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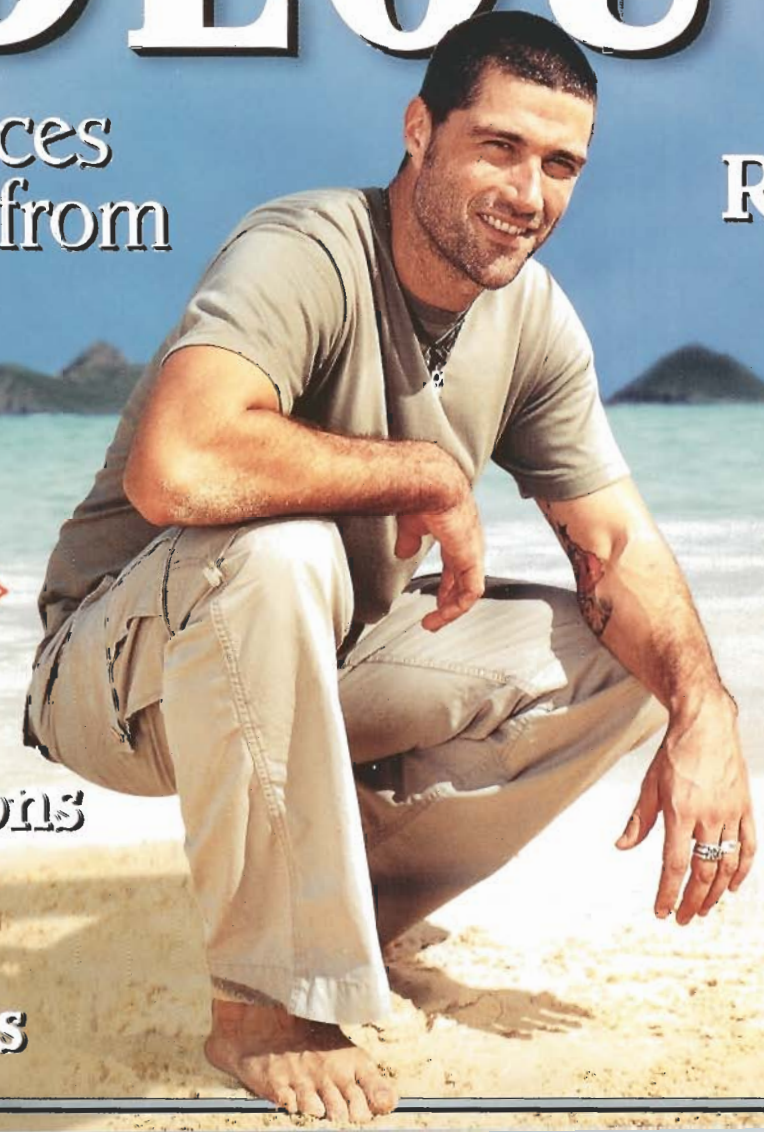

