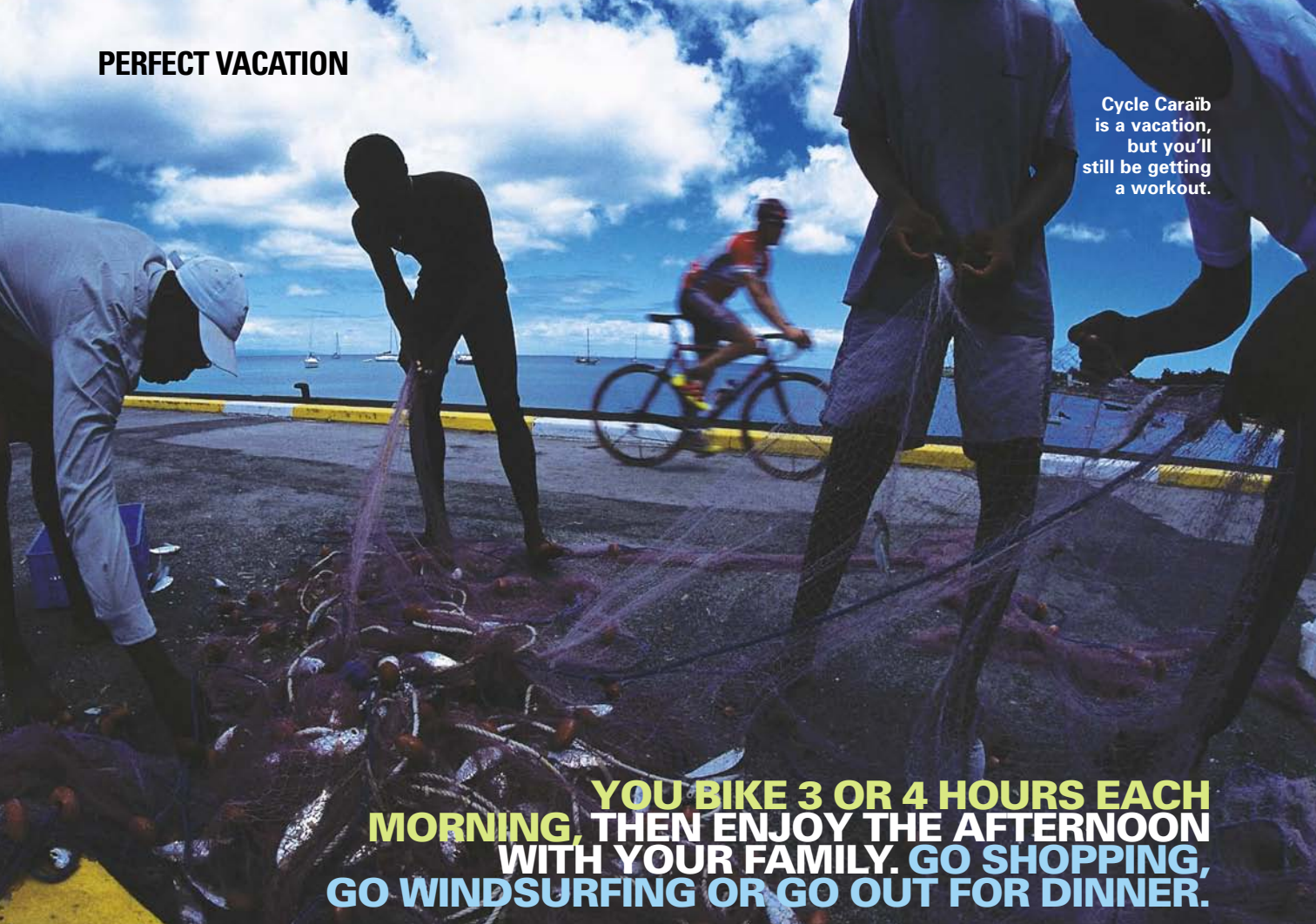


HOW I SPENT MY WINTER VACATION

HOW TO GO FROM SHOVELING SNOW TO WHEELSUCKING A PRO IN ONE WEEK.

