

Kate riding the rugged, dusty roads in the southwest of the Baja Peninsula



Credit: Chris Pennington

[Profile]

Kate Leeming

She's completed expeditions on six of the world's continents, cycling the equivalent of twice its circumference, much of it off-road. Now she's ready to take on Antarctica.

Words *Megan Holbeck*

There are nine bikes scattered around Kate Leeming's house. Together they tell the story of the 85,000km she's ridden over sand and snow, dirt and road during 30 years of expeditions. In the lounge room is her road bike, boxed up with a cracked head tube, a reminder of 1990s Europe where she discovered her passion for cycling. The leaking garage holds two mountain bikes: One carried her on 2004's nine-month expedition around Australia; the other accompanied her across Africa five years later.

These were shifted to make way for fat bikes for her next (and biggest) challenge: Becoming the first person to cycle across the Antarctic continent via the South Pole. She's been working on this one since 2013, and the proof is spread through the passageways and rooms of her Melbourne rental. Fat bike number one accompanied her to Norway in 2013 for the first test—establishing whether the project was even feasible. Fat bike two has the best story. Its first trip was to northeast Greenland in 2016, but since then it's been dedicated to sand training, including a couple of world-first trips. One followed the dry riverbed of the NT's Finke River. Another tackled the dunes of Namibia's coastline. Fat bikes three and four (trials in Arctic Canada in 2017 and Iceland in 2018, respectively) are boxed up, ready for Antarctica.

Bike number five was delivered for Leeming's eight-week expedition through South America starting in March. Unfortunately, she completed just 17 days before it was interrupted by COVID-19. It was to be the last of six preparatory trips for Antarctica, with one on each continent, each designed to be a viable stand-alone expedition while also preparing her for the polar challenges of cold, wind, altitude and difficulty of riding on snow. (Or the next best thing, sand.)

Lastly, there's Kate's mountain bike for everyday riding, bringing the tally to nine. As she says, "There's not quite a bike in every room, but..."

SPORT, SUCCESS AND FOCUS

I don't think I've ever met anyone more focused than Kate: I imagine her to-do lists and notes encompassing entire notebooks, cross-referenced, colour-coded and meticulously

ordered. We meet at Melbourne's St Kilda Beach on an insanely blustery 36°C day, our planned stroll becoming a sand-blasting fit for Namibia's notorious Skeleton Coast. She's wearing jeans but I don't think she even registers discomfort; for now she's just concentrating on the questions.

Kate walks like a squash player: ready to turn, accelerate or stop an inch from the wall. But this is tempered by her pace. It's as if she's keeping an eye on her destination and rationing her steps for maximum economy of effort. The same is true for her conversation and planning methods. It doesn't matter what we discuss—organising ten-month expeditions, cycling with armed guards in Somalia, establishing online education programs—her approach is the same. One step at a time, make the most of what you've got, do the work and the planning and the rest will follow.

This approach has been shaped by a lifetime of competition, with sport the backbone of her life. Kate grew up on a family farm in WA's southwest and was a natural sportswoman. In secondary school she boarded at Perth College, making state squads for squash, athletics, cricket and hockey. She graduated from University of Western Australia in 1988 with a teaching degree but didn't feel equipped for the job. "I'd just been going straight through the system," says Kate. "The kids probably knew more than I did about life." However, she'd always wanted to travel, so, with a group of friends, she organised a month-long university hockey tour to the UK. Kate didn't live in Australia again until 2002.

It was while living in England that Leeming discovered her two lifelong passions: real tennis and off-road cycling. Her two-wheeled fetish began in 1990 after she spent five days cycling in Ireland, and then followed it up with a group journey around France. Partway through her friends left, keen "to smoke dope and stuff". That wasn't Kate's thing. "I was in the middle of France and couldn't speak the language but I was on my bike and just loved it." This exploration continued in numerous trips over the next couple of years: through France and Spain; a 9,000km trip to Turkey and back; and a journey up to the North Cape of Norway, still one of her favourites.





