

In search of freedom



In February 2021 I got to be part of small four-person team, led by race director Chris Fisher, that did a reconnaissance of the race route for the inaugural edition of the Freedom Circuit scheduled for April.

This is that story.

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Bad photos: Riders

“Kuphi isipaza? Kuphi isipaza!?” Warm greetings aside this will be the most often asked question of locals during the inaugural Freedom Circuit bike packing race scheduled for April 2021. This begs the question, ‘why do I need to know the whereabouts of a shop for a bike race?’

The last 20 years has seen South African mainstream mountain biking culture grow up on a diet of multi-day stage races. These are world class events where a riders’ every need is catered for. I’ve seen inflatable swimming pools and pizza ovens in locations so remote I could barely get my bicycle there. Riding ranged from damn hard to easy, and almost always on well-maintained routes and tracks. Stage race fatigue birthed gravel riding events and its favourite tool, the gravel bike. These events are similarly well organised: manned waterpoints; 100% rideable routes and large fields. Great camaraderie and a

real test of pure lower limb horsepower. Given the relatively fast riding speeds and numerous support stations, 100mile (160km) and 150mile (240km) events are within reach of average riders.

The Freedom Circuit is none of these events.

The Call

I got the call from Chris Fisher in January asking me if I wanted to do a reconnaissance ride of the race route in February. My reply was simple - “count me in... for whatever”. I assumed this recce would be done at a leisurely pace and was a little surprised when I got a text message with the ride plan. Chris wanted to mimic the average riders experience and complete the longer 700km route in 100hours, 20 hours quicker than the five-day cut-off. He also wanted us to ride our bikes in race trim, with all our gear on board - clothing, power, bivvie, and food. When February rolled around the recce team had grown to include accomplished adventure racer Julia Fisher and veteran ultra-endurance cyclist, Mike Woolnough. My leisurely-pace ride had morphed into “I’ll be hanging-on-by-my-toe-nails-to-keep-up ride”. The objective was to lay down a perfect bicycle GPS route for use in the actual event in April; to explore some alternate routes; and to establish



If this picture doesn't stir your soul, then you're probably being shown this photo at your funeral.

potential re-supply points for competitors in the actual race.

The Format

At its core the Freedom Circuit is a self-supported event. There are two courses: a long course of 430miles (700km) and a shorter, 250mile (400km) course. Both have the same cut-off of five days (120hours). Riders will get a GPS route and have to stay on the route. So far so good.

At this point the format diverges from the norm: while there are checkpoints where riders sign in, these points are not support stations as you may have come to know them. They will offer basic meals and rustic lodgings, but riders will need to pay for these just as if they were using commercial hotels or restaurants. Riders have to carry everything on them from the start. Clothing, water, food, and power. There is a list of mandatory gear designed mainly around safety and catering for the range of weather you're sure to encounter. 'GPS route' you say? Don't be fooled into thinking that you cannot get lost. I've seen many people utilise the wrong settings on their GPS and get woefully lost. I've also had a GPS fail on me 600km into a 1000km race. Bring a spare.

The route traverses properly rural South Africa and you will only pass through two small towns - Underberg and Matatiele. You can choose to camp or use commercially available lodgings. The golden rule is that you may only use support that is available to all other riders. i.e., no outside or personalised support. Riders will be allowed to ride in pairs or small groups. Save for this localised concession the race is classified as self-supported. For the rest you'll be left to fend for yourself using community taps to refill water; spaza shops to find coke and snacks; and the checkpoints for a more filling meal. "Kuphi isipaza?" You will thank me.

Heart and soul

For the purist bike-packer accustomed to Tour Divide-type rules, the localised differences may sound like anathema. I disagree - bike packing and self-supported style riding is about the spirit of adventure. It is about self-discovery. It is about putting oneself 'out there', opening yourself up to an experience that is potentially life changing. It is about reducing, for a few days, your life to the basic nomadic needs of eating, sleeping, and moving forward. There is an inner kid in you yearning to get muddy again. There is an inner 30-something wondering how to get out the office again. There is a wiser 45-year-old wanting to connect with herself again. That is what these types of events are about. The rules merely facilitate these journeys.



On a 100 hour plan we got into CP2 at around 10:30 at night having ridden in the rain for four hours. A sense of humour is part of the mandatory equipment list.

The terrain

There's an old phrase I enjoy repeating: "just as the spreadsheet is not the business, the map is not the terrain." This rings true for the Freedom Circuit. It cannot be ridden



If you're new to a GPS this is generally bad news.

on google earth. Trust me on this. You absolutely will push your bike. Sometimes for an hour at a time. When you see 14% on your GPS it's likely the gradient and not your battery power. You will cross so many rivers you will need to start counting on your toes. Your belly button may even get wet. Mine did. When you finish the long course, you will have climbed the equivalent of Kilimanjaro two-and-a-half-times (13'000m or 43000ft). Just under twice for the short course.



