

Destination unknown the Computershare Change A Life Cycle

Report by Editor
Photos: Craig Dutton



On 10 September 2009, sixty leading executives associated with South African businesses departed on the second Change A Life Cycle, organised by the share registry company, Computershare. The pun in the name of this event is intended, because this is a cycling tour, born of a desire to salvage something positive after Computershare senior manager, Mike Thompson was murdered during a robbery at his house in September 2007. It is a testament to the calibre of Mike's colleagues and clients that they chose not to say someone must really do something about South Africa's shocking violent crime statistics (at least 50 people die as a result of violent crime in South Africa every day) – they did something, and launched the Mike Thompson Trust to fund anti-crime initiatives. Pedalling for eleemosynary purposes is already a popular pastime, but the intention was always to make this tour smart enough to be exclusive with a good conscience... you need big bait to catch big fish! A formidably well-organised event around the Victoria Falls collected R2.3 million for the Trust in 2008.

Faced with a tougher economic climate in 2009, the organisers were undaunted. Sponsors stepped up to the plate: Computershare, the JSE, Kelly Group and Sun International were the primary sponsors of the 2009 Change A Life Cycle, and more than half of last year's participants simply said: "send me the bill" when time came to deposit the R20 000 entry fee... All they knew for sure was that they needed their passports, and that they would be based

on the luxury Rovos Rail train, cycling for four consecutive days on road bikes, and travelling to a new destination every night. I was the lucky journalist who joined them on this tour!

Out of the big smoke

The where and how of the Mystery Tour remained a mystery despite a dizzying calendar of *meet the team* events, news letters, training rides and a marketing campaign consisting of post cards and parcels dispensing tantalising hints at the possible location of each day's ride. From the lavishly restored Central Park Station in Pretoria, we steamed away knowing only that we were going so far that the whole first day was dedicated to travel.

Neither words, nor images can really do justice to the stately sway of a Rovos Rail carriage, and gradually, even the most stressed out executives surrendered to the clink of heavy silver on good bone china and the glint of crystal in the dining carriages. Over the next few days we would be mock-captives in our gilt cage of restored period rolling stock, where delicious food and drink flowed freely, and there was always someone to talk to in the observation cars, dining rooms and lounges, when we were not snoozing in our cabins. Deprived of nothing but our sense of direction, the cozy confines of the train persuaded us to get to know not just the people with whom we spent time on the road each day, but also those sitting where there happened to be a free seat in the dining car, or those on a quest for something at the other end of the

train, encountered by chance in the narrow corridors. Cell phone embedded GPS units returned only spotty data, and by late afternoon on the first day, glances at the vast grassy landscape flashing by the windows no longer tried to pinpoint our location. The first route briefing meticulously plotted left and right turns over more than the promised number of kilometres, with a minuscule altitude gain, and a Google fly-through... We might as well have been heading to the moon for all the sense it made without a location!

