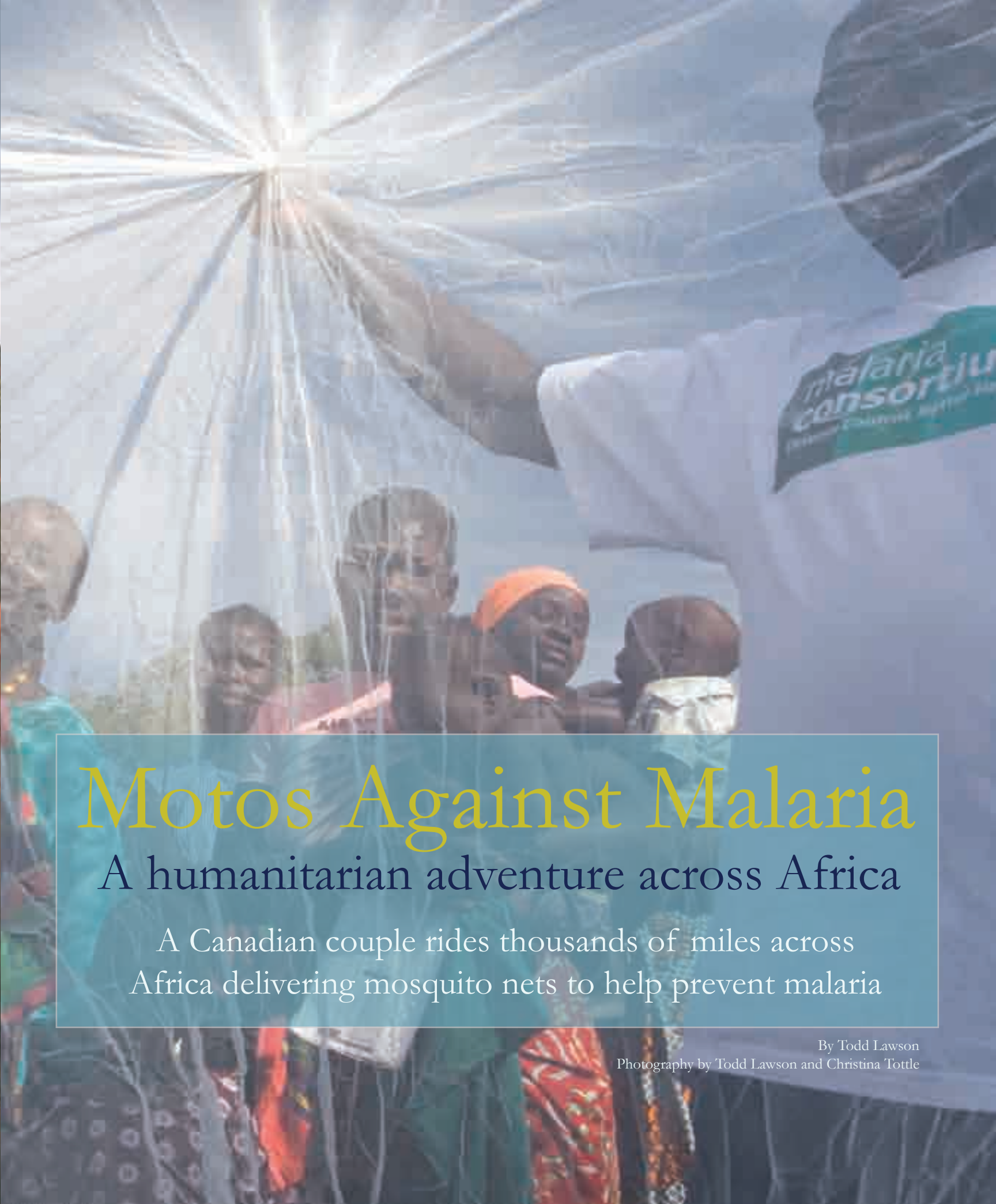

Motos Against Malaria

A humanitarian adventure across Africa

A Canadian couple rides thousands of miles across Africa delivering mosquito nets to help prevent malaria

By Todd Lawson
Photography by Todd Lawson and Christina Tottle

A teenage boy bangs away at a rusted truck hub hanging from a tree—the makeshift alarm clock for 300 students at Manyara Secondary School in northwestern Tanzania. It's barely 6:00 a.m. as we peel our bodies off the cement floor and are offered tea and white bread for breakfast. The African sun has just poked its head over the vast horizon, throwing a warm glow onto the dusty school grounds. Children saunter around in clusters before eventually gathering around the middle of the courtyard, waiting for their day to begin.

"Good morning students," says a tall man dressed in a grey suit and green tie too short to reach over his bulging belly.

