

GO PRO

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Images: GFNY Cozumel

White sands, Sinatra and side winds. Welcome to the 10th birthday of GFNY Cozumel. But just what makes GFNY stand out from the gran fondo crowd? We venture to Mexico to find out...

3.2k
Number of riders taking on GFNY Cozumel



GFNY Cozumel was first raced in 2013, not long after the debut Gran Fondo New York, or GFNY for short, was launched by Uli and Lidia Fluhme in 2011. Influenced by major marathon and triathlon events, the former bankers have since expanded the series – whose tagline is ‘Be a pro for a day’ – across the globe using a franchise model, with 30 races in 2024 from Brazil to Bali, Maryland to Malaysia, and European outings in Sweden and France, with seven events in the latter allowing riders to experience the Tour de France icons Alpe d’Huez, the Tourmalet, Croix de Fer and more on closed or traffic-managed tarmac.

Above Powered by refried beans, Matt starts the 160km race near the front

Below Riders wear GFNY jerseys to heighten the ‘pro for a day’ feel

Held in May each year is the showpiece GFNY World Championship in New York City, the organisers somehow hosting the start line on one of the world’s busiest structures, the George Washington Bridge, and

fully closing it to cars. New for 2024, the event will host a UCI 1.2 professional race, the Gran Premio New York City, at the same time and day as the amateur event, something that’s common in running and triathlon but very rare in cycling.

“This new format of pros and amateurs racing together aims to revolutionise cycling where both traditionally race in separate events,” Uli explains. “Having the pros start just minutes ahead of the amateurs will bring the racing fans closer to their heroes and elevate the event experience for all riders, spectators and sponsors.” GFNY expect 180 pros from 25 teams for the Gran Premio, with up to 5,000 entrants for the mass-participation race.

The Fluhmes discovered gran fondos in late-1990s Italy, where the races originated back in the early seventies, and which differ to UK sportives by adding a competitive element for anyone seeking it. With the Tour of Cambridgeshire having held its final edition in 2023, gran fondos are few and far between in the UK: July’s Gran Fondo Isle of Man is the sole UK qualifier for the 2024 UCI World Series.

Despite GFNY pitching to multiple cities, there’s still a UK-shaped hole on the GFNY calendar, with traffic management and reluctant councils just two of the challenges preventing the GFNY model from establishing roots here. “But there’s nothing like a gran fondo,” Uli, who still races much of the GFNY series, explains at the Cozumel expo. “They’re races for all-comers, from beginners to professionals, all together on the same roads in a competitive race for some and a personal challenge for others.”

The demon barbers and singing founding fathers might be absent, but race director Shaun Gad’s claim that GFNY is ‘the Broadway of cycling events’ is ringing true as I trundle my bike to the start line of GFNY Cozumel at 5am on a moonlit Mexican morning. The bright lights and booming sounds of the pre-race festivities have acted as a beacon to the race HQ, where the most committed racers are already occupying the corrals in a bid to get the best spot before the 7am starting horn. Given GFNY’s New York heritage, Big Apple-themed songs from Jay-Z and Sinatra fill the airways instead of the latest Latino pop, the pre-event build-up unlike any cycling event I’ve experienced and closer to the razzmatazz of an Ironman triathlon... minus the compression wear.

The NYC soundtrack is replaced by AC/DC as 7am nears, Brian Johnson’s howling surely catapulting anyone within a 10-block radius out of their Sunday morning slumber. Facing me and 3,200 other racers is 80 or 160km of cycling over a two-lap course on the tropical Mexican island. The Caribbean sun supplants the vast artificial lights focused on the corrals. *Cinco, cuatro, tres, dos, uno... vamos, vamos!*

My only previous venture to Mexico was a day in Tijuana, a parade of pharmacies and seedy bars across the border from San Diego, which ended with an hour-long grilling at US customs under a vast George W. Bush

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portrait as I’d forgotten part of my visa. It’s taken me 15 years to come back, my weekly ‘Mexican’ theme nights of fajitas and arthouse wrestling documentary *Nacho Libre* with the kids being my closest brush with the land of mariachi, mole and Mayan temples.

