

Wheels of fortune Krista Bernard went for a bike ride that lasted almost four years and took her through 19 countries. Accolades followed adventure and she returned home with a thirst for discovery that remains unquenched. By Jody Scott

"Walking with nomadic camel herders and drinking fresh yoghurt from big pots balanced on the heads of colourful women with jingling ankle bracelets, kohled eyes and hand-embroidered clothes, the threads of one world weave into another.

"In Quetta, I rest and meet another cyclist heading towards Europe. We decide to cycle to the [Iranian] border together. The sun has hit the desert, fading the landscape and blasting my lips so they crack when I smile. Caught in a sandstorm and facing harsh weather, we decide to travel by night.

"With the light of the moon outlining the road and silhouetting the shapes of the dunes, strong spring winds blow toward us all the way from Turkey and finally we cross the border into Iran."

The pages of 28-year-old Krista Bernard's journals overflow with vivid descriptions of the foreigners she befriended and lands she crossed during her three-and-a-half-year cycling journey through 19 countries. Her stories are crammed with more exotic sights, tastes and sounds than most people could ever experience in a lifetime, but then most people would probably balk at the idea of riding across the world alone on a bicycle.

Softly spoken, Bernard admits to being "very naive" when she left her family and friends in Melbourne in 1996 to begin her ride from Indonesia to England. With just \$4000 in her pocket and aged 24, she believed the journey would take about 18 months.

"I wanted to see how the cultures merged and changed, to discover the differences and how it gradually becomes England as you travel across the continents," says Bernard, who migrated from England to Australia with her family when she was 19. >



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> "But it is a hard trip to plan because there are so many things you could never know about a place until you get there. Some places are open, some aren't and that situation changes from week to week and month to month."

There were also many unforeseen mechanical hold-ups, like the weeks she spent waiting in Nepal for Shogun Cycles to send her a new wheel from Australia. Another time, she had to backtrack 15 kilometres in mud and rain to the closest village after her bike gears snapped in the mountains of northern Laos.

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"Cycling was the only way I could do it, because I am a bit of an environmentalist. It [cycling] is also slow enough to be in touch with the people, the cultures and the land," Bernard says. "We live in an age where it is easy come, easy go – it was nice to think you would actually have to make an effort to get to where you want to go. It makes you really appreciate the places you arrive in."

No stranger to epic cycling trips, Bernard had already completed a solo journey down the east coast of Australia, a ride through the Northern Territory's Central Desert on the famous Old Andado and Oodnadatta Tracks and

a trip across the Nullarbor on dirt roads before she set out on her international trek. However, she says those close to her were more than a little taken aback when she announced she was planning to ride overland to England and many warned her against setting out alone.

"My mum was really worried and my friends thought I was a bit crazy. I don't think many people thought I would actually do it. A lot of people also brought up the fact that I was a woman and this journey was a dangerous and foolhardy thing to do. But I had to block out their fears because they weren't my own," she says.

In retrospect, there is no doubt the journey brought more highs and lows than Bernard could have imagined. Beginning in Indonesia, she cycled through Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand (again), Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Israel and finally Egypt.

Yet snippets of Bernard's adventures have to be prised from her. Perhaps it is a symptom of having seen so much that the truly adventurous are often modest and characteristically reticent. Could it be that the long silences involved with travelling solo have taught the likes of Bernard to use words economically?

Or is it because they are simply overwhelmed by their experiences: humbled by the highs and made stoic by adversity. The most likely explanation, however, is that with over three years on the road, Bernard has so

many stories to tell that she simply doesn't know where to begin. However, once extracted, her anecdotes are worth the effort.

Along with spectacular mountains and desert vistas, the highlights of her trip included climbing volcanoes dawn in Indonesia, a 300-kilometre Peace Walk with Buddhist monks through minefields in Cambodia, yoga lessons in the Himalayas, a private audience with the Dalai Lama in India, a stint as a guide and cook on a luxury yacht in the Mediterranean and extra roles on Egyptian film sets in Cairo.

