

# TROPIC THUNDER



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Ping, off-road legend Russell Bobbitt, and ten of their newest friends spent a week riding through one of the most idyllic locales on the planet thanks to Costa Rica Unlimited

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ROAD TRIPS USED TO BE MY JAM. After I quit racing full-time, I spent the next five or six years traveling around the world, racing in some amazing places and sharing my experiences in the pages of this magazine. It was awesome. Then I had kids and started my career in the fire service, and with the very limited free time I had, I just wanted to stay home and relax. Now, with my kids a little older, I wanted to hit the road again occasionally. When a great opportunity came up, I jumped at it.



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One of the owners of Costa Rica Unlimited is Terry Beal, a longtime industry friend.

When I heard about the venture, I loved the concept: create an exclusive compound right by the Pacific Ocean in Costa Rica and host guided motorcycle tours to experience some of the most gorgeous landscapes in the world. Terry told me the housing is first-class, the bikes are in great shape, the staff is incredible—but those things can be a bit subjective, right? I'd believe it when I saw it.

I received my itinerary and was confused when my departure city read Tijuana, Mexico. Either this was a mistake or Terry was trying to treat me to one of the area's infamous donkey shows. It turns out there is a massive parking structure on the U.S. side and a bridge that takes you straight across to the international terminal at Tijuana International Airport. Despite my skepticism, we made it across without incident or

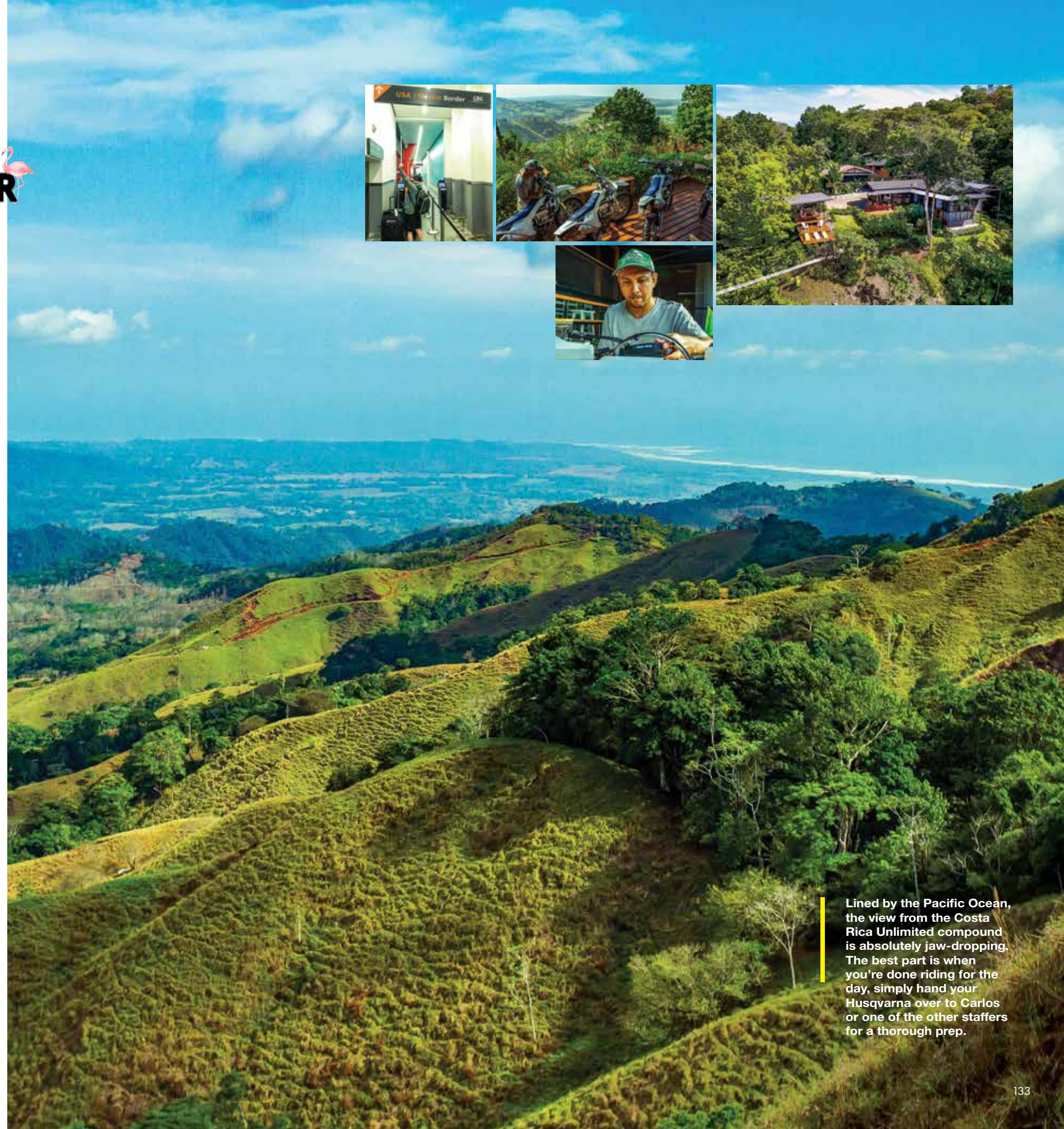
animal-themed entertainment. The two hours prior to my flight I spent texting love notes to my wife. As any married person can imagine, my wife was none too thrilled that I was taking off for Costa Rica for a week while she was left alone to handle the kids, work, meals, life, etc. Of course, I tried to explain that it was a work assignment and I was only doing it to provide for my family as the head of the household and to honor my contractual obligations as an editor of a motocross publication. She didn't buy that load of crap for a minute; when I got back, she got a weekend in Palms Springs.

