

Paradise  
found

**THE PURE LIFE IN  
COSTA RICA**



Words by Stuart Millar  
Photos by Derek Frankowski





FUERZA PUBLICA  
COSTA RICA



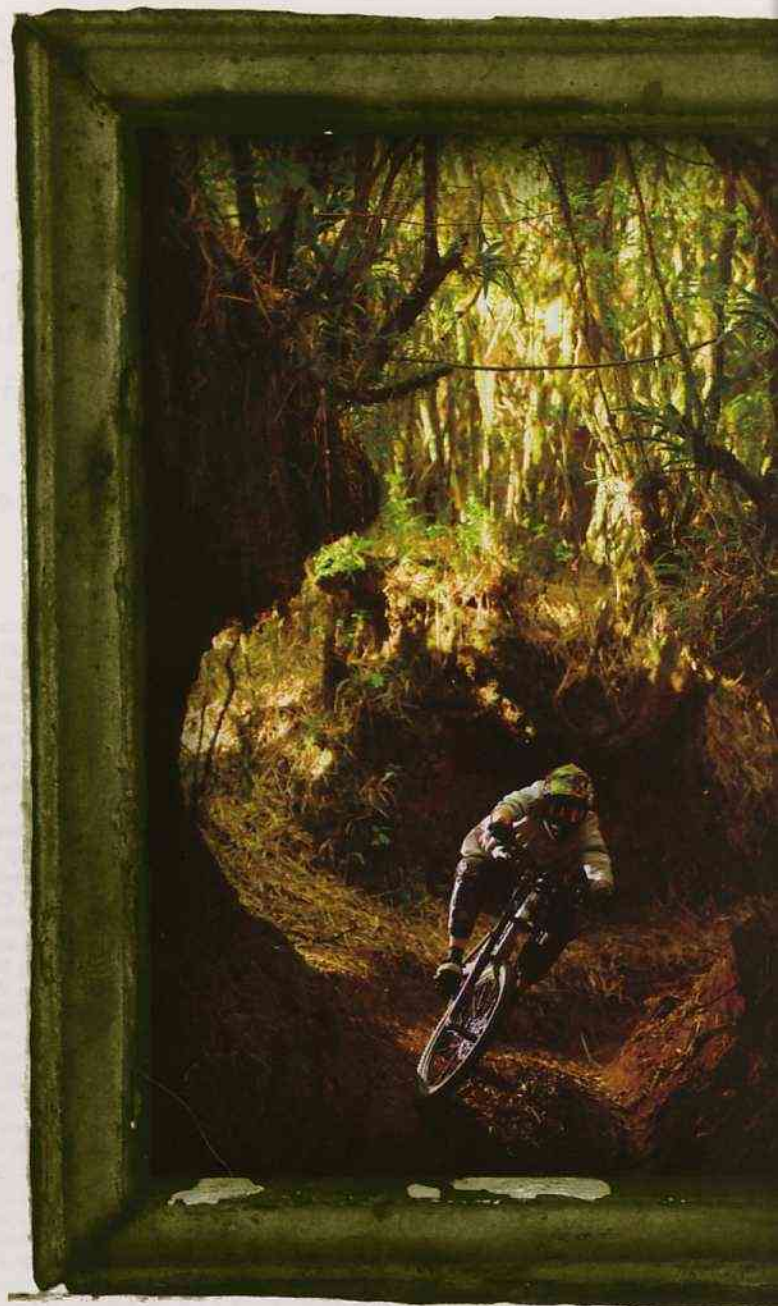
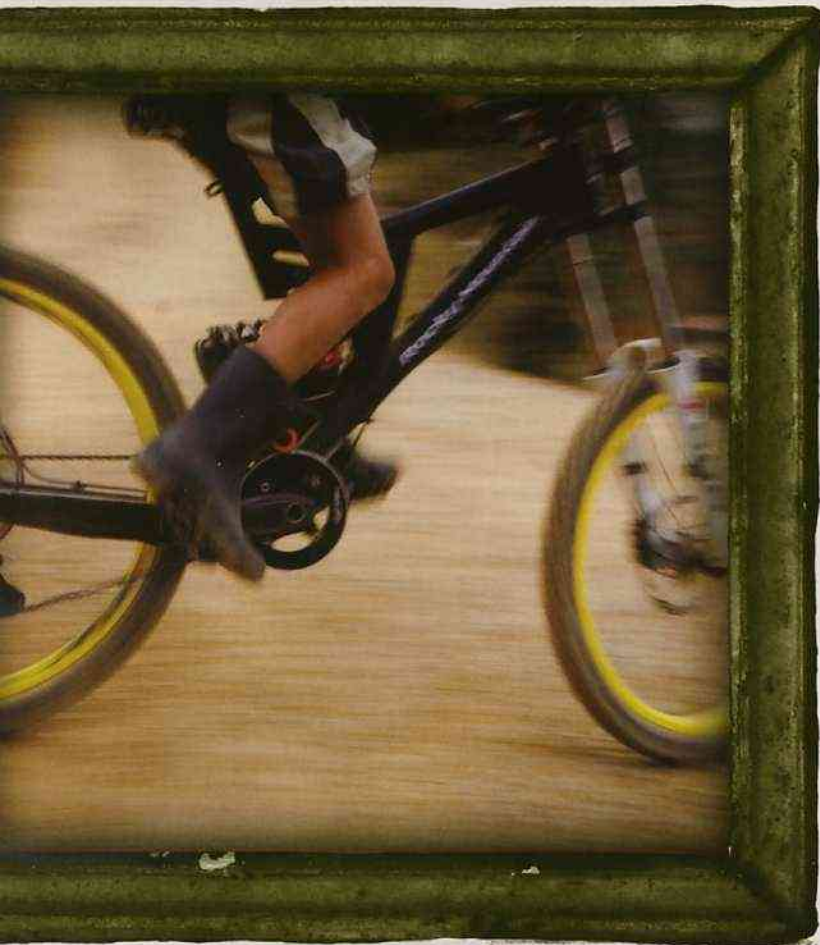


