Upon entering the expansive, arid plateau between western Colorado and eastern Utah on Interstate 70, the first thing you need to look for is the green Mile 19 exit sign. Otherwise, you just might blow right by the town of Fruita, population 8,000. That would be a big mistake, especially if your car has several bicycles atop the roof rack. This small burg sandwiched between the Colorado River and the 200-mile-long Book Cliff Mountains in Colorado’s Grand Valley contains some of the best bicycling opportunities in the West.

Previous to its cycling fame, Fruita was best known for dinosaur bone finds, fruit orchards, and a headless chicken. The town was in desperate need of an economic jumpstart, and cycling served up the perfect recipe. Fruita has been transformed over the last decade and a half into a modern day mountain biking mecca. Much of the conversion is due to the efforts of Troy Rarick, a charismatic local bike shop owner, who, along with a band of dedicated local trail builders, developed trails designed specifically for mountain bikers. Fruita has become a growing, vibrant community because of its dedication to building something special for cyclists, literally from the ground up.

A few trails started out as cow paths, but most were handcrafted with lots of thought given to flow and sustainability, and built with the sweat of untold hours of labor. Rarick has a simple motto for trail maintenance: “keep singletrack single.” This simply means keeping trails narrow and true by riding intelligently and keeping motorized vehicles and cattle away. These well-maintained trails exceed the conditions of normal bike trails, partly because they began as mountain bike trails, not jeep roads or foot paths.

In 1994, Rarick left a bicycle shop in Denver to begin a new position managing another bicycle shop in nearby Moab, Utah. On his way there, he stopped by Fruita and immediately saw the potential for great riding along the red-rock plateau with its wealth of public lands. The image of thousands of mountain bikers driving right by on I-70 on their way to Moab, where mountain biking was all the rage, was another strong enticement to do more research.

Soon Rarick bought a run-down storefront on the town’s main street and started Over the Edge Sports. He and his mountain-biking buddies began crafting trail systems in the Book Cliffs area north of town. They created another set along the benches above the scenic Colorado River just west of town. One of Rarick’s gifts is his ability to generate media coverage. Photographers and writers came to check out the new trails, and the word spread. A gamble on a couple of ads in Bicycling magazine touting the Fruita Fat Tire Festival paid off after more than 350 riders registered for the first event. Suddenly Fruita had hopes of an economic revival. Moab was not the only game in the West anymore.

Two of the area’s more famous geo-
graphic features also contain the best riding opportunities. The 18 Road Book Cliffs and Kokopelli Trail loops above the Colorado River have become synonymous with fat tire nirvana. The 18 Road riding area is a 20-minute drive north of Fruita and contains narrow singletrack trails craftily etched among the Book Cliffs foothills. Narrow ridgelines jut out into the sagebrush prairie with tentacle-like form. Catchy monikers adorn these well-marked routes such as Zippity Do Dah, Chutes and Ladders, Prime Cut, and Frontside, and range from intermediate- to expert-level riding. My personal favorite is Kessels Run. If there was ever a trail designed for a helmet cam, this is it. Do yourself a favor and pedal up Prime Cut, cross the gravel road, and return to the trailhead on Kessels Run. It’s less than five miles round trip, but the last several miles induce a gravity-fed high on a skateboard-like course with one banked corner carrying momentum into the next one for the entire length of the trail. Sheer bliss! I guarantee a large smile back at the trailhead and an unquenchable thirst to sample more of these trails.

Just west of town, the Kokopelli Trail loops are located on a series of scenic benches above the Colorado River. If you’re a beginner, or you just want an easier warm-up ride, then do Rustlers Loop first. The 3.5-mile loop rolls along with great views. There are even signs posted along the route with riding and trail-etiquette tips. After this introduction, graduate to the popular Horsethief Bench, which has awesome views and more challenging trails, including a few short hike-a-bike sections. Farther up the Kokopelli Trail are still more amazingly fun trails such as Steve’s, Lions, and Handcuffs.

The main Kokopelli route, named for the mystical humpbacked flute player of Hopi legend, is a 142-mile multi-day jaunt all the way to Moab, the other king of the region’s mountain-biking scene. The Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Trail Association put the trail together in 1989. It takes most riders three to six days to complete the trail, which is really a combination of jeep roads, dirt roads, sandy stretches, slickrock, some singletrack, and pavement. Think the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route in the desert Southwest. You could try the route as a self-supported trip, but the preferred (and sane) way to tackle the Kokopelli is to go with one of the guided tour companies and let them haul your gear and do the cooking.

To celebrate all of these cycling opportunities, Fruita likes to throw itself a cycling party. At the end of April, the annual Fruita Fat Tire Festival features live music, plenty of food, refreshments and lots of new friends to go riding with.