I had a fun group to share the adventure that included our associate editor Kyle Scott and Michelin's Randy Richardson, whom I've known for years. Randy also brought a couple of his buddies from South Carolina; I would come to know them lovingly as Bobby Light and Hurricane Harvey. I couldn't imagine any scenario where we wouldn't have the time of our lives, but first we had to get there. Two

flights on a very questionable Mexican airline later and we were in a rental car in the capital city of San Jose, headed for the Costa Rica Unlimited compound.

As we pulled in to Playa Hermosa, we got to meet the second partner in the company, Chris Killbride. Chris is one of those guys who was born to run a business like this; his easygoing personality fits the Costa Rican lifestyle perfectly. He's just one of those guys who is immediately best friends with everybody he meets. About halfway through the trip, I was already thinking about what I should get him for Christmas. Chris met us in town on a dual-sport bike and led us back to the compound in shorts, flip-flops, and a T-shirt—a fairly standard Costa Rican riding kit.

The driveway to his place should be listed as one of the most treacherous roads in the world. In less than a mile, you climb over 1,000 feet at a 26 percent grade. As I navigated my obscure Chinese rental car up the climb, I felt like Evel Knievel



Lined by the Pacific Ocean, the view from the Costa Rica Unlimited compound is absolutely jaw-dropping. The best part is when you're done riding for the day, simply hand your Husqvarna over to Carlos or one of the other staffers for a thorough prep.





**Michelin's Randy Richardson knows how to beat Ping at his own splash game. (Inset) But all is well in paradise after enjoying a cup of coffee suspended over the vast jungle.**

For as long as I've been riding bikes, I've taken great pleasure in roosting my riding buddies with mud or splashing them in a puddle.

strapped into the Skycycle X-2 as he awaited launch over the Snake River Canyon. Cresting the peak, we pulled into the gated compound, and it immediately felt like we were in a five-star resort. I expected a beautiful girl wearing a coconut bra and a banana-leaf thong to greet me with a tropical drink trimmed with exotic fruit and colorful miniature umbrellas. Instead I was licked thoroughly by Bullet, the family dog. It was probably for the best; much easier to explain to my wife. We were the last to arrive, and it was already

pretty late, so we settled in and crashed, anticipating a full tour in the morning.

Since Costa Rica sits right near the equator, there isn't much variance in temperature throughout the year, and the sun rises and sets near the same time all year long. As a guy who needs a large cup of coffee to get going, the 5:20 a.m. sunrise was a bit ambitious for me, especially in a house with open windows on all sides. Sipping my first cup of bean-flavored water, I scoped out our accommodations. Wow. There are five houses on

the property, and each one is unique, spacious, and meticulously clean. Breakfast was served by the staff every morning, and the local cuisine was delicious. They encourage you to push away from the table right after breakfast and start getting ready for the day's ride, which typically sets off at around 9:00.