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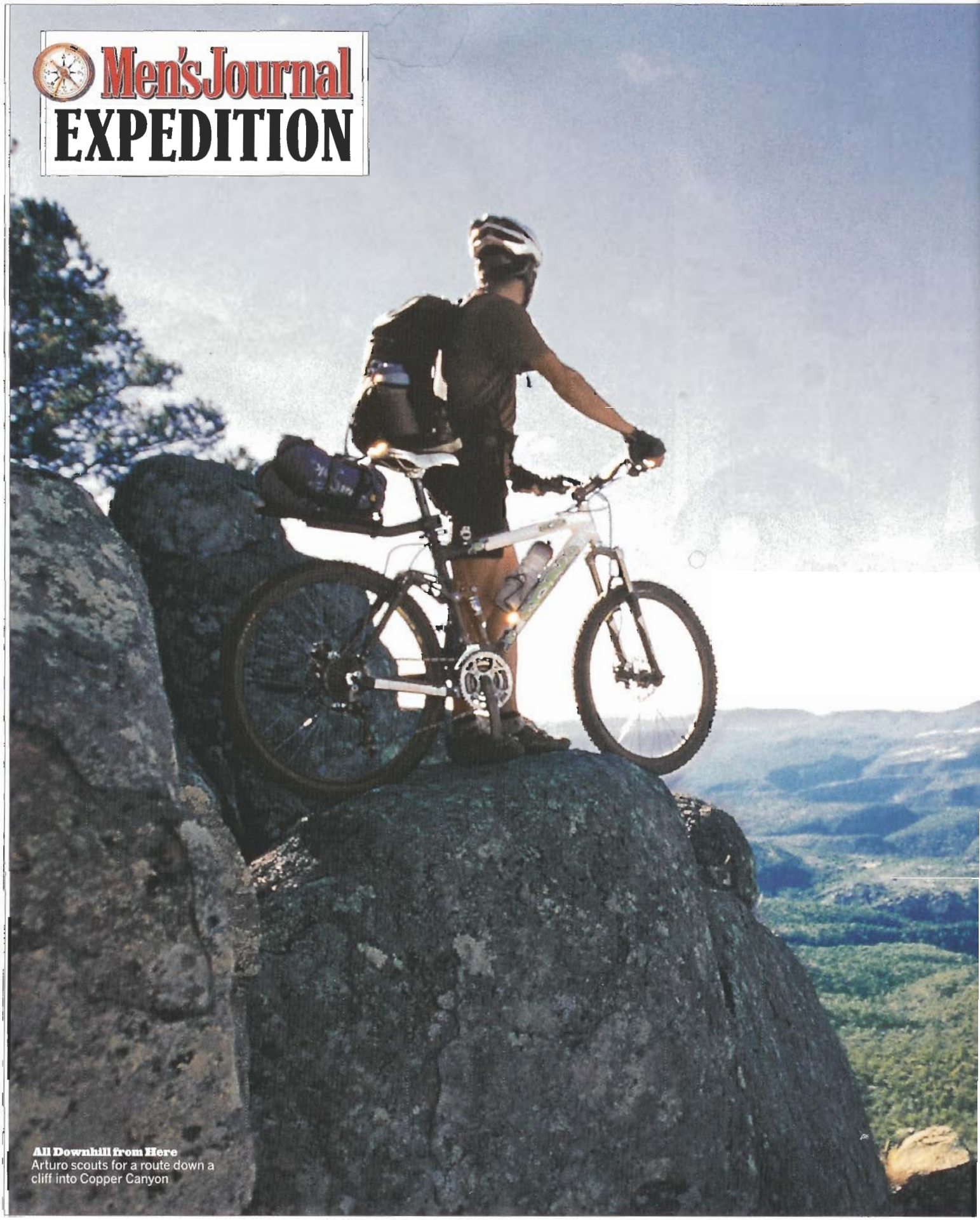


All Downhill from Here
Arturo scouts for a route down a cliff into Copper Canyon

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

text by **KEVIN FEDARKO**
photographs by **SCOTT MARKEWITZ**

Not many people know this, but the end of the world lies about 350 miles south of El Paso, Texas, deep in the heart of Mexico.

If you spend a day driving from the U.S.-Mexican border across the vast rangelands of Chihuahua, and then spend the next week bushwhacking through a hellish anarchy of tangled forests, sharp crags, and bald-topped mesas that stretches off to the south and the west — a wildly uncombed region extending all the way into the the Sierra Madre — you will eventually arrive at a place where the earth drops away into sheer nothingness.

Here, the cliffs are so steep and exposed that they appear to have been cut by a machete, and at their base, nearly 4,000 feet down, the earth simply continues falling for another 500 feet in vertiginous slopes of loose dirt and shattered stone. Ranks of enormous cacti march up the faces of the boulder-choked escarpments. Waterfalls tumble between precariously balanced pinnacles of rock. And far, far below it all, at the very bottom, a river spools along a bed of pebbly debris like a fine wire of silver. It's the sort of spot where donkeys pause for long moments of self-doubt, where even goats get cold feet.

If you make the journey to this spot, you may venture down the trail and see what lies beyond the cliffs. But proceed with caution, because a slip here can cost you dearly. I know this because last autumn I rode off the edge of the world on a bicycle. And as I did so, the friend I was riding behind committed a grave mistake.

