



Tidiani rode a custom pink-and-purple Peugeot. But the bike's rims had that rhythmic wobble indicative of African roads and roadside bike mechanics. Tidiani's legs pumped out a base-note beat to our frantic spinning as we rolled up and down the rocky knolls outside Bobo-Dioulassa, Burkina Faso. Tidiani was a member of the Bobo Bicycling Club, and was eager to escort my partner and me on the road to Ouagadougou.

"How long will you take to reach Ouaga?"

"Perhaps four days," I said in my faltering French, "three if the Harmattan wind is kind."

Tidiani was sure that an able-bodied biker could make the 350-kilometer stretch in a day-and-a-half. When I tactfully suggested that we were not in a hurry, he frowned.

"There is nothing between here and the city but villages...cows and millet and old people drinking millet beer. You must go to Ouaga directly. That is where all the bicycles are. It is a city on two wheels."

We had already been escorted by many African cyclists, but they invariably rode one-speed bikes with the wheels pointing in two different directions. We took Tidiani, the first serious bike racer we'd met, as a sign that we were nearing the promised land.

This was the last leg of our pilgrimage to Ouagadougou, the reputed bicycling Mecca of West Africa. Ouagadougou was featured among "The World's Best Cities for Cycling" (Bicycling May '92), where it earned an honorable mention along with other beacons of bikedom like Amsterdam and Padova. David Mozer, in his book "Bicycling in Africa," called it one of the select regions on that continent where bicycling enjoys mass popularity. After 2000 miles, from the rainforests of Cote d'Ivoire to the sweltering sahel of Mali, my partner and I were ready for the hub of bicycling enlightenment for the region.

But after all our expectations and experiences along the way, our arrival in Ouagadougou was like getting two flat tires. We reached our mecca on a brisk January afternoon after 60 miles of riding against the dusty Harmattan wind from Sabou. We were dog-tired and eager to appreciate all the benefits a biker-friendly haven could offer. In particular, we had a hankering for some of Ouaga's famous pastries.

What we found were streets swarming with hyperactive automobiles and traffic circles that made moths around a flame look sensible. Mopeds weaved in and out of traffic in bursts of muffled speed. One-way streets predominated, and some streets were entirely torn up, leaving direction and speed to the driver's discretion. The few bicycles we saw were in sorry shape and pitifully lost among the throngs of

motorized traffic. That first afternoon we were confronted with the naked fact that, its biking reputation notwithstanding, Ouaga was a big, busy city. Three months of biking through the bush had made us hicks on wheels. We also didn't find our pastries.

But we were determined to give this pedaling purgatory a fair chance by staying for a day or two. The second day we stumbled upon a *patisserie*. The third day we discovered avenues with protected lanes for two-wheeled traffic, as mentioned in *Bicycling's* review. On the seventh day we rested, but only after a rollicking day-ride through a city park.

Just as we had found in the West African countryside, recreational bicycling does not exist in Ouaga. Bicycles are work-horses, loaded with charcoal, goats, chickens, bails of hay or stacks of firewood. Ouagadougou riders tend them to work if they cannot afford a moped. But a Burkinabe will not saddle up his or her bike for a spin around the city park unless it is to haul food, fuel or fodder. The few oddballs that push pedals for sport are serious bike racers, and they only appear en masse in the regular Sunday races.

It was just by coincidence that we found the two-time champion of the nationwide Tour de Faso in a downtown bookstore. We were actually looking for literature on biking in Burkina when we encountered Ousmane Soudre, a clerk in the store. All of the magazines and books he showed us were imports, with European riders on the covers. But Ousmane was Burkina's finest in the flesh, twenty-nine years old, brash, and tight as a brake spring.

"This is the bicycle I want," he said, pointing to the cover of a book on racing in France. He put his hands out as if to grasp the handlebars, and said something approving about the shifting levers in his native Mossi. "But we do not have wealthy sponsors as you do in America. I must work here," he waved his hand disdainfully, "to support my real life, which is racing."

The author rode long and hard to reach Ouagadougou, supposed cycling Mecca of West Africa.



