

SPORTS

'It sounds crazy': How a Pa. man went from not owning a bike to biking the length of Africa



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It was a training ride, nothing close to what Cornel Mancas had planned for himself, just a short test. It was supposed to be a nice afternoon outside with his son on bicycles.

Rolling down a flat rail trail near his home in York, Mancas realized he could not keep pace with his son on the 18-mile ride.

"I had to stop like 20 times," Mancas said.

By the time Mancas finished, his son had been waiting at the car for about 20 minutes.

"What took you so long?" Alex said.

Mancas could have rattled off so many answers on that day in 2017.

He was 45.

He was about 30 pounds overweight.

He wasn't accustomed to riding this distance.

Yet, he said nothing. Instead, a crazy idea Mancas had plotted in his mind for 2018 took hold. He was going to bike the length of Africa.

Laughing about it now, he remembers thinking: "I will show you, you 13-year-old boy."

Bicycle Africa tip-to-tip? 'Sounds crazy'

Anyone who heard Mancas' plan tried to talk him out of it.

His brother.

His sister.

His son.

"I thought he was crazy at first," Alex Mancas said about his father's plan. "I didn't want him to do it, of course, because I love spending time with my dad and he would be gone for months."

Eventually, Cornel Mancas just stopped telling people.

"How are you going to tell your friendly neighbor, 'Oh, I'm going to bike across Africa'? It sounds crazy," he said.

So many things brought him halfway across the world to attempt to bicycle the length of Africa, from its southern tip to its northern tip. It was this dream, this desire, this wanderlust: He wanted to accomplish something *big*. And what could be bigger than Africa?

"I'm the definition of a midlife crisis," Mancas said. "I'm serious. I'm sitting on my couch, for weeks and months saying, 'I've got to do something, I've got to do something.' And I didn't know what."

The inspiration came to him on that couch in York. He watched a documentary, "Inspired to Ride," about amateur cyclists racing from Oregon to Virginia.

"It blew my mind," Mancas said.

He couldn't fathom pedaling all those miles. Professional riders in the Tour de France cover incredible distances, but they are professionals. That is what they do. They are surrounded by a support staff, being fed from their bikes, their every ache tended to by a masseuse or medical personnel.

Mancas was not a professional. He was a truck driver from York, working for J.B. Hunt. Still, he couldn't shake the thought of what these fellow amateur athletes accomplished.

Could he really do something this big? He lived for these types of moments. A big bicycle trip like this could top the time he ran the New York City Marathon. Or when he climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro. This would be bigger than leaving his family in Romania and moving to the United States 20 years ago.

Searching the internet he found an entire community passionate about touring. People biked across the United States. People biked from Alaska to Patagonia. People even biked across Africa.

Africa?

The man who didn't even own a bike dreamed about nights spent rolling across an untamed land.

How Mancas planned his journey

He had enough of this couch life.

Mancas bought a bike on Amazon. He planned a route. He expected to spend 4 1/2 months for the tip-to-tip tour, riding from south to north on the African continent. He would pedal eight, sometimes 10 hours, a day. No support vehicles. No riding companions. He just wanted to cycle.

He would sleep in a tent when possible.

He would stay in hotels or hostels when needed.

He used his life's savings to cover his mortgage while he was gone.

Then he flew across the world for his big adventure.

Mancas arrived in Cape Town, South Africa, on Jan. 12, 2018. He washed his feet in the south Atlantic Ocean before taking off. He departed Jan. 13.

Days in, his body shuts down

Mancas struggled to complete the first 60 miles. "After five days of cycling, my body shut down. I had to take a day off."

The tour it seemed, had ended.

At one point, he told himself that if he could make it out of South Africa, he would purchase a plane ticket home from Namibia.

"I wasn't sure if I would make it the first 10 days, but after 10 days I knew I could make it," Mancas said. "I was more concerned with the mental aspects, if you break down mentally, physically you will also break down."

Somewhere in Namibia, after the 10th day of cycling, he just knew: He had made the right choice.

He could cycle the length of Africa.

Keeping a link to York

His one connection to home was Facebook Messenger. He wrote in his native Romanian to family members. Friends reached out to other people, and they would be added to the conversation on the instant-messaging platform. It almost became a blog for him.

