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Diary Of A Conquistador

There Is No Coasting On Costa Rica's La Ruta

by ben bostrom

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To suffer is character-building. To race La Ruta de los Conquistadores is life changing. Pain is the separator of all humans. When the lactic acid flows through you, essentially poisoning your muscles, and the mind pleads to shut the body down, who will hold out that little bit longer to win? That's the first question you must ask yourself if you want to take up "sport" as your job. There are plenty of humans on this planet with similar genetic and physiological ability, but only the mind allows one to prevail over the others. In my circle, the losers become a nice snack food. With each inch toward victory, it inevitably allows the lead person that little edge. The gaining of ground crushes the ego of the followers, allowing self-doubt to creep in with each foot of loss. Then the mind takes over, putting thoughts in your head. "Did I sleep well? Did I take in enough calories for breakfast? Do I just not have it today?" With each thought, the body slips into a comfortable protection mode, and that is all she wrote. You have lost. The victor devours you, making him stronger and building his confidence with each bit of ground gained. Welcome to La Ruta, the playground for pain thresholds and mind-over-body accomplishments.



Best Western. Not exactly the kind of accommodations that 155 enjoyed for most of La Ruta.
image by nikki hale

Honestly, I had no idea what to expect upon arriving in Costa Rica for this famous mountain-bike race, known as the world's toughest. The stories about the race are legendary. Hour-long hike-a-bike sections through the jungle while post-holing in mud that is sticky as gum, chest-deep river crossings, back-to-back 30 percent 3-mile grades, carrying your bike over

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4-foot railroad-bridge gaps with a 30-foot fall into crocodile-populated rivers, 75 miles a day and 40,000 overall feet of ascension for 4 straight days, 3:30 am bus rides to the start of each stage, getting lost for the day, getting dropped in the neutral zone for starts, etc., etc. Sound intriguing? Well, I can tell you it's all true and a damn good time for the hundreds who start and attempt to finish the event. The participants come to conquer La Ruta from every corner of the globe and in all shapes and sizes. A few key elements link this motley crew: a fondness for pain, the need to persevere, and the butchering of the Spanish language. There are the superstars of the bicycle industry who believe the race is tough because they suffered for 5 hours a day. Then, there are the true heroes who finish just before the cut-off point each day several hours later. La Ruta is a true race of attrition that has fractured the soul of many of the world's best mountain bikers. I am proud to say I finished and finished well, thereby letting the bicycle industry know that we motorcycle folk are a very hardheaded breed, as well.

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Day 1: Mud, Sweat, and Tires

The first day of La Ruta was brutally hot with only 4 aid stations on the 6-hour stage. After cruising at 30 mph for 10 minutes in the "neutral zone," we hit the first hill. I was desperately trying to hang on to the lead group before we dropped into the jungle because the fear of getting lost weighed heavily on my mind. My first mistake was



The Life of Ben. Just one haircut from Nikki, and we'd be changed forever, too.
image by nikki hale

pushing my bike through the mud and then realizing it now weighed too much to carry due to the snowball effect of caked clay on the tires. The rivers made fine baths for the bike and rider and were, oh, so welcoming. Popping out of the jungle with only one chain issue, it seemed that the next 50 miles would be smooth sailing. But that was not to be. As I took off up the long asphalt climb, the rear tire decided it had had enough and built up enough pressure to explode right off the rim. Forgetting my small pump, I aired the tire up to 15 pounds with a small CO2 cartridge, only to arrive at the aid station and realize that the team car had gone on without me in order to keep pace with my teammate who

was in the lead pack. Sweet. I rode 50 miles bouncing off the rim hoping to miraculously avoid a pinch flat and a hell of a lot more rolling resistance to boot. That was a long day!

Day 2: The Hills Have Eyes

The second day started out with a 3-minute "neutral zone" warm-up to 30 percent grades. I had never seen hills like this, ever! And just when I thought it couldn't possibly get any steeper, they packed rough concrete over the surface to hold the dirt onto the hill. Yes, it got steeper. This is the point where you learn a lot about yourself. You have no opportunity to relax on the pedals or stop pushing your bike higher. If you stop giving 100 percent, it's not possible to complete the hill, and your race is over. I have never felt pain come from my legs like that before, and it didn't help that they were smoked from the previous day. I decided right then and there that I was a changed man, and my approach to road racing and life from then on would be different. No race is as hard and painful as that hill, and I can take that experience with me on all my future ventures in life. Others don't want it as bad you do, I promise. Running 4th with only 3 miles to go and losing the chain again did little to hinder my spirits. I lost 4 positions, but I was a changed man and knew I could suffer with the best. Pain never felt so good.

Day 3: The S**t Hits The Face

On the third day, we had to ride up the side of a 10,000-foot volcano, traverse to another volcano with rain inevitable, and I froze my ass off on the 2-hour volcanic rock descent. "Does it get any better?" you ask. Oh, yes. Yes it does. The downhill was crazy! Fog obscuring your vision, glasses off due to fogging and mud, dodging cows, the steady spray of manure and piss in your face, and your arms hurt so bad from the steady bar pressure that you want to cry. Despite the obstacles, though, this was looking like Benjamin's day to shine-except my teammate bonked in the first hour, and I got stuck doing pull duty to save him as much time as possible since he was leading the overall race. Man, it was a long day, but I stuck it out and it felt good to be there for him.

Day 4: The Tracks Of My Tears

On the final day of La Ruta, the rain was relentless. The stage was epic, with a group of 7 of us off the front and charging. Each rider selfishly took short pulls to conserve energy for the final sprint at the end. Not me, though. I learned the rules of the peloton that day. The team



According to 155, you haven't lived till you've ridden down a volcano, with cowpies for dessert.
image by nikki hale

with the yellow leader's jersey does the lion's share of the work, and that, my friends, meant that I would get stuck out front because my teammate had that honor. The finish of the

stage was, by far, the least friendly part of La Ruta. It consisted of 10 miles of railroad tracks and, just when you thought the pounding was over, more railroad tracks ;). The finishing touch to the final stage was the most fitting, though. As if my bike didn't already need a complete rebuild after the event, the final 3 miles were spent pedaling through near-seat-high salt-water swamps. Basically, just stick your bike back in its travel case and salvage what parts you can when you get back home. I finished 3rd that day with a satisfied belly from all the "food" I'd taken in, and I felt more complete in life, as well, with the invaluable knowledge that I had learned about myself and developed a whole new approach to competition.

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