At 11,500 feet up we pause for a few minutes to suck in the thin air. Standing in the shadow of a giant summit known as Cerro de la Muerte — the Peak of Death — it feels like we are gazing down on an entire country. The high mountains of Costa Rica's Valle de El General stretch in a 360-degree panorama of solid tropical forest. Beyond the hazy black outlines of ancient volcanoes and the Interamericana Highway to Panama, we can just about make out the Pacific coast 25 miles off to the west if we squint hard enough. They say that on a really clear day, it's possible to also see the Caribbean sea lapping onto white beaches a full 50 miles to the east.



Left: Hidden in the peaks around Irazu, Costa Rica's highest active volcano, is some of the country's finest riding.

A Providencia kid puts Wade Simmons RMX through its paces - farmer style.



Above: Dave Watson blasts into a new section of the dusty, rutted natural tunnel on Volcan Barva.

Below: The world's best coffee is grown in the mountains around Santa Maria - now you know what it looks like before it goes in the jar.





But right now it's what lies immediately beneath our feet that commands our undivided attention: uncoiling itself almost invisibly downwards over moonscape boulders and between miniature bushes, is a secret singletrack descent, 13km long and falling more than 4,000 vertical feet. Breathing short, sharp breaths - more from adrenaline than altitude - we drop in.

There is no chance to ease into the action. For the first 20 minutes, rocks more the size of obese teenagers than babies' heads litter the twisting, off-camber trail and allow no margin for error. Arms ache already, sweat runs down my face almost as fast as the swear words roll out my mouth and my new Totem fork works its ass off as I try to find a line over, through and around the relentless boulders. Then we reach the forest, and the trail opens up just enough to become fast, flowy and perfect.

In Costa Rica, a skinny sliver of tropical paradise nine degrees above the Equator, they know how to live. This is a country so laidback that it abolished the army 50 years ago and survived peacefully ever since. Pura Vida, it's called, the pure life. The slogan is everywhere you look, from billboards to beer bottles, and the locals shout it to each other as a greeting. But ask them to sum up what it means exactly and they struggle for an answer. After the toughest, most challenging eight days of my mountain biking life, I think I can suggest as good a definition as any.

It involves an international bunch of riders, united as much by their ability to drink village after village dry of Imperial beer as their love of riding. It involves shuttle runs up rough, rutted dirt roads in a rental van so stale from collective sweat and toil that Nene, our driver, compares it unfavourably to the stench of monkey. It involves blasting, filthy and famished, into hamlets far from the gringo tourist trail and being welcomed like Hollywood heroes by grinning, bike-crazy kids and a feast that the finest five-star resorts on the coast would be proud of. And, most of all, it involves the riding: mile after uncompromising mile of steep, brake-searing, natural descents in 30 degree heat on jungle trails whose very existence is known only to a tiny and blessed few, and which take me far - dangerously far - beyond the edge of my ability. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger? Pura Vida indeed.

This downhill bike trip of a lifetime is the brainchild of two men. Chris Winter, the Whistler local behind Big Mountain Bike Adventures, has built a healthy business from scoping out some of the most exotic singletrack on the planet and taking clients to it. Three years ago he hooked up with Costa Rican Paulo Valle, former national cross country and downhill champion, all-round ripper and a one-man trailbuilding machine.

Now they offer two DH trips a year to ride a network of descents that are special in so many ways. They take in everything Costa Rica has to offer: steep volcanoes, dense jungle, tropical cloudforest, the lot. They are lovingly sculpted by Paulo and his buddies, who spend most of the rainy season taking their machetes and pickaxes to the hillsides to carve bottomless, gnarly downhill. "It's too wet to ride," he explains. "So we build."

In a land dominated by cross country riding, and where many lycra-clad bikers apparently spend their Sundays pedaling up paved roads to come back down them again, this would be remarkable enough. But the most special thing about the trails is this: they are all secret, hidden gems, some of them even illegal, tucked away on private land and only accessible because Paulo has made deals with the local landowners that keep them sweet and us riding. Part of the deal is that the numbers are strictly limited, and that means that the only people who get to enjoy these treasures are the posse who maintain them

from the North Shore - an Aussie and me have been tempted to shell out a considerable sum of cash and fly a long way to a country which, until now, has never troubled the list of top downhill destinations. We are a mixed bunch: eight blokes, three women, ages ranging from early 20s to late 50s, with jobs including a tugboat captain, a barrister, two engineers for Canada's second largest crisp manufacturer and a flight attendant who in a previous life was a two-times world windsurfing champion. Completing the riding crew are freeride pioneer Wade Simmons, who has been the star guiding turn on these trips since they kicked off, and his BC compadres Dave Watson and Geoff Gulevich. I am in high class company.

