

Chicago Bike Activist “Pretires” to Ecuador Invites Us Along for the Ride

By Michael Burton

You sold your car long ago. You launched a monthly activist bike ride that routinely draws over 1,000 cyclists. You’re the co-owner a bar that's become the crossroads of the Chicago cycling movement. And, you’re widely recognized as Chicago’s foremost Daniel Burnham impersonator as you advocate for the depaving of Lake Shore Drive.

Now, you’ve turned 60 and decided it's time to “pretire”. Where do you go?

Well, if you're Jim Redd, you move to a mountain town on the equator where there are no parking lots, of course! And you invite your Chicago cycling friends to come enjoy the hospitality at your newly-purchased inn and take bike trips among the surrounding hills.

In June, longtime Chicago Critical Mass agitator and Handlebar co-owner Jim Redd and his wife Marshia Jackson will become the proprietors of a small inn called *La Posada del Arte y Bicicleta* in the picturesque mountain town of Baños, Ecuador.

Redd and Jackson first fell in love with Baños on a vacation in 2001. “We went to Ecuador for a week and used Baños as a base for bike rides in the surrounding Andean mountains and jungle,” recalls Redd. “We were awed by the rugged beauty of the area, the cultural diversity, and friendliness of the local people. And as we relaxed at the end of each day’s ride in the town’s soothing volcanic hot springs, which give Baños its name, we felt like we had found paradise.”

Similar to German explorer Alexander Von Humboldt, who discovered the region’s wonders in 1801, Redd was compelled to share the fruit of his South American adventures. But instead of writing thirty scientific tomes as did Humboldt on his Andean travels, Redd decided on a more direct approach.

Last year, Redd and Jackson launched an adventure travel company called Tread Lightly Tours and in January of this year, they led a group of six Chicago cyclists on a weeklong inaugural trip to the Baños area. Days were spent cycling down the sides of 10,000 foot volcanoes and evenings relaxing in the hot springs and hanging out at open air restaurants and cantinas. “Our guests were as enchanted with the beautiful countryside and laid back attitude of the town as we were,” says Redd.

“About halfway through the trip we made an amazing discovery. The town of Baños was tearing up many of its streets to take space away from cars and give it to pedestrians. The roads around the town square were being narrowed from three lanes to one. We were so excited that the city was prioritizing the needs of people over cars that we went straight to cityhall to thank the mayor. He happened to be going on his weekly radio show when we visited him and he invited us to address the town.”

Later on in the week, Redd and Jackson found out that the small hotel that served as their base for the tour was on the market. After staying on in the town for a few weeks after the tour, they decided to buy the 11-room stone structure, which has balconies overlooking the town’s waterfall and is a short walk from the hot baths complex.

“We’ve put our Chicago house on the market and our offer has been accepted for *La Posada*,” says Marshia Jackson. “We are very excited about living in Baños and playing host to Chicagoans and travelers from all over the globe. Besides running the hotel, we’ll also lead adventure bike trips around Baños and other parts of Ecuador.”

And while Redd now has a one-way ticket to Ecuador and prepares to embark on a new life adventure, he can’t help but feeling bittersweet about leaving Chicago behind.

“I’ll miss all my friends in Chicago,” reflects Redd. “I feel proud to have helped get Critical Mass rides rolling here. Just as the monthly rides have inspired countless Chicagoans to take up urban cycling, I’m hoping that bringing folks down to Baños will show them what’s possible when people decide a city should be designed for people first, not cars. Heck, I don’t think this town even needs a Critical Mass!”

For more information on Jim’s adventures, Baños and biking in Ecuador see www.posadadelarte.com.