

# THE RIFT VALLEY odyssey

By Simon Lee

Photographs: Courtesy of Eric Nesbitt, Getty Images/ThinkStock

Some six months or so ago rumours began to emerge that a group of hardened endurance mountain bikers were planning something new, something never done in Kenya, something that would pit man (and indeed woman) and machine (read bicycle) against mother nature.

Rumour rapidly turned to reality and by June 2010 the Rift Valley Odyssey had been born. The RVO as it is more commonly known is NOT a race; it is an adventure. There are no helicopters buzzing overhead, no water stops, no route markings and no mechanics. Your support group are your team mates and your only route markings are on the GPS attached to your handlebars. Your water, food and anything else you deem necessary are carried either on your bicycle or on your back.

## Rules of the Road

The rules of engagement are pretty simple. You have to ride in a team of two or three riders. Each team must have at least one GPS device and be totally self sufficient in terms of nutrition, tools and first aid kits. And finally, you cycle, probably like you have never cycled before.

## Bring it On

My friend and I decided that we were up for the challenge and started putting in the miles. Thankfully cycling has become very popular in Nairobi, so much to the chagrin of my long-suffering wife (who joined the ever growing group of MTB widows) I started riding whenever the opportunity presented itself. Two weekends before the RVO was the inaugural North Kenya Classic, a two-day individual race that runs through some of the harshest terrain Laikipia has to offer. Feeling good about my fitness I entered with the intention of riding flat out to see how fit I really was. The first day was run over 67km in burning 41°C heat and after 50km I "hit the wall" as they say, and had to haul myself over the final 17km to the finish. However, given the pace of the first 50km, I felt good about my endurance.

## The Big Day

On the morning of the ride the alarm sounded at the crack of 5AM, but unlike a work morning where the snooze button sees some serious attention I was out of bed like a child on Christmas morning; the day had finally arrived! At the start line in

Tigoni the field was buzzing with last minute preparations and after a short brief we were on the road a little after 8AM.

## Finding the Way

The first hour was a steady climb through the tea plantations of Tigoni through rural villages and along quiet farm tracks. The riding was not too technical and there was ample opportunity to chat as we rode along. It was in this polite setting that I made my first mistake and learnt a valuable lesson in the art of navigation by GPS. Just before a descent into a wooded area I stopped to adjust the saddle on my bike, my teammates sped off down the hill and out of sight. I gave pursuit, confident I could catch them given the relaxed pace but the track ended abruptly in a small village with no cyclists in sight and a couple of perplexed farmers wondering what this mzungu was doing on his bike in the middle of their farm yard! That was when I realised the need to zoom in and out on the GPS to get a metre-by-metre update of where you are. After that, the most back tracking we did was a couple of metres down a wrong track as the GPS maps were superbly detailed.

## Keeping Focused

The route passed under the main highway and we dropped down into Kijabe town where baboons joined the list of obstacles to avoid hitting! We sped through the town and into the Nyati forest for some wonderful single track. The track winds its way down through the forest and full concentration is required as you slalom your way down. All too soon the track widens out and the combination of the drop in altitude and lack of tree cover meant a sudden increase in temperature.

## Following the Tracks

The route then follows the original Lunatic Line (some may say a fitting route for the RVO to take) all the way to Longonot town under the lower Naivasha road and onto the talcum powder dust trails through the Kedong Ranch and down to the South Lake Road, and then it was a short ride to the finish at Carnelly's camp.

## Testing Ascent

Shortly after 8AM the following morning we were back in the saddle for day two. The first 17km were on tarmac through the Ol Karia entrance of Hells Gate National Park, climbing steadily past Hobbles Volcano and down to the Naivasha Gate. From there we were back on tracks riding across a picturesque grassy plain to the base of the

day's biggest challenge, a mammoth 30km grind from 2000m up to 2820m. For the next three hours every corner presented yet another climb and the elation at reaching a peak was short lived as you looked across the valley to what always appeared to be a longer or steeper hill. Thankfully the scenery was stunning, with fantastic views and the combination of the clear blue sky and the lush green vegetation made the whole landscape idyllic.

## Thrilling Descent

At the highest point of the ride there was jubilation with team photographs and high-fives all around. We headed down the other side of the hill to a spectacular view of Lake Naivasha shimmering far below and then off the main track down perhaps the steepest descent I have ever done on a mountain bike – and I have been riding for a good 20 years.

Danny's descent as it is called literally plummets down the side of the escarpment. Thankfully for the most part it is rideable, though on a couple of sections sanity and the realisation that I have dependants prevailed and forced me off the bike for a spot of portage. Once at the bottom the gradient became more "normal" with some fun sections of single track finishing off the circuit before re-joining the outbound route back through Hells Gate and on to the finish at Carnelly's.

## Family Affair

What a weekend; fantastic terrain, stunning landscapes, great company and superb organisation. The setup of the event with the camp at Carnelly's made it very family friendly with many of the riders bringing along their families, adding to the relaxed atmosphere.

## We'll be Back

So what of the future of the RVO, will it be back in 2011? Most definitely and personally, nothing will keep me away from the start line. The route will no doubt be different, but the format of self-sustaining adventure riding will continue meaning excitement and challenge will be guaranteed.

## Thanks

Hot off the press are the proposed dates for next year's event – 21st to 23rd October (yes indeed, that is three days!) so mark it in your diaries and we hope to see you there.

However, as with all things, these events don't just happen of their own volition, it takes time, money and energy to pull off. A big show of appreciation must therefore go to Eric Nesbitt, Mike Kontos, Daniel Szlapak and Alex Tibwitta for coordinating everything – great job. **D**



### More Information on RVO 2011

For more information on the 2011 edition of the RVO including ways you can support please check out the website [www.riftvalleyodyssey.com](http://www.riftvalleyodyssey.com)

### General Information on Cycling in Kenya

For more information on other races, social rides and general cycling related matters please check out the Facebook page "Kenya MTB" or join the Yahoo Kenya MTB forum by sending an email to [mtb-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:mtb-subscribe@yahoogroups.com)

### Race Calendar – 10 to 4 goes multi day

The now legendary 10 to 4 mountain bike race held each February will extend from a single day event to a two day event for 2011. Scheduled for the weekend of 12th and 13th February, day one will be "4 to 10 to 4" meaning you will go up and down the route with day two being the more standard 10 to 4 route.

More details to follow on [www.10to4.org](http://www.10to4.org)