The majestic Dolomites buzz as the sun ricochets from their sheer, pastel walls. We ride toward the lower flanks of Sass de Putia, a bifurcated spire of towering rock near Passo delle Erbe in this quiet corner of Val Badia in the far north of Italy.

Just ahead is a section of the ride that my friend, Igor Tavella, mysteriously describes in slightly broken English. “We are approaching the Mushroom Patch,” he says with a mischievous grin.

We follow Igor up an anonymous gravel road, which steeply climbs and steadily narrows. It starts as a typical gravel doubletrack, with tall grasses sprouting between parallel hewn grooves. It then gradually contracts, and the greenery becomes plusher. Finally, evidence of any path vanishes. Our route is, now, not so much a path as it is a circumstance.

A small group of us had set off at sunrise for the sixth annual cycling gathering known as YOLOmites5000. Legend has it that two friends — one a Ladin from Badia (there are about 30,000 people in the Dolomites who identify as Ladin first, rather than Italian or Austrian) and one an American — were riding bikes on the various steep backroads, farm tracks, and trails in and around Val Badia.

The American asked the Ladin, “What’s the shortest route you could create to get to 5,000 meters of climbing?” And Igor, the Ladin, got to work creating what would become YOLOmites5000 (You Only Live Once!).

It’s about 80 miles, it never strays more than about 10 miles from where you start, and it never repeats the same road in the same direction. The views are staggering. In fact, the route is choreographed to the rising and setting sun, so you reach a particular meadow at just the right time to see the sun’s rays light up the dew on the blades of grass. It’s all part of Igor’s ploy to keep you pedaling through the pain.

Given the length and the steep terrain, it is supremely hard, maybe even a bit absurd. It isn’t a race; it isn’t a gran fondo. It is about 40 percent paved, 40 percent gravel, and 20 percent meadows/mushroom patch/pasture. Speaking of which ...


“What now?!” one of us mutters. Igor, a former Italian national mountain bike team member, attempts to pilot his bike up and over the lumpy, spongy ground. He fails.

We take to foot. White Sidi shoes turn the color of muck as we tiptoe between patches of enormous mushrooms and ankle-deep mud. Some smiles turn upside down. While he doesn’t vocalize it, everything about the rider next to me says, “Whose idea of fun is this?”

The Benefits of Getting Uncomfortable

Whether we realize it or not, there are substantial psychological benefits to getting mentally and physically uncomfortable. Maybe not every day, but every once in a while.

Things like motivation, self-awareness, and confidence can be improved and refined through the use of discomfort. It's a tool.

And then there's resilience, which blooms when we overcome barriers and return to where we were — or better yet, progress beyond where we started. Riding bikes, then, can serve as a crucible for creating more (or honing) resilience.

As we steadily extend where we’re able to go and how we deal with adverse circumstances, we become comfortable being uncomfortable. We may even begin seeking out opportunities for discomfort, knowing that they’ll lead to small but
Rides like YOLOmites5000 help us become more resilient humans through their ability to make us satisfyingly uncomfortable.

Opposite: The riding in Alta Badia has an elemental quality: blue sky, majestic scenery, and incomparable serenity.

Below: Surrounded by the sheer limestone walls of the Dolomites, the steep climbs in and around the village of Badia serve as the canvas for YOLOmites5000.
meaningful alterations. That’s the very definition of transformative.

If a big bike ride can help shape us into more resilient, more confident, more motivated human beings, I’d say that’s worth the price of a little discomfort.

Of course, it isn’t actually about how hard the bike ride is. Discomfort has obviously been around a lot longer than riding bikes. Bikes just happen to be our preferred means of eliciting discomfort.

What I’m alluding to is how human evolution has been driven, in part, by periods of tribulation, scarcity, and hardship. Thus, endurance efforts that took place without the creature comforts of modern life have had a lot to do with our development as a species.

That’s because our human ancestors evolved in environments with sporadic food availability — they commonly went many days without consuming any food. Because of that, research has shown, natural selection favored individuals capable of outperforming their competitors, cognitively and/or physically, when in a food-deprived state — in a state of discomfort or scarcity.

Thus, humans evolved to use energy only when absolutely necessary. The catch is, our brains use a lot of energy, consuming roughly 20 percent of our daily calories, even though it represents just 2 percent of our total body weight. To reduce the caloric demands of thought, our brains evolved to quickly spot patterns and familiar situations, and to then process them or deal with the situation using very little energy.

