

Day 26

4th July 2017

Communal campsite en route to Cuba Chaco Mesa Road bivis

162k / 100.7miles

2578m / 8458ft (3042m / 9980ft descent)

40.9%↑ 47.1%↓ 12%→ 18.9% max

What doesn't kill you ~~only makes you stronger~~

Gives you a set of unhealthy coping mechanisms and a dark sense of humour



1st Bivi site



I was next to last to leave the campsite this morning. I had previously noticed that Rich was always up and busy about 05.00, whereas I was still snuggled in my sleeping bag fighting the demons regarding the cold I would experience when I finally got up!!

As it was I was off by just after 06.00.

I soon caught up with most of the team and stopped for a bite to eat at the top of what, in my ignorance, I took to be the summit.

However at least the first half of it today was to be characterised by a multiplicity of false summits. No map remember.



The start of today's trail varied between occasional rugged hike a bike sections through to just relatively rough.

This is a typical benign section

While I ate, some of the others caught up in dribs and drabs but I left them soon after I restarted as we all progressed at our own rate.

I was rapidly coming to the conclusion that New Mexico was neither as small, nor as benign, as I had hoped.



My first stop, made on the assumption I had reached the top!!

The trail to Cuba seemed to go on forever.

It consisted of a never ending series of sharp ups, with me wondering if that's the last one,

before the appearance of yet another hill as the descent petered out. If you look at the route profile for today you will understand

This continued for 80k.....

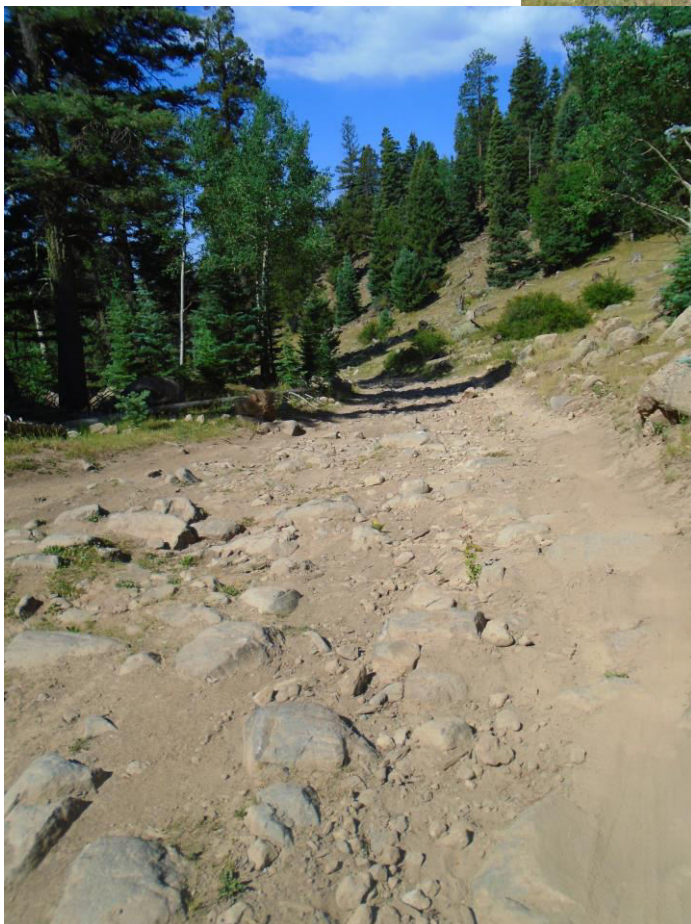
Water was also becoming a potential issue. It was getting hot and I didn't know how far Cuba was. At this rate I was never going to get there!

I caught up with the last member of our group – Leah (for the 3rd time!). She was also having water issues. Fortunately, before I had to decide whether to give her some of my precious reserves she spotted a small lake and went off to fill her bottles. I elected to carry on.

The trail continued on in the relentless saw tooth up/down manner. I think this section is probably the only part of the whole journey where I would have benefitted from having front shocks on my bike.

Further examples of the trail and the rocks encountered.

With the majority of this part of the route being through dense forest views, like water, were at a premium.



