



**RUTH'S MISSION** This month editorial assistant Ruth Brooker swaps the muddy trails of the UK for the exotic delights of the Caribbean. No, of course we're not jealous.

# This month St Lucia

Our Ruth jets off to St Lucia in the Caribbean to ride Tinker's Trail in the jungle with the legendary XC racer Tinker Juarez himself...

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**A**s we bounce over the clear blue sea in a little red wooden speedboat, with the waves spraying on deck and the twin Piton mountains looming behind us, it suddenly dawns on me that this is the first trail I have ever had to access by boat. We skirt around the rocky coastline to approach a small deserted beach lined with palm trees, leap into the shore break and stumble up the dark volcanic sand. This place is stunning, but it's such a surreal experience I feel like I must be fantasising. Any minute I'm expecting Man Friday in a loin cloth to burst out of the undergrowth. This must surely qualify as the most unusual place to go mountain biking...

## Bikini babe

Last week was just a normal week in the office, when I got a phone call inviting

me to ride the trails with Bike St Lucia and Tinker Juarez himself. It had never occurred to me that you could ride off-road in the Caribbean. At first I thought it was a joke, but I'm never one to miss an opportunity, so I packed my bikini and sunhat and the next thing I'm stepping off the plane in St Lucia to thundering rain. Apparently this is, as the locals say, a "trop-i-cal depression", but the downpours stop as quickly as they start and are blown away by the constant trade winds that keep it feeling cool here, despite the scorching sun.

A couple of American bike journalists are also on the trip and we're staying at the luxurious Coconut Bay Resort & Spa, just 10 minutes from the airport. Ah, this is the life: my room overlooks the Atlantic Ocean and there's a platter of fresh tropical fruit to welcome me. I'm like a feral dog around free food; I »



**ST LUCIA**  
ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

**How to get there**  
British Airways fly from Gatwick to St Lucia (Hewanorra). Expect to pay £500-600. Visit [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com).

**Where to stay**  
We stayed at The Coconut Bay Resort & Spa in the south of St Lucia. It's an all-inclusive hotel: all food, drink and some activities are included in the price. See [www.coconutbayresortandspa.com](http://www.coconutbayresortandspa.com). There is plenty of accommodation on the island. For more info, go to [www.stlucia.org](http://www.stlucia.org).

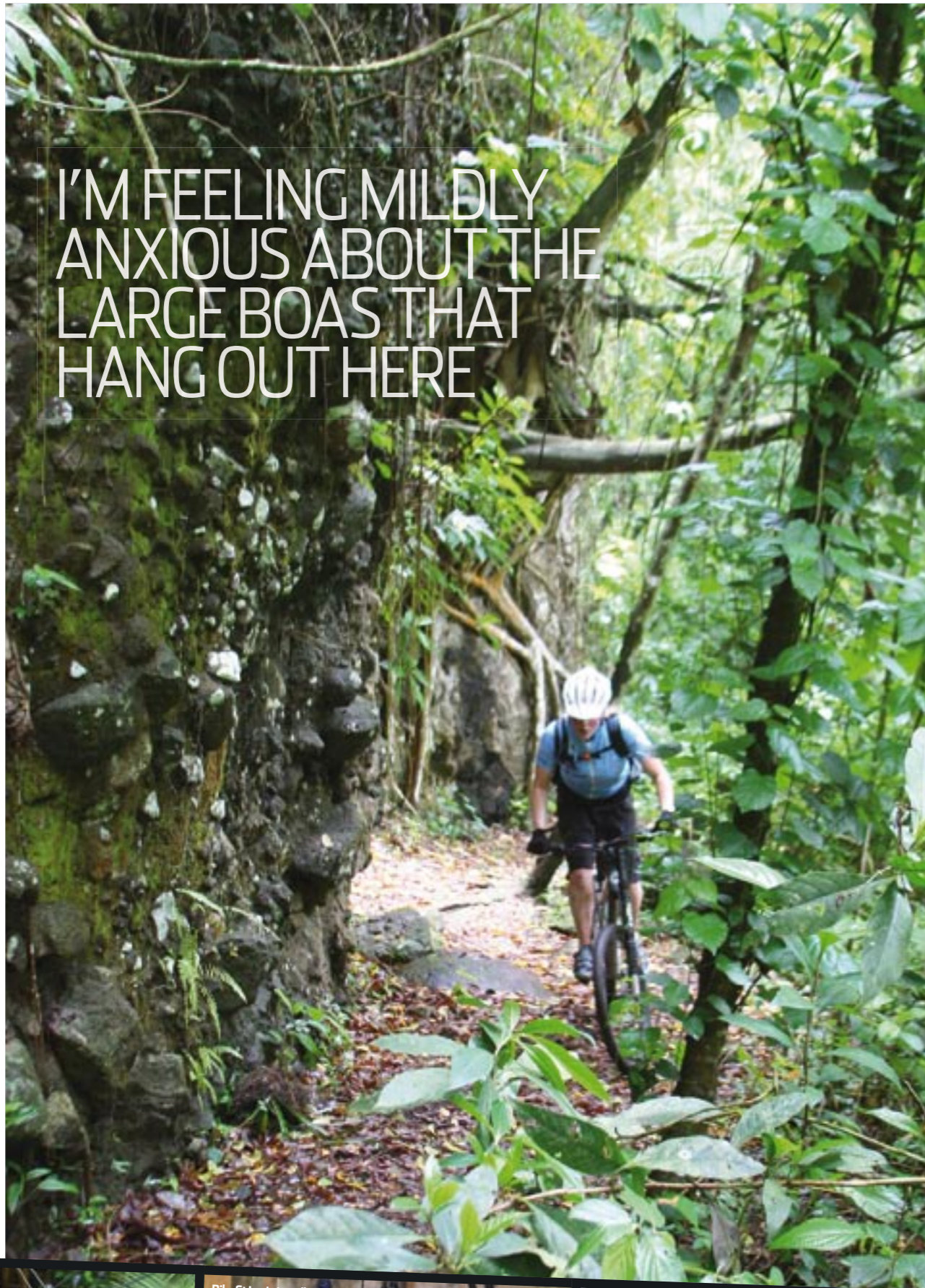
**How to get around**  
You can hire vehicles from Avis ([www.avis.co.uk](http://www.avis.co.uk)) or use taxis.

