

Vista Post Ride Recap

Preface

-The Vista 300 description from bikepacking.com

“The Vista 300 is a self-supported bikepacking adventure. It has some of the best singletrack, vistas, gravel, and country roads that Cherokee National forest and the surrounding areas have to offer. Spanning several mountain ranges and watersheds, this loop starts and finishes on the banks of the Hiwassee river in Reliance, Tennessee.”

-I knew this route would be challenging however I thought it was going to be challenging in that the climbs would be long, chunky and there would be lots of gravel with a little bit of fairly easy single track thrown in. I expected some downed trees and that was verbalized prior to the start.

-I did not realize how rough the Terrain would be and how much hiking I would do.

-this ride consisted of myself, Nick Breaux and PJ Terry.

-I met these two fellow dummies during last years TNGA. PJ was 16 at the time and per his parents was to ride with a fellow rider to be allowed to do such an adventure, I don't blame them being a new father myself. PJ and Nick had ridden many a long rides and were riding TNGA together. Nick had a bad fall and had to drop out in Helen (mile 95). We had been ping ponging all day and I was in Helen at this time and PJ and I continued that adventure to the finish.

-Ever since TNGA the 3 of us have stayed in contact and have ridden several long day rides and a 24hr ride together.

-we all wanted to make the GD for this years Vista but schedules would not allow for the other 2. I tried but got sick (used a bad filter, always check that your filter is working) leading up to the start and was also unable.

-my wife and I are expecting our second child in August so this would be my last multi day ride for at least a few months. We also have a 16 month (Wylie) old so fitting in training can be creative. Creative but fun, Wylie has logged many bike miles between the bike trailer, front bike seat, and most recently shotgun seat this year. He loves it and so do I. such a fun way for us to spend time together.

-2 days before our planned start, Nick found that his mtb bike frame was destroyed so last minute he decided he would give it a go on the gravel bike.

-we knew a gravel bike would be a challenge of its own as a close friend of mine, Garrett, tried this out during the GD so I had first hand knowledge of what that first half of the route would be like on such a bike. The route is so chunky, it just beats you up too much for this type of a bike and I think the route gets more challenging terrain wise as you go.

-several months ago I had asked the FB group page about a gravel bike on course. One person gave a thumbs up to it but when you ask the vets such as Grahm and Raschole, you should listen to them or at least listen to their advise when it comes to the route. Otherwise maybe don't listen to everything Raschole has to say, he has a lot to say.

-we all arrived next door to the start line the night before our depart and stayed at Kim's (route mastermind) Fireside Outpost base camp. We stayed in one of the cabins. This place is awesome and I highly recommend. There are so many outdoor adventures to explore in this area.

-<https://firesideoutpost.com>

-preride dinner at Jessica's Place and bed time.

-I couldn't sleep, I was too amped up. I think I got 2-3 hrs total, what a bummer is how I felt. I needed that rest, oh well here we go!!

-we all decided to forgo a sleep system and travel as light as possible. Besides our 24 hr ride, only Nick had experience with this style of riding.

-bikes of choice. PJ was on a very XC Scott Spark set up, Nick some kind of gravel bike set up with 42mm Pathfinders, I was on a rigid Ti Fargo with mustache bars

-our goal was to finish as close to 48 hrs as possible but definitely under 60 hrs. We knew this would be challenging as a group but also knew we could attain our goals.

Day One

-goal was to start at 6:30am, we rolled out at 7am sharp. Not bad and still a descent hour. This did mean we would likely miss Indian Boundry store for resupply at mile 96, but we weren't going to count on this anyways as it would be risky with such few resupply options up to mile 178. With the pace we wanted to push, the few other spots would be closed at the time we passed through. IB would just be bonus anyways.

-the route starts with a punch in the gut as you ride up a little used single track, Coffe Branch, with moving baby head rocks for the first 6 miles or so. We climbed at least 2k during this spand. Nick got a flat 2.7 miles in and had 2 punctures including in the sidewalk. What a way to start but somehow 4 plugs later he never flatted again. He did add extra PSI. I liked this trail and it was one of my favorites after I got warmed up. There were many trees down but only 2-3 that I had to get off the bike for. I ride Pisgah often so gnarly technical is my favorite.