"Good morning Headmaster!" they shout back in unison.

"Today is a special day for us. We have some friends who have come from Canada. Their organization has supplied us with new mosquito nets for your beds. Show them respect and be cooperative. Please have your dorm rooms clean; they will be around shortly to begin the exercise."

We start with the girls, who giggle and prance around the narrow dorm. They help us rip the packages open and tie each net neatly to the metal skeleton of their bunks.

"I am happy for my new net," says Chikundi, a 15-year-old with a dignified smile. "Before there are too many mosquitoes flying around my head at night, keeping me awake. I want to sleep so I can study well and learn, but in the day I am tired. I think now I can sleep better. Thank you, mister and madam."

My wife, Christina, and I have been waiting for this day for almost a year, when we had first contacted the Against Malaria Foundation with the idea of delivering nets to African villages far removed from normal distribution routes.

As we ride away on our Yamaha AG200s, our remaining 30 nets crammed into our army-style saddlebags, I think of my brother Sean, who introduced me to the world of independent overland travel nearly 10 years ago. Freewheeling through southern Africa's wild expanses on two Honda 250XLRs, it was the journey of our young lives—until the adventure came to a sudden, heart-wrenching halt. Sean contracted cerebral malaria, and succumbed to the disease within four short days. The worst day of my life came immediately after the very best experiences I had ever known.

With his inspiration driving me, I knew I had to keep his spirit alive, to keep traveling, as he would have. Now I was back in Africa, attempting to do something to prevent the disease that took his life, and continues to take thousands of lives every day. Our efforts are but a tiny drop of water in the vast ocean of aid in Africa, but as we ride away from that little school full of emotion and hope, it feels good knowing that every one of those 300 children will sleep better tonight, will study hard tomorrow, and can dream a little bigger. Ironically, I take solace in Sean's death. None of this would be possible without him. We would not be here, riding across Africa once again, to experience the incredible impact this disease has on these children's lives, and the potential for a simple bed net to stem its toll.

Hours later we stop, alone and confused, at the northwestern edge of the massive Maasai Steppe. The road has all but disappeared. Instead, traces of animal paths branch off into the desert like limbs of a tangled tree.

"How much water do we have?" I ask Christina, peering nervously into the parched landscape.

"Enough for two days," she replies. "Maybe three, if we eat raw food, don't wash, and skip coffee."

Our spirits plunge. A pair of Maasai women herding long-horned cattle emerges from a cloud of dust. Their necks, ankles, and wrists are ringed with bands of gold and swirling beads, but the women's ears stand out the most. Hoops of flesh dangle at their lobes, big enough for my wrist to fit through. We ask for directions, but they speak neither English nor Swahili. Despite waved hands, pointed fingers, and babbled words, we are utterly lost in the African wilderness. I knew my brother would be smiling with pride at our predicament in this desert of desolation. This was the kind of stuff he lived for.

"Let's just go," I say impatiently. "All these paths probably lead to the same place anyway."

Christina rolls her eyes, but agrees—backtracking is not an option. We've covered 100 crunching kilometers since yesterday, when we were disappointingly turned away at the gates of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area. The gate guards, however, did mention a "secret road" around Lake Eyasi to western Tanzania.

"Is nice road. You can see the lake and you can reach Burundi country. Is no problem."

All around us, coated in white dust from the daily onslaught of wind-whipped sand, thorn trees stand alone, reduced to frail, mummified skeletons. Battered huts poke through the haze, but we see no other signs of life. Just as we're about to throw caution to the wind and guess which way to go, salvation putters up on a little Yamaha DT175 dirt bike with a leopard-skin seat. He sports a bushy beard, no bottom teeth, and a thick wool tuque under his helmet. Behind him sits a long-

legged man with a helmet far too big for his head.

"Where are you moving to?" he asks. We show him our scribbled list of directions, written in Swahili by the park guides, and chat in charades and broken English.

"Okay, no problem. I am called Msekwa," he grins. "We will move together. Do you have water?"

We look at each other and smile, then give our savior a drink.

The landscape soon swallows us in a murky bowl of grey, black, and tan. Cruising across the grim desert wasteland, we try to keep pace with our guide, who rides swiftly, weaving in and out of the dead trees. Without him this is a roadless no man's land, and we'd surely be meat for the hyenas. We pass women carrying calabashes full of muddy water collected from shallow wells. Maasai tribesmen ride one-speed bicycles with bows and quivers of arrows strapped across their muscled backs. I stop to ask one of them if I can take a photograph, but he backs away nervously, using his bike as a shield.

