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
Water! 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 Barbados 360, the host village, beside Bayshore beach in Bridgetown, feels more like a base than a race venue, but things change dramatically when the starting pistol sounds.
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 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...
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 place 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.’
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.
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
Many thanks to Jane Hansom of Sponge Marketing, who played a pivotal role in the organisation of the event as well as ensuring we were able to participate. Thanks also to Lennon Chandler from Barbados Tourism for showing us much of the island, and also Virgin Atlantic for assistance with our travel arrangements. Go to visitbarbados.org for more details on cycling opportunities on the island.