

# TRAVEL PLAY LIVE

The Heartbeat of Australian Women's Adventure & Travel



AU\$12.95 ISSUE #1 SPRING 2015

ADVENTURE x EMPOWER x INSPIRE x DREAM x CHANGE



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*Changing the world one  
turn of the wheel at a time.*

WITH KATE LEEMING

What do Africa, Russia, Australia & soon Antarctica have in common? Kate Leeming has ridden her bike across them. Sometimes you hear about an adventure that seems so outrageous that you question the adventurers motivation; are they mad? When I first heard of Kate Leeming's adventures, I'll be honest I was gobsmacked. After speaking with her, I was inspired. Upon reading the introduction in her book Njinga, I was excited to bring you her story.





I had discovered my passion, but realised that there was a far greater value to these journeys than personal satisfaction. - Njinga



**Growing up there were a few events that kindled a fire in your adventurous soul, can you tell us a little more about those events?**

Growing up on a wheat and sheep farm in Western Australia, I remember my grandmother telling me the story about her uncle, William Snell, a pioneer who in 1897 became the second person to cycle across Australia when he pedalled from Menzies in the Western Australian goldfields to Melbourne to propose to his childhood sweetheart. Fortunately she accepted and they were married. He then put her on a boat bound for Fremantle and cycled all the way back again.

I enjoyed cycling for fitness and always dreamed of travelling but never imagined what I could achieve on a bike until after university when I travelled to the UK, initially playing hockey for my university. After the tour I stayed in Europe and it was then that I first tried a short cycle excursion in Ireland. Over the next two years I cycled a total of 15,000km through Europe as my personal exploration, from Spain to Turkey, through to the Nord Kapp, Norway, the most northerly point of mainland Europe. This is where I discovered my passion for travelling by bike.

**What was it about riding a bike that appealed to your sense of adventure?**

Travelling by bicycle suited me because I was able to combine my natural interest in geography with various attributes that have enabled me to also be a successful sporting professional - physical and mental strength, ability to focus, self-discipline, persistence, ability to work under pressure and competitiveness. Travelling by bike, I found, gives a close and personal connection with the people and the land and an incredible sense of place; a unique perspective of how the world fits together. I love bringing a line on a map to life.

**After discovering your passion for cycling, what was it that made you realise there was a greater value to these journeys?**

After my Norwegian trip, just as I was starting to plan my first major expedition across Russia, I met polar explorer Robert Swan, OBE, first person in history to have walked to both the North and South poles. It was Robert who inspired me to take it to another level.

I learned from him that there was a lot more value to what I was doing than simply riding a bike and ever since then I have always tried to create some sort of benefit for the people I meet and places that I have the privilege of exploring.

**Your first major expedition was the Trans-Siberian Cycle Expedition, tell us a little about what that expedition was in aid of.**

The 1993 Trans-Siberian Cycle Expedition was a five-month, 13,400 kilometre bicycle journey from St Petersburg to Vladivostok to aid the 800,000 children of Chernobyl.

Accompanied by Brit Greg Yeoman and five different Russian cyclists who covered various sections of the trip, the 153 day expedition was completed one day ahead of schedule, before the onset of the severe Russian winter and despite tackling the 1,500km swamp in eastern Siberia, where no vehicles could pass.

This was an opportunity to learn more about the new Russia emerging after 70 years of communism. In completing the expedition in a continuous line, I became the first Australian and first woman in history to cycle the breadth of the 'new Russia' unsupported.

I returned to Australia in 2003 and, always wanting to see how my own country compared to the many other places I had cycled, organised the Great Australian Cycle Expedition (GRACE Expedition), a 25,000 kilometre, nine and a half month journey through Australia, 7000km of which were off road on remote tracks including the Cape York Peninsula Development Road, Gulf Track, Tanami Track, Gunbarrel Highway and Canning Stock Route. The GRACE Expedition was a Demonstration Activity for the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. I created a special education programme and visited remote schools, outstations and took part in some school of the air lessons. To share and realise more of the value of my story, the next challenge was to write and publish my first book, Out There and Back about the Australian expedition.