In essence, we learned to identify a positive trait, mimic the behaviors of those possessing the trait(s), then repeat that process, suggests Dr. Peter Attia, an influential physician and host of The Drive, one of the most popular podcasts covering the topics of health and medicine.

The type of brain power involved in overcoming a pattern that disagrees with what we might already believe — critical thinking that yields progression — requires more energy. And we do this type of thinking during times of discomfort; that’s when we grow most effectively, according to recent research published in Psychological Science. That’s when we alter our perception of what’s possible.

So, seek the uncomfortable — not all the time, but every so often — and we can be certain we are creating transformative potential.

To put it in more practical terms: reaching places of discomfort, with the goal of pushing through those experiences, yields self-understanding, which creates opportunities to recalibrate our capabilities.

By pushing “boundaries,” we soon realize they’re not actually boundaries — we’ve been constrained by arbitrary endpoints. Which raises the question for each of us: is this just the beginning of what I can do?
The better the reward, the faster we forget the torment, the discomfort, the burning lungs and fiery muscle fibers.

EARNED, NOT GIVEN

After 20 minutes of squishing through the spongy meadow, we earn our first reward: a dramatic break in the trees reveals a jarringly ripped tower of rock, surrounded by flowing pastoral grasses.

Eventually, we regroup at a rustic mountain rifugio that serves delicately moist apple strudel and creamy cappuccino. The view is staggering; our smiles are broad. Our feet are really wet; our shoes are really brown. But this is the Dolomites. The pain is transient. The views are eternal.

Cycling journeys like this remind us that the best experiences are earned, not given. Though they may carry us through swamps, such ventures produce memories that never fade. They are best suited to those who can laugh at an absurd twist of fate, for those who aren’t perturbed by 20 percent gradients, and for those — no matter the suffering — who wouldn’t think twice about turning back.

Some rides may involve traversing a bog. There may be times when the state of the “road” is cringeworthy. But sometimes we must trudge through the swamp to reach the meadow.

Sometimes it’s essential to leave what we know, forgo comfort, take a chance, add some uncertainty, and let go. Get vulnerable — and grow.

THE SATISFACTION OF EXHAUSTION

Our jerseys stretched from the strudel, we set off in pursuit of more. How easily we forget about the ache in our arms from carrying our bikes through a swamp. Now we head downhill, which we know only means one thing — a grotesque, barbaric climb, likely on dolomitic marbles, can’t be far away.

And here it is.

We collect ourselves before stepping onto the slow-motion, human-powered escalator of pedaling up precipices. No one has a gear low enough to make such steepness anything but a grind. Everyone wants to find a circular rhythm, but instead there are only hard edges — crank revolutions become squares and each pebble becomes a wall. And still we churn.

Eventually, we escape from the forest that has enveloped our suffering. We are released into space, thick green grasses waving gently at us from either side of this crude gravel track. It isn’t that the gradient has eased; it’s simply that we don’t have tree trunks to remind us of the angle of our strain. And still we churn.

Most of the riders shoulder a sweaty stoicism and quietly go about the business of grinding up the climb. Of course, there are a few who find catharsis in exaggerating their torment, who take every opportunity to groan, burp, or stutter in the name of pain.

“That bad? Really?!”

“Ughhh. Pfffft.”

But there it is. The harder the climb, the more profound the reward. The better the reward, the faster we forget the torment, the discomfort, the burning lungs and fiery muscle fibers.

A pencil-thin steeple, on an equally narrow nave, sits precariously on a ledge at the far end of the meadow, and only a single serpentine trail leads straight to it. The Chiesa di Santa Barbara. Behind it is a gargantuan curtain of rock, crystalline facets sparkling in the afternoon sun. You couldn’t conceive of anything more beautiful.

We collapse in the grass, soaking in warmth, rolling in heaven.

PROCESS YIELDS PROGRESS

It’s not the destination, it’s the journey. You may have heard this maxim quoted by a sports psychologist or life coach. In fact, it is a saying famously attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Enjoying the road to get somewhere, it implies, is every bit as important, if not more so, as arriving at that somewhere.

In the parlance of human psychology, the aphorism suggests that a process-oriented perspective is more effective than a goal-oriented perspective, whether in the context of a challenging bike ride or as a strategy for life.

