

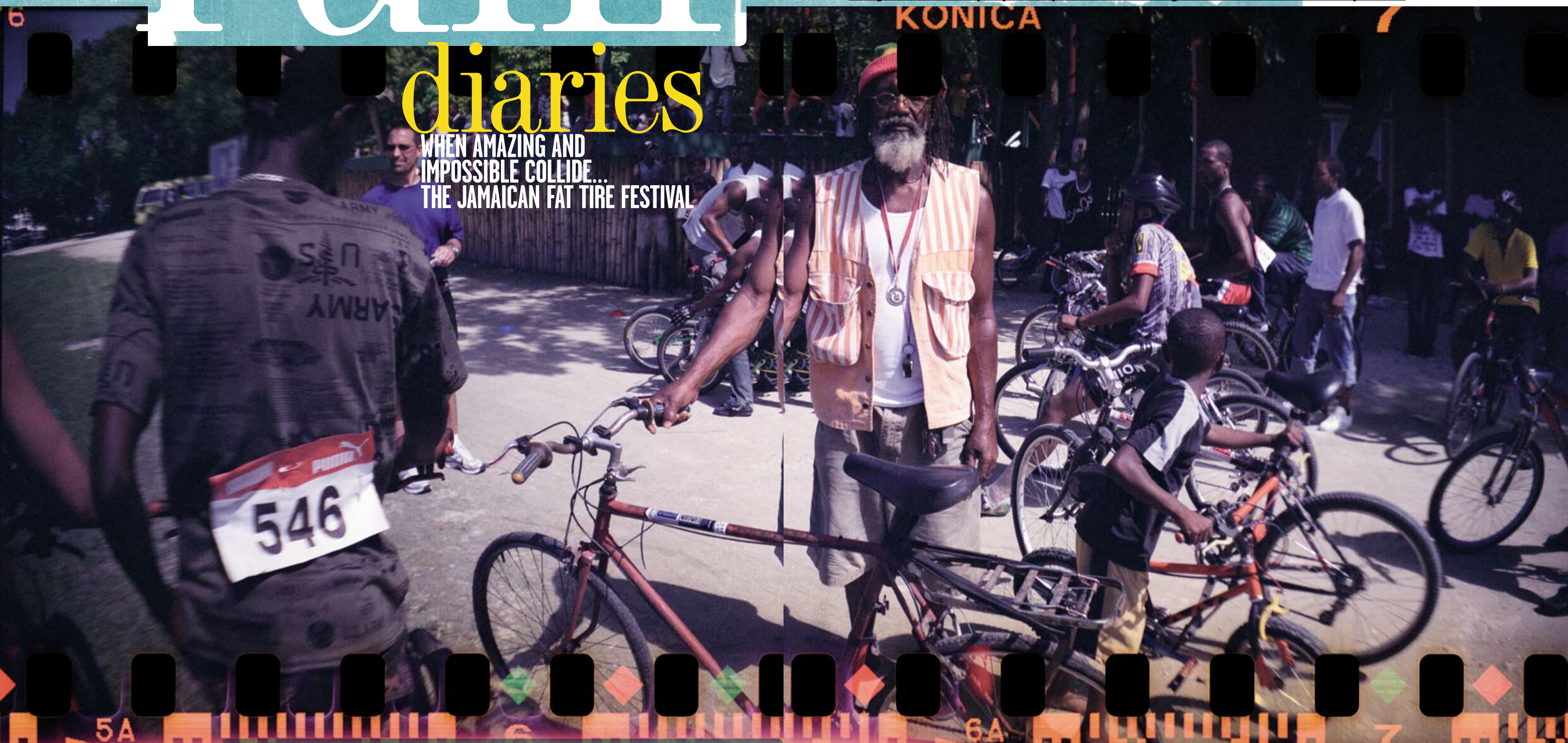
the

ram

diaries

WHEN AMAZING AND
IMPOSSIBLE COLLIDE...
THE JAMAICAN FAT TIRE FESTIVAL

I'm kneeling down, with sponge in hand, attempting to scrub away the hard earned dirt and grime from my bike. Each patch of clay, dust, oil, mango juice and cow pat is a deliciously filthy reminder of the past week. Right now my bike is an agricultural time bomb waiting to be dropped upon the UK and the task to cleanse it for re-entry is taking time. The muck won't shift easily and the stains require elbow grease to erase them, but this chore is a happy one. In each patch of mud and crud there's a memory of the week's riding and cleaning them gives me time to sit quietly alone to process the incredible sights and scenes I witnessed over the past week.



