

ADVENTURE

● (In the photo) Keeping to traffic-free routes made for relaxed, social riding.

TIME

BIKEPACKING IS JUST FOR MACHO BLOKES? WRONG. **CASS GILBERT'S** PHOTOS FROM A FAMILY TRIP IN ECUADOR TELL A DIFFERENT STORY





I MET THE Dammers while riding through Ecuador in 2012, en route from Colombia to Peru. Mountain guides by trade, the three brothers live off-grid on an organic family farm outside Quito. There, they run unusually resourceful outward bound courses for teenagers, which include multi-week bikepacking trips.

In the interim, we'd kept in touch – and we'd all had children. So when the chance came to visit Ecuador once again, this time I travelled with my partner Nancy and my two-year-old son Sage, so they might experience this varied and unfeasibly rugged country for themselves.

In any shape or form, our first outing together would have been enjoyable enough. It came complete with dirt roads, singletrack, a 'hike a bike', and even a stint bouncing along the sleepers of a disused railroad, set to a backdrop of high altitude páramo and silhouetted volcanoes. But factor in no fewer than eight bicycles and five accompanying trailers, charged with a payload of children ranging from six months to three years old, the journey took on a different, even more memorable character. So much so that I consider this diminutive expedition, compacted into three nights, to be amongst my most enjoyable tours ever.

We packed light, aiming to stay completely off surfaced roads, riding bikes that featured an assortment of wheel sizes – 26in, fat, 29in, and 29+. We kept distances short, under 20 miles a day, and tried to harmonise riding times with baby naps. When the toddlers needed a break, we stopped and played football, or they trotted alongside us as we walked our bikes.

Despite the downpours, the occasional meltdowns and

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● **Clockwise from top left:** Matthias, Nicole and three-year-old Ayra, with their bikepacking rigs – a Specialized 29er and a Surly Krampus. Mr Fox and Sage's favourite story book came along for the ride, helping provide a sense of familiarity in our Big Agnes Copper Spur UL3 tent. Times around the camp fire were as rewarding as the riding itself. Even if the route doesn't go quite as planned... it's all part of the adventure.

the odd flipped trailer, our tour proved to be an incredible life experience for everyone, of all ages. Together, we blazed a trail of family fun through the countryside. We built roaring campfires and drank water that bubbled up from highland springs. We collected watercress and roasted it with garlic. Every moment was a chance to learn and share, from cooking outdoors, to pitching tents, to gathering firewood. We explored, we laughed, and we shared a love of bikes, riding, good company and simple living.

At the risk of sounding overly effervescent, I couldn't recommend a family bike adventure more highly, wherever it may be in the world, for however many days you may have. Call up your friends, gather the troops, and brew up a plan. I guarantee that it will warm the cockles and feed the soul.

Gear

We all pulled Chariots (thule.com), the benchmark for touring trailers. While I prefer the simplicity and weight savings of the cheaper Cougar model, the CX (which we own) features a more comfortable seat, removable window panels and improved waterproofing. Additional to their suspension, we shod them with larger-volume, two-inch tyres, to help with the rough cobblestones found in Ecuador.

This said, two-wheel trailers have a propensity to tip over on uneven terrain. A single-wheeler, like the Weehoo (rideweehoo.com), could be an option for shorter dirt road and singletrack tours, in fair weather at least. If pockets run deep, the single-wheel Tout Terrain Singletrailer (tout-terrain.com) comes complete with 200mm of suspension and ample ground clearance, making it the ultimate choice for off-road, family bikepacking adventures. ●

Cass Gilbert is a cycling journalist and world traveller. His blog is whileoutriding.com

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