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Accompanied by literary and artistic sidekicks such as Aristotle, Dante, and van Gogh, the author of "Ghost Rider" conducts a voyage of body and mind on a bicycle adventure through West Africa. 12 photos.

The Masked Rider: Cycling in West Africa Details

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Krehel says

Read this back in 1998 for reason of my of Rock Musician and Drummer Neil Peart and mainly his writing style. Dedicates front of book to Jackie and Selena "acchh" who both passed away a few years after the book was written. Again well written by man who takes bicycle tour through Africa. His description of Godzilla Bugs biting him and terrible dysentery and encounters with rebels with guns is riveting. Funny parts in book as he sits with another man alone in a tiny village and the man is playing hand drums and reluctantly offers Neil a chance to "play" with the bongo. After which the man looks and smiles not realizing who he just handed drum bongo to. Could not speak each others language but enough was said via facial expressions by the elder African that he expressed "WOW".

Tim says

An interesting look at a region that isn't well known to Westerners. The interaction between the tour participants has a ring of familiarity if you've ever had people visit you in a remote area. It is obvious that the writer didn't spend much time getting to know the local culture, but that he has traveled quite a bit. His travel experience and ability to speak French helped him see better than others, but it is still a very superficial peek behind the curtain of culture. I applaud their willingness to "suffer" through questionable accommodations and food, but I'm put off by the complaints. Hundreds of millions of people live like this throughout their entire life. If you're interested in West/Central Africa, not a bad read. Otherwise, I probably wouldn't recommend it.

Michael Steeves says

Stepping back

This was Neil's first book, written several years before his next one (and which I'd read first, "Ghost Rider"), and provides a flashback that shows a bit of the person that Neil was. Set in the context of his cycling trip through West Africa (Cameroon), you get to see some of the country and people from a much more interesting and in-depth vantage. No tour bus, hitting all the tourist traps and staying at hotel with all the modern amenities, the small group cycles through the countryside and spends the night at villages along the way. You get a glimpse into the lives of the people there, but it's also a somewhat superficial one, as the language barriers (Neil doesn't speak French fluently, and most of the Cameroonians don't speak English beyond a few words or phrases they've picked up) prevent much in the way of dialog.

The cycling group also never seems to gel, the disparate personalities keep them from being anything more than temporary travelling companions. I would love to read a similar book about other trips that he's taken, where he develops more of a relationship with his companions just to see how things differed. Neil recognizes how he does contribute to the overall stand-in she's of the group, but as he travels and comes to have epiphanies about their various personalities, it doesn't seem to make much impact in how he related to them. He mentions Steinbeck's quote about allowing others to help you here as well, but "Ghost Rider" also

never has long-term travelling companions like he does here, so it's not clear if he's changed much in that regard.

He's pretty frank about the challenges and day-to-day issues with the trip, including bouts with the local microbiota, and while a trip like this is (sadly) probably never in the cards for me for several reasons, it did remind me of some half-formed plans to spend the turn of the century on safari with my best friend. We never did that, but graduation for my oldest is approaching, and maybe in a few years I can convince my wife that this would make a great gift for her.

Greg Canellis says

Stylistically, this effort is one of the better written of Peart's books. Slow going in the beginning, as the descriptions of remote Cameroon villages and towns, and the roads and trails linking them gets redundant. It doesn't take Peart long, though, to begin psychoanalyzing his fellow riders of the bicycle tour. Surprisingly, or not, Peart picks on the two women, especially the eldest rider, Elsa, while admiring his two fellow male companions. Peart paints himself quite the trail blazer, riding out ahead of the pack, and forced to wait on the others. Bicycle enthusiasts will certainly be disappointed as Peart never mentions what gear he favors, not even what brand bicycle he is riding. Likewise, music lovers are offered a couple descriptions of tribal drums, but that is all. The abrupt ending is horrible, but Peart's experience of a month long ride through a rugged impoverished land carries with it a lesson that he has seemed to have appreciated.

John says

Not bad, though Peart spends almost as much time talking (often complaining) about his companions, as he does describing Cameroon. I came away suspecting the book's popularity is due to his celebrity status as a musician.

Lynne says

Peart is an engaging observer and writer, and he sure is intrepid! His tale of a cycling tour through Cameroon has a bit of everything -- cycling, drumming, ethics, politics, character studies, introspection. Even if you are neither a cyclist nor a drummer, if you enjoy travel and venturing in new ways and places, you will enjoy this book.

pianogal says

This is a very interesting book about something I would never, ever do. I can't even imagine trying something like this. Also, it was perfect that Neil took Aristotle and Vincent VanGogh to read. I probably would have taken something a little lighter, but that's just me.

Josh says

This is a book filled with many different elements of culture. This autobiography written by progressive rock drummer Neil Peart shows the importance of broadening one's horizons to other lifestyles. Cycling around Africa, he discovers African history and really puts an open mind on everything around him. "I can worship Nature, and that fulfills my need for miracles and beauty. Art gives a spiritual depth to existence -- I can find worlds bigger and deeper than my own in music, paintings, and books. And from my friends and family I receive the highest benediction, emotional contact, and personal affirmation. I can bow before the works of Man, from buildings to babies, and that fulfills my need for wonder". Through this newly found culture, Neil discovers what's beyond himself. This quote is important to put in perspective. Finding the time to appreciate the finer cultural things in life is something many people lack when they're so caught up in their own worlds.