**You then turned your attention to Africa. What is it about the African continent and her peoples that inspires you?**

Growing up, I had always been intrigued by Africa and the unmatched diversity of its people, nature and landscapes, but previously

I didn't have the confidence to pull off a major journey there because of the overwhelming number of reports, mostly through the media, that it was a difficult and dangerous place. I started to become aware of some of the continent's humanitarian problems after the Live Aids concerts in 1985 and from then my interest in development issues grew. Being a qualified teacher, I have a passion for the importance of education and when studying a map showing levels of illiteracy across the continent, I could see a line of countries spanning the continent from west to east at the base of the Sahara Desert that were in most need of improved education. This was how the concept for the Breaking the Cycle in Africa expedition germinated.

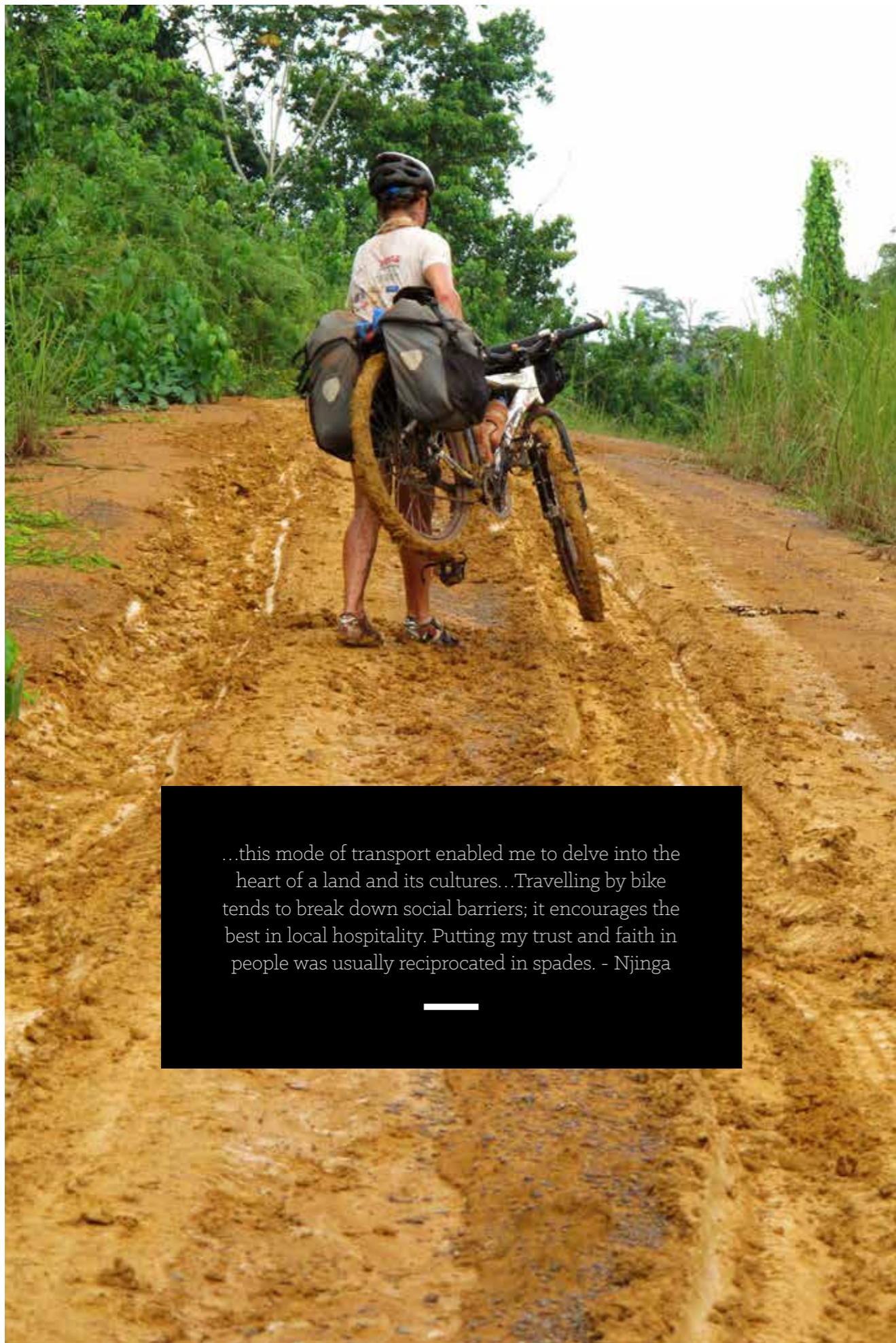
**What was the core goal for Breaking the Cycle Africa?**

