

Leaving Las Vegas

By: Jayme Otto

Everyone stares as Kim Coats strides through the Kigali café. Any *muzungu* (the Kinyarwanda word for white person) creates a spectacle, even in Rwanda's capital city, but this statuesque blond from Las Vegas makes an especially significant splash. But rather than writhe in insecurity, 45-year-old Kim looks perfectly at home.

In fact, her voice takes on an evangelical fervor as she speaks about her work with Project Rwanda, an organization that uses the bicycle as a symbol of hope and works with farmers in the Central African nation to secure microloans and purchase transport bicycles that help them improve their economic conditions. Founded in 2006, the project promotes cycling by managing, recruiting, and training the Rwandan national cycling team and organizing an annual festival, the Wooden Bike Classic. Project Rwanda also works with nonprofits such as Malaria No More, which uses the bikes to transport mosquito nets and malaria treatments to rural villages.

Now, relaxing in the Kigali café, Kim is also settling into her full-time position as Project Rwanda's bike-distribution director. She has spent her morning prepping 50 cargo-

carrying bikes, each of which can haul up to 400 pounds, for delivery to a malaria clinic east of the city. If she feels tired from juggling bikes that weigh half as much as she, Kim doesn't show it. She looks a little dusty, wearing low-slung jeans, a white tank, and her hair pulled back into a ponytail, but her megawatt smile and a rapid-fire conversation about her work mask the gritty residue the labor has left behind.

These particular bikes, now en route to the Malaria No More clinic, will help save lives—literally. But every bike Project Rwanda puts into circulation helps bolster the nation's economy. Project Rwanda doesn't deal with ordinary cycles—only cargo bikes with knobby tires and long back ends designed specifically for transport. Since coffee is one of the nation's biggest cash crops, most of the bikes go directly to help coffee farm-

ers. The more coffee a farmer can haul between tree and processing point, the more money he can make.

It's hard work raising funds, increasing awareness of Project Rwanda, and maintaining and distributing bikes. But Kim feels the rewards are inimitable, especially since Project Rwanda provides ongoing income-generating potential to the country's rural coffee farmers—for whom the difference between a four-hour ride and a 12-hour walk to the processing plant translates to about \$200 per growing season. This may not seem like much money from the perspective of most Americans, but for people living in a country with an average per-capita income of below \$400, that's a significant impact.



Kim Coats hugs a recipient of a Project Rwanda bike.

Finding her dream

Life in Rwanda is a far cry from what Kim knew in the United States. Until a few years ago, she hadn't even heard of the Central African nation that borders the Democratic Republic of Congo. Kim grew up in Kansas and spent most of her adult life working in the restaurant industry. She helped her husband open a string of successful restaurants in Kansas City before they moved to Las Vegas in 2003 to expand their business.

MOLLY FELTNER

Kim spent many years pursuing her husband's dreams and eventually branched into food-distribution sales on her own. She even landed her "dream job" as the business development manager for Sysco Food Services. The Sysco job provided the kind of work Kim loved: landing new accounts and cultivating relationships with restaurant owners. She made great money, enjoyed fabulous perks, and schmoozed with the top chefs in Vegas. But Kim wasn't happy. "I felt like I was just going through the motions," she says. "Was my life really about selling chicken fingers to casinos in Las Vegas?"

Kim had taken up cycling in Kansas City as a way to stay in shape, but she fell in love with the desert riding around Las Vegas, and grew more serious about the sport. Cycling helped lift the cloud of depression she felt weighing down upon her. "Riding kept me sane," she says. "It was either that or therapy."

Unsatisfied with her life and starting to see it spin out of control, Kim decided to take action. She scribbled in her journal three things she needed in life: cycling, helping people, and traveling. Kim kept this list in the back of her mind and started looking for signs that she could make the changes necessary to fulfill these needs.

Later that fall, while on an airplane with her sister, Kim read a magazine article about Project Rwanda. As soon as she finished reading, she knew immediately that working with this organization was the opportunity she was looking for. "This is it!" she said to herself.

