With spring in full bloom and the NBA playoffs about to come to a merciful end, my wife Jamie had a big idea. She wanted to cycle the Virginia Creeper Trail, all the way, in both directions. This Virginia rail-trail stretches 34 miles from Abingdon in the southwest portion of the state to Whitetop at the North Carolina border. We would pedal the full length one day, camp overnight, and then ride back the next day.

The Virginia Creeper Trail is somewhat an oddity in the rails-to-trails movement because it has a noticeable grade. The trail follows a slight downhill pitch from Abingdon (elevation 2040 feet) at the northern terminus to South Holston Lake (1750 feet) at mile 8, where it gently ascends to Damascus (1930 feet) at the midpoint. It takes a steeper angle uphill from there to Whitetop (3576 feet) at the southern end. That’s a climb of 1800 feet over 25 miles — most un-rail-trail-like.

Jamie wanted to bring Katie, our 14-pound border collie-Jack Russell terrier mix, along for the ride. We fastened a wire basket on the back of her mountain bike for Katie to ride in, complete with a harness. Of course, with space on the bike rack taken up by the basket, this meant stowing camping gear in every nook we could think of, including panniers, fanny packs, and backpacks, to accommodate the dog. But, hey, she’s family.

We started at the trailhead at Abingdon on a gunmetal gray day. A historic town full of restored brick buildings, Abingdon is home to several restaurants and hotels, as well as the renowned Barter Theater. Many Creeper Trail riders take in a play as part of their trip.

Barely out of the gate, we came to a long trestle decked in pressure-treated lumber to make it biker-friendly. This served as a harbinger of things to come, as the Creeper Trail features over 100 trestles and bridges. Large curved trestles up to several hundred feet long populate the early stretch, serving up expansive views of farmland below. A prime example comes at mile 3.7, near the site of the old Watauga station. Another rises high over the muddy waters of South Holston Lake at the confluence of the Middle and South forks of the Holston River.

Two miles into the ride, the trail snaked through a string of unique mound-shaped land formations known as the Great Knobs. Then it follows a ridge, with the landscape falling away on either side. In other areas, a cliff rises on one side. Gravity tugged us ever so gently along the slight downhill grade, spoiling us for what lay ahead.

Through most of the stretch from Abingdon to Damas-
cus, the trail meanders through open fields and cow pastures, crossing private property much of the time. Fresh-cut hay, rolled into round bales, lay scattered in fields, giving off a sweet smell. We passed through farms with gates at either property line to keep cows in, and friendly but curious bovines often gathered there, as if to welcome us. Occasionally, the trail turns to singletrack as it actually passes through residents’ yards near Damascus.

The Creeper Trail goes back a long way in history, to a time when trestles and bridges hadn’t made it to the drawing board, and farmers worked small plots of land by hand. The trail began as an Indian footpath, and later saw use by European pioneers and Daniel Boone as he explored the area. At the beginning of the 20th century, timber men came to the area for the hardwoods covering the mountains, and built mills, furniture factories, and dye plants. Shortly after 1900, W.B. Minge built the Virginia-Carolina Railroad from Abingdon to Damascus, and in 1905 the Hassinger Lumber Company extended the line to Elkland, North Carolina.

The railroad hauled lumber, iron ore, supplies, and passengers, getting its nickname, “the Creeper,” from the early steam locomotives that struggled up the railroad’s steep grades. With all its sharp curves and climbs, this epitomized a mountain railroad.

Having failed to turn a profit in decades, the Creeper ran its last train in 1977. Over the years, the national forests bought up much of the territory with the intent of protecting what wilderness was left. As industry has declined in the region, recreational activity has increased. Within a century, the trail has come full circle, back to its roots as a quiet thoroughfare.

As a reminder of its industrial past, the Creeper engine and its tender now sit on display near the Abingdon trailhead. And coal cinders left behind give the mostly dirt doubletrack of the trail an asphalt color.

As we wheeled into the town of Damascus (population 1000), it became obvious why it’s the focal point of the trail. It boasts the moniker of Trail Town USA, because in Damascus, the Creeper Trail intersects the Appalachian Trail, TransAmerica Bicycle Trail, and the Historical Daniel Boone Trail. Every year in early May, Damascus holds the week-long Appalachian Trail Days Festival, drawing throngs of hikers, many of them through-hikers making their way all 2,160 miles from Georgia to Maine. Local lore says hikers have dubbed Damascus “the friendliest town on the trail.”

People in this part of Virginia like to celebrate their mountain heritage with festivals. Whitetop has the Maple Syrup Festival in late March, the Ramp (onion) Festival in mid-May, and the Molasses Festival in early October. Abingdon holds the Virginia Highlands Festival in early August, while Damascus holds the Fall Festival on the first weekend in October.

About a mile and a half past Damascus, at mile 17.5, the scenery turns spectacular, as the trail crosses Iron Bridge and ascends into the 650,000-acre Mount Rogers National Recreation Area in the Jefferson National Forest. In this remote wilderness, the trail intertwines with Whitetop Laurel Creek as its numerous trestles crisscross the waterway. The creek cascades in an endless series of roaring falls, tumbling over massive boulders. The clean smell of the cold spray permeates the air as trout fishermen, some of whom biked in, cast flies gingerly into the water.