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

As he said this, Quentin, who is 39 years old and has been an elite backcountry athlete for more than a decade, took his eyes off the trail for about a nanosecond, which was just enough time for his front tire to collide with a sharp stone and come to an abrupt halt — while Quentin himself kept right on going.

He completed a graceful midair arc before planting his butt on a boulder balanced at the edge of the drop-off, one hand still feverishly clutching his handlebar grip and brake. And for a horrible, sickening instant, there he dangled — eyeballs gyrating in their sockets, 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 entourage attempting 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 insanely alluring 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 8,000-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" Shepherd 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 22 years, *El Patron Grande*, as Shepherd became known, extracted some 27 million ounces of ore — about 80 cubic yards of pure silver — from wide veins in the area's igneous rock. And because Batopilas was so remote — there was no road connecting it to the outside world — every ounce of the stash had to be lugged out on convoys (or *conductas*) consisting of between 50 and 100 mules, each animal hauling two 75-pound ingots of silver, up a corkscrewing 140-mile trail filled with steep climbs, hairpin bends, and heart-stopping drop-offs. El Patron Grande's bullion trains departed Batopilas once each month, and the entire shipment, usually worth about $120,000, was protected by a legion of heavily armed guards. At the town of Carichic, the silver was loaded onto stagecoaches and driven another 115 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."

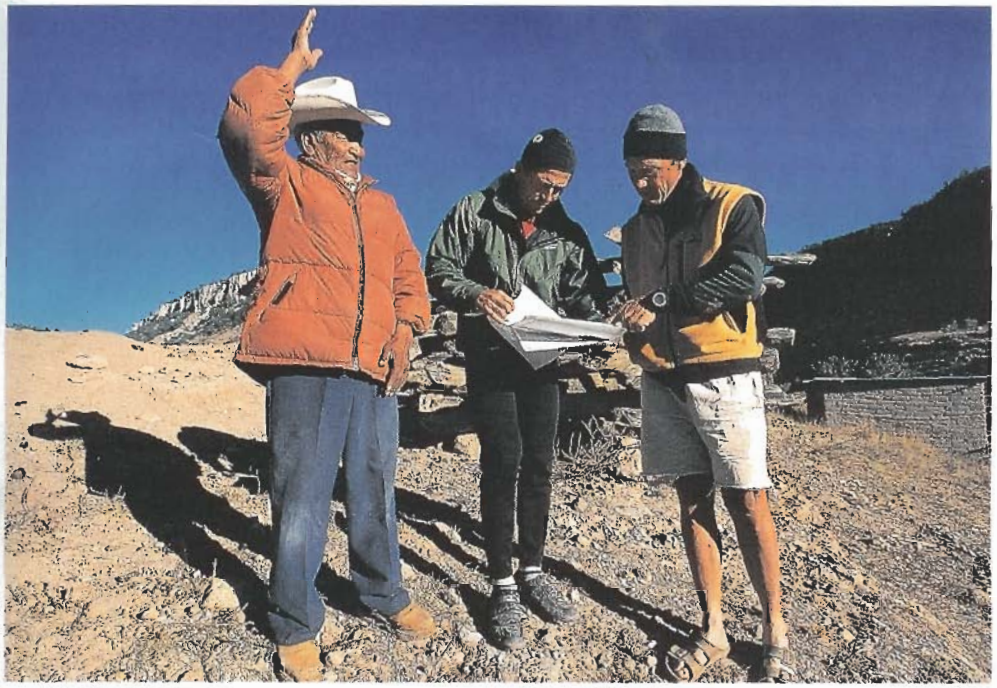
Profits dried up after Boss Shepherd died in 1902, and it wasn't until 1978, when the Mexican government finally dynamited a circuitous, one-lane dirt road down to Batopilas, that the town re-emerged as a destination — this time as a stop for backpacking adventure travelers. Meanwhile, the old Silver 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 Mariachi* of Mexican mountain biking arrived in Copper Canyon.

