



RACE SPECIAL REPORT

The Caribbean island of Tobago isn't the most obvious cycling destination, but it has more to offer than you'd ever believe. We took part in the Tour of Tobago and had our eyes opened wide...

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RACING THE PROS IN PARADISE



Chances are, you've never even considered taking your bike to Tobago, or anywhere else in the Caribbean for that matter. There are many places better equipped to host your riding holiday. But what if you're lucky enough to have been to the Alps, Majorca, even South Africa, and are looking for something more? Well, we might have found the answer...

Sports tourism is high on Tobago's agenda, and it's one of the driving forces behind the Tobago International Cycling Classic (TICC) and UCI-ranked Tour of Tobago races, which form a week-long festival of cycling every October.

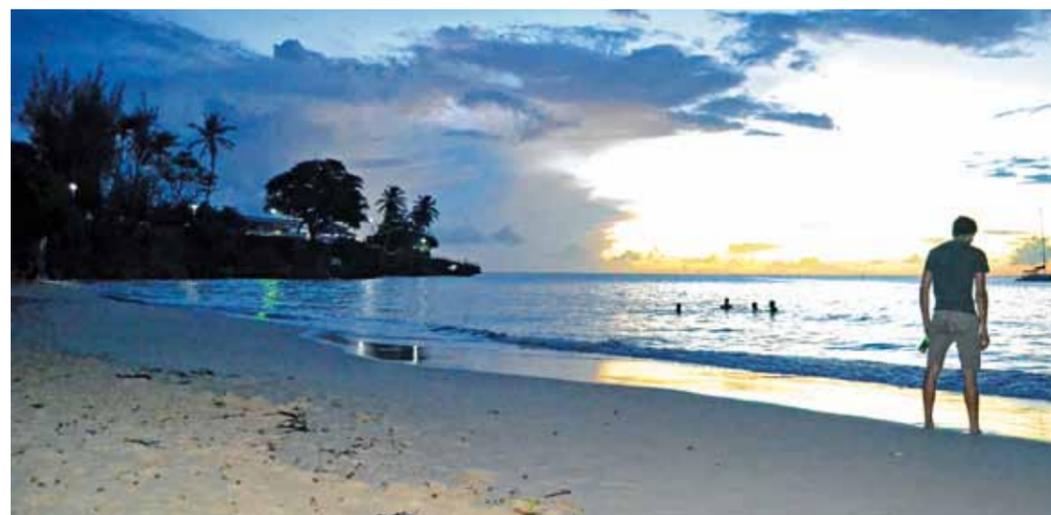
Our invite was originally to spectate and report, but Tobago is much too far to go and not ride. I wanted to get involved, and ended up joining a semi-pro team for the week, a composite Elite team pulled together for these races, run by a cousin of the organiser, Emile Abraham, who also happens to be the winner of the first three editions of the UCI race. We'd be racing in the colours of Emile's US Continental Pro team, Incycle-Predator. It turned out to be the most intense and eye-opening cycling experience I've ever had, and it took place on a stunning island, in ridiculous temperatures,

on batshit-crazy roads with locals who learned to drive from playing *Grand Theft Auto* – the original GameBoy version. Thirty per cent gradients. Amazing views. Forty bastard Celsius. Fruit you've never seen before. Food that is nothing like Levi Roots Reggae Reggae microwave meals. As a local rider told me with a smile while I was applying my third coat of sunscreen, "You're a long way from Europe, white boy."

TEAM DREAM

For a week I was one of the team, no special measures. I lived with them, cooked and ate with them, sat in the team meetings as a rider not a journo and was given a role to perform in each race.

The top teams present were UCI Continental level, others were Elite amateurs, though everyone I met was a full-time rider. When I first met my teammates and explained that writing was a full-time job, they were first shocked and then looked disappointed. They'd been hoping for a strong teammate, not a hobbyist. While they weren't all full pros (usually defined as being on a Continental team), these guys were all-in for their cycling careers. Two of them did some coaching on the side, one organised races. Another is just flat broke. It was truly eye-opening →





THIS PIC Jamie wasn't going to travel this far and not ride ABOVE RIGHT Anyone need a pee? RIGHT Racing in Tobago takes no prisoners - 27mph average!



to see how much they sacrifice so they can train for 20-30 hours every week. They believe they can make it as pros, they want it very badly and so they commit fully.

HOT FUSS

The four-stage TICC began with a circuit race – 10 laps of an 11km loop. On the start line my Garmin said 42°C and it was less than 20 hours since I'd landed. The race was quick, with averages of 26mph, and I was of little use to the team early on as I just tried to keep up. The heat was horrific. Then, at half-distance, my group rejoined the front group and I learned that one of our team, Winston David, was up the road with just one other rider. That's when school started and I began helping the team by sitting at the front of the bunch without pulling too hard, our road captain, Michael Olheiser, calling instructions. He always seemed able to see how the race was shaping up. Most of the time I could barely see at all. Winston won the race and the sprints jersey, Emile was third and Jean-Michel Lachance 10th.

Stage two was four laps of a very hilly 20km circuit. With the leader's jersey to defend we went in with a plan. In the team meeting, Emile asked me if I'm a good climber. At home I have nearly 200 Strava KOMs, but this was another level. "No, not next to you lot," I replied. So my job was to ride hard from the start to discourage attacks on the way to and

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then up the first climb. I lost touch with the lead group about halfway up that climb. Emile and I both climbed off to get in a team car and pass up drinks. Michael and J-M helped set up Winston in the lead group and he delivered again, getting second after one rider had got away. The yellow jersey was safe.

