

Cycle Touring Sudan

Following the Nile through the Nubian Desert



Leana Niemand

Cycle touring –

More addictive than cocaine and twice as expensive.

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Following the Nile through the Nubian Desert
1 611 Kilometres – 26 Days



Thank you

As always when cycle touring, I was amazed and humbled by the kind generosity of strangers and the random acts of kindness bestowed on us by the people of Sudan.

A huge thank you to Eben Human who suggested I write this book. Without his help and support, this book would never have been published.

Thanks also to Ernest Markwood for allowing me to use his photographs in this book.

I'm also immensely grateful to my sister Amanda who, through the years, selflessly, kept my journal entries and photos well-organised. Without her, there would have been no record of my travels.

As always, I'm much indebted to my friend Val Abrahamse, who kept my personal and financial matters at home in good order while I travelled the globe. It would have been impossible to achieve this without her conscientious efforts.





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SUDAN

Metema, Ethiopia - Galabat – Doka, Sudan – 88 km

Not being early risers, it was late before crossing the border from Ethiopia into Sudan at the scruffy border town of Metema. The immigration office was no more than a mud hut under thatch. Upon emerging from the dark and dingy room, one found oneself in super conservative Sudan.

The day was hot and windy, and not feeling 100% riding became a struggle, only reaching tiny Doka towards the end of the day. The tents were pitched in the vicinity of a police checkpoint at the turn-off to the village. Camping close to the police wasn't the safest place, as the trouble in South Sudan was ongoing and police were continuously under attack. The only reason for camping near the checkpoint was water availability, and thus worth the risk. Checkpoints had plenty of water and we could wipe ourselves down, cook and fill our bottles. Water is a significant concern in the desert, and fortunately, the police didn't mind sharing.

Before setting up camp, Ernest and I first rode to the market. As Doka was no more than a few simple homes, a mosque, and a small market, only a few potatoes and tomatoes were available.

Laying in my tent, I grinned as never in my wildest dreams did I think I would cycle Sudan twice!



Doka – El Gadarif (Al-Qaḍârîf) – 90 km

The next morning, we pushed onwards to Gadarif, a slightly larger town a further 90 kilometres north. The day turned out another scorcher, and again I had to drag myself along and felt weak, nauseous and without energy.

Filling our water bottles at a petrol station, a farmer befriended us and gifted us 50 Sudanese pounds (a substantial amount of money in those days). After thanking him, we headed straight to the nearest hotel. Our benefactor will never know how handy his donation came in. My entire night was spent vomiting and I could at least do so in the privacy of a room.

El Gadarif – Migreh – 97 km

By morning, I felt considerably better and could at least look around Gadarif's markets which are famous for selling sesame and sorghum. Anyone entering Sudan had to register with the police within three days of arrival. Ernest and I thus proceeded to the police station, where they appeared reluctant to perform this task. Staff informed us it was "hard for them to do so", and that it was better to register in Khartoum, more than four hundred kilometres away and not a distance doable in a day. Big eye-roll.

By the time all was done, the time was 11h00. Thank goodness the wind died down a tad, and Migreh was reached without too much difficulty. Once again, camping was near a police depot with nothing but desert surrounding us.



Migreh – Desert camp – 110 km

Sadly, the route north ran straight into the prevailing wind, thus not making for enjoyable cycling. Nonetheless, it remained a task that had to be done. Encountering a headwind is never a pleasant affair, but facing it daily became a mission. Most days we had our heads down, one pedal stroke at a time.

I was only 100% sure of one thing, which was nothing ever stayed the same. Everything passes, and sooner or later, the wind had to subside. It was apparently not going to happen that day. The only positive thing was the many small settlements at regular intervals along the Nile to get a Marinda or Pepsi. The luxury of buying something sweet to drink became a daily highlight.

