



Valle Nacional at four in the morning... publication date: Apr 30, 2008

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author/source: Marcus Dalrymple

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Valle Nacional at four in the morning was silent save for the chirping of a cicada and a dog barking in the distance. We cycled south over a mine field of deep, rain- filled potholes and crossed the Cosomopoloapan River. As we began climbing the steep track out of the town, we heard the sound of a lorry approaching and moments later were blinded by its headlights as it swung around the corner into our path. It stopped and the driver leaned out:

'Don't go any further,' he warned, shaking his head. 'There is a *tigre* ahead prowling the edge of the track. This is not the way for cyclists. Only *narcos* and lumber jacks use this road!' he said ominously. I turned to Simon. 'He must be having us on. He saw we were a couple of gringos and thought he would have a laugh.'

Turning back was not an option. Ahead of us was a monumental climb of 3000 metres to Cerro Gordo which we had to cycle in a day if we were to reach the Pacific in two days time. We thanked the truck driver for his concern and cycled on up the endless switchbacks. And then we saw her; the puma, standing iron grey against the pink dawn, ten feet away from us where the side of the track gave way to dense jungle. She was about the size of a Great Dane with paws like dinner plates. We stopped cycling, our hearts pounding and then she was gone as silently as she had appeared. That's when the adrenalin started pumping. We mounted our bikes and cycled like madmen.

Seven hours later, dripping with sweat we reached the hamlet of El Machin, a few kilometres below Cerro Gordo, where we pulled up outside a shabby *cantina*. A police truck was parked in the dust. We pushed open the swinging doors and ordered cups of *café de olla*. The policemen briefly looked up at us before returning to their game of cards, their machine guns and rifles propped up against the wall. A few moments later the fat *sargento* pulled his revolver from its holster and slapped it on the table. 'Now let's see who the real men are,' I overheard him say in Spanish. 'Let's play a little roulette like the *bandidos* did in the old days.' His companions looked at him silently, beads of sweat appearing on their brows. 'Pepe,' said the *sargento*, addressing a young man with a wispy moustache and bad teeth, 'you're the youngest – you go first!' There was silence for a minute and then Pepe nervously picked up the gun, rammed it into his mouth and pulled the trigger. Simon and I looked away and flinched. We could not believe what was happening and then we heard *Pepe* drop the gun on the table and run outside where he was violently sick. His colleagues sniggered as he returned, ashen faced, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. The barmaid had made herself scarce and we were now the only witnesses to this terrifying game. The *sargento* then took up the gun. 'To show you guys that I am not a pussy I'll go next,' he goaded and raised the revolver slowly to his temple. He was about to pull the trigger when the crackly sound of a voice was heard over his radio. He lowered the gun and