That was obvious from the minute I turned up at the plush, four-star Condessa resort in the hills above the capital San Jose on the first day of the trip. This was meant to be the chilling day - a chance to get over the long flights, build our bikes and hang by the pool. But as we pulled into the car park in Paulo's Kia 4x4 truck, we found Simmons, Watson, Gully and the early arrivals geared up and itching to ride, their selection of big, gleaming downhill bikes lined up for action like fighter jets on the tarmac. This was bonus time. Still spaced out from jetlag, I threw my Bullit together at warp speed, gulped down a club sandwich and climbed aboard.

Ten minutes later, we are standing at the top of the remains of a dried-up creek bed, lined on both sides by tall trees and rolling farmland. The trail was built by Ricardo, who is using his week's holiday from his job as a software developer to serve as Nene's co-pilot and deputy bike leader. A gap jump marks the entrance, and the other riders blast off without hesitation. They are fast, very fast, floating over the loose, smooth stones and tricky techy rock sections where choosing the wrong line leaves you in no man's land. It's only 15 minutes top to bottom but the bone-juddering roughness shakes my brain and body out of its stupor as I try to hold on at the back. That night, sleep does not come easy despite the exhaustion; the trip is designed so that the trails ramp up in difficulty as the week goes on. I am going to have to raise my game...a lot.

The next couple of days pass in a blur of bumpy, cramped shuttle runs, Spanish reggae music, huge fast descents, rocks, near-vertical chutes, big crashes, a lot of bruises and a surreal incident involving a dust-blown trail and a cow accelerating so fast that three of the group end up stacking into it.

Meanwhile I am at the back, and struggling on the 'real gnarl'. Crash landing is my new best trick - over the bars, somersaulting down vertical sided hills, sliding off the back, all seem to come naturally to me. The combination of the steepness and the technicality is way beyond anything I have ridden in the UK or abroad. Deep down I know I'm out of my depth on the really big stuff. But slowly, painfully slowly, my riding is progressing and I'm getting down sections that I would never have survived back home. That is what happens when you have Simmons, the Godfather, giving you one-to-one coaching. Small triumphs maybe, and short-lived, but they



when we finally break free from the sprawl of San Jose and drive into the big mountains towards Irazu, the highest active volcano in Costa Rica at over 11,000ft. Its summit is otherworldly - a wide flat plain of grey volcanic ash dropping suddenly into the crater, 300m deep and more than a kilometre across, with a strangely inviting pea green sulphur lake at the bottom. It would be breathtaking if there weren't thousands of other daytrippers milling around beside us.

Sightseeing satisfied, we head to a nearby peak and manoeuvre ourselves in to the start of the trail: it is not so technical, just enclosed and dusty, cutting down through spiky thick bushes then opening out onto super fast, loose dust like powder snow. Down and down and down towards the clouds beneath us in the valley, digging the tyres into the turns, trying to hold the drift. Dropping into a short narrow gully, the wheels going shumpf shumpf through the volcanic powder, throwing up blinding rooster trails behind us, no space to turn so straightline it, before it opens again into a series of steep flat corners. Onto the brakes as we enter a hamlet, Simmons taking a little detour to hip jump off the tall banking. Kids hang over the barbed wire fences of their parents' small yards, yelling "hola!", giggling insanely and holding out their hands to high five us as we pass.

We come to a stop a bit further down the road. A young boy, no more than 10 or 11 years old is perched on the bareback of a small grey horse, expertly herding cattle back up the hill. He throws us disparaging looks, unimpressed with our expensive bikes and third grade Spanish. Just idiot gringos getting in the way of the important business. We take off again, and the trail just goes and goes forever, now on sketchy, marbled doubletrack. After a flowing eternity of acceleration, pump and flow, we finally reach the trucks. In the restaurant at the roadside, buzzing with families and leather-clad bikers, we guzzle enormous plates of rice and chicken and plantain, swig Imperials, and talk in breathless, disbelieving tones about the sublime sensations we have just experienced.

