

OAXACA

Carlos pulls out a computer printout of a topo map marked with trails that are established and some other Magic Marker lines for those that are not. The idea of the day's agenda is to ride Piedra Descent, a long, sweeping downhill starting near 10,000 feet up in the pine forest, to a point where the trail turns right, only we are going to look for something-of-a-trail that goes straight. Always seeking new *campesino* footpaths, goat and burro trails, for turning into singletrack adventures, Carlos thinks it might be possible that a series of pathways saddle a ridgeline that would, if we can find a way across, be a ride that many in the mountain biking community would call "epic."

We sit down to a breakfast of mushroom and farmer cheese quesadillas, spicy sausage, beans, and *tasajo*, a dried beef-like jerky that is a Oaxacan specialty. Breakfast is washed down with bowls of hot chocolate, perfect on a sunny, mountain morning with temperatures in the 40s F. The view from the windows of Comedor Truchas in the Sierra Juarez village of Benito Juarez is one of tranquility. Clouds softly undulate, an ebb and flow on the mountain as the sun shines high above. The cloud forest breathes its wonder.

"I don't know if there are any trails out there." "We have all day. You have a GPS, right?" "Yes. You want more beans?"

We pay the cook for our pleasant morning meal, and then we change into clothes for a day of mountain biking and exploration in the northern reaches of the Sierra Madre de Oaxaca. I strap

on my hydration pack. I reach for the bike, throw a leg over, and clip in. The sun feels warm when not in the shadows. We pedal out on rocky, village road.

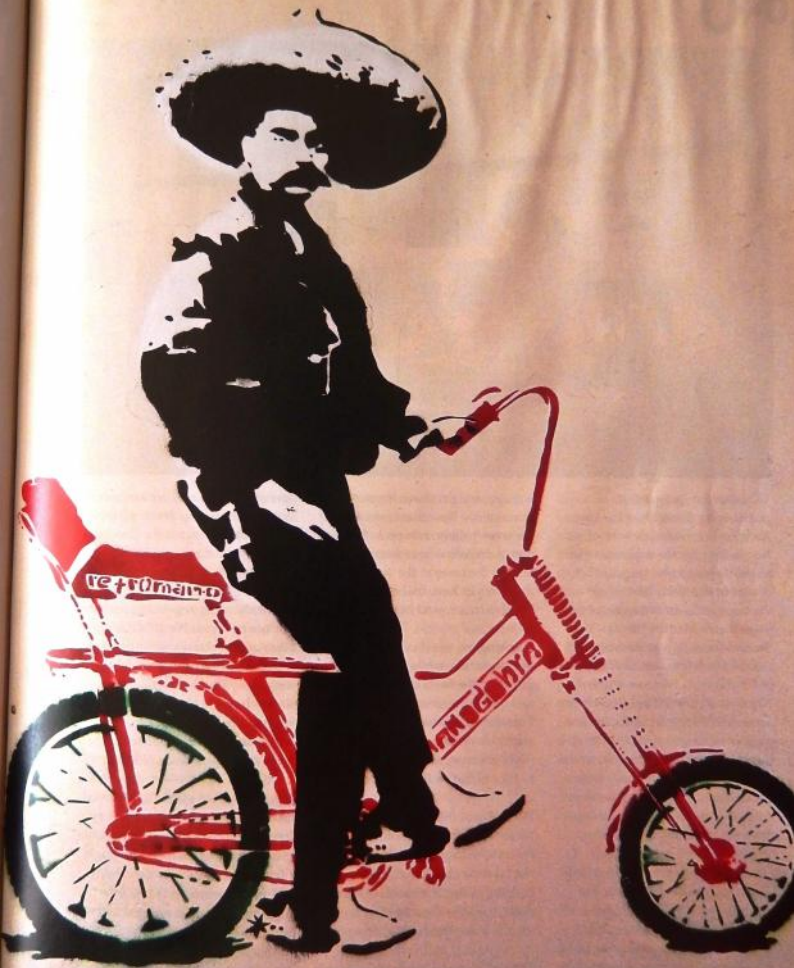
A short doubletrack climb away from the village through the pines warms the legs. We crest and then roll down. Suddenly, I am being sprayed by tire sealant. What is going on, I think.

I locate the hole and roll the tire downward. It seems to seal relatively fast. Carlos is not worried at all, no matter that we are what will end up being four hours from the pick-up point and have more than twenty miles of riding to go. "We're okay," he says. I hope so.

