

MUNGA MAN

The man behind the richest mountain bike race in the world didn't simply wake up one day with the idea. As Jazz Kuschke discovered, for Alex Harris, the Munga is the culmination of more than 20 years of adventure expeditions and non-stop bike races.



ALEX HARRIS is one of South Africa's most revered adventurers. The list of his exploits reads long and prolific, a combination of commercial and personal expeditions that's seen him conquer the Seven Summits (the highest mountain on each continent), slog through the jungles of Borneo and cross the Empty Quarter of the Arabian Desert. He's walked to the South Pole and has stood on the summit of Kilimanjaro 15 times. Enough

to legitimately claim he's bagged some peaks and experienced life-threatening danger.

More than enough to unpack the kitbags for good and reap the rewards of the potentially lucrative corporate motivational-speaker circuit. The 43-year-old Portuguese-born Joburg native did all that. Kinda. He kept the bikes out of storage and of late has been throwing everything at the toughest bike races in the world. Now he's organised what

promises to be the king of them all, with the biggest prize purse in biking, dwarfing almost all other sport.

ADVENTURERS ARE MADE

"For me it started out really from a passion for travelling," explains Harris of his love for adventure. "No one in my family was ever very adventurous, so as a child I did virtually nothing of the sort. But I definitely always was curious."

He was introduced to climbing in the Magaliesberg in the late 1980s and those early cragging trips quickly led further afield and eventually abroad.

"I began rock climbing at the end of school and then joined the Mountain Club of SA in the early '90s and began doing bigger expeditions around the world," Harris says. "Then around 1995/96, I started doing the smaller adventure races for a few years before

he formed with climbing partner Sean Disney after resigning from a sales position in which he'd excelled. Disney and Harris met in the air force and, soon after they completed their conscription, Mount Everest was on the cards, but things didn't work out. Harris eventually reached the summit from the northern side in 2005. His return after being disappointed on the world's highest mountain twice before goes some way

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Alex's adventure achievements

FEBRUARY/MARCH 2013 – Alex and team become the first to cross the Empty Quarter unsupported.

JANUARY 2012 – unsupported crossing on foot of the Ramlat al Gharbaniyat, Arabian Desert, Oman.

JANUARY 2011 – supported crossing on foot of the Liwa section of the Arabian Desert, UAE.

DECEMBER 2009 – unsupported crossing on foot of the northern tip of the Naukluft Desert, Namibia.

MAY 2002 – led the Discovery expedition to North America's highest mountain, Denali (Mount McKinley, 6 192m).

APRIL 2001 – guided the first SA expedition to Cho Oyu, Nepal (8 201m).

APRIL 2000 – led the first South African expedition to climb Australasia's highest peak, Carstensz Pyramid (4 894m).

DECEMBER 1999 – led the first South African

Crossing the Empty Quarter on fat bikes called for a big pump.



JUNE 2009 – expedition to Broad Peak (8 047m) in the Pakistan Karakorum.

JANUARY 2008 – first South African to walk unsupported to the South Pole (1 130km in 65 days).

JUNE 2005 – reached the summit of Everest from the north side.

JUNE 2005 – completed the Seven Summits, the highest mountain on each of the seven continents.

APRIL 2003 – led the Discovery Everest expedition to the south side of Everest.

expedition atop Antarctica's Mount Vinson (4 897m)

JANUARY 1999 – first South African to climb on all seven continents.

SEPTEMBER 1996 – led the first SA expedition to Everest's north side, becoming the youngest to lead an Everest expedition.

JULY 1994 – first SA ascent of a 7 000m peak, Mount Lenin, Uzbekistan (7 134m), 15 ascents of Kilimanjaro (5 895m) on five different routes, three ascents of South America's highest: Aconcagua (6 960m), three ascents of Mount Kenya (5 199m).



Whether racing across South Africa, or scaling Everest, Alex Harris has grit in spades

to describing his dedication, drive and intensity. It speaks of a man who won't sit down until it's done, and done well.

While Everest may be the pinnacle for most mountaineers (and should be for him), Harris rates walking unsupported to the South Pole in early 2008 as his most notable achievement. That journey took 65 days and covered almost 1 200km, an indication of how 20 years of adventuring has evolved into how and why he does things, and what kind of context he applies to what he attempts.