A sense of seclusion came over us in riding along the floor of a gorge carved in the rugged Iron Mountains, with hemlock boughs creating a forest canopy. We broke out of the woods to traverse a 550-foot-long trestle at Creek Junction, the junction of Whitetop Laurel and Green Cove creeks at mile 27.

The crowds of hikers and bikers we had seen in the northern end of the trail had dwindled to an occasional soul in the less-populated southern end. This gave Katie more opportunity to get out and run alongside as we pedaled. Small but athletic, she kept up easily, galloping like a miniature race horse. We limited her distance to a total of about six miles in each direction, so she wouldn’t wear sores on her feet from the coal cinders. We use a retractable leash — if you want to bring Fido along, remember that trail regulations require dogs to be leashed.

The grade wore on us after several hours of pedaling, and Jamie began to wonder if the end would ever come. We camped at a community center across the trail from the restored Green Cove Station near the end of the trail, making do with a drinking fountain, port-a-potty, picnic table, and our “pup” tent.

Heavy dew carpeted the ground the next morning, but a brilliant sun soon burned it off. The morning’s ride brought sheer delight, knowing we could cruise downhill all the way back to Damascus. With sunlight filtering through the forest canopy, it seemed easier to appreciate the pink and white mountain laurel and thick groves of rhododendron. Creatures such as snapping turtles, wood thrush, and flickers made occasional appearances, and we wheeled by a beaver pond. The pleasant Sunday weather also brought out packs of horseback riders.

After the downhill run, we stopped at an open, grassy park in Damascus for lunch. The parking lot brimmed with cars laden with bike racks. We met a group from Baltimore hanging out in the shade of a huge tree, resting from their cycling sojourn. To my surprise, they had come to these parts just to ride the trail.

Touring the Creeper Trail would seem incomplete without making the climb into the forest toward Whitetop, but we now understand why many people ride it one way. As an occasional biker — but a competitive runner — Jamie found the ascent arduous, especially after starting in Abingdon. Shuttle services operating out of Damascus ferry bikers to the southern terminus so they can pedal leisurely back to town.

For a more-serious touring cyclist like myself, the ride’s a kick, because it gives you more than the usual rail-trail. But any way you go, it’s worth the trip. Especially with the family dog. ●

Tom Gibson has been an Adventure Cycling member for the past three years.
Nuts and Bolts

ROUTE: The 34-mile Creeper Trail runs from Abingdon in southwest Virginia to Whitetop at the North Carolina border. You can ride the entire trail starting from Abingdon, or from Damascus at the midpoint, but the less-serious cyclists often prefer to pedal just the southern half from Damascus or take a shuttle to Whitetop and ride the downhill stretch from there to Damascus.

GETTING THERE: Abingdon lies along Interstate 81, about 12 miles north of Bristol, Virginia and the Tennessee border. Route 58, which runs along the southern border of Virginia, passes through the towns of Whitetop, Damascus, and Abingdon. For airline service, a handful of carriers operate out of Tri-Cities Regional Airport serving the Bristol/Kingsport/Johnson City area about 25 miles away.

WHEN TO GO: The Creeper Trail can be cycled any time of year, weather permitting, but with its higher elevation, May through October is the most favorable season. You can catch wildflowers blooming and trees budding in the spring, or trees turning brilliant colors in the fall. In summer, with its mountain streams, the trail offers a cool respite from steaming conditions at lower elevations.

WHERE TO STAY: Cyclists can camp along the trail, but it’s primitive, as there are no campgrounds. Abingdon has modern hotels, and Damascus has The Place, a hostel popular with Appalachian Trail through-hikers (closed in winter). In addition, a variety of small inns, bed and breakfasts, and rental cabins populate the area. A famous inn, with a renowned restaurant, is the Martha Washington in Abingdon.

EQUIPMENT: A mountain or hybrid bike works best for the combination dirt-gravel-coal cinder surface. Because the trail ventures into the wilderness, it’s a good idea to bring spare tubes, a pump, and repair tools.

FOOD: Abingdon has a host of eateries, ranging from fast food to quaint restaurants, while Damascus offers a handful of options for standard fare such as pizza, deli sandwiches, hamburgers, and hot dogs.

MAPS & INFORMATION: You don’t actually need a map to find your way, but it helps to have one to plan a ride and know where you are along the trail. You can pick up a map at the Abingdon trailhead or at any of the businesses that cater to cyclists in Damascus. For information on the trail and accommodations, call the Abingdon Convention & Visitors Bureau at 800-435-3440 or 540-676-2282 (e-mail: ACVB@naxs.com, website: www.naxs.com/abingdon/tourism or the Town of Damascus at 540-475-3831. For information on bike rentals and shuttles, call Blue Blaze Bike & Shuttle service (800-475-5095 or 540-475-5095) or Mount Rogers Outfitters (540-475-5416), both in Damascus.