



PHOTOS BY PETE McDERMOTT

STORY BY VICTOR MYERS

MOTORCYCLE DIARIES

A PUMPED-UP JOURNEY THROUGH CENTRAL AMERICA WITH BIKES AND BOARDS

I have a drinking problem.

Let me explain: It's universally understood that some of the best ideas are hatched over drinks. But where most people wisely pass on elaborate, buzz-fueled plans, my Achilles' Heel is that I don't. I act. On nearly every one of them.

The impulse decisions are at least getting more refined as I get older. Now that I'm pushing 30, time with my family is becoming a priority. Unfortunately, I rarely ever see any of them, and we share few interests. But on a trip east to visit my brother Dan in Kansas City, over a round of beers at his local dive, we hatched a plan to combine what common interests we did have—motorcycles and travel. How about a journey through Central America?

The trip still needed something original. How to build off our interests? I'd put in nearly a decade managing a resort off the coast of Belize, spent years as a river guide and paddling instructor everywhere from Alaska to Patagonia, shaped paddleboards and built boats. I'm a genuine paddlesports hobo. My brother Dan is 25, a film director and producer, bartender, promoter, musician and general rabble-rouser.

Enter the inflatable standup board. We would roll and rig inflatable SUPs to our bikes and traverse the subcontinent with a simple goal: Have a good time on any kind of water and document it. We'd cross the highlands of Belize, Guatemala and El Salvador, and surf in both the Caribbean and the Pacific. The thing was, I hadn't actually spent more than a week with Dan since we were teenagers. It seemed as if I'd blinked and 10 years had passed. We'd become adults, and I didn't know him as anything but my little brother.

We tried to round up all the right gear. We tried to make an itinerary. We tried to save money. Dan would fly to our starting

point, Belize City, on January 15 with the paddling gear, and I'd find the motorcycles. Planning and reality are two different things. Especially when Dan brought two friends, Skyler and Pete. Dan told me we'd never film anything worth watching without Skyler running the sound and video, and Pete on the photos. Problem was, I only had one bike—a '96 Suzuki DR 350. After two days spent scouring for another, we got desperate and blew our meager budget on a 2007 Suzuki DR 200.

Four dudes, four bags, three inflatable SUPs, three paddles, three cameras, four GoPros, one sound kit, two small dual-sport bikes, zero motorcycle-touring experience. Two words: junk show. Dan took a long look at the pile of gear.

"Do we really need the boards?"

"We're fine," I said. "We just need more straps."

We rolled up the boards with the three-piece paddles, pump, tripod, and whatever else we could squeeze in the bundle. This was all lashed behind the seat. Panniers held our personal gear and camera equipment. Finally, just before the day's end, we mounted up and headed west for the Cayo district of Belize on the Guatemalan border.

I wasn't worried about our safety in Belize, which I knew well. But we had a lot of unfamiliar miles ahead carrying expensive equipment, especially with our planned route through notoriously hostile parts of Guatemala and El Salvador. Theft was always a concern. It wasn't just a matter of babysitting the bikes though. Roads were bad, holdups common, and a breakdown could cost us our trip. Or worse. I'd heard plenty of warnings about banditos. One of my Belizean coworkers had been held up at gunpoint and robbed on the first stretch of Guatemalan road we were headed toward. Another friend was raising money for a kidnapped acquaintance. My biggest



concern, though? Running rivers and surfing remote breaks with a crew that had virtually no water experience.

We started with some rivers flowing out of the Maya Mountains toward the Caribbean—familiar spots I'd guided on. It was a good way to get used to the boards, and to breaking out all the gear and re-rigging the bikes. We ran the Rio Mopan, which forms part of the border between Belize and Guatemala. It's a scenic Class II-III river where iguanas and howler monkeys bustled around us, not to mention locals on inner tubes smuggling live chickens and God-knows-what-else across the border. Paddling to the border-crossing bridge, we took out in Guatemala and let the local kids try the boards, rewarding ourselves with a little fiesta at a riverside bar.

