

SWITCH GEARS

▼“PANAMA,” A TRAIL WITH BIG jumps, drops, climbs and volunteer-built woodwork, is one of four double black diamonds at Virginia Key North Point Trails. Much like on ski slopes, the difficulty of trails is marked from easiest to hardest by a green circle, blue square, black diamond and double black diamond.

If you type “**Virginia Key**” in YouTube, you may be surprised to see the search engine autofill the phrase “mountain biking.” This search will bring you pages of rider videos, 90% of which start with some variation of “you’ll never believe there’s a **mountain bike park** on the beach in Florida.” After 11 years, this gem isn’t so hidden anymore. But the story is longer than that punch line. And like any good one, it features **action sports**, local legends, booze, tycoons, porn and a happy ending.

words_kylea henseler. photo & design_sydney burnett.

If Miami-Dade public schools didn’t have President’s Day off, then the amount of children I saw as I rode up to the Virginia Key North Point Trails on Feb. 21 would warrant a quick call to a truancy officer. But I’m pretty sure they did, and this park, a bridge away from the mainland, has become a hotspot for families and riders of all levels.

One could drive to the trails and pay \$8 for parking, the only cash you’d have to shell out all day, but I don’t have a car so across the Rickenbacker I rode. After turning left off the main road, I biked through Virginia Key Beach Park, the site of the first beach to officially be designated for Black residents following a protest in 1945. Closer to the trails I passed the Virginia Key Outdoor Center

(where bike rentals cost around \$35), in time to see a mixed-age group of kayakers head to a put-in point across the street that a guide calls “Jimbo’s Lagoon.” More on Jimbo later.

The mountain bike park itself sits on 50 acres of land at the northernmost tip of Virginia Key, right behind a sewage plant. This used to be a dumping ground for dirt, wood and public works waste.

But after five years of lobbying, “Frenchy,” president of the Virginia Key Bicycle Club, along with partners John Voss, the club’s treasurer, and Mary Jane Mark, president of Mack Cycle, got the city to hand it over in 2010. By February of the next year the first four miles of trail were open. In those months before opening, Frenchy said, he was at the trails 10 hours per day, seven days a week.



Now Frenchy, real name Bernard Rivier, is fondly described by Outdoor Center owner Esther Alonso-Luft as “a living cartoon.” He practiced cyclocross back in France, a close cousin of mountain biking, and moved to Miami in the 1980s to play rock music. He was here when the local mountain bike community started to form in the 1990’s, and he worked at Oleta State Park for 17 years, building 15 miles of trails, before starting work on Virginia Key.

The park is up over nine miles of trails now, and Frenchy’s shooting to hit 11. In as many years, the spot has come a long way. Trails, all named after classic rock songs, wind around and over each other and are accompanied by features like jumps, teeter totters, drops and woodwork, all built by volunteers in the bike club. Frenchy is there every Saturday and Sunday with whoever wants to come, marking out new trails and maintaining old ones.

“It’s all sh*t that comes out of my head,” Frenchy said of the park features. Frankly, it’s the kind of sh*t I can’t believe is free. There’s tons of woodwork on the trails, with some comparable to what I’ve seen at pricey downhill mountain bike destinations in New Hampshire. “It’s funny,” said local rider Nate Brown, “because it’s actually more developed than places like where I’m from,” (Maine originally).

There’s also a whole area dedicated to practice drops, and a new set of dirt jumps that Alonso-Luft said will likely be responsible for a number of her rental bikes coming back beat up.

Alonso-Luft is a bit of a badass herself, and she can tell you the whole story of the land the trails and Outdoor Center rest on.

VIRGINIA KEY NORTH POINT TRAILS

VIRGINIA KEY OUTDOOR CENTER - KAYAK PADDLEBOARD AND BIKE CENTER

3801 Rickenbacker Cswy
Arthur Lamb Jr Rd.
Miami, FL 33149

Scuba diving was her hobby, until an ear injury she didn’t realize she sustained kickboxing became more serious while she was trying to clear her ears underwater on a dive trip. Unable to continue with scuba, she turned to kayaking, fell into planning trips for paddlers and, eventually, opened up the center.

In the six years she’s been in business, Alonso-Luft said, her fleet of bikes has grown from 20 to 60. At any given time, a number of them are broken.

“It’s an opportunity to bring people into a sport that becomes a lifetime passion,” she said. “You go through the pain of having to see your bikes get pretty beaten up, but you turn around and we’ve seen so many of our customers have just become avid mountain bikers.”

It’s been “breathtaking,” she said, to watch the park and outdoor community in Virginia Key grow. The island has a long history, she tells me, and it’s the last remaining bit of what she calls “Old Florida” in Miami.

