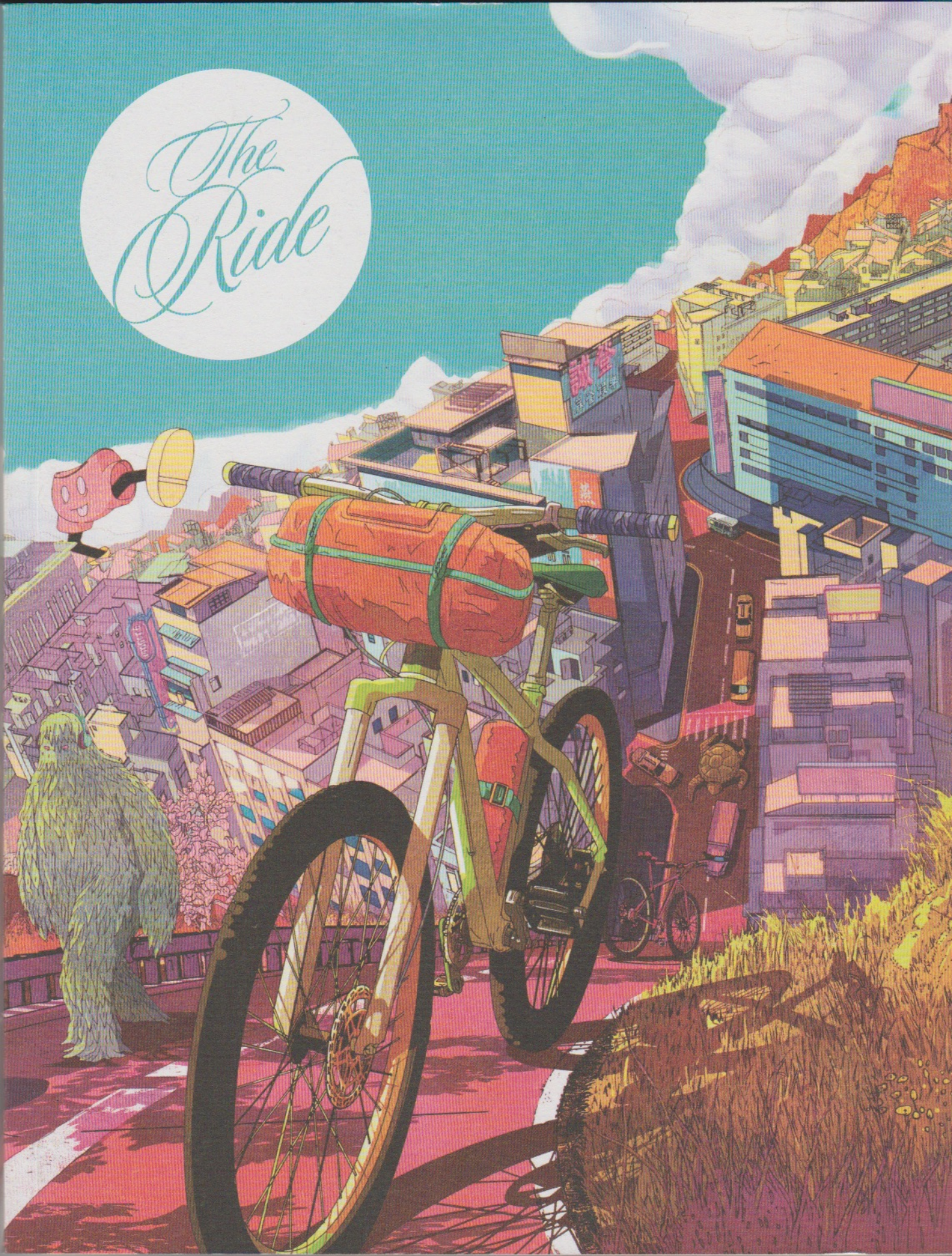


The Ride



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RIDE NEVIS

By Mike Duff. Illustration Joe Snow

As the boat pulled up to the dock and Oualie Beach came into view, my worries that I'd needlessly lugged my road bike 7,000km from London to the West Indies evaporated. Above a hut with dinghies and windsurf boards piled up outside, flapping in the warm Caribbean wind, a bright yellow Tour de France flag greeted us. This was just the first hint that I'd underestimated the cycling pedigree of this tiny island.

