

From journalist to solar entrepreneur

July 9, 2015



Windhoek

Leaving behind the comfort of a salaried job with the benefits of full-time employment and dedicating one's energy instead to growing a new business is a decision that requires careful planning and financial savvy.

But, what if you saw something that fascinates you and you realise this could be one of the magic formulae for the future? This is what happened to award-winning journalist, Marita van Rooyen of Windhoek.

One of the toughest decisions entrepreneurs like Marita face is when to set out on your own, especially when you have been a journalist for several years.

While studying in the United Kingdom more than a year ago, where she regularly saw people riding their converted solar bicycles to and from work, she struck upon the idea.

Having pondered it for a while, she decided to take action: "I became tired of walking around and talking to people. I needed to take a break. Journalism is hard work. So I decided to take a break and put my energy into something new," she says.

It was in the UK that Marita first saw specially designed roads for cyclists. The idea of entering the electric bike industry stuck, and she decided to act on it.

"I asked myself why can't I duplicate this back home where the sun shines all year long? The solar-powered electric bike is booming in Europe. You can ride bikes from the UK to Germany and people over there are crazy about E-mobility," she told New Era.

"Bicycles are known to be the most efficient, healthy and affordable way of moving. So I asked myself why not bring the idea and introduce it here in Namibia as nobody in my country is cycling because everybody is driving cars?" she explained.

"As a retrofitted bicycle with an electric engine, the SunCycle, provides a sustainable and environmentally friendly form of moving within our country," she said.

In Germany and the UK, there are recharge stations everywhere, she said: "You take your car or bike and recharge it along the road wherever you go. We plan to do the same here. We [plan to] set up several recharge stations at major shopping centres," she said.

Marita and her co-founder partner, Bernhard Walther recently registered SunCycles Namibia and introduced some of the converted solar bikes to the public.

They currently operate a small workshop where the bikes are converted and fitted with a solar kit.

"You can buy a bike from us, or we can convert your bike into an e-bike. The point is also to show customers how it is done so the customer does not have to struggle when he is out there. You can bring any of your old bikes and we can convert it with a solar kit to set you on the road. We call it retrofitting."

They collect old frames, spray them and then convert these to e-bikes by putting a motor to the rear wheel.

"The e-bike is one of the fastest way of moving in and around the city. Riding an electric bike is also cheaper than riding a regular bike," Bernhard said.

Some of the customers that took a test ride said: "This lovely bike now has a mounted solar battery ... should be seen as the future of urban transport, as one can happily cruise the streets of our towns. It is also serious fun on this electric bike."

Speeds can easily reach between 25 to 30 kilometers an hour, with light to moderate pedal input and can reach a distance of 40 kilometers on a battery pack. Marita said their product is affordable and sustainable form of transport for urban and rural areas. Top speeds on a good road can reach 40-45 kilometer per hour.

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During my recent official visit to the UK, I met with Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, at Buckingham Palace.

