Men's Journal
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Five gringos, a tortilla peddler, and the godfather of Mexican mountain biking tackle a mission to map the great lost silver trail of Copper Canyon

THE TRAIL AT THE END OF THE WORLD

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photographs by SCOTT MARKEWITZ

not many people know this, but the middle world lies about 50 miles south of El Paso. It's deep in the heart of Mexico.

If you spend a day driving from the U.S.-Mexican border across the wet páramo lands of Chihuahua, and then spend the next week hiking through a gallery of arid landscapes, you'll arrive at the town of the same name. You'll be at the edge of the Sierra Madre, where the earth drops off to the south.

Here the cliffs are so steep and exposed that they appear to have been cut by a giant knife, and at their base, new green leaves just sprout from earth simply continues falling, for another two feet into vertical dirt and shattered stone. Rains of enormous size

As you hike up the town of the Indian border of the mountains' west flank, you come to a place where the earth drops into sheer nothingness.

Here the cliffs are so steep and exposed that they appear to have been cut by a giant knife, and at their base, new green leaves just sprout from earth simply continues falling, for another two feet into vertical dirt and shattered stone. Rains of tremendous size

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"Dude, this is totally gnarly." announced Quentin, kicking his head backward to make sure I was paying attention.

As he told this, Quentin, who is 35 years old and has been nine times backcountry athlete for more than a decade, took his eyes off the trail for about a nanosecond, which was just enough time for his foot to collide with a sharp stone and come to an abrupt halt — while Quentin himself kept right on going.

He composed a graceful mid-air arc before planting his butt on a boulder balanced at the edge of the drop-off, off-hand still broodily clutching his handle grip to brake. And for a horrible, sickening instant, there was no hand — no hand bristling with teeth, legs windmilling in the air.

I really didn't want to watch whatever was about to happen next.

Quentin and I were part of an unusual venture: a seven-person Toureco attempt- ing to locate, ride, and map out a lost treasure trail that slices through some of the wildest territory in the Americas and may soon emerge as one of the world's most instantly thrilling adventures.

The Copper Canyon region is a complex web of river-cut canyons extending across an area half the size of Switzerland. On the ground floor of this labyrinth of 3,000-foot-high mesas and gorges that penetrate deeper than the Grand Canyon lies the town of Batopilas, where, in 1880, a former American politician named Alexander "Boss" Shep- herd established himself as a legendary silver baron. (He had been the governor of Washington, DC, but was kicked out of office amid charges of corruption.) For 23 years, El Patrón Grande, as Shepherd became known, extracted some 27 million ounces of ore — about 60 cubic yards of pure silver — from veins in the area's igneous rock. And because Batopilas was so remote — there was no road con- necting it to the outside world — every ounce of the silver had to be hauled out on donkeys (or by hand) consisting of between 50 and 100 miles, each animal breeding two 72-pound ingots of silver, up a corkscrewing 400-mile trail filled with steep climbs, harpin bends, and heart-stopping drops (don't ask El Patrón Grande's bullion trains departing Batopilas once each month, and the entire shipment, usually worth about $10,000, was protected by a legion of heavy- ly armed guards. At the town of Creelico, the silver was loaded onto stagecoaches and driven another 250 miles northeast to the Bank of Mines in downtown Chihuahua City.

The route was known as La Ruta de la Plata, or "the Silver Trail." Petits died right after Boss Shepherd died in 1902, and it wasn't until 1978, when the Mexican govern- ment finally dynamited a circuitous, one-lane dirt road down to Batopilas, that the town re-emerged as a destination — this time as a stop for backpacking adventure travelers. Meanwhile, the old Silver Trail vanished into legend, rarely traveled and never mapped. As for the notion of riding down the thing on bicycles, well, that idea was so ludicrous that no one even proposed it — until a young man known as the El Mariscal of Mexican mountain biking arrived in Copper Canyon.