The rest of our crew consisted of an airline pilot named Kevin; a Florida businessman named Corey; Dusty and Jackson, who both flew down from Phoenix; Matt from Mas-







The waterfall cliff jump is one of the great stops along the way for the entire crew and, of course, *ciento uno*.

sachusetts; and, of course, Russell Bobbitt, our legendary tour guide. We geared up and I claimed my brand new Husqvarna FX 350. The stable of bikes at CRU was impressive, and seven of the twelve bikes on the tour were fresh out of the crate. In the same way sailors christen a new vessel by smashing it with a bottle of champagne, I dedicated my new bike by stenciling my number on it in black Sharpie. Of course, I added the written version below it, so as to avoid any language barriers on the trail.



Just like that, the *ciento uno* was ready to rip.

We set off from the compound on a series of fire roads through the hills. I was stunned by how many dirt roads they've cut through the mountains

because of the steep terrain and elevation (the highest point in the country is over 12,000 feet). From the roads, we would hop onto sections of single-track that darted through the dense foliage of the jungle. I was constantly ducking my head under leaves or leaning left or right as we weaved down the trail.

While the temperature doesn't change much during the year, the amount of rainfall does. March is right in the middle of the dry season, and the trails were a fair depiction

of that: at every stop, there was a thin coat of dust on each rider's face that looked like a shoddy earth-tone paint job from Earl Scheib. The trail dropped into a creek bed at one point, and I thought we were going to lose Kyle. It was his first time out of the country, and I don't think he was prepared for the crushing humidity of Central America. The six-hour flight the day before, beers at the airport, and two cups of coffee that morning weren't helping his situation either. Struggling to maneuver his bike through the rocky, technical sections of the trail, he began to over-heat like a Volkswagen with a bad water pump. As the rest of us laughed and pointed, Kyle dropped his bike and slumped over on the damp jungle floor, gasping for air like a goldfish on linoleum. After some fluids and a snack, we had our fearless photographer up and going again.

We eventually came to a river crossing—one of many in the area—where I was beaten at my own game. For as long as I've been riding bikes, I've taken great pleasure in roosting my riding buddies with mud or splashing them in a puddle. I've become skilled in timing a pass so that I hit the slop at just the right time to cover my pals with filth. As we approached the river, I saw an opportunity to blast Randy, and I idled up alongside him. As we neared the edge of the water, I grabbed a handful of throttle and leaned back,



only to realize Randy had the same idea a split second before I did. A wall of water rained down on me as we plowed through the river. Well played, Randall. Well played. We stopped and cooled off in the water, and some of the guys even plopped in with all their gear on. Afterward, we stopped at a local roadside grill for lunch and then cruised the fire roads back to the compound.

While breakfast and lunch are included in the CRU packages, dinner is up to you. We decided to head down to Jaco for a quick surf before grabbing some food in town. Hurricane and Bobby Light had never surfed, so I gave them a 60-second lesson on the beach, patted them on the back, and wished them good luck. The swell wasn't particularly good that day, with water that felt more like a Jacuzzi than the ocean, but it didn't matter. We rode a few waves, then ordered some grub at a local restaurant before heading home. It could have been jet lag, dehydration from sweating all day, the 50-mile ride, or just the fact that I'm old, but I was tired. We all were.

The next couple of days, we followed the same schedule: wake up, coffee, breakfast, ride for five or six hours with a stop for lunch, hang out and bench race while the CRU staff cleans your gear and preps your bike, then dinner as a group. The last two days we had some rain showers at night

that completely changed the complexion of the trails. The dust was gone, and the roads that were dry and slick turned into Velcro. The trails that were in the tree canopy, however, went from technical to nearly impassible sections that you'd see in the Red Bull Romaniacs race. I've never ridden on actual gorilla snot, but I imagine it closely resembles some of the greasy ruts we navigated over the last two days. If that type of riding isn't your thing, definitely make plans to go in the dry season. Our guides explained that these are standard conditions on every trail when the rainy season hits.