The pictures below show the first real views in 30 miles

Obviously eventually all good things come to an end and I finally, after nearly 80k of this trail through the forest, I spied some tarmac.

Knowing that I would be descending to Cuba it was a little disconcerting to see from the GPS that I would be turning right, uphill.

However, not 100m up the slope, I saw a figure I recognised as Marty. I caught him up and to wind him up said *'I think you are going the wrong way!!'*

He did a double take before realising I was pulling his leg. I kept him company until we reached the crest. Thankfully this proved to be the last major hill of the day.



*My first real views in 30k.
I had come from the hills in the far distance, through the intervening forest*





As if by way of payback for all the effort expended the TD Gods finally relented and gave us a long exhilarating swooping run down to Cuba on a wide open quiet lovely smooth road. The drop of 1,500' in 9k was a real morale booster and I entered Cuba with a big grin on my face.

Quite possibly the best bit was the cooling effect of the slipstream.



Needless to say Cuba¹ is not the liveliest, nor the most scenic of towns.

The thriving metropolis that is Cuba

Indeed I think I am right in stating that New Mexico is not renowned for architectural. Innovation.

Nevertheless the presence of an ubiquitous Subway allowed me to stock up on my usual 12" tuna. I went off piste and ordered a chicken thing to go as well but found I had eaten half of that before I left the place.

Thus it was, 18" of filled sandwich later, I restarted on cycling – still hungry!

1. Cuba's most recent claim to fame is that the National Christmas Tree was harvested from the nearby Santa Fe National Forest in 2005!!!

Once out of Cuba the topography was in stark contrast to that traversed earlier in the day. I was now in the desert with the occasional bluff and or geological feature, indicative of a volcanic past.

The following photos illustrate the terrain encountered on this part of my trip.

Two elements which don't show up in these images are the inevitable wind and surprisingly large amount of litter.

I had naturally been shielded from any winds while cycling in the forest; with such wide open tracts now there was no shelter.



The significant amount of litter/detritus, smashed bottles or alcohol related packaging, strewn either side of the road was really quite depressing.



Hitherto, presumably reflecting a vibrant community spirit in the area, there had been frequent road signs stating that the next x miles were being sponsored by '*Bill Bloggs and family*' or '*Acme Products Inc*'. etc and this had helped keep the verges clear.

This was not apparent in New Mexico.



The TD route directs the riders on the 180k Chaco Alternate, unfortunately it's paved the whole way.

Ha listen to me - this is the chap who only this morning was whinging that the trail

through the woods to Cuba was never ending. No pleasing some people I say!

Even so, I do wonder why we TD riders are not directed on the off road trail route some 40k to the south east. I suspect it's because the area is notoriously prone to being rendered impassable when it rains due to the notorious thick 'bike-seizing' muddy conditions.

One section of the Chaco Alternate is arrow straight for 28k. One can see the road stretching seemingly into infinity (and the setting sun) with just hills/undulations to liven things up.



Beginning of the long straight section north west, directly into the wind

You may be getting the vibe that this was not my favourite part of the trip. Nothing for it but to put your head down and plod on and ignore the wind.

Eventually, some 50k after Cuba, I decided to stop, although it took some time to find a suitable non litter strewn spot for my bivi. A combination of the relentless adverse wind, the unremittingly similar terrain, lack of bends and increasing tiredness all contributed to this decision.

New Mexico certainly wasn't turning out to be the simple and easy 'last state run up to the finish' I had half hoped it would be. Even the flat bits had a sting to the tail.

My scribbled notes suggest that, at the time, I considered today was possibly the hardest day to date. On reflection I don't think it was and what I wrote immediately after I stopped lying in my bivi was coloured by my feelings at the time.

I bivvied out with, no tent, as there was no possibility of rain and it is much quicker and also less conspicuous when viewed from the road. Decided to ditch the remaining 6' chick sub, as I didn't trust the contents after 8 hrs in the sun.

I realised, as I drifted off it that it was the 4th of July but I had seen none of the expected fireworks - probably because there was no habitation for 40k in any direction.