"I'm passionate about exploring the human psyche and the way God has given us the capacity to endure and persevere. That side of things excites me and has pushed me to seek out more individual challenges, like doing the Empty Quarter after Antarctica. I look for something a bit harder and a bit different. But the motivation is not to be the first: for me it's really just about exploring both the world and the human dynamic."

But if this beyond-impressive list of expeditions earns our respect, it is perhaps a bit obscure for the average bike rider. We can't comprehend quite how severe a minus-30-degree blizzard is at 8 000m above sea level, but we know what it feels like to ride 100km with a headwind, and therefore we can relate to Alex Harris the bike racer. Almost.

SLEEPLESS ACROSS SA

Harris has won the Freedom Challenge Race Across South Africa (RASA) twice. He broke

the record for this 2 300km non-stop test of fitness, navigational skills and mental strength in 2011 (his second win). And then finished second to Martin Dreyer in 2012, both well under the '11 record. His time that year was 10 days, 23 hours and 57 minutes.

Bizarrely, he evolved into a mountain-bike racer not out of his adventure-racing background but rather via track cycling. Five months after he got on a track bike for the first time in 2006, he won two golds (1 000m and 1 500m TT) and a silver at the South African Track Champs (35–39 years), and was selected to represent South Africa at the UCI World Masters Track Championships in Manchester in the 35- to 39-year age category. Harris won a silver and a bronze at the Champs. The following year he defended his age-group 1 000m title. In 2010 (the year of his first RASA win), he came back to win five golds and a silver in the same division.

On tackling big mountain challenges and expedition-length bike races, Harris explains, "Ultimately it's a very personal thing. At the end of the day you can have a cause or you can align it to this or that, but the motivators fundamentally are personal and affect your life on a day-to-day basis. Of course, it's all connected through the process, because you have to involve sponsors,



THE MUNGA
Fast facts

ROUTE: Bloemfontein to Stellenbosch, +1 000km, marked.

ENTRY: \$10 000

PRIZE MONEY: first \$750 000; second \$100 000; third \$50 000. The fourth through 10th teams will each win an entry into the following year's race.

UNDERDOG DRAW: \$100 000. Every team that finishes the race within the five-day cut-off period goes into a draw for this prize.

AID STATIONS: there are five stations along the race route, spaced roughly between 150 and 200km apart.

WATER POINTS: approximately every 50 to 60km.

Top five survival tips

1. Ride in a bunch up to the first village.
2. Pace yourself from there on out.
3. Manage your time well.
4. Sleep at least four hours a day.
5. Spend time at the water points and drink!

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you have to involve media and all of those have a direct link. But ultimately you have to be honest with yourself," he says.

Training-wise, there is a major difference between the requirements for track racing, expeditions and non-stop bike racing. "When I compete on the track circuit it's a very specific periodised programme," he explains. "In 2010, I came out of Freedom, took a few weeks off and then started converting endurance to speed. But other than the one-off competitive event, expeditions are more a general type of fitness, so most of the time I try to keep myself somewhere between 70% and 80% fitness throughout the year," Harris says.

"For the desert stuff, we pull tyres similar to what we did for the South Pole: you know a few months before you start converting endurance to power-specific. I have an unusual kind of career, so I combine a general fitness with a specific fitness."

Harris has a degree in sports psychology. "Part of my studies was human movement studies, and I've always been passionate about being body smart. Also, the older you get, the more you realise you have to take better care of yourself," he says. "You know, my body is kind of my work tool that I've invested in for the past 25 years. It's an asset and I have to look after it well."

In June 2013, Harris put his work tool to test over the 4 500km of the Tour Divide (TD), the world's longest unsupported mountain-bike race. He finished third, in a time of 17 days and 5,5 hours. The TD traverses the length of the Rocky Mountains, with 70 000m of total vertical ascent, from Canada to the Mexican border, along the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route. As with RASA, it's not a race timed in individual staged days; the clock runs continuously from the start until riders cross the finish line. Unlike RASA, bear spray is one of the recommended kit items.

