

## (the lost) Third Letter from Africa: Finally on the Road...

- By 2 Wheels 2 Capes, "Moto piedzīvojumu klubs ""apPasaule""", Latvija

South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland; travelled - 3300km

Finally we are on the road with our bikes. Martins is thinging in his helmet - on the road again.... All the hustle and troubles of this world are left behind, and we are riding towards new adventures and discoveries. One could claim that everything in this world has been already discovered, there is nothing left to explore, in particular when traveling to places where civilization has evolved for thousands of years. The same applies to the most popular tourist sites, where millions of people visiting each year....can you find anything unspoiled and special there? However for two of us this is still a major novelty and there is clearly a feeling of pioneering. We have dreamed about this trip for so long trying to imagine how it is going to be, but now this is for real and we are experiencing it right here, right now. We are learning new things for ourselves and about ourselves. And we also hope that we will be able to share this joy of discovering the great continent of Africa with our friends and followers at home in particular with Latvian school kids who are controlling our trip remotely.

### *Winemakers' Country Roads*

We have set our route to the very Southern point of Africa - Cape Agulhas, which should be the real start point of our cape to cape expedition. It has been less than 2 h on route and our navigation devices GARMIN is taking us for a shortcut through agriculture and wine making lands. We are enjoying our first African dirt roads and dust clouds. But even more we are happy to see that already in this very early stage of the trip we are off the beaten truck, away from major touristic sites and escaping highway rush. These small roads always makes us feel that this is where the real life is taking place and that's what we want to learn about the most.

On our route to the Cape we stop for one smaller winery. There we get a chance to try numerous whites, reds, and roses, and also enjoy some breakfast after all. Sauvignon Blanc with slight asparagus aftertaste is our favorite. **We have also managed to fulfill one of the tasks of the Latvian school kids. They wanted us to visit Groot Constantia, but it was not possible due to forest fire in that area. This alternative of Rivendell is very nice as well.**

### *The Most Southern Point*

Cape Agulhas proves to be rather rough place - cold wind, drizzling rain, beach with rocks, and possibility to touch two oceans at the same time. We shoot quick photos and taking off, this is not very riders friendly climate here, definitely not something we would have expected in Africa. Though our Cape Town friend - Frisbee has given us additional task in this site. We have to visit the lighthouse, get its little model and bring it to Alexandria, Egypt. It appears that a prototype sister light house to this one used to be located in Alexandria. It is not very clear yet if it is still there because we heard that it has been destroyed by earthquake. Regardless the request of our good friend should be respected, so we get the little model and it will be traveling with us up North.

### *'Meerkat' Project*

We turn north and heading right inland. Our next destination is Karoo region in South Africa. As per recommendation of the EU Delegation to South Africa (SKA) we are about to visit a site where construction of the world's biggest radio telescope called Square Kilometer Array takes place. Why Square KM .... because the ambition is that when this science mega project will be finalized the total surface of antennas installed in different African countries will be as big as one square kilometer. This radio telescope will be largest in the world and should be able to look much further in space than humans manages ever before. And who knows there might be some answers of ever lasting questions like is there life in other galaxies? The project is implemented in several phases and current sub-project of constructing here 64 antennas is called 'Meerkat'. We are pretty excited about this fact as this little animal is also a symbol of our motorcycle expedition. So, we can say that two meerkats' have met here.

We are really grateful to our friends in the EU Delegation and SKA team in Capet Town for this opportunity to visit the site and have very knowledgeable guides who are ready to spend with us hours when taking us around and explaining in detail all the technical features of this amazing scientific undertaking. It is equally interesting to learn that this world class project will have several locations in Africa - including South Africa, but also Ghana and Mozambique, and in fact Africa will be leading in coming years in space exploration.

### *South Might be Cold*

Already night before arriving in SKA we spend the night in our tents. Though the area is really sparsely populated hal-desert and we sometimes do not meet any

car on the road for hours it is not easy to find a spot to camp. All roadsides are fenced probably to protect animals from road traffic and vice versus. We also experience first serious distances on gravel roads and had to push it to stick with our planned milage. As result every night we stop riding only after dark and rather exhausted. We are also surprise how cool it can get at night and in the early mornings when we start the ride. Apparently the whole teritory here is above 1500m above the level of sea and famous for being the coldes part is South Africa. During the day though it gets sun starts burning and the heat is hardly bearable.

### *Mountain Kingdoms*

On the third day of the ride we have reach Lesotho. Tiny enclave country surrounded by South African Republic from all sides. This country is located in South African highlands. During colonial wars of 19th and 20th century the local tribes under leadership of their king and with some help from British managed to protect their territories and paved the road to independence. Nowadays it is one of few kingdoms in Africa.