"We were a little crowd, all of us closely watching," said Dan Iozsa, who used to be roommates with Mancas when they lived on Madison Avenue in York. "It would be worrisome when he would go off the grid for three or four days or he would cross a border. I knew he had to change phones or get a new SIM card ... but everyone online would be quiet. I think we were all thinking, God forbid something happened."

Mancas would text his son with the help of an app, usually hearing the positive reinforcement he needed to keep going.

"It was mixed emotions," Alex Mancas, who is now 15, said about communicating with his father while he was on the other side of the world. "He would feel ill, or sometimes he would feel motivated and he would send me pictures of the different cultures and people he met.

"When I did text him I was always hoping he would text back soon. I was always hoping he would still be alive, because I knew he was out there with the wildlife. I was a bit frightened, here and there, but I'm proud of him for doing this."

Cornel Mancas reached out to friends for help.

Iozsa helped him early on when he was in a pinch and off-road in South Africa. Iozsa loves to travel, and this was his friend.

"I thought, man, I'd love to be more involved," Iozsa said.

He had followed other world travelers from afar, but never one of his friends. And this time, he could actually help. From his home in Phoenix, Arizona, he started scanning Google Maps and looking at elevation. He would check weather reports.

"I became the ad hoc, unpaid road manager," Iozsa said with a laugh.

He would do his homework each night, trying to find the best information to feed Mancas.

Where could he obtain water? Where could he sleep? Would he need to camp in the bush, or could he find a hotel in a city or town? How many miles would he need to pedal?

Mancas lived a day-by-day existence on his 10-country route.

He slept under bridges. He slept in a police station. He slept in the Sahara. He slept on the banks of the Nile River. He stayed a night in an abandoned stone quarry. And he even experienced the delight of staying in a gorgeous resort.

Encountering and anticipating the wildlife

The roar of the lion woke him up around 5 in the morning.

It happened in early February on his last day in Botswana, located near the border of Zimbabwe.

Mancas had no fear. He had researched camping in the bush. Lions typically don't attack closed tents, because they don't associate tents with food. So Mancas sat and listened.

"It was a male roaring, he was probably yards away from my tent," Mancas said. "It was just beautiful. I could hear zebras coming from the other side, they have specific sounds they make, and jackals. It was like a symphony. I sat in my tent for a half hour, just pinching myself that, 'Wow, this is just wonderful.'"

The scary part came later, Mancas eventually had to leave the tent. He still had to pack up and start pedaling.

Unzipping the tent, he didn't see the lion.

The symphony had finished, his wildlife philharmonic orchestra had departed. It was time for Mancas to hit the road again.

"Honestly, I was more concerned about the elephants," Mancas said. "They are not like the elephants at the zoo. They will charge you."

Still, he remained safe. The hair-raising experiences with wildlife would be limited to his wake-up music in Botswana.

"People think about Africa as soon as you get off the plane you are going to see lions, zebras and giraffes," Mancas said. "It's not like it was a hundred years ago, you have to look to find the wildlife."

A hit-and-run and other close calls

Mancas spread out some of his personal belongings from his journey across his dining room table. He has his daily journal, where he jotted his daily mileage from country to country. He has his passport, stamped with his destinations.

One item seemed out of place: an X-ray.

It's a reminder of the hit-and-run accident that could have easily ended his adventure.

In April in Sudan, a Toyota pickup truck struck Mancas from behind. The collision knocked him off his bike. He hopped a ride with another passing truck to a police station.

Mancas went to a hospital, where they ruled out serious injuries. He had a cracked rib, but he could continue his journey.

"To me, when he had the accident, that was a sign that this is for real man," Iozsa said. "We were all watching from a distance, but I'd read stories about people being killed."

"When a car hits you from behind and they leave you there along the road, that's a real wake-up call."

His bike needed to be repaired at a shop, but after replacing the rear wheel, he was on the road again. He actually took a taxi back to the spot of the accident so as not to skip any inch of the road.

"It reminds me of the quality humans have," Iozsa said. "He was doing these things, going way beyond what you think your body can do. If your mind is up to it, your body will follow."

All of this happened mostly out of sight.

Through the entire journey, Mancas had almost no social media presence.

