

Island

In the Caribbean, the Barbados 360 offers a fast-paced race for some riders, and a relaxed treat for others

Words **PETER STUART**
Photography **PATRIK LUNDIN**

Time





After around 10km the race passes through the fishing town of Oistins, where crowds gather on Friday nights to eat at the famous market

‘W

ater! Please!’ I shout to the woman behind the bar of the rum shack. ‘Actually, two waters please!’ as I hold out my hands

ready to receive the much-needed bottles.

If my heaving chest and sweat-soaked cycling attire don’t convey the impression of a man in a hurry and requiring rehydration, then surely the desperation in my voice indicates the urgency of the situation.

‘Water, you say?’ the woman replies slowly. She looks at me for a moment while I drip sweat onto her floor, and then she says, ‘No problem,’ and wanders to the back of the wooden shack.

As I stand there, itching to get back on my bike and rejoin the race, I see the woman stack some drinks on the back shelves before stopping to count some coins. I’m quivering with impatience, and also desperate to get something to drink as my bidons have been empty for the past 20km.

Five full minutes of Barbados’s infamous ‘Island Time’ pass before she wanders back. ‘Water, right?’

I have only myself to blame. I’m here because I took a wrong turn on the course of the Barbados 360 and missed the main water point, so now I’m fending for myself. It’s 34°C outside and my legs are fried from clinging to the front of the race since the start. Come to think of it, perhaps my unhurried vendor is actually a godsend.

Raring to go

It’s 5.15am, two hours before I will find myself waiting for water in a rum shack somewhere in Barbados. We’re gathered around the start village in Bridgetown on the southwest coast of the island, only metres from the Prime Minister’s office. I’m putting on sunscreen in the dark. There may be no light as yet, but it’s already 25°C and the sun will soon be edging over the middle of the island to our left.

We’re ready to start the Barbados 360, the largest event of the island’s week-long

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The host village, beside Bayshore beach in Bridgetown, feels more like a luau than a race venue, but things change dramatically when the starting pistol sounds



The details

Isle have a bit of that



What Barbados 360

Where Bridgetown, Barbados

How far 97.3km (Gold Course), 63km (Silver Course)

Next one September 2018 – TBC

Price \$75 (Gold Course),

\$65 (Silver Course)

More information visitbarbados.org

► Festival of Cycling. As Barbados is not much larger than the Isle of Wight, today's ride will circumnavigate the entire island over only 100km. The queen climb is the ascent of Cherry Tree Hill, which is only 2km in length but has back-to-back 20% ramps along its 204m of ascent, and averages 10% overall. The course profile may not be very demanding compared to European sportives, but that's not to say this is an unchallenging event, mainly because the Barbados 360 is most definitely a race.

Alongside me are several professional riders from the neighbouring islands of Antigua and Trinidad and Tobago, as well as a bunch of high-level amateurs. That's because the first prize is \$2,000, plus entry and flights for next year's event. Competition is sure to be serious, which is why today's race offers a rolling roadblock for the leading group of riders.

For now, though, everyone seems relaxed as we enjoy snacks and compare bikes by the

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ocean. A folk guitarist strums away, while the sea laps gently against the sand. From here you could swim straight off the beach to a shipwreck a hundred metres off the shore, where turtles routinely gather. We can even make out some tracks from where a clutch of baby turtles have made their way from their nest to the sea.

This is certainly a place to chill out, lie back and enjoy the gentle pace of life, but the lethargic scene is shattered as soon as the starter's gun sounds. It's like a volcano erupting – all of a sudden our beachside gathering explodes into an all-out race. In seconds we go from a stationary crowd to a 50kmh shoulder-to-shoulder pack. Against all advice and reason, I find myself pushing to get up to the front.

Normally I'd be trying to suppress my early adrenaline rush, but today I can't help getting swept up in all the excitement. There is, however, a practical reason to be nearer the front of the bunch. The road is littered with potholes, some of which could swallow a 25mm wheel whole, so I want to be in a position where I can see the road ahead, and where I'm less likely to get caught up in any crashes.

Up at the front, there's some impressive kit on show. The leaders are sporting logo-laden ►

Bathsheba on the east coast is the scenic highlight of the day. In contrast to the bustling western side, it boasts a very quiet, pastoral and rugged coastline



Passing by one of Barbados's numerous rum shacks



The climb up Cherry Tree Hill is the hardest of the day, with an average of over 10% for more than 2km and a 200m ramp that hits 20%. It also offers a stunning view back over Bathsbeba



fluoro kit and have their team support motorbikes rolling alongside. It could almost be a true pro race, except where normally the outriders would be on sparkling BMWs, today spare wheels are being ferried ahead by slightly battered scooters playing loud music.

