

h ~~o~~ t sun

JUG WINE AND HOT, HOT SUN

A sunburned misanthrope bonds with strangers in the Andes, finds company in suffering and catharsis through sweat.

THE SECOND MORNING HAD STARTED OUT WITH PROMISE, cool and lush.

We'd thrown up tents the night before in a green field on the bank of a rowdy, flowing and frigid river, eaten meat from the fire, drunk Gato Negro wine from gallon jugs, sung songs, stargazed and tiptoed down the first steps of the road that leads from total strangers to more friendly acquaintances. Mid-morning the next day, as fumes from the night before vaporized off my searing flesh and two hours into an unrelenting haze of technical rocks, I was beginning to have serious doubts about my ability to survive the day. Catching back up to a trio of riders paused in a shady patch of trail, Dave Campbell, owner of Mountain Bike Adventures, guide and leader of this group of nevermet strangers and the pied piper who had lured me here to this steep and rocky slice of Chile with the promise of epic singletrack and ripping good times, hailed me cheerfully:

"Well, Mike, whaddya think of it so far?" he said, blowing a bead of sweat from the tip of his nose, grinning. "This ain't exactly yer Napa Valley wine tour, eh?"

At this point, some background is necessary. I am uncomfortable in groups. I fear strangers. And, having been in this business for over a decade now, I do not trust the hyperbole and overblown enthusiasm with which most people describe their preferred riding environments. I've had the opportunity to travel the world, and have tasted the most forbidden fruits of the sweetest singletrack in the most awe-inspiring landscapes on this planet. In short, I am spoiled, paranoid and more than a little cynical. So when Dave started calling me almost a year prior to this heat-blasted day, extolling the beauty of Chile, telling tales of a singletrack Mecca unexplored by the rest of the world, of food, music, smiling faces and times too good to pass up, my natural, reflexive response was, "Yeah, right. Mecca. Sure it is, buddy, sure it is..."



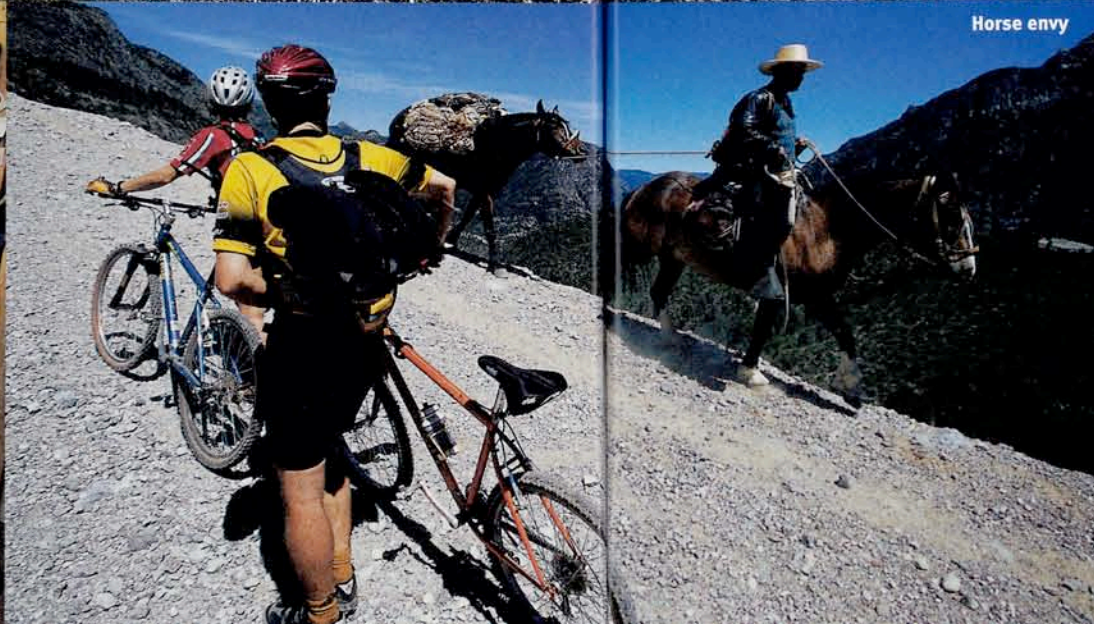


Santos contemplates a shortcut.

Horse envy



How did Gary Coleman's bike end up in Chile?



Chalk one up to persistence on the part of Dave. Prior to photographer John Gibson and I finding ourselves in the clutches of an apparently very fit madman down in Chile, my total exposure to the group tour experience had come from standing on the side of a country road in southern France, watching the oddly overdressed and painfully out of place clients (picture Monty Burns bent with feeble exertion atop a bright red Cannondale hybrid, "Must...turn...pedals....nnnnnnrrrrggghhh...") on a backcountry tour as they wobbled past me on a gentle grade in a display of pain and fear and discomfort, the likes of which I prayed I would never have to witness again. If this was group touring, I wanted no part of it, thank you very much. But Dave painted a very different picture: One of technical rocks, stunning views, and climbs long enough to feel like you'd bitten off a piece of something real. He talked enthusiastically of a week spent riding hard and eating well, of sleeping under the stars of a southern sky, of bathing in hot springs, of being somewhere unique. And he promised, "Look, I'm not going to lie. This isn't one of those easy tours where we hold your hand and wipe your bum for you, okay?"