After too many liters of Gallo beer on empty stomachs, we decided it was a good idea to get back on the water. We rounded up the gear from the kids, and one by one, made our way downriver, regrouping just in time for the biggest rapid of the day—a manky, shallow mess of big moves ending in a frothing, un-stickable hole (meaning

there's no way we were making it through upright, beers or no beers). The large crowd of loitering spectators laughed as the hole dealt our flotilla a healthy beatdown: sobering swims, rocky wakeups, Skyler even lost his paddle and cut his back. We were battered and bruised, but stoked.

Humbled, we avoided alcohol the next day to run some whitewater on the Macal that required serious attention. The long, remote river had everyone tense. This time, we ran the biggest drop of the day first. I gave the river rookies a pep talk and we started firing up the rapid: less blood and fewer injuries. Skyler turned out to be a natural. We spent the day hucking deep-water drops and paddling up to rock walls where we'd climb up and then either jump or fall back into the water. We were living life, seeing the country and spending our days paddling any water we found.

The next leg was the lush and rolling Petén region of northern Guatemala. We packed the bikes light for the border crossing, and convinced my Belizean friend with Guatemalan papers, Carlos, to drive Pete, Skyler and the boards across. But with both bikes in my name,

the border crossing was anything but smooth. A bureaucratic misstep could've ended the trip. Fortunately, my eight winters in Central America taught me a few things about sweet-talking officials—especially females like the one processing our paperwork that day—my rough Spanish aside. A few smiles, a flirtatious, eye-contact-heavy conversation, and we were moving. She insisted this would be our little secret—a secret that would come back to haunt us.

Carlos was on edge driving the rough road from the border.

"Don't stop for any reason," he kept saying.



Luckily, we made it without incident, motoring west down the spine of mountains that extend along the border and into the quaint mountain town of Flores, which sits on a small island in the southern part of Lago Petén Itzá. We followed Carlos to a small restaurant run by his family and began drinking buckets worth of bottled Brahma like it was our job. The cerveza helped us choke down the leathery carne asada.

The next day, we headed south toward the town of Rio Dulce on the banks of Lake Izabal not far from the Bay of Honduras. Once a bustling tourist destination, Rio Dulce had become a ghost town of empty homes and dilapidated hotels as the Mexican drug trade moved into the area. The overwhelming police and military presence gave the town a vibe of Old West lawlessness that we kind of liked. That is, until the horror stories

We rode every type of road, crossing mountain ranges while climbing up to 20,000 feet in a day.

of robbery and kidnapping from every expat we met began mounting. And then we got pulled over by the Servicio de Análisis e Información Antinarcóticos, Guatemala's version of the DEA.

We looked a little out of place to the officers: two motorcycles loaded with gringos, traveling with a car with Belizean plates. When the officers caught Skyler filming with a GoPro, any chance of an easy resolution went out the window. The Guatemalan narcs promptly seized all our cameras and called our information in to Interpol. Luckily, the report came back clean. After another hour of haggling and passport crosschecking they handed back our gear and told us to get

lost. No bribes were necessary, but the close call drained our good humor. We needed some SUP.

We pulled over at a small *Aqua Caliente* creek and paddled to a beautiful sloping, 20-foot waterfall created by a hot spring. It was the perfect pool for our road-wearied bodies and mounting frustrations. Nothing was going as planned and we were doing more drinking and less paddling than I'd hoped. As Dan and I laughed over some funny brainstorming for the film, I let all that go.

We were feeling a little burned after all the overland travel. Anxious for some surf and island life, we followed the Rio Dulce out to the Caribbean and caught a boat to the islands about 90 miles from river's mouth at the Bay of Honduras. We ditched our bikes and most of our gear and headed to Glover's Reef—a pristine ring of coral featuring four skinny islands.

We spent a few days at Slickrock Adventures—the island eco-resort where I'd worked for years—using the boards to tour one of the healthiest reef ecosystems left in the world, checking out schools of dolphin, reef fish, rays, and even sea turtles. We towed the boards as we snorkeled, speared lionfish and soaked up the sun. We parked at an abandoned fishing shack where we deflated the boards a bit to sleep on for the night. The surf wasn't great, but the island pace—and plenty of Belikin beer—was a welcome change from three weeks on the road. And even though Dan and I were rarely on the same wavelength during the trip, making something happen together for three weeks brought us closer than we'd been in 10 years.