The road cuts through towns and villages over the first 10km, a blur of colours as we pass churches and pastel houses. Proud colonial homes stand alongside dilapidated bungalows, and every few kilometres we ride past a Chefette restaurant. I'm told it's a fried chicken fast food chain of near unbelievable popularity here in Barbados, so much so that McDonald's was forced off the island in a matter of weeks when it tried to compete.

The little port of Oistins springs up to our right. It's another local jewel, where a fish market on a Friday evening is one of the trendiest places to eat on the island. As soon as we ride past, the road suddenly pitches upwards on a 6% ramp and quickly the pack divides, with many of the hangers-on being cut loose on the lower slopes.

Suburbia gives way to countryside over the next 20km, with patches of tall crops and thick forest replacing the villages of the coast. An

intermediate sprint splits the field again, with a handful of strong riders shooting off ahead. I take up position at the head of a chasing group, and I genuinely don't know why – I'm already exhausted from 50 minutes of riding at my limit, and there's still a long ride ahead, but I'm just caught up in the excitement of a real race.

As we take a corner, a rider hits a pothole and somersaults only inches behind me. He avoids bringing down any other riders, and I find out later that both he and his bike were unharmed. At the time, though, it's a stark reminder not to take too many risks on this sketchy road surface.

We make our way down quieter country roads, with the lead group gradually increasing its gap ahead. Now that we know we have little chance of catching them, our group settles into a calmer pace and it begins to feel a bit more like a regular sportive, although team support scooters still circle us like a school of dolphins.

We're now in a small group of maybe eight or nine riders, and I decide it might be wise to get some information about the route ahead. I speak to a rider aboard a Cervélo, who turns out to be a local. His name is Jason, and he tells me, 'It's a lot of steep climbing from here, and some heavy, broken roads.'

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The rider's ride

Cervélo R5 Dura-Ace Di2 9150, £7,199, derby-cycle.com

The Cervélo R5 was the ideal partner for the Barbados 360. With aero tube shapes and supremely stiff construction, it's fast on the flats, yet with an impressive frame weight of 810g it floats up steep inclines too. On top of that, it sprints excitedly while also handling very accurately through testing descents.

My one alteration, with the benefit of hindsight, would be a wider set of tyres. The roads of Barbados are badly maintained, and at times I felt I'd have been better equipped with a cross bike. The 25mm tyres, along with the R5's stiff ride, sapped some energy over the rougher terrain. Running 28mm tyres at a lower pressure would have reduced a lot of those harsh jolts.

The build kit of Enve 3.4 wheels and Dura-Ace Di2 were well suited to the challenge, if a little pricy. The shifting was always fast and accurate, even under the heavy loads of 20% inclines, while the Enves had a light-but-stiff quality to them.



◀ I ask if he rides on these roads much, and he replies, 'In Barbados we have club rides each morning, but we set off very early, 4am most days to keep clear of the traffic – and the heat.'

Knowing that these locals can ride the route in the dark, I decide to keep close behind their experienced wheels. Knowing that they usually seek to avoid the morning heat, I down half a bottle of water.

After a long stretch of climbing we're surrounded by tall sugar cane, and the road is so scarred and cracked that it feels almost like pavé, which on shattered quads creates a severe energy drain. As I hit one particularly bad pothole my bike computer leaps from



We discuss our heavy legs and pounding heads, and miss a small yellow arrow on the road

my stem and disappears into the foliage by the roadside. I'm quickly knee-deep in a grassy field, scrabbling to find it. By the time I return with it in my hand, my group is long gone.

Another country

I get back to my bike and only a few metres of pedalling later I realise I've reached the highest point of the day, the summit of Horse Hill. It's just shy of 300m of elevation, and it offers an enticing view of what's ahead – a sinuous descent to the ocean.

While dropping down to the coastal town of Bathsheba, I can already tell that the eastern coast will be the highlight of the day. Where the western coast had stretches of white sand and palm trees, here the rugged coastline has an oddly pastoral, almost British, charm to it.