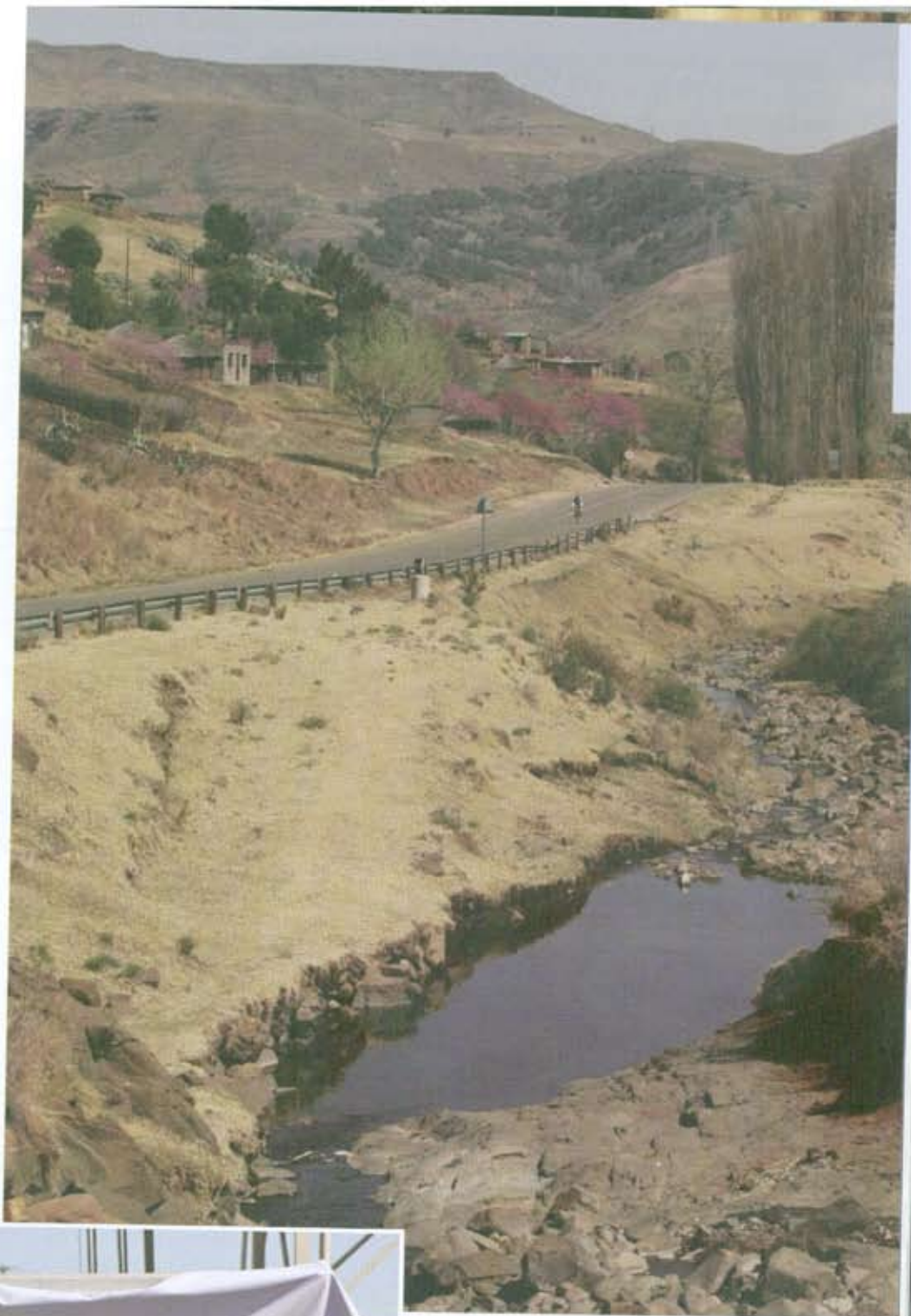
Ja, but where are we?

Daylight and the first day of cycling brought a thermometer just about stuck at one degree Celsius, with kilometre after kilometre of quiet roads and good tar surfaces leading the cyclists away from a railway siding in – Moerengon? For safety, the riders were divided into groups riding roughly at beginner, intermediate and advanced pace, with a ride captain and a dedicated follow vehicle each, to carry basic puncture repair equipment and spares, day packs and the mountains of clothing discarded as each day warmed up. Carriages at the back of the train were specially modified to carry the bicycles in just as much comfort as their owners, and on the first day we were astonished to bump into Alan van Heerden when we went to fetch our bikes soon after 06:00. He was invited along as one of the celebrity cycling guests and was only scheduled to leave later with the fastest group, but there he was at the back of the train, helping people to ready their

bikes and pump their tyres. Over the days that followed, he not only broadened our cycling vocabulary with some choice Flemish expressions, but tirelessly repositioned wayward cleats, saddles and handle bar angles in pursuit of that cycling Nirvana where everyone likes riding a bike as much as he does!

We left Oranjerivier Station, and encountered road signs to Petrusville and Hopetown before a brief detour to the right wing settlement of Orania, where we were baffled to find very good real koeksisters next to a six foot facsimile of one, extolling heaven only knows what virtue... A hundred windmills later, it had warmed up a bit and we arrived at the lunch stop, overlooking the vast Vanderkloof dam (with hydroelectric capabilities, noga!). The wind had picked up, the terrain in the vicinity of the dam was a bit more hilly than we had encountered earlier, and the kilometres were adding up, so the riders really needed their last tea stop, positioned at about 125km. There were some objections by the local traffic authorities, and it was interesting to watch the body language as Computershare CEO, Stan Lorge went to negotiate with them. Crisis averted, we had our tea stop, and poor Stan lit another cigarette. I might not approve, but I can't say I blame him! The last 25km back to the train parked at Kraankuil Station was downhill – a good leg-loosener for the following day's ride, which promised to be another 150km excursion into the unknown.