-after Coffee Branch trail the miles spun off fairly fast. The terrain was perfect for a gravel bike and Nick was pushing the pace. I found a wallet half buried in the gravel and exchanged it with a church volunteer at mile 37 for us to use the spigot. I was happy to assist in getting this wallet to its owner as there was cash, social security card etc still in it. We were also thrilled to get water without having to filter.

-Tellico Plains mile 47 and first resupply. We stocked up heavy here. It was getting hot and we were very exposed to the sun in this town and section. This would likely be our last food resupply until mile 168 in Mccaysville. PJ still had the goal to make it to mile 96 Indian Boundary so he took off and said he would see us there. Nick also took off with him. It only took a few seconds for them to disappear from my site.

-I put my head phone in one ear and began the next many hours listening to podcasts and spinning up climb after climb. I always struggle to eat the first day of any multi day ride. It was hot and it was surely a struggle to eat. I drank many of my calories from Scratch powder mix and sucked down many SIS gels. The climbing just before IB was tough and I struggled from Tellico Plains to IB. The lack of sleep and heat had caught up. I had to walk sections of steep loose gravel just before IB. A bonus was the spring piped running out of the side of the mtn. So cool to refill water this way and so time efficient.

-Mile 96 Indian Boundary. I arrived at 6:33pm. It had closed 33 minutes prior, if only we started at our planned 6:30am departure. I really just wanted a coke, the caffeine sugar would have been a nice jolt. Oh well can't dwell on the what ifs. Gotta keep moving. There was running water so still no need to use a filter. The less work the better on such a journey. Nick and PJ were no where to be seen. This was a little bit of a downer as I was struggling at this point and eating was very tough. I also didn't want to slow anyone down so was glad they were feeling good and I knew I'd catch up at some point. I just had something to work through, been here before, it rarely lasts long (just feels like it does).

-Half a mile down along the lake there were familiar bikes leaning against a tree. Turns out they were having some similar struggles and hadn't been there but maybe 15 minutes before I arrived. They also missed the store being open. We chilled for another 15 or so watching people ride their bike up and down the trail and others frolicking in the water. Easy to day dream and be jealous of relaxing like these other "normal" humans during rides like this.

-Enough of the day dreaming, back to work as we now had a 9 mile climb up the sky way. This is a beautiful vista view tarmac climb that gets a little steep at times but not over bearing. It's the length of it that is tough as it takes awhile to climb. We stopped a couple times to refuel and enjoy the views. The sun began to sink midway through the climb and the temps went from hot to perfect to chilly. It was difficult to stay dressed appropriately. Jackets were put on and then quickly taken off after each stop and start. I had a wind vest that worked well but not perfect. We finally got to the end of this climb and we had a long gravel descent ahead of us so we put all our clothing back on a bombed down.

-this is we're we started to separate from Nick on chunky terrain, and would regroup many miles later. As I type this, I am in awe in Nick and what he accomplished on that bike. PJ and I took off and at one point PJ had to slam the brakes to avoid hitting a hog, what an adrenaline rush.

-between mile 120 game check station and mile 138 Coker creek welcome center there was a grueling steep and loose gravel climb that we had to hike a good amount of. At the top we all needed a break and refuel so we laid under the almost full moon (or was it a full moon?) and star lit night. Using our helmets as pillows and gazing up at the sky as planes and satellites visibly passed over head we fell asleep for maybe 20 minutes. I think PJ just sat there but Nick and I did get those precious minutes of sleep. Okay enough relaxing, it's back to work.

-mile 138 Coker Creek Welcome Center. We all needed rest at this time. There was no Coke machine which we hoped there would be but there was running water and there was a covered deck to lay our weary bodies on. There was surprisingly a lot of car traffic through here and it was late in the night. An 18 wheeler stopped right next to where we were laying. It's idling engine was very loud we were just getting ready to lay down for an hour sleep but I thought maybe we would need to move on. At last the truck departed and we got our hour of sleep.

-packed up and refilled we headed out towards Buckbald. Buckbald is a two or so mile out and back climb with 360° views. Just before it however there was some single track that starts by pitching straight up and was very rocky and technical. On another day maybe we could've ridden it but not tonight with our bikes fully loaded and us needing to persevere ourselves. So we began our hike a bike which seemed like it was going to be bad, but it really wasn't that bad and did not last that long as we reached the top fairly fast. We then bombed down This

trail which I found very fun, was technical in spots and I probably should have walked versus ridden some of these sections. This trail was a challenge for the gravel bike and we knew Nick would take a bit to get through this section. Just after this trail is the climb to Buckbald so PJ and I continued on, we figured Nick would catch us at some point on the gravel. PJ and I each enjoyed a honey bun at the very top as we looked out at the star glazed sky while sitting and enjoying not moving. Honey bun down and water swigged, it was time to keep moving. We passed Nick as we descended and he was close to Everesting the Climb.

