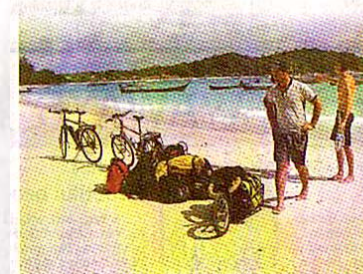


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A Swiss pair pedal back home from Down Under
[8C]

PEDALLING HOME

Two cyclists set out on a transcontinental odyssey back to Switzerland

■ *Phooeadon Duangmee*
The Nation

ALEX KAESLINE and Albano Tundo left Darwin, Australia, on bicycles last May on their way home to Europe. So far they've spent nine months on the road and ocean on a cross-continental cycling odyssey.

"We are cycling to Switzerland and expect to arrive there before Christmas 2008," says Tundo over an espresso at Starbucks in Bangkok's Khao San Road.

+ "It all began as a joke - pure and simple," recalls Kaesline, a Swiss who quit a banking career to pursue photography classes in Australia.

Strictly speaking, this adventure was his idea - if not his mistake.

"One night I called Albano from a party and told him I was going to cycle back home from Australia because I could no longer stand flying after experiencing terrible turbulence.

"I thought nobody would take it seriously, but Albano quit his nursing job in Switzerland and flew to Australia with his bike."

Tundo decided, heroically, that he wanted to accompany his best friend home - the long, or even the wrong way - on two wheels.

The first part of their journey, from Darwin to the Tanimbar Islands in southern Indonesia, didn't involve much peddling, as they crossed the Timor Sea for Indonesia on a small fishing boat. Tundo found the high seas and rough waves far different than anything he'd ever encountered on Lake Geneva. He was seasick the entire time. After 52 hours at sea, they arrived at the pier in Yamdena - the largest of the Tanimbar Islands.



"It was pure adventure, but also a little weird because you always have a hundred people staring at you, and there's only the two of you to look back at them. It was strange," says Tundo, who was experiencing Asia for the first time.

"The Yamdena live beyond the modern world. They don't have Internet and many of them have hardly ever seen white men. They keep making a buzz around your bike, and act like, 'You're crazy, man! What are you doing here?'" adds Kaesline.

As if being a stranger in a strange land didn't create enough of a sense of adventure, Kaesline and Tundo found themselves in deep waters with local officials after leaving on an even smaller

fishing boat from Yamdena to Kupong, West Timor. The officials - who probably couldn't believe that a couple of foreigners were riding bicycles to Switzerland via their remote island - had the two quarantined for 24 hours.

However, Kaesline says that Indonesians, in general, are friendly people. Even if they can't speak English, they are always willing to help travellers.

"One day we arrived at one of Indonesia's remote islands and asked a crowd of local people for the harbour master, who we'd been told was named Nichola," recalls Kaesline. "Another local guy showed up and volunteered to take us to Nichola. We found two men of that name, but they weren't the Nichola we were looking for.

"One Nichola pulled out a rifle when we approached," adds Tundo.

But before the two could scream, "Switzerland is a neutral country, and you can have the bikes if you want", they were ushered into a house and served hot tea.

"This was the scariest part of our journey since we left Darwin," says Kaesline. "We thought we might be robbed, but instead we got tea. And the guy who helped us find Nichola, the harbour master, was indeed a crazy man - mentally retarded."

From Indonesia's far south, the duo followed their noses northwest. They passed through the island Flores, with the first long stretch of cycling, climbed Mount Rinjani in Lombok, and arrived at Bali in late July.

"I was taught to surf for the first time in Bali - by a German woman," says Tundo.

After just one month on the road the itinerary changed quite a few times because there were so many places to see and things to do. Perhaps, as in the original Odyssey of

legend, the gods just don't want duo to arrive home on time.

In September, they reached central Java, which was devastated by an earthquake in May. Many people were still in need of shelter, so Kaesline and Tundo volunteered to help put up houses.

"We don't follow a strict plan anymore, but generally keep heading west in the direction of Switzerland," Kaesline says. "We wanted to leave on a boat from Singapore to Vietnam, but couldn't find any boats in service. Now we're supposed to travel through Thailand."

"All roads lead to Rome anyway, so if you can find Rome, Switzerland isn't far away," jokes Tundo, who was born to Italian parents. "In fact, after cycling for nine months in Indonesia and losing wheels in Malaysia, Thailand has proved to be a paradise."

The duo arrived at Koh Lipe, a remote island in Thailand's Satun province, in December.

But since they arrived in Bangkok earlier this month, the two have decided to split up and take their own side routes - for a while, at least.

"We've been on the road together every day and night for nine months. It's time to take a break and follow our own paths for a little while," says Tundo. "I will go west to Pagan in Burma, and Albano will head east for the Angkor Wat and the Mekong in Cambodia and Laos. Then we will join up again in Bangkok."

China, India, Pakistan and Iran are the next probable stops after Thailand. So if you see two Europeans teaching German for noodles in Lhasa and *naan* in Islamabad, it's probably just Kaesline and Tundo. You could probably ask them how they lost their wheels at a mosque in Malaysia.