On a less glamorous note, she became adept at mending broken snakes and chains, not to mention punctured tyres, in less-than-ideal environs ranging from torrential rain & total darkness. Like bike maintenance, the stomach troubles that hampered her early in the trek gradually became less of an ordeal as her system developed a cast-iron resistance to even the most unhygienic conditions.

There are also some stories Bernard is reluctant to elaborate on, including being followed and attacked by a man on a lonely mountain road in Iran – an assault for which he received a two-year prison sentence.

"After that I was more tentative about cycling on the very quiet roads I had always cycled on before," she said. "It wasn't that I had felt invincible previously, but I don't think I had taken into consideration that it could actually happen to me. It was so out of my experience and understanding

> Not long after the attack, Bernard spent five days in an Iranian prison, where she was threatened with 60 lashes for walking unchaperoned with two Iranian men. She was found not guilty and made a hasty exit to Turkey.

These were not the only testing times she faced along the way. In Turkey she was attacked by mountain dogs, in Bangladesh her tea was spiked with drugs, in Egypt she was robbed and stalked, and in Pakistan, she was pelted with rocks. There were also frequent run-ins with men who were tempted to take advantage of a lone female traveller, not to mention numerous armed and aggressive soldiers in troubled territories.

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These memories are clearly painful and Bernard is uncomfortable reliving them or inflicting the detail on her friends and family. While correspondence home hinted her trip was not all happy pedalling, Bernard is an optimist by nature: the sketches on her letter from Pakistan of men holding hands look more like folk dancers than a hostile roadblock intent on stopping the lone female cyclist in her tracks.

"Tribal chiefs and their levies – men dressed in ragged blankets and sequined hats – took to their bicycles and motorbikes to escort me through some of the most dangerous areas," says Bernard. "Sometimes rocks were thrown at my head, or crowds of village men and boys would join hands and block the road so I couldn't pass. Scary. But I found I could never get too angry or upset – it was better to save my energy for other things."

It is not in Bernard's nature to dwell on the negative and she prefers to talk fondly about the people who welcomed her into their homes, especially between Pakistan and Turkey. "The hospitality of Islamic countries was so great," she says. "I was a guest everywhere and in some places people would even try to give me money. No hotel would charge, every family would fight over me, gifts were bestowed upon me so often that soon my pannier bags started to bulge and it was hard to do them up."

The most striking evidence of Bernard's insistence that the hardships were balanced out by the rewards is the story she tells about the most physically gruelling day of her entire trip. After cycling uphill for 60 kilometres from Hetauda to Daman, which is in the Himalayan foothills and 2322 metres above sea level, she was offered a free stay in a five-star hotel at the top. After a 10-hour slog, Bernard was more than happy to accept.

"They said: 'Oh madam where have you come from? You are a very great hero, come inside' and they let me stay in the hotel for a couple of nights for free," she says. "I just felt so honoured to be greeted so nicely at the top."

While her original plan was to cycle to England, Bernard decided that she had had enough after months of battling to obtain a Libyan visa – only to be turned away when she reached the border. The final straw was having her clothes, money and bike stolen after she was forced to return to Cairo.

"By the time I got to Egypt, I was really tired. I had been away from home for three years, had passed through 19 countries and I wasn't enjoying it anymore," she says. "It felt like there were all these things flowing against me. I was mentally, physically and spiritually exhausted."

She finished the trip by flying to England where she stayed with friends while she saved money for the airfare home to Australia.

Back home in Melbourne, Bernard was recently awarded the Australian Geographic gold medallion for Young Adventurer of the Year. She is now studying to become a yoga therapist and is writing a book about her travels with the working title of *Krista's Travel Worldly and Beyond*. While Bernard acknowledges her story is unlikely to launch too many cross-continental cycling trips, she hopes her tales from the road will inspire others to pursue their own goals.

"If you have a dream of a life you want to have, you can do that," says Bernard. "If people are inspired by seeing others who are prepared to go out and take risks, then it might inspire them to take risks in their own lives. It makes you dream of the possibilities for yourself and that's exciting."

As for her own dreams, Bernard still has a few of her own. Although her family doesn't know it yet, she hopes to join a friend on a cycling trip from South Africa to Sweden next year. ■

