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# MTB AYITI

Haiti from 13,000 feet. Everything seems quiet and still and innocuous. There are rows of muscular, toothy mountains and hillsides, brown and green, with an unforgiving severeness. Snaking dirt roads cut upward, over and across the topography. Layers of foliage. Soft clouds. The sweeping arc of the coastline with water that starts aqua near the land's edge and then turns a deep, moody blue as it pulls back.

I take out a camera and make some photos from the plane window. I am on a massive Boeing 737 with approximately 12 other passengers, six of whom are a family of Mennonite missionaries. The rest are aid workers.

Somewhere in the belly of this plane is a bag containing my mountain bike. I'm going to ride up and over the island. Mostly up. At least that's what they tell me.

This is my first cross-country mountain bike race. I do not speak French nor Creole, and up until now the extent of what I knew about Haiti came to me from the pumped-up alarmists at CNN and a book by Zora Neale Hurston that I read when I was 15 and, quite honestly, did not fully comprehend.

As we taxi toward the gate, I get that what-have-I-gotten-myself-

into feeling—a sure signal that whatever is about to come is going to kick me in the gut and rock me sideways. In the good way.

### Conflicted

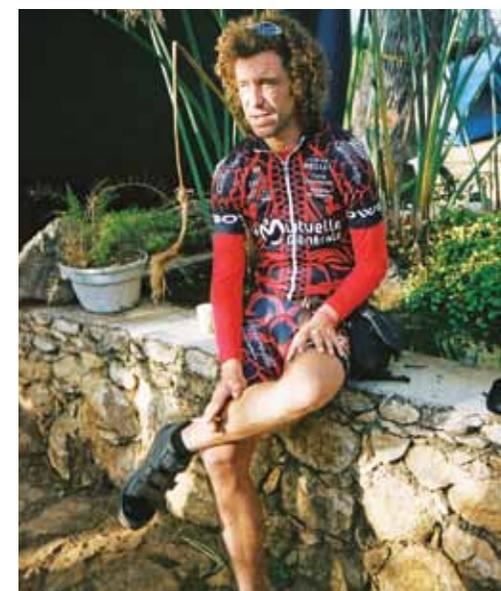
Port au Prince is everything you would expect a city to be after 200 years of oppression, conflict, despots, flawed foreign interventions, occupations, rebellions, in-fighting, and natural disasters. Simultaneously rundown and overrun, it pulses with the energy of survival and resilience. Spend just a few hours with the history of Haiti and you'll just start to form an idea of how things got to this point. The 2010 earthquake aside, this is a place that cannot seem to catch a break.

The van ride to our hotel takes us past some of the largest IDP camps: miles and miles of tarps and tents interconnected by

makeshift alleyways and walkways. Piles of rubble, long rows of women carrying impossible loads on their heads, child-vendors weaving precariously amid the poetic chaos of the traffic, selling everything from iced drinks to dried plantains. Horns, heat, color, light.

Three years ago the ground here shook with a force 30 times greater than an atomic bomb. Some 250,000 people died. Somewhere between 350,000 and 400,000 are still living in tents.

I have a \$3,500 mountain bike in my bag and I am here for a sporting event. The van drops me off at a stunning hotel protected by high walls, a locked gate and two guards. The courtyard is rich with lush greenery, majestic trees and a crisp, blue swimming pool. As the server in the outdoor bar delivers a cold beer, it is pretty hard not to feel conflicted.



WORDS: HEIDI SWIFT IMAGES: SWIFT & MTB AYITI



**“THERE MAY BE STARS RIDING THE FRONT OF THIS RACE, BUT THERE ARE ALSO HEROES OVERCOMING UNIMAGINABLE ODDS AT THE BACK OF IT.”**

### Rumors

In the days leading up to the race, speculation about the course reaches a fever pitch. We’ve been told there will be a 45-minute hike-a-bike section. We’ve been told that the stage 3 descent is a never-ending kidney rattler. A kid from the Global Dirt disaster response team tells me he’s ridden those footpaths on his moto and he can’t imagine how we’ll traverse them on mountain bikes. The event’s photographer and course designer, Steve Zdawczynski comes back from a final scouting trip with his forearm split open, the result of attempting to ride a moto no-hands so he could clip the belt on his backpack. An unsettling sign nonetheless.

How big can rocks be? How steep can grades be? How high can our heart rates soar? There’s only one way to find out.

### BONSWA!

The course lives up to the hype. Unforgivably steep, treacherously loose, severely scenic. Lungs filled with fire, thrashing heart, eyes

filled with vistas that spread out in postcard style, sprawling and vast. Two stages in one day. It’s 11,000 feet of climbing in about 29 miles. Yes, you read that right.

