

“A Ride in the Clouds”

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I have always thrived on exploring our beautiful world, while absorbing and learning lessons along the way. There are always those unexpected pleasures and moments we cherish. Friends made in passing, and friends made for a lifetime. A winding path, a new bridge to cross, an un-chartered territory. Sometimes this may be discovered in our own neighborhoods, or in a foreign country or on the other side of the world. These unforgettable experiences are waiting for you “Carpe Diem”!

Every so often, I enjoy planning a new trip, which allows the act of randomness and planning to take on a life of it's own. The beautiful country of Costa Rica, where heaven and earth seem to spread it's inviting arms for us to enjoy, create that merge.

Costa Rica is known as Central America's jewel. A perfect haven and dream for the outdoor fitness and sports enthusiast. The countries natural attractions of rain forests, national parks, active volcanoes, abundant wildlife, and golden sandy beaches draw tourists from all over the world. Mountain biking, hiking, or sea kayaking all offers incredible experiences and memorable images in a land that has remained in time.

I wanted to share this experience with two good friends Keith and David. Two people who would also take home some unforgettable moments captured in time.

The next thing I knew, we were off for two weeks to hike and mountain bike the volcanoes Irazu, Poas and Arenal of Costa Rica, while taking some time in between to enjoy the surf, kayak, swim and hike through various National Parks and rainforests. Here is a brief inside description of one of our trips that was simply unforgettable.

We slept only two hours the prior night, having taken the red eye from Los Angeles to San Jose, Costa Rica. We un-packed our suit cases, and ate breakfast full of foods that would give us a substantial carbohydrate load for the energy needed for our adventure. We packed our gear, met our guides in the lobby, and we were off. We had already broken a full sweat from the 85-degree heat and humidity already at 8 a.m. in the morning.

As the van hitched with mountain bikes ascended up the winding road, the mercury on our friendly thermometer descended rapidly. We had just passed a sign that read 8,500 feet above sea level. We headed into the gates of massive nebulous formations. The last inkling of sunlight filtered through only long enough to catch a glimpse. As we negotiated our way through the skies thick blanket of moist air, our visibility was only good enough to ensure us that the road has not vanished into this air. I felt my body rapidly trying to adjust to the extremities of the altitude and increasingly cold

temperature. I knew it was only the beginning of what was to be one of the most physically challenging and exciting excursions I had ever taken.

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Our destination was to the top of Irazu volcano, almost 12,000 feet at the lip of the crater, where the conditions would soon slap a rude awakening to any thought of a normal day of mountain biking. Knowing that, I soon accepted what nature had in store for us.

Our van continued upward, the rain began to play Macarena on our van. One of the van's windows had decided to stay at half mass, as the elements were invading us. The cold mountain rain, gave me a prelude to what was only the first course on the menu leading up the entree. We stopped briefly at 10,000 feet to attempt to warm ourselves with the internationally well-known Costa Rican Java from a small mountain cantina. The opportunity I was waiting for. Our guides seemed well versed on the terrain of the mountain, but they had omitted to tell us about the below 30 degree temperatures at the top. I on the other hand should have planned better. With a short sleeve riding jersey to my back, I knew that the difference between ammonia and warmth was anything that I could barter or buy from the locals at the cantina. Three t-shirts stapled to the wall would have to suffice us.

As we arrived at the summit, the rain subsided, and we quickly mounted our bikes. We were excited to ride along the lip of the crater. A few moments, we saw our first view of the spectacular inner crater of Irazu. Inside the crater existed an aqua green lake, created by the many years of rainfall, minerals and gasses, sulfur being the main ingredient. We began to hear a hissing sound, which lingered in the background, as we admired the beauty of nature's work. As the sulfur began to fill our nostrils, we knew it was time to tail out of the there, before being overcome by the gas.

We continued our ride to the foot of the park entrance and discussed the strategy of the terrain and our ride. Suddenly nature had decided to throw another surprise, to ensure us of a most memorable experience, hail, hail and more hail, dropped from the skies. I thought, is this possible, in Costa Rica? The moment of truth had arrived. Our guides gave a quick look to one another at then at us. We knew that it was our decision to either march on, or call it quits for the day. I smiled, gave the thumbs up, as did Keith and David. So our journey began.

