

A World View with Spokes

David Mozer of the International Bicycle Fund and Bicycle Africa believes in the transformative power of the bicycle

by Dan D'Ambrosio

David Mozer has a hard time getting people to sign up for his tours to Africa. Bicycle Africa, the company he founded in 1983 together with the International Bicycle Fund (IBF), was designed to be the for-profit fundraising arm of the nonprofit IBF, which Mozer has used to spread the word of the good bicycles can do in the world.

"The purpose of the International Bicycle Fund is to promote sustainable transportation and cultural understanding worldwide," Mozer said in a recent interview.

Mozer attributes the difficulties of signing bicyclists up for his African adventures to a variety of factors, including what may be his own shortcomings as a promoter, but believes that these are mostly out of his control.

"It struggles," Mozer said of Bicycle Africa. "The Bush era was not good for international travel. I don't go to mainstream places. People hear about problems in Somalia and hesitate to go to Ghana even though those two places are in the same proximity as New York and Los Angeles. I have a love of bicycling and I have a love of Africa so I keep persevering."

His website, ibike.org, covers all of

Mozer's various two-wheeled interests, including the IBF and Bicycle Africa, Mozer lists what he calls the "15 Myths of Bicycling and Travel in Africa."

First is the myth of the void, followed closely by the myth of wilderness, both of which essentially posit that you'd have to be crazy to ride a bike in Africa unless you want to get lost or eaten. Africa is more than wildlife and vast open spaces, says Mozer.

"Wildlife constitutes a very small part of Africa, and only a very small portion of Africa contains wildlife," Mozer writes. "Africa is about people and culture: people with a long history, a multiplicity of complex cultures with sophisticated governmental structures, elaborate artistic expressions, diverse religions, ontology, and colorful traditions."

Next Mozer takes what he calls the myths of violence and disease. The first holds that the people of Africa are "violent and dangerous."

"The exact opposite is probably closer to the truth," Mozer contends on his website. "It is safer in many African capitals to take a late-night stroll than in many North American cities."

Mozer is not naïve about the violence



that certainly does occur in Africa, but he says we have a twisted view of what it's like on the ground in many of the countries there.

"Granted people must be selective about where they go; however, there are more choices than one can manage to get to," Mozer writes. "The violence associated with Africa is tragic, but it is also isolated to specific geographical pockets."

And disease? There are a number of serious ones, Mozer says, but the chance of contracting them is miniscule.

"Of diseases with higher infection rates, easy effective prevention is available," he writes. "You will be 95 percent of the way

Man on a mission. David Mozer in his hub, where he researches and deconstructs the myths about bicycle travel in Africa.

to being safe by being current on your immunizations: tetanus-diphtheria, polio, and measles are pretty routine."

The myth of pollution holds that the water is unsafe in Africa.

"Generally, Africa is less industrial and uses few or no chemicals in their agriculture methods," Mozer writes. "The groundwater in Africa can be as safe or safer than that in industrialized countries."

Not only that, he says, but in the past 20 years there has been a "massive effort" to develop water resources, thanks to the World Health Organization and other aid

organizations in the United States, Canada, and the Scandinavian countries.

Mozer goes on to cover myths of sanitation, pestilence, famine, AIDS, climate, hygiene, civilization, and suicide, the last of which has to do with the way Africans drive, leading to the belief that in Africa bicycling is suicidal, goes the belief.

"The endless stream of negative images of Africa is amazing," Mozer writes in his conclusion. "Even as I finish this article, I have a hunch that many readers will find one more reason for not considering Africa. Whatever it is, I suspect it's not as serious

as they imagine. Year in and year out, I go, I have fun, and I return. I have seen people from nine to 75 years old do the same."

Mozer, 57, has been a self-described bicycle activist since junior high school in Seattle, where he grew up and still lives. His introduction to Africa was through the Peace Corps in 1975, when he was assigned to Liberia. Mozer had thought he might be sent to South America, but was just as happy to go to Africa.

"I took my bicycle with me, which was unheard of in 1975," Mozer said. "Not much bicycle touring was going on at that

point — anywhere. If you wanted panniers, you found somebody in the UK to get you canvas saddlebags.”

Graduating from Evergreen State College with a nontraditional bachelor's degree that covered history, economics, and “behavioral stuff,” as well as biology, math, science, and teacher training, Mozer taught math and science in a middle school in a Liberian village called Gorblee, a trading center.

The second year, Mozer was in Fisebu, where he was more involved in developing curriculum, and traveling back and forth to villages in roadless areas to help them make their schools more effective and efficient. When he was done at one school, the administration would send him off to the next school with a group of students to guide him.

“I'd grown up in western Washington. I threw my cards to the wind and the Peace Corps was the first thing that came through,” Mozer said. “I tend to be a sponge wherever I am. I take an interest in the complexity and diversity of the world. I didn't know enough to be scared. I didn't fixate on Hollywood images of Africa. I was just going someplace to have a job.”

