

## **Borderland by Mountain Bike: New York Gringo on the Demarcation**

Copyright © Erik Schlimmer

From the September and October 2004 issues of *Mountain Biking Magazine*

### *Part I: A Run for the Border*

For the first 29 winters of my life I snowshoed, winter camped, and backcountry skied in the Northeast, and by 2003 I grew tired of being beaten by frozen projectiles while snowshoeing through knee-deep snow and skiing down glare ice. One more year of these activities seemed unreasonable. By that November, the question of whether to participate in the 2003/2004 Northeast winter was answered with "Screw it." I decided to retreat to a warm locale but wasn't sure where I wanted to go. And I didn't know what I would do when I got there.

A week later I found the setting for my winter vacation while examining a map of North America. The United States-Mexico border, identified by a red and green line on my road atlas, stretched across the entire continent and looked inviting. It was as far south as I could go without leaving the United States. It had to be warmer down there than Upstate New York. With my locale decided, I needed a plan. I quickly formed four goals: mountain bike the entire length of the border, ride as close to the border as possible, ride at least half the distance off-pavement, and not die.

I told my friend Pete about my idea and he quickly tried to dissuade me. "Look, Schlimmer, you don't want to unknowingly ingest a mild sedative down there and wake up handcuffed to a wall while some psycho dresses you up like Little Orphan Annie and fondles your unmentionables. My advice? A Ruger Mini-14 rifle, 500 rounds of ammo, body armor, and a large sword just to let them know you're totally off your rocker." I brushed off Pete's indelicate advice. To me, my plan seemed like a winner.

Arriving in Port Isabel, Texas, on December 26, I put my car in storage, planning to pick it up two months later. At the self-storage center I met my first Texan, Joe, a well-built man of Native American and Latin descent, with skin the color of wet sand and a voice as soft as the constant Gulf breeze. He managed the dozens of brown and tan self-storage sheds, one of which would house my car. After explaining my planned ride to Joe, he seemed as excited as I was. With eager eyes, he declared in a deep Tex-Mex accent, "Man, this is gonna be great! Yeah. What kind of motorcycle do you ride?"

"Oh, no. I'm riding a mountain bike."

There was silence. Behind his desk, with its backdrop of dream catchers and velvet paintings of wolves, Joe waited for my laugh or the "just kidding" wink. But it didn't come. I was serious. With a distorted face he asked, "You mean, like a bicycle?"

Knocking out 36 miles the first day felt great. By the time the sun set I could barely smell the ocean. I spent my first night hidden in a grapefruit grove after forcing my way through eighty percent humidity and the hottest temperature of the trip, 82 degrees. Since I didn't carry a tent, just a small tarp and homemade sleeping bag, mosquitoes ravaged my head from dusk to dawn. When the sun rose I had slept for only one hour and looked like I had contracted small pox.

After escaping the heat and humidity of the coast, on day four I entered vermin-free farmland near Hebbronville, 200 miles northwest of Port Isabel. The terrain was flat, nearly featureless, but I couldn't complain much. It was sunny and 75 degrees during the first week of winter.

Turkey Mountain, the first major geological feature of the trip, rose from the west Texas plains on day eight near the town of Uvalde. Beyond this point I climbed and descended moderate grades west on paved Route 90, a lonely road that boasted a 121-mile stretch of serviceless pavement. Flanked by barren desert, Route 90's midway point was Dryden. Population: six. To reach a community with a population of more than 900 I would have had to backtrack east for 99 miles to Del Rio or keep riding west for 105 miles to reach Alpine. Dryden's six residents lived on the eastern cusp of the 175,000-square-mile Chihuahuan Desert, which I spent three weeks traversing. The highlight of this parched land of desert and sky is Big Bend National Park, one of two such parks in Texas.

By the time I rode to Big Bend National Park's entrance at Persimmon Gap on day fifteen, I had covered 750 miles, but only 140 of those were off-pavement. Help towards reaching my fifty percent off-road goal came from Old Ore Road and River Road, backcountry lanes that traverse Big Bend National Park. Twenty-five-mile Old Ore Road climbs and descends over bowling ball- to pea-sized rocks, exposed bedrock, and gravel washes below the impressive Alto Reflex, a three-mile-long burgundy wall of rock that towers 800 vertical feet above the road. Then there is Cuesta Carlota, another high ridgeline that turned yellow, orange, red, then purple, as the sun set each night to extinguish the heat. River Road was twice the

length of Old Ore Road and twice as scenic, but this came with costs. There were sandy washes to push my bike through. Washboard sections miles in length made me feel like I was running a jackhammer instead of riding a bicycle. With three days of riding, I combined these two roads and shorter connector roads to navigate "the Big Bend" via 100 miles of fairly technical riding, all the while enjoying solitude, scenery, and backcountry campsites.