Albeit a tarmac road, it was in poor condition and congested with predominantly large trucks. They were all seemingly heading to Port Sudan, Sudan's main port situated along the Red Sea. As a result, I was dead tired almost every night. Ernest did the cooking, following which I usually went straight to bed. Not that there was much else to do when camping in the desert.

Desert camp – Wad Medani – 41 km

A short cycle led from our desert camp to Wad Medani, located on the west bank of the Blue Nile and only 41 kilometres away. Being the centre of a cotton-growing region, Wad Medani was quite a substantial town for the desert and had a population of nearly 300,000. Moreover, the town was established due to the Gezira irrigation scheme and consequently sported accommodation and food. Staying the night was a no-brainer, and we spent the evening stuffing our faces with falafel. To this day, I swear Wad Medani makes the best falafel in the world.



A good deal of the political trouble at the time was in the Darfur region. Still, a strong military presence prevailed virtually everywhere. The killings of villagers increased, and the government failed to disarm the armed militias, known as the Janjawid, who continued to attack civilians in Darfur. As a result, hundreds of civilians were killed in Darfur and Chad, and some 300,000 more were displaced.

Wad Medani – Desert camp – 81 km

It was a good thing we were well fed as the next day was an exhausting ride in blistering heat and into a howling wind. Sudan wasn't kind to me and I felt tired and nauseous - things were not going my way. Upon pulling off the road to set up camp, I immediately had about 100 thorns in my tyres. This was the last thing I needed. Ernest was a star and quietly went ahead and changed both tubes and filled them with sealant. I had no energy to even think of changing tubes.

Being winter, it became dark almost immediately after sunset, and it was best to find a camping spot at around 18h00. The mozzies were ferocious! I had no idea there were that many mosquitoes in the desert. It felt like they had been waiting for the unsuspected cyclist to set up camp. The safest place was in the tents, at least until way past sunset.

Desert camp – Truckstop – 71 km

On waking to the violent flapping of the flysheet, I knew we were in for an additional day grinding into the wind. Ernest in front and me following closely behind, a difference to our usual formation as I've long learned he didn't like taking the lead. Still, little headway was made all day.



There might not have been beer in Sudan, but at least all settlements had water. Each community had a shelter where pottery urns filled with water were kept and not once were we refused this glorious and lifesaving liquid. The water stayed surprisingly cool in those pots, even in the extreme heat of the desert.

In the dying moments of the day, a truck stop with a restaurant, showers and toilets came into view. Here one could camp at the rear and enjoy the luxury of a shower. Sitting outside our tents, a Sudanese man who spoke English befriended us. He was immensely proud of his English and showed us his English textbooks.

The conversation took a bizarre turn. He accused me of lying because, according to him, a woman couldn't cycle such long distances. I wondered how he figured I got there. He then inquired whether I had any education. I confirmed I attended school for 12 years, after which I spent quite a few years pursuing further studies. Not believing me, he threw me a few questions (to check, I guessed). Luckily, the questions weren't awfully hard, more like general knowledge. Still not happy, he insisted I couldn't drive a car. Upon confirming I had not one, but two vehicles back home, he exasperatedly exclaimed, "But you can't climb a mountain!" By then, I'd lost interest in the conversation as we were clearly worlds apart. One couldn't blame the man as he was taught that from a young age. His way of thinking confirmed my belief that children shouldn't be exposed to political or religious beliefs at a young age. Instead, both should be taught as a science at school; otherwise, it's nothing but brainwashing.



Truckstop – Khartoum – 50 km

In the morning, we turned the bicycles in Khartoum's direction. Once there, camping was at the Blue Nile Sailing Club, a favourite amongst overlanders. It was also the place I camped during my ride from Cairo to Cape Town two years previously. The sailing club had a superb location on the Nile, with a gentle breeze coming off the water. Outside was a shack that sold fruit juice consisting of half mango and half avocado in two distinct layers. The stall was immensely popular!