We stop only once, briefly, in a small Maasai village to eat cold rice, beans, and a big boiled turkey leg. Our arrival causes a stir. Curious tribesmen gather around the bikes and attempt to peer into the wooden food stall for a better look at our dusty white faces. A few flaunt western clothes, but most are decked in animal skins, silver jewelry, and colorful beads.

After three more exhausting hours of riding, we arrive at the passenger's house. It's surrounded by nothing but a few acacia trees, fenced in with skinny logs bored into the thirsty soil to keep wild animals out. He shows us around his sparse compound—a few pots hanging from a mud wall, a small bed in a dark corner, two tripod stools on the ground.

"You can stay here," he says, pointing a long finger towards the bed. An escape from the elements is enticing, but one look at Msekwa tells us our answer.

"We go home," is all he says.

We soon approach a dry river bed, full of heavy sand, and I go down twice. Christina handles the crossing with aplomb, surprised and elated that she's getting over her sand-riding phobia. The land is open and barren, with almost no distinguishing marks and nothing on the horizon to pinpoint our bearing. Even our heaven-sent guide stops to ask for directions when we get momentarily lost amongst a maze of cotton fields. We're now throwing long shadows. We come across a muddy river about 50 feet across. I think about running it because I'm too spent to push my bike through, but Msekwa talks me out of it.

"Is very deep. You walk through. We push." Wise advice.

In the last of the day's light we arrive in his village, ready to drop. We've only covered 202 kilometres, but it feels like 1,000. At Msekwa's modest, three-room home the first thing we notice are two tattered mosquito nets hanging outside. "We have malaria here, much malaria in the season," he tells us.

Christina explains the details of our project and we give four new nets to him and his children—a small token of appreciation for getting us here unscathed.

"Please also give one to your friend, the next time you see him in the desert."

"I thank you velly much," he says, although we're the ones feeling grateful. Without him, we surely would have been left scared and lost in the steppe.

The following morning, our friend serves us steamed sweet potatoes and some encouraging words of advice.

"You will have no problem to border. The road is rough, but the road is there. Just follow straight. Don't deviate!" He waves as we ride away. "*Safari Njema*!"

After an expensive and tiresome entry into Uganda, we find ourselves fading, and keep our eyes peeled for a place to pitch camp. Struggling to cut furrows in the soil with ox-driven plows, farmers wave to us with wide smiles as we pass by, their wives and children hacking at the earth with handmade hoes. Weaving high up through a series of hairpins hugging a countryside road, Christina spots a tiny track that eventually leads to a sustenance-farming settlement. A footpath runs from the road down to a rustic homestead, where a white-haired elder is picking cotton from a pile of branches at his feet.

"*Habari zeno*," we say politely. He smiles, head wobbling to and fro, but doesn't speak.

A crowd soon gathers, and a young man with a beaming smile walks to the front to greet us.

"You can feel at peace here. You are most welcome," he says perfectly, intentionally loud so the others can witness his English prowess. "Each and every thing is here for you."

Christina says, "Can you please ask this man if we can stay with him and his family? We are tired after a long day and we would like to rest. We have a tent and food, all we need is some space over there on the grass if this is possible."

He turns to the old man, speaking a language we cannot recognize, then says, "I have told these people that you would like to stay here. They tell me that you are most welcome and they thank you for your visit. Don't worry, please feel free. You can have each and every thing you want."

I thank you for coming here, to our village.
We have been blessed by God. We cannot forget you.
We shall all pray for your journey and we hope you return one day.

The sun sets softly over crops of green, and we make dinner over an open fire while a crowd of 60 curious neighbors looks on. Dennis, "Mr. Each and Every Thing," as we call him, translates questions from the horde. "Why are you here, they are wanting to know? How did you find this village; it is too far from Kampala. They are not seeing white people."

"We are from Canada, but we started our journey on the motorcycles in South Africa. We are here because we want to share with this family the last of the mosquito nets we are carrying. They are for the children, to prevent malaria."

He relays the message openly to the crowd, and the murmur rises in volume as they process the information.

"Okay. Thank you," he says slowly. "These people, they are in disbelief. They don't think you can arrive here from South Africa with these bicycles. It is too far."

It's a response we've heard many times before. For these villagers and so many others throughout Africa, life "outside" is a dream. Survival by subsistence is reality. Not many of them ever venture outside the borders of their own territory, let alone across a border into another country. Again we are reminded of how lucky we are to be able to travel as we do.

In the morning, pellets of moisture drip off the tent as we unzip the doors and step into thick fog. We decide to get started early, hanging nets before the throng arrives. Virginia, a mother of five, is the first to wake. Her husband, the white-haired elder, is awake but still in bed. He smiles as I carefully step around him and hang a net with a length of black string. Sitting on his bed, he takes us both by the hands and speaks gently and, to our surprise, in English.