Yuri Trusov, Greg Yeoman and Kate on the summit of 2200m West Sayan Pass, Russia

Credit: Kate Leeming



Credit: Greg Yeoman

While cycling in Arctic Norway, Kate had the idea for her first ‘proper’ expedition—the 1993 *Trans-Siberian Cycle Expedition*. The USSR had recently collapsed and Leeming’s plan was to become the first woman to cycle across ‘New Russia’, making a five-month, 13,400km trip from St Petersburg to Vladivostock.

A fortuitous meeting with British polar explorer Robert Swan gave Kate the confidence to extend herself, turning her personal ambition into an expedition with value to the wider world. Leeming knew of Swan and his achievements, including being the first person to walk to both the North and South Pole. When he came into the London health club where she worked, Kate cornered him. Swan took her under his wing, acting as the expedition’s patron and introducing her to invaluable contacts in Russia.

This was Kate’s first big expedition. She learnt as she went. She learnt how to put a journey into a form people could understand, with meaning and story and a vision for what it could achieve. She learnt about logistics—in less than four months she planned an itinerary, found sponsors and equipment, set up fundraising for children of the Chernobyl disaster, arranged Russian support (including accompanying cyclists), and found expedition partner Greg Yeoman. (In Kate’s typically direct style, she met his brother at a weekend party, then called Greg on the Monday and asked him to cycle across Russia with her.) This organisational feat is more impressive considering it was pre-internet, when telegram was Russia’s most reliable form of communication.

In Kate’s words, they nailed the expedition; the five-month trip finished one day ahead of schedule. In fact, bar the recent South American trip, all of Leeming’s expeditions have been completed on time, to budget, meeting all key milestones and without major incident. During Kate’s 36 months on expedition she’s ended up almost two weeks ahead of schedule!

Kate’s love of expeditions springs from her desire to bring a line on a map to life, to understand the world and its people better. During her Russian journey she filled the blank space

of Siberia with mountains and plains, and experienced the “almost embarrassing friendliness” of locals. She was riding through a nation in transition. “The price of a loaf of bread in St Petersburg was the equivalent of seven cents Australian. By the time we got to Vladivostock it was the equivalent of 40 cents. In six months.”

Kate returned to London with £14 in her pocket, finding a job at the Harbour Club in Fulham. This was fortuitous—the