The sailing club was where one met practically anyone travelling overland north or south. So, it was no surprise to meet Clive and Denise, a British couple on a 1954 Triumph en route from London to Cape Town. As can be imagined, they had enough experiences to keep a conversation going through the night. Also camping at the club were Charles and Rensche on motorbikes heading south. Meeting them was a blessing as we learned where to find water further north. Unfortunately, the route to Wadi Halfa involved an open desert crossing and therefore a serious lack of water.

The next four days were spent in Khartoum trying to extend our Sudanese visas (without success) and registering with the police. The rest of the time was spent (as usual) eating anything in sight.







Khartoum – Desert Camp – 106 km

We finally rode out of Khartoum on Wednesday, 12 December (winter). It became one more day battling into a stiff breeze. By five o'clock, we'd done a mere 105 kilometres.

When biking in Africa, it's best to cycle north to south as the chance of the prevailing wind being in your favour is far greater.

Camping in the desert usually meant one could go about your business undisturbed. Pitching tents and hauling out cooking equipment when people were nearby typically brought a crowd of spectators. Generally, they kept their distance and observed the madness in wonderment and awe from afar.

Desert camp – Desert camp - 86 km

The following day, our path left the Nile and led straight into a desert storm. It must be mentioned that when leaving the Nile, there is no reference and the landscape looks similar whether one looks north, south, east or west. The wind was exceptionally fierce and whipped up sand to the extent that visibility was down to a few metres. With bandana-covered faces, we dragged the bicycles through the thick sand. By then, there was no visible road, direction, or path; we could only hope we were heading in the right direction.

At one stage, I lost my cool, threw the bicycle down, kicked it and shouted to the wind, only to realise I might've broken a toe. Feeling defeated, I had no choice but to pick the bike up and, hobbling, pushed the bike into the wind. We must've made a sad sight - two lonely cyclists at a snail's pace through the desert.



Desert camp - Desert camp – 81 km

From our desert camp, Ernest and I only managed 81 kilometres. There were barely any water stops on this day. With heads down, we pushed into the wind until time to set up camp. The only water stop encountered couldn't have been more fascinating. These places often had a *dhaba* (a basic stall selling food, usually only one dish). They were places no one ever passed without stopping. So, we sat in wonderment, staring at Sudanese men, dressed in jallabiyas, eating raw goat.

By evening, gale-force gusts made pitching a tent challenging; in no time, the whole shebang was covered in sand. Eventually, Ernest lit the stove and produced a sandy pasta meal. Not much later, we crawled into our equally sandy beds. I know I've been harping on about the wind, but there are no words to describe how challenging cycling and camping can be in such dire conditions.

Desert Camp – Al Dabbah – 111 km

Eventually, the route spat us out at the Nile at Al Dabbah, and it almost felt like meeting an old friend. The wind seemed stronger each day. Biking was challenging, but setting up camp and packing up was equally problematic. I'm sure I lost half of my belongings to the wind. We located a derelict building by evening and, after dragging the bikes through the thick sand, set up camp behind it. With a broken toe, this was even more tricky, and I vowed never to kick the bike again.







Al Dabbah – Sali – 92 km

On a Sunday, the two desert rats (which we jokingly called ourselves by then, as I'm sure we looked and smelled the part) pedalled the 92 kilometres from Al Dabbah to Sali. The route ran close to the Nile, with numerous settlements on the riverbank.

We were promptly invited in after turning into one of the settlements to get water. The stove was hardly lit to make supper when a large tray laden with goat's milk cheese, olives and dates arrived. The desert folk were incredibly hospitable. I think they gave us their sleeping quarters while they slept in the kitchen area.

Sali – Dongola – 71 km

A further 70 kilometres led to Dongola and it became another day grinding into a stiff breeze. Therefore, I was in no mood for petty bureaucracy arriving in Dongola where authorities required us to register with the police before booking a hotel. I suspected the reason was being a woman. I was not happy and with my lip dragging on the ground set off by tuk-tuk to the police station.