In January 1978, Mozer completed his

three-year tour with the Peace Corps and left for his own “serpentine exploration” of West Africa. His bike had served him well while working for the Peace Corps, but for this adventure — from Ivory Coast to Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and across the Sahara to Algeria and Tunisia, then on to Malta for a boat to Italy — Mozer relied on various forms of local ground transportation, from motorcycles to shoe leather.

He hitchhiked across Europe to Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands before finding his way to the UK for a flight back home to the U.S. In Italy and the Netherlands, he was able to borrow bikes from friends, seeing for the first time in the Netherlands how it was possible to have an entirely separate infrastructure just for bikes.

Back in the States, Mozer applied to graduate schools and was accepted at American University in Washington, D.C., where he started a master's program in applied economics with a focus on Africa. In 1981, he returned to Liberia as a graduate intern at the American embassy.

“The day I arrived, I had more time in country than anybody else in the embassy,” Mozer said. “It was good in terms of being prepared, but it reinforced for me that I was not cut from the right cloth to



work for the State Department. I tended to leave town every weekend instead of hanging out at the bar with people.”

Mozer says there are four main functions for an embassy: political, economic, counseling, and general services. He served in all four areas, including what ended up being his favorite job, managing a discretionary fund of \$50,000 that allowed the U.S. ambassador to help villages throughout the country.

“I was in charge of reviewing these requests for development, grants of \$1,000 to \$3,000 matched with labor in kind,” Mozer said. “If they wanted to build a school, they might ask for money for cement but cut their own timber and provide labor.

“So I was in charge of reviewing their progress, doing site visits, making recommendations, monitoring projects, going to dedications. It was fun, it got me out of town every weekend, and when I arrived, they would help me find lodging and food. It was life at its best.”

By the fall of 1981, Mozer knew it was time to move on. He returned to Seattle and enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Washington. After just one quarter, however, he wanted to get back to Africa and bicycle activism.

Mozer had gathered extensive touring experience over the years, not only in Africa, but also in the U.S., where he had

passed on the Bikecentennial ride of 1976 that formed the seed for the Adventure Cycling Association, to follow his own path.

“I wasn't a joiner,” Mozer said. “People have more or different kinds of imagination than me. I couldn't imagine getting hundreds of people to bicycle across the U.S.”

To prepare himself for offering a tour in Africa, Mozer joined the most remote bike tour happening at the time, a ride to Mongolia that included former Seattle bicycle coordinator Josh Lehman and former Adventure Cycling board member and Seattle bike-shop owner Angel Rodriguez and his wife Carla.

“It was fascinating,” Mozer said. “I figured out what I liked and didn't like. One thing I didn't like was support vehicles.”

Mozer began advertising his first Liberia trip for December 1983. He created a brochure, took out an advertisement in the Bicycle Paper, a Seattle publication that's still around, and some other papers, and got “two or three” sign-ups. Bicycle Africa has more or less struggled along with low numbers ever since, but Mozer has never given up and he does have some very loyal clients.

“I have good repeat participation. It's

more of a problem recruiting new people,” he said. “I don't seem to be able to pique people's interest, but a couple of repeat clients have done a dozen trips.”

Bicycle Africa tours are not inn-to-inn and don't use five-star accommodations, but they are “very friendly,” Mozer says, with “good immersion and good food.” Josh Lehman, now bicycle-pedestrian coordinator for the state of Massachusetts, based in Boston, is among the “small corps” of people who believe in what Mozer is trying to do with bikes in Africa, but that hasn't made it any easier for him.

“He said, ‘Hang on, people will get it,’ almost 30 years ago,” Mozer said. “I'm still waiting.”

Mozer may be waiting, but he is not standing still. One visit to the IBF website makes that clear, with its wealth of information on subjects ranging from urban planning, facility design, rural mobility, traffic safety education, energy conservation, and responsible tourism. As Mozer writes, the one common element of everything IBF does is the bicycle and underwriting its proliferation.

“Because of limited resources (both labor and funds), most of our material and financial support is provided as small matching

grants to grassroots or community-based organizations undertaking unique initiatives in less developed economies,” Mozer writes on the IBF website. “We have been particularly active in sub-Saharan Africa. Some of IBF's support has gone to training welders in Zimbabwe to make bicycle trailers, supplying bike parts to Eritrea, supporting a youth mechanics training program in Ghana, supporting the Pan-Africa Bicycle information Network, and donating bikes to Cuba.”

Today Mozer is beginning to organize tours in his own backyard, a “cultural” tour, for example, from Seattle to Victoria. He tries to bring his own belief that the bicycle is a means and not an end — a means to “education, knowledge and experience, clean living, and sustainability” — into his tours.

IBF and Bicycle Africa are extensions of his personality, says Mozer, which never caused anybody harm and never made much money.

“I could be idealistic, maybe to a fault,” he says. **AC**

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