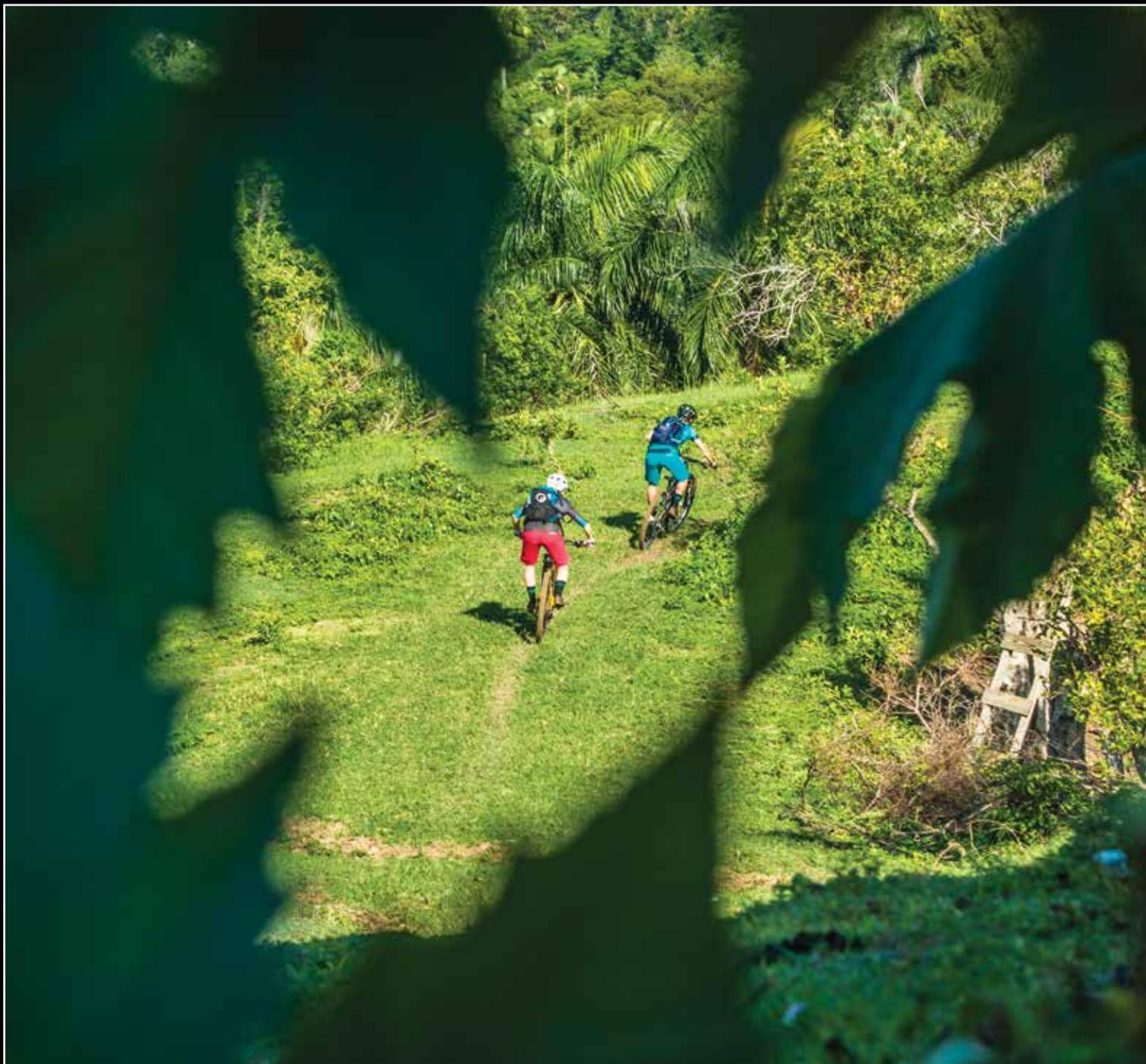


WE'LL TAKE YOU THERE

# mountainflyer

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**KEEP THE JUNGLE SIDE DOWN**  
RIDING THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

**10,000 TURNS**  
WITH GENE HAMILTON

**800 YEARS IN THE MAKING**  
SLIGHTLY GROOMED IN THE ARAGON PYRENEES

**FROM THE NOWHERE TO THE NOPLACE**  
IN THE SHOP WITH AHEARNE AND IGLEHEART

## Root Down



We called ourselves the Mafia II. Innocent enough but not without the casual deviance of adolescent boys, we were a gang of derelict 10-year-olds in possession of BMX bikes: our ticket to freedom. During the school year we gathered in the morning and rode to school together, zigzagging down the road, hopping curbs, speeding down ad hoc singletrack created by generations before us, and cutting through backyards and across vacant lots to gain the shortest, most entertaining route to school.

