

Suzie Q from South Africa loving the river crossing in Costa Rica
PHOTOS: ASTRID STARK



Cycling till Doomsday

Follow the footsteps of the Mayans to the end of the
World writes *Astrid Stark*

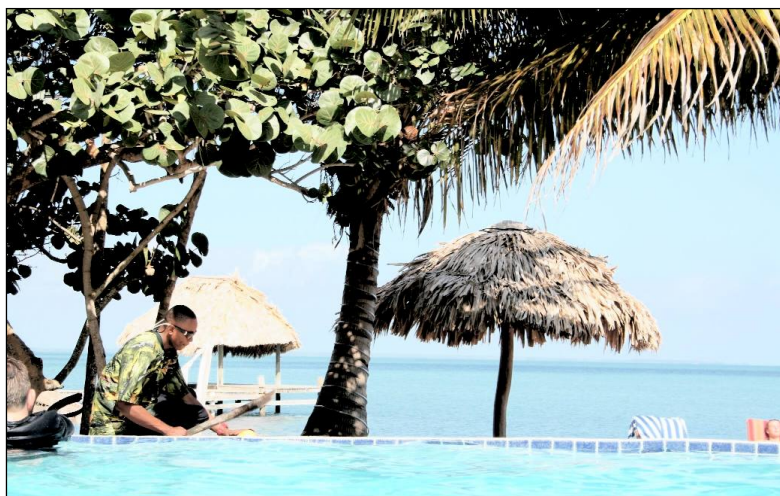
HE IS slumped against me in the cramped and swelteringly hot minibus. We're on a Honduran road and speeding towards the Guatemalan border as if we're fleeing from the police. He is tall for a Honduran, wears a weathered cowboy hat, and what looks like the real deal Stetson boots. The enormous moustache doesn't muffle his snoring. With every bump he snuggles tighter and his hairy left hand starts creeping towards my leg.

Am I imagining it? But now his hand is resting lightly on my thigh. I scrutinise his seemingly comatose face. And then he starts caressing my inner thigh with his fingers. I am Jacky Chan, my elbow whacks him, hard, in the ribs. He jumps out of his seat – he is quite tall – glares at me and spits Spanish. I don't understand what he is saying but I can guess. He had it coming. Besides, I was in a foul mood.

I have been travelling across the Honduran back roads for the last 12 hours using chicken buses, taxis, minibuses, tuk-tuks and doing a lot of walking. See, I had the misfortune of being attacked by a pack of large and very angry Honduran hounds a few days earlier. Truth: they were three teeny tiny Chihuahua-looking critters.

There I was cycling on a sunny day with Henry Gold: maverick, inventor, raconteur and survivor of an elephant stomping. Henry thought it would be a nice idea to create a bicycle tour from Costa Rica, through Nicaragua, then Honduras, Guatemala and finally into Belize.

The tour would start November 17 and end in December, 2012, yep,



Chopping up coconuts for Pina Colodas in Belize

the end of the world. And so it was done. He called it the Doomsday Ride. So there we were, Henry and me, babbling away, taking in the glorious natural beauty of Honduras, waving at the friendly locals, and pretending not to be utterly ex-

hausted. The critters started chasing us as we hit an uphill. We were used to being chased by dogs, and besides they were tiny so we ignored them. They were relentless and building up speed and one went straight for my leg. Too late, I

grabbed for my water bottle to spray the cretin and there it was. His tooth just broke the skin on my calf. Game over for me for a bit. I had taken just about every imaginable vaccination, pill and precaution for South America: except the one for rabies. I love dogs. They will never bite me. What a laugh. Anyhow, the feisty Welsh tour doctor wagged her finger in front of my nose and sent me back to go and get some shots while the rest of the cyclists on the Doomsday Ride kept on moving forward toward the glorious Guatemala.

What gave my elbow that extra momentum into the cowboy dude's ribs was the fact that the rest of my clan were about to enter the village of Copán to visit the ruins, one of the finest preserved Mayan sites in Honduras, and one of the main reasons for me wanting to get on this trip: the Mayan temples. I never got to see the Copán ruins, as I stood in endless clinic queues with Mayan mums and their babies, towering above the short ladies like a freck-

led-faced redheaded barbarian.