I'm not sure if I'm smiling or grimacing. My mouth is open and my lips are taut, in an expression that could signal pain or pleasure. My redlining Polar sends out an urgent stream of figures: 192, 194, 198....Yet, I'm thrilled. Approaching my aorta's blowout point here, on the French-speaking Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, trumps the last time I felt my heart pounding in my cranium. That was 24 hours earlier, back home in upstate New York, when I was trying to keep up with an 18-inch dump of snow, shoveling madly but still falling behind.>

Guadeloupe's sunny skies and cycling-friendly culture make it an ideal place to log early-season miles.



Cycle Caraïb is a vacation, but you'll still be getting a workout.

YOU BIKE 3 OR 4 HOURS EACH MORNING, THEN ENJOY THE AFTERNOON WITH YOUR FAMILY. GO SHOPPING, GO WINDSURFING OR GO OUT FOR DINNER.

Here I'm being buried not by a nor'easter, but by Kevin Livingston—yes, that Kevin Livingston, late of teams Telekom and USPS, with six appearances in the Tour de France. Kevin's towing me, Stephanie Bleecher and another rider at 30 mph on a knife of oven-hot, two-lane road that cuts through head-high, electric-green sugarcane straight toward the coast. My snow-and-lactate-addled body cannot make sense of the warmth and verdant life around me.

We're chasing a group of three cyclists about 200 meters ahead. One of the leaders is Rich Borow, Stephanie's husband and nemesis on the bike; they each push each other hard. Just three minutes ago, Stephanie blurted to Kevin, "Help us get back on—I'll buy you a beer!" Suddenly our pace jumped from a merely difficult 23 mph to this glorious, agonizing 30 mph.

THE FITNESS VACATION

We're at Cycle Caraïb, a six-day antidote to most cycling vacations—you know, the kind where you get to visit Umbria, or Wales, or even the Caucasus and learn about food, and history, and culture... and oh, by the way, your mode of transport is a bicycle.

Chris Gutowsky, a former track champion and pro racer who now runs a Bloomington, Indiana-based bike-touring outfit called VéloSport Vacations, designed Cycle Caraïb to include all the ingredients of an exotic vacation (French-

speaking island, wonderful weather, creole cooking) while focusing on cycling first. And maybe second as well. You come here because Gutowsky invites just-retired pros such as Livingston to coach, cajole or even shame you into becoming a better rider, and because you want to get your fitness level cranked up before the weather back home will let you.

And you come, as Gutowsky explains, because it's a vacation that you and a non-cycling spouse or partner can both love. The full-service resort you stay at for the entire camp supplies all meals and, if lounging on a sunbathed Caribbean beach isn't appealing enough, also provides non-pedal entertainment such as snorkeling and Jet-Ski riding. You bike three or four hours each morning, about 30–60 miles, then enjoy the afternoon with your family. You can get in some shopping outside the resort or take windsurfing lessons or go out to dinner, but having the hotel as a steady base makes life easy after a morning of exertion.

As for the riding itself, the client dictates the pace. Everyone from 14-mph day-tourers in their mid-50s to national championship contenders shows up. But, unlike Gutowsky's bread-and-butter trips, which shadow the Tour de France and serve cyclists who want to ride stages of the race and witness some of the action, the goal in Guadeloupe is to have a fitness vacation in its purest form. In addition to a visiting pro, Chris, his wife Kathy and employee Jean-Luc Serriere serve as guides—setting the pace, stopping traffic, splitting the riders into groups by fitness and ambition. You just pedal; they keep you rolling.

The rides in Guadeloupe vary greatly, even if the scenery doesn't. (You always see goats tied up in front yards, along with the occasional cow and chicken.) Gutowsky picked this island in the Lesser Antilles because the roads are fantastic, with winding mountain sections, a combination of grueling short climbs and longer ascents, and many miles of pin-straight asphalt that suck you into all-out pacelining.