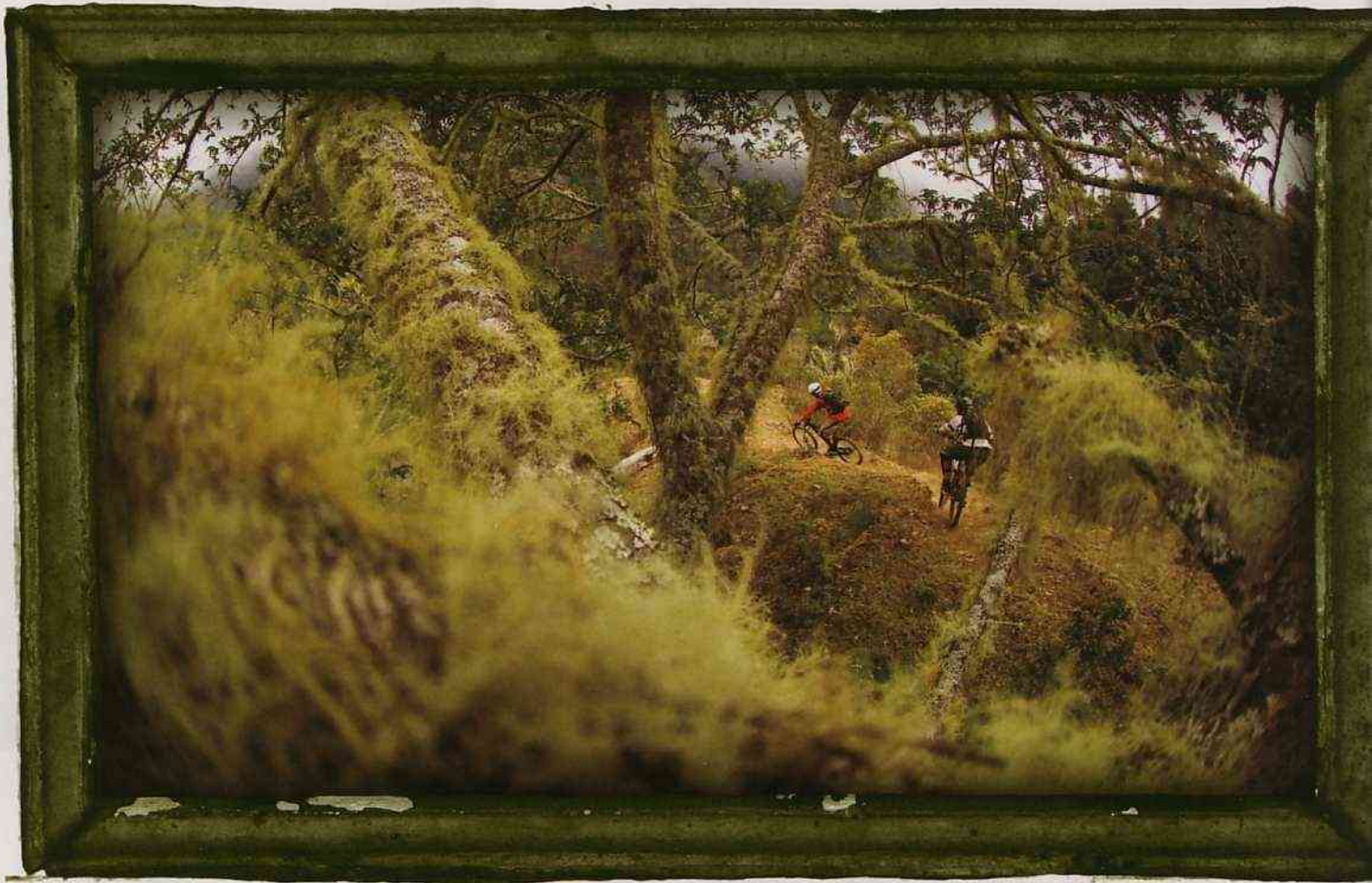
That night we head south over a high mountain pass, the dramatic views obliterated by opaque fog, to the village of Santa Maria in the heart of coffee country. When we reach the cabins and drag ourselves out of the van, the hot sweet smell of the jungle hits and the soundtrack of cicadas kicks in. This is the Costa Rica we've been waiting for. And tonight the number one band



