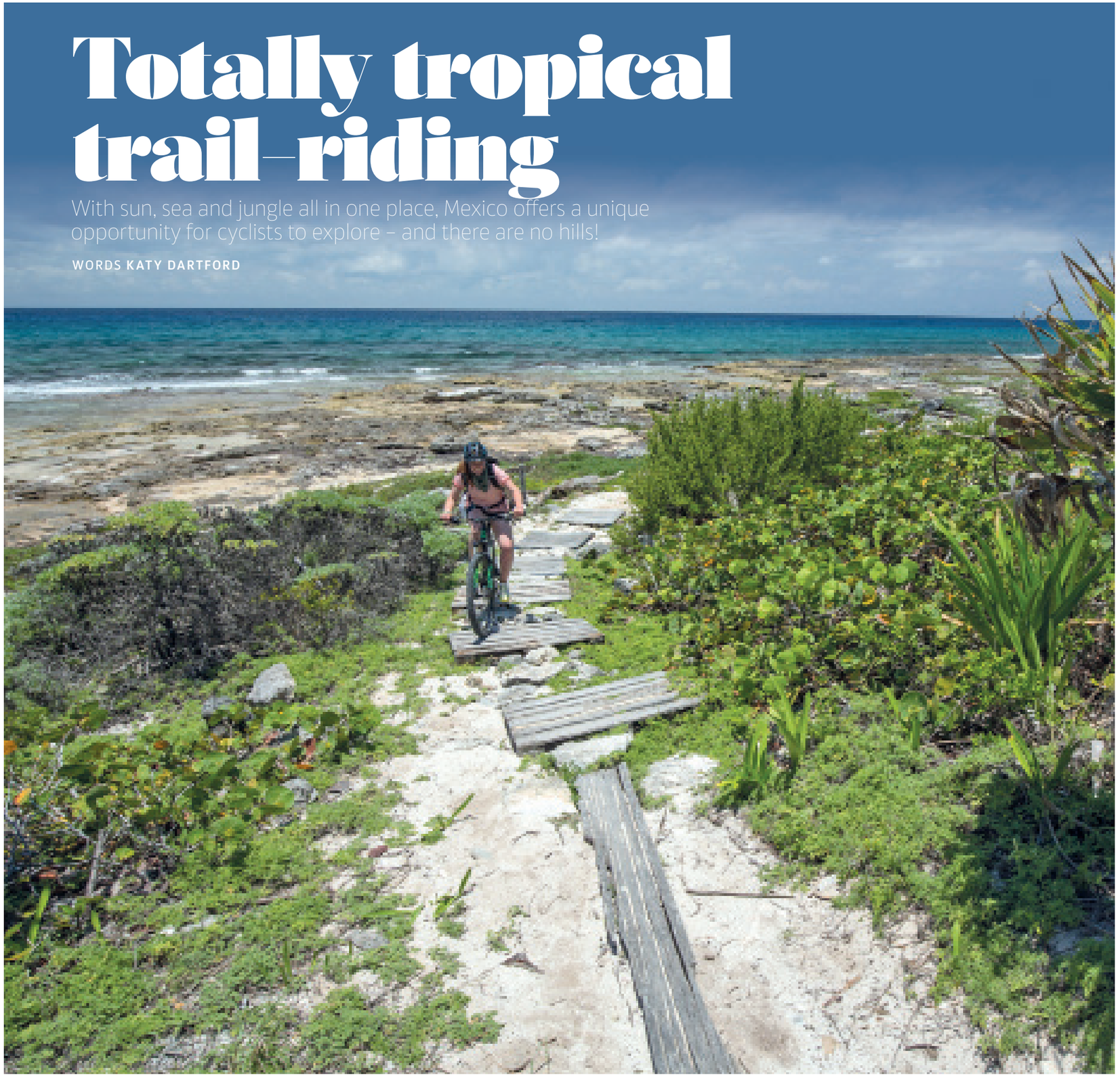
Totally tropical trail-riding

With sun, sea and jungle all in one place, Mexico offers a unique opportunity for cyclists to explore – and there are no hills!