But don’t despair if you miss the festival. Come into town on the third weekend of May to celebrate Mike the Headless Chicken Day. Enjoy a car show, participate in a 5K run, or gorge yourself during one of the chicken-eating contests. This event, of course, has a back story. In 1945, local farmer Lloyd Olson had his mother-in-law over for dinner. His wife sent him out to the yard to bring back a chicken for the pot. Olson botched the beheading when the axe missed its intended target, leaving one ear and the chicken’s brainstem intact. Surprisingly, the bird did not die. Olson cared for the chicken by feeding it milk and water with an eyedropper. Despite not having a head, Mike grew from 2.5 pounds to over 8 pounds in the two additional years he lived. Mike’s fame grew after he was fea-
tured in *Life* and *Time* magazines and went on to a career in traveling sideshows, where patrons paid 25 cents to view the headless wonder. At the height of its popularity, the chicken earned a princely $4,500 per month ($50,000 in modern money) and was valued at $10,000. Olson was criticized for keeping the headless bird alive, but several humane agencies examined Mike and declared him free of undue suffering.

Fruita has drawn plenty of acclaim for its network of mountain-biking trails, but road cycling should also be included on any trip to the area. There are several outstanding options for memorable rides.

The most popular road ride is the 38-mile loop connecting Fruita and neighboring Grand Junction using the Rim Rock Road in Colorado National Monument. In the 1980s, legendary riders such as Greg LeMond and Bernard Hinault duked it out during a famed American stage road race, the Coors Classic, which used this route and called it Tour of the Moon for its striking and exotic desert landscape. In one of Kevin Costner’s first movies, *American Flyers*, the route was called Hell of the West.

Now those titles seem a bit extreme to describe this route, but you will earn your stripes after riding from the valley floor in Fruita at 4,500 feet to the high point in the monument at 6,640 feet. Riders will gain a total of 2,800 feet elevation over the course of the ride. The red rock spires will keep you company on the lightly-trafficked climbs to the top of the mesa.

The preferred way to ride the loop from Fruita is to ride past Dinosaur Hill, where many fossils have been discovered, then pedal toward Grand Junction on Highway 340. Instead of taking the direct route to the monument, opt for South Broadway and South Camp roads and then climb the park’s eastern entrance in Grand Junction. There is an entrance fee, and the park requires cyclists to have a front headlight and rear taillight as there are three short tunnels to ride through. Look for rock climbers out on the dramatic spires and take the time to admire the red rock landscape along the 18 overlooks. Then wrap up the ride with an exhilarating descent along the winding road back into Fruita.

If you desire a longer and more challenging ride, head out of Fruita north and west on county roads to Highway 139 and climb the 8,268-foot Douglas Pass in the Book Cliff Mountains. It is approximately 35 miles from Fruita to the pass, and the grade
gets steeper near the summit of the climb. There are no services along the out-and-back ride, so plan accordingly and carry extra water, food, and repair kits.

There also are plenty of flatter road-biking options in the Grand Valley between Fruita and Grand Junction on smooth county roads that cross the agriculture-based countryside. Lettered roads run east to west whereas numbered roads go north to south. The world’s largest flat-topped mountain, Grand Mesa, dominates the landscape to the east.

After an exhilarating morning ride, Troy Rarick mentioned that Fruita’s remote location adds to its appeal, making cycling “a little more of an adventure.” Whether your preference is road or mountain biking, it is easy to see why Fruita and the Grand Valley of Colorado are well worth the effort to visit. I first came to Fruita when the trails were in their infancy. Now it’s great to see firsthand how the sport of cycling has transformed a sleepy little town into a first-class cycling destination where the mountain-bike tires are fat and the trails remain skinny. 

Chuck Haney is Adventure Cyclist’s resident mountain-biking writer and singletrack specialist. You can learn more about him at chuckhaney.com.

Rivendell’s Sam Hillborne

Worth a serious look before you buy your next bike. It might be just right for you.

The typical modern road bike is designed like a racing bike. It must be. It won’t fit tires larger than 28mm, so it’s good only for light riders on smooth roads. It won’t fit fenders, so it’s bad in rain. It won’t fit racks, so it won’t carry gear. It puts the handlebar low, so you have more weight on your arms and hands, and more strain on your back. And most of all, it’s made of carbon, a material known for catastrophic failures. When the typical modern road bike fails, you’ll be riding it. And then the ruined frame is not recyclable.

The Sam Hillborne is the antithesis of that bike. It fits tires up to 40mm, even with fenders, so you can ride comfortably — and swiftly too — on surfaces rough or smooth, wet or dry. You can raise the bar an inch or more higher than the saddle, so you ride relaxed, with little weight on your arms. It’s frame is steel, a material known for its toughness & safety, so the Sam you buy today will grow old with you. If you wreck it in a crash, it’s not junk, it’s repairable. If a car kills the steel frame, it’s recyclable — over and over again.

The Sam Hillborne frameset costs $1,000-1,250. A complete bike runs about $2,500 or so, and that’s with good parts on it. Not a bunch of third choices. Nothing you’ll want to upgrade.

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Feel the flow. Many Fruita trails were developed specifically for mountain biking.