I clip back in and ride again. It holds. Three minutes later, I am being sprayed by more sealant. I stop and rotate the tire again. Carlos pulls out a local version of a patch kit: a thorn about an inch long. He slides it into the hole, replacing the thorn that was likely in there, and we turn the

thorn that is tucked into the tire towards the ground. We wait a few minutes. "It'll be fine now."

Back in 2008, Carlos, a California native, began building singletrack in the Sierra Juarez foothills and mountains outside of Oaxaca, Mexico with a few locals. Working with landowners and residents in the area north of town, he has steadily constructed a trail system with a week's worth of riding. Today, there is near one hundred miles of ribbons of joy out his back door, along with hundreds of miles of doubletrack that one could take far into the Sierra Norte de Oaxaca, or down into the Sierra Sur mountains that abut the Pacific coast. Based in San Pablo Etla, a twenty minute taxi ride from downtown Oaxaca, MTB Oaxaca leads rides for intermediate to expert mountain bikers, though beginner rides through lower elevations and into villages can be arranged. For three days in between work responsibilities, I rode with Carlos on his handcrafted trails.





To gather my geographic positioning, I consulted the map hanging on an outside wall of his house. Locally, the mountains are in the Sierra Juarez range, which is part of the Sierra Madre de Oaxaca that is an extension of the huge Sierra Madre Oriental. The Sierra Madre de Oaxaca is split into Sierra Norte and Sierra Sur. MTB Oaxaca's rides are in the Norte, with lower foothills starting around 3,000 feet in elevation and peaks reaching above 10,000 feet. It is predominately a pine-oak forest that has riding year round, with the best conditions being between August and December, meaning the trails are fairly dry-to-tacky, aside from hours after a fresh rainfall, and the vegetation is lush green. If you like dry desert like conditions with golden-to-brown landscapes, go in February.

We are soon dropping altitude fast, twisting and turning through trees, leaning way back off the saddle. No sealant is spraying. Back and forth we go, switchbacking across

a main, straight down line on the mountain, a flow that keeps the front tire rolling over rocks and dirt. Adrenaline courses my blood, and all the cares in the world that I might have had are gone. Carefree has found its definition.

Bombing on, we slice down the mountain, white-knuckles gripping the bars, legs taut and feet quivering over the pedals. Forearms are flexed, and shoulders are tight. We shoot the main route at times, stopping twice to take in the endless vistas.

We arrive at the point on the map where the Magic Marker lines for unknown trails begin. We do not take the curve to the right, keeping straight instead. A line going up onto the ridgeline is seen. We are feeling positive.

The trail soon becomes overgrown with vegetation. Still, it is clear that it was a trail, or a footpath of some kind. We hike-a-bike a little, pushing through the understory. It

opens up again, and we are back in our seats, riding down a steep incline after we scout the line. We continue pedaling on what seems like a trail that sees more use.

It quickly ends, vegetation seeming to close in on us. We get off the bikes and backtrack. Another trail skirts around to the other side of the ridge. We take it, and find it somewhat able to be ridden. That too quickly closes, and we hike with our bikes some more along what appears to be an old footpath.

Up ahead, I see a light in the forest, an area that seems to be not deep forest Sierra. I walk towards it on the diminished trail. Sure enough, I find a clearing. Trees are freshly cut, felled not more than a few days ago. We are reminded of the real challenges facing guardians of the Sierra Madre de Oaxaca. Trees are often cut for firewood and lumber, a practice that is illegal.

That trail ends abruptly. We park the bikes and climb uphill, a walk



to determine if there is a trail that crests the rise and drops down to where other established trails are to be, according to the map. Stopped over in places, and finding trails of some kind in others, we are not able to link anything together. It appears that no throughway exists over the ridgeline from where the right-hand turn of the Piedra Descent ride turns downward. We decide to backtrack our way to the bikes and then make our way back to another trail that we saw dropping off the mountain. We are scraped on our arms and legs by the dry, stubby brush. Still, I am happy where I am. It is very quiet, only the soft sound of a breeze through the trees can be heard.

We find the bikes and within a few minutes are dropping off the mountain on a too-steep trail for riding the whole length. Maybe the downhillers could ride its entirety, but not us. I am able to ride the deep gulch-like trail with high earthen sides only by unclipping and using my feet to

steady my way down. During the rainy season, there is little doubt that water rushes down the mountain on this trail.