Oddly enough I was having the time of my life. We were a curious bunch of cyclists from across the globe: eight South Africans, a big bunch of Canadians, and a small representation from America, The Netherlands, Germany, and France. We were ready to tackle the 28 days of cycling along the footsteps of the Mayans and through ancient temples. Our tour leader was a roughshod but charming crocodile Dundee type from Brazil with a strong aversion to bathing. The young and feisty Welsh doctor tended to our bodies.

There were two support vehicles, one hilariously driven by a robust Costa Rican called Bernardo, who spoke not a word of English, seemed allergic to road maps, and the GPS, and had a most peculiar sense of humour. We spoke Spanglish and used charades and somehow we managed to understand each other. Then, toss in the tour founder, Henry Gold, a quixotic maverick who emigrated from Communist Czechoslovakia to Canada, had an epiphany when the elephant stood on his head, and created a whole bunch of epic bicycle tours all over the world, aptly named 7Epics. They are seven incredibly long and rather tough bicycle tours across the globe.

Cycling was akin to torture on some days. We took the back roads which were excellent for beautiful, quiet nature rides up and down lush tropical hills. However, it also meant that we often bumped along rutted roads, roads filled with tiny stones, and sometimes no roads. Sometimes, after rattling across washboard roads, it felt as if your brain was leaking out of your ears

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and your spine shifted a little to the left. We often fell, cursed, some of us cried a little, and it was only good fortune that we never broke any bones. We met friendly locals on the way and practised our Spanish on them. We ate mangoes and slurped on freshly harvested coconut milk. It seems like the further we cycled away from the big cities, the friendlier people were. We cycled past thundering waterfalls and down endless beautiful downhills. The sight of the lunch truck crammed with sandwiches, fruits, juice, Nutella – and every cyclist's Achilles' Heel – peanut butter, would bring tears to our eyes as we ate it by the spoonful and out of the tubs. We were careless about what we put in our mouths. We knew the next hill would devour the newly acquired calories.

The Doomsday Ride is cleverly designed so you can ride most of the day on your own, or with the group – your choice. So when you have the grumps with the rest you can pedal it out on your own. The only rule is that you have to be at the final destination by sunset, otherwise the support vehicle will collect you. So that is a helluva lot of freedom in a strange land, which is utterly liberating and exhilarating.

But some often rode together. Our weird and wonderful little group quickly bonded. Some chose partners of the same speed to ride with and others tackled it alone. Such freedom. I sat out for many days taking photos and taking notes. But the rest of the Doomsday family members were tough as nails, taking each day in their stride. And then on our rest days? Well you'd think that we would collapse in an exhausted heap. Nope. We'd go horseback riding, kayaking next to a volcano, swimming, learned to dance the Punta, ziplined in a rainforest, took yoga classes, and milked cows.

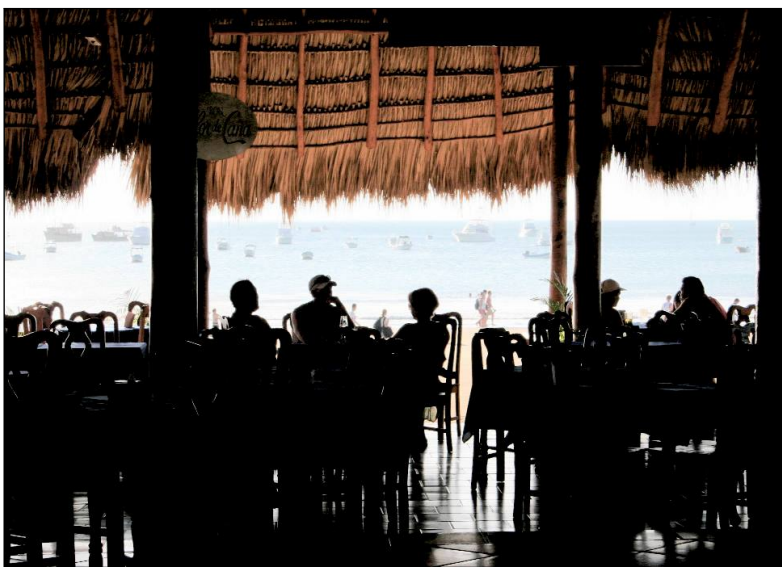
But cycling was just one part of the adventure. I did get to experience the other two Mayan ruins, Tikal and Lamanai, on the trip. Imagine cycling through an ancient Mayan temple that is tucked away in a lush tropical rainforest. All you hear is your breathing and the babbling of Howler monkeys in trees up above. The smell of damp soil and vegetation hangs heavy in the air and the criss-cross of sun and shadow throw psychedelic patterns into the jungle where, you're almost certain, you saw the silhouette of a Jaguar on the prowl.