A collection of Rambo bikes ready to get Ussain Bolted around James Bond beach.



Top of Mountain Jah Works.



Until a year ago, the thought of this little island afloat in the Caribbean only conjured up images of sandy beaches, dreadlocks, and puffs of blue-grey smoke. However, in the two trips to Jamaica I have been fortunate to make in the past twelve months, I found it is so much more than just reggae and Rastas. Jamaica is rather small at only half the size of Wales, but because most Jamaicans live a very modest life in small abodes nestled and squeezed into whatever flat area they can find to build on it crams in the same population. You see, unlike some other Caribbean islands Jamaica doesn't just sit upon the brilliant blue sea, it thrusts upwards from it.

The highest point is the Blue Mountain peak, which stands at 7,405ft, which is considerably higher than Ben Nevis (UK's highest at 4,409ft) and over twice the height of Snowdon (Wales' highest at 3,560ft). As you descend upon Jamaica aboard a jet engine the peacock blue sea is only interrupted by the piercing ascent of a lush green mountain range whose sides slide straight into the sea like a pleated jade tablecloth. The terrain is steep and the mountain sides are smothered in a rich and dense explosion of flora. This is where things start to get very exciting for a mountain biker that has been trapped inside a plane for eight hours together with a symphony of screaming kids on half term break. I was to be a part of the twelfth annual Jamaica Fat Tire Festival. A week long laid back roots, rock and rum tour where the only rules were that riders had to enjoy a drink after the ride and lycra, although not banned, was frowned upon.

As I stepped off the plane in Montego Bay the thing that first struck me was the sweet perfume of Jamaica. Warm and scented with tantalizing reminders of the amazing food, flora, land and people that I met on my last trip. Stepping off the plane in Jamaica is like slipping into a comfy pair of slippers and a warm bath, except the slippers are blue suede dancing shoes and the bath water is rum flavoured.

After a sunset drive along the north coast to Ocho Rios, where for most of the journey the bus driver attempted to get the bus up to take-off speed, I was deposited outside a hotel entrance that had a bar and sandy beach within view. I was making a quick mental calculation as to what order I should indulge in these delights when a hand rose from a table and waved at me. I was not expecting to know anyone at the hotel as Andy Giles, one of the organizers, had informed me by email that I would have to occupy myself whilst the rest of the crew was finishing up the day at the Bicycle Bash at James Bond Beach. However, Facebook is a wonderful thing and the hand was attached to a digital friend, Marshall Paul, who I had befriended in the community hall of the internet months ago. Marshall Paul loves Jamaica more than Charlie Sheen likes the nose candy and each year he spends several weeks relaxing and revelling in the beauty of the place before returning to Toronto where he works as a sound engineer and part-time Jamaican Tourist marketer. I had never met Marshall in person before but I immediately felt at ease in his company, like the thread of biking had always held us tied like old friends. This was a feeling that was repeated throughout the week as I met other new friends. We bantered like old ladies catching up at the weekly knitting circle as I stowed my bags and bike away in my room then we stepped outside for a drink and some long overdue food. Jerk chicken and plantain was on the menu and the flavour festival of the week began.

The next morning I awoke to the pale blue sky of pre-dawn light. A jump in the sea as the sun rose freshened me from the flight and shallow sleep then I was ready to get into the rhythm of the island on my bicycle. The ride that was planned was a drive up to the hills around Ocho Rios then a slick singletrack slip and slide descent which followed the Dunns River to the sea. You may not recognise the name Dunn River but if you are old enough to of have been riding bikes around the time of the first TV screening of Dale's Supermarket Sweep then you may remember Level Vibes, one of Hans Rey's legendary videos in which he rides his bike up a tropical waterfall and hops along a floating bamboo raft. Well, that was all shot on the Dunns River and I can tell you from my experience of just walking up that waterfall that Hans Rey is a mutant from the future because it is almost totally unfeasible that anyone could have ridden up that waterfall.