A direct 10hr British Airways flight takes me from Gatwick to Cancun airport, where buses depart for the Playa del Carmen ferry stop on the Riviera Maya. The colour-burst of dense jungle, vibrant homestead exteriors and the turquoise Caribbean Sea make the dark and dank UK November days a swiftly diminished memory.

A 19km ferry journey from the Mexican mainland takes me to the island of Cozumel, Mexico’s largest inhabited island, but one that largely consists of untouched mangrove forests and swamps. It’s a tropical haven of wildlife, white sands and coral reefs, the crystalline water producing one of the world’s great diving locations while its deep-water harbour makes it a major cruise ship destination. Cozumel is also an endurance sports paradise, with the long-established Ironman Cozumel held on the weekend following GFNY Cozumel in 2023 and triathletes already out in force on aerobars on the island’s highway.

Above The lime green army awaits the starter’s horn at 7am on race day





20
Kilometres, the length of the 'King of the Wind' section



Top The eastern shore offers an unbroken stretch of white sands

Above Matt looks for someone to draft on the 'King of the Wind' part

Mixing competition with personal challenges in front of us is the annual GFNY Kids event, which sees three to 13-year-olds taking on a host of distances from 270m to 5km in Cozumel's lively main town of San Miguel. Adult entrants to Sunday's main event, meanwhile, get to do a Saturday loop of the island with the charismatic 1984 Olympic Games' track cycling star, Nelson Vails, who still rides with the swagger of someone with an Olympic silver medal in their pocket.

Cut to race morning and, as someone who sits in Uli's 'personal challenge' category, a spot in the first corral is wasted on me. I instead sit on a bench with a plate of muffins in the vast outdoor expo area. My default riding mode in the UK is slowly and by myself, so this annual immersion into the frenetic nature and tactics of a gran fondo alongside 3,200 other racers is a wake-up call more powerful than the expo's instant coffee brew. It's not unwelcome, however, swiftly providing a re-education on echelons and pacelines, plus the importance of drafting and communication amongst the racers bedecked in the mandatory GFNY jerseys.

The racing is decidedly cooperative once we're on the smooth tarmac of the Carr. Costera Sur. It runs alongside the island's main and only highway and, at 50km in length, stands as one of the world's great unbroken bike paths. Sticking with Shaun's Broadway analogy, the Mexican cycling hand gestures even have a jazz hands flourish, while understanding the shouts of derecha (right) and izquierda (left) is belated proof that

my 1,574-day Spanish streak on Duolingo is paying off. *Muy bueno!* Just one pantomime villain goes against this community ethos, brushing my shoulder as he dodges between miniscule gaps in the peloton that aren't there. The next time I see him he's sitting in a bush stage left. What's Spanish for karma? (It's *karma*).

The ocean-hugging route heads south towards the Punta Sur Eco Beach Park, where I was a day ago visiting the protected lagoons, mangrove swamps and a Mayan ruin, while keeping a keen eye out for the American crocodiles that, local whispers suggest, were left here by a Hollywood film crew in the 1960s and have since flourished.

The Rasta Bar at Cozumel's southern tip marks the start of the 'King of the Wind' portion, a timed 20km section on Cozumel's windswept and undeveloped eastern shore, with only the odd shack selling coconuts breaking the continuous view of the Caribbean sands



"The aroma of chargrilled chicken from the taquerías is divine, the impact on my mental resolve less so"

Above San Miguel town has enough charm if you tire of the Caribbean beaches and sea

and sea. Tagging onto a bunch here is imperative for shielding from the westerly winds, which I manage on this first lap, but still my speed instantly drops from 30 to 25km/h. We reach the island's highest point, a mighty 15m above sea-level, the flat, freewheel-adverse course making me regret my stubborn adversity to indoor cycling in prep for events (there's just 431m of elevation gain over the 160km).