"I thank you for coming here, to our village. We have been blessed by God. We cannot forget you. We shall all pray for your journey and we hope you return one day."

Virginia speaks no English but is constantly talking to us, using hand gestures and gentle eyes to show her gratitude. With her help, we hang three more nets in their mud-and-sticks home, banging nails into the walls with the head of an old hoe. Dennis arrives, and starts where he left off with his "each and every thing" speeches, translating for us as we begin to pack up. He accepts his mosquito net with a gigantic, face-stretching smile, as if we were handing him keys to a brand new car.

"I shall use it to help my mother," he says. "She is very sick now so I can say this will help her. I know you must go now and continue this work, but we wish for you to return to us. Each and every thing is here for you. You can even live here how you wish."

We're now out of nets, so we ride on to Kampala to receive news from the Against Malaria Foundation (AMF), the organization handling the logistics of our net-distribution efforts. The foundation is making huge headway into the prevention of malaria through worldwide funding from organizations that host special events, with all proceeds used for the purchase of nets. To date, 387,000 supporters of the AMF have combined to raise enough money to distribute over a million long-lasting, insecticide-treated mosquito nets. Unfortunately, we aren't yet able to access any of the nets that we've raised money for through our own *Motos Against Malaria* website, but another large project is taking place in two months. The news gives us time for some uninhibited exploration, and we head northeast into Kenya, soaking up the freedom of the open road.

The euphoria doesn't last long. A cracked rear hub and puncture after puncture leave our blood boiling under the relentless African sun. With no more spare tubes or patches, I wobble into the border at Moyale, Ethiopia, on a rear tire almost completely shredded off a punched-out rim.

Ethiopia greets us with many pleasant surprises: the best coffee in the world for pennies a cup, gasoline prices half of every other country, freshly blended fruit juices—even good pizza. As is often the case, the people and culture of the country leave us with heightened memories and life-long friendships. After the rutted nightmare through northern Kenya, the sleek tarmac takes us on a speedy ride through an ever-changing landscape, from deserts to rivers, lakes, valleys, mountains, and lush green farmlands.

We reach Sudan with reservations. In our 38 countries of motorcycle travel, we've never ridden through a Muslim country reeling from a 27-year-long civil war and ongoing genocide. The kind and generous locals soon put our minds at ease, but the continual military check points don't. We're searched time and time again by police looking to make a buck off of two weary western travelers. Seeking respite from the heat and corruption, we find passage aboard a massive Nile River barge heading south. It takes two long and relaxing weeks to reach the south Sudan capital of Juba, and we fire up the AGs, bound for the next border.

Back in Uganda, we jump straight into a huge, 30,000-net distribution project taking place in the remote northwestern corner of the country. Most of the 2,000-plus nets for which we (Motos Against Malaria) have raised money are to be given to children under five years of age, and we're there to make sure each net is properly hung over every bed. After taking part in the training, registration, allocation, and distribution, we're anxious to check on the success of our personal project. We stock up on food, supplies, and fuel, and begin an intense follow-up, using our little underdog Yamahas to go from village to village, hut to hut, to meet and talk with the beneficiaries about malaria prevention. We cover as much ground as possible, using the rutted roads and village singletrack to visit all the homes we find. Groups of mothers greet us with shows of the incredible African spirit that we've come to love. They dance and sing and clap upon our arrival. The outpouring of affection and gratitude brings us to tears. Thankfully we have a way of repaying them back. Although many have never seen a mosquito net before, all understand that they will help save the lives of their children. Exhausted after each day's efforts, we find a mango tree to sleep under at night, with a mosquito net strung between the handlebars of our bikes.

> The outpouring of affection and gratitude brings us to tears.

We manage to help hang more than 300 nets in several different villages, but a shortage of food and fuel forces us to head back to home base. We've been on the road for 11 months, and although the scope and scale of Africa is incredibly intimidating, we must ride on. Our goal is to reach Morocco, delivering nets along the way, but civil unrest in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) puts that to a quick end. All land borders are closed to foreigners, especially overlanders, in the neighboring countries of Uganda, Rwanda, and the Central African Republic.

Our African odyssey has been a roller-coaster ride of emotions and experiences, and western Africa will just have to wait. We decide it's time to head back home to Canada. Even though there are thousands more children in need of mosquito nets, we know that we've done what we can. If we save but one life, it has been worth every gravel-crunching, mud-slinging, rooster-tailing, livestock-dodging kilometre. I can feel my brother smiling from above.

Africa Trip Route

Cartography by David Medeiros *(mapbliss.com)*