This was where General Herbert Kitchener killed 15,000 of the indigenous Mahdist tribes in 1899. The British were brutal in those days. First, they killed the people but later killed the wounded, raising the overall death toll to over 50,000.

The following day was spent in Dongola. True to its location in one of the hottest and driest regions in the world, the weather was sweltering. Dongola was an excellent place to do much-needed laundry, bicycle maintenance, and stock up with provisions for the road ahead. All while stuffing our faces in anticipation of the next big desert starve.



Dongola - Kerma – 54 km

Following a well-deserved break, we departed Dongola along the western side of the Nile, heading north to Argo, where crossing the Nile was by a small ferry. Upon arriving at the crossing point, it was prayer time and thus not a soul in sight. All one could do was wait until the boatman returned from the mosque.

Once on the opposite bank, the road veered away from the Nile, making finding the way almost impossible - it was a good thing Charles gave Ernest the GPS coordinates where to meet the river afterwards. Camping was along the bank of the Nile under palm trees which sounded far more romantic than it turned out.

Kerma – Kahli - 53 km

From Kerma, a further 53 kilometres took us to Kahli. The midges were ferocious and got in everywhere - nose, ears, mouth and food. In the evening, it became a matter of pitching the tent in record time and hiding inside till sunset, when they miraculously disappeared.

By then, we were well entrenched in the Nubian lifestyle of drinking sweet black tea and could barely wait to pitch the tents and boil water. Strange things one does when there's a lack of beer - my mother would've been proud of me.







Khali – Desert Camp - 54 km

Our plan, after Khali, was to do an open desert crossing. We therefore continued straight where the river made a big loop as it was considerably shorter. By then, we were almost in the middle of the Nubian desert, which, surprisingly, wasn't all sand. Instead, the terrain became mountainous, rocky and corrugated. In other places, one sank deep into the soft sand and the bicycles were dragged along with great difficulty. As expected from a desert, the area was plagued by windstorms which became our biggest nemesis. With bandanas tied around our faces, we leaned into the wind, sometimes pedalling and other times walking (the toe was never the same afterwards).

Whether looking north, east, west or south, the landscape remained one vast desert. Yet, in the distance a structure loomed. Upon reaching it, we discovered not only the ruined remains of a building but four men on motorbikes huddling together, trying to have a bite to eat out of the wind. Astonished to see us, they offered us a few chocolate biscuits, a prized item in the desert. Albeit going with the wind, they had problems of their own. Their motorbikes were significantly heavier and sank far deeper into the sand. Eventually, they wished us good luck, and we set out into the wind, fuelled by the chocolate biscuits.







Desert camp – Desert camp - 52 km

The past few days, we could only manage approximately 50 kilometres of riding and at night camped in the wadis (dry riverbeds), cooking our fast-dwindling supply of rations. Moreover, the nights and mornings were bitterly cold. Reluctant to emerge, the time was usually nine-thirty or ten before getting underway.

Desert camp – Desert camp - 72 km

The next day, the two desert rats managed 72 kilometres, a distance we were pleased with as biking days were short when departing late as the sun set around 6 o'clock. During the day, we uncovered a *dhaba* selling *foul* (pronounced fool) and *aish* (warm pita bread), a dish that became our favourite while cycling Sudan.

Even though trying our level best to do longer distances, the going remained dreadfully slow. Therefore, catching the weekly Wadi Halfa/Abu Simbol ferry in four days seemed more unlikely by the day.

The fascinating part was that camp was amongst the ruins of a deserted town. To this day, I wonder about its history, but Maslow was correct and all I was concerned about was food, water and pitching the tent.







Desert camp - Akasha – 74 km

Albeit trying to get underway earlier, the time was 9 o'clock before getting going. Our eyes were set on the small community of Akasha, almost 74 kilometres away. At least we were cycling along a road of sorts, but it deteriorated as soon as it left the Nile. Conditions were becoming increasingly challenging, and the wind, sand, corrugations, and mountains seemed even worse. At least Akasha was reached before dark, which sported a tiny shop where one could buy a few items. The shop had a relatively limited supply, but we were delighted and excited about buying more tea and a few sweets.

