

# Adventure

## Digging the dirt

One couple, two different agendas. The solution? Costa Rica, where Stuart Millar gets off the beaten track on a bike tour, while his partner, Karen McVeigh, joins a surf camp

The citizens of Providencia don't see too many tourists. Tucked out of the way at the bottom of a tarmac road in a green valley, the blink-and-you'll-miss-it hamlet is surrounded on all sides by pristine jungle-covered mountains in the heart of a country that regularly features in top 10 lists of the world's favourite destinations. But the gringos who flock to Costa Rica tend not to stray far enough from the tourist trail to end up in places like Providencia.

Which is a shame really. Because the locals here are no strangers to the concept of hospitality. Far from it. As we roll into the village on dust-caked mountain bikes, scratched, smelly and hungry after a day of epic jungle descents, we are given the sort of welcome the five-star resorts over on the coast charge serious dollar for.

A dozen grinning, jabbering farmer kids – every one of them wearing shorts and wellies – crowd around us, relieving us of our bikes, like over-enthusiastic valets. The difference is that they want the bikes to go and play on a makeshift jump they've built. Before we've had a chance to admire their skills (considerable, especially given the footwear), we are being gently ushered into the Flor del Campo bar, handed bottles of ice-cold Imperial beer and sat down in front of heaving plateados of locally caught trout, refried beans and salad. The aching in my arms, neck, back, legs, everywhere, fades into a fuzzy glow. More Imperials flow and the sun moves lazily across the sky. If we didn't have to load up the trucks and make it over a high-mountain pass before dark, it would be impossible to tear ourselves away.

This is the other Costa Rica, hidden among the volcanic peaks that run down the centre of this skinny sliver of paradise like an exposed spine.

Rural and isolated, it is a world away from the canopy tours, turtles and tropical reserves that have made the country the international poster child of ecotourism. And if it wasn't for the fact that these mountains are home to a secret network of world-class biking trails, we would have missed it entirely.

It was the promise of singletrack treasure that brought our 11-strong group of riders to Central America. We are a diverse bunch – nine Canadians, an Aussie and me – with ages ranging from early 20s to late 50s, and an impressive array of day jobs, among them a barrister, a tugboat captain, two engineers for Canada's second largest crisp manufacturer and an air stewardess who used to be a world windsurfing champion.

But we are united by a serious passion for mountain biking – we all bear the battle scars and stories of horrible crashes to prove it – and we are all here for one thing: the downhill trip of a lifetime. No uphill slugs, just mile after uncompromising mile of steep, brake-searing descents from 3,000m-plus summits in 35-degree heat through dense jungle, tropical cloudforest and volcanic dust.

The trails are lovingly built and maintained by our lead guide, Paulo Valle, a former national cross-country and downhill champion. Best of all, their existence is known only to a blessed few. Hidden away on private land, they are only accessible because Paulo has secured access rights from the landowners. The only people who get to ride them, apart from Paulo and his friends, are the clients on this trip.

The highlight of the early rides comes on our third day, when we head out of the sprawling capital San José towards Irazú, the highest active volcano in Costa Rica at more than 3,430m. Its fertile lower slopes are a checkerboard of ripening crops. The top, however, is otherworldly – a wide, flat plain of grey volcanic ash dropping



The fast way . . . mile after uncompromising mile of brake-searing descents

### We are ushered into a bar, handed bottles of ice-cold beer and plates of trout, refried beans and salad

into a crater more than 300m deep and a kilometre across. The sulphur lake at the bottom is pea green. Our attention, however, is elsewhere.

After a tricky bit of manoeuvring, we find the top of the trail on a nearby peak and drop in. Enclosed and dusty, it cuts through spiky thick bushes before opening on to fast, loose dust like snow. Blasting down and down towards the clouds beneath us in the valley, digging tyres into the turns, struggling to control the drift, I drop into a short gully, wheels going slumphy through the powder. Suddenly, we are racing into another hamlet. Kids hang over barbed wire fences, yelling "hola!". The other guide, Wade Simmons – a pro rider and mountain bike superstar from Vancouver – takes a small detour to ride past and give them high fives.

