

AZT300

THOUGHTS, THORNS AND THICKETS!

RACING THE 2016
AZT 300

xplore

After racing the Tour Divide three years in a row, I was keen for something else. Keen to see a different part of the US and maybe try my hand at another kind of race. Enter the Arizona Trail race; an altogether different kind of beast. Where the TD has sweeping vistas and tall mountain passes that touch the sky, the AZT has gnarly ridges and grovelly canyons that weave in and out of every conceivable cactus known to man. But it is also significantly shorter. Two forms of the race are served up to whet your appetite. The full monty, or 750 miles worth, which starts at the Mexican border and heads north, through the Grand Canyon ending at the border of Utah. Then there's the milder version, the 300. This ends pretty much in the middle of Arizona.

Time pressures meant the 750 was not an option and so I opted to give the 300mile a go. Scott, the race founder, said 'don't worry; you're not going to feel like you haven't raced doing the 300.' Boy was he right! 75 riders signed up for both versions of the race, split roughly down the middle. I stood at the start line looking around, amazed at how much some of the riders were carrying. I wasn't planning on sleeping in the next two days, or some power naps at most meant I was leaving all that luxury behind. Scott gave a short speech then waved us good-bye.



The first part of the route weaves in and out of the nasty Canelo Hills. Narrow single track takes a direct line that leaves you breathless pretty much from the start up some small, sharp hills. The land was breathtaking though, when I could catch a glimpse of it. Not an hour in I came round a bend and my front wheel washed out at speed which had me face planting in a pile of dust and gravel in an instant. I lay there for a moment sure my race was over but all seemed fine. I jumped up, bent my handle bar back and jumped back in. The Canelos have this fine, marble like gravel that can be unforgiving if you are too hard on the left hand. As the hills slipped by I slowly got into a rhythm. I was lying somewhere up front.

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50kms in and the Canelos spits you out on some paved road for a bit of respite. A tail wind pushed us past the small towns of Patagonia and Sonoita, before turning back towards the mountain and the Coronado forest. This was a mixed section with stunning single track on exposed ridges but also grueling hills. The AZT is notorious for hike a bike meaning a lot of the time you are off the bike pushing up some short, steep grovel. By nightfall I was on the outskirts of Tucson, but I may as well have been on the moon. The AZT ostensibly follows the Arizona Hiking trail...yes, the hiking trail! This winds a circuitous path that only a deranged viper might take! Follow it on a bike and you can imagine the frustrations of seeing city lights off in the near distance but knowing it will be days before you get there!

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As darkness swallowed me I knew I was somewhere near Colossal Cave. Being a keen caver, I had a vague interest in the lay of the land and wondered what might lie deep in the earth. Occasionally I would glance around but nothing but formless hills returned my gaze. I was now hungry in a primal way and was hoping something may still be open. As the odd light faded away, I knew I had either missed the turn to the Cave Centre, or it was closed. I still had a pocket of bars and snacks and was kind of expecting this after similar experiences on the Tour Divide. I pressed on and felt like an alien in a lonely world.

Not having done a route before it's hard to be sure when you are riding through a particular feature that people have spoken about. "This monster pass, or that gnarly climb." In the dark things slow down and time becomes like a thick gel. Like one of those dreams where you know you need to run but something is holding your legs back, and so you kind of wade. That's what I was doing. Wading through the hills. I stopped around 10pm for a 15 min powernap. Scrunched up behind a low wall I drifted into a see-saw state. The rest of that night was blurry. I know I saw Neil Stiltzer come past, as I climbed a pass high up in nowhere land. I remember also a Jeep parked in the middle of absolute nowhere, and dropping down a road that seemed to be ripped apart by a Balrog. At times I was off my bike, pushing down this crazy road. Then I was climbing again before sleep monsters tugged at my arm. Warning me gently that things would get worse if I didn't bow to their insatiable appetite. It was now around 2am and I needed another 15 min powernap. Longer was simply not possible, as without any sleeping gear the cold would wake me up. But 15 mins was all that was needed to push on.