In the early 1990s Arturo "Chito" Gutíerrez, a native of Chihuahua City who became addicted to singletrack 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 train station, Gutíerrez started renting out single-suspension Gary Fishers, and in 1994 his little operation came to the attention of David Appleton, a grizzlyish 50-year-old Texan who owned an adventure camp for teenagers in Colorado's Tarryall Mountains. Together, the two started offering commercial backcountry bike tours of Copper Canyon to pioneering American shredders, and word quickly spread that the area was a rock-hopper'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 Arturo, who, at 36, has legs of springed steel and the negative body fat of a professional bike racer.

Trailblazers
Clockwise from left, Arturo, Jerry, David, the author, and Quentin relive the day's ride

FOR A HORRIBLE, SICKENING INSTANT, THERE HE DANGLED — EYEBALLS GYRATING IN THEIR SOCKETS, LEGS WINDMILLING IN THE AIR.



Human GPS Gavino Flores, 70, a Tarahumaran farmer at Huajochic, offers directions to the next way station

"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 just seemed natural that we had to go and find the answers to these questions."

The Silver Trail team assembled at 9 AM on 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 was 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 remote country, unarmed, on bicycles. But the bulk of the attention we drew had more to do with the boldness of Arturo and David's ambition for this journey. If we could succeed in locating the Silver Trail and mapping it, they hoped, the Mexican government might be persuaded to develop the route as a unique eco-tourism resource — a national hiking-and-biking trail that could jump-start the struggling economy of the canyon area while placing Chihuahua itself squarely on the international adventure-travel radar.

To pull this off, they had assembled an eclectic squad. For help with route-finding and repairs, they brought along Quentin, a veteran guide who now owns David's Colorado operation, Outpost Wilderness Adventures. Short, raw-boned, and intensely funny, Quentin carries himself like a Jack Russell terrier on speed. Then there was Scott Markewitz, an accomplished biker and photographer who would document our progress, and Joel Cordero, a local sidekick of Arturo's who delivers tortillas around Creel every morning on his mountain bike. Joel, 35, also happens to be a champion racer. The final member of the team was Jerry Brown, a wiry 55-year-old surveyor from Durango, Colorado, who sports a white handlebar mustache and looks like a cross between Sam Elliott and Lance Armstrong. Jerry has spent the last 30 years mapping oil and mineral deposits throughout India, Bolivia, and Turkmenistan. In 1988 he mapped the entire Colorado Trail, which runs 480 miles from Denver to Durango at an average elevation of 11,000 feet. Three years later he did the same thing for the 165-mile Tahoe Rim Trail. Probably the most experienced backcountry cartographer in the U.S., Jerry has been to Mexico many times, where he is affectionately known as "Señor GPS."

We rode off briskly along a paved highway that blazes across Chihuahua's windswept plateau, and after about 40 miles our escort of Mexican cyclists, journalists, and police cars dropped off. Then we piled into a pair of trucks driven by our two-man support team and drove the remaining distance to the ranching village of Carichic, where Boss Shepherd's men had constructed a heavily fortified way station to shelter and feed his bullion trains — one of five such stations along the trail. Located about 30 miles apart, each three-room station was equipped with a kitchen, a strong room for the treasure, and a sleeping room, all fronted by a long portal and surrounded by corrals and barns. Each was made of stone except for Carichic, which was adobe.

What's left of the Carichic 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 rounded and weathered. When we got there, we set up camp and spent the evening dialing in our bikes in preparation for what lay ahead. Soon, we had frames, tires, and pumps strewn all over the station, and everyone started to feel primed for action — not to mention thrilled by a sense of discovery that had taken hold as soon as we had pulled up to the ruins.

"Just think about those guards and mule wranglers hanging out here with their rifles and all that treasure," said David in his slow Texas drawl.

"Yep, they probably built it this far outside of town so they could keep tabs on the loot," said Jerry, looking up from cleaning his chain ring with a dirty rag. He grinned like a teenager on prom night. "Boys, it looks like this adventure's finally about to start. This is great!"

Jerry's excitement, I knew, was due at least in part to his wanting to get busy with the arsenal of high-tech mapping gadgetry he had brought along. In addition to his Hewlett Packard OmniBook (which would ride inside the support truck), 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 rack over his rear wheel (to log our location every five seconds). With all this techno-assistance, Señor GPS reckoned he could nail both our own location and the trail location to an accuracy within 10 feet.