**When to go**  
The peak (and most expensive) time to visit is December to February. In March and April it's quieter and the weather is still good. June to November is the hurricane season, with the heaviest rainfall and some tropical storms, but it doesn't rain constantly.

**Biking and activities**  
A jungle biking daytrip with Bike St Lucia costs US \$95. This includes boat transportation, bike and helmet hire, lunch and snorkelling. Bring your own pedals and saddle if you like a particular set-up. They also offer entertainment for companions who don't want to ride. For more information visit [www.bikestlucia.com](http://www.bikestlucia.com) and [www.junglereefadventures.com](http://www.junglereefadventures.com).

You can also go diving, snorkelling, zip-lining and hiking: see [www.cyclestlucia.com](http://www.cyclestlucia.com). All activities can be booked via the hotel too.

I'M FEELING MILDLY ANXIOUS ABOUT THE LARGE BOAS THAT HANG OUT HERE



Tinker tames his own well-signposted trail



**DAVID 'TINKER' JUAREZ**  
Age 45  
Lives Florida, USA  
Sponsor Cannondale  
**Career highlights**  
■ 1st Subaru 24hr Champion Challenge 2006  
■ 3rd RAAM 2006  
■ 1st Saab Salomon 24hr Mountain Mayhem UK 2005  
■ 24hr Solo US National Champion 2001-2004  
■ 1st Trans Alp Challenge 2004  
■ US Olympic XC team member 1996 & 2000  
■ NORBA National Cross-Country Champion 1994, 1995, 1998,  
■ Silver Medal, World Cross-Country Championships 1994

Tinker has raced for 34 years at an elite level. He grew up riding BMX in Los Angeles and began racing cross-country in 1986, then got into 24-hour XC racing.

can't leave it, even if I'm not hungry. Which is bad news because this hotel is all-inclusive, so you can have as many cocktails as you can force down. (The Dirty Banana is my favourite; you can drink it while floating in the pool.)

St Lucia is 240 square miles of mainly mountainous jungle, so most of the towns and villages are situated on its shores. After settling in, we are driven up, down and around the steep, winding coast road to the tiny fishing port of Soufriere. Just as you would expect, there's a relaxed pace of life here as we pass people chilling out on their verandas, but the colonial style houses hint at the island's historic French and English domination.

**Banana republic**

In Soufriere, we're met by Paul German, who runs Jungle Biking, and he takes us by boat to the trails on the west coast. After landing on the beach, we wander barefoot through the vegetation to the Bike St Lucia centre, in a clearing surrounded by banana trees. It's situated in the 400-acre Anse Mamin valley, which was home to a French sugar cane plantation in the 1750s. The crumbling remains of this former industry are still present. The centre's headquarters is a restored building with a workshop containing a fleet of Cannondale bikes. It's here that we find Michael Allard, a wiry silver-haired Californian who originally conceived the idea of cutting trails through the valley and establishing Jungle Biking. All the trails were hand-built using

cutlasses (yes, really!), wheelbarrows, picks and shovels. It took 18 months and the efforts of 10 people for the main trail to be built in the year 2000.

As we're busy setting up our bikes, the diminutive figure of Tinker Juarez, who's a frequent visitor to St Lucia, quietly appears. He has a slight and sinewy physique, his characteristic dreadlocked hairdo is still intact, a crucifix dangles around his neck, and a mystical aura of calm surrounds him. I'm normally a blabbermouth but have turned shy in his presence. Only a few days ago Tinker came third in the 3,000-mile Race Across America (RAAM) road race, and he's here to have a nice relaxing break – and also to get married to his partner, Terri.

