

CURPENCY

PORTRAIT



Cross-country cyclist and adventurer Kate Leeming has one more continent to conquer.

Story by Tony Davis Photography by Josh Robenstone

IF YOU BELIEVE THE HUMBLE BICYCLE is the purest design of all, you won't get an argument from Kate Leeming.

"It's very efficient and effective. It's beautiful looking ... good for physical and mental health. The bike is an incredibly simple tool that everyone can benefit from."

Leeming knows more about bikes than most. She rode one across Africa (a circuitous route of 22,000 kilometres from Senegal to Somalia), and around Australia (25,000 kilometres over nine months) and from one side of Russia to the other – a comparatively modest 13,400 kilometres, though bears and Siberian swamps were among the hazards.

If things go to plan, Leeming will be the first person to cycle across Antarctica. She has set aside 62 days – and her warmest gear for the katabatic polar winds and temperatures as low as minus 40 degrees.

Bicycle design has changed surprisingly little since the "safety bicycle" began to replace the penny-farthing in the 1880s. It's still all there: the triangular frame, the equal-size wheels, the chain drive to the rear via cogs that determine the gearing.

The arrangement is remarkably effective (as much as five times more efficient than walking), but Leeming's bikes have a major update designed for sand, snow and ice: the pedals can drive both wheels.

She's now tested her all-wheel-drive "fat bikes", with balloon tyres to provide flotation on soft surfaces, in north-east Greenland and Arctic Canada, as well as along the Finke River in central Australia and on some of the world's tallest sand dunes in Namibia.

Leeming believes Antarctica will be a new level of difficulty. "When it's loose, flyaway snow, especially the very dry type of snow that's there, you can't grip anything. Obviously if you're sinking deeply it doesn't matter how good the bike is, so I'll be pushing and carrying."

Ice is fine because she can put studs on her tyres but sastrugi – snow carved into

irregular peaks and troughs by the wind – will be more challenging. "If it's possible to grip it then my bike is the best tool for that." There's also altitude (the South Pole is nearly 3000 metres above sea level) and crevasses. "But the wind is the most demoralising thing because you can't see it. It's just there and you've got nothing to show for it. It's just wind."

The trip was scheduled for this Antarctic summer (mid-November to the end of January is the only weather window), but COVID-19 and the accompanying retreat of sponsors has pushed it to November 2021.

Leeming's bike, designed to her requirements by Christini Technologies in

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Philadelphia, uses bevelled gears, rods and universal joints to send drive from the rear hub to the front when needed. The system weighs less than 600 grams. “It’s just so clever,” says Leeming. “Immediately the back wheel slips, the front wheel engages.”

Born in Northam, Western Australia, in 1967, Leeming represented the state in four sports while at school. She used a bike for fitness but upon moving to Britain in 1990, she realised it was the ideal way to see the Continent. She covered 15,000 kilometres in three trips. “I felt very connected with the people and the land, and it enabled me to bring a line on the map to life. It gives such a grounded perspective, you still cover good distances, and it just means so much more to get somewhere under your own steam.”

Along the way Leeming discovered real tennis (once known as Royal Tennis in Australia), went professional, and rose to number two in the world. There was a French husband at one stage. “He came over to Australia and then things changed and so I just haven’t really made time for anyone else. I don’t look outwardly enough because I’m too focused on what I’m doing.”

And what drives her? “There’s personal and there’s outside motivation to do all these things. In my Russian trip I aided the children affected by the Chernobyl disaster and in all of my expeditions since then there were other motives, whether it’s education, sustainable development, the causes and effects of extreme poverty.

“Every journey I think changes me a little bit, and understanding how the world fits together is really important.”

Aside from earning her income from public speaking and coaching real tennis, Leeming is working on two films, planning her Antarctica trip and running the Breaking the Cycle education project, which aims to inspire the next generation of leaders. How does she relax? “It might seem strange. I actually go out riding.” ●

Kate Leeming is no stranger to riding on snow, but she believes her solo assisted ride across Antarctica will be her most challenging trip yet.



ROPE AND GLORY

“It can take years to design a chair I’m happy with, but this idea came almost instantaneously,” says Ronan Bouroullec of the new Rope chair for Artek. “It was like pulling off a magic trick.”

The illusion was decidedly lo-fi, as the best tricks tend to be. It involved a few sections of garden hose and some pieces of string lying about the Paris studio he shares with younger brother Erwan. Threading the string through the hose, he began reflecting on how a solid structure could be anchored by something more fluid, and how that combination of rigidity and



suppleness could make for a truly unique seat.

The rope in the chair becomes tensile as it resists the weight of the sitter and retains the body’s form even after it has vacated the perch. Like magic.

“And it’s so close to a drawing, to a child’s sketch of a chair,” says Ronan, clearly delighted.

Both brothers, who have co-signed their work since setting up a shared studio two decades ago, sell their drawings through the prestigious Galerie kreò in St Germain. But whereas Ronan’s sketches are typically rounded and organic, conjured up freehand using marker pens, Erwan’s tend to be jagged and febrile, enhanced by CAD.

The Rope chair, then, bears all the traits of a big-brother Bouroullec creation. The rope is marine grade for durability, and comes in only black or natural flax. “It’s simple, intuitive, and it won’t date,” says Ronan. “But what I like most is that it makes me smile.”

Available through Anibou, Sydney. For more drawings, @ronanbouroullec on Instagram. Stephen Todd

Christmas has arrived early for watch purists thanks to A. Lange & Söhne’s release of a refreshed Lange 1 Time Zone. The classic beauty has an asymmetric dial accommodating two time displays (home and away), a “city ring” to easily set the second zone, plus outsize indicators for date, day-night, daylight saving and power-reserve. A new single-barrel calibre with 72 hours’ reserve powers things and three versions are available, cased in white, pink and yellow gold. Priced from \$79,700.

Bani McSpedden

More treasures in our Watch supplement inside.