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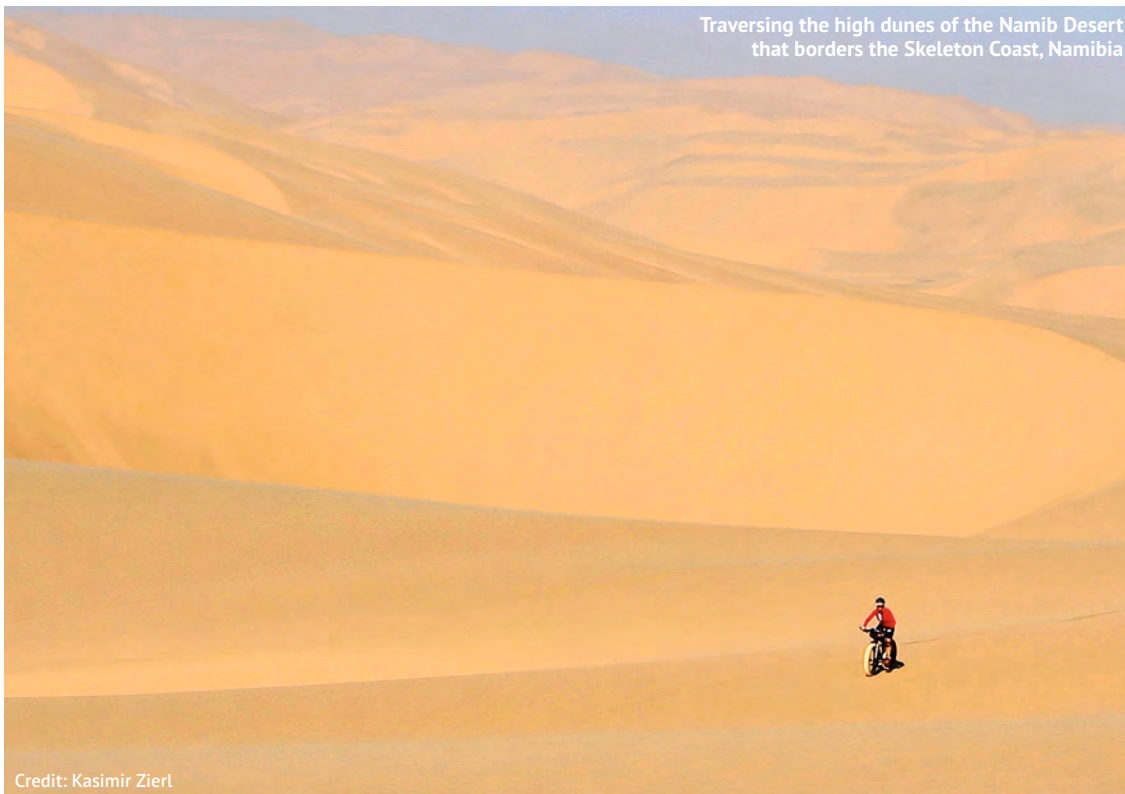
club had just built London’s first new real tennis court in 80 years. Played on a walled court with a hard ball, real tennis is the precursor to all modern racquet sports. Leeming describes it as strategic, “a mixture between tennis, squash and chess”. It was her first exposure to the game, and she picked it up quickly thanks to her diverse sporting skills, competitiveness and focus. She soon committed to real tennis, releasing the long-held vision of herself as an all-rounder to concentrate on one sport. It paid off. Within three years she had won both the singles and doubles titles at the 1996 Australian Open and become one of only two female real-tennis professionals worldwide.

Since then, real tennis has been the constant in her life, becoming her passion and livelihood, as well as forming her community. There are only 12,000 players worldwide and Kate describes it like a family, with great connections and real care, and through it she’s found love, travelled, and established a career. In 2002 she met fellow player (and now ex-husband) Arnaud Domange before they moved to Australia together for Kate to take up her new role as a professional at the Royal Melbourne Tennis Club. It’s a position she’s held ever since, with time off for expeditions.

Kate rides into the evening on the Tanami Road, NT



Traversing the high dunes of the Namib Desert that borders the Skeleton Coast, Namibia



Credit: Kasimir Zierl

Real tennis has brought Kate success, with rankings as high as world number two. But it also brought her only major injury, when she damaged her knee during a game in 1996. Despite eight operations, it's still—and this is the technical term—buggered. Leeming had to accept that continuing to compete at the highest level would result in further damage. However, cycling was okay...

Kate funnelled her energy into planning the *Great Australian Cycling Expedition* (GRACE). While most of her previous travel had been overseas, this nine month, 25,000km, UNESCO-supported journey was a personal discovery of the country, beginning and ending in Canberra. More than 7,000km of it was off-road, tackling the rough terrain of the Gulf Track, Tanami Track, Gunbarrel Highway and Canning Stock Route (CSR). She also made it home for a visit, riding through the back gate of the family farm. GRACE let her understand her own country and how it fit together, giving her a deep connection to the people and the land.

Both the Nullarbor Crossing and the CSR had family connections. In 1896 Kate's great great uncle, William Snell, cycled from WA to Melbourne to propose to his childhood sweetheart, becoming the second person to cycle across the Nullarbor Plain. (After the wedding he cycled back again, while his wife took the boat.) Snell also reconditioned two-thirds of the wells along the CSR, the section of GRACE that Kate found most physically demanding. She rode a regular mountain bike for 28 days along this 1,800km sand track, crossing four deserts and more than 1,000 sand dunes up to 16m high. It was on this stretch, looking out at Lake Disappointment, that the idea of cycling across Antarctica first surfaced. "It was 45 degrees in the shade and it just looked like Antarctica. I thought, 'That's a good thing to imagine right now.'"

