





WHEN THE TRAIL FALLS AWAY

SPICE, JUNIPER, MANGOES
AND COFFEE AT THE
JAMAICA FAT TIRE FESTIVAL

WORDS SEB KEMP PHOTOS IAN HYLANDS

I've smelt an aroma that I hope never to lose. Even if you scratched and sniffed my skin you wouldn't smell it now, but this bouquet is soaked deep into me, and with a little effort I can bring it into my consciousness. Just one word, sound or picture in my mind fools the receptor neurons in my nose and the smell curls up inside me like wisps of smoke from Aladdin's lamp. The fragrance transports me elsewhere, conjuring up people, places, flora and good times from a week of the best times. I don't even have to close my eyes for the illusion to take hold; it's so powerful that it changes the present. This smell and the lessons learnt while swimming in it were gifted to me by an island afloat in the azure blue waters of the Caribbean: Jamaica.

Don't get me wrong, this is no thinly veiled reference to cannabis. Some Jamaicans, it's true, do have dreadlocks and a 'cherry' glowing behind a cloud of pungent fog. But just because a few fit this picture, it doesn't mean the whole island shares the cutchie—the communal pipe.

KATIE HOLDEN AND SEB KEMP, BLUE MOUNTAINS



Jamaica is not just a balmy island shrouded in the blue smoke of the demon weed. It's crystal waterfalls and a sea as warm as a bath. It's the simple joys of delicious food; find me a steady supply of jerk chicken with plantain, peas and rice, festival, some ackee and salt-fish and you'll have a best friend for life. It's picking succulent fruit straight from the tree, walls of speakers booming throughout the day, and every moment full of potential celebration. It's the preening and dancing of people comfortably in tune with the basest instinct: sex. It's the easy smiles, loose shoulders and casual gait of a people truly happy. Then there is the singletrack. This is like distilling the joy of all the above and pouring it into miles and miles of sinuous trails.

In February I was invited to join in the fun of the Jamaica Fat Tire Festival. The island has gems hidden in the bush and mountains that would make even the most avid collector of trail tales fawn like a schoolgirl at a Justin Bieber concert. I spent the first days of my week on the north coast deep in wrinkled farmland, overlooking glittering blue sea.

Imagine, if you will, tight, rooty, rocky one-hour descents carved by the history of hillside farmers. You know the type of trails—created purely for necessity and commerce but lending themselves sublimely to the playfulness of our toys. Rough, rugged and challenging trails that force riders to duck, dive and weave like kingfishers. These trails wind through bamboo, grassland, flowers and jungle before ending up on quiet sandy beaches.

The Fat Tire Festival is a laid back affair. It's an entire week of casual riding, accommodation, shuttles, food and rum, all organised by Jonathan Gosse and Andy Giles. These two guys moved to Jamaica for a better life, and they've both made moves to make Jamaican lives better. Jonathan works for a charitable trust that aims to improve lives through sports. Andy, an optician, gave up the possibility of a handsome income in the UK for the satisfaction of working with the Jamaican people. These guys exude huge amounts of warmth and generosity, and they went to great lengths to arrange the best week imaginable. While the maximum number of entrants to the festival is

twenty, this year there were just ten of us, and some were regulars.

Later in the week we pushed south. Before arriving in Jamaica I had imagined a blissful island floating on the sea, with sandy beaches ringing stands of coconuts and hidden plantations. What I didn't expect to see were such incredible mountains. From the air, it looks like the centre of Jamaica is lifting off from the coast, shooting high into the sky, trailing a thick jade veil with folds and pleats that ripple into the sea. The highest mountain in Jamaica is Blue Mountain Peak, at 2,257 metres, surrounded by the cluster of sub peaks that supports it. The sides are steep and the valleys are narrow. The peaks are green all the way to their summits and the lush, misty climate makes it a prime growing area. The main crop is coffee beans, which you Java Joes may recognise as some of the finest and most expensive available.

After a drive up implausibly winding potholed roads, which the rains try to wash off the slopes each monsoon season, we arrived at what can only be described as a secret mountain kingdom (I'm

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not allowed to tell you more than that). Bikes were unloaded, pads strapped on, and greetings were made as the Fat Tire revellers and the residents of this empire mingled.

After a bumpy, bouncy, jolting, jarring bone-shaking bike ride up an even more absurdly potholed mountain road, we came to a stop. This particular edifice of trails is growing at an incredible rate, and where our jalopy of an elevator stopped was not the top. The penthouse is currently being built, adding another three hundred vertical metres of potential singletrack.

Eventually we dropped in from around two thousand metres and before us lay hour upon hour of glorious singletrack. This time the trails were crafted with bikes in mind, so they rolled, spun, contorted and wriggled us down and around that mighty mountain. We hooted and hollered with

sweat running, hearts pounding, thighs tingling and jaws numb from smiling so hard. Over the following days we rode as much as we could, but there was also time for swimming in paradise pools, chowing down on jerk chicken and drinking perhaps a little too much Appleton Rum.

If this all sounds good enough to inspire a trip, here's what you should bear in mind. 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 Jamaica Fat Tire Festival. Just follow the rules of St Mary Off-Road Bicycling Association (SMORBA), leave the Lycra at home and come to make friends, not skid marks. **S**

For more info on the Fat Tire Festival, or to read the SMORBA rules, visit www.smorba.com.

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