

LAVA & JAVA

When Don Jorge hears that I rode out to Florencia from Turrialba, a loop that is no more than a cross-country cruise through sugarcane fields and coffee farms, he matter-of-factly says, "That's easy. The good riders at least climb up to San Juan Sur." I tell him it was a warm-up, a ride to check out the bike to ensure that it was functioning properly, that I was planning to ride up to the volcano on the weekend.

"Up to where you can't go any further? Where you have to then walk up to the crater zone?"

"Yes. All the way up."

"Now that's a mountain bike ride!" His eyes get big. He pauses. He asks a few questions to clarify in his mind that I know where the "top" is and that we are both talking about the same place.

We are. He pours me another cup of coffee. He smiles. "You better get good rest this week. Leave when the sun rises."

Turrialba, a small town situated an hour-and-a-half drive east of San Jose, is locally called Lluvia

because of the abundant rainfall it gets year round, *lluvia* meaning "rain" in Spanish. Even while much of Costa Rica is experiencing the dry season months of December to March, Turri still gets rain, a product of its proximity to the Caribbean Sea, mountainous topography surrounding the town, and the foot of the Turrialba Volcano combining to create unique weather geography. For coffee growers in and around Turrialba, the rains translate into larger berries, longer harvest and a unique quality. Turrialba coffee, when compared to other coffee growing regions of Costa Rica, has lower acidity and a fuller floral bouquet, as the Tico baristas say. It is a smooth drink, not strong at all, what many might consider to be a breakfast-style coffee. Coffee experts in the country remark that Turri coffee is great for blending with other coffee beans because it

balances acidity and adds an aroma that fills the house when brewing.

The coffee farmers of Turrialba, however, would never blend their beans with other beans. As they say, "I produce the best coffee in the world." Don Jorge has a sticker on a window of his coffee-roasting shack that says so.

Perched atop a hill behind his humble dwelling is a ramshackle cabin-of-sorts with a front porch view that would rival any view anywhere in the world. For sitting on a chair and drinking the organic coffee that he grows right there on his farm, it truly is perfect. Finca Antigua, "Ancient Farm," is his passion. All the vegetables, fruits and coffee are grown without what he calls, *agro-toxicos*. His goats, for cheese and milk, and chickens are fed from what is grown on his farm. The manure from the



animals serves to fertilize his farm. It is a closed cyclical system. It is a system that he believes in deeply, saying that farming, for him, can only be done that way, the way it was done in "ancient" times, in unison with earth's systems. Having spent some time living and learning farming techniques with the Cabecar people, Don Jorge has a conviction so steadfast and real that makes me wish I could believe in something the same way, be it organic farming or something else.

Along with Don Jorge's Finca Antigua, other coffee farmers in Turrialba are embarking on agri-tourism projects as value-added income to maintain their livelihoods. Coffee's volatility on the world commodities market means good and bad years to a small farmer. A steady source of income, tourism is an avenue they are exploring. With thousands of tourists coming to town to raft and kayak the world-famous Pacuare River, the hope is that some might stay a few days to visit and learn about coffee farming.

Add in that Turrialba is one of the staging grounds for La Ruta de los Conquistadores, along with a very strong local mountain bike culture, some farmers are considering opening their farms to mountain bikers, the footpaths they use to harvest their coffee being singletrack. The owners of Finca Monteclaro are building trails for mountain bikers. At a 2012 regional mountain bike race, some 2,000-plus riders rode through Monteclaro as part of the expert loop.

Borrowing an old mountain bike from a friend, I leave a little after sunup, knowing that I have around 7,000 feet of straight elevation, making it 8,000-plus of total elevation to reach the



top in about thirty miles as I traverse the mountain instead of the direct route up. The traverse has less traffic and is ideal for mostly gradual climbing before the final grueling 10 miles.

Volcan Turrialba is not visible, hiding somewhere up in the clouds on an overcast day. I arrive at the first intersection on the map and stop at a little restaurant. They have *chan*, a drink made from the seeds of a local plant. The seeds become gelatinous after a few hours in water, and impart a minty flavor. They add some sugar, the result being a refreshing glass of hydration.

I continue on, passing by Guayabo National Monument, an archeological site. Not long after, the road becomes rockier

and wetter, making for some slow going. People wish me well, and offer greetings of *adios*, a way of saying hello in much of rural Central America.