Finding Rwanda

Turning her "aha moment" into action was slightly more difficult. It took Kim more than a month to track down Project Rwanda's founder, Tom Ritchey, the former road and mountain-bike racer who conceived the mission while touring the country's lush, hilly countryside by bike in 2005. Ritchey then put her in touch with board members in the U.S., who helped her plan a four-month volunteer tour "in country." She'd be working with Jock Boyer, the American coach of the Rwandan national cycling team and the project's main voice on the ground—he wasn't exactly thrilled that a volunteer chick from Vegas wanted to step in and help with the manpower the project needed to continue growing.

Kim wasn't deterred. Six months after her conversation with Ritchey, she rallied her cycling friends and held a Project Rwanda fundraiser—a bike ride—as her going-away party. She then boarded a plane that bounced from Atlanta to Amsterdam to Nairobi before touching down in Kigali. "Some days I questioned my sanity," Kim says of her first weeks in Rwanda. "Had I really given up my six-figure job, married life, pretty clothes and shoes, and the perks of eating at the best restaurants in Vegas for this? But every time I'd be ready to buy a plane ticket home, a friend would send me a note telling me I was the toughest woman he knew, or a farmer would tell me how much one of our bikes had changed his life."



"So many people, me included up until last year, make excuses for not doing what they're meant to do in life."

Despite the positive balance of work and reward, deciding to make such a major—and permanent—life change hadn't been easy. Upon first arriving in Rwanda, she'd originally planned to stay for just four months. But as that milestone approached, she came to realize she couldn't go back to her old life.

Although Kim discovered Rwanda because of the project, the country has recently hit Americans' adventure-travel radar. The boon of ecotourists hoping to spot an endangered mountain gorilla at Volcanoes National Park amounts to only 7 percent of the country's 700,000 annual international visitors (business trips and family visits contribute 80 percent of the total), but this number is increasing.

But even Rwanda's up-and-coming ecotourism industry and reputation for good business practices aren't enough to heal the nation's collective psyche. The country is still recovering from the tragic 1994 genocide in which over 1 million Rwandans were slaughtered. An epidemic of AIDS still haunts female survivors of the genocide, and the country's economy has languished while an entire generation—hundreds of thousands—of orphans have grown up. Despite a now-stable political climate and President Paul Kagame's admirable efforts to rebuild the economy and national identity, the electricity still goes out frequently and running water is only available in cities.

Finding herself

"For years I'd felt like I wasn't in the right place. I was always searching," Kim says. "In Rwanda I am happy and content for the first time in my life." She had decided that this sense of peace was worth cultivating, so when Project Rwanda offered her a paid position as the national bike director, she accepted. She would return to Vegas that fall, but only to file for divorce and pack her bags once again for Africa. Kim Coats would move to Rwanda. Permanently.

For Kim, a major perk of living in Rwanda is the riding. Known as the Land of a Thousand Hills, the lush, green countryside is full of winding rural roads, challenging climbs that reward with 360-degree views, and fast descents along terraced farms that rise thousands of feet above the valley. The cycling is an unspoiled type that people pay thousands of dollars to experience—and Kim has it practically all to herself. She often feels like

she's stepped into a page of *National Geographic* as she rides past villagers in long, colorful skirts walking the roadsides carrying everything from water to timber on their heads. "There's not a fast-food joint, billboard, or brick sound wall anywhere in sight," she says.

A serious drawback to Rwandan riding, however, is that medical care can be out of reach. If Kim were to suffer a serious injury while cycling, she could die before reaching a hospital that could treat her. This reality weighs on her mind when she rolls along country roads and plantation trails. In fact, on a casual ride with a group including two members of the Zambian cycling team last December, Kim let fear slow her down—not something she usually allows.

Her tentativeness caused serious tension within the group, which in turn taught her an important lesson—one that translates perfectly to her new life: "[Being overly cautious] feeds into a potential accident. If you stare at the rock or rut in your path trying to avoid it, you will

ride your bike directly into it." On that ride she embraced fear a little too much, and she admits that this "could've catapulted me directly into the danger I was trying to avoid." But in terms of her work, her travels, and her life path, Kim has thrown that overly cautious mindset out the window—and has decided to embrace adventure instead.