EU has its Delegation here. It is Friday afternoon and busines will close soon, though we are warmly welcomed by Michael Doyle, the Head of Delegation. Michael apparently is the only European excellency accredited in this kingdom, as no RU member states have diplomatic representations here. We enjoy the company of ambassador for good one and a half hours and learn a lot about the country, people, and sites to visit. We are entertained by Michael's stories of his student years when he was traveling across Lesotho and reached the Suni Pass on the back of a beer truck. The Delegation's Press Officer lovely young lady Liatile takes us to the best burger place in the town and we can testify that these burgers could be amongst top five in Africa. The only drawback is that we are in this country over w/e so the possibility to visit some EU supported projects are limited.

### *Entertainment for Kids of Lesotho*

It is late afternoon when we are leaving Maseru and heading deeper in Lesotho to explore the country. The landscape of the North West part of the country is beautiful green hills with impressive canyons carved by rivers. This looks like very fertile land and much more densely populated compared to neighboring regions of South Africa. The contrasts ar stunning - juicy green landscape,

farmlands on lost of slopes, no more fences around houses or on the roadsides, plenty of people, cattle, and very lively traffic - cars, bicycle, dunnies etc. We have hoped to visit at least one EU financed project - Metolong Dam, however our plans need to be adjusted. Andzs with his bike goes off road to enjoy some canyon view and manages to ride over a sharp piece of glass from a crushed bottle. The tire is flat and it is time for the first repair works. While doing the tire repair job on the roadside we quickly get surrounded by local school kids and shepherds, who feel pretty entertained by the white guy getting dirty in their village. Later on they decide that these two strange people might need some help and we get to borrow a bigger pump, so we can get quicker some air back in the tube. We also get entertained by some local song and dance, so it is a win-win situation after all.

### *No Sun no Internet*

The tire repairs took some time and it starts to get dark. On top of that rain clouds around us might cause some trouble as well. GARMIN brings us through curvy roads to a rather fancy hotel, not our style but rain starts dropping, thunder storm picks up and we stop for night. We are happy to learn that there is free wi-fi in the hotel, however there is no much use of it, as the signal is down. Receptionist kindly explains that the internet is working only when the sky is clear, but otherwise bad weather means no internet.

### *Looking for Cat's Dam*

This day we are devoting 100% Lesotho, though it is the only 24 h we can spend here as we are so much behind the schedule. It is pity we can't stay longer here in particular because of great hiking options we can see all around us. This time we just have to enjoy this great landscape while crossing the country from North to South. While starting our day we learn quickly that Africa can also be a rather wet place. The clouds are still there as it was last night and first three hours of riding we do in rain. The good news comes once we reach one of the first 3000m high passes, where clouds get stuck behind the ridge and we continue our ride on a sunny side of the hill country. We both are amazed by spectacular alpine scenery. Probably not the most dramatic mountain views we have experienced in our trips, however there is something special about contrasts of green hills, rocks, brown and yellowish farm lands, and little cute villages on the slopes.

**We reach one of the famous Katse Dam - 185m high engineering masterpiece, located right in the middle between impressive mountain ridges, and claims to be the second highest in Africa. Suggestions to visit this place came from several Latvian schools, therefore we are making a stop to explore it bit better.** Security guy is happy to show us around and he appears to be as knowledgeable as the best guide could be. We learn about hydro electricity production and sophisticated tunnel systems used for circulating water. We follow up on the question of school kids about European countries that has participated in construction of the dam, specifically, there has been at least German, French, and British companies involved. Quick video interview of the security guy and we also learn that the dam is named after some famous local person, but in translation Katse stands for Cat. So, for us this becomes the Cat's Dam.

### *The National Road A3*

Nice finished with the visit of the dam we set our route to the Sani Pass - one of the highest in South Africa (3200 m above the sea level) and famous for its off-road and scenery! Next 200 km turns out a real dirt road challenge both for us and our bikes. We start with relatively good gravel road but it gradually turns into something more like a mountain trail washed out by rivers, huge pieces of rock to be jumped over, and difficult sections of clay and sand. At some stage it feels like that our heavy loaded bikes will get destroyed already in this very early stage of the trip. According to the map we are still on A3 which is supposed to be one of the main national roads but it feels like it can be managed only by 4x4's. Though it is only European perception that this is four wheel drive road - we keep discovering regular cars and minivans taking this challenging road here and there. We keep wondering how these vehicles have made it so far? Probably some of little dunnies hanging out here in big quantities have been used to assist?