In the summer, we spent every waking hour on our bikes. Occasionally, we'd venture farther, riding old hiking trails through the deep canyons that split Los Alamos neighborhoods into a series of fingers. These trails would take us "downtown" where all the action was. Brodie contests (who could skid the farthest and leave the longest mark on the sidewalk), bike tag, sprint races and laps on our self-made BMX track kept us going until the sun set. When we were on our bikes, our parents had no idea where we were. We got into our fair share of trouble, too. But in the bigger picture, bikes kept us out of trouble. We were empowered, and we knew just what to do with it. Needless to say that bike had a profound effect on my life.

Our bikes and our ability to ride them meant everything to us: our pride, our pursuit and, literally, our freedom. Put a kid on a bike and it changes her life. I lived that truth, and I'm now seeing it again in my daughter. At 8-years-old, thanks in part to the coaches and staff at the newly formed Crested Butte Devo team, she and her gang of young accomplices are charging singletrack, exploring, finding their limits and pushing past them. The coaches push them to go further than I thought possible for a little girl. They laugh, they crash, they cry, and they keep riding. The look on their faces at the end of the day is unmistakable pride. They are empowered. They are lucky.



In this issue, Sarah Rawley writes about traveling to the Dominican Republic to meet her friend Elena Forchielli and photographer Devon Balet. The purpose of the trip was to explore the area and experience the riding, the landscape and the culture. The images are stunning, and their tales are inspiring. Add it to your list of great places to ride. But that's not the most important take-away from the story.

As impoverished countries like the DR get discovered for mountain bike tourism, doors are opened. I'm proud to say mountain bikers, in general, have a good record of advocacy. Even though most of us ride our bikes primarily for hedonistic sport, there is more to it, and we know it. We like to spread the seeds of two-wheeled freedom wherever we can.

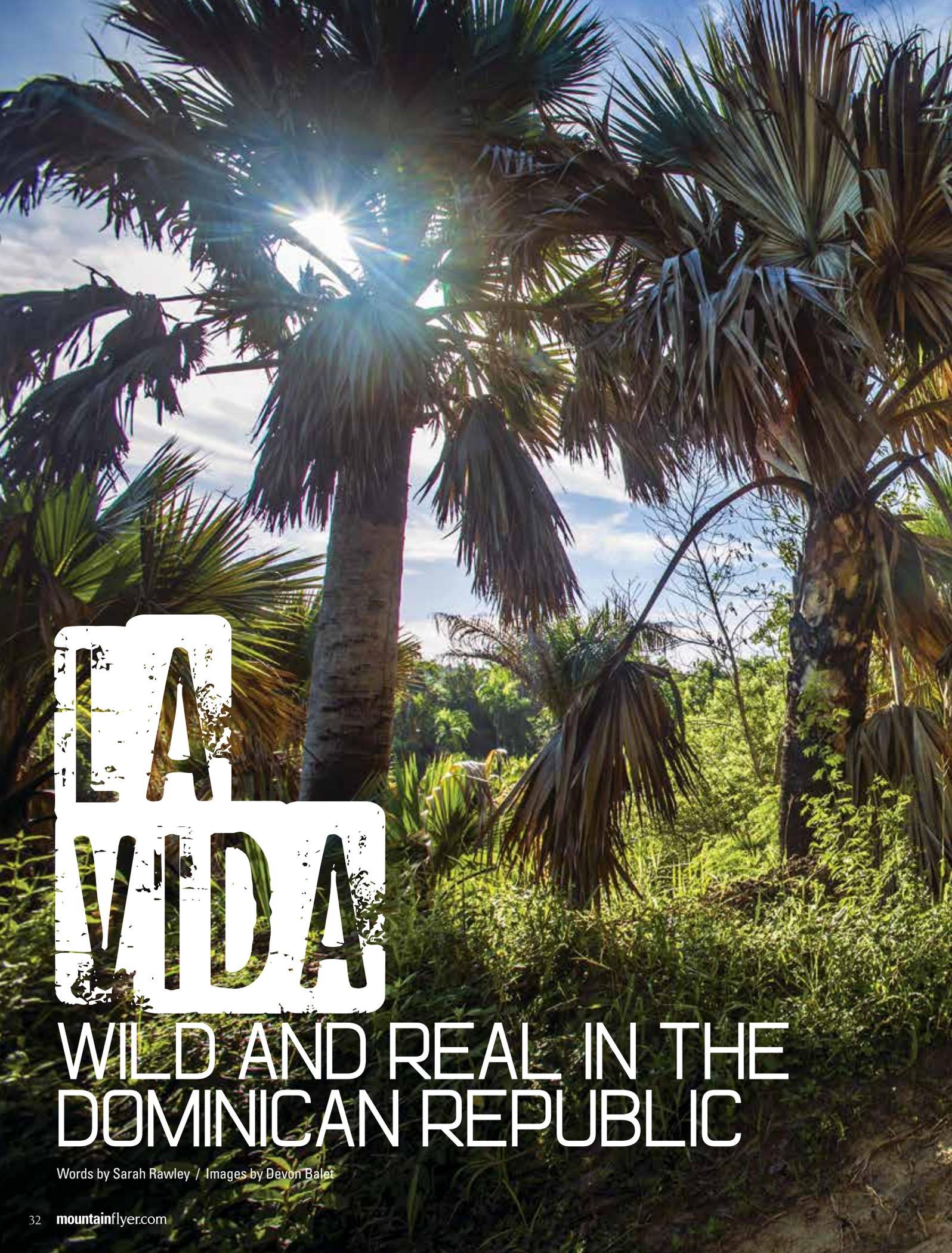
Part of the draw for Sarah to visit the DR was to witness firsthand Elena's work as a volunteer with the Mariposa DR Foundation, an innovative nonprofit aimed at helping young girls in the DR, where 28 percent