But the hardest bit of the trip was yet to come. With a month to go, Kate's husband said he was leaving her. It devastated Leeming, giving her an insight into how much her mind could disable her body. She was tight-chested. She couldn't sleep. She found it hard to function. It is the only time Leeming has ever contemplated quitting. (Although she didn't.)

BREAKING THE CYCLE

Kate returned to Melbourne, the Royal Melbourne Tennis Club and her 'normal' life, working out what that looked like, and what she wanted it to be. As part of this process, she began planning her next challenge—a bike crossing of Africa. The continent had long fascinated her, but she needed to find the purpose and story to turn this idea into a marketable adventure. "The purpose is always integral with the expedition. The story is essential. That's how people learn and that's what people are going to follow."

Leeming enjoys this creative process of taking the blank canvas of an idea, sketching a rough plan and story arc, then shading in the details with organisation and research. It gives her trips a deeper meaning and purpose: to understand how the world fits together and then sharing this, through online education programs, books, articles, public talks and film. (To this end, she's written two huge coffee-table tomes, countless magazine articles, produced two films and set up the 'Breaking the Cycle' educational portal and accompanying school program.)

She only moves from the planning to the organisational phase when she's really sure, saying in *Outdoor Magazine* the "transition from dream to reality—plucking up the courage to announce the project and then launching into the organisational phase—is, in my experience, the biggest challenge of all."

Her 2009 trip, *Breaking the Cycle Africa*, was planned as a west-to-east crossing of the continent through countries most in need of improved education, exploring how this contributes to extreme poverty. Kate's expedition was designed to highlight complex problems and potential solutions to the resulting issues: things like health and HIV, women and education, peace and security, economic empowerment. Beginning on Senegal's most western point and ending with an armed escort in Puntland, Somalia, after 299 days and 20 countries, it wasn't the most direct route, forming the shaky U of a two-year-old with a crayon. Asked to nominate highlights while being buffeted by St Kilda's hot, sandy



Kate testing the first ever AWD fatbike, an engineering marvel made by Steve Christini

Credit: Phil Coates



Meeting students in Uganda
Credit: Helen Brown



With students in Namibia
Credit: Kasimir Zierl



Swirling sands on the Skeleton Coast, Namibia

Credit: K. Zierl



Mud nearing the Gabon-Congo border
Credit: Z. Kratky

swirl, Kate struggled. Her eyes narrowed in both concentration and protection. “Africa just feels like where we come from,” she finally said. “Just the humility, especially of the women—the humility and the humanity.”

This was Leeming’s first supported trip, and a huge step up in terms of logistics, fundraising and organisational difficulty. Costs alone illustrate the scale. The Russian expedition took four months to organise and cost about \$17,000; Australia took eight months and cost around \$50,000. She spent 18 months and around \$200,000 organising Africa.

This is small change compared to *Breaking the Cycle South Pole*. Kate has spent seven years organising and training for the trip so far, and is still securing funding to meet the minimum budget of US\$575,000 for the supported expedition.

To give some idea of the difficulty of this challenge, it’s worth briefly recapping the (very short!) history of cycling in Antarctica. The advent of fat bikes around 2006 made cycling on soft surfaces possible, with fat tyres increasing flotation on snow and sand. This led to cycling in Antarctica being technically feasible, and four people have since taken bikes to the South Pole. All have been laudable efforts, with varying amounts of actual riding. (Especially with the unsupported attempts, the bikes have been pushed or pulled for most of the way.) British Olympic cycling hero Chris Hoy’s experience shows the difficulty of getting Antarctic expeditions off the ground. In 2017 he announced on TV show *Top Gear* his intention to ride across Antarctica, enlisting actor Jude Law and planning a documentary series. Even with their profiles, they couldn’t make it happen.

Antarctica’s extreme environment and remoteness make logistics challenging. And expensive. The necessary support vehicle is exorbitantly priced. A litre of fuel is \$30. Logistics alone, Leeming estimates, will cost half a million dollars.

