

Wonderful people everywhere



Roads where no end is to be seen in Baja California, Mexico November 2008

Four years ago, they got on their bicycles. They crossed through Europe, Asia and North and South America. Aaldrik Mulder and Sonya Spry now have 50,000 km behind them. Last week they returned to the nest in Bolsward. Very soon they will pedal off for the last stage of their world bicycle tour. Another two years in the saddle. "It is a way of life."

Elizabeth Vogelzang
Photographs: Aaldrik Mulder and Sonya Spry

The clothesline behind his parents' house in Bolsward is full. A tent is drying inside out and bike pants hang in a row in the sun. Inside are Aaldrik Mulder (43) and Sonya Spry (46) with a cup of coffee. Ma Mulder smokes a cigarette and offers her children another cup. She is enjoying the presence of her son and daughter-in-law. Four years ago, she waved them off for the trip of a lifetime.

During that time, she could only make do with e-mails and telephone conversations. "Arhh, you can't hold onto their hands forever"; says the Bolsward mother quite down to earth. "But I wasn't over the moon when they told me about their plans."

They lived comfortably in Arnhem. Aaldrik earned his living as a manager in a snooker and pool centre. Sonya, originally from Australia, gave English lessons in the business world. A fine life; nothing to complain about. But the idea of an adventure was always brewing: travelling the world by bike. And not just a few months or a couple of kilometres here and there. No, six years long, striding over all the continents.

"We were thinking about it for a long time", says Aaldrik. "Suddenly, we realised that we could actually do it. We had the financial and physical ability to see it through." They set a date and scrimped and saved for three years. On 31 July 2006, they hopped on their bicycles and literally left everything behind them. The car was sold, the washing machine, refrigerator, books. "We rigorously did away with everything", Aaldrik replies. "Nothing stored in a container. Everything gone. Then you also don't have to worry about anything from the other side of the world." Sonya: "It was quite strange when we rode away. We had absolutely nothing anymore."

HOLIDAY
Years of preparation; months of organising. When they finally cycled over the border they realised then that it was actually happening. Aaldrik: "The first days we just felt like yelling 'hoorah'. The weeks that followed felt like a vacation. Thereafter, it became a way of life."

They set forth into Germany, in the direction of Belgium and France; pedalled around the Iberian Peninsula; went through Italy towards Greece and Turkey. Their itinerary had been adapted to suit the seasons.

"In the summer, you don't want to go through the desert and the winter is no time for the Himalayas. Moreover, they had to take visas for countries like Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan en Turkmenistan into consideration. Sometimes it took weeks to obtain the necessary paperwork. "Days of just hanging on". Slipping a dollar note can sometimes move things along and although that extra page in the passport can help, we have never had to go that far.

Previously, everyone asked if they were scared about cycling through deeply religious countries. Okay, Sonya had to wear a headscarf in Iran and long pants. But scary? No, far from it. "It was a revelation. Through the news and media, people have a negative impression especially with regards to Sharia law and nuclear weapons. But 99 percent of the population has nothing to do with the political situation. They are just wonderful people. Everyone was incredibly hospitable, especially so in the Muslim world," confirms Sonya.

They slept in budget hotels or in their tunnel tent: often just along the side of the road. Two westerners. Packed to the hilt, sweating and slaving away on their bicycles. An attraction. "People came up to us, curious. They wanted to be in a photo with us. They wanted to help us with everything. They rode next to us in their cars and gave us fruit, chocolate and drinks: as if we were riding in the Tour de France."

TIBET
The first part of the journey also went through China, Pakistan, India and ended in Nepal. They wanted to enter Tibet, but the political unrest meant they had to strike that plan from the list. Therefore, they flew to Malaysia and pedalled to Singapore and then Bangkok. Here, they tried for a second time to get into Chinese controlled Tibet. The Olympic Games were in Peking, thus it did not work this time either.

After two years, they packed up for a flight to Vancouver, Canada. It was a strange sensation when they arrived at the airport. "We could suddenly understand everything," says Sonya. "Before, it was just a prattle of Chinese or Arabic. Now we heard everything around us. In the supermarket, it was no longer a gamble as to what was in the packet."

During the next four months they made their way down to San Francisco. They were snowed in on a 3000 metre mountain, where for two days they remained in their tent and ate all their supplies while outside it was minus 15. Three days later they came up against the suffocating heat of desert, salt flats and canyons of Death Valley. From Las Vegas they travelled further to Los Angeles and then onto Mexico.