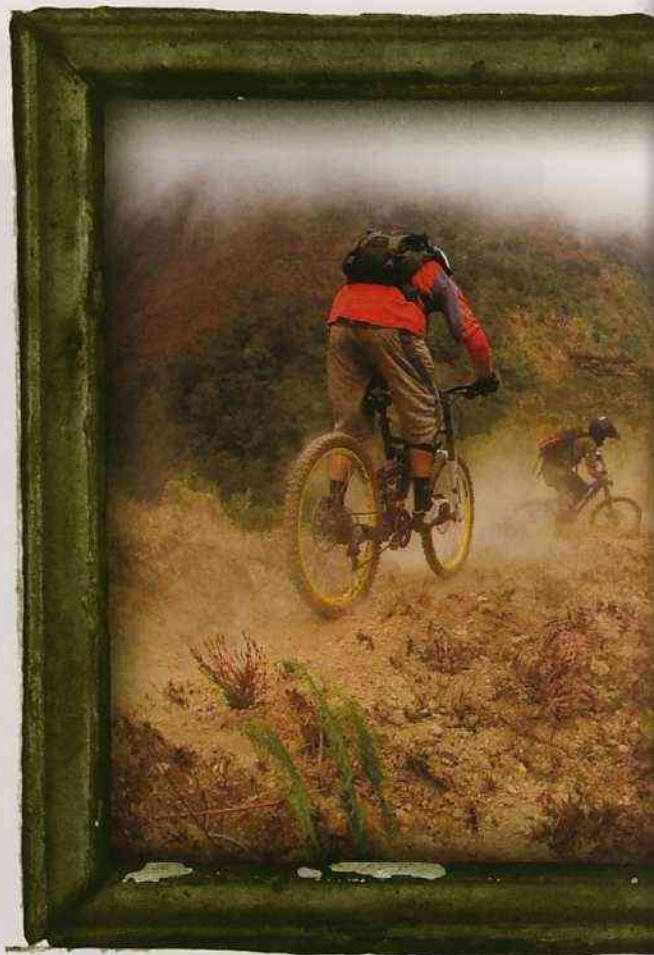
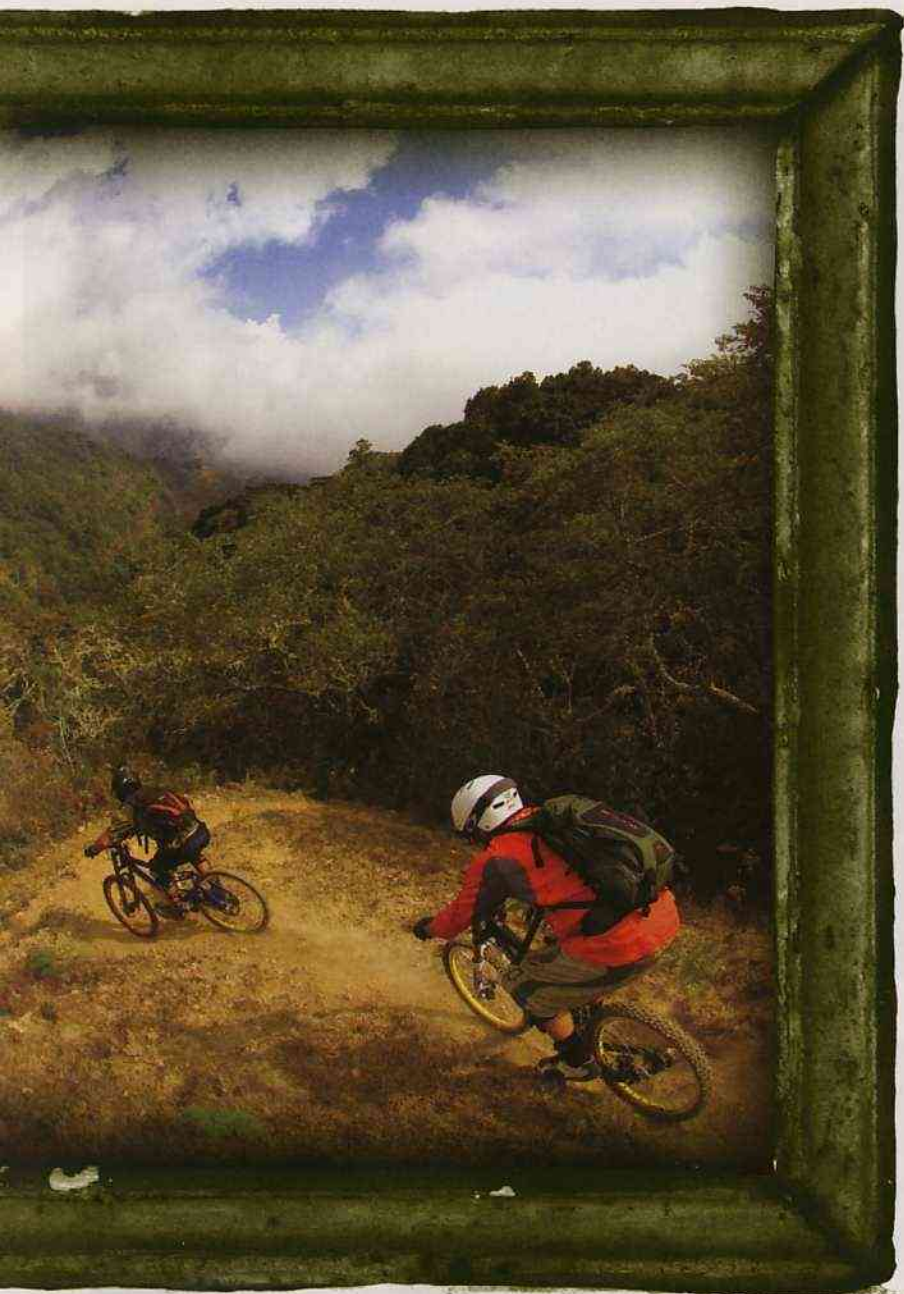
Left: There are more wildlife species than Europe and North America here, so you get used to shooing away the hummingbirds.

Below: Simmons leads the way down through mossy, tropical cloudforest.

Bottom: The tourists come for the monkeys, sloths and crocodiles, but for the locals it's the cows that pay the rent.