Festival HQ.

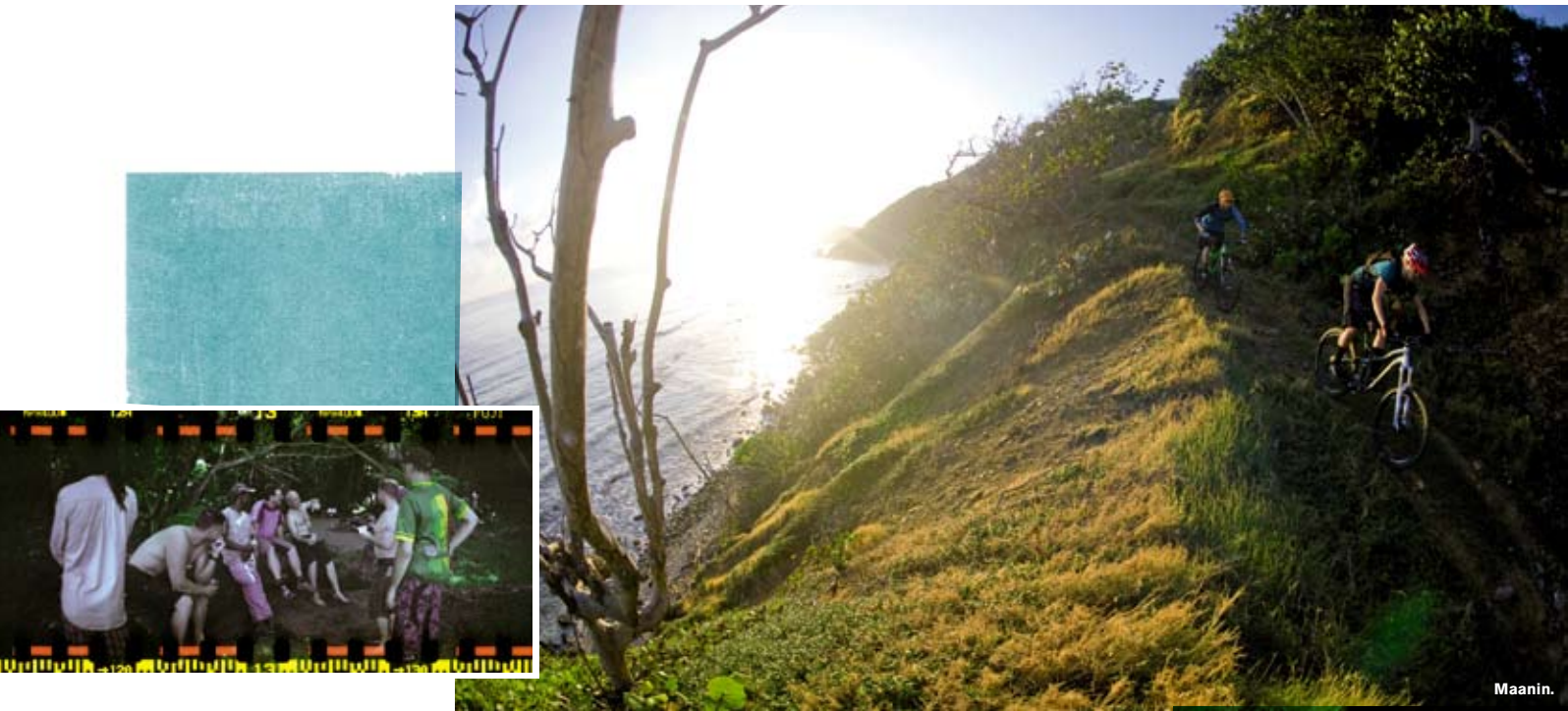


Pon di Gully side!



Pressure Drop, all the way to the beach.