WORDS KATY DARTFORD









A sharp thud in front of me made me jump as I paused for breath and to wipe the stinging sweat that was pouring into my eyes. An Armadillo had just plunged off a tree and hit the ground hard. I reached for my camera, but it scampered off into the undergrowth before I had a chance to snap it. I waited a little longer, before pedalling rapidly off into the jungle, trying not to lose my group.

This was no ordinary mountain bike trail, but one with spider monkeys swinging high overhead in the canopy and deer bounding though the mahogany, cedar and palm trees. At the Punta Venado Bike Park in the heart of Mexico's Mayan Riviera I'm surrounded by over 2,000 acres of jungle and four miles of beaches, brimming with birds, mammals and reptiles.

Expat guide and founder of the bike park, Doug Depies, meets us at the centre and sets us up with our Giant Stance bikes. Cross country mountain biking in the Yucatan Peninsula has grown steadily over the past decade, he tells us. The single track trails, with man-made rollers, steep banked berms and jumps were created from small paths that used to connect villages. The centre has been here for five years and since then 28km of blue green and black level trails, which are also accessible for trail runners, have been created. I pedalled about 7km in about an hour, (taking plenty of stops to watch wildlife) along mostly green (intermediate) trails, but a few black sections were thrown in to spice things up. Fortunately, although some technical sections, it was pretty much flat so we had plenty of steam left to ditch the bikes, and run, on nicely warmed up legs.

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June in the Yucatan brings unpredictable thunderstorms with temperatures reaching up to 32C/88F. But despite the sauna-like heat, the dense green foliage either side of us provided cover. We pedalled fast and hit the brakes hard to stop and watch the wildlife dancing around us. The suddenly the bumpy, dirt trail gave way to the turquoise ocean, sea breezes and hard peddling through sand and steep north shore.

When they were building the bike park, Doug explains, they found small cenotes – natural sinkholes created over years and years of erosion of the limestone bedrock, filled with cold, fresh water. With 100 per cent humidity at this time of year, they made a great place to cool off after spending the day mountain biking in the muggy jungle.

Mexican adventure

Mountain biking though the Yucatan jungle leaves riders with a different vision of the area. To experience more of this, we went on a nocturnal jungle hike led by Barna Takats. The Yucatan offers so many adventures in the outdoors and as well as the jungle, Barna took us to swim with the Kings of the oceans; whale sharks. Cancun is one of the best places to do this with the biggest whale shark aggregations ever recorded in the world. We also cycled around Mayan ruins and fished for bonefish, permit, and tarpon on the saltwater flats of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve.

Columbia Sportswear

I travelled with Columbia Sportswear to test their Spring 2018 Omni-Shade Sun Deflector technology. In the form of tiny dots, a titanium dioxide compound coats the outside of the running and fishing shirts. The dots are meant to reflect the sun's rays, preventing sunburn and keeping you physically cooler. With the hot and humid setting of Mexico, staying cool was a challenge, and the Omni-Shade line certainly kept the sun – and bugs – at bay without cooking us in the long sleeves. Although the fabric feels a little heavy and you think it's going to be hot, it really isn't. Some of the pieces included their earlier Omni-Freeze Zero technology, meant to produce an added cooling effect. Instead of wicking away sweat, Omni-Freeze Zero's polymer rings in the clothing absorbs sweat and conducts heat away from the wearer's skin, so your actual sweat aids in the cooling process instead of simply evaporating.

Details:

pvbikepark.com/
encounters.com.mx/
barnatakats.com/

Accommodation:

We stayed at beachside eco lodges, Nueva Vida de Ramiro (tulumnv.com), and at Jolie Jungle (joliejungle.com/en).