After exiting the park, I rode paved and dirt roads to Ruidosa, Texas, an isolated border community set below 7,000-foot-tall Chinati Peak. Rolling into this settlement of twenty people early on day twenty, I met Celia and her son, Rusty, at the only store, La Junta General Store, which they own. Rusty gave me advice before I continued down Chispa Road, a 75-mile dirt path that runs towards the next border community, Lobo.

Standing seven inches taller than me, Rusty, with long hair, goatee, and nose ring, looked more like a strip club bouncer or Special Forces soldier than the devoted son and self-taught chef his mother explained he was. In a rich Texan drawl Rusty convincingly warned, "Listen, if you see someone walkin' with a backpack on – they'll be just walkin' [here Rusty did a dead-on impression of a person just walkin'] – don't ask them what's in their pack. And if they ask you for water, give it to 'em and just keep on ridin' and don't look back."

Your typical smuggler in this area could be someone like Rusty described. It could be a guy with a backpack on, getting paid \$100 to carry sixty pounds of goodies up nearby Pinto Canyon Road. Or it could be a prominent rancher who, like many other ranchers in west Texas, owns his own airstrip in the middle of 250,000 fenced acres. Or it could be someone like former Presidio County sheriff Rick Thompson, who got busted ferrying 1.2 tons of cocaine through this area in 1993. Thompson's serving a life sentence in prison.

But the smugglers didn't turn me back on Chispa Road because I didn't see any smugglers. They were napping in their huts in Barrancos de Guadalupe in Mexico or filling out time sheets at the Border Patrol office in Presidio. But me, smart guy, I was on Chispa Road getting lost and stuck in a place called "The Bog."

After immediately taking a wrong turn outside Ruidosa, pedaling and sliding twelve miles down a slippery red clay dead end road, I headed back to the correct road. Unfortunately, this rectified turn, the real Chispa Road, led me to The Bog. Located exactly 1,000 miles northwest of my start point in Port Isabel, The Bog is a hard-packed section of road on a dry day. But on a rainy day (like day twenty), The Bog turns into a slimy, sticky mass of Texan death

cement. After that day's slight precipitation, The Bog quickly clogged my drivetrain and caked my cycling shoes with five-pound, fist-sized clumps. The Bog stuck to my tires so they wouldn't fit through the front fork or rear frame. The Bog transformed my bike into a \$900 anchor. By noon I had covered ten percent of the route to Lobo and had had enough. An order of retreat was given.

To escape The Bog, I backtracked, carrying my forty-pound bike for a tenth of a mile, then hiking back to pick up my now detached 25-pound panniers to carry them for that tenth of a mile. Repeating this process for three hours, I made it back to a dry shelf above The Bog, less than one mile towards Ruidosa. I then used a rock to scrape twenty pounds of mud off my tires and frame. Covered in red and brown sludge, I ate some food, drank some water, and put my panniers back on my bike. With dusk surrounding me, I was ready for a shameful ride back to Ruidosa to beg Celia and Rusty to let me sleep under the roof of La Junta General Store.

I hopped on my bike and with the first half-pedal stroke the rear dropout bent into a fifty-degree angle, forcing the rear derailleur through the spokes of the rear wheel. It was at this point that I almost cried. I looked around in despair and saw only what I saw on the way into The Bog. That was an endless expanse of nothing. Calming down, I turned my bike over and delicately removed the panniers and rear wheel. I built a little workbench out of boulders. For twenty minutes I beat the rear dropout into an acceptable angle using a chunk of limestone as a hammer. Success!

Flushed with energy after solving a grave situation with impressive creativity, I was on my bike again, the thirteen-mile ride back to Ruidosa seeming much, much longer than it was eight hours earlier since it was raining and pitch black out. Additionally, with much mud still stuck on my bike, its weight was increased by fifty percent, but its shifting and braking capabilities were reduced by 96 percent and 50 percent, respectively.

