

"Mountain Bike story from Oaxaca"

After much running and screaming (mostly from Jaime), we left my house, picked up Cricket and Eugenio and started our way towards Oaxaca. When we arrived, we picked up Alvaro who would be our guide through the high sierras. Once we reached Oaxaca City, we traveled southeast towards Mitla for 25 miles, then north for 25 miles of uphill back roads to a small town called Benito Juárez where the wonders of the Mexican Sierra began to show. After asking for permission to enter the Sierras from the local community leader, we hiked to the first of many lookout posts built on mountain peaks. The view was more than amazing, and from there we could see the distance we would travel in the next few days. It was 3 o'clock in the afternoon and we started our way up the hill on our bikes; our truck with our camping gear would meet us later at our camp site. After a few miles of going up hill, we turned onto a small single track and started a wild roller coaster ride through deeply dense forests. Unfortunately, when you are on a bike, everything that goes down, must go up, and so it went. We peddled uphill for the next 2 hours until we reached another small town called Cuajimoloyas. By this time we had gone from an altitude of 9000 feet to 6800 feet and back to 9600 feet. We were tired, but we still had a wonderful 8 mile downhill to go before we reached our camp site and we enjoyed it immensely. We barely made it to our camp site before the sun went down. After a few minutes, camp was set and we were enjoying a cold shower in a small creek a few feet away. Life can't get much better than this! Here we were, in the middle of the Sierras, two nights away from a full moon, no signs of civilization and no worries, just our bikes and a hundred more miles of forests to go. On the next day, we woke up at 5:30 a.m., got in our truck and drove for 30 minutes to a place called Piedras Largas or Long Rocks. This was the second lookout post of our trip. From here, we were able to see one of the most incredible sunrises you can imagine. Because of all of the dampness in the atmosphere, the light from the sun is not its usual bright yellow, but instead it turns into a rich orange that just explodes from the mountain peaks. It's simply breathtaking. We then returned to camp, had breakfast, packed up and started our way to Yavesia. The ride was a beautiful, 12-mile soft downhill coast, which included perfect picture and video opportunities. When we reached the small town of Yavesia we were amazed. I had personally never seen a town so clean and well organized. And when you realize that this is a town of 1,500 people, with no paved roads coming in or out of it, and the only access to it is through 56 miles of back roads through the Sierra, you begin to understand the love and understanding that the locals have for their town and the beautiful forests that surround it. At the beginning of the trip I had not paid any attention to the fact that we had to ask for permission to enter these forests, but after asking Alvaro a few questions, it was clear that admission was restricted to these areas for the purposes of conservation, and every time we entered an area of the forest guarded by a different community, we would be required to ask for permission to enter. After seeing the results of this organization, we were all more than happy to ask for such privilege. After a brief tour of the town's XVIII century chapel, we started our way uphill (again!!!) towards Amatlan. This was a 4 hour intermediate climb with one small downhill which ends at a river crossing. A wonderful place to cool down before heading up again. For the next 2 hours, you climb and climb and climb, until you have left the arid countryside and reentered the forest. On top of the hill we had been so desperately trying to conquer stood Amatlan. Entering this town is like winning the final stage in the Tour du France; once you go through the town's entrance arch, you find yourself being cheered on by all of the children of the town. I just could not help it, and once they started cheering, I just let go of the handlebars and waved my arms up in victory... the climb was over and I had conquered this stage of the Tour du Oaxaca! After a couple of minutes of catching our breaths and having a cold drink of water, we hopped back on our bikes and began the downhill towards Puente de Hierro. After 4 miles of a curving road, we were in front of a small iron bridge or as we call it in Spanish Puente de Hierro. There we had a small lunch in a little restaurant next to the bridge. It was amazing, we had started the day inside a forest, then we descended to a more arid climate, then we climbed into the forest again, and now we were well into a tropical landscape. All of this in one day and on our bikes! But none of the places we had visited so far could have prepared us for what was next - Los Pozuelos. After quick lunch, we headed in the truck to Ixtlan, a small town 80 miles northeast of Oaxaca. Just like the other towns we had visited, it was spotless. Two small size churches glittered in the middle of it. From the outside you can see incredible crafting on the walls and entrance arches, but on the inside stands a complete Renaissance treasure; incredible wall paintings and gold covered sculptures give you the feeling you are entering a holy place. And if you add the landscape to that, well, holy is an understatement. Ixtlan is a town of 2,500 people in the middle of a spectacular forest. This is not your ordinary reserve. For starters, it is not officially a reserve which means that the local community, with no federal government funding or regulations, takes care of this beautiful place. Every member of the

