

URGE Cape Verde Event

Feb. 2011

I once read somewhere an adventure doesn't start until something unforeseen happens during a journey. Well let me say that it didn't take long for this adventure to embark. When I arrived at LAX airport to start my trip to Paris, where I was supposed to meet the rest of our 20 some people on our team before we continued together to the Cape Verde islands off the west coast of Africa; I realized that I had forgotten my backpack with my passport, money, phone and computer on the porch of my house, 1 hour and 20 minutes away! Help!! I immediately called my neighbor, begging him to jump in his car to deliver the pack, hopefully in time before my flight. No such luck, by the time I rallied my friends Garrett and Richie Schley who to embark on this heroic mission, they regretfully failed to deliver by only minutes. The flight closed and I was screwed. Next I found myself buying a last minute flight with another airline for \$2000, on the spot in the hope of makings it to Paris in time to make the once a week flight to the remote islands in the Atlantic. Once in Paris, I was told by the airline my bike would be on the next flight – I had to listen to this very sentence for the next 7 days, before my bike box finally arrived, not only open but completely shredded.





Fabien Barel's invitational URGE event has been going on for 3 years, after Mt. Kenya and Annapourna the group of hand-selected gravity riders would invade some of the Cape Verde islands with it's steep mountains and volcanoes. The event is mix between adventure, race and supporting local causes and charities.

The plan was to have 4 timed stages on unseen trails; but the real goal was to have an adventure and to give back, while racing was supposed to be secondary.

Amongst the invitees were no other than 10 time DH World Champion Nico Vouilloz, Mega Avalanche specialists Jerome Clementz and Rene Wildhaber, the current woman's DH World Champ Tracey Moseley, former DH World Champ Sabrina Jonnier, Mr. Allround beast Mark Weir, French jounalist and Masters World Champ Sam Peridy, sweet and fast Anka Martin, Rowan Sorrell trail guru and all mountain specialist from the UK, Marco Nicoletti 24h specialist on a 29er, one leg balance wonder Greg Doucende, Doro Lindtke and Sam Normand 2 amateur riders who had to qualify out of 400 entries. Last but not least our host and former DH World Champ Fabien Barel and myself, who hadn't raced in over a decade and who's goal it was to survive and to not get beaten too badly.

In addition we were joined by photographer Sven Martin, Fred and Manou who were organizing the journey and events, as well as a bunch of cameramen that recorded and captured everything we did.

We had a great group of people together and although traveling in such a bunch is no easy task; we had good times, incredible rides and one heck of an adventure; if I only had my bike. Luckily for me, the first few days involved more traveling and

visiting some local charities, schools and our Godmother of the event, Cesaria Evora who is a world renown singer and diva.

Our first riding destination was the island of Fogo with its 3000m/10000ft. active volcano. It's an understatement to say that everybody was more than pale after a horrible 4 hours ferry ride in the violent waters, I thought the journey would never end – traveling to our village in the Caldeira – a poor village inside the 20 mile crater at 1700m, from where the cone of the still active volcano rose. It looked a bit like on the moon, it was a fantastic location. While everybody was busy shooting photos and film, I took Fred's bike for a spin, riding to the edge of the crater from where the trail fell straight down into the clouds and towards the raging blue ocean, where we would have to race to the next day. The locals were growing all kinds of agricultural products, they even make their own wine, from grapes that grow on the sandy slopes of the volcano.



Stage 1: The very next morning we had an early start, with the mission to climb the volcano with our bikes, as far as it made sense, then embark on foot to the top for a group shot before we would hike back to our bikes and start racing into the unknown. The hike to the top was brutal and took us all morning. The eve before we had decided the starting order by pulling numbers, poor Anka had to go first. It was quite steep and intimidating, the sandy ground was soft and ankle deep – and nobody was quite sure how to tackle it or how fast we could go. It turned out to be a 90kmh/ 60mph run for the fast guys, and not that much slower for the rest of us during the first 30seconds of a race that would take me 47 min. The thing that made me a bit uneasy, was not just the fact that I was on a borrowed bike, or that there are no helicopters that could potential rescue one, neither was it the reality that medical

help was hours if not days away; no it was the big sharp rocks on the bottom of the first shoot. I'm used to riding technical and steep trails all over the world, the difference here was, that I had to do it fast, which is a entirely different ball game.

Everybody had brought more or less 6inch All Mountain bikes, once Anka had carefully worked her way down the course, 3 minutes later it was Mark Weir who set the pace, by straight-lining full speed down the mountain. Before I got to take off as 8th rider, I had the pleasure to watch Nico sprint down the slopes fearless in a tucked down position. I was thinking, so much for riding at 70%, as we were advised to do.