THE HIGHEST POINT IS THE BLUE MOUNTAIN PEAK, WHICH STANDS AT 7,405FT, WHICH IS CONSIDERABLY HIGHER THAN BEN NEVIS (UK'S HIGHEST AT 4,409FT)



The ride we took was itself almost as slippery as riding down a waterfall on tyres made of glass Coke bottles. It was rocky too so wheels were moving from side to side faster than they were downhill and it required the snake like hips of Shakira just to keep the bike sort of upright. There were yelps, shrieks and giggles because this trail was a wide awake strobe light nightmare that left us all with sweaty palms and our hearts knocking on our chest like a mallet on a xylophone. A fantastic way to start the trip; it was only lunch time and there was another ride planned, but only after some jerk meat goodness at Scotchie's Jerk Centre.

Now for those not familiar with Jamaican cooking, let your giggles subside long enough for me to explain that 'jerk' refers to a method of cooking in which meat (typically chicken or pork, but can be applied to almost all meats and fishes) is marinated with a mix of aromatic spices which including the Mila Kunis hot Scotch Bonnets and is then smoked over coals for a considerable time to allowing the flavour to infuse into all of the meat. Once cooked the meat looks like it has been cooked in the afterburners of an F-16, but bite into it and the seasoning takes away all preconceptions. It is good enough to eat the bones too. Add to it some plantain (a cooking banana), peas and rice, festival (a savoury donut roll), some ackee (fruit) with saltfish and you have the exact kind of nourishing, delicious meal to recharge any a protein fiend biker. Fortunately for us (especially man-mountain Jamie) this was just the first of many more jerk stop-offs that week.

In the afternoon we were shuttled along the coast back up high above the ocean before unloading the bikes to continue on pedal skywards until we were above the sweet sounding and even sweeter smelling

Mango Valley. From there we did a circuit through choking bamboo and juniper woodland to a descent down through open grassland, finishing with an exhilarating skittle through village walkways where kids and dogs chased us with yelps and barks all the way to the fishing bay of Rio Nuevo. It was all very Michael Palin meets the Metal Mulisha to be honest.

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WHERE THERE
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FIRST PLACE AND
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DEFINED BY THE
UNQUESTIONABLE
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FINISH LINE**

The next day, like most that week, started with a mild mind blur and brain rot being washed away by a smoothing bath in the sea. Bikes were loaded and we were off to the top of another remote hilltop before we knew it. The day was to be a simple one; downhill on several luscious lines of ribbony singletrack before ending up at a remote beach with jerk and Appleton's waiting for us. What followed was simply more sublime than anything I could have imagined. We lapped a narrow thread of deliciously decrepit downhill called John Crow Gulley several times because it was so good and deserved a few more tyre tracks on it just to make sure its excellence was not mistaken. But the afternoon's trail blew my mind and my gentleman's region more than anything previously experienced. The guys at SMORBA (mainly Andy and Jonathan) with the help of local mountain man, Grant, have uncovered and fluffed a seraphic trail that combines picture postcard views with fast and untamed rooty rocky greatness. Pressure Drop, as it is known, whisks over grassland and garden patches that hang right over the steep coastline, before falling into sweating dense forest, where roots corrugate the trail and rocks jut forth with enough crooked regularity to keep any rider on their toes. The crowning glory in this trail (which goes into my top five trails so far ridden anywhere) is the fact that the trail abruptly ends in a gravelly turn which points you right at the rolling swell beating upon the uncluttered beach of an immaculate compact cove. There are no beach side bars, no hotels, no hawkers and no rosé tourons. Just Grant and a few other locals tending to a barbecue and a cooler full of cool ones.

Grant doesn't ride bikes but he loves helping the guys uncover, regenerate and build trails to ride upon. Jamaican's are some of the most warm hearted people I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. They smile openly and they laugh heartily, either at you or with you. They may attempt to hide their good nature at first but that is only because they are trying to make measure of who you are. They are fiercely independent, resourceful and proud, so no man can expect to show them how to do anything even if it is how to ride a bike for the first time! Jamaicans love the mountain bike, even if they may call riders mad men, as it fits with their competitive streak. For Jamaicans there is no riding for fun, only for first place. On many rides I would be greeted by the question of whether I won or not. Unable to grasp the idea that we had travelled half way round the globe just to enjoy a fun frolic, they were convinced we must be racing. Jamaicans love simple sport where there are winners and losers, first place and last place, all defined by the unquestionable outcome of a finish line. On that day, every one of us felt like winners, even if only one of us took the prize in the eyes of the locals.