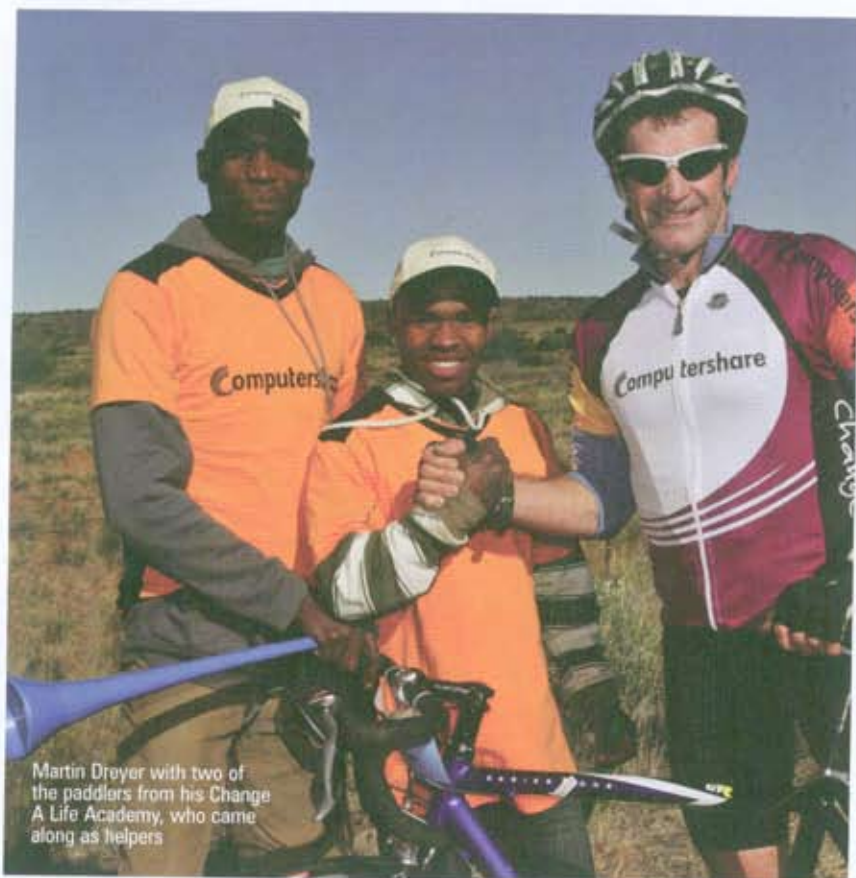
Each carriage on a Rovos train has a dedicated host or hostess, and at the end of the day's ride, all their tidying efforts would be undone in record time by a fresh onslaught of sweaty kit and clutter, as the ensuite bathrooms produced freshly scrubbed takers for still more daily gifts, food, drink, and conversation. That evening, the train's journey back in the direction from which we had come was interrupted for a spectacular track-side feast on a bed of carpets and brocade cushions under a kazillion stars.



Moerengon, Eishdisnice, Muthlungurabi, Sumbigriver, Verde Faka Vie?

Sometimes massage tables were even set out under the trees. No expense or effort was spared in preparing these stops, but the stand-out moment of this day was one that money could not buy. Not long after passing through Bethulie, we reached the second stop at 80km. The location was unremarkable, but no one wanted to leave until the result of the final game in the Tri Nations series was broadcast over the radios in the support vehicles. South Africa beat New Zealand 32-29!