In the early morning Neil Belchenko passed me in a cheery mood. He was doing the 750 and would go on to break the record. I pushed on at my pace as the sun revealed a stunning world. I was about to get off my bike and push or carry it for almost an hour up the side of the mountain. I knew somewhere ahead lay the notorious climb up Mount Lemmon, but wasn't sure where. Once on top of the hike a bike, a manic descent brought me to a paved road and the bottom of Mount Lemmon. Lemmon is a bit of an anomaly in the area. All around southern Arizona the flat and dry desert is pock marked with sharp hills, and then this huge thing sticks out. A crisp paved road snaked its way up the sides as I peddled along slowly. It was Saturday morning and the pass was filled with road cyclists, tearing past at speeds making my effort look quite pathetic. Most ignored me. Some passed a comment about what a novel way to climb the pass, on a mountain bike. Novel! Really!

By midday I was sitting eating a burger in a café in the small village of Summerhaven, nestled near the top of Lemmon. As I poured over the maps, little did I suspect this was the last food I would get, for the rest of the race! I knew there were other places up route, but what I grossly miscalculated was how long this next section would take. Beyond Lemmon lay Oracle ridge. In my mind, I imagined a trail dropping forever down a fast track way into a mystical valley. After all, I had just spent the whole morning climbing up this thing, how hard could it be to get down the other side? Wow. The problem when you have a vivid imagination and you are dog-tired, is that you tend to script what's ahead to suite your miserable state and that of course, has nothing to do with reality.

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Right off the bat I was grumpy with Oracle Ridge. More climbing, I thought. Seriously. When do we go down? But it wasn't just the climbing. It was the nature of the beast. The start of Oracle ridge included a few 'minor' hills. No problem on its own, but combine that with sketchy hiking trail, lots of rocks, and every type of cactus in existence and you have the ingredients of the next world series cussing contest. I scrambled, bashed, clawed, dragged, mangled, crunched and cussed my way up those peaks. At one point I was pushing my bike on a narrow path and fell over sideways and tumbled off a small 2m cliff into a huge thorn tree growing on a pile of rocks. As I spiraled slowly in the air, I remember almost screaming. Great, I thought. This is how I'm going to leave this world. Not in dignity like those famous words of Will Turner's mom from the Harlan Kentucky feud "Stop that! Die like a man, like your brother did!" but rather screaming and clawing my way down a mountainside. As my left arm audibly smashed into a rock I came to a stop. Something wet had splashed on my face. Blood I thought. Its over. I'm alive but the race is over. I said a quick prayer for healing and protection then slowly maneuvered my way out of the thorn tree and off the rocks. Getting back up to the path proved way more difficult and just as painful as I now had to wrestle back through the thorn tree. When all was said and done, incredibly I was ok. Ripped to pieces with a big gash in my arm but ok.



I pressed on. Finally the last of these minor peak summits was reached and the much-vaunted downhill began. I was still in pain and also shaken from the fall which left me with little confidence plummeting down narrow switchbacks. I took it easy until the country eased up and the trails smoothed out. The evening light was soft and fantastic. Soon I was in the Tiger mine area doing the sums of when I might find food, and trying to work out where exactly I was. By nightfall my eyes were starting to play tricks on me. Hallucinations began way sooner than they normally do. I wasn't yet two full days into this race and already I had company. In the distance somewhere a light bobbed in and out of the water. All of a sudden it was real. It was actually Kurt Refsnider, race legend and record holder who was doing the 300 in reverse. We stopped and swapped stories before he sped off into the night. I carried on feeling buoyed by the friendly encounter, but all too soon that wore off.

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I was now in what I can only describe as a zombie state. The hallucinations weren't that vivid like normal, but rather subtle. The music was there yes, and the presence of others. But there was something else. I felt like my bike was an experiment that needed to end, or a parcel that needed to be packed away. I kept thinking of a process in my mind that needed completion. The construct of dough kept coming to mind but in a riding form I could not quite find the language for. It was frustrating, mind numbing and endless. The land was the same. Up, down, left, right, through a riverbed, then another, into a thorn bush, then another. I had so many thorn and cactus tips in my legs I think I'd become anesthetized. Two more times I crawled under a bush trying to escape the wind for a quick power nap. Then up, and back into the mire.