We eventually come to an abrupt

stop a bit further down the road. A young boy, no more than 11, is perched on the back of a small grey horse, expertly herding cattle back up the dirt road. He throws us disparaging looks, deeply unimpressed by our expensive bikes and poor Spanish. When the last cow has passed, we take off again and it seems like an eternity of acceleration before we finally meet our trucks back on the road.

That night, we drive further into the mountains, the views obliterated by thick fog. Our destination is Santa Maria, a little town surrounded by coffee plantations. By the time we get there the clouds have lifted and the sweet smell of the jungle fills the air. As we drive past the tree-lined square, we discover that it is festival time, and there's a big attraction at the local dance hall tonight: Mexico's number one mariachi band.

The hall is rammed when we arrive. Mexico's number one mariachi band – four tiny blokes in frilly white shirts and lurid green waistcoats – are going down a storm. The locals are dressed up and dancing hard, and before long we are being invited up to join in. Shots of *guaró*, the local sugar cane over barbed wire fences, yelling "hola!". The other guide, Wade Simmons – a pro rider and mountain bike superstar from Vancouver – takes a small detour to ride past and give them high fives.

His big prize: a toaster.

When the bar and the one next door run dry of Imperial, we retire less than gracefully to our beds. The beauty of this trip is that while the riding may be hardcore, the accommodation is extremely comfortable. We started off at the Condessa, a five-star resort set in the hills high above San José. In Santa Maria, our cabanas are arranged around a courtyard where the owner's family serves us dinner in the open air to a soundtrack of cicadas. And from here, we will head deep into the mountains to a remote bird sanctuary, where dozens of hummingbirds hover around the breakfast tables each morning.

We need all the comfort we can get. The trails are extraordinary, each one very different from the last. Some are sublime, swooping blasts through the dense cloudforest. Others are technical, exposed and scary. It is only thanks to my body armour that I survive without serious mishap.

But all this is just a warm-up for the big finale – Cerro de la Muerte, the Peak of Death. Costa Rica's second highest mountain earned its name when crossing it meant a three-day journey by foot or horseback that only a lucky few survived. Now it is the highest point on the Interamericana Highway, so it's easy to cross. Negotiating the 13km, boulder-strewn trail that descends 4,000 vertical feet off one of its flanks is a different matter.

I'm trying not to think about that as

we stand sucking in the thin air near the top of the 11,322ft summit. From up here, we can just about make out the Pacific coast 15 miles off to the west. On a really clear day, it's possible to see the Caribbean 50 miles to the east.

It's time to ride. The first 20 minutes are nasty, huge rocks and twisty off-camber turns which have me working hard to stay on board. Eventually, sweating hard and swearing harder, I reach the forest. The trail opens up just enough, and from there on it is perfection. A rooty, leaf-covered section has us whooping, but there is even better to come. The roots disappear and we are railing along soft black earth. It's more like snowboarding in virgin powder than riding a bike.

Rounding a corner, we find a group of birdwatchers staring into a tree. One of them lends us his binoculars and explains in hushed, reverential tones what has captivated them. It is a shimmering blue-green quetzal, one of the world's rarest birds. People come from all over the world in the hope of spotting them, and we've just bagged one at the end of the best bike descent of all time.

It is the perfect finale. Time for me to head off to the Pacific coast to meet up with my partner. But I know it will be a culture shock to step back into the world of the regular tourist. Over the past eight days, we have seen the real Costa Rica up close, the calm pace of village life, the sense of community and the friendliness that never falters, no matter how dishevelled we roll up. They have a name for it here: *pura vida*, the pure life. And they know how to live it. **SM**

## Up, up and a wave

For seven summers, I played at surfing. I would head for Devon or Cornwall full of enthusiasm and, every now and again, I'd even manage to catch some white-water waves and ride them to the shore.

But that whole unbroken green water thing always eluded me, as did the task of fighting through the breakers to get Out Back, where the real surfers sit astride their boards, scanning the horizon for the next big one.