“When people are focused exclusively or too heavily on the outcome, what you often find is that their behavior and their thoughts are fear based, because they’re like, ‘well, what if I can’t do this?’” says sport psychologist Julie Emmerman, who works with some of the world’s top professional cyclists and other elite athletes. “A strength-based perspective includes things like process goals that you focus on, and remind yourself of, in order to give yourself the best chance of success.”

During challenging situations, using that process-focused strategy, there are opportunities to test ourselves, to evaluate strategies to cope, and to modify and change our demeanor, our reaction, and our approach — in the moment, according to Emmerman. When a journey ends, many of the learning opportunities vanish, though much can also be gleaned from an assessment after a performance or challenge.
The Dolomites, Italy

HOW TO GET THERE

Take your pick from three international airports. Venice is closest, but flights are often a bit more expensive. Milan (Malpensa) and Munich are about four hours away. I prefer flying into Munich because the drive south through Germany and Austria is often a bit nicer than the commute through northern Italy’s cities from Milan.

RIDING IN THE DOLOMITES

The stunning scenery and secret backroads of the Dolomites make it among the greatest places on earth to ride bikes. For enthusiasts of the history of professional cycling, a ride through the heart of the Dolomites can be a moving journey. These roads are the stadiums of our sport. We don’t have a Fenway. There is no Wrigley Field. Instead, our sport’s history is, literally, written on the road. We have the Passo Pordoi, the Passo Giau, and other sinuous strips of buttery smooth pavement snaking into the mountains of Italy. That’s just one facet of the long and winding history of this place. South Tyrol (Südtirol in German or Alto Adige in Italian), to simplify, came to be in 1918 after the Italians annexed the province from the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I. The region is a time capsule. And then there’s the landscape. The spectacular scenery seems a creation of Hollywood. The peaks’ jagged spires defy what you know a mountain to be. Mist-shrouded vertical columns of pink and gray stop us in our pedal strokes, repeatedly. While climbs take a while, the descents take a while longer.
For our own safety, and for maximum benefit, we must be the ones to turn the discomfort dial during our journey; we must choose to partake in transformative discomfort. It should never be forced upon us (though a little persuasion or coaxing may be necessary). Opportunities can manifest in various ways; for athletes and adventurers, it’s often events or routes that we’re not sure we can complete that present the best prospects.

As soon as we commit to such a daunting challenge, there’s a chance we’ll feel uncomfortable. We know we’ll face problems and hardships, perhaps some we’ve never experienced before, equally demanding for both their physical and psychological struggle. There might be problem-solving, route-finding, and mental hurdles. Tapping into resilience will be a pathway to success.

Our inner dialogue might go something like this: “Dear god, what have I gotten myself into?” Or: “I must be having a midlife crisis!”

If either of these scenarios seems familiar, we’re on the right track.

But that’s when high-level thinking begins. We form a plan. We get organized. We devise a training regimen, an equipment list, a series of strategies to cope with the unknowns. Whatever it is that we do, there is a process, a procedure, and a plan. Beyond that, we look forward to the unknown — meditative moments out there in the void that can only be created when high challenge meets curiosity and courage.

The next thing we know, through the act of chunking — breaking a giant task into more digestible portions — we start to build confidence. We problem-solve. We turn fear into energy. We turn anxiety into anticipation. And we overcome obstacles.

This can be generally defined as grit, and it is critical to the success of most adventures. Resilient, gritty athletes view change as impermanent — they know that negative, uncomfortable moments will pass. Through the act of reframing, resilient athletes see all emotions and moments — especially discomfort — as opportunities for growth.

“Reframing is an attempt to challenge the way a person is thinking about something and encourages them to see the optimism, encourages them to see the opportunity, encourages them to see the good in it,” Emmerman says. “One of the characteristics I see frequently in professional athletes is that they have a perspective that allows them to accept that they may not be at their tip-top form at an event — for example, because of sickness — but they know and they trust in the process so that at the next event, they’re going to have another opportunity. So they have patience, and they have perspective.”

All these benefits from riding the humble bicycle. The simple task of turning circles with our legs matures into a vehicle for development, a means to becoming a more humble, more skillful, more joyful human being.

Embrace the uncertainty, open the door to vulnerability, embody positivity. Let the transformation begin. 

A former neuroscience researcher, Chris Case is a journalist, book author, adventurer, and founder of Alter Exploration, which creates transformative cycling trips around the world.