OK. So Gibby and I found ourselves meeting strangers at the airport in Santiago, Chile, with no real idea of what lay ahead. Our traveling companions were the dot-goners, Jodi, Lori and Lynne, three self-assured women from Silicon Valley; Donna and Trina, two friends from Vancouver; Lisa, soloing in from Calgary; Martin and Santos and Lena, all strangers but all from Toronto; and the tour crew—mechanic Barry and his ass-kickingly strong girlfriend, Joanne, Steve and his guitar, our ringleader Dave (also all from Toronto),

and Santiago (he'd be Chilean), the fleet footed dancing machine, ever smiling beast of burden and cooker of all meat.

Many hours later, hundreds of miles south and near midnight, we were feasting like royalty at the adobe walled home of Santiago's parents. A band was playing, and, fuelled with wine and laughter and fine, fine food, people were dancing. I pushed a plate away from my belly, stuffed tight as a drum, and the thought occurred that I could get used to this kind of life. I fell into a drowsy reverie thinking about having slaves clean my bike, sherpas carting me up the steepest hills, and endless snaking ribbons of downhill singletrack, ending with lavish meals and endless buckets of ice cold beer waiting at the bottom. Yep, a fine way to live...

Flash forward two days to the smell of sunburn and the spine-jarring festival of rocks. It was hot out, and most of the group had sucked down more than their share of liquid friendship the night before while Steve played guitar and the girls all sung along to Blue Rodeo songs. Sheen of sweat, shimmering haze on the horizon, listening for the welcoming thunder of the nearby river and hopefully a swimming hole, the thought crossed my mind that five more days of this was likely to either beat me into shape something quick or beat me down something fierce.



A trip of biblical proportion: baptism...

As if to underscore this notion, the following day started with a seven-mile climb up and along a road paralleling the gas pipeline running between Chile and Argentina. A gentle roll out from our campsite rapidly devolved into alternating between granny ring crawling and pushing as we clawed our way up to a barren saddle. From there, we were treated to fast and steep fireroad descents festooned with shaley rocks, and a long, rolling day, heading toward the finish at a remote park wedged against the Argentine border. Legs still in some sort of shock, going from winter to jet lag to repetitive long days in the dirt, while the carrot dangling before most of us was the lure of hot springs waiting at the park. Arriving late in the day, as the sun slanted toward golden and the surrounding peaks threw themselves dark with shadow, we beelined for the stone pools then collapsed with a collective sigh of saddle sore relief, keeping our ears peeled for the sound of Santiago arriving in the truck with reinforcing rations of beer and wine.

Long ride + hot soak + cold beer + lots of barbecued meat = hard, hard sleep—not the best recipe for the next day's early morning start and the beginning of the trip's longest day. We rolled out of camp in the cool of dawn, looking and feeling like shipwreck survivors. Two long, crushing climbs separated by a dozen miles of fireroad and one long, dark tunnel later, we were almost halfway. Stopping for lunch, the level of enthusiasm in the group was probably comparable to that of said shipwreck survivors. But something else was happening. The combination of crushing miles and heavy drinking was beginning to carve out some bonds. Santos, who had popped with heat prostration on the second day, was riding with power and a smile. The

dot-goners were freely entertaining all with tales of past ribaldry. We were riding long miles through steep terrain in hot weather, and nobody was complaining. I thought of some of my riding friends back home, almost all of whom are tough and experienced, many of whom would be sniveling with misery by this point. Maybe there was something to be said for the company of strangers, after all. The paranoid misanthrope inside me sat silent with wonder.

After four days of mountain riding boot camp, we ran a gauntlet of insane proportions to catch a flight north, destined for the beach town of Maitencillo. We caught our flight with minutes to spare; 11 sweaty and dirt-crust-ed gringos squeezed onto a commuter flight full of well-dressed business folk. Many hours later, around midnight, at the end of a day which had started in the quiet light of dawn with sore backs and stiff legs, we were slumped full-bellied (again) in a restaurant that looked like it had been built as part of a collaboration between Dr. Seuss, Salvador Dalí and about 3,000 hits of acid. Perfect.

The terrain in Chile is like an exaggerated California, much of the country is a coastal range that borders the Pacific Ocean. Inside that range lies a central valley, which in turn gives way to the Andes. To the north lies the Atacama Desert, drier than anywhere else on earth. South toward Patagonia, the landscape is cool and rainy. In between lies a Mediterranean-like climate, similar to California's, backed by a mountain range taller than the Sierra Nevada. It's just like California, only stretched much longer, squeezed more narrowly, mountains pushed higher, with greater extremes of hot and cold, wet and dry. The Andean riding we had done reminded me of some



...purgatory...



...pestilence...

