# Food&Drink Independent Life 11

# Travels offthe eaten track

Tom Kevill-Davies gave up his job to spend a year touring the Americas in search of the perfect meal - and discovered gastronomic greatness in the most unexpected places

Circumstance

discovered, are

the food itself

m starving. The overweight man in the mosquitos are almost unbearable. The humidity is stifling and the the boat's engine hammers into any

 $I'm \ counting \ on \ lunch time, but \ the \ plate \ of \ gruel$ slopped in front of me is inedible. I try, over and over again, to swallow a spoonful of the grey, insipid-smelling broth, punctuated by broken fish

bones, indecipherable globs of meat dark chef's hairs and fish scales. I can't do it. The chef of the optimistically named Siempre Adelante (Always Onwards) has far to go.

The irony is not lost on me that in searching the Americas for the perfect meal, I have almost certainly as important as found its worst.

 $I^{\prime}m$  the son of two devoted foodie parents, and I grew up around good

food - my father a master of french culinary tradition, my mother always in search of flavours, experimental and improvisational. Cycling, unlike food, was never a huge part of my life – I cycled to and from my advertising job in London, dodging cars and buses as part of the daily grind. Then four years ago, an old friend and I decided to take a couple of weeks off work to cycle to the Ardèche, refuelling along the way with hearty pâtés, crêpes suzette, cool, crisp rosé and gooey goats cheese salads. It was the first time I had experienced the magical marriage of gears and gastronomy: on a bicycle, food is your fuel and if you told them of my plans to ride through Mexidon't fill up, you're not going anywhere.

I returned listlessly to my job, my home, my girlfriend, my car and my family, bitten by the bug me. The Mexicans recoiled in shock when I re-

 $\operatorname{\mathsf{-}}\nolimits \operatorname{\mathsf{I}}\nolimits$  wanted more of life in the saddle and to taste the hammock next to me has snored more than an hors d'oeuvre of the freedom, reloudly all through the morning and ward and sensory hombardment of riding headfirst into the unknown. My well-paid job was no longer challenging me in the ways it once had and incessant clanging and belching from a re-shuffle at my creative advertising company brought me to a natural cross-roads; it was time to leave London.

I had long been fascinated by the American road trip and, scared of languages, put off by African heat and daunted by Asia, a plan gradually coalesced: I would take a year to cycle from

the gastronomic mecca of the USA to the beaches of Brazil. Five months later, and with a total budget of £10,000, I found myself in New York, Union Jack flag flying and loaded panniers in tow, with a large yellow sign attached to my rear mudguard: "Eating my way from NYC to Rio. www.thehungrycyclist.com".

My aim was to collect recipes along the way. News spread - my website

was receiving lots of traffic and meal suggestions, and invitations and ideas poured in. Unexpected and undeserved generosity on a scale I had never before experienced came my way – when an American (North, South and anywhere in between) proffers the clichéd "mi casa es tu casa", they mean it. I was offered places to sleep, wonderful food, taught recipes, invited to weddings, carnivals and festivals. My budget stretched well – a year passed easily and soon turned into two-and-a-half.

Americans looked at me in horror when I co. "You're not packing a piece?" they asked, astounded that I didn't want to carry a gun with



vealed my plans to ride to Guatemala. "It's full of ban dits and machetes" they would warn. (The machete part is true - all Guatemalan men do carry them - it's an agricultural country and I soon learnt that machetes were the multitools of Central America), In Guatemela, I was urged to be wary of the gangs in El Salvador -

So, after 752 days on the road, did I find the perfect meal? Well, yes, I found plenty of them. From smoky tripe tacos to moose burgers and Olympia oys-

enjoyed some truly flawless meals. I fuelled my travel and my passion for wonderful food and in doing so, my understanding of food and what it means to people has changed. The context of food has become important. I had underestimated the sanctity of provenance, the dictatorship of the seasons and the role of certain foods in the local psyche. History, food, culture and labour are entwined in a profound union.

ters to cold beers and spit-roasted guinea pig, I

Take the acaraje. The utterly perfect way to fuel a cyclist, I discovered, was this Brazilian dish: balls of mashed black-eyed peas, fried in dende (palm) oil and smothered in a headily rich paste of nuts, shrimp and coconut and a spoonful of peppery okra and shrimp stew. Bahians, holding onto unspoken culinary identities, cook acaraje day in day out, keeping alive African tradition, the ingredients reminders of an unwelcome history and an ancestral struggle shaped by slavery. They

cook using their land's offerings and the perfected recipes, themselves concentrated snapshots of history, are undiluted by imported foods from modern supermarket shelves.