Because it's a French territory, there's a huge cycling culture. One Saturday morning no fewer than 20 groups of riders in full regalia blew by us in packs of three to fifteen, some shouting or waving to us. This attitude infects the drivers as well. They pass with amazing care, giving up the whole lane, shouting encouraging words or giving kind honks and, at intersections, always yielding the right of way (save one fellow who tried to take out Stephanie and me, which is what put us behind her husband's group).

And although it's warm in Guadeloupe in March (especially compared to a deep-freeze winter) there are constant trade winds, and passing showers that are frequent, short and blessedly refreshing.

THE VISITING EXPERT

Yeah, Livingston will yank your whipped carcass along in a paceline. And, if asked, he tells Tour stories, such as how disciplined everyone is about what they eat, or how few cycling groupies there are (how, in fact, women never even recognize pro cyclists out of uniform). But he's not here to revel in his own exploits. He's here to make us feel like the heroes.



Guadeloupe's varied terrain offers good riding for cyclists of all abilities.

Livingston is a guy with tremendous skill and an amazing drive, now turned toward getting others to love bikes. "The thing that got me into cycling is the same thing that gets everyone into the sport," he says. "Total strangers will just talk to you about their bikes and gearing, and soon you're friends."

His enthusiasm is infectious, and his coaching is so subtle you don't realize you're being coached until, suddenly, you're riding more smoothly. For the week I'm here, he jokes with riders, especially the recreational ones who barely know how to sit on a wheel, and gently nudges them toward improvement. He teaches Franca Rofe, a petite New Yorker in her mid-30s, how to drink ("You want your dominant hand on the bar," Livingston says), even how to remove and replace her water bottle smoothly. He teaches everyone about gearing: "You have to really learn to use gears to your advantage, to know what gear you need before you get to the next climb, or next descent, the next clean straightaway."

One day, after a long descent that cut through a lush forest, Livingston pulls me aside to explain that I should brake less.

How To Hang With a Hammer

LIVINGSTON'S 4 SIMPLE WAYS TO RIDE BETTER

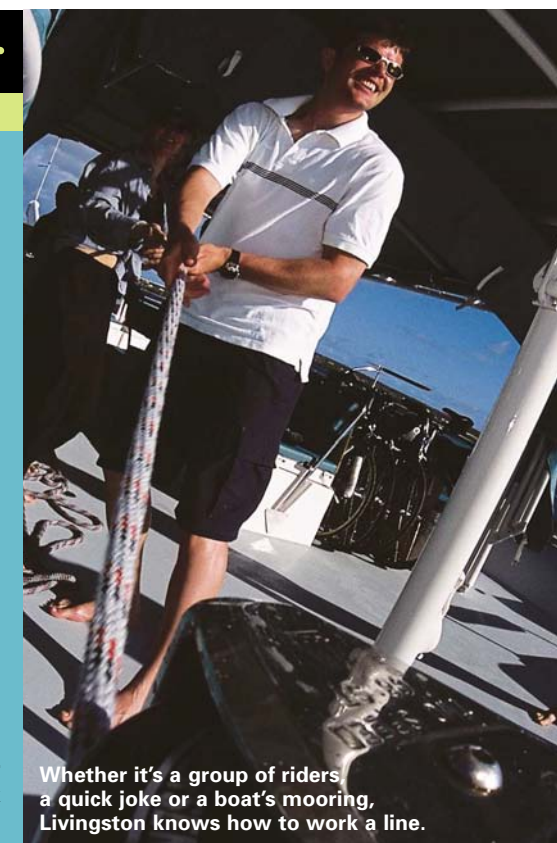
Kevin Livingston has a way of describing complex skills in simple terms, and of talking in fresh ways about cycling's simplest, most important elements. He's also the humblest hammer you'll ever ride with (see p. 48). "When you're coaching other riders, you learn that what works for you may not work for them," Livingston says. "Everyone's different." While he warns us not to take his advice as gospel, it's hard to imagine going wrong with these four tips.

