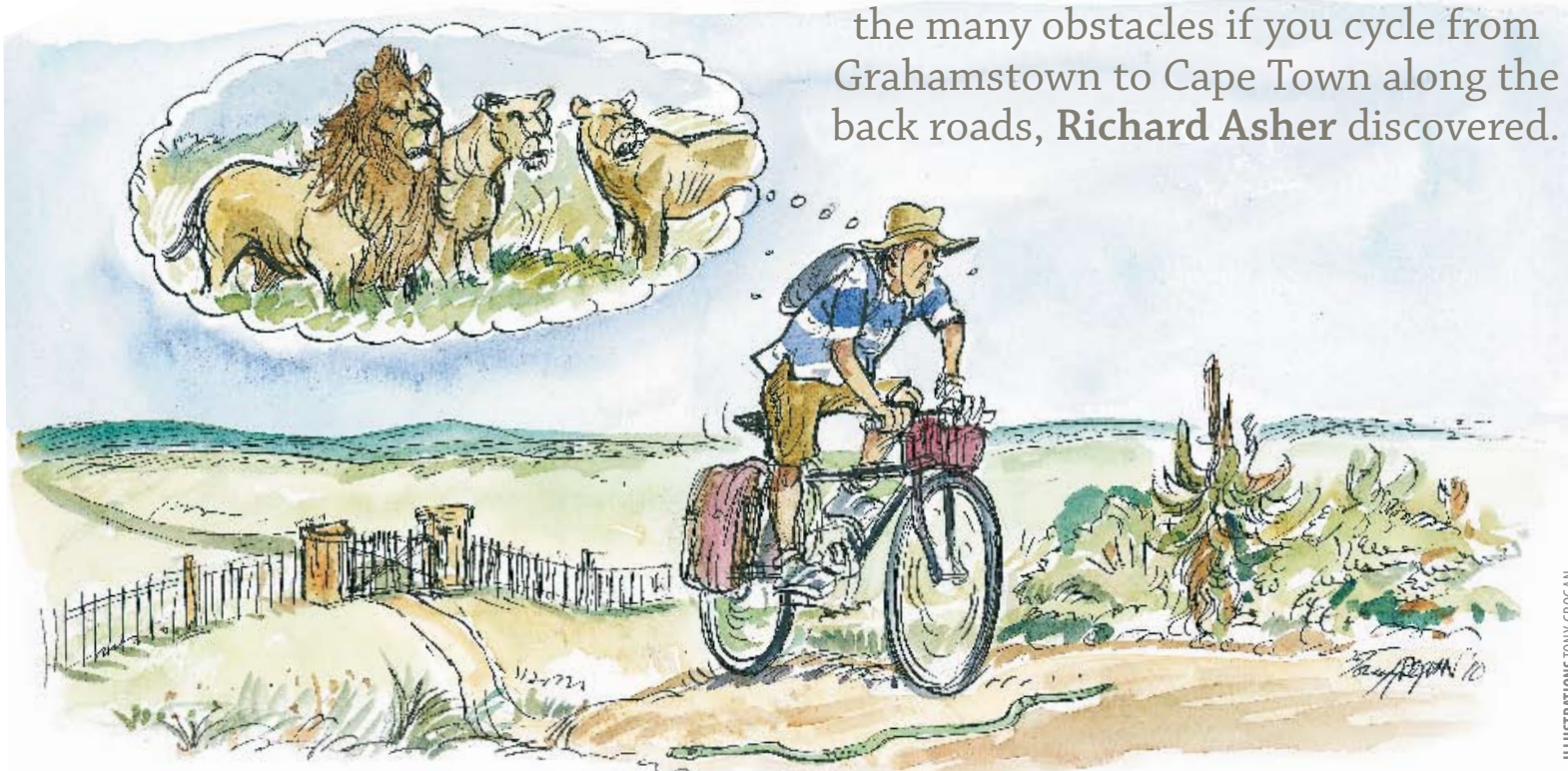


All the way home on muscle power

Game reserves and rivers are some of the many obstacles if you cycle from Grahamstown to Cape Town along the back roads, Richard Asher discovered.



ILLUSTRATIONS TONY GROGAN

Should we ever set out to travel the same road twice? That's one of the great philosophical questions of modern travel.

Should we seek new routes and destinations at all cost, or might we experience something a little different each time we retrace our steps?

What is it that makes me ponder that question so much?

I think it was sitting through 28 trips along the Garden Route in the space of four years that did it. With my home in Cape Town and my studies in Grahamstown, I came to know that 10-hour stretch of the N2 far too well. The Garden Route's a postcard and all, but by the middle of my second

year the familiarity had bred an unreasonable level of contempt.

I was sick to the core of that Shell garage in Riviersonderend, where we'd invariably pull in for the first recharge on the road east. This was where, if I was travelling on the bus, an ever-so-kind chap called Dawie would lisp that we'd better be back from the toilet in 20 minutes or else.

If, on the other hand, I was wedged into a back seat with three others, it was a vital place to rediscover sensation in my legs.

It would have been a lot better, though, if somebody had told me about the brilliant pie shop just three doors down from the petrol station. I didn't discover it until years later, and

I'm still trying to catch up on those lost pies of my youth.

Heidelberg and Riversdale (no mall in those days) excited me little, and Albertinia's flat, drab surrounds seemed to have been transplanted from somewhere on the Highveld. Mossel Bay brought relief in the form of the sea, but George scared me with its industry and large retail outlets.