Constantly cycling; making kilometers. Sometimes on highways, but frequently in impassable or completely deserted areas. "Then we follow the trail of a car's tyres. There is no road or path. Just a sense of direction. If you ride in the mountains then you have to reach the top. In the whole of Central Asia there are only two choices of road.

Aching in extreme cold and scorching heat; their bodies still like clockwork. That is until Sonya was laid up in India. A sciatic nerve problem meant she barely could walk. "For six weeks, I lay stretched out on a hotel bed. I thought: now it's over." Aaldrik was her therapist and helped her, step by step, get back on her feet. It could have very well been the end of their trip. But they persevered. Giving up was not an option. "We don't have anything. We have nowhere to go back to."

COLA
In Pakistan, Aaldrik reached his physical limits. Afflicted by the sun and paralyzed by temperatures around 55 degrees he nearly passed out. "We just rested in the shade against a mountain. I was almost unconscious." Sonya flagged down the first car and her husband was packed into the loaded vehicle and set off at the nearest drink stand.

In Mexico they took two months off to rest. They settled in a village on the coast. "We worked on our website," says Aaldrik. Sonya wrote about their experiences for a guidebook: "the bible for world cyclists."

They continued through to South America. The couple chose yet again not to take the easiest route. "You can go along the coast, it is reasonably flat, but then you do not see what we have seen." Ultimately, they crossed the Andes thirteen times. "In just one week in Peru we went from 2000 meters to 4000 meters and back again five times." Aaldrik: "Sometimes we climbed the whole day from morning through to evening and with gradients of up to 20 percent."

Perseverance; not giving up. The couple have had to pull the other out of a dip from time to time, because naturally things can sometimes get the better of you. "It is extreme. On top of a mountain, driving rain, wind speed ten. And if you have had an earlier altercation, then it doesn't seem like a particularly good day", says Aaldrik with a broad smile.

"But fortunately we never seem to simultaneously sit in a dip"; says Sonya. "And we are accustomed to this lifestyle." Their relationship is resistant to stress. "Sometimes we want to knock each others' heads off, but then we say sorry and go on."

Homesick, they are not. Of course their family and friends are far away. But for Sonya that has always been the case. When she turned eighteen, she left her parents home in Australia. Since then she has always lived far away from them. "Whether I am 1000 km away or 20,000 kilometers, it makes no difference. Moreover, internet makes the distance small. With e-mails and Skype they keep loved ones informed about their well-being.

What Sonya sometimes misses on the road? "A clean, private bathroom and toilet or a large, freshly washed towel."

Belo Horizonte, Brazil was their last stop. From there they flew to Frankfurt and cycled to Bolsward via Arnhem. Now, just a few days under the wings of Ma Mulder. They need to renew the insurance, their passports and then pack their panniers again for the continuation of two more years of cycling.

They will pedal on through Europe; venture on to Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and into the Middle East. "We will then make a final attempt to enter Tibet and then Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia before going to Indonesia." And as a last leg of the journey they will travel half a year in Sonya's home country, Australia. After looking up Mum and Dad Spry, who saw their daughter for the last time eight years ago.

Travelling the world day in and day out, for years at a time: Is that not boring? "No, not at all," they both say categorically. "The world is so beautiful; and so varied. But even more overwhelming is the hospitality" finds Aaldrik. Sonya: "Our world is so extraordinarily wonderful. Almost all people on earth are really friendly."

Ma Mulder pours another cup of coffee, while her son and daughter-in-law tell their story. "He has it from his father. He was also a wanderer," she sighs. "As long as everything goes well for them. I came to terms with that long ago. I am no longer worried. It is better to let go."

The trip has changed them; of course. Aaldrik: "You're free in what you do, but also in how you think. I now look at nothing with trepidation, I can do anything. We'll see what will happen." Afraid of ending up in a black hole when their journey is finished in two years? No, they are not.

"We do not know what we will do," says Sonya. "But that doesn't matter much. We have plenty of options, because we have travelled. We know many people all over the world. Anything is possible." Maybe they stay in Australia, perhaps they end up somewhere else on the globe. "We're not going back to anything. So, there's nothing binding us."



Sonya Spry and Aaldrik Mulder cycling six years around the world.



Pakistani children are curious and walk along with us. "We were an attraction. As if we were cycling in the Tour de France"



In inhospitable areas Aaldrik and Sonya followed their own path when there weren't any roads.



On high mountains in the blistering heat. Aaldrik: "At 55 degrees I almost lost consciousness."



"Our world is exceptionally beautiful and almost all people on earth are incredibly wonderful."