Race director, Chris Fisher walking the talk. He wanted to ensure that he experienced the route as riders would and he rode every single (and then some) mile.

The route covers iconic sections of the region. Names that when uttered at a local bar are sure to get you a free drink and a front seat on which to tell your stories. When your children hear these stories they will be reminded how you were their first hero. And still are.

Traversing "The Vuvu Valley" you will track the Tina river on the valley floor for some 9km. Like the road of bones in eastern Russia the tracks on this valley floor are filled with a small piece of every rider that has ever come through here. I can barely type the words without getting a lump



Food at Mrs Kibi's house. The most delicious potatoes I've had in some time.

in my throat. Once you've refuelled at Mrs Kibi's house, you will wet your feet in the "Tinana" river. Thirty minutes later you will have carried your bike through what appears to be the eye of a rock needle. You will need to take photos as



Julia Fisher crossing the Tinana. In case you're wondering, Julia is not especially short. It's the water that is deep. Yes, they are related.

no-one will believe you. At "Black Fountain" you will follow the scars of cattle tracks that descend for 13km before you, once again, hoist your bike on your shoulders to scale the nasty ascent of "Koebung". At this point you will curse the race director. If you don't, you should. You will pass "Marizell Mission" and negotiate the spectacular uphill single track of "Stations of the Cross" that draws you up as if on a ski lift. The blue skies, green hills and red wattle drag strips of the "Mpharane Ridge" will fill the reservoir of your soul. You will silently apologise for having said such nasty things about the race director earlier. You will follow ancient paths that join the "Three Villages of Queen Mercy". Route directions pre-GPS included gems like "turn left at the outdoor bathtub after the blue house". Tubs break and houses get painted. You'll tip your helmet to Mr Rattray as you traverse Pleasantview Farm on the access road to the magnificent section through "Politique Kraal." Here, your odometer will click through 600km and your altimeter will reflect over 10'000 metres ascent. If you pass here in the dead of night you should take a moment, turn off your light, gaze upwards, and reflect in wonderment on your journey. Not just this one. You will meet Mr Dalu Ncgobo who "sleeps with one eye open" at "Ntsikeni Lodge" waiting for riders to arrive. You simply being there keeps him and the lodge alive for yet another season.

You will have stories. Stories that can only be earned, never bought.

Some advice

Having done this route in 100 hours I can tell you: It. Is. Hard. You will be broken at some point. You will wonder “why?”. If you want to avoid riding at night and get a good night’s sleep, do the 250-mile (400km) course. Doing the 430-mile route (700km) will force you into forgoing sleep, riding at night and having to, in Mike’s words, get



Community water taps will be your friend. This one is at the top of Black Fountain.

a “wobble on”. Please don’t use a gravel bike. Even if you’re a masochist. Lower your expectations when it comes to amenities. Don’t be a ‘tjop’ (colloquial for idiot) just because you’re paying for something. After all, this is rural South Africa where every person you see



A typical spaza shop. This one had frozen ice lollies which we jammed into camelbaks to cool the water! You’ll find cokes, crisps and perhaps some peanuts & bread. They don’t typically adhere to nutritional guidelines.

likely lives off less than \$1 a day. You won’t even have electricity at some of the re-supply points. One of them is a fully functioning school. Others are the actual houses of rural South African folk. Be nice and people will return the smile and be helpful. The trail and its people that eke out a living are sensitised to riders and ensure our safety. Don’t ruin that for future adventurers. Be focussed, but don’t miss the important stuff on

the side of the track. Carry spares. There is definitely nothing resembling a bike shop on this route. Be self-sufficient. Spaza shops may not be open. Cokes may be warm. Taps may be dry. Rain may ruin a previously rideable road. You may not have cell signal. TIA (this is Africa).



Early morning departures will be required whether you are doing the short or long course.

Why Larry, why?

When I recount stories like this I am, at some point, inevitably met with silence, followed by a hushed “but why do that?”. The question is fair, the answer complicated and highly personalised. I imagine my life as a canvas and each experience a dot on it. Some dots are larger, representing a greater influence on my life. Having children. Finding a soul mate. When I was younger these dots appeared disconnected. As I’ve got older, I understand that the dots are in fact joined. It is my job to ensure I place new dots on my life’s canvas. I want dots that are both large and spaced further apart from the existing dots. This broadens the canvas of my life and ensures I influence my future with positive, large dots.

I ‘hit the wall’, on the base of the climb through Pleasantview farm. I could pedal no more. I had to stop, take a few minutes, and renegotiate a new deal with myself. I needed to remind myself about the ‘why’. Having completed a few of these events in the last two years I am reminded that my happiness no longer comes *from* things, but from *doing* things. I am reminded how much more, less, is. I am reminded that my happiness doesn’t exist somewhere in the future but comes from my past. Last, I am reminded that I am solely the author of my happiness.

This, is freedom.

[PS: Mike and I paid our own way. We have entered the 700km race in April. If we said anything nice about Chris or his race its not because he paid us. Onward!]

