The European Issue.
Olympic Podium: All 3.
From Hope to Orange.
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.

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.
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 rattle. 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 bruised and course designer, Steve Zdawczynski comes back from a final scouting trip with his forearm bruised. An unsettling sign nonetheless.

How big can rocks be? How steep can grades be? How high could clip the belt on his backpack. To ride a moto no-hands so he could clip the belt on his backpack. To ride a moto no-hands so he can trade for goods. First rule of racing mountain bikes in Haiti:

**BONSWA!**

To everyone you pass. Second rule of racing mountain bikes in Haiti:

**BONSWA!**

They’ll 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 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.

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 a mountain bike before today. He is legally blind. He has never ridden a mountain bike before today.

**Camp Winnie**

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

**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 mountain ranges—a landscape that most foreigners have never seen.

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 paintings 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
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.

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...
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*