The climbing continues. Suddenly, a pack of mad, snarled, little, yip-yip dogs, as I call them, surrounds me. I get off the bike and put it between me and the dogs. They are relentless. Into my brain pops a memory from my time working in Honduras: 'Make like you are going to pick up a rock to throw at them.' The second that I bend over, they take off running back down the road without a bark. No rocks are thrown.

I arrive at the intersection where in the past I have turned left and gone back down the mountain to Turri town. I turn right this time.

making my way over to the next right-hand turn in the road to climb the final eight miles to the top.

I am off my bike twenty minutes later. The gradient on this particular part of the climb is too much for me, some five hundred feet or more of pedal power that I do not have in me. My legs are thankful for not trying to grunt it out. Undoubtedly, getting out of the saddle and stretching my legs after three hours of climbing is relief that my morale needed.

I am tired. I cannot see the top anywhere. I am engulfed in fog. I hope that when I get up there I will be able to see the cone.

It is almost an hour later, and I am at the intersection to go over to the zone where you have to walk up to the crater. I made it.

I find a place to eat. Remarkably, just as I park my bike, the clouds part and I see the cone for about three minutes. It seems to make the ride complete, that it was all worth it. The exhaustion I was feeling lessens.

Two cheese tortillas and a cup of hot chocolate are sat in front of me. I eat and drink slowly, sharing some of the tortillas with a dog giving me hungry eyes. Satiated, I pay and then walk over to the bike. I clip in and pedal away, knowing I have about one and a half hours of descent back into town.

I take the direct route down, passing some road cyclists on the way up. I wave, saying, "I made it to Turri Volcano!" They give me thumbs up and shine big smiles my way.

I am very happy. I am very tired.

When I see Don Jorge the next morning and tell him that I made it to the top and that I have pictures to prove it, he jokingly asks if I got a truck ride up there. We both laugh. He gets up and comes back with a cup of coffee. It was just roasted the previous day. I taste berries and a subtle chocolate note on the back end. I tell him so. He agrees, and says that this year's harvest has an especially ripe bean flavor to it, a lot of fruitiness, he says.

I sip some more. He says that I should come back and ride Los

Conquistadores, what locals call what those of us outside of Costa Rica call La Ruta. I tell him that maybe someday I will. He says when I do that he will bring me some coffee from his farm when I overnight in Turri.

I thank him, adding that after the race, should I ever do it, I would like to go back to his farm and sleep in his coffee shack for a week. I tell him that I want to do nothing for that week, other than help out on his farm when needed, and cook and share life with him.



He likes that idea. I then add one more request.

"What? Anything you want? Please tell me."

"I want to ride a bike from the porch up there on the hillside, down the path where the goats graze in the grass, past their pens below, on through the coffee, past your house and out your front gate."

He looks at me like I am crazy. He then tells me so. I explain that the dirt and stone stairs that run alongside the animal houses and his house will be a bit that I am pretty sure I can ride it out. I tell him that we can roast the beans on his woodstove and grind them in the hand grinder, like we have done before, and then we can brew it *chorreada*-style, as all good coffee-drinking Ticos do. We will sit back and enjoy the caffeine ride while taking in the vista of the mountains and the Reventazon and Pejibaye rivers.

And then I will put on my helmet, clip in, and ride like the wind down through his farm. He laughs at the wildness of it all, to him, a coffee farmer. When I say that people would love to visit his farm for a day, to eat fresh organic goat cheese made on his farm, to drink his coffee and learn about how he farms, to complete the day by taking a minute downhill mountain bike ride against one of the most magnificent backdrops on the planet, he gets a serious look on his face.

He considers it. He looks away.

"Do you think people would want to hear my message? Will



they be interested in hearing my ideas about caring for the land, for future generations?"

"I do."

"Then they can come and bike down the hillside through the farm. It is not my farm," he says, emphasizing the word "my."

"I am only caring for it in this life, as I feel it should be cared for. I don't think a bike would cause it harm."

"I get to go first, though, Don Jorge!"

"If you get back up there first!"

I take the invitation, hoping to make it there again soon. More than anything, I want to go back and sit with my friend, enjoying his passion for nurturing by way of producing the best cup of coffee in the world. s

More: fincamonteclaro.com/en_monteclaro.html. Readers could contact Don Jorge via local phone to visit his Finca Antigua: 2556-1890, or 8397-7503. He checks email from time to time at: icabecar@yahoo.com 5