We bottom out, connecting to the primary Piedra Descent trail that rolls alongside a creek. The trail is quite rocky in some sections, smooth hardpack in others, and crosses the same creek near a dozen times. The mixed-bag of riding surfaces keeps anything remotely close to mundane, or boring, many horizons away from my mindset.

In the foothills and higher elevations of the Sierra Juarez behind Carlos' house in the village of San Pablo Etla, a spiderweb of trails, with some long runners, stretch out into the landscape.

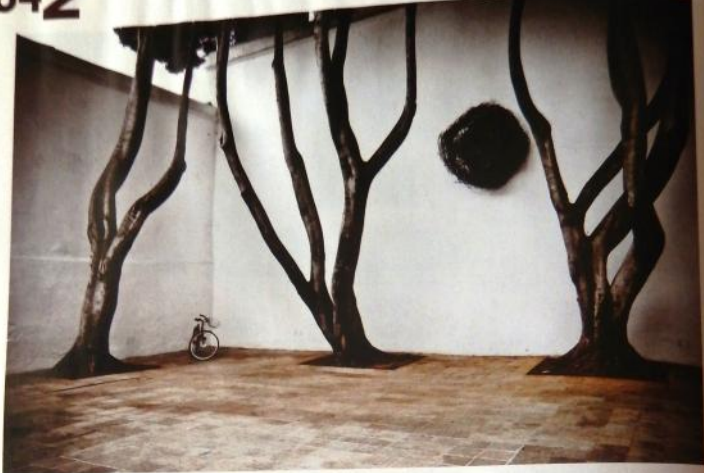
Classic cross-country intermediate-to-expert riding characterizes the pedaling. Mid-Ridge trail is the jumping off point, and where MTB Oaxaca will get a feel for your bike-handling skills. Fifteen miles of a rollercoaster loop that has a few short strenuous climbs, a couple

super sweet downhills with raw, beautiful, mountain chain vistas, and intermittent rock gardens that might throw you to the ground, sit, literally, outside his front door. And that is only the beginning ride, lasting a couple of hours.

Other rides are mapped out and on the tour slate, and new trail building projects are a continuous effort. One could easily spend several days in San Pablo Etla riding singletrack. Combine that with the doubletrack, and you could spend a week, or more, riding new routes every day. If you are willing to explore, like we did on the Piedra (Rock) Descent ride, you might be the first person ever, along with MTB Oaxaca, to ride a bike on a trail.

We are sitting by the creek. Carlos is making a seat and pedal adjustment and I am grubbing. The afternoon air is calm. It is warm, but not hot. Humidity is not present.

"You going to try and walk up from the other side of the ridge to



see if you can find a trail that you could connect from where we left off?" "I might. Seems like there should be something up there."

"Probably is, but if not, maybe you could build a trail." "That would be a lot of work, and I don't know if it's permitted." "True."

The thought of a trail coming across the ridge and down to where we are headed consumes me. It would be a ridge trail with breathtaking views that would roll on for seven or eight miles, by our estimation. A smile comes to my face. I have a feeling that I am going to hear about the first navigation of the trail in a few years. Then I think: I want to be there for that first run.

"Ready?" "Yep."

The trail continues on, meandering out into an opening from the mountainous valley behind us. We muscle through some very

technical rock gardens and a few more stream crossings, clearing some but not others. We come to a small wooden cabin. It is brand new. A sign notes that it will be used by the forest service to house a guard, someone who will try to monitor tree cutting in the area.

As we roll out into the open land, connecting to doubletrack, I look back at the saddleback where we were up on the ridge, and see the drop off of it clearly in my mind's eye.

"That's where the trail would come down on the map, right? That's the Magic Marker line off the ridge?" "That would be it." "I got a feeling you will find a line through all of that."

Carlos smiles, sort of, knowing that it would be a little nonsensical to try and find a line up there.

The sun shines high above in the Zapotec sky. A few large cacti stand

like sentinels. The Sierra Norte rises up behind our backs and the Oaxaca valley sprawls out in front of us. In the far distance, the mountains rise up again, the beginnings of the Sierra Sur that march on down to the Pacific. We have another hour or so of riding to go to the pick-up point.

Mostly doubletrack, Carlos cuts in on footpaths to spice it up along the way. I enjoy watching daily life going on around me. I reflect on an earlier ride with Carlos along Mid-Ridge while we are passing through villages, feeling mtb-content. I am not seeking anything more in the moment. The tires keep rolling, the thorn patch working just fine. We may not be able to make permanent marker lines on the topo map, but we are able to cross off some lines. We consider it progress.