of girls 11-15 have at least one unwanted pregnancy. They are trapped in a cycle of poverty. Through education, health and access to recreation, the Mariposa Foundation gives these girls a chance for self-empowerment and a step toward real freedom. Elena teaches physical education and has even been able to get the girls out on mountain bikes.

In reading the article, it's clear the effect the girls had on Sarah and what a stable tourism economy could mean for the people of the DR and for the Mariposa Foundation. Mountain bikers can be a part of that by bringing something other tourists can't: a deep understanding of what a bicycle means to a kid.

I can picture those girls with pride in their eyes, zigzagging down the street, hopping curbs and cutting their own singletrack on the way to school. That is the root of empowerment. 🌱

*Brian Riepe*



# LA VIDA

WILD AND REAL IN THE  
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Words by Sarah Rawley / Images by Devon Balet





It's like nothing you've ever ridden. The trail network is infinite, and you can have it all: world class surfing and kiteboarding on the beach, a vast jungle to explore and ride, and towering mountains in the distance with farmland, cloud forests, pine forests and alpine valleys.... And the people—they are incredibly welcoming.

“So, are you in?”

When my friend Elena Forchielli told me there would be more than beaches and piña colodas to entertain my Type A personality, I decided to take her up on the offer to head to the Dominican Republic for a vacation infused with adventure and culture. Elena had already been living in Cabarete for a few weeks, surfing, exploring trails and volunteering for a local nonprofit when I arrived on the scene, along with our friend and photographer, Devon Balet, who was keen to dive into uncharted mountain bike territory.

The Dominican Republic is most reputable for its pristine beaches, consistent maritime winds and passionate merengue dancing. Yet, beyond the 1,000 miles of coastline where rambunctious music echoes into the early hours of the morning, are thick tropical rainforests that ascend into four distinct mountain ranges, including the tallest mountain in the Caribbean, Pico Duarte at 10,164 feet. Enveloped in the folds of fertile valleys and forests are endless miles of singletrack that were originally formed by agricultural transport, but in recent years have generated another activity under the banner of ecotourism and a passageway to explore the interior of the island.

The small town of Cabarete is the ideal launching point for two-wheel excursions. Located less than 20 minutes from Gregorio Luperon International Airport in Puerto Plata, the laid-back beach village grants equal access to water sports and land activities. The abundant recreational resources are all right there, but it takes an experienced eye to guide you to the local spots where you can soak in the best of the DR. Our mountain bike guide was Max “Maximo” Martinez. Max was born and raised in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, and has been a mountain bike guide in Cabarete since 1994. He owns seven bikes that he meticulously cares for and knows every spec of current bikes on the market. He introduced Candace Shadley, founder of the Trek Dirt Series to her first mountain bike ride in the mid-'90s, and is Lonely Planet's go-to mountain bike guide in the region. Max knows every twist and turn deep in the jungle and how to link together six hours of singletrack outside the gates of El Choco National Park. The depth of our exploration in this region would be dependent on Max's extensive knowledge of his backyard.

Over our first drinks on the beach, we casually introduced ourselves but promptly dove into each other's backgrounds and what brought us to Max's domain ... which was to find the next



best mountain bike destination in the world. It wasn't happenstance that we stumbled upon the DR. We had seen videos of Spirit Mountain MTB Park in Manaboa, La Vega, and heard that a rich cycling culture revolved around the country's metropolitan areas, but residents and visitors rarely venture out to explore the diverse countryside.