In the early 1990s, Álvaro "Chino" Gutiérrez, a native of Chihuahua City who became addicted to sin- gletrack while attending high school in Silicon Valley, moved to a rough-edged lumber town called Creel, which sits near the rim of the great canyon. In the central plaza next to Creel's main station, Gutiérrez started renting out single-suspension Gary Fishers, and in 1994 his little operation came to the attention of David Appleton, a geologist 35-year-old Texan who owned an adventure camp for teenagers in Colorado's Taos Mountain. Together, they started offering commercial backcountry bike tours of Cop- per Canyon to pioneering American shredders, and word quickly spread that the area was a sick-bopper's paradise. It was then only a matter of time before the idea of riding La Ruta de la Plata came up.

"Because the old Silver Trail ends right there in Batopilas, our clients were always curious about it," explains Álvaro, who, at 35, has legs of squirrel muscle and the negative body fat of a professional bike racer.

Toureco Hiking Tours

Contact: left

Arturo Jophy Durán, the 32-year-old and Quentin raise the stink.
FOR A HORRIBLE, SICKENING INSTANT, THERE HE DANCED—EYEBALLS
GYRATING IN THEIR SOCKETS, LEGS
WINDMILLING IN THE AIR.
They wanted to know all sorts of things. How many days did it take? Where did it go? Have you guys ever done it? It isn't unusual then that we had to go and find the answers to these questions."

The Silver Trail team arrived at 9 a.m. in the morning of our first day across the street from the Bank of Mines in Chihuahua City. An ensemble of local bikers and newspaper reporters were there to see us off, and the previous evening José Reyes Baeza, the governor of the state of Chihuahua, had come to our hotel to shake hands and pose for photographs.

The curiosity was provoked in part by the odd spectacle of a joint Mexican-American expedition attempting to penetrate such a remote country, unequipped on bicycles. But the bulk of the attention we drew must have been due to the bolivianos of Arizona and David’s ambitions for this journey. If we could succeed in locating the Silver Trail and mapping it, they hoped, the Mexican government might be tempted to develop the route as a tourist eco-tourism route — a national hiking-and-riding trail that could jump-start the struggling economy of the copper mines while placing Chihuahua itself squarely on the international adventure-travel radar.

To pull off this plan, they had assembled an eclectic squad. The help with route-finding and trail repairs, they brought along Cuchillo, a veteran guide who now owns Colorado’s operation, Copper Wilderness Adventures. Tall, raw-boned, and immensely famale, Cuchillo carried himself like a Jack Russell terrier on speed. Then there was Steve Marenholz, an accomplished laker and photographer who would document our progress, and Joel Connelly, a local outdoorsman of Arizona’s who delivers tortillas around Creel every morning on his mountain bike. Joel, 34, also happens to be a champion racer. The final member of the team was Jerry Brown, a thirty-year-old surveyor from Durango, Colorado, who sports a white handlebar mustache and beards like a cross between Sam Elliott and Lance Armstrong. Jerry has spent the last three years mapping all and mineral deposits throughout India, Bolivia, and Guatemala. In 1998 he mapped the entire Colorado Trail, which runs 486 miles from Denver to Durango in an even higher-elevation route of 11,200 feet. Three years later he did the same thing for the city of Tabule (now a city that is not officially recognized as "Silver CPS.")

We rode off briskly along a paved highway that brings Mazatz across Chihuahua’s hard-won desert plateau, and after about 40 miles of our ascent of Mexican cyclists, journalists, and police cars dropped off. Then we piled into a pair of white vans driven by two men support team and drove the remaining distance to the ranching village of Cañada Whose Base Shop-\ndesert had constructed a heavily fortified way station to shelter and feed its bullion men — one of five such stations along the trail. Located about 320 miles apart, each three-room station was equipped with a kitchen, a strong room for the money, and a sleeping room, all hidden by a long portal and sur- rounded by corrals and barns. Each was made of stone except for Cañada, which was adobe. What’s left of the Cañada station now sits atop a small knoll a mile or two outside the village and surrounded by farms. Only two shoulder-high walls are still standing, the adobe blocks retracted and weathered. When we got there, we set up camp and spent the evening dallying in our bikes to prepare for what lay ahead. Soon, we had frames, tires, and pumps strewn all over the station, and everyone seemed to feel proud action — not to mention thrilled by a sense of discovery that had taken hold as soon as we had pulled up to the runs.