-at this point riding was becoming a struggle for all of us as we were all very tired and the climbs seemed like they were going on forever. They were becoming very long, very steep, and the gravel was becoming very loose and chunky. We started up one of the chunky gravel climbs heading to McCaysville and soon into the climb we all had to lay down and rest a bit. we ate, drank and slept for maybe 15 to 20 minutes. At this point it was early morning and the sun was starting to show itself. We had 1.5 hrs of total sleep.

-8am at mile 164 Vicks tire shop and store. This was a monumental spot for me as, Garrett, who I mentioned earlier riding on his gravel bike for the grand depart made it to this location before deciding his body could not take the pounding any longer. I sat on the half broke plastic chair where I saw Garrett sitting when I picked him up and took a picture of the Vic's sign and texted it over to him. This lifted my spirits a bit, maybe because I knew that someone else had felt the pain I was feeling right now. Garret and I exchanged some texts before making our way to McCaysville.

-mile 178 Mccaysville. I think it was around 9 AM at this point it's a small town with not a lot but there are several restaurants in a very small radius. I was hungry for food for the first time the entire ride, and this made me so happy. It took us a minute to find something that was open but alas Katz's deli was and oh wow was it amazing. I doubt I would say this place is amazing in any other scenario but at this point in time it was amazing. Breakfast down, coke down, coffe down, water refilled, restrooms used. We were feeling happy and off we go to Ducktown.

-miles 46 to 178 were a bit of a struggle but I was having fun now. I know this next section from Ducktown to around mile 220 from riding the Cohutta Cat bikepack route (opposite direction) in years past And I was excited to see some terrain that I recognized.

-mile 186 Brushy creek single track. What a blast I had on this section this section is flowy single track. Spirits were high and I was craving real food and eating a lot of it. After the (sad face) burned down white water center we continued on some much steeper and challenging single track. This would be some fun trails on any other day but these trails were a bit challenging with how technical they are for a loaded bike and the amount of torque needed to clear many sections so we hiked much of it. To add to there were many very large trees down. The kind that involved fishing your bike through and over, we spent a lot of time and calories doing this. Up to this point we hardly had seen a down tree beside the very first 6 miles.

-we eventually made our way to mile 200, thunder rock campground, refilled water and off we went through some super fun rolling gravel roads. Really fast descents that jettied you halfway up the next climb. We were rolling and rolling fast. So fast we thought we could make it to Jessica's Place at mile 246 for a much deserved burger before 10pm close. We were wrong. The sylco trail ruined our burger dreams.

-mile 214 f'ing Sylco f'ing trail. This trail f'ing blows. "Love it or hate it" they say and as described on RWGPS app. I have ridden this trail twice before on the Cohutta cat adventure (it wasn't fun but it wasn't bad. I never "loved it" but I also didn't f'ing hate it, it was what it was. Tough, rugged, trees down everywhere, overgrown, off/on the bike constantly, whatever.) Where is that cursing Giraffe when you need him? The forest has almost totally reclaimed this trail. I'm itching from poison ivy as I type. We got lost several times and had to use our phone apps to figure out how to get through. 3 hrs or so later and missed burgers at Jessica's place we were through it.

-straight rollers and then fast tarmac from 218 to mile 228 Ocoee Dam Deli, Win!! We stunk so bad. This place was packed at 8pm with all the "normal people" enjoying dinner after their lake and river fun. We decided we would order to go and eat outside so we wouldn't stink up the place but oh that AC felt so good. "Never mind miss hostess, we would like a table please."

-big supper (as they say in the south) down and to go cheese steaks wrapped up, we were off to The town of Benton.

We wanted to make it to Kim's mini house, as we knew it was a welcomed spot for riders to sleep on her porch. This section of road to Benton was beautiful. The sun was setting and we turned our lights on. We all commented after how awesome the drivers were through here. They must have been fellow cyclist or used to seeing bikes on the road. How I wish this was the norm. Too often we are dangerously passed because we are such a 10 second inconvenience (insert another sad face, humanity).