The third stage was a true criterium, an 800m circuit on very narrow roads with four 90-degree bends. "If it rains, it will be carnage," said Michael, doing nothing to ease my nerves.

It didn't rain, it monsooned. I missed my pedal at the start, and in that second I lost about 30 places. After that I was just trying to hang on. Every corner exit onto the longer straights was a full-bore, out-of-the-saddle sprint, followed by sitting down and heaving until the elastic contracted and you were onto the wheel in front.

I was still in the main group with two laps to go when I punctured, at which point it was too late to take a lap out and swap, so it was a

DNF. Emile, J-M and Winston all placed high, though, second, third and fifth, scoring good points and securing the overall. We found out later that several other teams had agreed to work against us but it had made no difference.

SCARBOROUGH FARE

The final stage was another crit, this time on a more flowing 1km course in Scarborough on the southern coast, where the ferry goes to Trinidad. Now we had it all to play for, so the plan was to get all seven of us to the front and stay there for the whole race, bossing it completely for 50 laps.

I felt tired, so my job was to set the pace early and if that used me up then fine. As it happened, once warmed up I felt great. I drilled it for five laps then swung off and rejoined our line in sixth spot where I was able to recover enough to last the race and take some more turns later, though it was Daniel Patten, Andy Scarano, Michael and J-M doing most of the work to keep the pace high and Winston out of trouble.

It was a hell of a sight, seven fluoro yellow jerseys lined out on the front of a peloton that began as 100 riders and was gradually whittled down by our pace. The race averaged 27mph, with many laps over 29mph. At the end we got swamped a bit and the phenomenally powerful Dutch crit champion, Yondi Schmidt, sprinted to a second straight win, but Winston's sixth →



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Jamie in (full) charge; shore is hot; all out of flapjack at the feedstop; electric pacemaking

WHEN IT'S 42°C AND YOU'RE RACING FLAT OUT, MISSING A BOTTLE FEELS LIKE THE END OF THE WORLD



was enough to secure the overall win. J-M survived a last lap crash to get the sprint jersey and we were also the top team. It was an amazing thing to be a part of.

As much as Incycle-Predator bossed the TICC, we ran out of luck for the UCI Tour of Tobago. First, J-M and Michael were prevented from racing by some UCI red tape, then Daniel punctured very early. While he was getting serviced, Andy's rear wheel threw a spoke. I stopped to give him mine and then had to wait several minutes for the team car, which was now at the back of the convoy. It meant that after just 20km my race was all but over and all I could do was ride round. At 60km, half distance, I punctured, and with no support cars around I had to hitch a lift back to the start.

Meanwhile, Emile was in the top 10 until he was hit by an official's motorbike and clattered into a kerb. He stayed on but broke his pedal, so J-M gaffer-taped his shoe to it and sent him on his way to an eventual hard-earned 12th. Winston finished close behind, followed by

Andy and Daniel who both toughed it out to reach the finish.

WATTS UP

The racing in Tobago was – measurably – the most intense riding I've ever done. On all three circuit races I spent more than 10 minutes of the race in zone 7 (over 525 watts for me). Sometimes your vision goes funny. But much more than the pain, what is most memorable for me about this whole trip was the team spirit. The rest of the team knew each other a bit, though they'd never been teammates or spent as much time together. I was a total stranger. By the end of the week we'd have done just about anything for each other. And riding as part of a team – riding for each other, not just wearing the same cycling jersey – is something that every cyclist should get to experience.

During the week the team taught me to make coffee like a pro (using an improvised filter holder made from a chopped plastic bottle), walk like a pro (shuffle like a 95-year-old), eat like a pro (constantly but very cheaply) and curse the shit wi-fi like a pro...

On the bike they taught me how to work as part of a team, something I'd never done before. When our guy was in a break, I learned how to block the chase efforts of other teams by riding steadily at the front. Once we had the yellow jersey, I learned how to set a fast early tempo on the front to prevent attacks from sticking and how to patrol our leader's back

wheel to keep him safe in the crits, constantly moving inside and out to block any other riders from passing him or getting on his wheel.

Thanks to my background of racing motorbikes, the criterium cornering speeds came easily. The aim is to carry the maximum speed through the tight turns by using every inch of tarmac, often hitting a pedal on the ground while trying to keep the power on. Less natural was taking bottles at speed – you get a split second to grab it. I went three for five on the first stage. When it's 42°C in the sun and you're racing flat out, missing a bottle feels like the end of the world. Catching the next one feels like winning the lottery.

I learned to give up a wheel for a teammate, and that doing so isn't galling when you're part of a real team. I had my first massage from a pro soigneur and learned it's not cool to flinch even when it feels like she's reaching inside your bones and crushing your soul.

Another highlight was counting your fat stack of prize money like a pro... Teams pool and split everything and we won around £220 each over the week, though I gave mine back because I was the only one with a salary.

TOBAGO GO!

Tobago makes everywhere else I've ridden, Dolomites included, feel tame. The roads are hugely challenging, with leg-busting climbs that frequently exceed 20 per cent, and thrilling descents that wind through trees like one of the boa constrictors that might greet you should you overcook a corner. The island has 21 species of snake and with the way some corners tighten unexpectedly, you'd think the road builders were keen to feed them. If you're a confident bike handler you'll love it; if not, take spare brake pads. And shorts. **PLUS**

How to travel to Trinidad and Tobago

British Airways flies to Port of Spain in Trinidad from Gatwick, with return flights starting from £525 and taking just under 11 hours. Bike boxes cost extra (around £120). There's an hourly island hopper flight between Trinidad and Tobago for around £30 each way and your bike is free on this one. For more information go to: www.visittobago.gov.tt