We wanted to delve straight into the DR's untapped trail network, yet not forget we were vacationing on a Caribbean island where 80 degree ocean and happy hour would tempt us to sprawl out every afternoon for a siesta. Max was on our program, and between his furrowed eyebrows I could see the wheels begin to spin on how he would help us explore a little deeper than the typical tourists. A few drinks in, the plan was set for the next day, and it was to begin with a morning surf session.

Playa Encuentro is located 6 kilometers west of the heart of Cabarete on the chaotic



C-5 highway and is a haven of surf schools that run out of brightly colored shacks. The locals are welcoming and excited to get you on a board to catch a few waves. Mornings are best, with the calmest waves for a water-loving fiend as myself. With my bike jersey serving as a rashguard, I felt like a fish out of water trying to use my upper body strength to surge with the tide. I caught a couple of waves, called it a successful effort, and watched my compadres take turns riding waves in, giddy with excitement from the natural forces of the ocean.

We returned to Cabarete via a quick ride from a motoconcho, a small motorcycle that provides a cheap alternative to taxi service. A word of wisdom from experienced expats, "Look for the oldest motoconcho driver. They will be your safest bet since they have lived another day to drive."

The traffic scene is unnerving to say the least, and the country is the deadliest nation anywhere for drivers, with 42 fatalities every year for every 100,000 inhabitants, according to the World Health Organization. It is not unusual to see up to five people, including small children, packed onto a motorcycle, or for drivers to carry all types of cargo, such as a washing machine, atop their bikes.

As a cyclist, I cringed at the site of a motorcyclist speeding in and out of traffic, crossing double yellow lines, without a helmet or protective gear. I was already exhausted from a morning of being tossed around in the waves, but knew once we departed on bikes



from our gated community at Cita del Sol, it would take extreme focus to make it down the narrow C-5 highway and through the local neighborhood of Callejón where vehicles, stray dogs and people filled the streets, wandering in and out of comedors (streetside dining) and colmados (corner stores) every other block. Hooonnnkkkk....

I could feel the gust of wind from a speeding motorcycle inches from my handlebars. My heart rate was pegged, and we were still cruising on flat pavement. I was antsy to leave behind the pandemoniac streets and find reprieve on the jungle singletrack where I could experience calmer sights, such as the vervain hummingbird, the second smallest in the world.

El Choco National Park is one of the newest additions to the 70 protected areas in the Dominican Republic. Bordered by the foothills of the Cordillera Septentrional to the south and the Cabarete Lagoon to the north, the park guards 48 square miles of pasture land, lagoon, jungle, tropical plants, Caribbean birds, caves and jutting hills. The park has a unique geological formation called the Caribbean karst, a pattern of limestone rock that has been uplifted by tectonic movement and exposed to erosion, resulting in a regular array of round-topped, conical hills and sinkholes. Any