While the physical aim of the Breaking the Cycle in Africa expedition was to cycle from Africa's most westerly tip, Pointe des Almadies in Senegal to its most easterly landmark, Cape Hafun in Puntland, Somalia in a continuous line, the real mission was to explore the causes and effects of extreme poverty and specifically, what is being done to give a 'leg up' rather than a 'hand out'. I wanted to create a positive story about Africa, a story of optimism and hope, because nothing ever develops and no one is inspired by being negative.

**You wanted to cycle across Africa in a continuous line - why?**

I wanted to demonstrate (metaphorically at least) that everything is connected; every issue, every culture, including my own. By relating the story through my education programme and website and post-expedition, my book, feature documentary and presentations, I wanted to link non-Africans to Africans to help dispel some of the many misconceptions about the continent and its issues.

I could find no record of anyone else completing the journey in an unbroken line previously, at least not to the tip of Cape Hafun. Cycling every kilometre was also essential to maintain my personal discipline – if I missed out a section of the line, it would then be easier to miss more sections when times were tough or when negotiating with troublesome authorities. Diversions off the route by vehicle were allowed and necessary



...this mode of transport enabled me to delve into the heart of a land and its cultures... Travelling by bike tends to break down social barriers; it encourages the best in local hospitality. Putting my trust and faith in people was usually reciprocated in spades. - Njinga

to visit certain projects and to keep within the schedule, but the line of my journey had to remain continuous.

**You have now turned your attention to cycling across Antarctica. What are your goals for this expedition?**

For many years I have dreamed of cycling across Antarctica, inspired by both stories of the explorers of the heroic age (Mawson, Scott, Amundsen and Shackleton) and by modern explorers, such as my mentor, Robert Swan, but I didn't have the confidence or experience to take the first steps of organising such a journey. As I learned about many of the poverty-related issues during my journey across Africa, I often felt frustrated and powerless to do anything about them and vowed to act to make more of a difference in the future. My motivation to take on Breaking the Cycle South Pole, which will be the first bicycle crossing of the Antarctic continent, is to satisfy my passions for exploration and education and as a humanitarian. The purposes of the expedition are to raise money and awareness for HIV/AIDS in Africa (via Charity Miles, (RED) and the Global Fund) and to run a global education program about leadership. It is again supported by UNESCO and I have several educational stakeholders primed to contribute once I can find enough funding to make this expedition, due to start in November 2016, a reality.

**What are some of the major hurdles in preparing for these kinds of expeditions?**

Making the expedition happen in the first place is the most difficult aspect of my undertakings. And, as my expeditions become more complex and require larger budgets, the journey to reach the start point becomes more arduous.

Taking it from the vision and pulling it all together is like conducting a finely-tuned orchestra in a complex musical score. With each of my previous expeditions, I have managed by being reasonably good shape at the start as I know I can adapt to the fitness demands in the first few weeks, but for Antarctica I have planned a series of training trips and test runs to ensure I am physically ready, the team is prepared and the equipment and logistics will allow me to go the distance. This has meant developing some innovative technology such as the first all-wheel drive fat-bike and custom made clothing.