It's all a big change from my last foreign gran fondo, the hill-strewn Il Lombardia in Italy, in autumn 2022, which was so cold and wet that my fingers couldn't untie my bike shoes at the finish. I experience rain here too, though this time it's welcome: a refreshing aquatic dousing from the Mayan gods just as the thermometer nudges over 25°C and the humidity levels ramp up.

A sharp left turn takes us back towards San Miguel, the 16km coast-to-coast section becoming one of my favourite parts of the course, an insight into the everyday world of Cozumel away from the coastline. The aroma of chargrilled chicken from the taquerías is divine, the impact on my mental resolve less so, so I venture to my first feed station of the day at the 80km mark, where quartered limes are handed out like half-time football oranges. Asado chicken sadly isn't.

The serene plotline changes after this intermission. The 80km riders have left us for their post-race tacos and the field has thinned out considerably. I'm now largely alone and without the benefits of drafting, but at least I can admire the scenery without worrying about crashing into any rear wheels. Another feed station venture and citrus hit is needed in prep for the

BEST OF GFNY 2024

More GFNY options to stir your pro ambitions this season



GFNY World Championship NYC 19 May 2024

The biggie, a 137km New York ride that begins on George Washington Bridge connecting Manhattan and New Jersey, and heads north of the city up to Rockland County. A UCI 1.2 pro race will start just before the 5,000 amateur riders in 2024.



GFNY La Vaujany Alpe d'Huez 16 June 2024

Both 61 and 152km courses are on offer here, but both tackle the famous 21 hairpins of Tour de France staple Alpe d'Huez (and the 20km descent that follows it) in south-eastern France. The 15km climb of Col de la Morte also faces the long-distance riders.



GFNY Uppsala 24 August 2024

Lovely Uppsala, just north of Stockholm, hosts this 79 or 134km outing in Sweden. And a deceptively hilly one it is, too, with 1,500m of climbing over the long-course loop to the north of the city.



3:40

Overall split of 160km race winner Flavio de Luna



Above The leaders complete their first lap, with Mexican Flavio de Luna (90) taking the race win

Left Cameraderie and teamwork were on display throughout GFNY Cozumel 2023

Below Locals look after editor Matt's holiday wardrobe during Cozumel's race day



second assault on the King of the Wind section. It's lonely the second time around, my average speed and posture fading faster than *Diana the Musical's* short-lived run on Broadway.

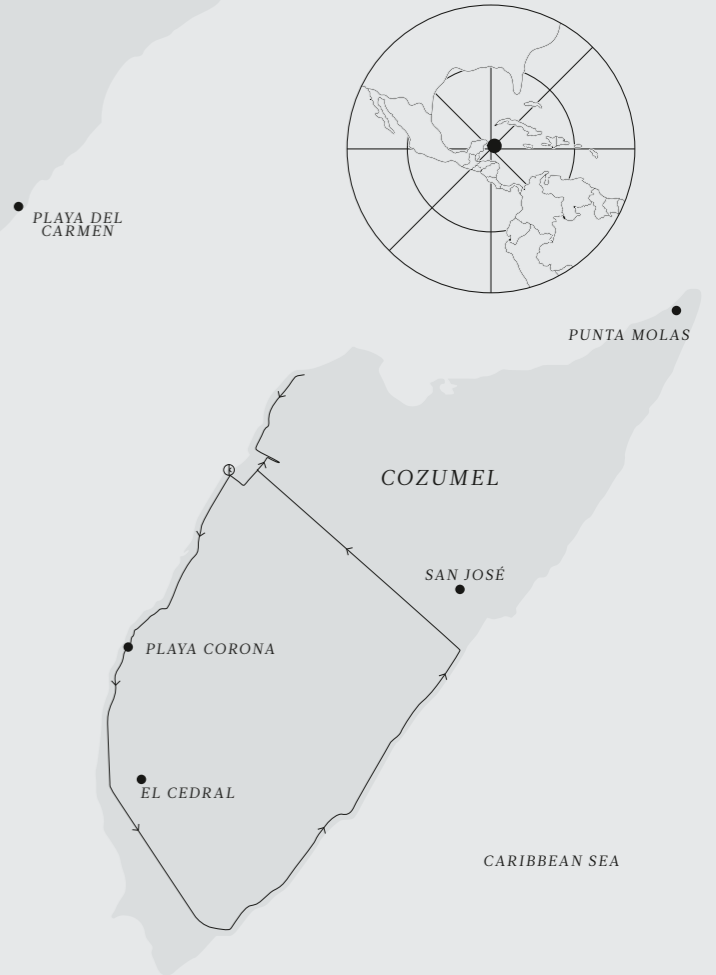
My second attempt at the 'King of the Wind' clocks in at an hour, 10mins slower than the first pass due to my flagging fitness and lack of drafting. The heat and humidity are also cranking up, the unfamiliar contact points of my borrowed bike becoming more unfamiliar as the metres tick by. Having spent the race's build-up immersing myself in one of the world's great cuisines, I've set myself a manageable sub-6hr target for the 160km but I'm now cutting it fine. I belatedly re-enter race mode and begin a game of cat and mouse (or *gato y ratón*) with a Mexican cyclist as we weave through the streets of Sao Miguel. Cozumel's airport is skirted before the finishing chute brings the curtain down on today's racing, my rival dropping me with metres to go.