"I got everything but a nine-speed Cuisinart," he had bragged to me during our drive down. "And I may pick up one of those in El Paso."

NAIL THE TRAIL

Jerry Brown's Silver Trail map and guidebook will be available by the end of the year (*970-247-0824, bearcreeksurvey.com*), but in order to complete his work, he'll first need to return to Copper Canyon for some additional tweaking and clarification. From Oct. 6 through 15, he'll be joined by Quentin Keith, David Appleton, Arturo Gutierrez, and 12 clients for the first-ever commercially guided Silver Trail traverse. Participants will backpack from Carichic to the old mule-train station at Los Pilares, then mountain bike the rest of the route to Batopilas while helping Jerry remap several ambiguous sections of the route. Cost: $1,800. Contact: Outpost Wilderness Adventures (*719-748-3080, owa.com*) or Umarike Expediciones in Creel, Mexico (*52-635-456-0632, umarike.com.mx*).

The Long Haul
Jerry and the boys test their will on another uphill slog

It all sounded great to me and looked impressive that first night at Carichic, but the next morning, just 15 minutes after breaking 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.

"No, there's two tracks, and we need to be on that one," Arturo 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, fellas. I have no idea which way we should go."

Evidently, 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 trains five days to get from Batopilas to Carichic, 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 Carichic, after unloading the treasure, the conductas took on machine parts, dynamite, liquor, and strongboxes filled with cash to meet the miners' payroll, then made their way back into the canyon. On one occasion a conducta 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 superbly

ARTURO AND DAVID WOULD FORGE AHEAD AS SCOUTS, PLOWING ACROSS FIELDS AND THRASHING THROUGH THE BUSHES LIKE DERANGED STEERS

maintained. Unfortunately for us, the past 85 years had taken quite a toll. Although some sections of the route were easily visible — especially when it passed over areas of exposed rock into which the iron-shod mules had scribed a foot-wide, four-inch-deep trough — more often it vanished amid the patchwork fields, dense forests, and thick undergrowth.