There is no secret to overcoming this stage except extreme hard work, virtually around the

clock at times, otherwise it will never happen. By the time I reach the edge of the Antarctic continent at start of Breaking the Cycle South Pole expedition, like with previous ventures, I will be confident of completing my mission. Setting off is always a relief.

**What have been some of the key highlights for you personally from undertaking these adventures?**

The start and finish of each expedition is always the most exciting; the start because the often tedious and stressful organisation phase is over and the adventure – when I am totally in my element – begins; the finish because I have successfully made it and achieved what I set out to do. Of these, arriving at the derelict lighthouse at Cape Hafun, the most easterly point of Africa, having cycled 22,040km in an unbroken line from Senegal, was the most exciting. The mayor of Hafun village at the base of the desolate tabletop mountain confirmed that no one had cycled across the continent to reach Africa's most easterly landmark before. Some of the soldiers who were protecting me, as well as my sister and cameraman (who travelled in one of the bulletproof vehicles), fired a few rounds out over the Indian Ocean to celebrate. It was a special moment for all involved.

**What have been some of the struggles you have had to face?**

I think overcoming the mental hurdles is the most significant challenge – the body will only do what the mind tells it to. My most mentally challenging experiences just about always arise when I am between twenty and forty percent of the way through a long journey. In Africa it was after the first couple of months when I was suffering from regular bouts of gastro and chest infections while spending long days pushing into the teeth of the Harmattan trade winds that whip sand off the Sahara Desert. In Australia it was one third of the way up the Canning Stock Route when I was suffering from the effects of dehydration and was surrounded by seemingly endless sand ridges in the Little Sandy Desert. In Russia it was entering the mosquito-infested wind-swept Siberian Steppe east of the Ural Mountains. In each situation, I am over the excitement of the start and the constant physical stresses begin to overwhelm my mental state. I have never wanted to give up because of my strong motivation to complete each particular journey, my belief in the cause(s) of the projects is deep-rooted and the fear of failure is too great.

I have developed many techniques to keep the pedals turning; break the task into manageable, sometimes minute goals, search for the beauty in my surroundings, trap favourite songs in my head, put the perceived dilemma into perspective with the whole undertaking, that is, think of the big picture. It is always important to focus on the question 'how do I get through' rather than 'what will stop me'.

**In preparation for your polar expedition you are leading a trip through the Zaskar, Himalaya and Pir Panjal Ranges, tell us a little about that.**

Several years ago I did a walking trek in Ladakh in the far north of India and fell in love with the region, vowing to return one day to see what it is like to cycle on some of the highest roads in the world. In Antarctica, the highest continent on Earth, I will be mostly cycling at an altitude of between 2000 and 3000 metres, so I think it is important to do some altitude training beforehand. I thought it a perfect opportunity to return to the Indian Himalaya and scheduled one of my training trips to cycle up the Manali Road to Leh in Ladakh. When World Expeditions offered for me to lead one of its cycle trips through this region, I jumped at the opportunity. I can't wait to return to the region and share these experiences with a small group of like-minded adventurous cyclists. The 15-day trip is fully catered for with vehicle support as we traverse the stunning Zaskar and Pir Panjal ranges on the Manali Road, average altitude, 4100 metres.

**If people would like to read your book Njinga, find out more about what you are up to or would like to support your expeditions, where can they go?**

My website, [www.KateLeeming.com](http://www.KateLeeming.com) is the hub to go to where you can find out more about me, my previous expeditions across Russia, 25,000km through Australia and west to east across Africa, blogs and updates about how my Breaking the Cycle South Pole venture is developing, read excerpts and purchase copies of my books, Out There and Back (hard copy or e-book) and Njinga (hard copy) and connect with me to book a speaking presentation.

**If you would like to find out more about Kate's World Expedition Trip, you can by going to the website:**

[www.worldexpeditions.com.au](http://www.worldexpeditions.com.au)



[www.travelplaylive.com.au](http://www.travelplaylive.com.au)