After rolling through the clatter and crush of Port au Prince, we are on the footpaths and rocky fire trails that lead villagers to markets where they can trade for goods. First rule of racing mountain bikes in Haiti: always give up the good line when you hear a motorcycle bearing down on you. Second rule of racing mountain bikes in Haiti: say hello to everyone you pass (*Bonswa! Bonswa!*). They will look at you like you are crazy. They’re right.

I spend the day learning to pick lines around donkeys, braking for farm animals, smiling at children who smile back, and alternately pushing, carrying and riding my full-suspension mountain bike.

### Sole Collector

They call it the Sole Collector because of the shoe soles strewn along the way: footwear

systematically dismantled by the sharp, massive boulders that comprise this “path.” It is supposed to be a 45-minute hike-a-bike, but it takes me the better part of two hours.

It is a death march to end all death marches. Demoralizing were it not for the never-ending awareness that you are cutting a path across the Chaîne de la Selle—the tallest of Haiti’s four mountain ranges—a landscape that most foreigners have never seen.

How do you experience awe and agony at the same time? Slowly.

### Riding Blind

As I register the unthinkable beauty of this place, I can’t help but think of Brian Cowie. Somewhere behind me, on a sweet Ellsworth tandem with Eric Miller as his captain, Cowie is pushing a bike just like me. Major difference: Brian Cowie is legally blind. He has never ridden a mountain bike before today. He is a Canadian paralympian with legs like rocket boosters and lungs

the size of his home country. The man can ride some serious bike.

Today, surrounded by these jutting, toothy mountains that he can’t actually see very well, he is learning the finer points of knobby riding in the most brutal classroom. Later over ego-soothing rum cocktails, Cowie and Miller will tell me about their day: one of the hardest either has endured in a long, long time.

There may be stars riding the front of this race, but there are also heroes overcoming unimaginable odds at the back of it.

### Camp Winnie

Sole Collector delivers a level of mental and physical annihilation that demands payoff. That payoff is

La Visite National Park: 24,000 acres of lush pine and broadleaf forest covered with narrow footpaths used by farmers and schoolchildren. Haiti has suffered from crippling deforestation due to charcoal production and agriculture, but La Visite gives you a glimpse into the kind of oasis that once covered most of these mountains.

Dropping into the path that leads to the heart of the park is like entering another world—the kind of world that once inspired Haitian painters like Alix Gabriel. Vivid plants of prehistoric size and shape, greens so intense they’re almost neon. My companion, a Haitian rider named Esaie Christian, and I become so mesmerized we lose the course, riding almost an hour out



Images: MTB Ayiti

## THEY SAID IT WOULDN'T WORK.

**They said the infrastructure was too poor, the resources too thin, the terrain too treacherous, the politics too precarious. But Travelcology founder Philip Kiracof wasn't buying it. He looked at Haiti and saw an adventurer's paradise: miles and miles of untouched singletrack, cerulean shorelines and fire trails with 360-degree vistas. Fueled by the belief that adventure tourism could have a profoundly positive impact on the country's economy, he set out to create an event that would prove his point.**

**On January 30, 2013, his dream became reality and the MTB Ayiti Ascent Stage Race kicked off with an 11-mile ascent starting in the heart of Port au Prince and climbing 4,000 feet to the Observatoire de Boutilliers in Kenscoff. The race got harder—and more beautiful—from there, taking participants into the heart of La Visite, one of Haiti's two national parks, and then down an exhaustive, soul-jarring 20-mile descent onto the surreal white pebble beaches of Marigot.**

**In the end, American pro mountain biker and ultra-endurance specialist Sonya Looney would take the overall women's win, while a scrappy and determined Haitian hero named Willy Joseph, wearing high-tops with flat pedals, gutted his way to victory in the men's division.**

of our way down narrow, ripping red-clay trails punctuated by gray stalagmites jutting out of the earth.

We make our way back to the course with the help of a chiseled old farmer who lets us cut through his fields as he runs behind us, pointing the way ahead.

Eventually we arrived at Auberge La Visite, a small inn run by Haitian national Winthrop Attié. Set on 50 acres in the heart of the national park, it's a two-bedroom oasis surrounded, for today, by a small village of tents, our lodging for the night. We refer to our temporary home affectionately as Camp Winnie.

### Tommy Cracks

Tommy cracks. Not physically, but mentally. Pedaling past the final checkpoint of stage 3 before we begin the 20-mile technical descent to Marigot, I find him standing by his bike, cursing. He is unsure of the next turn, as am I. I ride back to the checkpoint to get clarification two times before we get it right, burning precious time. He's pissed. I feed him. Then we start down the road together, adjusting slowly to the feeling of our bikes sliding underneath us through the loose dust and rocks. Villagers point and call out. When we ride through tiny towns, children line the road and reach out to touch us with hands or small sticks.