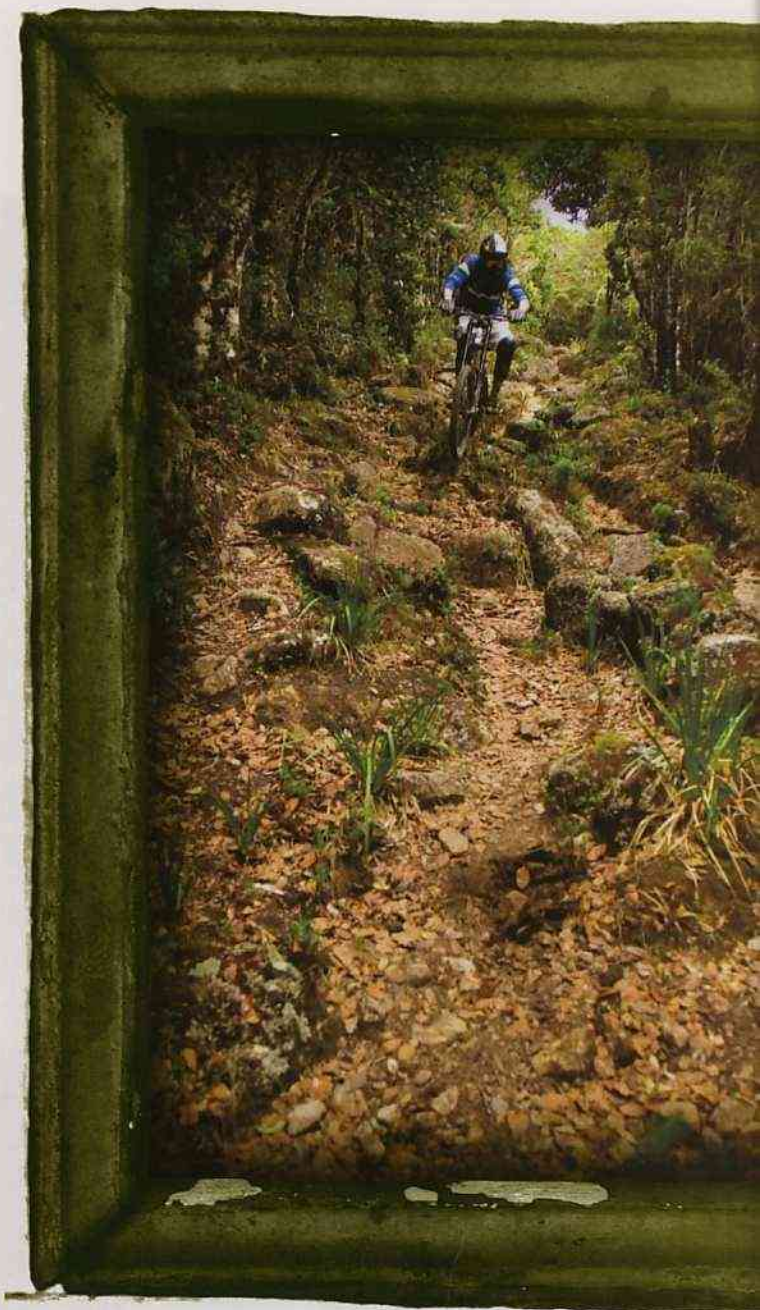




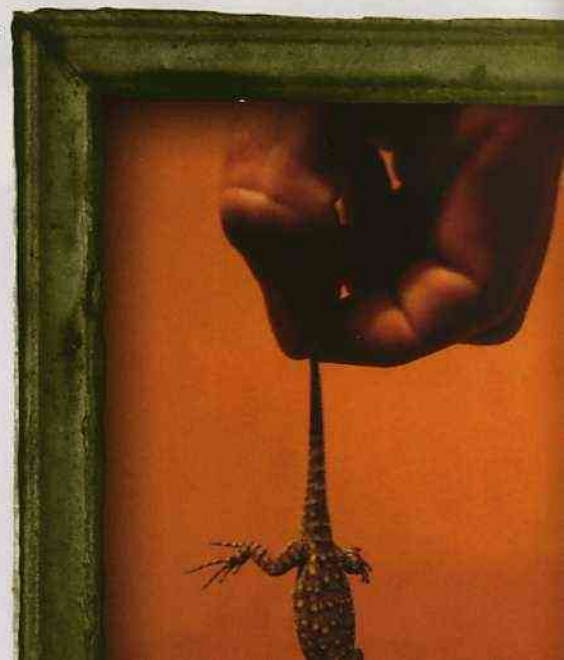
Left and above: Back wheel steering – the must-have skill for surviving the tight, loose switchbacks above Santa Maria