Unfortunately, Dan's trip was cut short after he received word he'd gotten a job Stateside.

Pete was already scheduled to fly home, and like that, our group was cut in half when we left the islands. I hated to see them go, but it meant one important thing: lighter loads on the bikes. Decision-making and traveling suddenly became a lot easier. Skyler wasn't about to head back to Kansas City, and neither of us were going to call it quits without reaching the Pacific. So we headed for El Salvador. I was intent on surfing both oceans and Skyler was just stoked to finally drive a motorcycle.

We continued south to the El Salvador border, our budget shot, and only a small balance left on my Visa. But being frugal isn't hard in rural Guatemala, where we rode every type of road, crossing mountain ranges while climbing up to 20,000 feet in a day. We meandered on backroads through farmlands and coffee plantations toward the border. It was the dry season, but we still managed to cool off from the riding with paddles in wide, beautiful riverbeds. We stopped in the friendly town of Chiquimula to see the *Negra de Cristo* (black Jesus) and have our bikes blessed. We even hit an authentic Guatemalan circus where African lions and tigers scrapped in cages, though the crazed motorcycle guys tearing around the ball of death stole our attention. In between acts, we'd down the occasional shot of Venado, a spirit much like Everclear, without the nice after-taste.

Riding on and reveling in the rich culture, we took an immediate turn back to fear-and-loathing when we hit the border with El Salvador. We cleared Guatemalan customs and immigration just fine, but the Salvadoran officials held us for four hours because of—surprise, surprise—insufficient documentation. We tried to plead. We tried to bribe. Nothing worked. So we limped back to the Guatemala crossing station, where they





CLOCKWISE: THE CREW PITCHES CAMP IN AN ABANDONED FISHING CABIN ON LONG CAYE, THE TATTERED MAP FROM THE JOURNEY AND ON THE RICKETY FERRY TO THE PACIFIC



informed us their computer system was down and there would be a wait. Two hours later, out of ideas, I started doing the only thing I could think of: a Pilates-style jump-rope workout. The impromptu sweat session in the customs holding room annoyed the agents enough that they hurriedly hand-wrote the forms to get us out.

Deflated but content to be on the open road, we blazed toward Guatemala's Pacific coast. It wasn't easy. We drove slowly up a pass on the most gnarly, washed-out gravel road of the trip. Two hours of winding down tight, boulder-strewn switchbacks brought us into a small frontier-like town at dusk. We were just in time to share tostadita-like *garnaches* and a case of beer with locals who were actually stoked to hang with gringos. The elevation kept dropping as we approached the coast, following any road that would lead us southwest, and to the ocean. Then the road

ended. We had reached a huge lagoon. But rather than more backtracking to reach our goal, we opted for a rickety ferry to take our overloaded bikes the last 15 miles to the open ocean.

The south-facing coast had good swell, but the steep beaches and the lack of points made for limited surf. We were determined, though, scouring the entire west coast of Guatemala for over a week, hitting every potential spot. Since it was mostly stumpy beach breaks, our inflatable SUPs weren't the ideal boards to be using. That didn't faze us though. We didn't have to worry about dings, so it didn't really matter. I'd just let the board take the beating.

We stayed on the coast as long as we could, devoting our final bit of time to the ocean. This gave us only a few days to get back to Belize. I had to go back to work. Our trip home was full of its share of mishaps and flat tires, but seven

weeks and 3,000 miles later, we reached Belize City.

Sometimes when you try to plan everything, you miss out on the best parts of a trip. You learn more about yourself and your friends when you let up and go with the flow. I guess that's why I'll never stop acting on those sporadic, late-night ideas.

Visit SUPthemag.com to see Part I and II of Deflated, the Myers brothers' three-part film from the trip. Myers owns Corridor Paddleboards in Boise, Idaho and plans to return to Guatemala this spring to film a third-act that combines donating a fleet of SUPs to an orphanage with a 60-mile paddle down the Rio Dulce.