

## Northern Lights

**Tom Stimson** went in search of the Aurora Borealis... with his unicycle

**A**t 78°13' N, Longyearbyen in Svalbard is the most northerly permanently inhabited place on earth. Equipped with a must for all Arctic expeditions – my trusty unicycle – I made for the Frozen North in search of the elusive Aurora Borealis.

Svalbard's 63,000km<sup>2</sup> archipelago, roughly the size of Ireland, is part of the Kingdom of Norway. Sixty-percent of it is covered by glaciers and permafrost prevents all trees from growing. I was travelling in January when temperatures can drop below -50°C, darkness is permanent, and polar bears prowl.

As the 'plane neared Spitsbergen, the day became a dark midnight blue, with only enough light to make out the mountains. I was staying in a former coal miner's lodge just outside the settlement. During the journey, most of my dried food had split open in my bag, covering my clothes.

My parents back in England joked about hungry polar bears sniffing their son basted in chicken powder!

I went snowmobiling (away from the settlement, you have to carry a gun to protect against polar bears), explored a beautiful ice cave, snowshoed, and even unicycled. Was it the most northerly unicycle ride in the world? I'm not sure but it made local news.

I prolonged my stay in Svalbard to try to catch sight of the Northern Lights. I waited and waited. Hours went by but still nothing. Just as I was about to give up hope, there they were: vivid green curtains of silk tumbling from the sky, rhythmically moving their way between the stars and the moon. They appeared from the mountains all around and directly above, showering down. It was astounding. I had finally seen them and it was worth it. The experience was something I will never forget.



## Down the volcano

**Dave Drinkwater** freewheeled for 32 miles in Hawaii

**T**he extinct volcano of Haleakala ('house of the sun') rises to 10,023 feet on the Island of Maui, Hawaii. A couple of years ago I signed up for an organised freewheel from near the top to Pa'ia Town near sea level. There are several small local firms doing this 38-mile descent each day. I used Maui Mountain Cruisers ([www.mauiMountaincruisers.com](http://www.mauiMountaincruisers.com)).

We were driven up to the Visitor Centre at 9,800ft in a minibus, with the bikes in a trailer. The top is an irregular plateau, a strange moonscape seven miles across and 21 in circumference. The bikes, meanwhile, were of a basic build: single freewheel, fat tyres, drum brakes front and back, wide handlebars, wide saddles. We were also allocated a motorbike crash helmet, plus cold weather protective clothing if we wanted it.

The one road up and down is shared with motor traffic but is wide and well surfaced, apart from several cattle grids. The guide rode

at the front and was in radio contact with the minibus driver behind us. When traffic built up we pulled over to let it pass. But we were told that we could exceed the speed limit – generally 15mph around the 29 hairpin bends and 30mph on the straights – so there wasn't much congestion.

We started the ride in bright sunshine. At 7,000-6,000ft we passed through the cloud layer into the eucalyptus forest. After 16 miles (one hour) we stopped at Makawo (1,600ft) at a café/shop, where we were joined by an inquisitive three-horned chameleon who was about five inches long. He liked crisps.

We freewheeled on down through the purple flowering Jacaranda trees and into the sugar cane fields. The ride was cut short at 32 miles on police advice because of road works. Apparently some riders had come to grief here a few months earlier. In our 32-mile trip we had to pedal a total of only 250 yards.



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