After good five hours heavy work we have managed this pearl of off road riding. Most importantly no visible damage to bikes and our bodies. On one of the latest passes Martin's bike suddenly loses rear brakes, but after cooling down everything gets functional again. For Andzs this is first in a life time mountain off-road adventure, and looks like he manages it well. We definitely owe a big thanks to our great mechanic Aigars who have prepared our motorbikes for this long journey,

### *Highest Pub in Africa*

Our Lesotho day comes to the end. We reach the Suni Pass and the border crossing with South Africa. Guide books claimed that this is a challenging pass in terms of driving. However we learn that on Lesotho side it has been mostly paved and even the last bit of gravel seems nothing compared to our A3 experience. We check out from Lesotho with local border guards (we had a permit for 2 days visit) but as it is dark outside and gets rainy, we are directed to a little guest house a few hundred meters from the border guards post. Initial impression is that it is some kind of campsite with some minimalistic cottages, however we quickly find out that it is rather fancy lodge with the Africa's highest pub in it. It is rather pricy, but with restaurant dinner and breakfast included + bottle of chery in the room! it is hard to resist this overnight option. Will use our tents in later stage....

Next morning come sunny and with a beautiful view over mountains on South African side. Once taking the curvy and steep dirt road down to the South Africa border crossing point we acknowledge what a good decision it was not to attempt this section of road when it is wet and dark night.

### *Song of Zululand*

In this sunny morning we are reaching area between mountains and the ocean called Zululand. These are Zulu tribe territories and we soon learn also that this part of South Africa is ruled (at least formally) by their own Zulu king. Latvian school kids asked for an interview with a chief of Zulu village, we instead prefer to stop and interview a proper Zulu biker on his shiny black chopper. It is also clear that Zululand nowadays lives its modern life with cell phones, cars, Coca-Cola etc. There is no space in this for exotic ethnographic features. Those are left with specific museums and dedicated sites for. During a break from riding we have a chat with a group of Zulu youngsters and have a short pop song video with them performing. This will serve as a greeting to school kids in Valmiera who were interested to explore Zulu traditions.

### *Little Finland in Swaziland*

We are leaving Zulu land and finishing our almost three weeks long visit to South Africa, Now enter the next kingdom of this continent - Swaziland. Border crossing is quick and easy. No need to change currency, as South African money is in use both in Lesotho and here. Swaziland is two times smaller than Lesotho and

inhabited by around one million people. Unlike Lesotho this country is not an enclave and it has external border to Mozambique. While riding for first hours here we try to identify the key differences - looks like the place is less prosperous and dry flat lands we have to cross to reach the capital city Manzini feels bit depressing after juicy green hills of Zulu land. Once in Manzini we figure out that this town has not much to offer, however this is the moment when we need to give a call to contact provided by our Finnish friend Markku. He has recommended us to get in touch with Tuire, Finnish Honorable Counselor in Swaziland. We are warmly greeted and invited to come over to Tuire's residence 25 km away from Manzini. Once arriving there the Swaziland starts looking much nicer in our eyes. Tuire and John welcome us in their home, which serves as Consulate, but also an art gallery and jewelry workshop. Both our hosts are very knowledgeable about Swaziland and different parts of Africa in general as they have spent most of their lives on this continent. On top of that both are just excellent story tellers, so we benefit a lot even without reading guidebooks. The place is also very nicely located in area surrounded by green trees and hills. We spend most of our time (and also the night) on residence's beautiful terrace. It has nice view to a rocky peak of a mountain which has bit sad connotation for locals as Zulu insiders used to teach local Swazi guys to fly from there. But nowadays this is not the case anymore and scenery is just nice. We are treated with coffee, dinner, wine, and endless conversations. After short site seeing we return to the residence again and enjoy visit to jewelry workshop, even some shopping. This place is so pleasant and easy that we don't feel how time is flying, However we should move on so we pack our bikes without lots of eagerness. However there is a moment when we should say goodbye to our new friends and hit the road. On our way we still stop by Tuire's daughter's gallery and chat with her about a large painting of meerkat.

### *Farewell from Kingdoms*

It is early afternoon and we have reached the Mozambique border crossing. In this first week of riding we have managed 3500 km, starting from ocean level up to 3200m heights, checked on desert, beaches, beautiful countryside, we did gravel, dirt, and tarmac roads, but most importantly we have met very nice and interesting people. The top highlights - SKA, Lesotho road A3 and sunny pass, and our great Swaziland hosts. We are grateful for all people who helped us to enjoy this part of Africa!

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