This year, I decided enough was enough. If I was ever going to surf even close to how I wanted to, I was going to have to put in the hours. Preferably, somewhere hot. And when my partner decided he wanted to spend eight days barrelling down mountains in Costa Rica, I spotted my chance.

Playa Hermosa, on the country's Pacific coast, was an easy choice. Its famously consistent beach break makes it a mecca for surfers and it is hauntingly beautiful. You come out of the water at sunset to the eerie cries of howler monkeys and the shrieks of scarlet macaws in the surrounding jungle.

There was an added attraction: the Del Mar Surf Camp, which offers daily surf and yoga lessons, is run by women for women. No testosterone, no over-competitive boys nicking my waves. Just me, the girls and a supportive vibe that made it easy to learn.

At first, it was the morning yoga practice, under the shade of a wooden canopy on the edge of the forest that I looked forward to most each day. Whenever I got into the water, I got



Girls only . . . no over-competitive boys nicking the waves

shouted at. "PADDLE!" they would yell, as a terrifying four-footer almost crashed on top of me. "Paddle!" they would cry again, as if I wasn't paddling like crazy while yet another wave eluded my exhausted body.

These Costa Rican surfing chicas were hard work, as were the relentless waves. If I wasn't paddling, I was wiping out. And it wasn't a good look.

At one point, Maria Del Mar, my coach that day, asked me what I had eaten for lunch. A salad. She shook her head: "You really have to eat. Surfing is hard." The next day, two hours before my lesson, I had fish tacos

and a plate of rice and beans so massive I could barely walk.

Then, something amazing happened. A huge wave hit the underside of my board and suddenly, I was on it, springing from prone to standing in seconds. With no time to think, I was racing shorewards. I looked down the speeding hill of glassy green water as it crashed forwards. Terrified but exhilarated, I wondered what would happen next and hoped I just might survive. I bent my knees, pointed the board right and, thwack, landed it perfectly, still riding, pumping the board with my legs until the wave's

momentum was exhausted and we had slowed to a walking pace. I pitched off sideways into the white, warm water, to emerge with a grin you could see all the way to Nicaragua. Maria grinned back at me. "Wow! You did it!"

It felt like all my Christmases had come at once. A massive rush, where, despite all the effort you've put in, you're stunned you've pulled it off.

In and out of the water, the women in the group became friends: Maggie, a blonde goddess from California had the dirtiest laugh you ever heard, and a habit of cycling around town in a tiny bikini to maximise her tan; Amanda, a petite, mild-mannered Costa Rican, who turned out to be the fiercest, boot-camp coach of all; and Maria, an inspirational woman whose love for surfing and her country was so infectious the ministry for tourism should bottle it. Dessi, another chica who runs her own clothes shop, made us the most gorgeous bikinis.

When not in the ocean, we hung out, walking in the jungle, horse riding, eating in the best fish restaurants in town, having a massage or just lazing by the pool in our hotel, the Marea Brava, right on Playa Hermosa beach. At night, we would eat in Jaco, a couple of miles away, and Maria ensured we mixed with the locals at parties at her friend's house in the hills, where we met some of the best surfers in the country.

Just writing about it makes me want to go surfing again. And every time I do, there's a Costa Rican voice next to me, shouting: "PADDLE!" **KM**

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**Getting there**  
American Airlines (aa.com) flies Heathrow-San José via Miami from £681.50 return inc tax.

**The biking**  
British Columbia-based Big Mountain Bike Adventures (ridebig.com) runs two Pura Vida downhill trips a year. The 2008 dates are February 15-23 and February 24-March 3. The price tag of Can\$2,295 (£1,150) includes guiding by Paulo Valle and a star guide, land transportation, accommodation, breakfast and dinner. A long-travel, full suspension bike is essential.

**The surfing**  
Big Mountain can also arrange surfing trips. Alternatively, the seven-day women-only Del Mar Surf Camp (costaricasurfingchicas.com) costs from US\$1,540pp inc full board, activities and transport from San José airport.

**Further information**  
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