-10 pm or so at mile 235 in Benton. Not much here but oh so many choices at the same time. 24 hr gas station, dollar general, IGA and sonic. We went to dollar general or IGA, I can't remember. What I do remember is browsing the store isles and nothing looked appealing. We needed to stock up as we would not encounter another resupply (not one that would be open) until the finish. I still had my cheese steak sandwich, around 2k

calories of scratch and gels so didn't need a ton. I finally spotted one box of pop tarts. That seemed easy, lots of calories and easy to eat. 8 pop tarts packed, Gatorade and water refilled, coke and Red Bull drank and off we went to Kim's place for some much needed rest.

-Mile 246 Kim's porch. Spigot used, jackets on and heads rested on comfy helmet pillows, we fell asleep instantly. The plan was to sleep an hour but no one set an alarm. I awoke to a mesquite buzzing me an hour later and realized how cold I was. Well there was our hour. "Guys let's go, it's been an hour". Off we went.

-1am we would have a fairly flat section for the next 10-15 miles heading back to the forestry mtns. This was a nice break but interesting road section. It looked like a bunch of drug dealers and anything else your imagination can take you after riding for so long and sleeping so little. Lots of dog chases later and we were at the base of our next climb. We had 3 pretty monstrous climbs left, 65 miles total and 7k of climbing remained.

-this first climb of the day was a mind game. It starts with smooth nice grade gravel, I even said "I'll take this all day." It soon pitched upwards of 14% grade and is so loose. We were walking before we knew it, if you call what we were doing walking. It felt like marbles were under our feet. We were finally able to ride the remaining quarter or so of this climb as it mellowed just enough to ride. It was a lot of work but we finally came to a paved section, "win" that took us to a T in the road. Without looking at the route on our bike computers we see the pavement continues left and right, YES MORE PAVEMENT!!! PJ then says something like "oh shit" and I instantly knew what he was about to say next. "We go straight". Straight up a Rocky technical steep single track in the middle of the night on tired legs. Off to hiking we go. On a normal day this section would be rad, these trails are really good but tonight and in these conditions I wanted the cursing giraffe by my side for some needed laughter. These trails went on for what felt like eternity and I swear we just kept doing the same trail in a circle. On the bike, off the bike repeat repeat repeat. We knew we would separate a good amount from Nick in this section. Downed tree after Downed tree to add to it. PJ and I finally make it to a campground. I'm so tired and have not been eating and have been out of water for a bit. I couldn't make words. I said something like "take me to water" and thankfully PJ lead us to a restroom with running water. I took my bottle out of its harness, threw a mouthful of peanuts in my mouth, unscrewed the lid from the bottle, drank the last sip that I couldn't squeeze into my mouth with the lid still on, laid down on the concrete without refilling water and fell asleep. PJ followed suit in similar fashion. An hour later I awoke to bugs biting me. We ate, refilled water and then realized there was no way Nick knew where we were. Thankfully him and PJ had service and we found out Nick was close by and had just finished this single track section, we still had about a mile to go. We knew we could catch up fairly quick as he wasn't far up the road and he would need to move slower than us with how chunky the gravel descents were. we caught Nick heading to our third and final big climb. This climb was not bad, it just lasted forever, 9 miles I think.

-mile 294 and it's time to bomb down to our last single track and then pretty flat and easy spin to the finish. We thought we would fly to the end, we were wrong of course as we spent the next 5 miles on Smith Mtn trail. This looks like a mtb trail but apparently only used by moto riders. It was interesting is how I would kindly describe this trail. It could be a fun trail but there is so much over growth it felt like the trees, plants and thorn bushes were playing an overly aggressive game of tag. Just non stop repeated slaps to the face while balancing on a narrow trail ledge with little room for error or you would roll off the side of the hill. The thorn brushes peeling the skin off our arms. Not near as bad as f'ing Sylco trail but pretty damn bad. Gotta look for the positives though and there was a spring to gather water from at the end of it.

-mile 300 to the finish, not much to mention here. Pretty fast besides the "go off route into a bunch of overgrown bushes and poison ivy just because, even though there is a perfectly good gravel road running parallel". Again find the positives, we did pass a section of the river and I soaked my body in it which was amazing.

-mile 316 FINISHED. My computer read 316 miles and 40k of elevation. Strava said it was almost 41k of elevation. RWGPS says it's 34k. Whatever each ones says, it's a lot.

-Completed in 55.5 hrs