

## TALES FROM THE TRAILS

# The bike race of a lifetime near Oaxaca

By **ANDY BOHLMANN**  
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

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Our man in Oaxaca, Mexico, Pedro Martinez, told us to be in front of his bicycle and mountain-bike touring shop on Calle Aldama at 8:30 a.m. Pedro, a former Mexican National Road Team member, was leading the local mountain bike racers 100 kilometers (about 62 miles) into the Sierra Madres to Santa Catarina Ixtepeji, to a beautiful jungle national forest for a bicycle race.

A dozen or so cars, trucks and Pedro's Jeep Wagoneer would soon be loaded with an assortment of bikes, not to mention cyclists, friends and families.

As we had never been to a local bike race, we were ready and excited. The trunk of our rented Nissan Tsuru was full of whatever we might need for a day in the mountainous jungle.

Since we had room for two in the back seat, we took a racer who was to meet her parents, and an old guy. Bike races bring together all sorts of oddities, and this guy was no exception. We didn't speak much Spanish, and they spoke no English. We all spoke cycling.

After our caravan made a "technical stop" at the Pemex for gas, it was up Highway 175. "Up" the highway was an understatement. Never more





ANDY BOHLMANN

Kathleen Bohlmann watched racers chug their way through a mountainous jungle near Oaxaca, Mexico. She and her husband, Andy, vacationed there in 2004.

## TALES: Stray cows on race course

FROM PAGE 1

than 50 kilometers per hour (about 31 mph) and shifting up or down all the time, passing through clouds and small villages, we made it to the entrance of the forest. We drove another 10 kilometers on a bumpy rock "road" deeper into a thick moss and fern jungle, until suddenly we arrived at the start area.

We couldn't believe what we saw. Crowd control, fencing, flawless registration, an ambulance, announcers and open fires where local Zapotec natives were cooking food and hot chocolate for everyone at no cost. Even some road riders showed up. How they got there is anyone's guess.

The course was 8 kilometers per lap, and everyone started together. There was dark and oozy mud, unbelievably hard climbing, stream crossings and singletrack no wider than the mayor's mezcal bottle. We could not believe we were at this event. The race officials, both female Mexican National Commissaries, ran the show. And did they ever! They would have fit right in our old Sand Creek Series.

The food was great. The climbing by the racers was second to none. The stray cows on the course didn't care. The mayor's assistant passed out homemade mezcal. We yelled and screamed for the riders to go harder.

Light rain fell from the cloud passing through the mountains. And then it was all over, except for the smell of the jungle and char-

coal fires, which is still with us.

So back down the mountain we drove, slower this time because of the light rain and a little mezcal. We took three people back to town, including the old guy who turned out to be the race announcer and cow chaser.

Then the road riders appeared in the mirror! Descending faster than us, they squeezed between us and the fast-approaching chicken bus at around 80 kph. We never saw them again.

Back in Oaxaca, we walked the three blocks to La Primavera and celebrated with Victoria (a great cerveza), torta cubanas and a huge plate of avocado. We had long since stopped being "gringo tourists."

After walking back to the hotel and up the 200-year-old stone stairway to the rooftop terrace, it was time for a Cuban cigar and wondering what just happened. Between the two of us, we've been to and organized hundreds of bike races, but nothing compares to that day at that bike race.

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Andy Bohlmann lives in Colorado Springs with his wife, Kathleen. From 1992 to 2002 they organized the Sand Creek Series mountain bike races.

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