Circumstance and company, I realised, are as important as the food itself. Hunger, so they say, is the best gravy. You've been cycling uphill in the Colombian Andes since 6am, it's dark, you're wet and scared. Your lower back feels like its being closed in a vice with every turn of the pedals and you are empty. The only place serving food is a gas station-cum-dormitory-cum-restaurant and at its dirty plastic tables overweight truck drivers congregate over heaps of food. Dogs argue for scraps of gristle on the cold concrete floor and as you take a seat on a broken plastic chair the patron quickly dumps the daily special in front of you: a deep bowl of steaming tripe stew, rice

and a jug of fresh mango juice.
Thirsty, you attack the mango juice and it's so clean and pure you never want it to end. The plump grains of rice mixed with a little chilli and cooked in a rich stock fill your nostrils. The tripe stew is slow-cooked and garnished with fresh coriander and lime juice and its robust flavours go to work on you like a magical, bovine medicine. It's just another a dusty town on the Pan American Highway, high in the Columbian Andes. But after a day of uphill struggles on a bicycle, this place, the people and its food are complete-

As a youngster, I remember listening to one of my father's sermons one Sunday as he declaimed enthusiastically on the etymology of the word "company". Its latin origins are the words "cum pane" - with bread. To have good company is to eat well. I witnessed this first hand, from the lesbian chicken I ate in Calgary (my lovely hostess's dyslexic take on Lebanese chicken) to the immaculate dim sum I shared with a group of rowdy chefs in San Francisco's Chinatown, or the morel and chanterelle pasta I ate with a homeless couple in the rain of northern California; it was the company that

made the meal. But my favourite food, that's easier to define. I find myself back on that miserable boat on the Rio Napo, chugging along the muddy waters, Hungry, sweaty and mosquito-riddled, I watched in relief as the lights of Iquitos came into view. On land, the only escape I found from the oppressive heat and soupy humidity was a small, backstreet cevicheria. Rickety fans whirring, I ordered a cold beer and awaited my jungle lunch of ceviche. Tender cuts of local fish, doused in lime and mixed through with red onion and chilli, arrived at my table on a heap of boiled sweet potato and chewy yucca. This was perfection. The lime juice was clean in my mouth, the fish didn't sit heavily in my stomach and the chillies drew a little fresh sweat. After the horrific dishes that came from the galley of the Siempre Adelante, every plate of ceviche I enjoyed in Iquitos, washed down with both

tles of ice-cold Iquitena beer, was a gift from the river gods.

It was all worth it.

Interview by Daisy Dumas

The Hungry Cyclist by Tom Kevill-Davies (Harper wheels, during which he enjoyed Costa Rica, Peru and Mexico

The hungry cyclist: a map of the route

taken by Tom Kevill-Davies (far left, in Ecuador) on his foodie tour on two

## **Global grub** What to eat where

Also known as Rocky Mountain oysters, bull's testicles are a cowboy classic and make a perfect Midwest snack.



The seafood in this converted gas station is unparalleled. By all accounts the best fish and chips

## White clam ceviche, El Rosarito beach,

The gringos have gone home, Mariachi is playing and the sun is setting over the Pacific. There is no better antidote after cycling through Tijuana.

## Fish tacos, La Paz, Baja California, Mexico

The Sea of Cortez is abundant in marine life and so there is no shortage of seafood in La Paz. The only way to start to the day

This punchy tripe stew is the only hangover cure after a night of tequila drinking with the hard-living Vaqueros of

### Papusas, El Salvador

north-west Mexico.

The national dish of El Salvador, these piping-hot maize pancakes will leave you dripping with sweat

Fried chorizo, fried pigs fat, fried eggs, fried plantain and avocado. This hearty Colombian platter makes a full English breakfast look like a health plan.

## Grilled Cayman, The Amazon, Peru

Grilled on the river bank, doused in lime, wrapped in leaves and tossed on deck in exchange for a couple of soles.

## **Piranhas, Manaus, Brazil**

Surprisingly great eating when shallow fried and often served as an aphrodisiac outside brothels

# Globo biscuits and a caipir

These air-puffed Brazilian biscuits are the perfect beach snack and accompaniment to a Caipirinha at the end of a long ride. The view's pretty good, too.



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