

Singletrack Magazine spends an eye-opening few days in the plentiful wilds of this incredible Caribbean island. There's so much more to the place than reggae, Rastafarians and rice 'n' peas. There's some seriously great riding to be had - and some mind-expanding things to be sampled.

RIDING JAMAICA

RHYTHMS OF LIFE

Words by Benji Haworth

Photos by Ian Hylands

It's amazing where a casual email can get you. In mid-January this year I received an email from a guy called Jonathan. The email subject line was 'Jamaican Fat Tyre Festival'. I looked at the smiley and sunny photos in the email. I looked at the snow and leaden skies outside the office window. I sent an email to Jonathan.

He replied. After a few more increasingly positive email exchanges it was time to 'take it to Skype'. Jonathan wanted to ask me some questions about our esteemed publication so he could throw some propaganda at the Jamaica Tourist Board who was keen to increase the profile of cycling in Jamaica (the Fat Tyre Festival itself is run by volunteers so their budget is pretty minimal). I wanted to ask Jonathan about the riding on the island. I didn't want to fly all the way over the Atlantic and return with magazine feature that wasn't worthwhile. All too often the riding in exotic-sounding places turns out to be a bit lame.

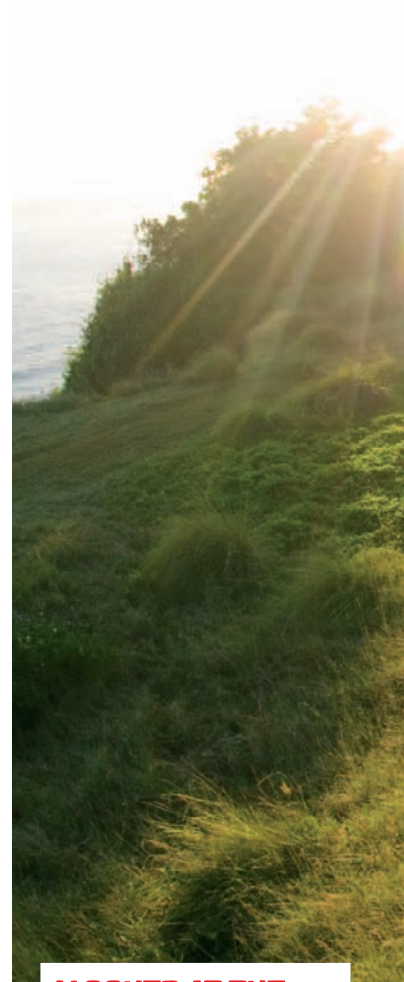
To cut a longer story short, Jonathan sent me some photos of the riding there, the Tourist Board agreed to help us out. In early February I found myself on a ten hour trans-Atlantic flight to Montego Bay.

Upon arrival at Montego Bay airport I was greeted by the lovely Marsha; a vision in lilac and purple (the official colours of the Jamaica Tourist Board). After the usual anxious wait for my bike bag to appear I was whisked off to the Customs Desk. I declared my bike ('How much is it worth? Oh, about \$300...') and then waited for a man to head over, glance inside my bike bag and state that it 'must be sprayed'. I guessed that this was some sort of token gesture of disinfecting rather than a comment on my bike cleaning habits. I dragged my bike bag over to a cramped, tiled room that contained a portable gardening sprayer, a small notepad and a mysterious, rusted-up chest freezer that had clearly seen better days.

The man requested 200 Jamaican



...and plenty of them.



I LOOKED AT THE SMILEY AND SUNNY PHOTOS IN THE EMAIL. I LOOKED AT THE SNOW AND LEADEN SKIES OUTSIDE THE OFFICE WINDOW...



We got up at 5AM for this? Fair enough, thanks!





THE OPENING BARS OF BOB MARLEY'S 'AFRICAN HERBSMAN' CHINKED OUT OF THE SPEAKERS AND THE MOOD CHANGED FROM PARTYTIME TO SOMETHING MORE AKIN TO A GOSPEL CHURCH. HANDS IN AIR.

Run what you brung.

dollars (JMD), which I duly handed over. This sounded like an awful lot of money but it didn't sound like I had much choice. As it turns out 200 JMD is about £1.50. He sprayed some spray over my tyres and told me it would take a few minutes to work. Then he wandered off. As I stood there it occurred to me that some tourists may get annoyed with such stuff. Whether it was due to flight-induced lethargy or my tendency to empathise with people who have dull menial jobs such as spraying bicycles in a cramped, tiled rooms but I didn't get annoyed. Sure enough the man returned after a few minutes, scribbled something in the notepad and told me that was it, I could go.