Riding in the intermediate group, most of us rolled through to take our turn at the front at a sensible ride-all-day pace, but things were not always so easy in the



Martin Dreyer with two of the paddlers from his Change A Life Academy, who came along as helpers



JSE day - sometimes going up is not a good thing!

other two groups... At least once a day our calm would be shattered by the fast group responding to some inexplicable compulsion to race as they went by, while the slower group struggled to find a pace that everyone could maintain. The last stop of the day was at 119km with a glorious view of the Gariep Dam, and here I saw a whole new side to Malcolm Lange, who was one of the other cycling celebrities invited along for the ride. Although no one has won more races than he, and I have reported on his cycling escapades hundreds of times, I have generally found him to be a bit aloof and shy, but there he was, giggling at the fact that he had just set a new record for the number of hours spent in cycling shorts in his life. Malcolm cheerfully spent the afternoon riding with the slower riders, teaching them how to draft, and helping them up the hills. The ride ended with a Karoo lamb on a spit at the Forever Resort below the town of Gariep.

One really hard day is a tradition at the Change A Life Cycle, and we knew it was coming... That night's route briefing was as vague as ever about where, but for once the altitude charts told us something worth seeing: with more than 300km already in the legs, 2300m of altitude gain over 90km was going to HURT!

Dreyer Diesel

Two days of quiet roads came to a rude end, as daybreak spat the cyclists out among the taxis, cars and newspaper hoardings of Maseru, with the huge mountains of Lesotho looming ahead. Tracing the Makhaleng river along the A3 road to the Mohale dam, we faced Bushman's Pass and the not inappropriately named God Help Me Pass (2318m) followed by Blue Mountain Pass (2641m). According to the information recorded

by my heart rate monitor, I spent 74% of this day riding uphill!!! Long before we reached the first water stop, the groups had splintered, as everyone tried to find a pace they could at least bear, if not enjoy. I looked at some of the gradients, and feared the worst. Many of my tour companions were already tired from the new distance records they had set, and quite a few were carrying the baggage of a stressed and sedentary lifestyle... Surely no number of refreshment stops and support vehicles to offer lifts and a pull could avoid disaster? For a moment there, I must have forgotten that these were not ordinary people, you don't become a high-powered executive by giving up! One of the stars of this day was Duzi legend, Martin Dreyer, who demonstrated why he will probably be invited to this tour every year. Riding a pretty horrible borrowed bicycle with a girl's saddle, he was his usual chipper self, apparently oblivious to his own discomfort. According to his companions, he towed them up the switchbacks with a tube when it became too steep to push. Although the front-runners reached the Mystery Lodge at the top well ahead of predictions, this day was not about them. The real story unfolded in the triumph of determination and camaraderie over gravity for those further back in the field. An elated crowd gathered for dinner that night. It could only be downhill from here.

Party time

The last day's riding started at Westminster Station in the Free State, with "only" 60km to go. This was a day for the sprinters, as the last few kilometres would be a race between the cyclists and the train. Resplendent in our cycling kit sponsored by Sun International, most of us guessed that Thaba Nchu would

be the destination, but when we passed that turn at the 23km we gave up. The second tea stop at 54km was a glamorous affair with fresh pancakes (yes, with cream, and ice cream) a visit from Miss SA, Tatum Keshwar, and a police escort. At the Sannas Pos station, Malcolm Lange added a train to the list of contenders he has beaten in a race, and it was touching to see him reassure those who tried to keep up with him that losing your lungs after an all-out effort was "perfectly normal"!

While we scrubbed up, the train took us back to Bloemfontein, a bus journey to the Windmill Casino and a gala dinner with all the necessary trimmings. There was good food, dancing girls, and light-hearted food for thought in Barry Hilton's comedy sketches, but once again our fondest memories are in intangible things... PJ Powers was a surprise guest entertainer, and no one remained unmoved when she called all the hotel workers and support staff including two from Martin Dreyer's Change A Life project up on the stage to sing with her...

It must have been a very good party, because there were still some men in dress suits in the dining cart when we arrived for breakfast, already some way into our journey back home.

Funds from the Change A Life Cycle are channelled into projects such as Martin Dreyer's Change A Life Academy, which trains disadvantaged youngsters in KwaZulu-Natal to become competitive canoeists and ultra-athletes, as well as I Choose to Change A Life, which provides leadership training to young criminal offenders who, in turn, launch anti-crime projects in their own communities. The DNA Project is another beneficiary. 