"Just think about those guns and how many guns- less hanging out here with their rifles and all that," said David in his show Tras de nuevo. "Yeah, they probably built it this far outside of towns so they could keep tabs on the races," said Jerry, looking up from cleaning his chain ring with a digital. "They gave them a nod a no go. My, my, my. 'Boys, it looks like this adventure’s finally going to start, this is great!"

Jerry’s excitement, I was sure, was at least in part to his wanting to get back to the usual of high-tech mapping gear he had brought along. In ad- dition to his Hewlett Packard OmniBook (which would ride inside the support pack), he was hauling two GPS units, one mounted to his front handlebars (to provide a rough guide of where we needed to go) and the other strapped to a saddle pack on his rear wheel (to log our location every five seconds). With GPS technology, he was able to time both his ascent to the summit and his descent to the lake. "I got everything but a space-shoot," he bragged to me during our drive down. "And I may pick up one of those in El Paso."

NAIL THE TRAIL

Jerry Britten’s Silver Trail map and guidebook will be available by the end of the year (703-347-0204, jbritten@verizon.com), but in order to complete his work, NFT first need to retire to Copper Canyon for some altitude training and acclimatization. From Oct. 1 through 25, he’ll be joined by Quentin Keith, David Appoloni, Arazon Gauntt, and 12 clients for the first ever commercially guided Silver Trail tour. Participants will backpack from Creel to the old male-f寒假 ation station at Los Pinos, then motorcycle the rest of the way to Floresville while trying to remate carved artifacts believed of the rock, Cost: $1,600. Contact: Desert Wilderness Adventures (703-348-9100) or one of three local outfitters in Creel, Mexico (52-633-406-0632, serranos.com.mx).
It all sounded great to me and looked impressive that fine night at Caticch, but the next morning, just 15 minutes after bucking camp, neither he nor anybody else seemed to know where the hell we were. “We need to be way over in that direction somewhere,” David announced, pointing left. We were standing in the middle of somebody’s cornfield.

“Now, there’s too many, and we need to be on that one,” Amaro declared, pointing right.

“Hang on, guys,” Jerry called out. “The GPS is telling me... well, I’m not sure what it’s telling me... Shit, just... I have no idea which way we should go.”

Violently, this wasn’t going to be quite as simple as we’d hoped. But at least we knew it wasn’t easy in Boss Shepherd’s days, either. Back then it took the bullion train 15 days to get from Bempos to Caticch, a brutal slog that entailed crossing three river drainages, countless sub-canyons, and the Continental Divide — an up-and-down odyssey requiring more than 20,000 vertical feet of climbing and nearly 16,000 vertical feet of descent. At Caticch, since unloading the treasure, the conductors took on machine parts, dynamite, liquor, and strongboxes filled with cash to meet the miners’ payroll, then made their way back into the canyons. On one occasion a conductor also hauled a grand piano for Mrs. Shepherd’s parlor. All this traffic would have been impossible if the trail had not been clearly marked and perfectly maintained. Unfortunately for us, the past 73 years had taken quite a toll. Although many sections of the more were easily visible — especially when it passed over areas of exposed rock into which the iron-shod males had scoured a foot-wide, four-inch-deep thorough — more often it vanished amid the patchwork fields, dense forests, and thick undergrowth.

Within a few hours of leaving Caticch, we hit upon a division of labor that would prevail over the next seven days. First, Amaro and David would forge ahead as scouts, plowing across fields and thrashing through the bushes like derailed steers until one or both of them fell off their bikes. Then they’d discuss which way the trail lay, subtly waving their arms in opposite directions. When Jerry caught up, he would voice an opinion that almost invariably diverged from whatever Amaro and David were saying. The ensuing debates, which were always cheerful and polite, concluded with either Amaro or David giving up and forgoing off in whatever direction he thought best, forcing the others to follow.

