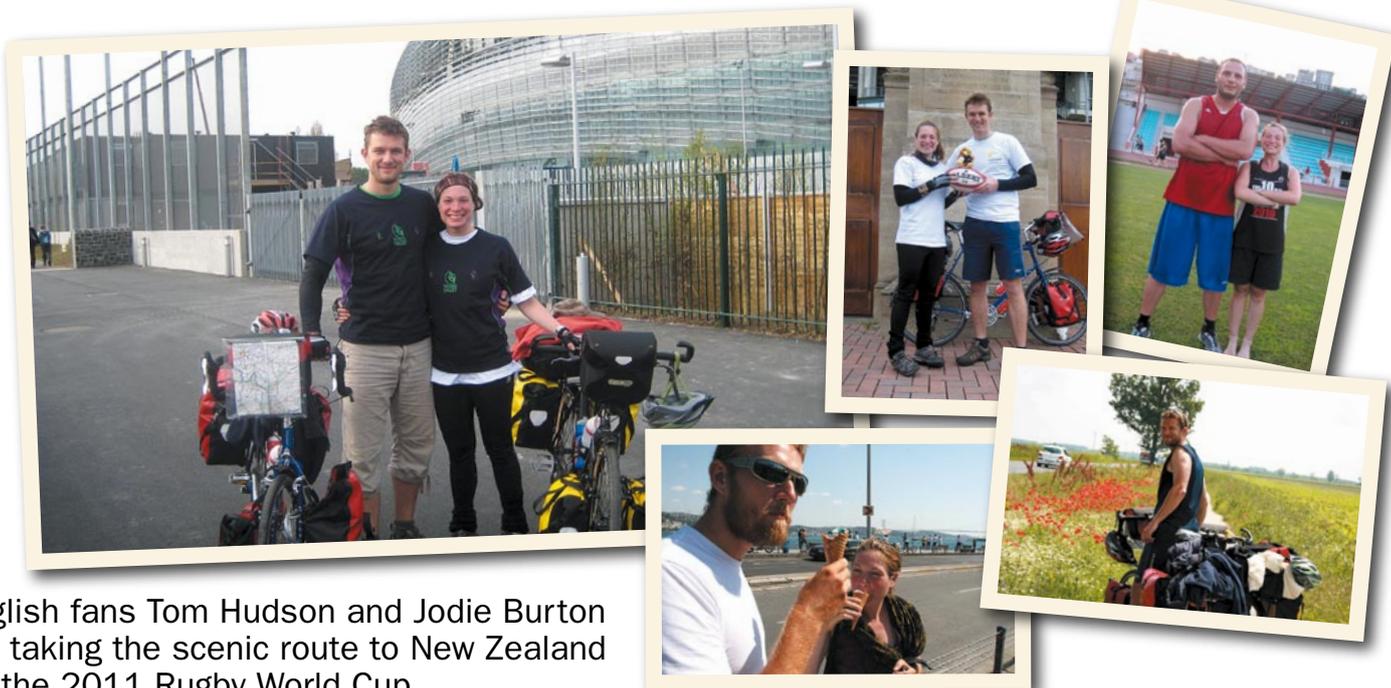


LE TOUR DE FORCE



English fans Tom Hudson and Jodie Burton are taking the scenic route to New Zealand for the 2011 Rugby World Cup.

BY RICH FREEMAN

Photos: Tom Hudson/Jodie Burton

While the top players in the world are aiming to be at their physical peak come October 23, two English rugby fans will be looking to put their feet up for a well-deserved rest.

Tom Hudson and Jodie Burton hope to be among the crowd at Eden Park for the Rugby World Cup final, but first they have to complete an extraordinary journey.

The couple left Twickenham on May 1, 2010, on a trip that will see them cycle 28,000km from the stadium that will host the 2015 World Cup final to Auckland, venue of this year's final.

"We had decided to emigrate [to Melbourne] and were thinking of how we could get there," said Burton.

The couple eventually decided cycling to Australia would fulfil their lust for excitement, but being rugby fans they decided to make the journey slightly longer.

"We wanted to have some project behind the ride and as New Zealand was close to our final destination we decided to make it and the Rugby World Cup the final piece," said Hudson.

Along the way they hope to raise £28,000 for two charities (Rays of Sunshine and Tag Rugby Trust) as well as promote rugby and all the sport stands for.

"We wanted to do something life-changing," said Hudson. "Rugby is a sport that teaches good principles such as integrity, teamwork and honesty and we want to use the sport to help strengthen

communities."

In addition to all the camping equipment needed for 18 months on the road, the couple also carry with them a Gilbert rugby ball and a scroll of honour.

"We want to obtain a signature from each nation that we cycle, an iconic figure, a legend of the people, to show that countries of different regions, beliefs and cultures, can stand side by side together in harmony," Hudson said.

Getting a signature hasn't always been easy. The couple were basically ignored by every club they contacted in France, though fortunately things have a got a lot better the further east they cycled – though that was not always the case with the terrain.

Following a freezing three-month trek across China, the couple got to meet three World Cup winners in a single day in Japan.

Hudson and Burton had coffee with Japan coach John Kirwan (who won the first RWC with New Zealand), before meeting George Gregan (a member of the Australia side that won in 1999) and Eddie Jones (a technical director with South Africa in 2007).

"That was one of the best days of my life not just the trip," said Hudson. "I actually was ill in the morning with a case of pre-match nerves. To meet three of your heroes in a day is amazing."

As they have been along the way, the couple were inundated with gifts, with Hudson being left speechless when Jones – in addition to a signed Suntory shirt – handed him a Barbarians jacket signed by the Wallaby duo.

Burton described Japan as a cycling holiday, saying: "Japan has been a standout. Incredible cycling, incredible people and incredible rugby."

That holiday spirit continued when the pair flew to Hong Kong for a few days, where they witnessed the biggest ever mini-rugby tournament, before flying onto Vietnam.

But with the clock counting down till the start of the World Cup, the pair were eventually forced to remount their bikes for the rest of the journey – a mere 12,000km through South-East Asia, before cycling down from Darwin to Melbourne and crossing the Tasman.

The couple plan to be in Nelson to help commemorate 125 years of official rugby in New Zealand and also hope to visit the Rugby Museum in Palmerston North.

The shirts and gifts they have collected along the way have already been sent to the museum and they plan to add the scroll at their journey's end.

Aside from that, the couple say their itinerary in New Zealand is still very much open, though they would like to promote the new national cycling route that is being planned in New Zealand.

"We will build our route around any invitations we get – as long as they have a TV," said Hudson.

The couple, as yet, don't have tickets to the final and Hudson joked he would present the scroll to anyone who could get them into the stadium.

So if you want to get your hands on a piece of rugby – not to mention cycling – history, or simply want to help a good cause, then contact them at cyclingtotherugbyworldcup.com.

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