Tommy is the 48-year-old owner of Cackalacky Coffee Roasters in North Carolina. He signed up for MTB Ayiti on a whim at the last minute. Having not raced in more than a decade, he'd bought a new mountain bike just for this event. "This is my mid-life crisis, Heidi," he jokes as we stop to eat. "I should have just bought the damn sports car ...." He is laughing. I know he doesn't mean it. It will take him a few more days to realize that he doesn't mean it.



Tommy cracks, but he doesn't break. He holds it together. After a few miles, he mellows out. We joke and complain together. We stop to rest our aching hands. We take turns on the front, finding lines through the rubble that don't actually exist, sliding wide on corners as we execute our new skill: the Haitian drift. For 20 miles we stick together, Tommy waiting for me every so often as I coax myself to match his descending ability.

Later we will cross the finish line on the beach in Marigot. I will

take a picture of him standing on the white pebble beach with the vast robin's egg greeny-blue of the Caribbean Sea stretching out to meet a pastel sky.

### Rosedanie

When Rosedanie Cadet showed up in Port au Prince, none of us knew exactly what to think. A small woman with a wiry frame and graying hair, this 52-year-old Haitian national had the steely look of determination. She arrived with the same fully rigid 1996 Gary Fisher Wahoo that she uses



Pre-registration is open for the 2014 edition.  
[mtbayiti.org/pre-register](http://mtbayiti.org/pre-register)

Images: MTB Ayiti

## CREATING.

The race itself was almost secondary to the more important objectives of the event: reveal Haiti's hidden geographic gems, inject the economy with nearly \$200,000 during the week of the race, recruit and partner with local businesses and micro-enterprises, and begin to create the infrastructures necessary to create sustainable adventure tourism opportunities.

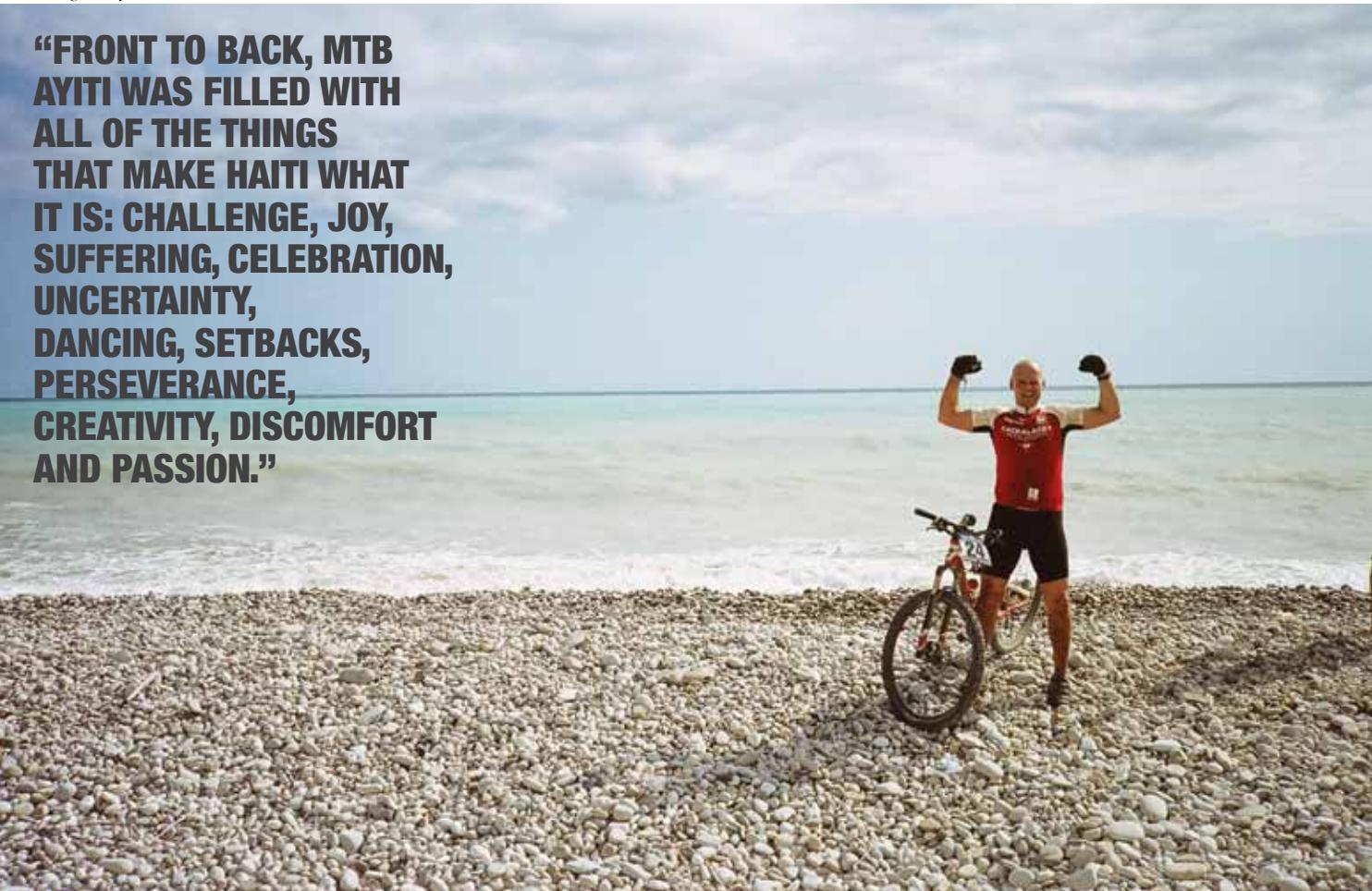
Pedro's donated tools and sent wrench and racer David Wilcox to spend two days training Haitian locals in bike mechanic basics (Wilcox also managed to snag 2nd place despite three fairly catastrophic mechanicals). Wellfit Wellness out of Colorado provided yoga, massage, foot reflexology and generally distributed stoke and support.