I had no other choice than to send her straight as well, it was like riding powder snow and actually felt quite stable, until the rock field below came rapidly closer at me and to my astonishment braking in the deep sand had absolutely no effect. Instinctively I put my butt way behind my seat and was holding on for dear life, until I heard and felt my tire cut through my riding shorts and chammies like a butter-knife. I couldn't help it but repeat this unintentional brake maneuver a second time before navigating through the rocks. At this point it was really important to read the terrain well, since there wasn't an established trail and there was really only one perfect line to make it through the rocks and little ravines before hitting the village inside the old crater. Wow, what a rush – that was really fun I told myself once I caught my breath and had found the main dirt road. Next came a 6km flat section ahead, which I wasn't looking forward to, since all the super fit honchos and gals were likely to dust me in that section. Relieved that I wasn't caught by the rider behind me, I arrived at the edge of the crater from where we had a 2km downhill on a beat up dirt road. Right before the start we had received word that the lower part of the trail was not only wet and in bad shape, but it was steeper and more technical than expected. The next 20 minutes, must have been the hardest downhill ride I've done – the trail was indeed technical with many irregular and inverted steps, my hands were so tired and my shorts kept sliding off. Four over the bars endos, gave me at least a chance to catch my breath for a second or two after each crash. Little did I know at the time that I wasn't the only guy who found it difficult, to say the least. But on the flipside, neither did I know that the fast guys would make over 13 minutes on my time and fly down the trail like Bubba rides the woops. The trail went on forever when I finally spotted the red tape on the ground, which indicated the finish-line. Wow, that was quite something – I was bloody, exhausted and pumped – 'what a ride!' My result was in the middle of the pack and the local meal afterwards was the best food period.

To get to the next island we had to travel all day via ferry and two flights. The islands are not only very big, some of them are more than 100km long, they are

spread over an area of 500 Miles.



To my surprise my bike showed up, I had almost given up hope to ever see my lost GT Force again. We all shuttled into the clouds and fog high up in the mountains of San Antao, to get ready for Stage 2.

This time we started in reverse order, and we had another full blown experience waiting for us. Amidst a wet cloud with hardly any visibility, we could barely make out two switch-backs down a sheer vertical mountainside on wet cobblestones with random holes and other hazards. Just as I was ready to start Nico had run up the hill from inspecting part of the course, he was just about to say something when the starter shouted go – for moment I wasn't sure if I should have listened to what the champion had to advise – I figured I would find out for myself soon. Any mistake would have been deadly, I'm not kidding. It was scary and nerve-racking but fun at the same time. Most of us wanted to have a safe ride down into the unknown. Halfway down, after about 15 – 20 hairpin turns later, we broke through the cloud layer and a beautiful lush valley with terraced fields revealed itself. The cobblestone trail was now dry and less steep and I just started to find my rhythm when I was welcomed by my cheering peers who were awaiting me at the finish. This stage was a lot shorter, it took me about 7 minutes, but it left a long impression. No wonder, Doro was shaken to the bones – it literally felt like we cheated death, we were more than happy to still be alive. Fabien promised us less dangerous stages to come, while I was glad it didn't involve more pedaling than it did. We spent the rest of the afternoon taking film and photos. While Nico, Fabien and Rene decided the stage amongst them – the highlight was really to ride with everybody to the bottom and watch them ride. What a high level of skills, I was honored to rub elbows with those guys and girls and it was quite inspiring to see all the different lines and riding styles.

Stage 3 and 4 were both on the same day, we shuttled deep into the mountains and pedaled for another 10km to where we were told the start would be. Word had it that we had a 20 minute stage with more dangerous turns and a few uphill's along the way. I was the last guy down the hill. It was a beautiful place, although once on

the bike – I had little opportunity to enjoy the views. It reminded me of a mix between Kauai, Machu Picchu and the Canary Islands. It's a need experience to race down these unknown trails, never knowing what's behind the next turn or how much longer the course would be.

Lunch, shuttle and one more race to go – this time it was my turn to lead, with Nico breathing down my neck, I was just hoping that I wouldn't be passed. Nice to be the first one down and glad to watch all other riders make it in one piece across the finish line. Nice intro into endurance downhill racing – it was awesome to see all the riders do their thing, set up their bikes and going through the emotions of racing in such an environment.

We had a nice farewell dinner and everybody received a beautiful mask carved from the local volcanic rock.

The journey home was a long one, but worth every bit of it.

Hans

Here is a link to some videos: <http://www.urgecaboverde.com/Videos-m21.html>

Link to the URGE Cape Verde site: <http://www.urgecaboverde.com>







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