community has his own responsibilities with respect to the forest, and this type of organization seems to work pretty well, since this is the oldest forest in the world. But the reserve not only covers the forest, it also covers many tropical areas and rivers that have not been walked, crossed or otherwise seen by modern man. This place is an ecological heaven. We started our mystical journey through this wonder of nature with an explanation of the bio-diversity and other aspects of the reserve given to us by Gustavo Ram' rez. Gustavo is the local biologist and mastermind behind the conservation efforts of this place (See his article Ixtlan de Juárez: Oaxaca's Northern Sierra). Once the talk was over, we headed uphill to enjoy one of nature's best conserved wonders. We will start with my personal version of what a fog forest is. A fog forest is a forest which receives incredible amounts of water (e.g. rain), but because of its altitude, does not have the characteristics of a rain forest. One of the incredible aspects of this place is the Horizontal Rain. This phenomenon happens when rain "falls" horizontally from the fog or clouds to the mountains. It almost looks like a ghost. As soon as all of our OOOOO's, HAAAAAA's stopped, we started our tour of the area. It was getting dark now and a full moon was lighting our way through. After a small walk, we returned to our camp site. Once there, Jose Miguel, a guide leading a couple who were trekking in the forest, asked us if he could borrow one of our bikes to go down to Ixtlan and pick up his truck. Now picture this; you are in a forest heaven completely illuminated by a full moon, the road down is 18 miles to Ixtlan, completely downhill, and once you reach Ixtlan you have a car ride back to your camp site. So the next thing that happened was probably the best biking experience of my life. Just an exhilarating hour and a half of downhill illuminated by a full moon in one of the world's most beautiful forest. When I returned to camp, dinner was ready, the tents had been all set up and everything was just perfect. So perfect, that we forgot the 6 hour bike ride and we decided to go for a midnight walk. It wasn't long before we ended up on top of the lookout post trying to figure out how to fix the universe (not an easy task). But every once in a while we would stop talking and listened to the symphony of the noises made by the birds and wildlife that surrounded us. Next morning we woke up to see the incredible sunrise once again. After breakfast, we went on a long walk all through the morning and into the early afternoon. We walked on the "Royal Road", which got its name from the old Zapotecan Indians that used to use this road to travel from Monte Alban (ancient Zapotecan religious center located 40 miles southwest of Oaxaca) to the Gulf of Mexico. This road was originally used for religious pilgrimages, then for commerce and trade and in the beginning of the colonization of Mexico by Spain, it was used to smuggle Indians slaves out of Mexico. On our way back from the first part of the walk, we stopped at the lookout post to rest for a little while, when suddenly we heard some movement coming a couple of miles from where we were. We all turned around to try and see what it was, but we couldn't see anything. We all thought it had been one of the deer we had been seeing all through our stay here. After a few minutes of silence on our part, we heard a roar. All of us instinctively turned around towards our local guide with question marks splattered all over our faces. Cesar, our community appointed local guide, immediately said "Puma". By the time he had finished saying Puma, we were all with our cameras on the side of the lookout post trying to catch a glimpse of that cat. Unfortunately, the vegetation is so dense, that we could only see branches and leaves moving. So a few minutes after that, we were up and starting the second half of our walk. The walk ended way too fast and around 3 p.m. we were biking downhill through the other part of the Royal Road to Ixtlan. This is a moderate downhill which we all considered among the most beautiful we had ever run. This single track has everything; steps, branches, fallen trees, tough curves, and any other technical maneuvers you may think of, they are all there. The only bad part of it is that it's only 9 miles long. Believe it or not, once you've run it, you wish it could be longer. But since all good things must come to an end, so did our single track and our stay in Pozuelos. Next, we were heading in the truck to the outskirts of another small town called Yubila. The camping site there was also incredible, but did not compare to Pozuelos. The next morning we decided to sleep in for a little bit and wake up was not until 8 a.m. By this time we were all a little sore in our legs and a little tired, but this was our last day so we had to make it count. Yubila's race, as it's commonly known by the local bikers, is a 12 mile run around a mountain. It begins with 4 miles downhill and then ends up in an 8 mile soft climb. A perfect run for the last day. The downhill track is covered by dried up leaves and branches, full of tight curves and many steps or obstacles created by the roots of the trees. Yet another perfect single track. And the climb was the best in the whole trip. A wide dirt road, of which you could not see the dirt because it was completely covered with what seemed like maple leaves. Just a picture perfect run. Finishing Yubila's race marked the end of our trip. This meant we went back to Oaxaca to leave Alvaro, and then returned to Mexico City. Leaving was sad - we all wanted to stay. But in a few days we had seen and lived enough to have memories to last a lifetime. But, in the words of a famous contemporary poet, "I'll be back!"