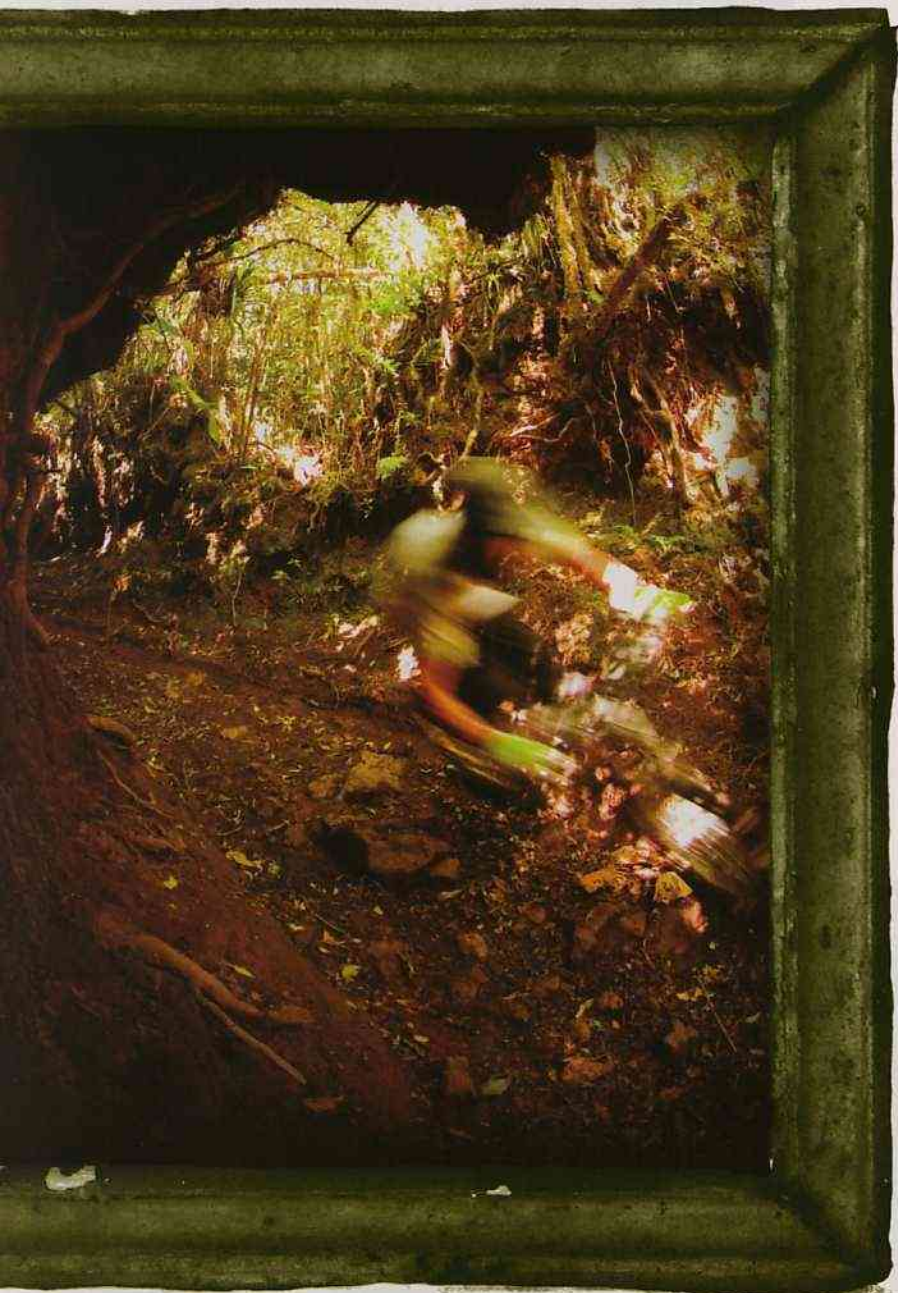


Above: Watson laughs in the face of the Peak of Death's boulders.  
Right: A nighttime visitor to our bathroom in the cabins at Santa Maria.



Above: Geoff Gulevich comes off the wall at Barva in full attack mode.





Top Left: Railing the Barva tunnel.

Above: Watson pins it over an ancient, near-fossilised tree above Barva. This is what he rides like with a massive hangover and four hours kip.

Left: This is what tropical downhill is all about: soft afternoon sunlight and two hours of non-stop descending to go.







Right: Gully, Simmons and Watson in close train formation. After a sweet





Left: End of the day, bikes loaded, and the welcome sign of the Imperial beer eagle.

In fact the number one band in all Mexico turns out to be four little flutes dressed identically like garden gnomes in frilly white shirts and lurid green waistcoats with big metal buttons. They are all tiny, the keyboard player so short that his instrument sits at his shoulder height. But they are going down a storm with the crowd of Ticos and Ticas in the packed dance hall, where we throw down shots of the local sugar cane hooch, called Guarro, and lots more Imperials. Until that bar and the one next door have none left. Highlight of the night is the dancing competition, won by a deadly serious and wildly enthusiastic lad wearing a cummerbund. The big prize...a toaster.

By now the trails are starting to seriously ramp up the challenge. But every bruising stack is worth it just to ride this terrain in a corner of the country that doesn't make it into the tourist brochures. A torrid couple of hours crashing my way round a scarily technical route above Santa Maria - narrow chutes with no traction, off-camber switchbacks, serious exposure - is followed the next by two steep but sublime swooping runs through the cloudforest. When we emerge from beneath the canopy into the sunlight, a vast lush Lord of the Rings valley is spread out around us.

At the bottom of the second run, we roll into the tiny village of Providencia (population 200) where a dinner of fresh trout, fried beans, rice and salad is waiting for us at the Flor del Campo bar. Outside a bunch of local farmer kids, who had greeted Paulo, Nene and Ricardo like royalty, grab our bikes to session a little hit with impressive style, even though every one of them is wearing wellies. Wade puts on a show for them but he is upstaged by Nicole, the lawyer, who pulls off a series of David Blane-grade card tricks that make all eight of the blushing young lads fall in love with her. It takes a long time to wrench ourselves away from hospitality like this, but we have another high pass to cross before it gets dark. The Peak of Death awaits.

This is it, this is what the trip has been building up to: taking on some of the steepest, longest, most unforgiving terrain in Central America on a long-travel, full suspension mountain bike. Our accommodation may be a stunning bird sanctuary, nesting in the bottom of a remote valley, where humming birds crowd around the breakfast tables in the morning sun, but there is no disguising the fact that we face a major step up even on the week's other trails. We have three days of riding here, on two epic descents.

the city of San Isidro (known to Ticos as Pussy Town because the women so outnumber the men). It starts off sweetly, through smooth, fast forest singletrack and for the first hour or so, I genuinely start to believe that I've got it nailed.

But then, just after we meet the local farmer and his wife out inspecting their land on horseback, it turns ugly. The pitch steepens dramatically, and the soft forest floor gives way to cut-up, off-camber rocks. Just blasting through this stuff is not an option, it's low gear only. All the way down I'm thanking God for how well my Totem and my Dainese armour are working, but even they are not enough to save me from a few big stacks as I try to pick my way down. Hours seem to pass before we cross the creek and begin a punishing a 30 minute hike-a-bike up to the next ridge.

Back on the bikes again on a narrow trail, with a channel cut by Paulo's pickaxe that is barely wider than our pedals. The whole group is toiling on this stuff so when a tropical rainstorm blows in, we gratefully take cover beneath a corrugated tin shelter in a field. For a good half an hour, we stand there, utterly blown, watching the rain batter down while an ecstatic young horse gallops around the field. The storm passes as suddenly as it arrived, and it has delivered us a second wind and a bit more grip. We fire down the final section to the vans, caked in mud but grinning wildly. Dave, one of the Vancouver squad, sums up our elation, "Holy shit, that was three mountains in one."