If only you could scratch this photo and savour the smell. There is no smell quite like Jamaican grasslands, and I don't mean the demon weed.

WHEN AMAZING
AND IMPOSSIBLE
COLLIDE YOU
HAVE THE
JAMAICAN FAT
TIRE FESTIVAL



Ras Lion – Masters Champion.



Nyamins.



After several hours of swimming, eating and some casual beverages, we mounted our bikes and started the pedal out of the cove along the coast to the night's accommodation. However the heat and good times had turned us into giggling schoolgirls and the task of riding in a straight line over zig zagging rocks was pretty difficult. As we swayed and shrieked from hidden cove to sandy bay and beyond, we picked up several more punctures. After the day we had enjoyed there were no grumbled or shouted expletives, just happy acceptance that we were jiggling along to the pace set by the trail and that was sufficient.

Andy and Jonathan have been organising the Fat Tire Festival for six years after taking over from other motivated mountain bikers, and they have it all set up so incredibly flawlessly that you have trouble believing that what happens next is really happening. It is like two guys attempt at shock and awe on a joyous scale. When amazing and impossible collide you have the Jamaican Fat Tire Festival. Take that night for instance. After an hour or so of sloshed scenic cycling we were pointed towards a gate in the middle of what appeared to be nowhere but there. Beyond the gate and over the grand grassy lawn, stood what looked like a knight's second home or a pirate castle. Fortified by heavy stone and battlements but softened by creeping ivy and bursting flowers, this place really did make us rub our eyes in wonderment. We were to spend that night resting in a mirage that upstaged any cheese fuelled dream. Although grand and magical, the sleeping arrangements were modest enough for us dirty bikers to feel at rest. Lizards crawled over the walls by the bed head, giant banana spiders hung from cotton thread thick webs, and the sound of a symphony of secret jungle creatures smoothed us to sleep. Right up until about 5am when the alarm clock screeched us awake.

The night before, after a few Appleton's and a belly full of food, a few of us had agreed to get up at what felt like about five minutes after we'd shut our eyes for the night to get some epic light dawn raid shots. With movements more akin to an ironing board than a human being, I lurched out of bed and into the same dirty riding clothes that I had left discarded on the floor. We were up to greet the sun as it popped over the horizon and chastely hid behind a bank of cloud. We waited for the grand light show and that's when we realised we had forgotten the coffee.

Jamaica produces some of the most exquisite coffee beans in the world but a Jamaican wouldn't know what to do with them if you poured foam on his shoes and sprinkled chocolate dusting on his head. They are baffled as to what the 'whiteys' want with the beans and they don't see the allure whatsoever. Which leads me onto the next stop on this wallowing tale, the Blue Mountains, home of some of the most expensive and highly regarded coffee beans in the world...except in Jamaica.

We drove across the island, along beach and through hills until the road turned inwards to the belly of the island, where the peaks really do tower over head, tight valleys of steep sided slopes close around you and the air becomes cooler and even more fragrant with the cologne of the land and its fruits. As the roads climb into the bosom of the terrain they become more and more unfeasible. The road seal crumbles into not just potholes but a lunar landscape. This is a place where no road has a right to be and nature shows its disregard for the transport of the hopes of man by slowly chewing parts of it off during each monsoon season. All along this winding whim there are homes and houses, shops and bars, tied to the roads edge and dug into the rock walls, feeding off the life that passes along it and chooses to live here. It is truly extraordinary and in just one ride along this road your mouth will hang agape more than it would during any visit to Shades nightclub. But only just.