On the road to Ouagadougou with bike racer Tidiani.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PHILIP JOHANSSON

By Philip Johansson

Soudre planned to win the Tour de Faso again that August, as he had the past two years. He also claimed to be the current champion of the "Tour d'Afrique" — a subject that raised some eyebrows at the Federation Cyclisme de Burkina.

"Mr. Soudre is referring to the Tour de France-Afrique, involving only the francophone West African nations," said Lucien Tassemedo, Vice President of the FCB. He was a large man in a long, grey robe, presiding over a dark office with two desks and a bed. According to Tassemedo, a full-fledged Tour d'Afrique is not quite a reality, owing to the enmity that characterizes the relationships between many African nations. "Mr. Soudre would like to be the champion of all of Africa, but I'm afraid that's not possible yet."

The FCB is a division of the Ministry of Health, a government agency designed to encourage and administer bicycle racing in the best socialist tradition. It is responsible for organizing the popular Tour de Faso, drawing riders from all over Africa to race 1300 kilometers of Burkina's bumpy roads and *pistes* in 11 days. The Federation also runs the regular races that draw droves of fans to the Boulevard de la Revolution on weekends.

"The Rally de Ville occurs every week on Sunday, if we can get a sponsor, or at least every other week," said Tassemedo. He had just turned on the fan, and was trying to keep the file of racing photos and memorabilia spread out on his desk from blowing away. "This week the sponsor is Peter Stuyvesant (a popular brand of cigarettes), and the winner will get 100,000 Francs (about \$400) and a plane ticket to Benin."

Racing in the Tour de Ville is free for the 150 members registered with the FCB. They pay \$15 for a license each year, and the Federation covers their insurance and the races. As Tassemedo carded through the yellow licenses, one slid from the stack onto the jumble on his desk. There was the familiar face of Tidiani.

The "bike" path in Ouagadougou swarms with mopeds.



PHOTO BY PHILIP JOHANSSON

"Ouedraogo, Tidiani. The Rail Sprint Velo Club of Bobo," Tassemedo read from the license, responding to my look of surprise. "You know the boy?"

"Yes, we met him on the road from Bobo. We hope to see him in the race on Sunday."

In contrast to the role the FCB plays in promoting bike racing in Ouagadougou, there are no such agencies, government or private, for encouraging recreational or commuter bikers. The *pistes cyclable* that parallel three of the largest avenues leading into the city, are generally for the benefit of the motorized two-wheeled traffic that dominates them. On any other street, organized chaos reigns, with bicycles at the bottom of a ruthless dominance hierarchy.

Bicycle owners must register their bikes with the gov-

ernment each year for 350 Francs (\$1.50), or risk having them confiscated: we saw stacks of blue Peugeot and Senisots at the central *Gendamerie*, which suggested that many cyclists have enough other uses for that money to not pay the fee, and take the risk of seizure. It costs 25 Francs (ten cents) each time you park a bicycle in one of the "guarded" lots at the central market. To avoid the expense by locking your bike to a sign post risks having your tires slashed by the "guardians."

"And if you don't have the 25 Francs?" I asked one of the less threatening guardians.

"Cet un problem."

In spite of these obstacles to recreational bicycling, we found ample opportunities to ride in and around Ouaga. A ramble through the large city park, the *Bois de Bologne*, offered a variety of terrains, from paved path to the bumpy margins of a rice paddy. We wound through acacia woodlands and garden plots for hours, stopping for visits with bemused gardeners and an intimate look at the fruits of Burkina's agricultural labors. For a more extended adventure, we chose a loop to the Loanga "granite sculptures." We fought the morning Harmattan heading east, past wind-blown bikers with charcoal sacks attached like sails to their rear racks and smiles on their faces. From the butte at Boudtenga, we headed north on the winding red *piste* to Zinarie.

Taking a left onto the new paved road at Zinarie, the wind blew us back to Ouaga at speeds of 30 to 35 mph. Returning to the bustling city on the *piste cyclable* of the Route de Kaya after this enlightening trip, we finally felt up to speed with the surrounding traffic. We weaved in and out of sputtering mopeds and laden bicycles, feeling a part of the uniquely African chaos on wheels we had dreaded only days before.