The one post that can still be found on Facebook came from a bicycle shop in Arusha, Tanzania. The shop posted a picture of Mancas posing with the staff working on his bike.

His lack of posts was by design. He didn't know if he could finish the adventure he started.

"I was insecure, I'd never done anything like this before," Mancas said. "I didn't know if I was going to make it to the end or not. I didn't want to tell everyone on social media I was going to do this, and then 1,000 miles down the road I'm done."

He had close calls, and he encountered reasons to turn back.

Twice, food poisoning knocked him off schedule. He needed to go to hospitals in Kenya and Ethiopia.

He ate something stupid from street vendors, he said.

He recalls a night he doubled over in a hotel room without running water. He hopped in a cab and at the hospital received antibiotics that kept him on the road.

A 'mentally and physically debilitating' region

Months before the trip began, back in York, Mancas read the warnings the touring community had posted: Don't ride Africa tip-to-tip from south to north. He would be riding into a wind. It would be difficult.

Mancas shrugged.

What's the matter with a little breeze?

Even now it's difficult for him to explain what it's like to ride into a head wind mile after mile, day after day, month after month.

"It's mentally and physically debilitating, you feel like you want to punch the handlebars," Mancas said. "The Sahara was the worst."

That relentless wind was accompanied by 125-degree temperatures and the constant concern of finding and carrying enough water.

He lived for respites from the desert. He rode along the Nile River and its greenery for about 200 miles. He came upon the Red Sea. He pedaled through cities.

On the worst days, there was just sand and wind.

"It depends how you put it, if you look at the negative side of it, yes it could be miserable," Mancas said. "But if you see the adventure and the romanticism, I loved it because I'm an introvert. I don't like people. I loved the nothingness."

7,000 miles later, a final health scare

Mancas finished the ride in Port Said, Egypt, along the Mediterranean Sea.

He brought his bike to the water.

He had to.

"It's my girlfriend," he said.

"I talk to her and everything."

He spent 108 days on the road, a little more than 15 weeks crossing the continent. He pedaled more than 7,000 miles. He dropped 40 pounds. He crossed the length of Africa — except for an estimated 150 yards spent on a bus in Malawi.

A planning mistake had taken him to a wildlife preserve where guards would not let him ride. Mancas eventually offered a bus driver money to look the other way as he exited the bus and biked on.

From there, he pedaled with his hands and he did it head-first.

His adventure, however, continued back in York.

When he arrived home he found himself on his couch again. He had no energy.

He stopped at a clinic for a check-up and bloodwork. He went home, still dragging. The next day a doctor phoned and demanded he go to an emergency room as soon as possible. His culture was anything but normal.

Mancas had contracted Hepatitis A, a liver infection caused by a virus typically transmitted by contaminated food or water.

Mancas has no memory of driving to York Hospital that morning. He would stay at the hospital three days, and even after losing so much weight during the last three months he lost another five pounds.

His doctor eventually told him: "You are a very lucky individual, what saved you was you have a healthy body."

Mancas had drank water in the Sudan. He had drank water from the Nile, like the locals in Egypt. He had bought food from locals during his trip. Any of this might have been the cause.

The incubation period for the symptoms of Hepatitis A can be anywhere from two to four weeks, which could explain why he was not overcome with fatigue during the last weeks of his trip.

His son recalls the first time his father came to pick him up after the trip and the physical changes he noticed immediately.

"I thought a homeless man was picking me up, because he had a crazy beard," Alex Mancas said. "A couple weeks later I told him, 'You need to get a haircut.'"

And yet, after all this, the hospital trips and the health scares, he wants to get back on his bike.

(story continues after map)

What's next?

Mancas still bikes. Some days he catches himself on a short ride in York County looking at people and thinking, "If you only knew what I just did."

"You've got to feel proud, because it was a positive thing," he said.

He caught the touring bug.

He is attempting to obtain sponsorship for another big trip. His savings took a hit with his African adventure. What exactly comes next, though, is still a question.

"What's bigger and bolder than Africa?" he asked.

Could he bike across another continent?

He's in the "baby stages" of planning a trip around the world in 2020. He would like to do it for charity.

Could he bike around the world?

He is ready to find out.

Cornel Mancas touring diary