1. ON RACING: "When I was an amateur, if I had a bad day on the bike I'd have a bad day, period. I realized I'd be a pretty miserable guy if I let cycling determine who I was, because everyone—everyone—who rides has more hard days than pure victories; it's the nature of the sport. So you need that intensity to be successful, but you have to find that line between riding and life, and be happy just being able to ride and know that it's great even on bad days."

2. ON LEARNING: "Talk with other riders off the bike. If you know you're weak on overlapping another rider's wheel, or about positioning on the inside of a double paceline, ask someone who's good at that skill for advice. It's the best thing about cycling: People love to share knowledge."

3. ON CLIMBING: "Downshift to a gear you can spin before you start climbing, and spin it smoothly on the flats even though it feels too small. When you hit the hill, your cadence will be clean and the gearing will be correct. While everyone else is dragging because they don't have the right gear, you'll be gliding by them. It saves huge mental energy and keeps you from blowing up too soon."

4. ON CYCLING'S PLETHORA OF RULES: "Cycling etiquette isn't just a bunch of rules; it exists because knowing how to grab your bottle without dropping it, or when it's okay to pass, will keep you and everyone else from getting hurt. Work at these skills until they become second nature." —M.F.



Whether it's a group of riders, a quick joke or a boat's mooring, Livingston knows how to work a line.

PERFECT VACATION



Climb the hill, work with the pro, lie on the beach, eat French food—just another day in paradise.

THE FIRST CLIMB LEAVES US ALL A LITTLE BREATHLESS. IT'S HOT AND WINDLESS, AND LATER IN THE DAY THAN WE'RE USED TO BECAUSE THE BOAT RIDE SUCKED UP MOST OF THE MORNING.



Because it's a French territory, everyone on Guadeloupe is pro-cycling.

"When I was coming up," he says, "I asked Sean Yates [once considered the best descender in the pro ranks, now a manager for CSC] how to go faster and he said, 'Don't brake.' Luckily, he gave me other tips later. But you gain control of the bike without brakes, especially in turns. You need to learn to live with less braking to get more control." On a 25-mph arc through the next descent, I stayed off the clamps. And, man, it felt a lot safer.

It's not just words. It's the aura of a real pro, a guy who helped Lance Armstrong win yellow jerseys, that makes even the best of us happy to learn from Livingston. One client,

Kerry Monahan-O'Brien, says that Livingston, "just plain taught me how to do everything better on the bike. Now I feel so much more comfortable that I really know I can go join my local Saturday morning ride. I never had that confidence before."

THE HAPPY CAMPERS

Monahan-O'Brien, a recreational rider and ex-runner, says she wouldn't be here without her indoor cycling instructor, Chris Griffin. And Griffin, a 43-year-old USCF Cat 3 whose quads have

the definition of a bodybuilder's biceps, wouldn't be here without his students. Griffin teaches at a Manhattan gym called Equinox. His class isn't just a hit, it's a standing-room-only, get-there-45-minutes-early-to-get-a-bike phenomenon. When he heard that two of his students were heading to Caraïb, he offhandedly said, "That trip is the dream of a lifetime," and his disciples secretly pooled enough cash to send him, as well. That inspired Monahan-O'Brien and her fiancé, Patrick Gaughan, to sign up, too, and Griffin put together a custom training regime for his clients who were attending.

During the six-day trip, Griffin is constantly out front, tugging the fast group along without dropping anyone. Gutowsky says there's always someone like Griffin at Caraïb, pulling the whole time so riders who are just hanging on (like yours truly) can get fitter just by sitting in.