Tikal in Guatemala is a World Heritage Site. Our group left Flores, the closest village to Tikal, at 3am to avoid crowds and watch the sunrise over the temples. We arrived in the dark and sat quiet like statues on the temple steps. When the sun finally made an appearance, so did the fog. And it stayed for a long time. The fog eventually lifted to reveal the ancient Mayan structures. The magical sounds of the jungle waking up made it worth the wait and journey.

Our last temple visit to Lamanai was filled with feelings of accomplishment and misery. It was our last cycling day on the Doomsday Ride into the heart of Lamanai ruins in Belize. It took place on December 21 last year, the day the world was said to end, and certainly the end of the Mayan calendar. We were expecting swarms of hippies and Doomsday theory supporters but there was hardly a soul in sight.



Lisa, aka Little Spoon, and Boston hitchhiking



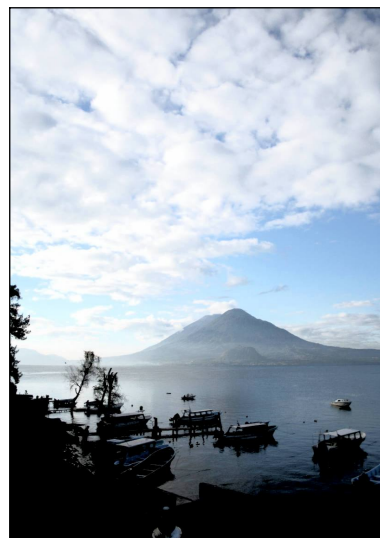
Time for Mojitos in San Juan, Nicaragua.



In Granada, Nicaragua' street



When cycling Central America it is not the dangerous roads, but the dinosaurs you have to look out for



Lake Atitlan from Panajachel, Guatemala

About Doomsday

THE DOOMSDAY Ride – La Ruta Maya – has been designed by Tour d'Afrique Ltd, (TDA Ltd.) a bicycle tour company that has been described by Newsweek as the World's leading bicycle tour operator. See www.tourdafrique.com.

The Next Doomsday ride starts on 17 November and finishes on 21 December 2013. TDA Ltd has been designing bicycle tours and races for 11 years and it has tours on six continents, covering more than 50 countries.

TDA LTD created 7Epics to complement its existing tours. 7Epics is a series of spectacular, fully supported, long-distance cycling expeditions/races passing through over 50 countries and six continents that, when combined, cover over 72 000kms – or almost twice around the globe. See <http://7epics.com/>

After our temple lunch we returned to Belize City, for the last time together as a group. Shortly after that we all started going our own way, some together for a little while longer.

And then back to our different countries – alone. And the first pangs of separation anxiety started setting in. It was inevitable.

You cannot easily spend five weeks with a group of people, travelling in the same direction, suffering hardship and extreme joy, and not become part of a very unique clan. Cycling Central America? Hell yes!

So if you decide to leap out of your comfort zone and get on a bike, don't forget those rabies shots.

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We had the entire ruins to ourselves. It was magical, mystical, and oh so peaceful. Lamanai may not be as well preserved, loaded with history, or as large as Tikal or Copán, but it is my favourite out of the three purely for its mystical ambience. We set up a table next to the Jaguar Temple and enjoyed a last early dinner. We poured whisky on one of the ruins: a local told us this would appease the gods and grant us a reprieve from this end-of-the-world business. And then we

waited for the grand finale. It hasn't come, yet.

Cycling Central America is the perfect way to travel. On your bike you choose to fly fast or go slow, and you stop as much as you like to take in the smells and spectacular scenery, or take photos.

You get to meet as many locals as you want. You can even hitchbike if the mood takes you. And you get to eat as much as you like without turning into The Blob. My memories of The Doomsday Ride

are of cycling through a lush rainforest, her relentless but beautiful hills, drinking Mojitas next to Lake Arenal, sharing great stories with the other cyclists, shopping – and the best Guatemalan hospitality in Antigua – getting lost, cringing at my bad Spanglish, the excitement that entering each new country brings, the crappy border posts, strolling through ancient temples, but mostly finding myself part of an impromptu Doomsday family.