I headed over to the taxi desk - where Jonathan had told me there would be a transfer to the hotel booked for me. I interrupted the taxi guys' and air stewardesses' flirting and introduced myself. My name was indeed on the list and one of the taxi guys signed off from his allocated flirt and instructed me to follow him outside. He told me to wait on the pavement and he walked over to ranks of cars and minibuses. I stood there, waiting.

It was dusk outside - obviously it was dusk inside too but this was the first time I'd experienced the outside world since the day before (a dank, miserable grey day at Gatwick). It was warm outside. Nicely. Not hot. Not muggy.

I continued to stand there in a state of semi-cluelessness as I watched the taxi guy shoot the breeze with a bunch of other taxi guys on the other side of the road for ten minutes. Just as my lethargy/empathy was starting to reach critical, the taxi guy waved me over and escorted me to a minibus and helped me get me and my bike and my luggage on board. I sat there, waiting.

The radio on the minibus was playing something



WHETHER IT WAS DUE TO FLIGHT-INDUCED LETHARGY OR MY TENDENCY TO EMPATHISE WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE DULL MENIAL JOBS SUCH AS SPRAYING BICYCLES IN A CRAMPED, TILED ROOMS BUT I DIDN'T GET ANNOYED.

appropriately reggae flavoured by Freddie MacGregor. This faded out and the DJ announced that today was the anniversary of Bob Marley's birthday. Which is quite a big thing in Jamaica as you can imagine. There then followed an hour or so of Marley's earlier stuff.

As the bus drove to the town of Ocho Rios (where my hotel was) it was fascinating to see the endless amount of roadside shacks there were. Varying degrees of ramshackleness. All of them brightly coloured. All of them illuminated by the flickering blue-hued light of television sets. Corrugated iron roofs. Rocking chairs. Wire mesh screen doors left ajar. It was difficult to see which shacks were people's houses and which were bars. I dare say most of them were a combination of the two.

I checked in at the hotel, where I was to be sharing a room with Ian (the photographer). After a quick shower and T-shirt change I phoned Jonathan to see what was happening. It was Bob Marley's birthday and I was in Jamaica; I wasn't going to have an early night. Jonathan told me to wait there and he'd come and get me.

Jonathan picked me up and we drove over to the Fat Tyre Festival HQ - a pub called John Crow's Tavern in the centre of town. I was introduced to the other Festival guests and organisers; a mixture of ex-pat Brits, Canadians and Americans. After sampling the local produce (Red Stripe and Appleton's Rum) it was announced that we were off to Margaritaville.

It turns out Margaritaville is a nightclub. After successfully passing through the metal detector-wielding bouncers, and squeezing our way through the heaving,

bouncing mass of dancing bodies, we were at the bar accepting the barman's suggestion of a 'Jamaican Sprite'. The resulting drink was an orange coloured concoction that, judging from the taste, was principally made from rum. The sound system was loudly pounding out some choice American hiphop (Notorious BIG was a crowd favourite). I gave up trying to make small talk with my fellow Fat Tyre Festivalists and practiced my head-nodding instead.

The DJ interrupted the music and spurted out something fast and unintelligible (to my ears). A huge cheer went up from the audience. The opening bars of Bob Marley's 'African Herbsman' chinked out of the speakers and the mood changed from partytime to something more akin to a Gospel Church. Hands in air. Eyes to the skies - or down to the ground. Communal, everyone-knows-all-the-words singing.

And so my first night continued. I managed another hour or so in the Church Of Bob but then my travel fatigue kicked in hard. I sleepwalked back to the hotel.

Today was the day of the Bicycle Bash. I'd seen photos from previous years' Bashes and they looked like great fun. A peculiar and distinctive gathering of Jamaican kids and adults. Some on nice bikes. Some on shonky bikes. Some there to compete. Some there to take part.

The Bash took place at a town called Oracabessa, ten minutes drive from Ocho Rios. Waiting outside the hotel lobby for the bus to arrive the sunshine felt delicious. It wasn't too hot or humid as I thought it might be. February



Pinned. Wonned.



Critical massive.