That's typical of the camaraderie that develops in camp. And not just on the bike. Each afternoon, at about 3 o'clock, it's Ti Time. The room that stores bikes, gear and travel boxes (although you can rent a bike, many customers bring their own)

GET THERE

Cycle Caraïb, Guadeloupe

Weekly from Feb. 29 to Mar. 28 (8 days, 7 nights)

CYCLING GUEST: \$2,425 **NON-CYCLING GUEST:** \$1,695

CHILDREN: 0-3, free; 4-11, \$195 each **BIKE RENTAL:** \$125

VELOSPORT VACATIONS: 800/988-9833;

velovacations.com

is opened so you can do any needed maintenance with the help of master wrench Serriere. In our group, "Mr. Clean" Griffin polished his Spectrum to a luster. "Nothing is worse for a paint job than sweat!" he pronounced through a grin, his eight-year-old purple bike gleaming like a Ferrari.

But shop hours serve a much higher function than the mechanical. Stephanie and her husband Rich share experiences of several other cycling trips they've been on; brothers Chris and George Dangles, both Chicago physicians, discuss a grueling tour they did across the Arizona desert; Gutowsky and his wife Kathy let fly bad puns. This is where you get to know everyone, where you find out what brought you together.

Of course, it's also important to bring a little grease to the shop hours. Not Pedro's. Rum. Add a shot to a little water, a squeeze of lime juice and a dab of honey, and you have Ti Punch. You also have a warm vibe I remember as much as any ride at Camp Caraïb: people laughing, smiling, groaning at jokes; Livingston swearing, with a deadpan face, as someone handed him a Pringle, that he never ate one in his entire life.

THE TWIN PEAKS

Two of the most gratifying rides happen on the same day. The first isn't on Guadeloupe. It's not even on wheels, but on the paired hulls of a giant catamaran that whisks us out on a magnificent, smooth sail to the neighboring archipelago of Marie-Galante.

There's not much on Marie-Galante. Industry, as such, is fishing and growing sugarcane. But there are excellent roads, little traffic and beautiful, white-sand beaches. This is the kind of place you think of when you want to chuck it all and live the low-blood-pressure life. Or the high-heart-rate life, as we all discover during our 44-mile ride here.

The first climb leaves us all a little breathless; it's hot and windless, and later in the day than we're used to starting because the boat ride sucked up most of the morning. The hill isn't brutally pitched, just long. It takes Griffin, Serriere, another rider and me (the A pack; Livingston sits in with B to coach) 20 minutes to top out. At the apex we regroup and check out the panoramic view, the light-blue ocean meeting the puffy clouds and even lighter sky, the green sugarcane all around and, on the coast, a stretch of white sand that rings the island like salt on the rim of a margarita glass.

The route then flattens out, whipsaws in sharp bends, and



Rum, lime juice, water, honey and maintenance—must be 3 p.m. at Cycle Caraïb.



In the Caribbean, cooldowns take on a whole new meaning.

finally dive-bombs back toward the coastline with several decreasing-radius turns to negotiate at 35-40 mph. Fun and scary, in other words, and typical of the kind of riding we do the entire week. There are roads cut through endless miles of sugarcane (the sometimes-acrid smell of burning plant wafts through the air; after harvest, fields are set afire to make way for new planting), sweet little villages with old, sometimes colorful, sometimes careworn Caribbean architecture and, of course, that soft, warm sea always on the horizon.

What's not typical is the next hill. The A and B riders meet up again in a pocket-sized coastal town then, together, we assault an unrelentingly steep mile of pavement. For added pain, the last 100 yards tilt improbably upward. Serving an extra slice of humble pie, Livingston for once shows what he's really capable of, big-ringing the whole hill and stomping the "fast" group into the tarmac as he blows by. Then Vitamin K turns around, rides to the bottom and ushers every last rider to the top, giving advice and serious encouragement the entire way.

An hour later, we're chowing down on creole-stewed fish at an open-air seaside boîte. In the distance, our gleaming taxi home bobs gently. To work off lunch, we load bodies and bikes into a dinghy and row back to the cat, where we take turns doing cannonballs off the stern. Livingston gets the most splash. Someone grabs a starfish from the seafloor. Underwater, I pause to look around, noting with an inner grin the total absence of snow. ■

Former contributor Michael Frank, now on staff as BICYCLING's deputy editor, won't be enjoying any more Caribbean cycling trips.