

# Cycle for Hope Report

## The Journey Begins

As you know I was recently away in Africa attempting to cycle over 1000km through Cameroon and Gabon. The trip was organised by Ambassadors in Sport (AIS); a Christian football organisation who aim to bring hope through football. The purpose of the cycle was to raise funds for the Hope Academy Project. This project seeks to use football as a tool to teach young people about team dynamics, life skills and Biblical principles, as well as high quality football coaching.



Along with two other guys from Northern Ireland, I left these shores on the 21<sup>st</sup> March, on route to Yaoundé, Cameroon. We arrived the following day and met up with the core team (who had been cycling since December). We gave them presents from home and of course some Dairy Milk. I can honestly say I have never seen people taking so long to eat a few squares of chocolate. The reaction was understandable as they hadn't tasted any Western food for the best part of three months!

After our rations ran out, we had no option but to eat the local delicacies which involved plantain (similar to bananas), cassava (similar to bark) and fufu (similar to dough). As you can imagine, an acquired taste (which we didn't have) was required for these foods, so we resorted to bread with chocolate spread.

## The Yaoundé Experience

We spent a few days in Yaoundé and met up with a local Pastor, Jean-Luc Pondi who looked after us during our stay. We were invited to speak at his Church on a number of occasions and explained who we were and what the purpose of the trip was. The local people were so supportive and enthusiastic about having us there and requested a question and answer session with us. All the young lads continually asked us if we could sign them up for a major European football club! There was obviously a misunderstanding somewhere along the line, probably due to the fact that our French speaking was rubbish.



Jean-Luc organised a football match for us against a local side, however, that one match quickly turned into five! We soon discovered that this is typical of Africa in that you just don't know what to expect! Once these matches finished, we had a 30km cycle to camp that night. The dreaded cycling had commenced!

## Day in the Life

The usual day would consist of breakfast at 6.30am followed by devotions; and then we aimed to be on the bikes just after 7am. We would get at least 70km covered by 11am and then stop for lunch and siesta until 3pm. It's too hot to cycle during this time so the nearest river would be sought out for a cool down. After siesta, we would cover a further 30km and then go on the lookout for a suitable campsite. Dinner would follow and then there would be some banter before we hit the sack!



The campsites varied from Churches to hospitals to rainforests or even unused logging sites. In other words, we pitched the tents wherever we could find a clearing. There's nothing as good as camping out in the wild and tasting the real experience. The only thing I *would* change is the mosquito factor. I'm convinced that Northern Irish blood must taste great as we were bitten *all night*. Despite this, camping outside was great, as night after night we were left speechless after being treated to breathtaking views of the stars.

## *Hero's Welcome*

We got a celebrity-like welcome every time we cycled into a new town or village. The kids would run alongside us shouting, cheering and offering us mangos in exchange for a spin on our bikes. It was such a privilege to spend time with these people as they were always smiling and laughing despite having little to call their own. We played a lot of football matches in these villages and had opportunities to talk to them about our trip and our beliefs. Not only did we want to bring them hope through football but as Christians we wanted to bring them hope through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For us, this was the most important message we could ever share with them.



As we cycled through Cameroon and Gabon the scenery was beautiful. The rainforests and mountain ranges were simply spectacular. The roads on the other hand were not so impressive. There was a lot of pain and sweat shed on these mountains; however, the views from the summit made our efforts worthwhile.

## *The 'beautiful game'*

The amazing thing about football is that it's a universal language. The 'beautiful game' supersedes many barriers and allows for the love and passion of the sport to be enjoyed by everyone regardless of race, colour, language or religion. It was both a privilege and a humbling experience to spend time and play football with these people every day. We made great contacts everywhere we went which bodes well for the future work we have planned for these areas.



We went to Africa with two passions; faith and football. We wanted to share these passions with as many people as we could and thankfully we were able to do this. The trip has enabled AIS to make valuable contacts and build up relationships throughout Africa, which will allow for the further development of Hope Academies across this continent. The Hope Academies will not only change lives and gives people the opportunity for a bright future, but lives will also be *saved* through the provision of medical units.

## *All things considered*

On reflection, I am so thankful for the opportunity to take time away for this trip. It allowed me to taste and see another culture, which in turn helped me to appreciate how privileged I was. We met a lot of people and saw amazing things that will remain engrained in me for many years to come. The greatest privilege of all was having the opportunity to share the Gospel message with the people, telling them that Jesus Christ loves them and longs to have a relationship with them. This is the greatest message that they can ever hear, one that can change their lives forever but also one that requires a response. We must now pray that the Holy Spirit will work in the lives of all those people and that a mighty work of salvation will take place. There is much work to be done on this continent but the workers are few; may God graciously rise up men and women who will serve Him wholeheartedly and give their all for the work that the Holy Spirit will bring about in this place!

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose"  
Jim Elliot