The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.

is a good time to visit Jamaica it seems. The bus arrived and our happy group piled in. On the way to the Bash we passed a steady stream of kids on bikes heading the same way. Kids on 16in wheeled mini-BMXs, MTBs, cruisers, tandems, trikes – you name it. If it was powered by pedals it was there. A particular highlight was the lad coolly wheeling a road bike with great ease for the entire duration it took for our bus to approach and pass him. Apparently some of the Bike Bash attendees will ride over to the event on their bikes from 30 miles or so away.

The bus turned off the main road and headed down a dirt track towards the sea. The amount of bikes and people gradually intensified. The bus parked up outside a large wooden sign over an archway that bore the legend 'James Bond Beach'. Looking down from the hillside above was Ian Fleming's Jamaican writing retreat – Goldeneye.

On the other side of the archway was where the Bike Bash was. What a sight to behold! So many different bikes and riders. Some ripping around. Some stood around posing. Some having a go on a jumpbox and a couple of quarter pipes at one end of grass field. I winced a few times as I watched past-their-best bikes take heavy landings – I was convinced something was going to break. The field was a 300m running track field within which was an intriguing collection of wooden jumps, stunts and obstacles.

While most of the people there were young there was one dapper old gent in slacks, collared shirt and a hat present. He was collaring anyone and everyone he could and bending their ear about how cycling was back in his day. It seems

OAP bike-bore mentalists are a common feature the world over.

After about half an hour of general milling around, posing, gawping and Guinness drinking a familiar voice crackled out of the PA system. It was Jonathan announcing the first race of the day. A spot race; the first seven riders on the track could race. All of sudden even the cooler-than-thou poseurs sprung into action and sprinted for the start line.

The race was a simple one-lap affair. The bikes on the start line were a bunch of BMXs, a rusty old ladies shopping bike and a tandem (with only one kid on board). With a crack of the starting clapperboard the race began. There was some serious competitiveness in the air. Despite my best cheerleader efforts the tandem kid didn't win.

There were a few more track races of varying degrees of randomness and then it was time for the 'crowd favourite' events like the bunny hop competition and the 'Rambolympics'. The Rambolympics race involved doing three laps of the track but each time you crossed the line you had to pick up and carry around an awkward object (beer crate, gas cylinder and finally a weed strimmer).

Just so you know, 'rambo' doesn't refer the Stallone film. Jamaicans use the word 'rambo' to describe something that goes up mountains. Singletrack Rambo Bike Magazine.

Being blunt, it was an odd experience to see so many black people riding bikes. I'm aware that this sounds like a crass and slightly dumb thing to say (what did I expect to see exactly?). But I'm not going to pretend I felt any other way. It was a



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Roost manoeuvre.

new experience for me. There was an unavoidable novelty to it.

There was also the fact that no one was dressed at all 'bikey'. No one had any cycling specific clothing (bar the occasional pair of gloves). No SPDs. Not many helmets. It wasn't until you saw the racer numbers pinned to the backs of jeans pockets that you were reminded that this was a cycling event. It was a great reminder – and advertisement – that fundamentally all that you need to 'do' cycling is a bike. Any bike.

I woke up with a desperate need to ride a bike. Inspired and still slightly buzzy from the previous day's spectacle. I built up my bike (only one bent rotor – result!) and headed to join the rest of our party at a nearby café for breakfast. After finally discovering what was actually available to eat (most of the menu was out of stock) we settled down to consume some calories. Over large bowls of spiced porridge there was a lot of excitable talk about yesterday's event and what lay in store over the next couple of days.

We headed off the John Crow's Tavern to wait for the shuttle bus. With the truck duly loaded up we headed out of Ocho Rios town and wound our way up an increasingly sketchy singletrack road. It didn't take long for us to pass above the

'tidemark' of scrubland and into some seriously juicy jungle.

As we unloaded the bikes at the top I had no idea what to expect. Which is how I like it. I try to avoid or ignore people who overly describe what the riding ahead of us is like. Riding trails 'blind' is one of life's great unknown pleasures. It's like losing your virginity repeatedly.

The track began rather unremarkably; vague and overgrown. Ugly. It was hard to get any speed up. It was a bit stop-starty. But almost imperceptibly the track became more distinct. We could get a feel for the bike, a feel for the traction. Our speeds increased. The track never really reached the status of completely visible or predictable – there was always a sudden babyhead rock or broomhandle root in the thin undergrowth or else a branch in the face there to keep us on our guard. It wasn't a trail for those who like to be wholly in control of their bike at all times. I, for one, loved it.

After that section we entered steeper, much darker and denser feeling terrain. The vegetation and dirt gave way to exposed rock. Limestone with large patches of algae smeared all over it. Bread and butter to a Northern mountain biker. I gorged myself upon it.