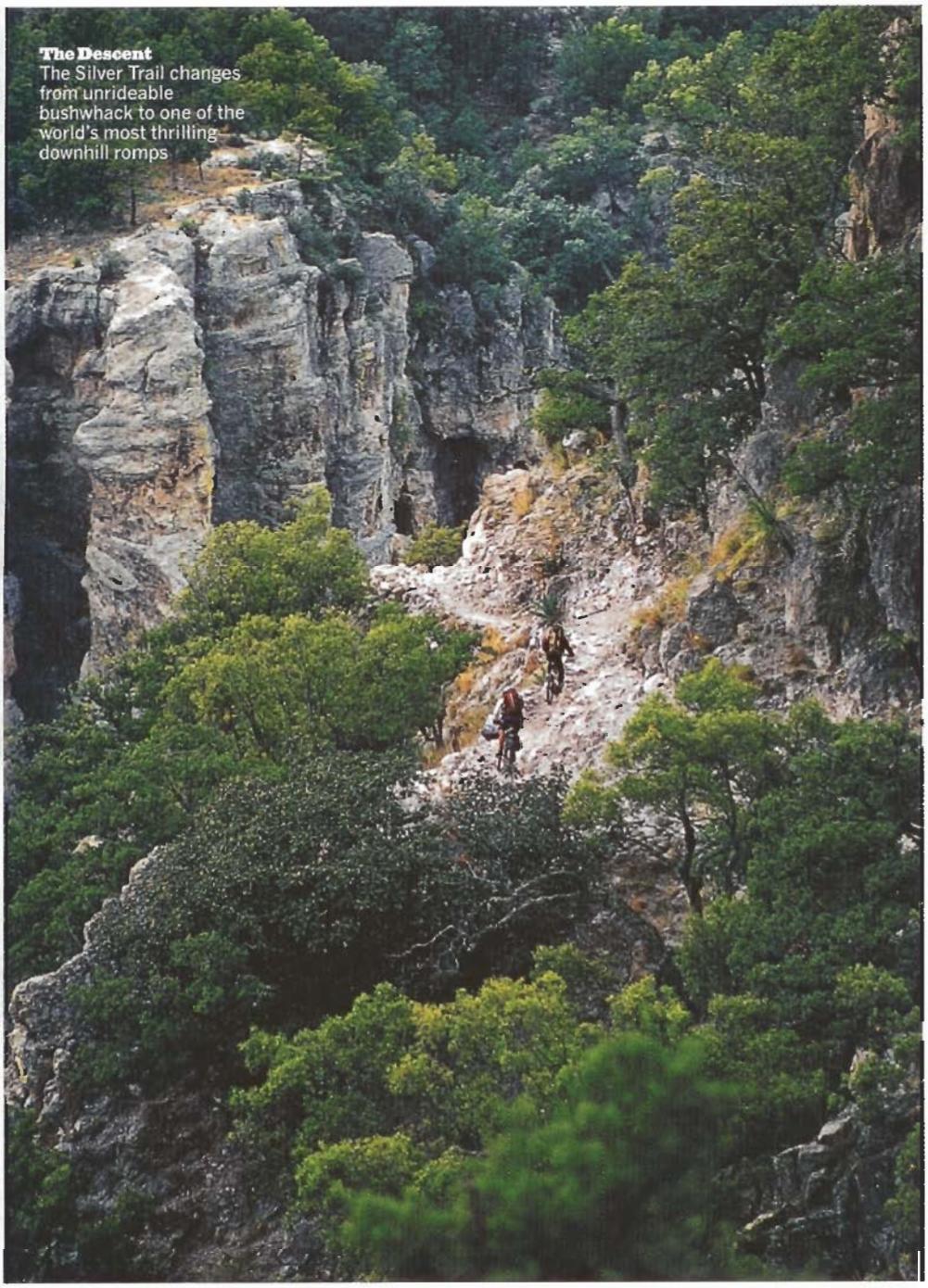
Within a few hours of leaving Carichic, we hit upon a division of labor that would prevail over the next seven days. First, Arturo and David would forge ahead as scouts, plowing across fields and thrashing through the bushes like deranged steers until one or both of them fell off their bikes. Then they'd discuss which way the trail lay, usually waving their arms in opposite directions. When Jerry caught up, he would voice an opinion that almost invariably diverged from whatever Arturo and David were saying. The ensuing debates, which were always cheerful and polite, concluded with either Arturo or David giving up and forging 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 Presidente, Mexico's finest cut-rate brandy, back in o hotel in Chihuahua City, this had struck us as pe fectly reasonable. After all, we told ourselves, the ri ers of the bullion trains had ridden on slow-pol mules burdened with several tons of loot; we wou be swishing along on state-of-the-art bikes ar carrying only 35 pounds in our packs.

How hard could it be?

By the end of the second day we resigned ou selves to the fact that instead of an epic bike cruis this would be a hellish backpack marathon in whi the role of our cycles was largely symbolic. It to us two full days just to get to the second station, Huajochic, an ordeal that felt something like Hanr bal trying to drag his army of elephants over the Alp After we surmounted our fifth succession of massi ridge-and-mesa-and-gorge, I stopped counting.

The morning after we finally reached Huajoch station, we clawed to the top of a 900-foot ridge wi the bikes on our backs, and there, to our deligh we were actually able to ride for a brief, intoxica ing spell across a mesa coated in fine orange san Then we descended 1,500 feet into the *Arroya de L*



The Descent
The Silver Trail changes from unrideable bushwhack to one of the world's most thrilling downhill romps

THE ENTIRE DESCENT WAS EQUAL TO POUNDING DOWN THE STAIRCASES OF FOUR EMPIRE STATE BUILDINGS.

Iglesias, "the Gorge of Churches," a valley of towering stone steeples that's cleaved by the winding path of the Corchi River.

Every 400 yards or so the river would take another turn, forcing us to dismount, heave the bikes to our shoulders, slosh through the water, then remount and ride on to the next bend. We did this for seven straight hours, completing 63 river crossings, until the valley ended and we embarked on a vertical bushwhack up a 1,900-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, bark, and twigs covering my bike helmet and turned to Quentin.