She did have fears, however, about that short period of time she'd be back in the United States, after her volunteer work ended and before her permanent job began. Would this short stint back "home" change her perspective about moving to Rwanda permanently? Would she really have the gumption to go through with the relocation? Her fears dissipated soon upon returning to Las Vegas.

Back in "the real world," Kim nearly had a meltdown while shopping at Target. "There was just too much stuff!," she recalls. "Do we really need 57 different bottles of dishwashing liquid?" Ironically, while in Rwanda the weekend before, she'd spent an entire day trying to find a bottle of dishwashing soap. Now she cringed at the excess. "Americans just don't realize how lucky they have it," Kim says. "Even when the economy sucks, they still have it better than 98 percent of the people in the world."

She continued to wrestle with reverse culture shock throughout her short stint in Las Vegas. "I felt really out of place in the United States and

have been struggling with that. It's crazy that a white girl from Vegas feels more comfortable working with Rwandan farmers who don't even speak English. But nothing in my life has given me as much thrill as listening to a farmer tell his story, fighting back tears, his jaw shaking as he says how much the bike means. For me, this is what it's all about."

These thrills are what solidified Kim's decision to go back to Rwanda and stay there. "I hear all the time from people that they could never do what I do," she says. "They have so many arguments for why they can't do something. You don't need to go off the deep end and move to Africa, but so many people, me included up until last year, make excuses for not doing what they're meant to do in life."

Kim's done making excuses. She describes a 6,000-kilometer, two-week, nine-country motorcycle trip through southern Africa last December: "Dropping my passport at the embassy to have more pages added felt like the coolest thing in the world," she laughs. "To me it signifies the reasons I'm in Rwanda: I want to have one great adventure in my life, work in a realm that helps people, and do it with a bike. I've got it all." ■

How Bikes Help:

The once ubiquitous wooden bikes that Rwandan farmers used to transport coffee, potatoes and other agricultural products to market are banned. "Farmers still use them in the Democratic Republic of Congo," says Kim, but the rickety rides carried heavy loads through the hilly Rwandan countryside—without brakes—and the Rwandan government banned the dangerous wooden bikes several years ago. With fewer wheels on the road, programs like Project Rwanda are even more important for helping farmers find ways to transport agricultural products to market. See how these bikes help:

- In rural Rwanda, 500 thousand coffee farmers tend garden-sized plots, each averaging between 200-300 trees that produce about 1,000 pounds of coffee during a growing season.
- Centrally located washing stations collect, process and prepare green coffee "berries" for export. It may take as many as 500 farmers' crops to fill one cargo container of green coffee.
- Two wheeled transport cuts the time and energy necessary to haul beans between the farm and the washing station and lessens the potential for ripe beans to spoil and ferment.
- Project Rwanda's bikes are sturdy, simple, and have an elongated, cargo-ready wheelbase that can support up to 400 pounds of coffee (or milk, or potatoes, or whatever else a farmer might haul).
- The patriarchal Rwandan culture assigns much of the manual labor for hauling and harvesting to women. It's not uncommon to see women hauling 200 pounds of coffee or potatoes on their heads. Project Rwanda's equal-rights approach helps women acquire cargo bikes which enhances their livelihoods, especially.
- With well-maintained, cargo-hauling bicycles farmers can transport a larger quantity of beans which ups their personal income potential. Hauling more beans in less time means farmers also have more time for secondary income projects and time to spend with their families.
- In partnership with local co-ops and Opportunity International Bank (URWEGO), farmers purchase \$200 cargo bikes as part of a package from Project Rwanda that includes ongoing maintenance, and support.
- Increased income allows farmers to re-pay their microloan in two years or less—without cutting into their base salary. When the loan is repaid, the additional income goes directly into farmers' pockets, or to purchase another bike.



Follow Kim's adventures at www.kimberlycoats.blogspot.com.
Learn more about Project Rwanda at www.projectrwanda.org.