After what seemed like hours of a crawling car journey in which we were treated to a Bucking Bronco of a ride, we pulled up at The Hotel Scorpio. Like a giant wedding cake that has been dropped into the middle of the mountains, the Scorpio stands perched upon rock like a drag queen at a Slayer concert. Completely out of place and so garishly resolute that it can only be admired, inside it is like a museum of tat and plastic bric-a-brac. Every horrid ornament that has ever been spat out by a Chinese crap factory is here. Pictures of waterfalls that are backlit by blue lights and accompanied by simulated waterfall sound; horse sculptures moulded in giant presses pumped with plaster of Paris and painted by three broad brush strokes; imitation fire places that are just red fabric blown by a small fan below. You imagine the tackiest trinket and it was there on display. And it was fantastic. To bask in all its bargain basement brilliance and explore all the lower limits of style and decor was a joy. Every corner held more incredible delights of plastic inventiveness. This hotel really did stand at odds with its surroundings, but in doing so added a heightened awareness of the deeply abundant lavishness of the misty dense green mountains that circled The Scorpio.




Grant – Machete Master.

JAMAICA PRODUCES SOME OF THE MOST EXQUISITE COFFEE BEANS IN THE WORLD
BUT A JAMAICAN WOULDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THEM IF YOU POURED FOAM
ON HIS SHOES AND SPRINKLED CHOCOLATE DUSTING ON HIS HEAD

The next day, after luxuriating in the lowbrow, we climbed and climbed upon impossibly steep dirt roads until we broke through the ceiling of foliage and a view of the distant coastline was our paycheck. However, we had not made our way to almost seven thousand feet by our own steam, instead we had been scampered this high by 4x4's, so really we deserved not this salary and we scampered away downwards. The Blue Mountain Peak is one heck of ride and is worth the journey to Jamaica alone. From the highest point you can see Cuba on a fair-weather day and all the way down the steep and narrow trail you are treated to a view of one of the most brilliant scribbles of trail anywhere. Unfortunately, although the trail from the peak is open to all brave souls, the trails that are undercover in the bush appear not on any map, so if you want to experience the alternative lines then you need the golden pass that only the Jamaican Fat Tire Festival holds.

After a few days exploring the Blue Mountain trails, swimming in paradise pools, chowing down on jerk and perhaps a little too much Appleton rum, we were treated to an all day drive back across the island accompanied by the badge of honour that was dubbed the 'Ken Klowak Memorial Hangover'. One last swim in the ocean and that's where we started this story. Scrubbing away the following and the preceding. I truly believe that this one week in Jamaica was one of the best weeks of riding and friending of my life and, if it wasn't for the crud and crap on my bicycle, I wouldn't entirely believe it had happened.

Do not discredit this trip as being entirely for the luxury of lucky git scribblers like myself. Not at all. This is an opportunity and open invite for everyone and anyone reading this. Paradise awaits, just be ready to chink a glass of sugarcane ferment and hide that lycra beneath a set of baggy shorts. 



Remembering why we ride.



When it gets this dark you have to follow your nose to tell you where you are in the jungle. Coffee beans, bamboo, mango, banana, jerk chicken, etc., all help lead the way home.



(left to right) Dagga Masta, Herbalist, Radio, Big Boss.

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INFO

HOW

You can attempt to explore Jamaica independently, but I wouldn't recommend it. There are no signs, no trail maps and no infrastructure for bikers yet. Instead I recommend you get involved with the Jamaican Fat Tire Festival. They organise an entire week of accommodation, riding, shuttles, food and rum. Jonathan and Andy go to great lengths to arrange the best week imaginable. Just follow the SMORBA rules and leave the lycra at home then come to make friends, not just skid marks. It is a laid back and the festival is rather like a family affair where most participants are regulars who have been coming for years and years.

WHAT

The Jamaica Fat Tire Festival is held every year around the end of February. At his time of the year it is raining cats and dogs at home but in Jamaica the temperature is tropically temperate (20 degrees) and it is before the monsoon season. This year the festival coordinated with the half term holidays.

WHERE

To get more information click into www.smorba.com British Airways operate direct flights to Montego Bay airport regularly.

WHAT KIND OF BIKE?

Although most of the trails are shuttle assisted, you would absolutely not wish to have a downhill bike. There are casual pedals between sections and heavy breathing in a full face is going to put a damper on an incredible experience. There are some very long descents involved (several hours on some trails) so a sturdy bike is required. An all-marketing bike, with an uppy downy seatpost is ideal.