At around 2am I saw a fire just next to the trail. It was Igor, a friend of one of the racers that was out waving at the passerby's. And he was awake! I pulled up and said hi. He offered me a beer, which I strangely accepted. I sat down next to his fire feeling like a visitor from another planet. But it was good to see company and I set off once again buoyed. The rest of that night I fought sleep monsters and drudge demons. At some point I impaled myself on a Cholla cactus. They say the only way to get this thing out of you is with a metal fork! It took about 10 minutes of fine motor skill to remove it and all its spines. As the early light filled the spillways and washes, I was beginning to cuss all the different forms of cacti. There were big brutes that lay just off the trail, knocked down by time. There were tall suckers that were easy to see. Often, just around a hairpin bend would lay a squat round one that was devastating to ride into. There lurked thin, long hard ones, like spears that would certainly kill a man if caught in the throat. I narrowly missed catching one in the chest. There were the ubiquitous knee high ones that you would catch on the shin riding into a wash, which were terrifyingly painful. But the worst of the lot no doubt was the Cholla. Innocent looking, benign almost, it grew on a fairly large bush, but if you happened to brush past the bush or ram into it which I did, then one of these individual Cholla grenades would break off and attach itself to you. It had some kind of mechanism that allowed the other spines to claw on and sink deeper if you tried to pull one out and didn't get it right. Finally there were the insidious barbed tentacles. These would lay close to the ground, looking no more ominous than a thin vine, but just as you passed, two barbs would surreptitiously reach out and sink deep in your calf jerking you back! Dog dangerous land indeed.

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It had been a long night. I was ragged but feeling good for the final stretch. Ahead lay a couple of famous climbs. The latter, a little more infamous! As I clawed my way up the Ripsey, the land fell away to reveal a country of deep magic and mystery. I was sprawled on a skyscraping ridge with the world far below. I wanted to stay a while and soak it in but this was a race. I was chasing someone and someone was chasing me. All too soon the sky was replaced by hot gravel as I made my way up the Gilla river valley. A stifling, dead heat had risen from the sands making me realize how lucky we had been before in relatively cool temps. Out of nowhere a right turn veered sharply skywards. This must be it I thought. The infamous final climb. Just then I caught sight of a rider about half a mile back. Gosh, who can it be? I knew I was lying third and thought I had a fair enough buffer on the 4th rider not to worry. From this distance it looked like Calvin Decker's colors who was racing the 750 but I couldn't be sure.

Galvanized by the prospect of losing 3rd place, a renewed, demon like energy filled my legs and I shot up the pass. The gap between myself and the 4th rider opened up as the pass snaked forever upwards. Then it crossed a ridge and a geological anomaly revealed itself. I could see the narrow track switching back and forth then dropping over a cliff then rising again. It was mind blowing! After an eternity I finally topped out and was thrilled to see no one following. I actually thought this was it, that I'm done as I opened up a trail gate. I took a picture of my bike leaning against the gate and thought 'at last'. My Garmin read 300 miles but alas, there was still more.



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For the next hour I passed picket gates and crossings and kept stopping to check the maps almost certain I had gone wrong. That maybe I was now on the 750 route? When your brain is that tired your thinking is mush. A few hundred meters from the end that 4th rider finally caught up. It was Calvin. We exchanged a few pleasantries before he asked if he could pass. Sure I thought, he still had a long way to go. In a little over 2 days and 9 hours I rolled up to the actual picket post and climbed off my bike. I was done. I was beat. And I was shredded. Like a tired old dog or a piece of old beef jerkey, Arizona had chewed me up and spat me out. We'd shared a love hate relationship. A weekend flirt. As I lay in the parking lot propped up against a car, I could have sworn I saw the old lady winking at me!

A week later, I'm still taking thorns out.

No story could ever be complete without thanking the people and organizations that made it possible. Without you, these things remain a dream.

A BIG SHOUT OUT TO ALL THAT MADE THIS POSSIBLE.

ETERNAL PARTNER

My Lord, protector and King. Jesus. Thank you.
That fall on Oracle ridge should have ended more than just my race.

PLATINUM PARTNER

Barnett Signs
To Barry, Brian, Kelly, Gina and the rest of the Barnett team in Dallas...
thank you for believing in me and being a home away from home. I love your spirit!



PRODUCT PARTNERS

BIG AGNES

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OAKLEY

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CELLFOOD

To Paul and Fiona. Thank you always for the support. I never leave that small blue bottle behind!



LYNSKEY

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Thank you! Alex Harris

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