Naturally unsatisfied with his minor podium placing, he went in 2014 not just to challenge for a win, but do to it in record time. Relentless snowstorms plagued the event and Harris crashed and injured his leg, causing him to abandon the attempt. He believes he has unfinished business with the TD and won't rest before he has the record, but first he's putting on something of a non-stop bike race of his own.

MILLION-DOLLAR BIKE RACE

Harris didn't wake up one morning and hatch the Munga over breakfast. The idea of a non-stop, unsupported bike race with a massive prize purse grew over time. "Two years ago we pitched a race

to Exxaro and Kumba, who own the Sishen iron ore mine," Harris says by way of explaining the origins of the name.

"We wanted to race flat-out along their railway line service road to Saldanha Bay. That idea was called the 'Iron Monger'. We could never get permission to use it from Transnet Rail Freight, which owns the road, so we ditched the idea. Then, as the idea grew, we changed the name to 'The Monger' and eventually my team felt that by spelling it M-U-N-G-A, it spoke at a more primal level, which is what the idea had become."

Primal, much like the seemingly unrelated thoughts and experiences that formed part of Harris's background as to just why he wanted to put on a race of this magnitude.

He rattles off more motivations as another cappuccino arrives. "Walking to the South Pole and thinking that if someone offered me a million rand to get there in record time, I would probably have dug deeper and got there faster. As things stood, I was content to ski as fast as we could and suffer for a bit longer to get there whenever.

"Racing the Freedom Challenge three times and receiving only a blanket, but being amazed that guys would suffer for nothing more than a blanket and the validation of peer approval. And the same

THE MUNGA Essential equipment list

THIS IS WHAT ALEX HARRIS WOULD PACK IF HE WERE RACING:

1. Spare tube and puncture kit
2. Small spares kit with criticals
3. Small medical kit
4. Dyna hub with light and USB charger
5. 1 x riding shirt
6. 1 x riding shorts
7. 1 x rain-/warmer jacket
8. 1 x Buff
9. Sunscreen
10. Chamois cream
11. Lip balm
12. Oakleys
13. 1 x space blanket
14. At least 1,5 litres of water
15. 1 x Revelate gas tank bag

experience for the Tour Divide.

"Racing conventional stage races and wondering why the prize money was so low, and building a business and brand over 20 years that was predicated on creating war stories for my clients.

"Walking unsupported across the Empty Quarter and thinking about a bike race across the same desert offering a million dollars in prize money.

"Having a degree in sport psychology and thinking a great deal about which set of factors truly motivates someone."

Harris believes the winning team will be the one that gets the pace just right. "Race hard for maybe 30 to 40 hours, try to sleep for four hours, and then give it horns to the end. Simple. Well, maybe not that simple."

Big names confirmed for the event so far include the indomitable Bart Brentjens (1996 Olympic gold medallist and former Absa Cape Epic winner) and Jeroen Boelen (a two-times Olympia's Tour stage winner), Team Salsa (made up of American ultra-endurance specialists Jay Petervary and Kurt Refsnider), as well as a Team Bulls outfit in the form of Karl Platt (another habitual Epic





THE MUNGA

Training philosophies for a non-stop race

"If you are in the underdog group and want to make the cut-off, then you need to be able to do a couple of back-to-back 200km rides at an easy pace. That's it. I say that tongue-in-cheek, of course, as this is a very personal thing. How much each rider will need to do in the weeks building up to this figure will be very personal. However, you will get stronger in this race, and you don't want to start overcooked."

– Alex Harris

Late nights, early mornings and portages dominate RASA. Alex has promised no carrying on Munga, though.

winner) and Thomas Dietsch. US endurance pro Jeremiah Bishop has also signed on, as have 24-hour solo specialists Cory Wallace and Jason English.

"Having riders of this calibre, and the diversity of our entrants will definitely create a dynamic riding environment – combining world champions with ultra-endurance, hard-riding enthusiasts," Harris says.

If Harris were racing the 1 000-odd kilometres from Bloemfontein to Stellenbosch, he would try to get into the right-paced bunch for the first section, where you are allowed to draft.

"Then, beyond the first village, go at maybe 90% of what you perceive your race pace to be, and constantly swap pulling with your partner.