Then there are the technical challenges, starting with the bike. The five fat bikes decorating Kate’s home are bespoke, all-wheel drive designs from American bike manufacturer and sponsor Steve Christini. Building them was

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extraordinarily challenging; the patented shaft drive system needed to accommodate the widest tyres possible—a whopping 13cm. She took the first iteration with her to Norway in 2013 and has made two more trips since to refine her bike, her systems and her clothing: Greenland in 2016, and four weeks of extreme-cold training in the Yukon in 2017. These helped identify her weakness—resilience to the cold—and develop ways of coping at temperatures down to -30°C.

READY AND WAITING

She’s been ready for *Breaking the Cycle South Pole* since 2017: Her team is picked, her gear sorted, her logistics in place. All she needs now (and it’s a big ‘all’) is the money to make it happen. Enter a series of preparatory expeditions, designed to hone the skills she’ll need in Antarctica, as well as keep her fit and prepared. “You get a bit soft sitting at home”, says Kate.

There’s been no danger of that. In 2018 Kate spent 24 days cycling Mexico’s Baja Divide to develop her sand skills, before heading to Iceland for a two-week polar training expedition. A few months later she headed to the NT for a 13-day trip along the Finke’s rough, dry riverbed—great practice for Antarctica’s sastrugi. She finished the year with a 24-day, 1,200km trip in India’s Ladakh region, cycling up to 5,364m in altitude, as well as helping install solar power in a remote mountain village. In May 2019, she spent six weeks riding Namibia’s entire 1,621km coastline.

Each trip had its own challenges. The Finke River trip was her roughest ever in terms of terrain. Namibia’s Skeleton Coast had appalling sand, far worse than the sand of St Kilda

Beach we were walking past. But that wasn't the only reason Leeming struggled to cover her planned 50km a day. There was the lack of roads. The constant, gale-force headwind. The diamond mines. The lions....

"Hang on—the lions?" I interrupted, not sure I'd heard right over the wind. Turns out I had. Prides of the world's last desert-adapted lions live in northern Namibia; Kate had to run the gauntlet and ride right past them. She waited a day until they'd moved a bit, then went "like the clappers".

This year, Leeming planned to spend two months in South America, riding from Cusco, Peru, up to Machu Picchu, then heading through Bolivia and Chile. A third of the way through, everything was going well. And then, abruptly, it wasn't. COVID-19 struck. International borders were shut. Curfews were established. Kate was lucky to escape: her trip home involved four legs and 53 hours in transit. (You can read about her retreat on Wild's website: wild.com.au/features/curveballs-can-be-a-positive).

With the world in lockdown, Kate is like the fat bikes in her hallway: boxed up and waiting, but ready to go. When the world reopens, Kate will resume her South American trip, which she will undoubtedly finish on time and to budget, bar the forced interruption while the world irrevocably changes. And then she will be done, with all planned trips complete except Antarctica.

On the baking day we met in Melbourne, Kate outlined the situation, her frustration obvious. She is ready. Has been for years. But she is getting older and needs to get money and sponsors to get the trip done. Then she can move on to other, different dreams.

As challenging as the trip will be, the hardest part is the logistics of getting there. "I reckon if I get to the start," says Leeming, "I will get to the finish." I don't doubt that for a second. **W**

You can watch Kate Leeming's *Breaking the Cycle Greenland* at AdventurePlus.com. She is the author of *Out There and Back* and *Njinga: Breaking the Cycle in Africa*. The latter is also being turned into a documentary series. She is currently working on a new film *Diamonds in the Sand* about her 2019 cycle down the Namibian coast. Find out more about Kate at www.breakingthecycle.education

CONTRIBUTOR: Megan Holbeck has pitched her tent in the family adventure camp, revelling in the slow pace and low demands for both fitness and navigational ability. She will emerge a fitter, wiser, more patient person in a decade or so. Until then, she explores with words.



Credit: Phil Coates



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