

One woman's epic bike trek to Timbuktu and beyond

■ Lawrence Money

Like Australia's fabled Black Stump, Timbuktu is that faraway spot on the map that everyone has heard of but few have ever visited. Melbourne sports-woman Kate Leeming has been there – and it is a fair bet she is the only Westerner to have travelled there by bicycle.

Timbuktu – or Tombouktou in French – is in Mali, on the edge of the Sahara Desert. "It was a Mecca for scholars in the 1500s, with twice the population of London, but it was ransacked by the Moroccans. It was only after Mali became independent that the local families brought out the valuable books from hiding. There are now many libraries in Timbuktu."

Yes, Australia's royal tennis women's champion has found her tales of Africa have made her one heck of a dinner guest since she pedalled solo 22,000 kilometres from west to east across Africa four years ago. Last month a film of the journey won two awards at the Action on Film International Film Festival in Los Angeles – best documentary (cinematography) and best documentary (sport). Leeming this week also launched a 346-page book, *Njinga*.

"Njinga means bicycle in one African language – and is the name of a famous African queen in another," she says.

Her extraordinary 10-month adventure led to Puntland, on the horn of Africa, where the president provided soldiers in two bulletproof vehicles to accompany her. When the party came

under fire from two snipers, "the soldiers jumped off, fired back and eventually said it was OK to continue", she says. She cycled off at top pace.

In the Congo she was surrounded by 10 men as a policeman took her passport away for inspection. "One asked me if I wanted sex," says Leeming who politely declined. "I thought: this could go horribly wrong." But with rare exceptions, the African men treated her with great respect.

There were falls off the bike, attacks by tsetse flies and bouts of gastric illness and chest infections. "After that I stopped eating street food", she says.

At one stage in Puntland the vehicles suddenly veered off on a new route. "I found out later that 20 al-Shabaab militants had set up camp in the village we were heading for," she says.

Leeming, a former teacher who grew up on a West Australian wheat and sheep farm, planned her journey meticulously and says she rarely felt unsafe even though she cycled alone for most of the time. For thousands of kilometres she was greeted with friendly, albeit curious, smiles and hospitality.

Already a veteran of a two-wheel adventure – in 1998 she became the first female to cycle across Russia – Leeming says the aim of her journey was to educate herself and the public about Africa. The experience does not seem to have curbed her enthusiasm for "stepping outside my comfort zone".

Already Leeming is planning to ride a "polar cycle" across the Antarctic.

Kate Leeming has written a book about her epic cycling adventures through Africa.

Photo: Eddie Jim