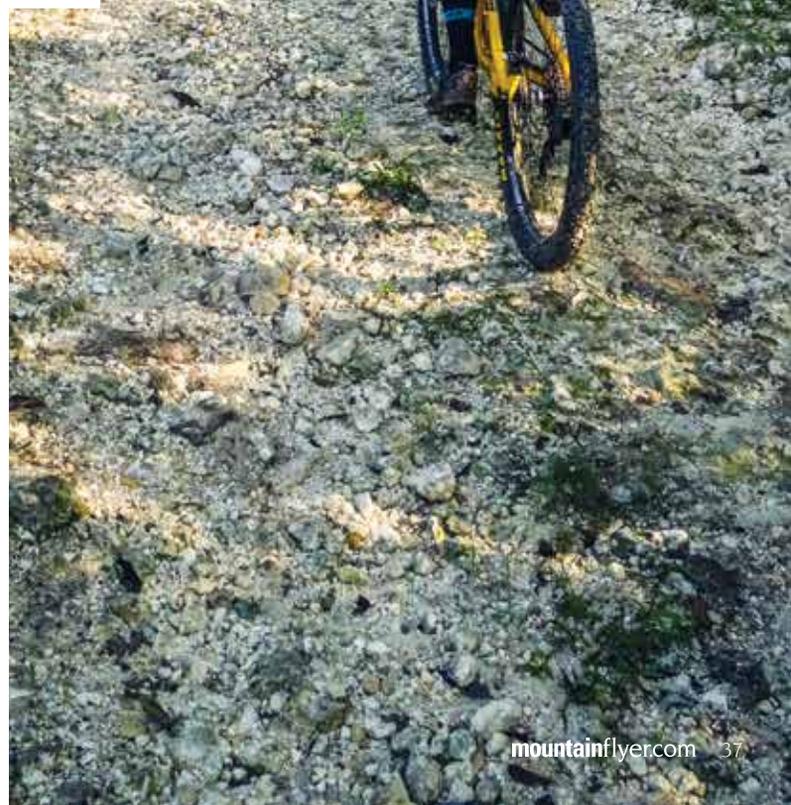


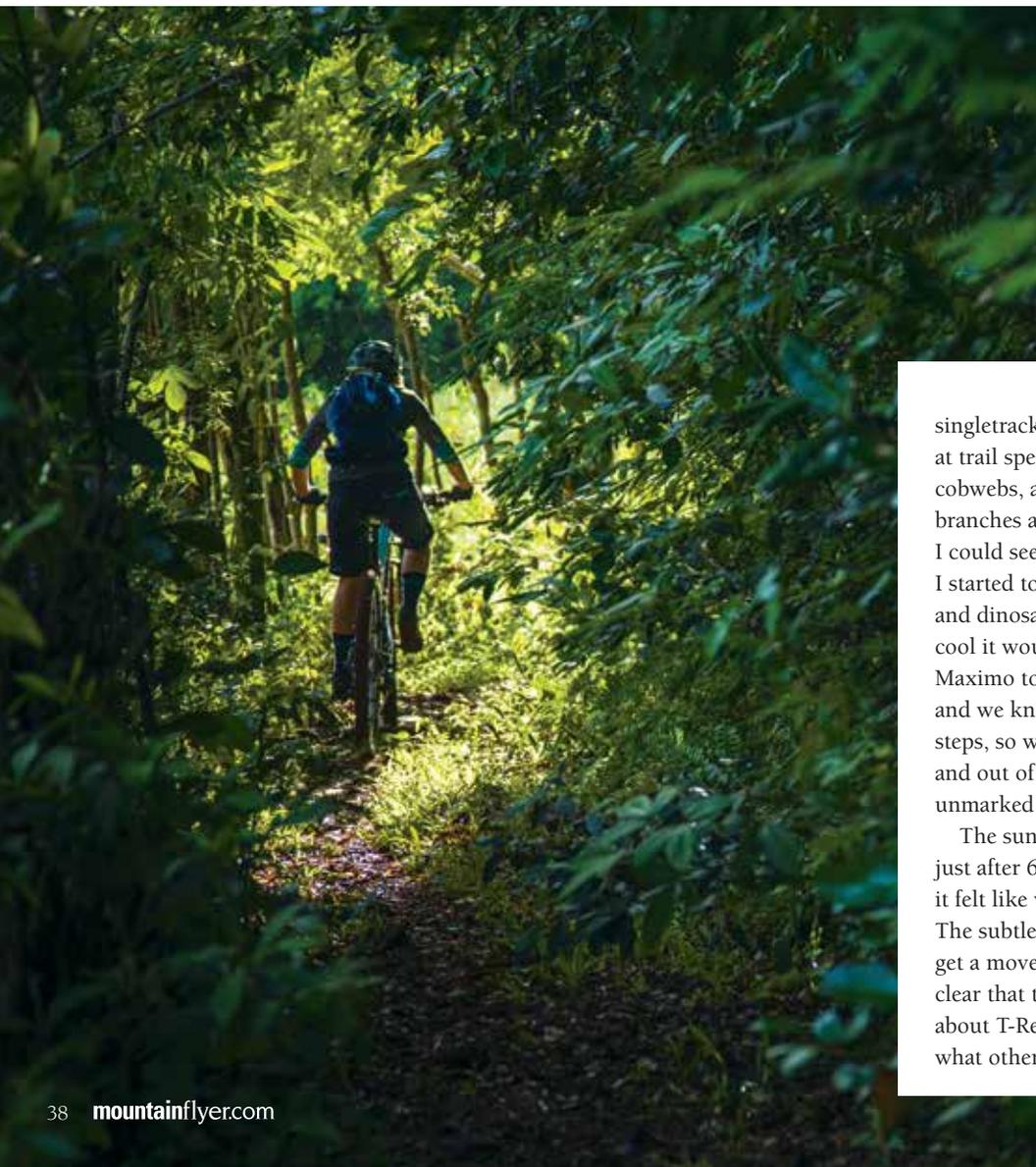
split in the rock has been exploited by tropical rains, which have rushed through, carving and cutting holes, hollowing out caves and gradually dissolving the rock. This has created another facet of ecotourism with visitors lined up daily for tours of the 5-million-year-old La Cuevas de Cabarete (El Choco caves).

As we approached the entrance to the park and cave tours, guards with rifles slung across their backs looked skeptically at the two gringas and one gringo, but Maximo's quick Spanish headed off any further interrogation. Finally, our wheels were in motion for exploring the mountain bike trails that begin just a few miles from the coastline.

