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A SOCIALLY DISTANCED TRAVEL ADVENTURE: BIKING SOLO FROM THE NETHERLANDS TO PORTUGAL

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2020 was a very unusual year. For Michel Font, 31, it was also the year of an extraordinary adventure. Just when he finally got accepted to take part in the TransContinental Race from Brest in France to Burgas in Bulgaria, the event was cancelled due to the pandemic.

As part of his preparation, the native Venezuelan had taken a job as a bike courier. When the event was called off, he was disappointed but also determined to find an alternative way to challenge his leg muscles, so he decided to go on a solo cross-country bike ride.



Planning the route

Michel's starting point was Amsterdam. He would then stop in Treveneuc in northern France, where his girlfriend would vacation with her family at the time, before ending the journey in Aljezur in western Portugal where his brother lived. Michel picked a route via San Sebastian in northern Spain as a friend there could provide him with a shower and a bed.

Michel's biggest concerns were the soaring summer temperatures in Spain and the sometimes not so bike-friendly Portuguese roads, which he knew from his time living in Portugal. To cut his cycle time in Portugal short, he planned to cross borders at the southern Spanish – Portuguese border.

He knew he needed to wake up very early to beat the extreme heat, then take a break during the hottest hours of the day and capitalise on the last hours of light by riding into the night.

With the route mapped out Michel prepared his luggage, which consisted of his Sleeping Kit (sleeping bag, mattress, hammock), his Survival Food Kit (stove, coffee and oats), his GPS, headphones and something he calls an Existential Immunity Kit.

The latter is nothing tangible, but nevertheless critical for Michel. It's a mental framework, a mindset that helps him "not to be carried away by the highs or beaten up by the lows", reminding him that he always has a choice. This means to rest, push his bike or cut the trip short and jump on the next train, if needed.

Packing his bike, Michel fastened his sleeping and cooking gear to the handlebar with some additional storage on the frame. His saddlebag contained a change of cushioned biking shorts, two

t-shirts, two pairs of socks, sleeping pants and a jacket, plus a small backpack for food and snacks and three bottles of water to complete his kit.

Adventure time

With preparation and planning under his belt, summer rolled around and Michel finally embarked on his adventure. Riding in solitude he'd have to cross several borders while relying on his bike and embracing any obstacles along the way. Of a total of 20 days, he spent 15 days riding, four days in France with his girlfriend, and one day at a doctor's office in Spain due to an infection on his finger.

During the first stage of his trip, Michel would wake up at 6 am to make coffee and porridge then ride until 9.30 – 10 pm, stopping in three-hour intervals to fuel up with food and coffee and visit a supermarket or the occasional café or restaurant, the latter of which became his preferred option later in the trip since it was "mentally easier to just sit down and order".

He'd rise earlier, around 4.30 – 5 am, during the second stretch to see the sunrise while he was biking. His break time would mostly be determined by his ability to find some shade and a hidden site to camp for the night, often stopping for the day after 9 pm. If there were no trees to set up his hammock, he'd use his inflatable mattress to get some rest.

During the third and last stage of his trip, Michel opted to see both sunrise and sunset while riding, and he would often cycle until 11 pm or midnight to maximise his time on the road. While this ensured he got more than his fill of beautiful sunrises and sunsets, it also meant that he wasn't able to get enough sleep. He was also forced to settle for less than optimal sleeping spots as it was hard to



find anything decent in the dark. A couple of times he even slept on the side of the road.

At this point, stopping during the hottest part of the day was an absolute necessity, and some days finding a little bit of shade and some trees to fasten his hammock was pure luck. Other times Michel just rested on the ground “until the sun was merciful enough” to let him continue with his ride.

The battles

Despite his strategy to avoid the harsh sun, Michel still cycled some days in 42-degree heat. The toughest part of his entire trip were lonely stretches along the Via de la Plata that runs across the Spanish peninsula from Astorga in the north to Sevilla in the south. The relentless heat along this route forced Michel to stop more often than he wanted to.

On one particular day he decided he’d keep battling through the heat against his better judgement. The temperature at 3 o’clock in the after-

noon climbed to around 38 – 39 degrees Celsius.

“Everything will pass; when things are horrible and you feel like quitting, if you are patient, at some point it will get better. Also, when things are really good and you’re feeling like a million bucks, at some point it will get worse.”

After already completing around 160-170 km that day, Michel felt good and decided to take on the last 40 km to the city of Trujillo as he had enough water and supplies to cover this stretch. Very soon though his legs started getting numb. The fear of cramping up finally forced him to stop, eat and rest a little, before continuing... but things got much worse. Michel eventually stopped under a bridge and tried to sleep, except instead of sleeping he began hallucinating that he was in an Air France lounge with an “endless supply of Evian and air conditioning.”

He somehow convinced himself to keep riding to the next town, where some locals pointed him towards a bar. Litres of water and three cans of



cola later, he'd entertained the patrons with his story, before climbing on his bike again for the last stretch to Trujillo, where he happily paid for a night in a hotel – the only point on his entire trip where he enjoyed the pleasures of air conditioning, Evian water and plenty of pizza.

The highlights

Apart from an endless supply of cold water and delicious food that particular night, Michel enjoyed riding through the Bretagne region, a place that made him feel as if he'd travelled back to Viking times. He was in awe of the Basque country, his entry point to Spain, where he took advantage of cooler weather while peddling past picturesque mountains and green pastures.

About twelve days into his trip, Michel recalled sleepily climbing into his hammock fastened between some small trees next to a stone wall, wild grass growing high beneath him. Sometime during the night he'd fallen out of his provisional bed, but the meadow provided for a cushy landing. He didn't move, only adjusted his sleeping

bag and looked up. The sky felt alive with an incredible number of stars glimmering against a black canvas, and he felt lucky to be a witness of this spectacle.

Being so close to nature for almost three weeks and mainly in his own company, Michel found it very hard to return to 'reality' and think about things other than ride, eat and sleep. Simplicity is a big draw for him to keep challenging himself and test his limits on these solo rides.

"Don't get caught up overplanning, just get out there and make this adventure your own. Don't be reckless, don't be naive but trust in the good in people. And don't forget your existential immunity kit."