
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Riding With the Reaper

Pat Sherwood and Ian Wittenber come face to face with death on the treacherous mountain roads of Ecuador.

By Pat Sherwood

November 2013



All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

Oct. 18 was Day 67 on the moto. The odometer read 8,500 miles.

After filming a community piece in Quito, Ecuador, the goal was to ride to Guayaquil. Google Maps said it would be 5.5 hours, so we figured 7.5 hours. We have learned that Google Maps cannot predict rain, potholes and broken roads, animals in the road, police checkpoints, old 18-wheelers barely doing 10 mph on twisty mountain roads, etc. We add two hours for every five listed on Google Maps.

1 of 4

My bike started right up, but Ian's was still starting and then immediately dying. I had no idea why this was happening. We had literally just gotten the bikes out from the Kawasaki Dealer in Quito two days prior. Whatever the problem, it was bound to bite us in the ass at some inopportune time.

After some stops, we got on the road at about 10:30 a.m. Getting out of Quito was quite a pain in the ass. The traffic was thick. The roads were bad. There was zero signage as to where in the hell we were going or what road we were on. The roads constantly split into multiple directions, and we had to make a random guess several times. Finally, we got the hell out and onto the main "highway" we needed.

Things started to deteriorate. There are several ways to get from Quito to Guayaquil. Some are faster than others. None are clearly marked with any signs, and one is more likely to miss the proper turn than to make it. This is what began to happen. After realizing we missed the most direct route some time ago, we continued on the second most ideal route. No drama.

We were in middle of nowhere when it was time to eat lunch. We gassed up, and the shitty little store had zero protein and zero fat. Only sugar. So I bought a big bag of animal crackers with a bottle of water. As it would turn out, I was lucky I ate something. We would not have the opportunity to eat again for a long time.

The scenery was breathtaking. Ecuador is jam-packed with mountains and vistas galore. At times it looked like we were riding through a pine forest high in the mountains of Northern California or Oregon. The roads constantly gained elevation, dropped, and then climbed again, and all roads going up and down the mountains are hairpin right turns followed by hairpin lefts ... mile after mile after mile.

On these steep, twisty mountain roads, buses, trucks and other vehicles struggle to climb the grades. The already slow speeds are reduced to a crawl. Thirty mph becomes 15 mph, and you can be stuck behind slow vehicles for 50 miles. So you have to pass—on hairpin turns with nothing but blind corners and no guardrails. We must pass 100 vehicles every day on roads like this. That is not an exaggeration. Some passes are sketchy and some are not. However, our most risky flirtation-with-death pass on a blind corner would not even register with the locals, who pass vehicles like they have a death wish.

Ecuador might be near the equator, but there was a very strong chill in the air and the temperature kept dropping rapidly. Soon, we were flat-out cold and the clouds rolled in. The sun was gone, and we pulled over and I put on a thermal-underwear top.

We were looking for another major Y intersection—our next best opportunity to take a slightly more direct route



Rain can be inconvenient on city roads, but it's dangerous when you're riding a motorcycle on twisting mountain roads without guardrails.



Sherwood traveling roads that may or may not exist according to various maps.

to Guayaquil. As it turned out, this major Y did not exist. We stopped on the side of the road with Google Maps on my iPhone alongside paper maps. No dice. Our little blue dot showed that we were right at this major Y and needed to go right. However, there was no Y. We were on a straight road with no options to turn. We rode up the road and then down the road to see if we had missed something. Nope. It was just wrong. We now needed to modify our route to become even longer and less favorable. The curveballs just kept coming.

We rode for a bit longer, and then the cloudy sky turned gray, the temperature dropped more and the wind picked up. That meant we were about to get dumped on. We pulled over again and donned our rain gear. We could actually look down the road and see the rain hitting the ground and approaching our position, and we got kitted up just in time. What hit us was not rain but hail. Our speed was reduced because of the weather, and our supposed 7.5-hour journey was looking much longer.

To add insult to injury, we hit the thickest fog I'd seen in a long time 40 minutes later. I could see 50 feet in front of me. Then it got even darker, and our speed was once again reduced to a crawl.

It's tough to explain how dangerous this was. Oncoming traffic just suddenly appeared out of the fog, usually going faster than appropriate. Or even better, cars appeared in our lane while executing dangerous passes. All of this on hairpin roads in thick fog in the mountains in a hailstorm.

The visors of our motorcycle helmets fogged up constantly, making our visibility even worse. I was constantly wiping the water away in hopes of improving the situation. Plus, we were shaking from the frigging cold.

The only option was to reduce speed to something manageable, press on and try to get to the other side of the weather. If we pulled over in the dense fog with our hazards on to wait it out, our chances of not being seen and hit by a car were high.