The 20% ramp on Cherry Tree Hill has many riders snaking across the road. With a \$2,000 prize for both male and female winners, the standard is high



The run to the finish is a fast stretch on closed roads through the Barbadian capital of Bridgetown



Indeed, this region is called the Scotland district, and its hills have become something of a holiday resort for locals who want to escape the holiday resorts on the west coast.

As I level out on the shores of Bathsheba, I can just about make out a rider up ahead, so I dig deep to close the gap. By the time I catch up, I recognise him as Nik, another rider from the UK. He too got dropped from the fast group of local riders as the heat started to take its toll. We discuss our heavy legs and pounding heads, and while we chat we miss a small yellow arrow on the road. It marks the turning for Cherry Tree Hill, the main climb of the day.

We unwittingly continue along our own road, which itself quickly becomes painfully steep. The climb, which we later discover is Farley Hill, hits 17% in the first stages, and it proves to be punishing on tired legs.

We crawl up slowly. Behind us is a quite breathtaking view of Bathsheba and the craggy coastline. Ahead of us is a dead monkey lying in the road. It's a strange and morbid sight, and does nothing to help my mood as I claw my way up the slope in the full heat of the sun.

Eventually I see a crest in the road ahead, and I know we must be near the top, which means

the day's biggest feed station isn't far away. I can already taste the cans of cola and flapjacks that wait atop the climb. I make a sprint for it, and lift my head to see... nothing. A barren, empty road.

It doesn't take us long to work out we've gone off track, and with empty water bottles we don't have much hope of descending and climbing Cherry Tree Hill again. We try to get our bearings and work out how to get back onto the right course again, but more importantly we need to find somewhere to refill our bidons. Which is how I come to find myself standing in a rum shack, watching a woman slowly count coins.

Rum punch

Once we get started again, I'm relieved to see some riders dashing over a crossroads ahead of us, and we quickly re-establish ourselves on the right course. I'm only slightly nervous that our diversion may have given us an unfair advantage and we could inadvertently find ourselves back towards the front of the race.

With the 6am start time, it's slightly surreal to consider that we're nearing the end and it's not even 9am. Tourists are just starting to mark their spots on the beaches, and the villages are yawning into life. ▶



The climb through the Green Monkey golf course is the last big challenge of the day, with ramps of more than 10%, and it shows yet another facet of the island's varied scenery

With our very own police outrider stopping traffic, we barely dip below 40kmh all the way to the finish line



► There's one more climb to go, a 126m ascent through the Green Monkey Golf Course (thankfully free of dead monkeys). It's lush and dotted with bright flowers, and again I'm struck by the island's ability to offer up completely different terrain seemingly at every turn.

The climb consists of four or five ramps and by the time we near the crest I'm clinging to Nik's wheel and sporting my best poker face. Once over the top, the route turns on to a wide

highway, one of the busiest on the island, and Nik and I give each other a slightly concerned look. At this time of day the road is light on cars, but we're well aware that drivers on these roads are a little haphazard at the best of times.

Just at that moment, the flashing blue light of a police bike appears from the road opposite. We worry that we've broken some local bylaw by being on the highway, but as it turns out he's here to clear our way. He sits in front of us, siren sounding, and offers us a royal lead-out into Bridgetown. It's a fantastic way to end the race.

With our very own police outrider stopping traffic, we barely dip below 40kmh all the way to the finish line. It's the closest I'll ever get to the feeling of being in a professional race.

When we arrive, my heart is pounding from my exertions and the sweat is rolling down and off my face. I collapse on the grass and watch as other riders cruise over the line, smiling and relaxed, enjoying the sunshine, and I realise that I still have a thing or two to learn about the virtues of Island Time. ✨

Peter Stuart is exotic island editor of Cyclist

Do it yourself

TRAVEL

We flew directly to Bridgetown from London Heathrow with Virgin Atlantic (virginatlantic.com), which offers flights from around £450. A bike bag can be carried in place of normal checked luggage at no extra charge, which can be a big saving over alternatives airlines that charge for long-haul bike carriage.

ACCOMMODATION

Cyclist stayed at the Accra Beach Hotel in Christ Church, which is an easy 10-minute roll from the start of the race. Accra Beach is very hospitable to cyclists as well as offering a great buffet and restaurant to help post-race recovery. Being located on the beach, it's also an excellent spot for *apres cycle*. Rooms start from around £200 per night for a double or twin. Go to accrabeachhotel.com for details.

THANKS

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