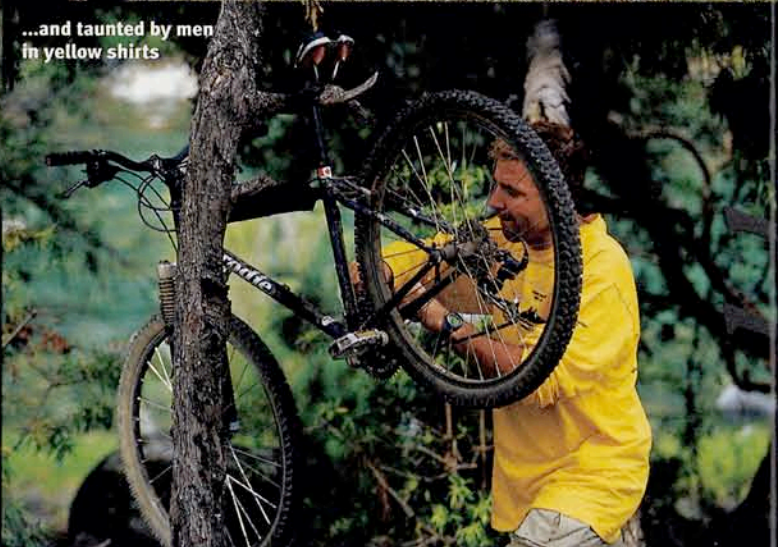
...and flagellation



Ravaged by thorns...



...led into tangled thickets of impenetrable bush



...and taunted by men in yellow shirts



...the group finally bid Chile a tired farewell...

remote Sierra terrain I'd been lost in. Maitencillo might as well have been Santa Cruz, only without any other mountain bikers except Mattias, our sparkling-eyed hammer of a guide and our host at the hallucinogenic beach hotel. A bounty of narrow, rolling sandstone trails winding through unpopulated farmland and light forest provided belly laugh relief from the beating we had been served in the Andes. The trails were fun and the rides were shorter. This left more time for goofing off with the group and drinking, both of which were proving far more enjoyable than I'd anticipated.

In this respect, the dot-goners were proving true champions. Aside from all being fit, good riders, this trio of women were professional grade drinkers, with storytelling capabilities to make a pirate blush. Nights were becoming several hourlong, raucous bull-

shit sessions, with punch lines like, "...so I peed on him...", "...and then we dated for a couple months...", "...shut up and pour...", "...I got your Southern Cross right here...", all punctuated by Barry and Joanne's hysterical brays of laughter that came from the perverted nonsense that was rapidly devolving into a code that nobody outside our group could ever hope to comprehend. We were running on fumes and laughing enough to strain muscles.

Dave Campbell has this penchant for cheerful misrepresentation: "Look, guys, there's a bit of climbing today...", uttered before a two hour push-climb; "Guys, this is gonna be some epic singletrack...", said before dropping into a tangle of thorns and clinging vines; "...ahhh, you should be fine with semi-slicks...", as he induces people to ride in one of the earth's rockiest places. But it's all enthusiastic mis-

representation. He also told me before we came down here, as he tried to defuse my anti-social reservations, "Mike, I'm not lying to you here. We have a lot of fun on these trips, alright?"

Got that right. A Mountain Bike Adventures trip is anything but a Napa Valley wine tour. It's tough riding in a beautiful place, hosted by a man and his friends, flying by the seats of their pants. It's rustic and rugged and rough-edged and more fun than I could have ever imagined. "We have a lot of fun on these trips, alright?" That doesn't even begin to describe it.

This wasn't what I had expected. I had come here thinking that I was going to ride tame terrain with polite strangers who would keep their barriers safe and high. Instead, sometime on our last night together, hours after the dot-goners had pinned down Dave, torn off his shirt and dripped candle wax on his nipples to thank/punish him for the trip, as we all glowed with that intangible sense of good that sometimes creeps up, unlooked for, I found myself in the grips of a mean Pisco buzz (imagine tequila mixed with turpentine), slow dancing with a man. And I'm not ashamed to admit it. He danced well. ☐

Dave Campbell went to Chile seven years ago to learn the language and ended up falling in love with a country. The tours he runs down there are put on in collaboration with the friends and contacts he made while living in Chile and learning Spanish. As such, his trips have an informal, family feel to them. Clients get fed to their bursting point and are shown a side of life that is far away from the four-star package tour experience. It's good stuff.

But it isn't easy going. When he says his trips are tough, he's not kidding. The terrain is incredibly rocky and there is a whole mess of climbing. These are good things, but be prepared. Good tires and full-suspension will feel like mana from heaven come the third or fourth day. That said, I rode a hardtail with skinny tires and survived just fine. But I sure would have liked some cushion for the pushin' on more than one occasion.

The Mountain Bike Adventures web site (www.mountainbikeadventures.com; 877-305-4222 for the phone people) details the logistics of the trip and lists prices for the next two, eight-day tours at \$1,395. That includes all ground and air transport in Chile, enough food to feed an army, all you can drink and accommodations ranging from cabanas to tents. You bring your bike, your clothes, a sleeping bag and your desire to get some miles in. They take care of the rest. At press time, round-trip fares from Los Angeles to Santiago were running between \$625 and \$675. —M.F.