And then it is time for that final Cerro de la Muerte run. After the rocks, we regroup and then it is into the cloudforest, a sensational rooty, leafy section has us all whooping but it keeps getting better. After a while the roots disappear and from there on it is just buffed, perfect singletrack on soft black earth that holds our tyres

that for the first time in eight days, I'm not thinking about what I'm doing, just letting the bike go, and believe me it feels good.

And then, just to pop a cherry on top, we come round one corner near the bottom to find a group of birdwatchers staring mesmerized into a tree. Silently, they point out what they are looking at: a shimmering, blue-green Quetzal, one of the world's rarest birds and one of Costa Rica's most important species. People come from all over the world to try to spot Quetzals, and we've bagged one at the end of the greatest mountain bike descent of all time.

It is not often that you feel blown away by nature on a bike. I don't mean postcard views. It's that feeling that surfers get when the combination of a hurricane swell and a gentle offshore breeze hands them perfect set after perfect set. Or when a snowboarder is about to drop in to a steep, backcountry slope on the very bluebird morning after a big weather system has dumped 36 inches of champagne powder onto it. Mountain biking is different. Its beauty is that it can be done anywhere, in any conditions. We don't need to wait on the perfect storm of meteorological events to roll in and spray a trail onto the hill for us. It's there already, just waiting to be hit. And if you don't hit it today, you know it'll still be waiting for you tomorrow.

But after those three days on the Cerro de la Muerte, we all feel that Costa Rica has a magical quality, a precious once-in-a-lifetime vibe. The riding alone is enough to have us believe that there might just be a Higher Power, one with a divine understanding of flow and 'gnarl' and exposure. But it's much more than that: the landscape, the ecology, the people and the way they are quietly determined to live their lives their way. As I head off to a Pacific beach to surf, recuperate and



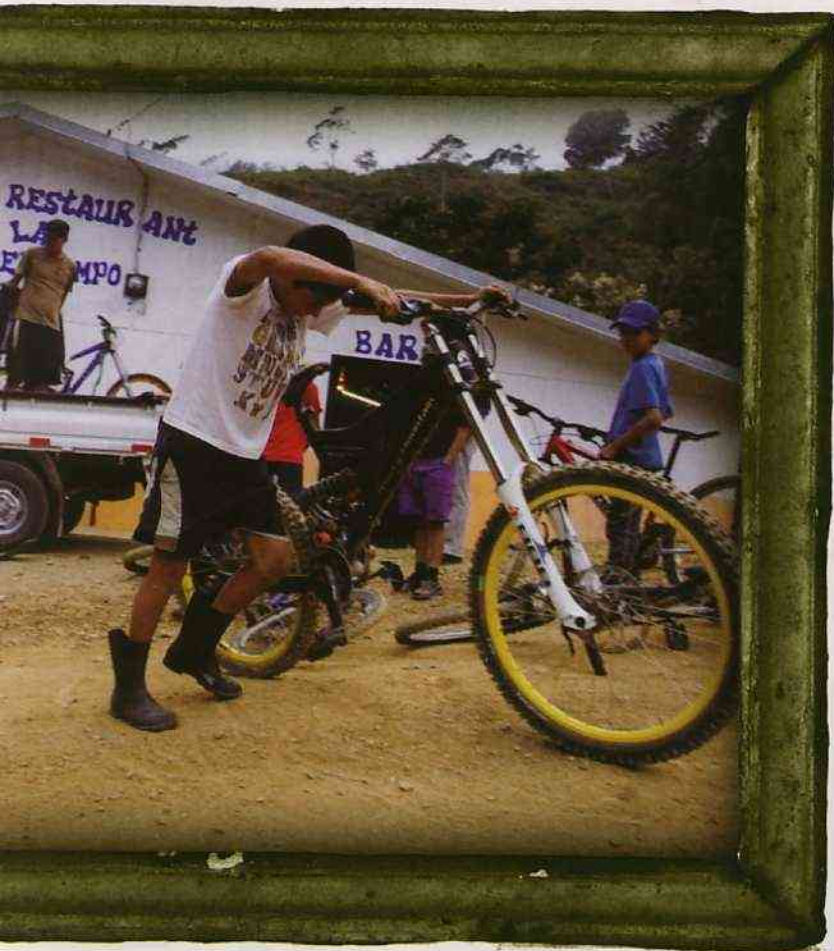


## THE DETAILS:

Big Mountain will run two Pura Vida DH trips to Costa Rica next year, from Feb 15–23 and Feb 24–Mar 3. The trips last nine days, with at least seven full days of riding. The set-up is a perfect combination of high-end accommodation and military planning. Transfers, shuttles and hotels all fit together with a precision Mussolini would have been proud of.

The price tag of CDN\$2,295 (about £1,000) covers guiding by Paulo and a guest guide, land transportation, hotels, breakfast and dinner every day plus a Big Mountain T-shirt. Flights can be had for about £600 with Continental or Virgin, flying via the US. It is best to take your own bike, the burlier the better, as well as a stock of brake pads, tubes, spare derailleur and anything else that might break.

If you want to extend your trip and hit the Pacific surf Big Mountain can also help set you up. The ideal spot is the Point Break Hotel on Santa Teresa Beach in Mal Pais, a remote but funky surf community on the Nicoya Peninsula. *For more information go to [ridebig.com](http://ridebig.com) or contact them direct on [info@ridebig.com](mailto:info@ridebig.com)*



Left: The kids of Providencia – the next generation of Costa Rican trailbuilders.

Above: The Godfather shows his appreciation for being one of the first mountain bikers to ever experience this virgin section of jungle trail.