Our plan called for us to make one way station each day. While swilling down a bottle of El Presidio, Mexico’s finest cut-rate brandy, back in a hotel in Chihuahua City, this had smacked us as perfectly reasonable. After all, we told ourselves, the iron-shod males had ridden on slow-pedaling steers burdened with several tons of loot, we were swishing along on state-of-the-art bikes carrying only 35 pounds in our packs.

How hard could it be?

By the end of the second day we resigned ourselves to the fact that instead of an epic bike cruise, this would be a hellish backpack marathon in which the role of our cycles was largely symbolic. From us two full days just to get to the second station, Huactivo, an asked that felt something like Harry Haywood trying to drum his army of dolphines over the Alp. After we summited our fifth succession of wind-gorge-and-mesa-and-gorge, I stopped counting.

The morning after we finally reached Huactivo station, we clowned to the top of a 500-foot ridge and stood expansively on the bikes on our backs, and there, to our delight, we were actually able to ride for a brief, intoxicating spell across a mesa coated in fine orange sand. Then we descended 1,500 feet into the Arroyo de L...
The descent was equal to founding down the staircases of four Empire State Buildings.

Iglehart, "the Gorge of Churches," a valley of towering stone steeples that's cleared by the winding path of the North River. Every 400 yards or so the river would take another turn, forcing us to dismount, leave the bikes to our shoulders, slosh through the wave, then remount and ride to the next bend. We did this for seven straight hours, completing 65 river crossings; until the valley ended and we embarked on a vertical bushwhack up a 4,600-foot mountain covered in a nightmarish tangle of underbrush. When I finally made it to the top, Scott, our photographer, took a skeptical look at the disheveled nest of leaves, bush, and twigs covering my bike helmet and turned to Quentin.

"So I'm wondering — do you think anybody on this team is going to break?" he asked.

"Let's just finish up and get to camp," said Quentin, too polite to point out my gasping for air.

We reached the third station, Los Pilares, about an hour after dark. As we gathered around a crackling campfire of pine twigs and everybody started sharing stories about prior expeditions, I got more and more of the flames and tried to recall if I'd ever felt so helpless.

I hadn't.

We spent the next three days forcing our way up and down the gorges and across the meadows of the high country in an effort to break through to the rim of the great canyon. And we'd probably still be out there now, except that two or three times each day, we'd stumble around a bend, surprise the hell out of a member of one of the mountain groups of indigenous people on earth, and start pumping him for directions.

Copper Canyon is home to the rural Taos-Haran-matan Indians, who call themselves naranis, or "those who run." They're enmeshed in their own spirit-people — marathonens, or, people that can go on almost forever. In 1993, some Taos-Haramatan women were brought to Colorado to participate in the Leadville Trail 100, one of the most grueling high-altitude ultramarathons in the world. Wearing traditional cotton tunics and sandals fashioned from discarded truck tires, two of them proceeded to capture second and fifth place. The third never won. He was 83 years old at the time.

Virtually all the Taos-Haranmatans we met were men. Some were wearing canvas pants, flannel shirts, and cowboy hats and presided over small farms. Others were draped in the traditional white tunic and made their borras in rocky caves that resemble the cliff houses of Mesa Verde. Regardless of girth, once they got over the initial shock of our rainbow-colored entourage, they complimented us on the naranisulas ("new horses") that we were riding, or, more accurately, carrying. After we asked them to show us the way, they would point out where the trail led and cheerfully assure us that whatever destination we were struggling toward could easily be reached in two or three hours.

Aside from the fact that it always took us four times that long to get anywhere, the only long-up we encountered with the Taos-Haranmatans was their unanimous refusal to accept that we were doing something as frivolous as riding bicycles up and down the arroyos for fun. The prevailing theory was that we must be searching for a lost silver treasure, and our appearance to the country was enigmatic with police and known strangers. Occasionally Amuro would take the time to explain his goal of revising the old Silver Trail as a travel destination, I might bring cash-flush recreationists to the area without disturbing the land too much, and each time the idea was greeted with surprising enthusiasm.