What you don't often find in Northern England are lagoons



Jamaica ain't flat.

**READER, I'M AFRAID
TO SAY I THEN SPENT
THE NEXT FEW HOURS
EATING JERK CHICKEN
AND CLAM CHOWDER,
DRINKING RUM, LAUGHING
WITH THE LOCALS AND
WATCHING THE SUN GO
DOWN WHILST LISTENING
TO REGGAE TUNES.**

of searing blue water. It was like riding through the set of 'The Land That Time Forgot'. I half expected Doug McClure to pop out of the water wrestling with a giant rubber coelacanth. As it happens the next person I saw was David from our party. A 60-odd year old ex-pat Brit who clearly hadn't lost the British skill of riding slithery rock. After a pattie and Red Stripe refuelling session back at John Crow's Tavern we loaded up the shuttle bus again and headed off up another narrow mountain road for the afternoon's ride.

The afternoon ride began with a big squelch. There were a lot of leaves on the ground which combined with a bit of overnight rain, gave the trails a consistency similar to that of compost. It took a couple of near-misses on some slippery, rooty steeps to shake me out my Red Stripe reverie. One of our crew wasn't quite so lucky and managed to do a proper 'scorpion' crash; an over the bars faceplant so quick and hard that your heels nearly touch the back of your head. Ouch. We rested for a while and proceeded with greater caution after that.

The ride passed through a succession of hillside shanty towns. At one point we were joined for a bit by a random Rastaman on his shiny new mountain bike. We paused for a while beside some kids playing cricket on a surprisingly good wicket. I hoped none of the North Americans would ask me to explain cricket. Thankfully one of them (Eric) did it for me, pretty much summing up hundreds of years of sporting tradition as 'even better than baseball for drinking beer and falling asleep to'. And it's hard to argue with that really.

We stopped at a shack microstore for a quick refreshment. I was constantly fascinated by the items for sale in these impromptu places. If you want to top up your phone credit, buy a hairnet, some cranberries and a bottle of Dragon Stout you're sorted. As it happens I settled for just the latter.

The ride finished with a couple of surprises. One of which was fun, one of which wasn't. The road up away from the shack store was steep and long. And it got steeper as it got longer. The sun was beating



Lancastrian body English.

down hot and hard. I took my helmet off and rode for a few hundred feet before putting it straight back on – the direct sun on my head felt more uncomfortable. The fun surprise came afterwards when we topped out the climb and paused briefly before nicking off between a couple of shanty huts down a sandy, bouldery sliver of singletrack. There were too many cheering and jeering spectators stood at the side of the trail for me to stop and lower my saddle. Despite taking a couple of saddle-blows to my midriff (ahem) I somehow got down this most unexpected treat of a trail.

The ride finished at our shuttle bus driver's beach bar. Reader, I'm afraid to say I then spent the next few hours eating jerk chicken and clam chowder, drinking rum, laughing with the locals and watching the sun go down whilst listening to reggae tunes. Sometimes clichés just have to be embraced.

I awoke with a suitably clichéd hangover and headed off to drink clichéd coffee whilst wearing clichéd sunglasses. I was pleased to see most other people had embraced the cliché just as fervently as I had. Today we were



**A LOT OF WATER
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TRAIL DURING RAINY
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VERY DISTINCT TYPE
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LIKE YOU'RE WATER. GO
WITH THE FLOW AND ALL
THAT JAZZ.**

leaving Ocho Rios and heading into the back country over towards Robins Bay.

We began the day's ride in an area that one of our party (Marshall) knew quite well. I made a point of riding behind him – although I like riding trails 'blind', in my hungover state that morning I needed all the help I could get!

The first trail sent us straight into tight, jungley, dark singletrack. My sunglasses suddenly weren't so useful. The underlying surface again appeared to be limestone but it seemed to be a bit smoother than the previous day's stuff. A lot of water flows down this trail during rainy season and this seemed to make the trail require a very distinct type of approach; ride it like you're water. Go with the flow and all that jazz. I was spat out at the bottom into blinding sunshine with a massive grin on my face. It's nice to impress other people with your riding but there's nothing like impressing yourself.

The next trail was also a peach – or rather a mango. There were mangos littering the trail all the way along it, though it wasn't quite so dark and stoney on this trail. It was a perfectly grippy twisty ribbon of tree-lined dirt that started off incredibly tight-but-fast before suddenly lurching downhill just that bit steeper and that bit slipperier until it got just that little bit too sketchy and dumped you in the stream at the end. Brilliant. My bike's down tube was completely covered in splattered mango.