We made a stop at a waterfall that doubled as a cliff jump. Each of us took turns hiking up and bombing off the ledge into the pool below. Then Hurricane Harvey stepped up. After peeking over the edge, he started having second thoughts, but the hike down was more treacherous than the jump. We waited. And waited. The Hurricane was downgraded to a tropical storm. He'd walk to the edge as we yelled encouragement. Then he was downgraded to a tropical depression. Finally, with his GI tract up near his throat, he made the jump. The Hurricane was back! The photos don't do that jump justice—it was bigger than it looks.

The last day of riding was an epic one. We started off with some fun trails, then made our way to a private piece of property where



After wrestling your bike through technical trails all day long like Bobby Light (main), the river breaks and the stunning wildlife that surrounds you from the moment you reach the CRU compound does not disappoint.



Riding a dirt bike through Costa Rica is a lot of things: fun, exhausting, and, most importantly, something to cherish for a lifetime. From the gorgeous views to nights out with the crew, impromptu volleyball games, group comradery, and sometimes lack of talent on the trails, it's an experience everyone should try to tackle.

one of the staff members lives. His family farm covers hundreds of acres of incredible land, and they were in the process of building an enduro loop. We rode a section of it, then stopped by another waterfall hidden in the back of his property. I don't want to sound too corny, but it was the kind of place where you could sit all day and just stare at the scenery. It was incredible. And we were riding dirt bikes through it.

The last stop that day was the beach. There aren't many places on the planet where you can ride wheelies down the beach and not end up in a prison cell trading cigarettes for extra ramen packets, but Costa Rica is pretty chill, and despite our

initial reservations, we found ourselves riding wheelies down the beach and even cutting a small turn track in the deep, sugary sand. Chris waved us off before we could blow up all his bikes, and we began the final, winding ride back to the compound.

As we sat around on the last night recapping the week's highlights, everybody had different moments that stood out. For Hurricane Harvey, it was the factory rider treatment: "I realize it takes a lot of people to run a business like CRU. To me, Chris has done an excellent job at putting together the entire package. Everything from the bikes to the accommodations was above my expectations. No gear to wash, no bike to wash, no oil to check, no air filter to clean, no bed to make, no breakfast to make—I was full factory for the week. After being on the bike for six-plus hours and coming back to an amazing view and not having to deal with any of those things made for a much more enjoyable vacation experience."

Randy Richardson had two favorite moments: "The river crossing with Ping, who tried to trick me into going slow so he could speed up and splash me, was fun. Too bad I pinned it, forcing him to finish in second place yet again! We were both soaking wet and laughing above the sounds of our pristine Husqvarnas.

"My favorite, though, was riding along a dirt road and

seeing a Costa Rican lady standing in her yard waving at me ... while breastfeeding her baby! #puravida"

Bobby Light had a different perspective, saying, "Costa Rican wildlife is crazy. Iguanas, rainbow macaws, oxen on the trail, squirrel monkeys at the house, quetzals, poison dart frogs in the wild. . . . It was a zoo out there, both on the porch and trail. Also, I got to check something off my bucket list: surfing for the first time, and the icing on the cake was lessons from Ping. Always expected riding lessons, not surfing lessons, but nonetheless it worked out, sort of. With Harvey, not so much."

I've had some pretty amazing experiences riding motorcycles in the 43 years I've been alive; I've been really lucky in that regard. This trip ranks right up there with the very best memories I have, and that's saying a lot. The CRU staff will host groups of any size and skill level and cater the trip to the type of riding you want to do. I promise you'll make memories you'll never forget. Thanks to Chris, Terry, and the entire staff at Costa Rica Unlimited. They've created something incredible, and I hope someday I can get back down for another turn. In the meantime, I just hope Chris likes my Christmas gift. ✨

## RUSSELL THE MUSCLE

If you're looking for a ride that's more domestic, check out Russell Bobbitt's Gnarly Routes Tour. Up to four people can join Russell and former pro Cole Kirkpatrick on exclusive trips throughout the United States. Moab, Grand Junction, Crested Butte, Sun Valley, and a private ranch in Post, Texas, are just some of the destinations Russell is leading his groups through. You'll ride race-ready KTM's set up similarly to Bobbitt's bikes, with an auto or manual Rekluse clutch, and each bike starts the tour with new tires. You get a professionally shot video of the trip, as well as a cache of images. Join the five-time AMA National Enduro Champion on a gnarly route! You can see more at [gnarlyroutes.com](http://gnarlyroutes.com) or find him on Instagram (@gnarlyroutes).