Knysna was just a claustrophobic speed bump. Humansdorp had an angry vibe I couldn't quite place. Then came Port Elizabeth and its fine array of smells, and finally good old Grahamstown.

So I got old and grumpy about the Garden Route. The N2 bored me with its constant sequence of towns, but I could never convince

the bus driver or my car-owning friends to try the back roads.

They were always in too much of a hurry. That's why I was positively glad when I couldn't find a space for my bicycle on my final journey home. This was my chance to take it slowly. And because the N2 is no place for cyclists, finding my way along the back roads would be a priority.

So I started going to gym and riding up steep hills. I fitted panniers, oiled my chain and learnt how to fix a puncture.

I wrote my last exam, convinced a friend to join me as far as Mossel Bay, and sent all my stuff on its way with another friend. Relieved of the burden of possessions, I was ready to go.

I was sure I'd told my mate about the dirt roads, but he arrived on the train from Bloemfontein brandishing a skinny-tired road racer. I told Pieter he was a simpleton, but it didn't change the fact that Day 1 was going to be a serious challenge.

The plan was to spend the first night at Addo Elephant National Park, which was pretty much due west of Grahamstown. It would be an idyllic ride on a boiling November day. We'd be well north of the truck-infested N2 – but the gravel road was unlikely to gel with Pieter's racer.

I think it was after the fourth puncture that he gave up. We weren't even halfway to our destination and he was out of tubes and patches. Seeing the writing on the wall, he hitched a bakkie ride to PE. I said I'd catch up with him the following evening and pedalled on. Addo was still far away.

I'd bought some detailed maps for the trip – those big square ones that show every last gravel track. They turned out to be excellent for finding roads, but less good at mentioning internationally acclaimed lion reserves.

So it came as a surprise when, entering my last few kilometres before Addo in good spirits, I suddenly found myself up against a large gate bearing the name "Shamwari".

I checked my map again. Yes, I was in exactly the spot I thought I was. Just no sign of a lion park on the map. Detours? That meant back-tracking: anathema. I was too tired for that. I wanted to get to Addo and lie down on a bed.

This was evidently Shamwari's back gate. The tourists came in on the west side, about 10km away. This gate was for staff and service, I gathered. The guard stared at me, but didn't seem perturbed by the arrival of an itinerant cyclist.

Said cyclist was quite keen to keep going in a straight line, lions or no lions. Extreme fatigue and the promise of a cold

"Once I hit the uphill I started to think about the finer points of my will."

shower do strange things to one's decision-making process. But I didn't really think he was going to let me in. I'm sure he wasn't supposed to.

But when I nodded at him and gestured at the gate, he shrugged and opened it. Probably thought I was a wildly lost Dutch tourist. Why should he care?

"This is the worst decision of my life," was my first thought as I sped downhill. "Idiot!"

Hurting down into the valley, I rather fancied my chances if it came to a chase, but once I hit the uphill I started to think about the finer points of my will. I'd researched a lot ahead of this trip, but not what to do when you meet a pride of hungry lions while cycling up a hill.

And a puncture didn't bear thinking about.

Happily the whole thing fizzled into an anticlimax. I did see an extremely long green snake cross the road ahead of me – I stopped and waited politely, as you do – but no sight of lions. I got some bewildered looks at the main gate, but I didn't care. I'd successfully crossed Shamwari alone, unarmed and on a bicycle.

After Addo I found Pieter in PE and we rode the lovely but murderous (if you're a westbound cyclist) Langkloof to George and then Mossel Bay. There we parted ways, and I was on my own for my journey into the wild heart of the southern Cape.

Several days later I found myself facing a river. On this particular day I'd survived being chased by a very angry dog as I passed through Vermaaklikheid and had to pedal flat-out to avoid him sinking his teeth into my calves. I'd sprinted the next 30km to Witsand, fearful that the persistent canine might come charging up behind me if I dropped my pace.

The dog-induced adrenalin was probably still pumping when I got to the mouth of the Breede, but it wasn't quite enough to

make me want to swim across. It's awfully wide down at Witsand. At least the river's name finally made sense to me.

Having heard something about boats, I'd decided to come this way rather than crossing further upstream at Malgas. I'd been expecting something like a ferry, though, so I was taken aback when all I could see were tiny contraptions.

To the layperson they looked like motorised rowing boats. They probably were.

Someone said he could fit me, my bike and all my paraphernalia into his vessel for R20. Nobody else was about, so I had no choice but to hope he wasn't a pirate and wobble aboard. It was a tight fit, but we made it.

Throwing my bike into a tiny open boat and crossing what felt like a small ocean in the middle of a day's ride felt like a novel form of biathlon. I couldn't stop myself thinking about the boat sinking and taking my entire trip with it, but she behaved impeccably. The whole thing felt rather stately, to be honest.

After a quick nap on the west side of the Breede, I embarked on a day's riding I'll never forget. My plan was to skirt De Hoop Nature Reserve and overnight in Bredasdorp. I only just made it.

Wind is to cyclists what bears are to salmon, and this was a particularly grizzly gale. On days like this the cyclist is reduced to tears as furious peddling seems only to send him backwards. Ten times the effort brings a fraction of the speed.

Beyond soul-destroying, it's a problem that screaming out loud never quite solves.

That day, a 29th car trip along the Garden Route might have tempted me. But when I made it to Cape Town three days later I finally felt like I'd experienced something of what lay between iRhini and iKapa.

There's no better way to learn about our country than to see it slowly and in open air. ■