We began climbing a dirt road, still slick from the previous three days of heavy rainfall. The wet, slippery clay surface was challenging to motor up, and our bikes groaned under the weight of mud that was getting packed into the crevices between our seat stays. Our fresh turquoise and coral kits were quickly fading into more earthy tones. A record storm had greeted our arrival to the DR, and we began to wonder if we had jumped too quickly at the opportunity to explore the jungle.

Less than a mile in, Max took us left and trail conditions instantly changed. We became carried away floating down foliage-covered





singletrack, slashing turns and hooting and hollering at trail speed. The front gunner had to slice through cobwebs, and we had to duck under low-hanging branches and vines. As we rode deeper into the park, I could see that the hills were actually old coral reefs. I started to joke about prehistoric times, when sharks and dinosaurs swam through this same area, and how cool it would be if pterodactyls were flying over us. Maximo took us deeper and deeper into the jungle, and we knew that we'd never be able to retrace our steps, so we happily followed his lead, weaving in and out of mango and avocado groves, sections of unmarked singletrack, doubletrack and 4x4 roads.

The sun was beginning to set in the distance. It was just after 6 p.m., we were running out of daylight, and it felt like we were miles deep into the tropical forest. The subtle rise of buzzing insects was an indicator to get a move on it. Bats started to awaken, and it was clear that the jungle was coming alive. Now my jokes about T-Rex were not quite as humorous. I had no idea what other animals we might encounter in the dark.



Maximo announced that we were back on track on our lollipop route. Riding by braille, we coasted through the gates of El Choco, and re-emerged into the lively scene of Callejón. Dripping in sweat from the thick layers of sunscreen, DEET and, truthfully, a little fear, I did not say no to a giant ice cold cerveza that was passed around the four of us. It may have been just another ride for Maximo, but we all felt like we survived an adventure race. It was time to spin back home down the neighborhood street of Callejón, this time filled with blaring music, chattering locals on doorsteps, and silhouettes in the streets.

We returned to a colorful night scene in downtown Cabarete. More than a dozen restaurants line the shoreline, and couches, tables and beach chairs are strewn about in the sand. We found ourselves at Eze Beach Bar Restaurant, a favorite that dished up a mix of seafood, pasta and fresh salads. The upscale, chic atmosphere provided a relaxing end to our busy day and put us at ease for our stroll back through town, past a friendly woman serving gelato until 11 p.m. Little did she know, we would become her most frequent customers over the next week. As the week went on, she would see us coming and before I could say, “Puedo tener...?” “Can I have...?” she would pull out two cups and a cone and dive into our favorite flavors

(pistachio and dark chocolate).

Exhausted, we fell asleep to the background noise of music and dancing. Dominicans pride themselves on being the loudest, and we witnessed this from dawn until dusk—starting with the rooster outside our apartment at 5:30 a.m., to the morning traffic mix of trucks, guaguas (minibuses used for public transportation), motorcycles and cow herding down the main strip, to vendedores ambulantes (street vendors) calling to us to check out their goods. It seemed like the moment we woke up, the small town of Cabarete was already at work, and at night, the party was still going strong at 2 a.m.

The next day we had more surfing and mountain biking planned, along with a visit to the Mariposa DR Foundation. Founded in 2009 by the founder of the internationally renowned adventure outfitter Iguana Mama, the Mariposa DR Foundation is a nonprofit organization that focuses on educating and empowering women and young girls in the community. The philosophy is that investing in the economic potential of girls can break the cycle of generational poverty.

Elena had been living in the DR for the past month, volunteering for the foundation. She was the P.E. teacher at Mariposa DR and rallied girls, ages 5 to 14, to play volleyball, baseball and other team sports, and she had a goal to ultimately take the girls mountain biking. I tagged along as the assistant P.E. teacher on a few afternoons