Nevis is a 93 sq km volcanic island in the Leeward Isles. Its name is an anglicisation of the Spanish Nuestra Madre de las Nieves, so named because the quasi-permanent ring of cloud around its summit reminded 15th-century catholic Spanish sailors of the miraculous snowfall on the Esquiline Hill in Rome during a hot 4th-century summer. Appropriate then as a venue for my escape from the European winter.

I'd had the good fortune to marry someone with family on the island and this was my seventh visit, to spend Christmas with the clan. This time, as well as the presents, and thanks to my sympathetic wife, I'd also brought my bike. Another kind soul had helped – the pilot of the four-seat plane who had brought us on one of the island-hopping legs kindly left his back seat on the side of the runway in order to fit in the bike. "I'll get it tomorrow, or the next day – it's no problem."

I set out early on my first morning to beat the heat, and planned a clockwise circuit of the island – around 50km. After about 10km on the lower ring road, St Kitts came into view across the shimmering 3km strait called The Narrows, which separates her from Nevis. I leaned my bike up against a rather philosophical road sign, which asked of no one in particular "Will it build goodwill and better friendship?" to take a photo. As I was slipping my phone back into my jersey, a mini-peloton zipped past, heading back in the direction from which I'd come. A dreadlocked rider at the back of the pack waved to me and yelled, "Come with us!" So I did.

About halfway around the island, having slipped through the sleepy capital, Charlestown, we began to climb towards Zion Hill. We'd been riding at a good pace for chatting. One of the group was a hotelier who had made Nevis his home and had brought a few pedalling guests along – a triathlete writing her first novel and her husband from London, and Reggie, a local, who, in spite of the weight of his dreads, looked like he'd be a mean climber. The ascent continued, and I began to question my memories of Nevisian roads

being largely flat. It's all a matter of perspective, really. Now, with two wheels and not four under me and a bit of winter weight on my body, the gradient seemed more noticeable. Still, I'd come to train, so the time for conversation was over, and I pushed away from the group to burn a few calories, and perhaps, I admit, to make some sort of statement.

That wasn't to last. I didn't shake Reggie, who probably didn't even notice I was trying. It turned out he was indeed a mean climber – one of two Nevisians to ride in the Time Trial World Championships in Geelong, Australia, in 2010, drawing a massive reaction from the crowds, who love an underdog. Reggie might have finished 20 minutes down on Fabian Cancellara, but he had no trouble taking a few minutes out of me on Zion Hill. Still, I mustn't have looked too pathetic because he offered up exactly the kind of local knowledge I was after. "Man, you wanna go see Winston at Wheel World and get out for a proper ride on Nevis."

As we completed our loop, having avoided some errant cows and a few agile monkeys on a screaming descent of the more wild, windward side of the island, I bid goodbye and made my way towards Wheel World. Situated on Oualie Beach, and comprising not much more than three colourful shacks and a Tour de France flag, it is Nevis and St Kitts' only bike shop, the HQ for the Nevis Triathlon and Cycling Club, and the nerve centre for the sport in this island federation.

Over the course of the week that followed, my Christmas holiday became an impromptu cycling masterclass. I took to the roads with a visiting Italian pro who taught me a lesson or two up Zion Hill (among others); I made friends with the Nevisian underdogs who became famous at the Worlds in Geelong; learned about the ill-conceived Bikes not Bombs project that donated hundreds of bikes but no training to the island (which is not at war and never has been); and, above all, revelled in the number of amiable people I was lucky enough to ride with and/or share beers with thanks to the convening power of the bicycle.

I shouldn't have pre-judged Nevis. You don't need the Alps or the Pyrenees to have a great place to ride. Just a few enthusiastic cyclists (and a little Caribbean sun always helps).

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