I cross the line after 6:07hrs in the saddle, having rarely exited that perch, placing a relatively successful 689th out of 810 long-distance starters (yes, all things are relative). Unlike at Il Lombardia, the finishing gantry isn't already being packed away by the time I cross the line, and the fiesta's just getting started. Local bands are in full swing, the awards presentation is taking place and plenty are taking advantage of the massages on offer. No-one, however, is paid enough to put their hands on my sweaty and salty limbs, so I instead gobble a plate of spicy chicken and slurp a bottle of the ubiquitous Dos Equis lager.

A siesta and some quality time with the Gulf of Mexico's tropical shoals follows, before a raucous 10th birthday party for GFNY Cozumel at the Senor Frog's bar runs into the early hours. Mountains of tacos, fried chicken and nachos are piled higher than any hills we've faced on the bike course today, while high-quality tequila that you sip and yards of salty margaritas that you certainly don't are consumed by thirsty riders. It's hard to think of anywhere else I'd rather be, especially in November. Just like Broadway? Nah, it's more rewarding than that. [plus](#)



MEXICO



GFNY COZUMEL

How to enter Cozumel in 2024, plus where to stay, eat and explore

Key dates

The 11th GFNY Cozumel event takes place on Sunday 10 November 2024. Entry starts at \$150 (around £118) at [gfny.com](#), which includes the GFNY jersey for race day. Ironman Cozumel is on 24 November.

Where to stay

We jammily stayed at the opulent InterContinental Presidente Hotel Cozumel Resort Spa ([ihg.com](#)), with its two swimming pools, four restaurants and own private white sand beach. The pre-event ride with the pros starts here and a bike mechanic service is also available. Prices

start at £264 for a double room. The Westin Cozumel and Casa Mexicana are closer to San Miguel town.

How to get there

We flew with British Airways from London to Gatwick to Cancún International Airport (10hrs). Half hourly buses depart here for Playa del Carmen (60mins), where regular ferries (45mins) run to the island of Cozumel.

Where to eat

Away from the hotel, Cozumel's oldest Mexican restaurant, La Mission ([restaurantlamissioncozumel.com](#)) in

downtown, comes highly recommended for its Combinación Mexicana plate of quesadilla, tamale, fajita, tostada, enchilada and much more.

Key sights

The Punta Sur Eco Beach Park (£16 for the day) has a wealth of wildlife within its protected mangrove forests and islet, as well as the aptly-named Playa El Cielo (heaven) beach. Take your pick from any of the rugged east coast beaches for solitude or Playa Palancar for more sheltered (and free) west coast sands.