The afternoon's trails were even better. Ian (photographer) had told me that the trail called 'Pressure Drop' was his favourite on the island and it was there that we rode next. After quite a bit of hike-a-biking up a muddy and indistinct hillside it began. It started as another excellent, tight and twisty, tree-lined singletrack before 'birthing' us out into the Mother Of All Scenic Views. Proper 'wow' stuff. We were still quite high (in altitude, before you ask) and the views all round... Tree-covered mountainsides, bright blue sea below, brighter bluer sky above. The

air was so clear we could make out the waves breaking on the beaches far, far below us.

The trail carved around and down the front of the long-grassed hillside via some testing switchbacks and off-cambers before re-entering the treeline. The trees weren't quite so tight or densely leaved in this section. The trail just went on and on. Distinct and bright enough to allow some speed but also with more than enough obstacles to keep the adrenalin flowing and the nerves jangling. The hillside echoed with the sounds of panic, thrill and glee. I could see why it was Ian's favourite trail. It's also mine.

That evening we ate classic Jamaican soul food cooked al fresco by some Rastamen who really know their stuff when it came to food. Chicken and rice and peas. Akee and saltfish. Breadfruit and coco. Some freshly cut sugar cane was passed around to chew on. Absolutely amazing stuff. Like chewing gum but natural – it certainly perked up anyone whose spirits were flagging from the adrenaline overload of the day's riding.

As the food consumption decreased and the rum consumption increased, the talk around the campfire turned to tomorrow – our final day. Ian had always wanted to do a dawn photoshoot in this area of Jamaica. There were lots of keen voices and volunteers and before we retired to our rooms (our dwelling for the night was an old, ivy-covered, stone plantation building). It was agreed that we would get up at 5am tomorrow and do it.

5am. From the numerous people who had volunteered the previous night, only four of us managed to drag ourselves out of bed: me, Ian, Marshall and Christophe (from Belgian bike mag O2 Bikers).

It was still pretty much pitch black at 5am so we hung around for almost half an hour until we could just about make out the trail that headed over to the photoshoot location.

Photoshoots aren't that interesting. They involve riding the same bits of trail over and over again at the behest of the photographer.



Dance -thru takeaway.

And quite a bit of standing around. It has to be said however that a meadow situated above a dramatic rugged Caribbean coastline, bathed in 'that' special sort of sunlight only experienced at dawn, with the surf crashing below you is one of the better places to be standing around.

Once the sun was fully up and 'that' sunlight had all evaporated, our little group of adventurers headed away, under the Pied Piper guiding style of Marshall, into the lush tree canopy. We were off to experience a waterfall known as Kwame Falls. After some river crossing riding and log hopping, we abandoned the bikes and continued on foot. The falls were worth the effort. It was an amazing place. Water cascading down a wide rock face at seemingly different speeds. Slow shimmers. Rapid ripples. Pulsing patches. It was absolutely hypnotic to look at. It was almost as if the waterfall changed and morphed according to how we contemplated it. The perceptions we imposed on it. Psycho-sympathetic.

The fundamental thing it took from my time at Kwame Falls specifically – and from my time in Jamaica in general – was a greater appreciation of rhythm. Not just the obvious things such as the near constant, yet always changing, sound of reggae music that coats and floats over the island. Not just the rhythms of riding bikes; how the best riding experiences are profound moments of synchronicity between rider, machine and trail working in perfect harmony.

Jamaica gave me a sense of how almost everything and everyone on this planet functions according to a rhythm. Rhythms of life. When you find a rhythm that suits you, things are so much easier and obvious; all you feel are answers. When you encounter a rhythm that you struggle to adapt to things are annoying and frustrating, all you feel are problems.

Jamaica taught me that it's best to adapt. Retune to the differing rhythms of life. Don't fight the beat. 🎧

Thanks to:

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Ian Hylands photography www.ianhylands.com
The people of Jamaica.

The Jamaica Fat Tyre Fest:

The event takes place every February during the week nearest to Bob Marley's birthday.

Go to www.smorba.com for more info about the Fest itself and about all the other riding on offer in Jamaica.

Our Top 5 Jamaican Foodstuffs:

1. Jerk chicken
2. Rice and peas.
3. Akee and saltfish.
4. Appleton Rum.
5. Red Stripe.



Machete snake-bite?