When Alonso-Luft was growing up, the area the trails now inhabit was known as the “Flats.” Filled in with dried and cracking dredge from Port Miami, it was a popular destination for four wheeling and bonfires. Slowly, the trees grew in.

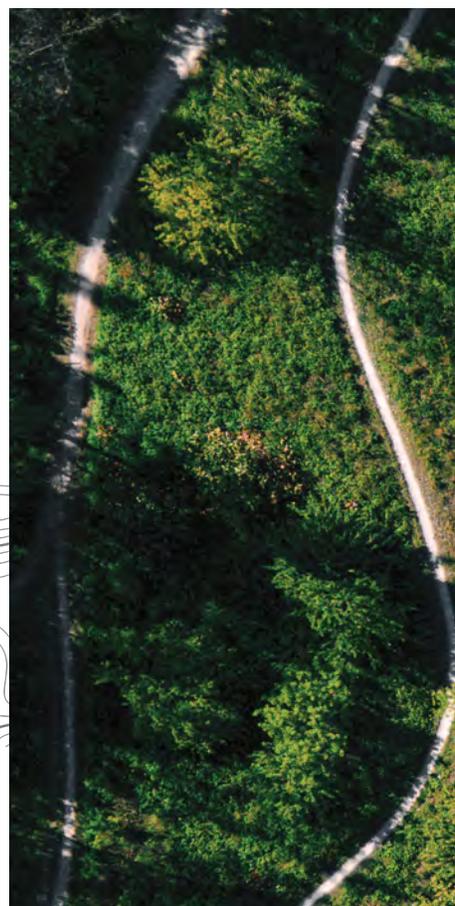
Across the strait, development on Fisher Island revved throughout the second half of the 20th century. You can still see the island that boasts the nation’s wealthiest ZIP code from a few clearings at the park— it’s close enough that I could count the windows on the condominiums across the strait. Virginia Key may have escaped the same fate, Frenchy said, because of the sewage plant next door. Nobody wants to walk



► **WHETHER YOU ARE A BEGINNER** or advanced rider, Virginia Key North Point Trails is a great place to work on your biking skills. Only a 15 minute drive from Coral Gables, this bike park has something for riders of all levels with easier paths and more technical trails that have a variety of wooden features.

STAFF TIP

Download the MTB Project app for an interactive map of the park along with other Florida trails.





◀ “VOLUNTEER BUILT, RIDER Supported,” is the message posted on a shipping container that riders see as they finish a lap of the park. All trails are built and maintained by members of the Virginia Key Bicycle Club, whose \$30-per-year dues cover the cost of trail-building and guarantee benefits like discounts at local stores, night rides, barbecues and kids events.



out of their multi-million dollar skyscraper and smell sh*t.

As development revved up, said Alonso-Luft, the “beautiful people of Fisher Island” didn’t want to be bothered by the company of their workers after hours. So, legend has it, they pulled some strings and got a local named Jimbo his license to sell alcohol so the commoners would drink there instead.

His shanty, formerly located across the street from where the Outdoor Center now stands, sold phenomenal smoked fish, she said. It was also a “code violation in progress,” operating on the “border of legal and illegal.”

“If you were a high schooler and you needed beer or weed, you went to Jimbos,” she said. So much porn was shot around the dive that actors and photographers can still be spotted from time to time making movies out by the trails.

Jimbos was handed over to the city by one of the founder’s daughters about three years before the Outdoor Center opened. The other daughter, Alonso-Luft said, told her Jimbo would have been happy to see what the land had become.

Today, it’s a place for families



that she said has the cleanest water in the city. With beach cleanups and unobtrusive practices, the land’s new stewards slowly allowed it to heal from years of debauchery and broken bottles. In the first year Alonso-Luft operated her business, there was little wildlife save the birds.

But as time wore on, native fish returned to the lagoons and the Outdoor Center began offering manatee tours that have become their most popular experience. According to Frenchy, the club’s volunteers clean litter on the trails and build around protected trees.

“It was a place nobody wanted,” Alonso-Luft said, “and now it’s the last place left to save.”

With Jimbos closed you may

have to travel a little farther for your post-ride beer, but it will be well-earned. The trails may rest on only 50 acres of land, but they are no joke. According to Frenchy riders from locales with more elevation may laugh at first, thinking they’re in for an easy ride, but they leave sweating as the park provides plenty of man-made climbs and requires a lot of peddling.

If you head over yourself, consider taking a lesson if it’s your first time mountain-biking. Definitely wear a helmet. Say hi to Frenchy if you see him—everyone who rides there seems to meet him eventually. And if you’re super green, don’t hit the new dirt jumps on one of Alonso-Luft’s rental bikes. 🚲

