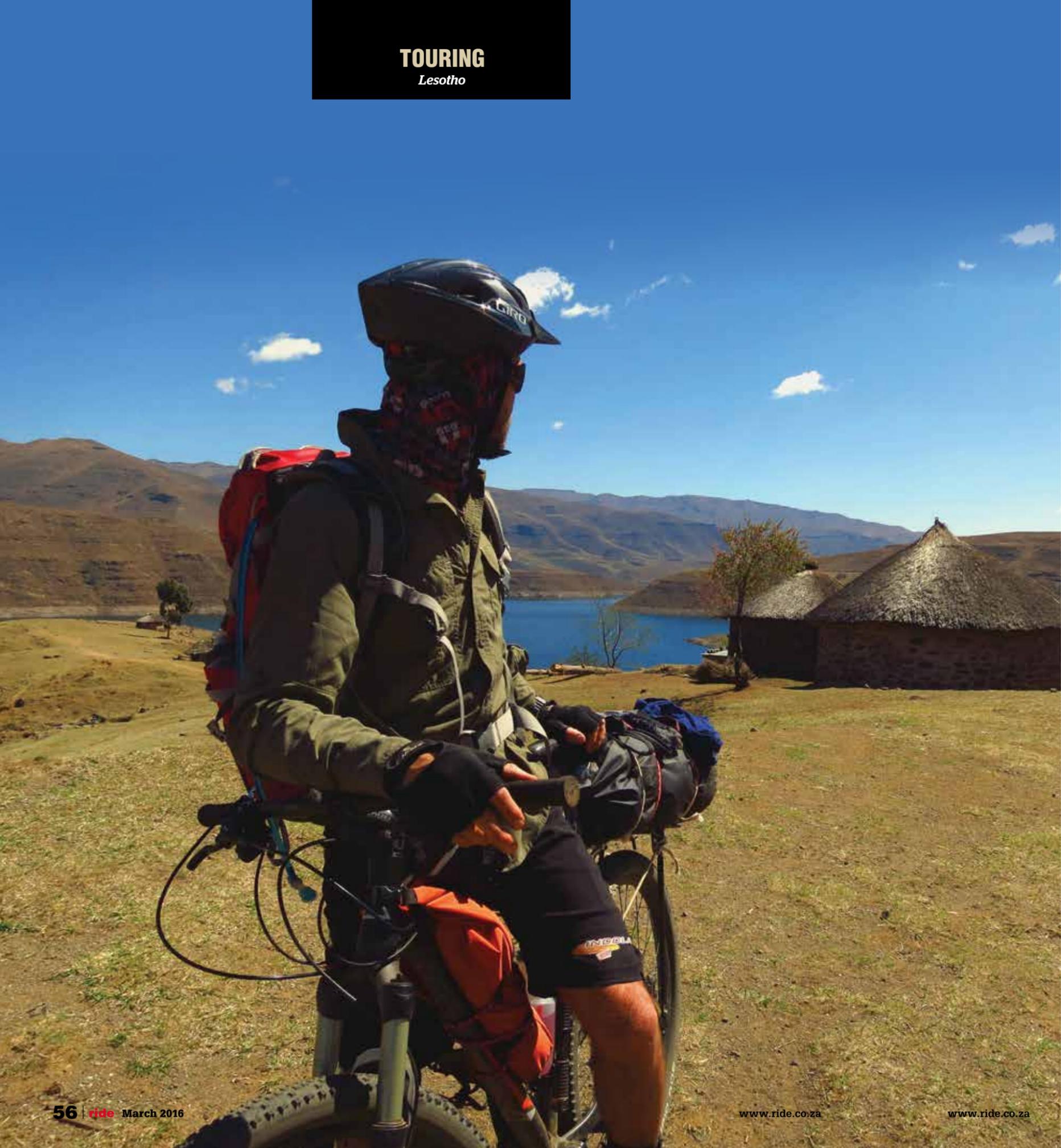
We reluctantly started up the mountain. Though steep, I managed to get into a rhythm, determined not to walk. Jon, however, rode a quarter of the way and couldn't help but dismount. He was carrying nearly one and a half times the gear I was and had just bought his bike; both were catching up with him. I finally got to the top and sat on a rock waiting for him. He followed up shortly after grumbling about the size of the mountain and the weight of his bike.

The day continued in this fashion well into the afternoon. Long downs were followed by long steep ups for roughly the next 30km. The size of the hills increased as we went, the highest reaching nearly 3 300m. →



## TOURING

Lesotho



At around the 50km mark our dreams finally came true. We reached the top of a hill to see a small dam, which according to our advisers was the end of the ups and start of a long down. The down outdid our expectations by far - running for about 12km until it flattened out through a beautiful high-sided valley. We roared down the hill ecstatic to be rid of the uphill. Varying the pressure on our brakes we managed to keep a vestige of control as our back wheels fishtailed under us, an emergency stop very unlikely.

We started looking for places to camp and found one alongside a river just before the next climb. After asking permission from the owner of a nearby house, we set up camp, made a gourmet meal of two-minute noodles and tuna and drifted off to sleep. We had ridden about 65km and accumulated easily over 1 100m of climbing by day end.