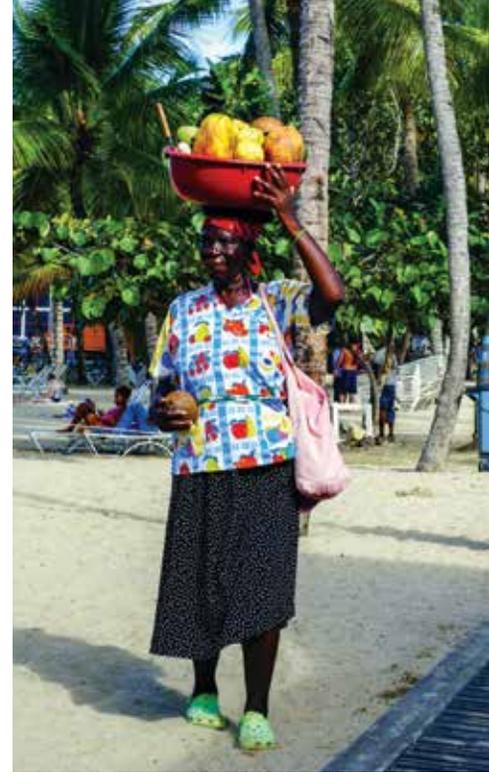
and was overwhelmed by these girls' amount of vida (life). Baseball is the national sport of the Dominican Republic, and when it came to playing ball, these girls were serious. They shrieked and squealed as they hit home runs, argued over who would be the best pitcher, and strategized positions in the outfield. When I was at bat, one of the girls snagged my iPhone and proceeded to take numerous selfies. Other girls joined in, so we took a break from the game to snap some pictures together. Some of them had never seen a smart phone, let alone touched one, taken pictures and looked at themselves instantaneously. They were beside themselves from the novelty of a device that is part of everyday life for many of us. Before I left that day, one of the girls came up and gave me a hug. It was a hug that didn't want to let go. Without words, I knew she needed a little extra nurturing at that moment. I hugged her back. I didn't want to let go either.

The week after I left, Elena sent me a video of the girls finally riding bikes provided by Iguana Mama. The sheer delight these girls expressed, some experiencing two wheels for the first time, was priceless and proof that bikes have the power to transform their lives—not only as a cost-effective, environmentally sound mode of transportation, but as a vehicle for independence and economic

viability. It is hard to ignore the poverty that exists in the DR, and that most Dominicans lack access to the abundant outdoor recreational opportunities. Experiencing the work of the Mariposa DR Foundation firsthand was encouraging. The positive impact in these young girls' lives inspired "vida" in the VIDA MTB Series, a women's mountain bike skills clinic that Elena and I run together in the States.

Gradually absorbing the way of life and taking the time to visit with locals along the way, is what can make the riding in the Dominican Republic so fascinating and eye-opening. Our mountain bike routes grew more intricate throughout our stay, and certain landmarks in the jungle finally became familiar. On one of our excursions in El Choco National Park, we were invited onto a local's property to check out private caves, and sample the guanabana (soursop), a tropical fruit that has been revered for centuries as powerful relief for a wide scope of disease and cancer. Packed with antioxidants, the guanabana's flavor is a combination of strawberry and pineapple, with sour citrus notes contrasting a creamy flavor reminiscent of coconut or banana.

Other highlights of our mountain bike explorations





included watching monkeys haphazardly jump from tree to tree in the Monkey Jungle and finishing our daily rides at our favorite cafe—FreshFresh—for a smoothie and quick work session. (One of the many lessons I learned while in the DR: When you find good wifi, don't take it for granted.) Life in the DR is real, and during one ride we found ourselves on the wrong side of a flaming barricade on a dirt road. The local community was rioting because the government was not properly providing access to consistent electricity. Power outages are very common, and community members had set up barricades on the dirt road to keep local officials in their village. At first, I thought we might be in danger, but residents carefully helped us over the barricade and made sure we didn't flat our tires on broken glass.

We opted for a day off of the bikes and were picked up in an air conditioned van by Helmut Ludwig, “CEA” (chief executive adventurer) of Kayak River Adventures. It was a nice contrast to the crowded guaguas we had been utilizing for longer trips to local surf spots. We drove 45 minutes east of Cabarete to Ciguapa Falls, where we climbed, slid, swam and jumped our way through six cascading waterfalls. The lush tropical flora and crystal clear ponds were definitely something out of a scene from Jurassic Park. Steven Spielberg, in fact, shot some of the film in the DR.

Our journey downstream ended with a short hike out of the canyon. (There's also an optional donkey shuttle for \$10 USD.) We were treated to an authentic lunch of la bandera, which translates to “the Dominican Flag.” This is served almost daily in every Dominican household and consists of white rice, stewed beans and chicken. A Dominican lunch table is not complete without a side dish or two. I gobbled several tostones (fried green plantains), which are twice-fried for a crispier consistency.