By the time I got back to La Junta General Store, Rusty and Celia had thought I had already made it to Lobo. So upon seeing me in my red and brown suit of clay, Celia, whose eyes were as big as the bottle of arsenic I wish I had, muttered in a concerned mother's tone, "Oh my God." So ended The Bog and hope of riding Chispa Road.

Three days later, on an alternate dirt route toward Lobo, my health deteriorated. I became violently ill (never eat seven Hershey's bars and two packs of beef-flavored Ramen noodles for dinner) and hypothermic in a rain and snow storm and slept on a fire ant nest. Then I

learned of snowstorms approaching the 4,800-foot-high Marfa Plateau that I was scheduled to ride across the following week. I decided I had had enough. Texas had won. After riding 1,100 miles over a 24-day period, I caught a Greyhound bus west. I would arrive in San Ysidro, California – a dirty and overcrowded border town at the western terminus of the International Boundary – and ride back to Marfa to complete my Borderland ride.

### *Part II: Westbound Now Eastbound*

San Ysidro was just what I needed. Sure the Border Patrol apprehended more than 470,000 illegal border crossers here in one year, and the nearby New River was so polluted that it once caught on fire, but I didn't care. It was warm and no one knew of The Bog. After riding past the busiest land border crossing in the world at San Ysidro, I rode to within 500 feet of the Pacific Ocean, calling it good enough. I couldn't ride to the ocean proper since Border Field State Park, which provides access to the Pacific, was closed because state workers were “building a pond” in the park.

I started my migration towards Texas 1,200 miles away, initially tackling an 1,800-vertical-foot climb over the Otay Mountains. But what comes up must come down, and I descended the east side of the Otays at 43 miles per hour, the fastest speed of the trip.

Crossing into the eastern half of California on day 28, I followed a thirty-mile section of the San Diego and Arizona Eastern Railroad from Jacumba to Ocotillo, the most scenic part of the entire ride. The line was closed to train traffic due to collapsed tunnels, explained to me by an engineer I haphazardly met on the line. He told me about the international travelers (his euphemism for smugglers and illegal border crossers) who had been hiding in the tunnels prior to the tunnels collapsing. Their campfires ignited the creosote and wood frames, causing the destruction. He told me about these mishaps after he mentioned a mountain lion had been stalking his crew for the past three days. This story came after he told me about the rockslide that destroyed his bulldozer, though a state geologist told him that that spot was the least likely place to have a rockslide.

Besides the collapsing tunnels, holed-up illegal border crossers, mountain lions, smugglers, and rockslides this area offered, I had to clamor through twelve intact tunnels, one an intensely-frightening, pitch-black three-quarters-of-a-mile in length. I also pushed my bike across nineteen trestles, some perched 800 vertical feet above Carrizo Gorge. Flanked by

boulder-strewn 4,000-foot mountains, this section of the Borderland culminated with a gorgeous descent into the Yuha Desert, which supports expansive stands of fifteen-foot-tall Ocotillos cactuses. But California wasn't always so scenic. Much of this 230-mile stretch included riding next to the border's nine-foot-tall metal security wall. I followed this barricade past well-armed Border Patrol agents, floodlights, and drug-detecting attack dogs. My tires rolled over .40 pistol casings and expended 12-gauge shotgun shells.

A dirt levee on the All American Canal led me into the Grand Canyon State near Yuma on day thirty. The weather was gorgeous, Yuma being ranked sunniest town in the world. Yuma provided snowbirds like myself a 91 percent chance that it will be sunny any given day. The levee provided scenic riding since it rose ten to twenty feet above the surrounding desert.

Only here could I feel safe on the border, or so I thought. I figured that if Mexican bandits wanted to rob me they first had to figure out how to cross the thirty-foot-wide All American Canal, a waterway turbulent enough to have the Border Patrol hold swift-water rescue training in. To me, my levee campsite was protected by an uncrossable moat. The next morning, after finding tracks leading from a half dozen rafts and inner tubes on the U.S. side of the levee, a sense of security departed. C-130s circling low on nighttime surveillance missions, spotlights searching for immigrants running north, and helicopters hunting down smugglers added to the Borderland ambiance.