"So I'm wondering — do you think anybody on this team is gonna break?" he said.

"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 past expeditions, I just stared into the flames and tried to recall if I'd ever felt so heinous.

I hadn't.

We spent the next three days forcing our way up and down the gorges and across the mesas 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 toughest groups of indigenous people on earth, and start pumping him for directions.

Copper Canyon is home to the reclusive Tarahumaran Indians, who call themselves *raramuri*, or "those who run." They are renowned for their *rarajipari* — marathon footraces that can go on almost forever. In 1993 three Tarahumaran runners were brought to Colorado to participate in the Leadville Trail 100, one of the most grueling high-altitude, ultradistance races 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 runner won. He was 55 years old at the time.

Virtually all the Tarahumarans 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 homes in rocky caves that resemble the cliff houses of Mesa Verde. Regardless of garb, once they got over the initial shock of our rainbow-colored entourage, they complimented us on the *nueva caballos* ("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 hang-up we encountered with the Tarahumarans 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 out searching for a lost silver treasure, and our assurances to the contrary were met with polite nods and a knowing silence. Occasionally Arturo would take the time to explain his goal of reviving the old Silver Trail as a travel destination that 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 Gavino Flores, a 70-year-old farmer living next to the station stop in Huajochic. "We'd be happy to sell them tortillas and take care of them."

Even the pack train of *narcotraficantes* we ran into one afternoon gave us a friendly wave as they led their mules loaded with enormous bales of marijuana off into the forest.

Our delight in the locals' [*continued on page 120*]

reaction was matched only by our amazement in discovering that each of the four stone way stations between Carichic and Batopilas was at least partially intact. Los Pilares, the third station, had been struck by lightning and burned some years back, but its stone walls were still straight, and the structure was being used to store hay. Station four, La Laja, was completely abandoned — missing its roof and carpeted in rotting apples that had fallen from trees growing along its exterior. And Teboreachi, the final stop, sheltered a family of Tarahumaran squatters. Each night our team would sit around a campfire conjuring visions of how the stations could be rebuilt, debating whether people would actually find the trail appealing, and nursing our various scrapes and bruises from the day's trek.

"Not many folks actually enjoy backpacking with bikes," Quentin said one evening while preparing to dole out our meager ration of freeze-dried beans and rice. "It's not exactly a lot of *fun*, what we're doing."

"True, but you gotta understand that things can improve," said Jerry, who was filtering water from a brackish spring into everyone's bottles. "When the Tahoe Rim Trail first started, we opened it to backpackers — but slowly it got buffed 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."

I was in too much pain to summon the kind of optimism of my fellow explorers, but every night as I huddled in my sleeping bag, I'd drift off to the sound of Arturo or David describing to someone their vision of the future of this place. It would be an adventure thoroughfare with rest stops to rival the Appalachian Trail, they'd explain, with enough colorful history to qualify as a miniature Lewis and Clark Trail. What's more, this would all happen without wreaking on Copper Canyon the insults that Mexico's tourism officials have already inflicted upon natural splendors in places like Cancún, Mazatlán, and Cabo San Lucas (an issue of particular concern to Arturo because the Mexican government has now trained its crosshairs on Copper Canyon as the locus of a big new travel destination, with plans to boost tourism in the canyons sixfold, to 400,000 people a year, by 2010).

"Here in Mexico, adventure travel is still very new and novel," Arturo told me one day when I happened to be on the receiving end of one of his impassioned speeches. "We just need to convince the politicians that the key lies in protecting the resource as it is."

Despite all the torment and the confusion, we made some impressive progress over those final days. And, to our surprise, we mostly stuck to the original Silver Trail route. By the time we reached the final station at Teboreachi, Arturo and David seemed to have developed a sixth sense about where the trail led, and Jerry's GPS units were jibing smoothly with our path.

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

The earth shattered into a chaos of abyssal gorges and soaring ridge tops. The plants and trees suspended from the cliffs looked like dense tapestries of emerald and jade. The exposed bands of rock created a rainbow of red and orange and black; the waterfalls were silver; 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 attempted to ride down the trail — until Quentin's mishap nearly sent him tumbling over the edge. (By hanging onto to his handlebar, he somehow managed to keep his balance and avoid adding sky-diving to the Silver Trail's list of adventure options.)