Before the racing started, there were a few days to soak in Haitian culture and begin to form our own idea of what this country is really about. We learned mosaic from local artists to make the first trail markers for what will someday be a large network of trails. We visited the El Saieh art gallery and I got to see and hold originals by some of my favorite Haitian artists, Gabriel Alix and Pierre Maxo.

We listened to live music and drank Barbancourt rum and danced. We visited local schools and distributed bikes as part of Hans Rey's Wheels for Life program. We met the ministers of tourism and sport. We watched Cyborg, possibly the most incredible break-dancing troupe in the history of the world—a band of performers from one of Port au Prince's infamous slums, Cite Soleil.

Then in the morning, we met in the lobby of the hotel and rolled slowly together to the start of the race in front of the site of the National Palace, which had been decimated in the 2010 quake. After the booming of loudspeaker call-ups, we observed a minute of silence and waited for Magalie Racine, the Minister of Youth, Sports and Civic Action to say "Go." She did. And we did. And the real adventure began.

**“FRONT TO BACK, MTB AYITI WAS FILLED WITH ALL OF THE THINGS THAT MAKE HAITI WHAT IT IS: CHALLENGE, JOY, SUFFERING, CELEBRATION, UNCERTAINTY, DANCING, SETBACKS, PERSEVERANCE, CREATIVITY, DISCOMFORT AND PASSION.”**



for transportation. The tires, which appeared to be original, had become so brittle with age that they were now crumbling off the rim. She rode in a skateboarding helmet and carried a faded Jansport backpack.

The condition of her bike proved to be insurmountable during the first two stages though the tires miraculously held together. That night, she and Streb went to work together to change the tires and adjust the brakes as best they could. The next day she rode the rigid bike with careful confidence—slow-going for sure—but there were no signs of her stopping.

Eventually, the race organizers sent a pickup truck to collect the stragglers, but Rosedanie refused the broom wagon. When she arrived in Marigot there was no one there to greet her. The finish line where the stage victor, Willy

Joseph, had been hoisted aloft onto shoulders four hours prior had already been taken down.

She rode to our campsite alone and came up the hill to where we were eating and resting. We saw her and let out a cry and her face lit up as if she'd won the whole shebang. A lantern rouge to rival any lantern rouge: our darling, our favorite—the ever-smiling Rosedanie Cadet.

### ***Bon Bagay***

*Bon Bagay* is a Creole phrase meaning, depending on context, “It’s a good thing” or “Awesome!” If MTB Ayiti is any indicator, Philip Kiracofe and his crew are onto something that embodies that sentiment. The race itself was a success, but the real measure of its impact will be revealed over the next several years. If the work of organizing, building infrastructure and creating a sustainable

ecosystem of support continues, there is real hope that adventure tourism can have a lasting, positive impact on the Haitian economy, empowering locals to share their country with pride.

Front to back, MTB Ayiti was filled with all of the things that make Haiti what it is: challenge, joy, suffering, celebration, uncertainty, dancing, setbacks, perseverance, creativity, discomfort and passion. The future of Haiti may still be precarious—the road to recovery from the earthquake still long—but one thing is certain: the power of bikes to bring joy and change is unstoppable, even in one of the most decimated, stigmatized countries in the world.

*Bon Bagay*, MTB Ayiti. It is, indeed, a good thing. ☺

More: [mtbayiti.org](http://mtbayiti.org)