"It would be nice to have tourists coming through here," declared Osvaldo Flores. A 70-year-old former living next to the station steps in El Hueh, "We better be happy to sell them toiletts and take care of them."

Every train of students comes in one afternoon and we are left with alone as we led their bikes loaded with enormous bales of marijuana into the market. Our delight in the locals'
reaction was matched only by our amazement in dis-
covering that each of the four stone stages be-
tween Carichic and Bélapas was at least partially intact. Lo Pilarre, the third region, had been struck by lightning and burned some years back, but its stone walls were still intact, and the structure was being used to store hay. Station four, La Laja, was completely abandoned — missing its roof and capped in rotting apples that had fallen from trees growing along its ex-
terior. And Teobeschi, the final stop, sheltered a fam-
ily of Tsáchila squatters. Each night our team would sit around a campfire conjuring visions of how the stations could be rebuilt, debating whether people would actually rent the land appealing, and nesting our various scopes and binoculars from the día de muertos.

“Not many folks actually enjoy backpacking with bikes,” Quentin said one evening while preparing to de-
sole our meager ration of frozen-dried beans and rice. “It’s not exactly a lot of fun, what we’re doing.”

“But you gotta understand that things can improve,” said Jerry, who was filtering water from a backpack spring into everyone’s bottles. “When the Tahuantinsuyo Trail first existed, we opened it to back-
packers — but slowly it got buffered out to the point where you could actually ride the thing on bikes. It took a long time, but it worked. The same thing could happen here.”

It was an odd enough point to summarize the kind of op-
timism of my fellow explorers, even more so as we had-
died in my sleeping bag. I’d drift off to the sound of Armoni or Davide describing to someone their vision of the future of this place. It would be an adventure through with me to see the Appalachian Trail, I’d explain, with enough colorful history to qualify as a miniaturized Lewis and Clark Trail. What’s more, this whole thing would happen without wrecking our Cop-
pex Canyon’s efforts that Mexico’s tourism officials have already infiltrated upon splendid landscapes in places like Cieneguita, Mestrián, and Cabo San Lucas (an aggregated of particular concern to Armoni because the Mexican government has now trained its chinks on Copper Canyon as the locus of a big new travel destination, with plans to boost tourism in the canyon itself: 10,000 people a year, by 2010.)

“Here in Mexico, adventure travel is still very new area,” Armoni said, “and I give it one day when it happened to be on the receiving end of one of his impassioned speeches. “We just need to convince the politicians that the key to success using the mountain is in”

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triple all the terrain and the confusion, we made some impressive progress over those final days. And, to our surprise, we mostly stuck to the original Sierra Nevada route. By the time we reached the final station at Teobeschi, Ar-
taro and Davide seemed to have developed a sixth sense about where the trail led, and Jerry’s GPS units were fitting smoothly with our path.

Of course, we still had plenty of problems. David lost his rear brakes, which had to be rebuilt. A bolt was missing from the center pivot on Scott’s bike; Quentin’s seat-post rack sheared in half, and the side of Jerry’s right shoe fell off. But by the afternoon of the seventh day we had raped the final encampment, reached the edge of the world, and found ourselves gazing into the impossible depths of the great canyon.

The earth shrank into a cloud of gray gobs and soaring ridge tops. The plateaus and trees sus-
pended from the cliffs looked like dense tapersities of emerald and jade. The exposed bands of rock, created a rainbow of red and orange and black; the water-
falls were red; and the sky had taken on a stormy shade of blackish blue. Bathed in the glow of late autumn, these elements seemed to draw from the grandeur of the Himalayas, the vastness of Africa, and the fecundity of the Amazon all at once.

After pausing to take it in, we mounted up and ap-
tempered to ride down the trail — under Armoni’s mishap nearly sent him tumbling over the edge. (By hanging onto his handlebars, somehow managed to keep his balance and avoid taking sky-diving into the Silver Trail’s list of adventure options.)

Challenged by the near disaster, we all got off and
carefully walked our rigs down the steep section until the singletrack finally widened out into a dirt road that descended in a series of boldly arcing switchbacks. Then we climbed back on the bikes and embarked upon what all of us will forever remember simply as The Descent.