When I first arrived to the Dominican Republic, I was completely overwhelmed by the commotion in the streets, the unfamiliar smells and food, the sultry air and navigating the local colmado. But in less than two weeks, I felt at home and suddenly surrounded by such



warm and genuine people who helped me feel less like a gringa and more like a local sharing in the island's rich natural resources. Mountain biking in the Dominican Republic is just in its infancy, and once people catch wind that the DR is a destination for the ocean, the mountains and everything in-between, small towns such as Cabarete will experience the positive impact of recreational tourism. As a result, I see a bright future ahead for the girls at the Mariposa DR Foundation, and hope to return in the future to continue exploring the depths of the jungle, to catch a few more waves, get more girls on bikes and be part of the rich and colorful Dominican Republic vida. 🌿

# THE BUZZ

## ON ADVENTURE

### MAX MARTINEZ

Max “Maximo” Martinez is the soul mountain biker of Cabarete and has more than 20 years experience guiding in the region. Max is famous for his “Max Endurance” (50 km) tour that includes everything under the sun—long uphill, downhill, singletrack and off-road. You can book with Max directly or through Iguana Mama for rentals, transportation and other amenities.

+1 809 882 5634

[maxofthemt@gmail.com](mailto:maxofthemt@gmail.com)

### IGUANA MAMA

Iguana Mama, based out of Cabarete, was the first licensed adventure eco-tourism company in the Dominican Republic and offers all kinds of tours, ranging from waterfall “cruising” to mountain biking to white water rafting. Action and adventure junkies should ask about the one-week “Mama Knows Best” tour—seven days of nonstop adrenaline featuring all of their activities.

+1 809 571 0908

[www.IguanaMama.com](http://www.IguanaMama.com)

### KAYAK RIVER ADVENTURES

Kayak River Adventures’ list of eco-friendly tours includes horseback riding, surfing, white water rafting, caving, cascading the 27 Waterfalls of Damajagua, kiteboarding, skateboarding, SUP (stand up paddle boarding), and, of course, kayaking. Their tours are small and go to rarely visited areas of the Dominican Republic, creating a unique and authentic experience.

+1 829 305 6883

[www.KayakRiverAdventures.com](http://www.KayakRiverAdventures.com)

### MONKEY JUNGLE

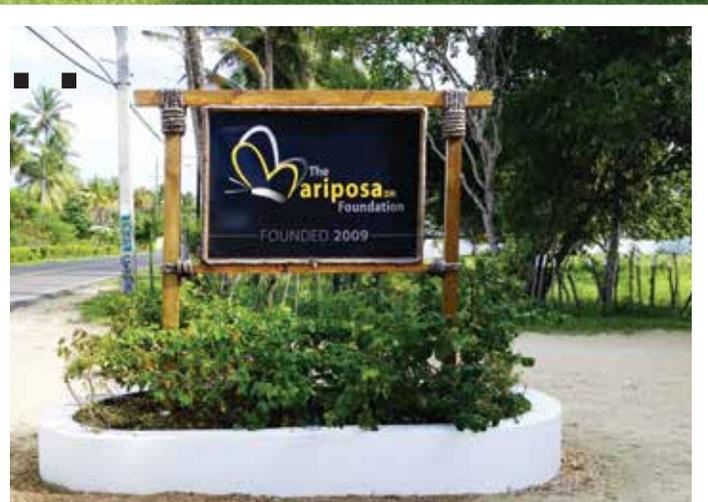
Located between Sosua and Cabarete, 9 kilometers up El Choco Road, the Monkey Jungle offers something for every age. This 280-acre working farm provides a 4,500-foot ACCT certified zip line, a 5-acre botanical garden with 45 squirrel monkeys, and rescue capuchin monkeys that entertain and provide countless memories. All profits go to charity, including the on-site dental clinic.

+1 829 649 4555

[www.MonkeyJungleDR.com](http://www.MonkeyJungleDR.com)



# IT TAKES A VILLAGE OF GIRLS



The Mariposa DR Foundation was founded in 2009 by a group of volunteers and girls who were inspired by past nonprofit work with girls and young women in Cabarete, Dominican Republic. The foundation works to develop and support community-based solutions to end poverty in the DR, where more than 40 percent of girls marry before the age of 18, and 28 percent of girls ages 11–15 have had at least one unwanted pregnancy. If a girl drops out of school to become a teenage mother it is highly likely her children will live in poverty as well. The foundation takes a holistic approach and engages the entire family and community, making a girl's education, health and safety of the utmost importance.

Mariposa DR's mission is rooted in "The Girl Effect," the idea that educating and empowering girls in poverty is the best way to end the cycle of generational poverty.

"World leaders, economists, and policymakers all recognize that an adolescent girl is the most powerful force for change, yet a tiny percentage of international aid is invested in that population," said Patricia Thorndike Suriel, founder and executive director of Mariposa DR. "Investing in the education, health and empowerment of a girl today means she will have the tools to make smart choices that will better the lives of her future offspring. She will reinvest 90 percent of her income back into her family and her community, making her the most influential figure in the today's world." –S. Rawley

Learn more and contribute at [www.mariposadrfoundation.org](http://www.mariposadrfoundation.org) 