Hannah says

I was thoroughly disappointed with this book. I picked it up because I spent the majority of my childhood there, from ages 2-18. I suspect that had the author had not been a part of a popular band, this book would not be nearly as widely read as it seems to have been, nor would it have such favorable ratings. The quality of writing is merely acceptable, it is less travelogue than subjective stream-of-consciousness narration, and his observation of people and places comes across as narrow-minded, arrogant, and hypocritical.

He consistently makes fun of an older traveler's weaknesses, inserting quotations from their fellow bicyclists as though to say, "See? They're all on my side. This is how obnoxious this woman is." He also seems to lack the introspection to realize that his own snide remarks to their tour guide may come across as equally grating, despite his assertion that his comments were merely "humor." The arrogance overflows into his observations of those he meets along their path, freely assigning motives and personality flaws to people he has only just met, such as the Lutheran missionaries who are fellow guests at a monastery where his touring group spends one night.

He frequently describes the cuisine as "rice with junk on it," neglecting to go into any informative detail about much of the various delicious foods they sampled. In fact, I began to wonder if he had even bothered to find out. He spoke favorably of the omelettes and the fried beignets, possibly because these were familiar to his palate? He also comments positively on the salad he ate at one of the restaurants, even though it resulted in gastric discomfort later on.

Rather than reflecting upon his experience as a white man in rural west Africa, he frequently gets irritated at being called "white," and at one point, snaps at a villager (he says "with new insight into the ugliness of racism"), "Don't call me names!" as though merely noting the difference in his skin color is an insult. I was a racial minority in Cameroon, and while racism exists there as in any other place where there is a dominant "race," the author's experience and consequent reactions seem more to do with his discomfort at being a minority rather than being a victim of genuine racism.

It is such a shame that he traveled to "Africa in miniature," and seems to have missed out on genuinely appreciating the beauty of Cameroon.

Ac says

I concluded that Peart is a better drummer than writer after reading this book. I also can't say that he was able to convey any particular insights about West Africa or its people either. However as a cyclist and traveler, I enjoyed his descriptions of the difficulty of riding almost 1000 miles through some inhospitable terrain.

Louise says

David, founder, owner and secretary of Bicycle Africa did a noteworthy job of leading 60 year old Elsa, the young smiling Annie, Vietnam vet Vincent and the author (whom I later learned is the drummer in the band Rush) to complete a month long bicycle trip through Cameroon unscathed. This rigorous 1988 trip went from Cameroon's Atlantic Coast to its northern border with Chad.

While the trail was nearly impossible, the climate hot and water not always available, Cameroon seemed to be an OK place for such a trip if you contrast it with the military culture of Chad where these 5 travelers ended their trip fearing imprisonment or death.

There are unique travel experiences such as spending a night in the convent, touring the "palace" of a "Fon" (ruler) and visiting a wildlife refuge. There are descriptions of the land, the condition of the roads and trails and of occasional wildlife. Lodgings become a literary motif in the descriptions of how each is uniquely bad. Friendly people call to them "hey white man" as a greeting. Many puzzle over Vincent, since they are unaware that there are black Americans. Peart describes the many towns and settlements they pass through or spend the night and he can sometimes find someone to communicate with in French or English.

Interspersed in the travelogue, are the musings of a young man (I wonder how Peart feels now about the opinions of his younger self). He analyses his companions: their hearts (hard or soft) and their reasoning (linear, circular or parabolic). He is reading Aristotle and letters of Vincent Van Gogh and comments philosophy and art.

I was disappointed in the photographs. I'd have liked more of the landscape and people. Most of these seem to be art shots. Only a few amplify the text.

While it lacks the historical and cultural perspective of writers such as Paul Theroux or Timothy Butcher who have both covered travel in Africa, Peart did a good job of communicating his unusual trip.

Catfantastic says

A fair first effort, but someone should have edited out "smashed circles of fried eggs." Ye gods. I laid the book aside for months after being subjected to that.

It was my mom who pointed out to me that Neil doesn't actually like anyone. Everyone else has something wrong with them. Neil alone is a man of integrity and beneficence and rational thought--even when he's taking advantage of his whiteness to cut in line at a bank when he KNOWS it's wrong, even when he's

dismissing an entire country's cuisine as "rice with junk on it." He's interesting and persuasive in the moment, but upon reflection, I think I'll just let him cycle on ahead and pretend he's first because he deserves to be there.

Sasha Lansky says

Good depictions of Cameroon, yet unfortunately a bit outdated in the non-PC descriptions of sub-Saharan Africa/Africans. Resorts a bit too easily to the noble savage ideal.

Jeremy Juliano says

I absolutely loved this book, it was as close to traveling West Africa on bicycle as I hope to get. I found Neal's prose self reflective which made this book an easy page turner. This is the type of book that makes me feel more knowledgeable and self-introspective as a person, about places, about people and about myself after reading it, and I am grateful to the author for sharing his adventures so selflessly.

Louise Armstrong says

For the first 50 pages I thought the answer to 'What kind of a person chooses to go cycling in Africa?' was going to be one I dislike, but then I got into it and finished the book. It's quite interesting in bits, but I missed the kind of informative quality that good travel writers like Bill Bryson or AA Gill have - this was more about the author than travel.