Perhaps next time, there will be a new ride in town.

411 OAXACA

Oaxaca's city center is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a Spanish colonial gem that offers the mountain biker a walk through architectural beauty during down time. Additionally, the country of Mexico has cuisine that UNESCO has determined to be an Intangible World Heritage, making Oaxaca, a region with very unique Mexican cuisine, a destination with rich history, delicious food, and amazing singletrack. Imagine post-ride meals of deep, dark *mole* (chili, chocolate, seeds, herbs and spices stewed for hours) sauce smothering chicken enchiladas. *Chilaquiles* and locally-grown coffee to fuel you for a morning ride? How about a hot chocolate *Oaxaqueno*, a nationally renowned drink, to put the antioxidants back in your body? Pork, beef or chicken tacos served on the street for a few dollars?

To arrange rides with Carlos, go to www.mtboaxaca.com. He has a fleet of bikes, if you do not take your own to Oaxaca. Bring your helmet, pedals and shoes, along with a hydration pack, if you prefer. While in town, stop by Zona Bici on Garcia Vigil #406. They have all you might need if you forgot to bring something, including energy bars and hydration products. They can service your bike and have rentals as well. They often refer people to Carlos when seeking singletrack. bikeoaxaca.com

United-Continental Airlines has a direct flight from Houston to Oaxaca. If you fly into Mexico City, take the ADO first-class bus from the TAPO station to Oaxaca (about \$37 U.S.). It is a 6.5-hour ride, but along the way you get spectacular views of the Sierra Madre, along with the snow-

covered volcanoes, Popo and Izta, between Mexico City and Puebla.

For a cheap lodging option in Oaxaca, I highly recommend staying at Posada El Chapulin on Aldama 317. The family-run, 8-room hotel is very clean and has hot water. For \$20/double occupancy, including WiFi and bottled water, you will not find a more hospitable place to lay your head. It is simple lodging, but is really all you need. Other lodging options of higher price and luxury are easily found online. Carlos can arrange lodging out in San Pablo Etla, if you would rather stay in a more rural setting.

Walk south of Oaxaca's *zocalo* to sample *mezcal*. Numerous storefronts abound, all with open doors for walking in and tasting the fermented maguey liquor. In the same area, chocolate processing stores are plentiful. Chocolate *Oaxaqueno* is famous throughout all of Mexico. Order a traditional Oaxaca-style hot chocolate for a post-ride refuel beverage.

La Farola is Oaxaca's oldest bar. Walk in and saddle up. Get there on a Friday evening around 8:00 to enjoy the local scene, complete with live music and dancing. Order a tube of your favorite Mexican *cerveza*, sit back and enjoy the spirit.

Oaxaca is world-famous for its food. You can spend \$2.00 on a plate of tacos from a street stand, or drop near a hundy on a full-course meal with drinks at some of the high-end restaurants. To start, walk into the 20 de Noviembre market and take a seat at any of the *comedores* that have a sizeable crowd. For sure, try some *mole*,

but you cannot go wrong with whatever you order. It's cooking that your Mexican mom or grandma makes, if you have a Mexican mom or grandma.

Grab a taxi and ask the driver to take you to Café Itanoni on Belisario Dominguez #513 in the Reforma neighborhood. The food, coffee and fresh fruit juices are excellent. The premise of the small restaurant is to celebrate the tortilla using ancient traditions. Women stand at ovens around the café making tortillas by hand, using techniques and recipes from way back, as they say. The tortillas are stuffed or topped in a variety of ways. Orders from the menu are single servings, so select several to get started. Prices range from \$0.75 for singles to \$4.00 for a full breakfast. Get anything with squash flowers and try the "holy herb" eggs. itanoni.com.mx

Oaxaca has quality coffee shops. I found myself going back to Café Brujula on Garcia Vigil #409. They make a great Americano and Cappuccino. A second Brujula is on the Alcalá, but the food options are limited there. Café Lobo Azul has a bike-share program for cruising around the city streets, and sometimes runs city night tours. On Armenta y Lopez between V. Guerrero and Cristobal Colon, they have lactose-free options, serve local coffee, and the soups are quite tasty.

Oaxaca is not on the U.S. State Department's Travel Warning List of states in Mexico. Travel is not restricted in any way there. How do you say, "Oaxaca?" wah-HAH-kuh, with a lot of emphasis on the HAH.