The 550-mile Arizona section, which took ten days to cross, was ruled by the 120,000-square-mile Sonoran Desert. In this inhospitable area I found 200-year-old Saguaros thriving above parched gravel, along with my favorite colorful cactuses, purple-tinged prickly pears and rainbow cactuses. Ironically, the coldest temperature of the trip was encountered in the Sonoran Desert. Outside the settlement of Sunizona, the temperature dropped to 19 degrees. I donned every stitch of clothing, crawled into my 40 degree sleeping bag, and hunkered like a mole. The next morning I stirred under a blanket of frost to watch the sun rise over 10,000-foot-tall Chiricauha Peak. Detouring north around this mountain due to it receiving twenty inches of snow, I crossed this range near Bowie, Arizona. I climbed 5,000-foot-high Apache Pass, the highest point of the trip.

Though frigid at times, a winter crossing of the Sonoran region pales in difficulty to a summer crossing. Shade temperatures of 130 degrees have been measured while surface temperatures have risen to 173 degrees. It's no wonder more than sixty percent of Sonoran

critters escape the heat by living underground. Unfortunately, waves of illegal border crossers cannot burrow. In 2001, 134 of them died while attempting to traverse the Sonoran region.

By the time I entered the 170-mile New Mexico section, I had spent forty days by myself. I was bored. I found myself limited on how to spice things up, so I just daydreamed a lot. I dreamed about going into the next town and learning everyone on Earth had disappeared except me. At times I rode with imaginary partners or pretended I was being chased. I imagined destroying a shopping mall with rocket launchers. I thought about women. I would wake up from a daydream and realize I was still pedaling and steering. I was on autopilot.

In New Mexico I encountered the only serious snowstorm of the trip, an ominous storm that caught me on the 4,600-foot-high Continental Divide. Hiding under a trestle with my bike, the wind picked up and snow swung down in a curtain of flakes. Pink and blue lightening sizzled the wintry air. I put on all my clothes, sat on my foam sleeping pad, and dozed off while the storm raged for the next half-hour.

On day 43 I returned to Texas through El Paso, the largest city on my route, entering along a nine-foot-tall chain link fence that had garbage stacked five feet high against it on the Mexico side. This rotting wall of beer cans, dead cats, condoms, and blue Wal-Mart bags partially obstructed my view of the *colonias*, the nameless Mexican shanty towns composed of shacks made of scrap metal, tires, cardboard boxes, and car doors. The Mexicans looked at me like I had no business being so close to them. I was on a bike that cost more than their past two years' worth of income, and I didn't ride an expensive bike.

As I veered from the wall of garbage I was corralled by three Border Patrol agents to be informed that I set off their detection devices. Like the other 55 Border Patrol units I had encountered by that point in my trip, the agents were not mad nor overly suspicious. They were simply interested in why a white guy with a Grizzly Adams beard was riding a mountain bike on an active rail line that ran through a poverty-riddled community accented by mounds of rotting garbage, smashed Thunderbird bottles, and the corpses of dogs. I then exited El Paso and fell into the west Texas wind I had left three weeks earlier.

With 200 miles to go, the answer to the question "Can it be done?" materialized. In my journal I described west Texas as having "awesome, scenic riding" and "the most beautiful terrain of the trip." This time, as opposed to being in west Texas nineteen days earlier, the

weather was marvelous, and I knew the end was near. I then stumbled upon a 100-mile-long, thorn-free dirt road near Sierra Blanca that led to Marfa.

My last night on the border was like other expeditions' last nights. It was bittersweet. I flipped to the first page of my journal and read the first sentence. "And here I go." 195 pages later I closed with, "Overall, I'll just plain miss the Borderland." From my final campsite I watched the sun slip behind the 6,500-foot-high Sierra Vieja Mountains, dyeing the western sky cotton candy pink. An hour later, right on cue, coyotes howled and yapped and assembled for another deer hunt through the dark desert.

After covering the remaining fifty miles, I pulled up to the Marfa bus station. I didn't raise my arms in a Lance Armstrong-esque pose, and I didn't cry like I predicted. I basically did nothing. There were no crowds, no reporters, no friends. I sat on a bus station bench alone, anonymously drinking a can of Coke, staring at the oil-stained parking lot.

Blushingly, one magazine assessed my 2,250-mile Borderland ride as being "epic," owing to riding a full 1,050 miles off-road, nearly all of it within twenty miles of the border, the definition of the Borderland. On the other hand, I've been called "crazy" for completing a 46-day solo ride across the most dangerous terrain in the U.S. But I take the compliments and criticisms in stride, reminding people that we each have our own idea as to what constitutes a vacation.