With full water bottles, we headed out of the village to camp in a nearby riverbed. Later, Ernest warmed water to wash as the weather became downright freezing beyond sunset.

Akasha – Desert Camp - 59 km

It's surprising how cold the desert gets in winter and after drinking our morning tea, we packed up and departed. Unfortunately, the day was again marred by soft sand requiring walking the bicycles through sand or over stony terrain. Although there were no water stops or settlements, we came across a road camp approximately 30 kilometres into the day. Staff were kind enough to fill our water containers, allowing enough water to cook and wash that evening.

Our days started to follow a familiar rhythm of shivering while drinking our morning tea, followed by pushing the bikes into the wind through sand or over stony terrain, generally, in the oppressing heat. By evening, we pitched the tents in the wadis while dressed in our warmest clothes.







Desert Camp - Wadi Halfa – 72 km

Awake early we were keen to get going as this was the final stretch to Wadi Halfa. The only way to get from Sudan to Egypt overland was by ferry from Wadi Halfa to Aswan in Egypt across the Aswan Dam.

Being a weekly ferry, it was essential to get the boat the following morning or wait a further week. Unfortunately, our visas expired more than a week before and we were desperate to get the coming days' ferry.

Great was our surprise to find the last 30 kilometres into Wadi Halfa paved. With smiles and an immeasurable sense of relief, the two desert rats made their way into the small port town of Wadi Halfa. I was relieved (and I'm sure so was Ernest) being out of the desert and in a dirty room with a sagging bed. We were even more delighted with the many food stalls and being in time to catch the Aswan ferry.



Wadi Halfa, Sudan – Aswan, Egypt

The following day was an early start to purchase ferry tickets and get our police stamps to exit Sudan. Even with all the checks and stamps, no one said a word regarding our expired visas, and we couldn't wait to board the ferry and get out of Sudan before anyone noticed. Being an overnight ferry departing at four a.m., I splashed out and treated us to a cabin.

The border between the two countries ran somewhere through the middle of the lake. After some time, a speedboat came hurrying along, police jumped aboard, and our passports were nervously handed over. Then, mercifully, no one noticed the dates, and we were free to go. Phew!

The remainder of the evening was spent chatting with fellow travellers and enjoying a beautiful sunset over the Aswan Dam.

The ferry from Wadi Halfa, Sudan arrived in Aswan, Egypt around nine o'clock the following day. We, nevertheless, only managed to place our feet upon Egyptian soil at around eleven. Thus, the saying, "Egypt was like a visit back in time", seemed accurate in more ways than one.



About Sudan (Please refer to your favourite travel guidebook or the internet for a more in-depth overview)

Capital City

Khartoum, situated at the Blue and White Nile's confluence, is Sudan's capital.

Currency

The Sudanese pound is the official currency of the Republic of Sudan. The pound consists of 100 piasters.

Language

Sudan is a multilingual country dominated by Sudanese Arabic. In the 2005 constitution of the Republic of Sudan, the official languages of Sudan are Arabic and English.

Religion

Religion plays a vital role in Sudan, with 90-97% of the population adhering to Islam. The vast majority of Muslims in Sudan are Sunni, belonging to the Maliki school.

Location and size

Situated in northeast Africa, Sudan is the largest country on the continent, covering an area of 2,505,810 sq. km, with a length of 2,192 km SSE – NNW and a width of 1,880 km ENE – WSW. It is bounded on the N by Egypt, on the NE by the Red Sea, on the E by Eritrea and Ethiopia, on the S by Kenya, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), on the W by the Central African Republic and Chad, and on the NW by Libya.

Population

The current population of Sudan is 44,005,240, and it is considered sparsely populated, with a population density of 25 per Km².

Internet coverage

Internet services are available, particularly in town areas, and most midrange and top-end hotels have Wi-Fi.