Ready for the Murphy's Law part of the story? Unbeknownst to me, my headlight was out. I did not realize it because it had worked the night before and we had been in daylight until we hit the fog. So, I was riding up front thinking that oncoming vehicles would see my headlight. Thank God nothing happened. When we later realized my light had been out the whole time, it gave me chills.

Finally we broke through the fog, but the bone-chilling cold remained along with the crazy roads. We rode and rode. Progress was slow for several more hours. It was getting dark, and we were not near Guayaquil. This is when a trip sucks and nothing about it is fun. Your body is exhausted from shivering in the cold. You are sore and aching from being on the motorcycle so long. You keep shifting around, trying to find a comfortable position, but there isn't one. But mostly, you are just mentally spent. Riding in these conditions requires intense and sharp focus every second of every minute, hour after hour.

The frigging map said we needed to make a right turn in about an hour. As the previous turn didn't even exist, we weren't holding our breaths. But against all odds, after an hour, we actually found the turn—but it was closed and blocked. The road was not passable. Are you shitting me? Fuck!

We were cold, hungry, borderline lost and far from Guayaquil. Fuel was beginning to become a serious concern. We had no choice but to press on.

After another 90 minutes of painfully slow zig-zagging up and down cold mountain roads, we were directed by the map to a right turn to Guayaquil. As you can guess, we were not hopeful. But the turn existed, and we were ecstatic to find the road was open.

At least heading somewhat toward our destination, we were aware that fuel was a critical issue. We needed a gas station ASAP. We finally started to drop in elevation. Down and down we rode on wet, twisty mountain roads, and it was now nighttime. With my low beam out, Ian rode up front and I rode behind him with my high beam on. The road turned to gravel, then dirt. It was under construction but passable.

Then it happened: I thought I blew my rear tire again when the rear wheel of my bike lost traction. I felt the ass end of my bike slide left, then right. It felt squishy and simply wrong. I slowed down to assess what was wrong and realized it was not my bike. My tire was fine; it was the road.

The road construction crew had dug up huge piles of dirt and lined the sides of the road with them. The rain had turned the dirt to an incredibly slick thin film of greasy mud. This slick substance had washed onto the road surface, which might as well have been covered in olive oil. Our bikes were literally sliding, and were on a steep downhill gradient at night with no headlight. You just can't make this shit up.

Ian was creeping along just ahead of me at about 5 mph trying to fight the slippery surface when his bike just kicked out from under him and fell onto his left side. I parked, and along with some locals who stopped to help, we righted his bike. Walking over to help him, I almost slipped and fell. This was a shit show, and we still had more than two hours to go under ideal riding conditions. These conditions were the polar opposite of ideal, and we had no idea how long the rest of our journey would take.

Just as we got his bike up and I walked back over to mine, an 18-wheeler came hauling ass around the corner, obviously unaware of the slippery conditions. Ian's bike was in the same lane as the truck, and I stood there watching. It happened so fast. I said to myself, "Well, this is where Ian gets killed." The truck tried to slow down and could not. Its red brake lights lit the night sky, but his speed did not change. The driver was committed to the line, and as luck would have it, he just missed Ian. Holy shit! We needed to get the hell out of here!

We proceeded to ride down this slippery mountain road very cautiously until finally the conditions changed back from deadly to just normally dangerous. We pressed on, damn near out of gas and running on fumes, until we rode through a tiny little town and found a gas station. We fueled up. I bought a bottle of water and some vanilla Oreos. We were starving.

In the dark night, in this small dirty town, the gas station did not look inviting, but we had no choice. There were about five rough-looking guys all sitting in the dark playing cards between the pumps at the crappy little store. As it turns out, they were cool dudes. They loved our bikes, and we started a conversation about our trip. This happens time and time again. People in Latin America have been amazing.

Now about 90 minutes outside of Guayaquil, we mounted up and kept riding through some shitty, sketchy towns. We hit yet another closed road, but I saw a motorcycle ride around the barrier, so we did, too. It worked out fine. Gotta love the locals.

After riding and riding, we finally saw Guayaquil on the horizon. We were starving to death but in the distance saw the Golden Arches! We rode directly to McDonald's. It was now 10 p.m. It had taken us 11.5 hours to get to Guayaquil. We were utterly spent in every sense of the word.

Say what you will, but after the day we had just endured, a double quarter-pounder with cheese tasted like heaven.



About the Author

Pat Sherwood works for CrossFit as a flowmaster and member of the Media Team. He's done just under 200 seminars all around the globe for CrossFit HQ and competed in the 2009 CrossFit Games. He hates HSPU and loves ice cream.