



# OUT OF THE SADDLE

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## Bitter Truths from Sugar Island

**M**y loaner Honda dirt bike buzzes underneath me as I navigate through gray loamy soil that had been coral reefs during the Pleistocene age and head into a field of towering sugar cane along the eastern coastline of Barbados. Back when the British started plantations in 1640, everyone knew Barbados as Sugar Island. Most, or maybe all the cane surrounding me on this ride will become table sugar, some might become molasses, and a smidgeon of it might be distilled into rum.

I'm doing my best to stay clear of the gray mud puddles, which means I can't think about industrial sugar cane processing. I'm a rookie dirt biker and I need to focus. My head knows that I should power through the puddles with a twist of the throttle and let a little rooster tail shoot up behind me, but I can't make my body obey. My hand reaches for the security of the clutch, gently checking my speed.

My dreadlocked guide, Learie Carasco of Trail Riders Barbados, reminds me that I'm on a trail bike, not my G 650 GS. "The clutch is only for shifting!" He's nice about it—I am his guest—but I know he's worried I might burn it up. Motorcycle parts can't be cheap or found easily on this ham hock-shaped island. The closest mainland, Venezuela, is

about 650 miles west and, with its collapsing economy, I doubt Learie sources parts from there.

Just thinking about damaging his bike makes my riding worse. I bog down once, trying to avoid a sloppy puddle in a truck's tire rut and end up stuck in an overgrown shoulder. Half a mile later I dump the bike because I should have throttled up but chickened out. Again.

Learie cheerfully reminds me to follow his line, which has always been my intention, I promise it has. He hits the throttle as his bike fishtails under him and I'm sure he's loving every slippery minute of it. I want to love it too!

At last we're out of the sugar cane and Learie stops so I can watch the waves of the on-rushing Atlantic about a football field away and catch my breath. After a helpful coaching session of my performance on the cane field segment of our ride, he asks if I want to climb a hill for a better view of the scenery, pointing to a narrow goat trail.

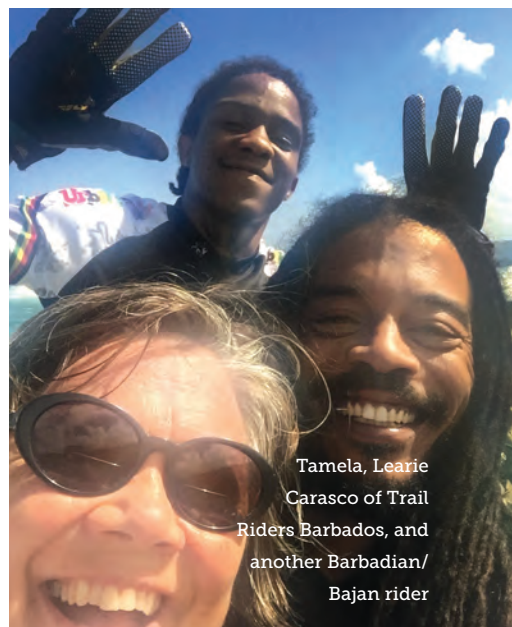
Dry land! I've got this, Learie!

I'm sure he didn't expect me to climb very well after my performance in the fields, and I'm relieved when he celebrates my achievement. "That was aggressive!"

A younger man pulls up behind us and gets off his bike so the three of us can pose for a selfie—a white woman with two black men on dirt bikes with the Atlantic over our shoulders. The image sticks with me as I put my helmet back on and head back to home base.

Later, after we turn the bikes over to the next group and rest in the shade, I ask Learie about his life on the island, assuming he has grown up there. Turns out he's lived in several places around the world, including the States, where he went to college. There's a cheery self-confidence in Learie that encourages me to take a deep breath and ask if he'd mind telling me the difference between being a black man in Barbados and in America.

There is no pregnant pause. Learie's happy to talk about it. He says he's given it a lot of thought, as a matter of fact. "Barbados is a



Tamela, Learie Carasco of Trail Riders Barbados, and another Barbadian/Bajan rider

black country. Our teachers are black, the cops are black, our representatives are black. Our Governor-General is a black woman. It's very different in the States. American authorities are white. That changes everything."

What would America feel like to me, a middle-aged white woman, if our teachers, police, and government officials more accurately reflected the diversity of her citizens? Based on my experience in Barbados, I think I'd be happier in that America.

This America taught me to be afraid of black men—sometimes overtly, and at other times so subtly that I didn't even recognize that fear was guiding my decisions. For example, in the early '80s, I wanted to go to an Earth, Wind & Fire concert until someone said, "You'll be the only white person there." Nothing more needed to be said; I got the subtext.

I'll always regret missing that concert. I'm sure there have been hundreds of experiences and relationships I've been deprived of because my racial upbringing held me back.

Look, I don't have any prescriptions for how we transform our country into one where everyone feels accepted in their own skin and with the skin of others around them. I believe that we can all play a role in that transformation, so for my part, I'm holding myself accountable for my acquired biases and I'm coming clean about the ways in which they've guided me in the past. It's the least I can do.

Check out Tamela's 2021 motorcycle tours and retreats at [www.TamelaRich.com/upcoming-tours](http://www.TamelaRich.com/upcoming-tours).



After a few hours of learning how to ride in sugar cane fields, Tamela made it safely back to Trail Riders Barbados' base camp, where she chatted up the friendly local Barbadian/Bajan riders.