Conflict in South Sudan

The Sudanese Civil War was a conflict from 1983 to 2005 between the central Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army. Although it originated in South Sudan, the civil war spread to the Nuba Mountains and the Blue Nile. It lasted 22 years and is one of the longest recorded civil wars. The war resulted in the independence of South Sudan six years after the war ended. Conflict is, however, ongoing.



About this Book

This book accounts for my cycle ride through Sudan en route from Ethiopia to Egypt. There are hundreds of different ways and the course described is by no means the best. If the intention is to use this book as a cycle touring guide, then please keep the following in mind:

The distances

Daily distances in this book may not be the shortest between two points as we tended to deviate occasionally. The daily kilometres recorded were, however, accurate according to my odometer. The reading often varied from distance markers and maps, and sometimes over or under-reading. I always noted the kilometres at the end of the day, which might have included going to the market or looking for accommodation.

Time of year and date

This book accounts for our cycle ride in Sudan in December 2007. Many things could have changed since roads may now be in better or worse condition. Places, where we stayed may now be upgraded or demolished. The hills may or may not be as steep as described, but it sure felt like it at the time.

Insurance

A travel insurance policy is necessary to cover theft, loss and medical problems. Some policies specifically exclude "dangerous activities", including scuba diving, motorcycling and even trekking. I don't think cycling is considered dangerous but check the small print.

Clothing

We spent most days in the saddle, so ensure you have good quality, padded cycling shorts. I cycle in ordinary sandals, but one can cycle in any comfortable footwear. Summers in Sudan are sweltering, but winter nights can be downright freezing, so pack accordingly. Personal toiletries should include insect repellent and anti-chafe cream. I recommend using a cycling helmet.

The bicycle

Any bicycle will do as long you are comfortable. I use an ordinary mountain bike with a Merida frame fitted with Shimano Deore bike parts, Alex wheel rims and Schwalbe tyres. The bicycle is equipped with Tubus bicycle racks. Panniers are expensive but essential items, and Ortlieb panniers are world-renowned. Make sure that you know how to fix a punctured tube. As I use Maps, a phone holder for the handlebar is convenient for navigation. ME or Google Maps to find my way. Furthermore, a handlebar bag is essential for holding a camera and other items needed during the day.

Recommended further reading

Lonely Planet: The e-book is less expensive and a handy guide.



About the Author

Born and bred in Cape Town, South Africa, Leana was never much of a cyclist but took part in a few Argus Cycle Tours (a famous cycle race in Cape Town, South Africa). Her love for cycle touring started in 2005 when she participated in the Tour D'Afrique, a race from Cairo to Cape Town. She bought a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and had no idea what she was letting herself in for. Surprisingly, she cycled every inch of the way to Cape Town. On her return, she found it remarkably challenging to return to regular life and decided to continue travelling by bicycle.

Leana, accompanied by Ernest Markwood, left Cape Town at the end of March 2007. What was intended as a long bike ride became an around-the-world cycle ride. In the beginning, they cycled together most of the time. Eventually, each found their own pace and direction in life and on the road.

In the process, Leana has cycled Africa twice, the Middle East, Europe (including the UK), Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia and Australia. From Australia, she flew to Ushuaia, Argentina and spent the next few years cycling South, Central and North America. Afterwards, a year was spent visiting the larger islands including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan.

At the time of writing, Leana found herself back in Southeast Asia.

Picture Credits

Ernest Markwood (Cover Photo), (p7 bottom), (p9 bottom), (p11 bottom), (p13 top), (p15), (p19 top), (p21 bottom), (p25 bottom), (p27 bottom), (p30 bottom), (p31), (p33), (p34 bottom), (p37 top), (p38 bottom), (p39 bottom), (p41 bottom), (p42 bottom top), (p43 bottom), (p45 top), (p49), (p51), (p53).









**There's nothing more exciting than being on my way
to a place I've never been before.**