As small balls of ice deflected off our rain soaked bodies, we began our decent. Our bikes cut through the mountain air of 26 degrees and blankets of ice. My body began to shake from the extreme temperature conditions, not good! As we entered a steep slick road that would lead us to our off road mountain trail, our speed increased quickly even with braking, in that short moment, I lost complete control of my bike. My world was in a slide and spin as I desperately attempted to gain control. A surge of blood ran through my

body like a locomotive train, and that quick again, I was in complete control 40 meters further down the road. Back in control, the scare must have stopped the shaking and I began to find my rhythm. I would have never imagined, that in a country known for its humidity, tropical weather and jungles, I would have been dodging my way in and out of a hailstorm. Don't you love it!

Our ride for the next 7 hours was not only a journey of physical triumph and exhaustion, but also a fascinating ride through small mountain towns that were interwoven around the volcano. The earth was rich with minerals; the aroma was sweet, filled by the flora and vegetation. Ideal condition for trees and farming. Many rare woods such as purple heart come from this region. Curious as I was, about the exotic woods, I stopped at a small wood shop, which seemed to be so obscure that I nearly crashed into it as I sped around a sharp turn on my way down an obscure trail.

This was an opportunity for me to rest, and appease my fascination with rare woods. I introduced myself to the owner and entered into a small but well kept woodshop. The owner was as excited to meet someone from a different land as I was. He invited me in for lunch, and talked about his life and family, as I told my life story. I often think about his kindness, and how honest and gracious he was. He presented me with a walking stick that was comprised of five different types of rare woods. This was a gift, he said, and would not think of taking any payment. He also wanted me to have a sample of the 13 woods that he harvested from the Costa Rican rain forest region. He proceeded to cut small pieces. This was one of those moments in time, where human powered exercise, paved the way for a short kinship that I would always remember. As I strapped my new mementos to my back, I thanked him many times over, for a memorable time shared, and for his kindness. I began peddling and soon was off continuing my journey.

Herds of cattle sporadically lined the narrow dirt trails, which we all shared. We all had a place to go; yet we shared a common path. That is so true, in so many parts of our lives. As our group mountain biked down the mountain, we all had our own personal experiences. We met many more special people along the way as we observed a way of life, and region of the world that would only be discovered by hiking or biking.

I had a great deal of time to do allot of thinking along the way, and often thought about, many places I have walked, run or biked, and how many experiences that came along with those trips.

I began to reminisce about a few of my excursions. My 12-hour walk through the ancient and historic city of Rome, Italy. The day I walked 100 city blocks in New York on a marvelous fall day, where I took, in all that New York has to offer. Or the day I biked over 100 miles from Los Angeles to Santa Barbara, enjoying one of the most beautiful coastlines in the world. My yearly trips of hiking in Sedona, Arizona, where I re-energize and find peace and tranquility on the pungent red mountains and mesas. Or perhaps the

day I hiked down into the dormant volcano of Haleakala in Maui, where for 9 hours, passing through four different climate and temperature zones. One of my most fascinating hikes yet. I plan on adding to that list.

As a photojournalist, my camera always accompanies me on all trips. I love to find those spontaneous moments where only you and life are at one, and you capture that moment in time. Yes, a picture does speak a thousand words.

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As I found my way at the bottom of the mountain, I looked up and said a small prayer, thanking God for his guidance and protection took in the moment and smiled. I still feel that smile as if it were yesterday. As I looked over my shoulder, I heard one of my guides, calling me. He informed me that Keith and David were almost down the mountain as well, and we would all meet at a local cantina. We all joined one another, and compared our experience down the Volcano Irasu. We laughed, patted each other on the back and drank a cold cerveza in celebration of a day well done.

Trip Tips:

I hired a private guide for our various excursions, though there are many active travel companies that supply a full package which include, guides, all accommodations, transport, van support, gear, meals and events. There are typically two guides per trip and between 15 - 20 group members. You can go to www.gorptravel.com, which lists a wide variety of active travel companies based on destination, price, and amenities.