By the time the Sunday race rolled around, Ouagadougou's cycling spell had taken hold. We were as comfortable on its seething avenues as we had been on the 2000 miles of quiet roads that brought us there. A record 114 racers turned out that Sunday for the 135-kilometer race. They rounded a closed circuit of 4,500 meters 30 times, each time ending at the Avenue de la Revolution, where thousands of fans clamored to watch them fight the feisty wind. Tidiani pumped along at the rear of the peloton, the wan smile we remembered him by never leaving his face.

The racers' times were slower than usual, because of the wind, but their spirits were high as they finished in front of the bandstand holding government officials and sponsors. The winner was a veteran racer, named Maxime Ouedraogo, from Ouagadougou. Tidiani did not place, but was filled with the same pride as the other racers; today they were the envy of the city on two wheels.

All too soon it was time to go, on to Ghana, where Chinese bikes ruled the road and *patisserie* was a foreign word. If we had been hasty, and left Ouagadougou the day we arrived, we would have remembered it as an urban nightmare. Instead it was a highlight of our trip. Bicycle-friendly it may not be, but bicycle-frenzied it is, and as such we will remember it fondly. ●

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Ouagadougou

Exuberant schoolchildren ham it up in the school courtyard that doubled as a campsite for the author.

Nuts and Bolts

TIME OF YEAR TO GO: Sub-Saharan West Africa is most biker-friendly in the dry season, which is winter: October to February. It is the only time that physical movement is bearable in the coastal rainforest. And the dry season brings the cool Harmattan wind to the drier climes.

EQUIPMENT: Don't bring rain gear, because if it's the rainy season it is also too hot to bother. In fact, keep clothes to a minimum. Do bring bountiful tools and extra parts: we went through several tires, tubes, spokes, and a rear derailleur. A stove that burns kerosene or gasoline is essential unless you like your food uncooked.

ROAD CONDITIONS: Roads range from smooth pavement to hub-deep mud to dusty washboards that rattle your teeth out. Significant stretches of pavement are possible, but any large loop will require some dirt roads. Avoid dirt roads after a rain at all costs.

BIKES: We rode GT Tachyons, tour-ready hybrids with drop handlebars and knobby tires.

ROUTE: We went from Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, through the west part of that country, into southern Mali, across Burkina Faso, then south through Ghana, a total of 3500 miles. Passing through the main cities is mandatory, for stocking up on packaged groceries, getting cash, sending or receiving mail, or attempting to make a telephone call. In the case of Ouagadougou, it was a sweet digression.

MAPS: Michelin makes the best map of West Africa, although Bartholemew also makes a good one. The only decent national map for the area is Michelin's Cote d'Ivoire. Other national maps are published by the French

"Institut Geographique National," or by the countries themselves. An excellent resource is the International Bicycle Fund, which offers package tours, country guides and personal consultations on biking in the region. IBF, 4887 Columbia Dr. S., Seattle, WA 98108-1919; (206) 628-9314.

ACCOMMODATIONS: Hotels are few and far between and usually on the dreary side. Occasionally on the coast you can find hotels that will let you camp on the beach. Some towns feature "campements," or informal motels, where you might pitch a tent. The best camping by far is in villages, where people are overwhelmingly generous and sociable. Camping in the "bush" is frowned upon, for cultural and safety reasons.

FOOD: Markets are available in most towns, but some only have market days once a week. Even then the produce is limited by the season, with yams, rice, cassava, eggplant, tomatoes and onions being the most common staples. Packaged goods are only available in larger towns and cities, so stock up on these when you can.

WATER: Water is readily available in every town, but potability is a serious problem for sensitive North American digestive systems. Closed wells are the safest, and are common in the drier regions, but filtering and/or treating all water is a full-time preoccupation. Be prepared to treat large quantities so you only need to do it once or twice a day. We carried 14 liters between the two of us.

TRANSPORTATION: All West African capitals are accessible by international airlines. "Consolidators" offer the best deals on flights, if you have a flexible itinerary and can stand their customer non-service. Look for their ads in the travel section of a city newspaper, or, better yet, ask your travel agent to call them for you.

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