Chastened by the near-disaster, we all got off and carefully walked our rigs down the steepest 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 exhausted, was starving for serious speed. And so without any discussion, each of us put the hammer down and started to fly. The surface of the road was coated with loose pebbles and riddled with deep water channels. We skidded through the first hairpin turn, then opened up our brakes and accelerated toward the next bend, bunny-hopping over the ruts. The next bend seemed to come up faster, and as we swerved through the arc, our rear wheels began throwing rooster tails of dirt and rocks over the edge. We pounded into that turn, then the next, and the next — our handlebars and chain rings and teeth rattling to the furious, staccato beat of the trail surface.

As we rocketed along, we passed through nearly a dozen layers of rock. For a few minutes we'd find ourselves whipping through a section of vermilion-colored stone in the road-cut, then the color would switch abruptly to maroon, followed by an interval of pure white. Then brown, which gave way to black. Then on to purple and orange, and back to black, and finally into green. The layers we flashed through represented hundreds of millions of years in geologic time, and this seemed somehow fitting because our downward sortie seemed to go on forever. And while the ribbon of river below gradually fattened, the air grew warmer, the vegetation more colorful.

We had launched our descent in a pre-winter world of ponderosa and pine forest, but soon we were barreling through lush sections of maples and live oaks. This swiftly gave way to terraced sections of desert ruled by 15-foot cacti and thorny acacia trees, and from there to subtropical gardens carpeted with red and orange flowers.

Gradually the fastest riders drew farther ahead, building up such a substantial lead that eventually I was able to spot them rounding separate switchbacks hundreds of feet below me, each one snaking around a bend farther down than the next: first Joel, then Arturo, followed by David, Quentin, and Scott. At the rear of the pack, Jerry and I found ourselves stopping every 10 or 15 minutes, partly to allow our brakes to cool and the cramping in our hands to recede — and partly, I think, because we both wanted to prolong the enchantment. We'd brake to a halt, stare out at the landscape for a long pause and then, with a silent nod to each other, clip back into our pedals and wordlessly resume the ride.

The entire descent was equal to pounding down the staircases of four Empire State Buildings, and it took more than an hour before we polished off our 4,500-foot run and reached the river. It was magical, and the speed and terror and exhilaration of the whole thing seemed — at least to me — to be setting us up for an even more magical culmination upon reaching Batopilas. Given everything we'd endured, I told myself, there ought to be cheering crowds, girls flinging flowers, maybe fireworks in the town square. At the very least, a parade.

Of course, that's not quite what happened.

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 Batopilas, it was nearly dark. When we crossed into town, the girls were all inside, the drunks draped across the doorways continued snoring in peace, and even the dogs didn't bother barking.

We rode into town together, the seven of us flashing over cobblestone streets to the whirring of our chains and the clicking of our gears. We whisked alongside elaborately scrolled sections of wrought-iron fencing that sheltered gardens bursting with the perfume of bougainvillea, mangoes, bananas, papayas, mimosas. We whirled past whitewashed colonial buildings graced with Moorish arches — homes whose wooden shutters were caressed by billowing palm leaves. We rode on through the hot, fragrant air until we reached the central plaza, and there, two things happened.

First, it started raining. Not the hard, bone-chilling rain of the mountains, but the delicious, blood-warm bath of the tropics. Then, wafting through the twilit air came the pealing of church bells. Someone was performing an evening carillon in the bell tower of the Batopilas cathedral.

It might as well have been a parade.

A few weeks later, after we'd all returned home and recovered from the journey, there would be another kind of celebration. First, Señor GPS would finish crunching his topographical data in Durango and e-mail the results down to Texas. David would print it out, and on his next trip to Creel, he would bring it with him to give to Arturo. And then, one afternoon in early spring, the El Mariachi of Mexican mountain biking would take his map of La Ruta de la Plata — a route he believes will someday take its place among the greats — to Chihuahua City.

Whereupon he would inform the governor that, as promised, he had found the lost silver of Batopilas.