"Do this till you need to sleep, and try and time it at a Munga race village," he says. "If it's not at the village, keep going till the sleep monsters attack. Hopefully, this coincides with your partner. Pull off the road and get a good four hours' sleep. Then go at 100% of race pace to the end... Thumbsuck!"

According to Harris, as the route traverses the Great Karoo, it will not have much ascent, relative to the Absa Cape Epic, Tour Divide or the Freedom Challenge. It will, however, be very rough under wheel, with bumpy roads, soft sand, rocks and tons of thorns. "Very scenic country and great riding, but at speed, it's going to put hurt on the body big time."

For their bodies to endure that kind of hurt, Harris has enlisted the help of acclaimed chef and Absa Cape Epic finisher David Higgs. "Our aid stations will



have meals 24/7, where riders will be able to eat farm-style food. En route, the water points will have snacks, so the riders will be able to pace themselves and carry enough food and snacks for the legs between.

"They will also be able to carry 'portables' from the main villages. David is helping us design these portables, which are basically real food done either with a savoury or sweet bent, and wrapped in tinfoil."

For Harris, The Munga represents everything that he's

worked for and achieved during his adventure and bike-racing career. It is a culmination of all his exploits.

"I wanted to create something that had the potential to attract not only some of the real hardmen around the world, but also the media, the public and potential sponsors.

"A figure in rands would simply not do it. Also, golfers were earning that kind of money, so why not mountain bikers, or ultra-endurance athletes for that matter?" [rde](#)

"ENDURANCE RACING CAN RIP YOU TO PIECES"

For more than 30 years, the Race Across America has been the toughest ultra-cycling race on the planet, and boy, does Connecticut-based Brit Mark Pattinson know it.



This much I know

YOU CAN'T TRAIN FOR NO SLEEP

Some people believe you can, but I'm not one of them. The body will never get used to a lack of sleep, so the only thing is to deal with it when it arises. My feeling is that if I know I'm going to get punched in the face for a week, why get punched beforehand? It's still going to hurt!

YOU'RE AS GOOD AS YOUR CREW

I had eight people in three vehicles, and they're the most important element of your race. They are friends I've met in the ultra-cycling community, and all volunteer their time. They enjoy it; it's always an entertaining two weeks.

INTENSITY TRAINING IS VITAL

I do more than most and only start doing long road kilometres in April, with two 70-hour weeks in May. There's a tendency among ultra-cyclists to do too many long rides early on – 650km rides in November is madness and will only make you miserable. I make heat acclimatisation a priority too, and ride in a heat tent in my loft.

THE RACE Across America (RAAM) is as big as it gets in the ultra-racing community. Held every June since 1982, the race traverses the country from west to east, over 4 500km through baking desert, sprawling mountain ranges and wind-battered plains.

This year I was beaten into second, again, by Austria's Christoph Strasser, who in victory broke his own 2013 speed record. Because the course often changes, it's measured in kilometres per hour rather than time, and he crossed the line in an average of 26,4kph, in seven days, 15 hours and 56 minutes.

Before you think that sounds a little on the slow side, bear in mind that it includes all breaks for rest and sleep. Although he's a very fast cyclist, he's mastered the ability to cope with minimal sleep. Most people, including me, sleep two to three hours a night, but he's down to as little as 40 minutes. I knew if he rode his own race and had no issues, nobody would be able to touch him, and that proved to be the case.

I realised pretty early on that I was playing for second – in the first 600km, Christoph was two hours ahead and already out of sight.

I start training for RAAM in October, focusing on intensity until March and then switching to endurance. The first 1 100km – the point where my body hurts the most – are hard, but undoubtedly the hardest thing to manage the entire week is sleep. After such tough days in incredible heat, and despite being exhausted, it's very hard to get to sleep. My resting heart rate is usually 35bpm, but during RAAM it's rarely below 80.

On the bike, however, you often fight waves of sleepiness and, because you're often riding through the night with nothing but the light from your support vehicle's headlights, the lack of visual stimulation makes it hard to stay awake. At 44 I'm getting on in years, so I may have raced my last RAAM. It's also a question of motivation – hoping that someone fails doesn't excite me. Besides, I really don't imagine this kind of thing is lengthening my life. It takes so much out of you! [rde](#)