**Queen of the jungle**

Paul takes us all on an introductory tour around the trails and fleshes out the history behind the ancient ruins that we are riding alongside. We then split up and explore the trails alone – it's great fun to be biking in such unfamiliar terrain. As I'm playing on the slippery roots and drop-offs by myself, the constant squawking, singing and buzzing of the tropical birds and insects appears much louder. It's all so lush and overgrown with thick vines hanging down that, thanks to a childhood of watching *Indiana Jones* movies, I'm feeling mildly anxious about the large boa constrictors that hang out in such an environment.

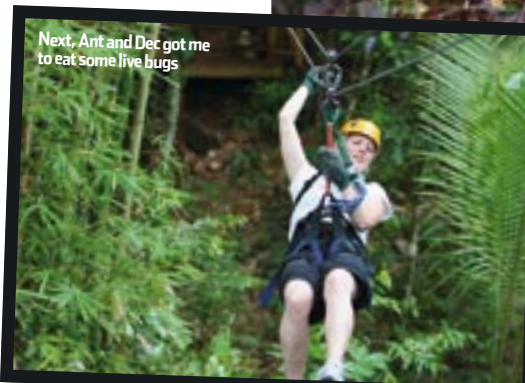
The main trail cuts deep into the heavily scented valley of banana and »



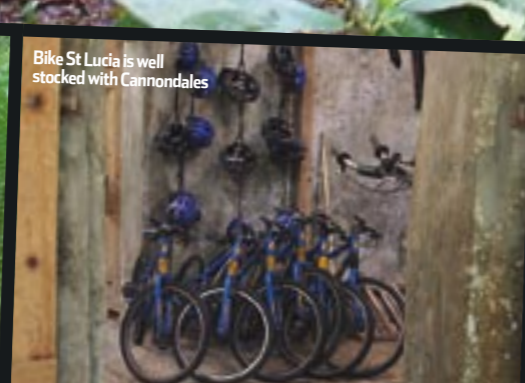
The twin volcanic Piton mountains loom ominously



Clip in, hold on, concentrate...



Next, Ant and Dec got me to eat some live bugs



Bike St Lucia is well stocked with Cannondales



Beats getting married at your local registry office!



Tinker is the only rider yet to successfully climb Tinker's Trail



"And now, it goes almost vertically up"



Riding through the jungle is a sweaty business

guava trees, and branching off this trail are small but sweet sections of singletrack, which are all named and signposted. It's surprisingly technical and greasy due to the constant humidity which makes riding in the jungle a very sweaty business. Compared with maintained trails in the UK, St Lucia's routes are on a smaller scale, but there are a lot of obstacles to test your skills on, and there's the luxury of having them to yourself.

**Tinker's Trail**

But all this is merely a warm-up as, after all, we're here to ride the black-graded Tinker's Trail. Michael was keen to add an expert-level trail to the network and approached Cannondale to see if any of their racers would offer their expertise. Tinker obliged; he loved the reserve and could see its potential, so stayed to give advice on issues such as the trail design, width and turn ratios. They took his suggestions and spent the next 10 months frantically hauling loads of earth up and down the mountainside. Tinker returned to St Lucia in December 2000 for the official opening of Tinker's Trail.

So far, no one but Tinker has managed to ride a bike to the top! Given that the trail rises 1,000ft in roughly a mile, it's hardly surprising, although a handful of people have ridden down it. Today we set out and Tinker rockets up the path and vanishes; I have no idea how you ride up terrain as unbelievably steep as this. You can pedal the first 100 yards, but I'm off the bike and pushing almost immediately. In fact, I'm starting

to regret coming up here. The gradient is impossible and I've never seen switchbacks so narrow and tight.

Eventually, after much grumbling, I make it to the summit, which reveals an amazing panoramic view of the titanic twin peaks and the glittering Caribbean Sea. But after such an epic push I'm wondering what the hell I'm going to have to ride down. I lower my saddle as far as it will go and clip in while clinging to a rock. I'm taking it steady because once you're on this there's no stopping, and it's made all the more exciting by the recent rains.

This is really steep and hairy; my brain's almost hurting I'm concentrating so hard, but apart from a brief, intimate collision with a tree I make it down alive and am buzzing from having survived it. I'm also chuffed to hear that I'm the first girl to have ridden down it. But perhaps that's because there aren't many who are stupid enough to try. Next year Paul is planning on cutting out a good intermediate trail, and they've already scouted out a route which should be a more conquerable challenge for us mere mortals.

I'm totally drenched in sweat and bits of dirt and twig have glued themselves to my damp skin, so we run down to the beach to wash off in the sea. The rest of the afternoon is spent snorkelling with colourful fish in the marine reserve near by. Needless to say, it's been a lot of fun and a totally unique biking experience, made all the more special by having Tinker along for the ride. I'm just disappointed I didn't manage to find a talking parrot... 🌀

I'VE NEVER SEEN SWITCHBACKS SO NARROW AND TIGHT



**RUTH'S ROUTE**



A spot of après-trail snorkelling is in order



"I can't tell you how much I miss Swindon"



Ruth's room with a view