### ABOVE

Three types of transport meet: the Afriski guides on their enduro motorbikes, local Sothos on horses and us on our push-bikes.

### BELOW

Sore asses and long uphills; just part of everyday life in Lesotho. Katse Dam can be seen in the background.

### OPPOSITE

Million-dollar view, from the bomas on the Katse Dam.

### Rude reawakening

We mounted our steeds a little reluctantly the next morning, our raw bums protesting. There was also our well-deserved fear of the first hill. Neither of us could help but dismount. We were shocked when a beat-up old taxi came revving past and beat us up the hill.

The kilometres ticked by slowly. The terrain was less imposing than the day before, but our bodies were tired and not used to consistent riding. Or riding, for that matter. The hills were smaller but many were so steep they forced us to walk.

Eventually we rolled up to the trout farm we had been trying to reach the previous day and decided that, though we had only covered about 20km, it was time to rest. The sky was dark and my ankles and back were aching. It turned out to be a wise decision. Within an hour the skies unleashed rain and lightning, battering the small chalet we found ourselves in. When it finally stopped, we unsuccessfully tried our hand at fly fishing before buying two fish from the farm. We then had a fish braai and refixed my bike rack, which had fallen apart earlier that day, with some rope and insulation tape. Note to self: next time buy a rack worth more than R200. That was it, time for bed. →

## THE SKY WAS DARK ... MY BACK AND ANKLES WERE ACHING



# BY THE NUMBERS

DAY	DISTANCE	MAX. ALT	ALT. GAIN
Day 1	38km	3 322m	1 150m
Day 2	64km	3 260m	1 162m
Day 3	19km	2 296m	829m
Day 4	54km	2 354m	1 487m
Day 5	57km	2 305m	1 599m
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>232km</b>	<b>3 322m</b>	<b>6 227m</b>



We woke rejuvenated from the rest, even the omnipresent pain from my injuries dulled. We left quickly, keen to make up the time lost the day before. As we rode, the Katse Dam began to open up from the small river we had been following. After passing through Ha Lejone we reached an escarpment and saw the dam properly for the first time. It was beautiful.

Winding its way through the large golden mountains, the malachite dam looked like a long shiny serpent slithering its way through the mountains. Sadly though, while beautiful, the dam was low, a result of the drought which seems to be affecting most of Southern Africa. I couldn't help but despair at the knowledge that despite the drought,

**BELOW**  
Afriski, our starting point and operations centre.



as a society we are still doing very little to conserve water.

We continued along the dam for the next 40 kilometres towards the wall at the southern end. Though we originally planned to cross the mountains back to the tar road in the east, we decided to change plans and rather to circumnavigate the dam to shorten the trip. The road was beautiful as it wound along the mountains high above the dam's blue depths. We intermittently passed friendly Sotho's all of whom shared the same confused expression at seeing us and our bicycles. The kids constantly yelled "Sweets, SWEEETS!" and though cute, the constant harassment got irritating.

### Ill winds

As the day progressed, the wind rose till we were almost blown off our bikes. Our chances of camping in the small tent we brought were blown away with it. We rode on the few kilometres to Katse to try find alternative accommodation. The hotel gave us, and our grubby gear, disdainful looks as we asked about camping and directed us towards a

**ABOVE**  
The malachite serpent that is Katse Dam tries to lure Shane.

## WE HADN'T THOUGHT ABOUT HOW WE WERE GOING TO CROSS THE DAM

place near the taxi rank. We found ourselves at a small establishment attached to the local shebeen which looked like it possibly served the clientele from the bar who sought alternative 'refreshment'. It was a bed, though, and we were happy to be out of the wind.

The last day started with the realisation that we hadn't thought about how we were going to cross the dam. There was no bridge. Our hopes for a short day dropped when the GPS suggested that crossing required a 20km detour. Deflated, we pushed off.

The detour turned out to be even further than we thought and, after 26 kilometres, we finally reached the other side of the dam, about one kilometre across from where we started. Our short day became the

biggest day of climbing at 1 600m.

Not having planned for the distance we soon ran dangerously low on water and food. Only a MacGyver solution from Jon, siphoning water off a wet slope, eventually got us out of our parched situation. All we had for lunch was a dry packet of noodles which was a clear winner for the worst meal we had.

The road felt like it would keep going on forever. We just rolled on like two little hamsters in a giant wheel. The GPS indicated we were nearly on top of the car which was waiting for us but we had long since stopped believing.

Then, like an oasis appearing in the desert, the car glinted in the near distance. We were there! We freewheeled down the last hill whooping with excitement.

### Grand finale

We had done it: had an adventure, seen amazing pieces of Lesotho and met amazing people. We were tired and hungry with aching butts but it was worth it.

Like every good adventure, it tested us with long periods of type-two fun, but the sense of achievement and the experiences were worth the challenges.

Cycling Lesotho really was an amazing experience. I encourage others to venture into the country. I would recommend contacting Afriski if you are going, as the expert local knowledge and friendly assistance was priceless in making our trip awesome.

Though any transport is amazing, bicycle travelling really did make the experience that much more special. The nature of the transport gives you the opportunity to interact with the world and the unique people around you and there is no fuel required.

Give it a go, bicycle touring might just be your thing. [📸](#)