Having spent a week slogging along at a glacial pace, every one of us, no matter how beat up and ex-
hausted, was yearning for some speed. And so with-
out any discussion, each of us put the hammer down and started to fly. The surface of the road was cursed with loose pallets and riddled with deep water-
sheds. We skidded through the first hairpin turn, then opened up our brakes and accelerated toward the next bend, twenty-hopping over the ruts. The next bend seemed to come up faster, and as we swerved through the arc, our motor bikes began throwing momentary trails of dust and rocks over the edge. We pealed into that turn, then the next, and the next — our handlebars and chain rings and rear tires flaring to the furious, stac-
tated beat of the trail surface.

As we rocketed along, we passed through nearly a dozen layers of rock. For a few minutes we could find ourselves whispering through a section of vermilion-
colored stone in the road-cut, then the color would switch steeply to maroon, followed by an interval of pure white. Then brown, which gave way to black. Then to purple and orange, and back to black, and finally into gray. The layers we washed through came up-
presented hundreds of millions of years in geological time, and this seemed somehow fitting because our downswung surname seemed to go on forever. And while the ribbon of river below gradually fanned, the air grew warmer, the vegetation more colorful.

We had launched our descent in a pre-water world of pandoros and pine forest, but soon we were hurtling through lush sections of maple and live oaks. This swiftly gave way to remedied sections of desert ruled by 15-foot cacti and thorny acacia trees, and from there to sub-tropical gardens carpeted with red and orange flowers.

Gradually the fastest riders drove further ahead, holding up such a substantial lead that eventually we were able to stop them mounting separate switchbacks bunch-
dreds of feet below us, each one taking around a bend farther down than the next. First came Armoni, followed by David, Quentin, and Scott. At the rest of the pack, Jerry and I found ourselves stepping every 15 or 15 minutes, partly to allow our bikes to cool and the clogging in our hands to recede — and partly, I think, because we both wanted to prolong the enchantment. We belted to a halt, meteor out of the landscape for a long pause and then, with a silent nod to each other, clip-
back into our pedals and peacefully resume the ride.

The entire descent was equal to pounding down the stairs of four Empire State Buildings, and it took more than an hour before we stopped off our 4,000-foot runs and reached the river. It was magical, and the view and sensation and realization of having done it whole-
thing seemed — at least to me — to be setting us up for an even more magical culmination upon reach-
ning Bélapas. Given everything we’d endured, I told myself, there ought to be something celestial, god-like fingen-
ners, maybe fireworks in the town square. At
the very least, a parade.

Of course, that’s quite what happened.

J

just before the conclusion of The Descent, my front tire blew out. By the time we got it fixed and reached the final bridge into Bélapas, it was nearly dark. When we crossed the town, the girls were all inside, the drunks draped across the doorways continued swinging in peace, and even the dogs—didn’t bother jorting.

We rode into town together, the seven of us fish-
ing for honeycomb stones to throw at the horse-
s in the town’s plaza and the something of an ar-
riage that was being prepared on a solitary colon-
building spaced with Mestrián arches — hothoah-
hos shores were curtained by blazing palm leaves. We rode on through the dirt, the orange air seemed we reached the central plaza, and there, two things happened.

First, it started raining. Not the hard, bone-chill-
ing rain of the mountains, but the delicious, blood-
warmth bath of the impetuous. Then, when the
twist air came the peeling of church bells. Someone was performing an evening cantar in the bell tower of the Bélapas cathedral.

It might not have been a parade. A few weeks later, we’d all returned home and recovered from the journey, then would be another kind of celebration. First, Sei-Sor GPS would finish crunching his topographical data in Dublin and e-mail the results down to Texas. David would pick it up, and on his next trip to Cred, he would bring it with him to Armoni. And then, one

afternoon in early spring, the El Marichal Mexican mountain bike would take his map of La Ruta and La Plata — a route he believes will someday take its place among the gear — to Chihuahua City.

Whereupon he would inform the government that, as promised, he had found the lost silver of Bélapas.