



## Cycle Kenya Challenge – 2009

On Friday 27<sup>th</sup> November 2009, 21 bikers completed the 'Kenya Cycle Challenge' organised by Liz Eaton to raise money for Kenya Children Centres so that another home for 40 orphan girls can be built. We cycled all the way around Mount Kenya covering almost 350KM in 4½ days. On the route we saw the many contrasting faces of Kenya: spectacular scenery with rugged mountains, deep gorges and fast flowing rivers; local people in brightly coloured clothing, happy children cheering us on and goats grazing along the roadside; lively markets with sellers earning just a few pence for their efforts; carts pulled by bullocks and donkeys and vendors selling all manner of goods off the back of their bicycles; beautiful flowers, wheat fields, banana trees, coffee and tea plantations, and rice paddy fields; but also crops destroyed by the drought, impoverished villages with families living in mud huts and starving people begging for money.



The cycling itself proved to be a huge challenge. Whilst everyone had put in months of serious training beforehand, without exception, we all found the whole event far more difficult than we had imagined. For all of us, it was the most physically demanding thing that we have ever undertaken.

We cycled over very difficult terrain in demanding weather conditions that included scorching sun, soaring temperatures of 35 degrees, thick fog and torrential rainstorms. At one stage we had to abandon our bikes for a couple of hours when the dirt road turned into marshland after a downpour. Our backup truck slid into a ditch on a hill and had to be towed out by a tractor from a local town.



We climbed hills totalling almost 14,000 ft – more than three times the height of Ben Nevis! On Tuesday we reached the highest point at 8,500 feet, an altitude where there is around 25% less oxygen and reports say that 1 in 4 people develop acute mountain sickness. Not only did we have to contend with the difficulty of breathing at that altitude, but we had to cycle uphill continuously for 30 miles into a fierce head wind. The route on the Wednesday was rated by our tour guide as the hardest stage he had ever ridden anywhere in the world in 17 years of running these cycling challenges. We climbed up 14 of the steepest and longest hills I have ever encountered – a total climb of 5,000ft in a day. The bikers described them as 'brutal' and 'relentless'. After climbing for 50 miles in the searing heat, several people were struggling with heat exhaustion. It was easier on Thursday and Friday with hills more like cycling in the UK's Lake District!

So was it worth all the pain? Definitely! We finished the Challenge by cycling into the Ngoingwa Children Centre. All the girls living there were waiting, singing and holding a tape across the finishing line. The National Press and TV were there to record our arrival. It was a truly emotional experience for all of us: great to finish such a hard challenge – but more importantly, the bikers saw the children that they had done it for. It was for them that they had trained, raised the funds and sweated around Mount Kenya. For most people it was the first time that they had met the girls and they were able to chat, take photos and have lunch with them.



In the evening we went back for dinner and the girls put on a show of dancing, singing and recital. The children looked beautiful in their matching dresses and put on an accomplished, confident and entertaining show that would have put many English kids of similar ages to shame. They performed everything in English (their third language!). Charity, the first girl we rescued and now just 13-years old, even recited a long poem in French.

It is incredible to remember how these girls looked when they were rescued as starving, abused and frightened little children. They really are being transformed into confident educated young women that will go back into the community and make a difference. We were sad when the time came to leave Ngoingwa but excited to think that all our efforts will help to transform the lives of another 40 destitute orphan girls.