

# COLORADO'S BIKE

Mountain-Bike Touring in the Backcountry Has New



# HUTS

er Been Easier



**G**olden morning washed over the ochre walls of Unaweep Canyon as it has every day for millennia before the age of humans with bicycles. The sun warmed our backs as we spun easily and climbed out of the Unaweep toward the highlands of the Dominguez Plateau. My belly full of plate-sized pancakes from Judy's in Fruita, my mind danced with happiness as I set out on a new-style of mountain-bike tour from hut to hut through the backcountry of western Colorado.

We topped the climb with a 50-mile view over the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area and followed a twisty road down to a deep river canyon singletrack. We found ourselves rolling along a fun trail through scraggly piñon pines bookcased by sandstone cliffs. Once on the trail, I was reminded how life on a bicycle can quickly change almost any day from ordinary to extraordinary.

Just an hour before, we'd pulled up to Single Tracks Bike Shop in Fruita to meet Colorado Backcountry Biker (CBB) owner Kevin Godar. Kevin greeted us with a smile and topographical maps for each day of our planned three-day mountain-bike adventure that he had developed after riding hundreds of miles of back roads and trails.



CASEY GREENE

Story and photos  
by Nathan Ward

"After looking around Colorado, I discovered this was the best place to put my dream into action – great trails, geographical variety, and public land agencies that are good to work with," he told me as we loaded our bags into his truck. Kevin told us all about the area as he drove to the start of the ride. Once there, we just unloaded our bikes, put on our packs, and started pedaling. "I'll drop your bags at the hut," said Kevin. "You don't need to carry a thing."

We were light and free as if we were headed out on a quick ride from home, riding fast on a new trail through a beautiful new place. Ducking under low-hanging Gambel oaks, my front wheel squished through fruity bear scat. Suddenly I was singing, "Hi bear! Hi bear!"

Reminded of my place in nature's hierarchy, my mind freed itself from everyday distractions. Carrying nothing but water and energy bars, I felt ready to ride forever. However, this wasn't a lengthy tour but a self-guided one that represents a new, potentially more fun way for me to explore on a bike.

Before hut-to-hut ski systems began attracting cyclists, there had really been just two ways to backcountry tour with-



**Water crossing.** A beaver dam makes a good bridge in a pinch.

out being in a guided and supported tour group. The first was to pull trailers on fire roads, and the second was to embrace the spartan and often masochistic sport of bikepacking. I tried both, and neither did it for me — it's difficult to pull a loaded trailer over challenging terrain, and I never loved feeling underfed while hiding from the rain in my bivy sack while bikepacking.

My personal ideal always included hav-

ing vehicle support to carry luggage and food between camps, but let's be honest, nobody ever wants to be the person who has to drive the truck rather than ride. In 2006, CBB solved this problem by offering a self-guided hut tour that is fully supported behind the scenes.

It works like this. You show up with your bike and clothes. Kevin hands you highlighted maps with route descriptions



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and GPS waypoints, shuttles your luggage, and arranges to pick you up or shuttle your vehicle to the end of the ride.

While you enjoy riding unencumbered through the mountains, he stocks your hut with fresh food, ice, drinks, sleeping bags, games, and comfortable mattresses. Your sleeping bag is waiting when you arrive. All you do is enjoy the ride — there's no need to carry gear, plan logistics, weigh your bags, or leave your heavy book behind. This is as easy as mountain-bike touring gets.

The idea for this new style of hut system came when Kevin worked for the fantastic — but longer and more difficult — San Juan Hut System that runs from Telluride to Moab or Durgango to Moab. He saw people struggling with long days, carrying heavy gear, and eating basic food, and he thought there should be a more enjoyable option for mountain bikers. After 18 months in the San Juans, he set out to make it a reality, and CBB was born.

We chose the Deluxe Dominguez Tour that includes two nights in simple huts and one night at the classy Gateway Canyons Resort in the tiny town of Gateway. My companions were Scott Damman and Shawn and Dena Gillis, all mountain bikers, parents, and business owners. This tour was short and simple enough to plan that we could all jump over the usual tour hurdles of time off, spouses, babysitters, and not enough time in a busy life to properly research and plan a trip on our own.

Our first day on the trail included 21 miles of dirt roads and singletrack through the 209,610-acre Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area southwest of Grand Junction. This slice of Colorado includes thick forest, rough canyons, sandstone bluffs, and 600 million years of geological history.

Native Americans lived and hunted in this area long before Europeans arrived. The Utes still consider the Dominguez area the land of their ancestors. If we had had more time, we could have explored some of these Native American grounds but, unfortunately, we were too busy riding bikes to stop.

Spinning through scrub oak cloaked in autumn reds, we loudly chatted to alert any bears that might have been munching on berries along the trail. Then the route led us straight into a deep pond. Scott decided to test the depths, hoisted his bike overhead, and promptly sunk in over his waist. The rest of us decided to forgo the



**Hut in the hills.** *It doesn't get much better than a roof over your head in the backcountry.*

shock and squish of a cold wet chamois and tiptoed on bike cleats over a dam woven of beaver-gnawed willows.

Then we climbed, debated the route, and pushed our bikes up Smith Point Trail, switchbacking to the higher plateau above. Once on top, we had transitioned from the red desert scrub below to the aspen groves and sagebrush of the high country.

"It would have been easy to get lost on

that trail down below," I mused, "It wasn't the most defined trail." Kevin's route directions weren't the most descriptive, but we had our GPS and his list of waypoints as a backup. If we'd been using our GPS, there would have been no debate about the faint trail junction below. But, you know, we're weekend warriors who like to live on the edge.

High on the plateau, we spun along a

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# Nuts & Bolts: Colorado Hut-to-Hut

**When to go:** CBB is open from Memorial Day (around May 30) to the first week of October. The best time is mid-June and mid-September. The temperatures are much higher in mid-summer so you need to start riding earlier. On our trip in mid-September, we experienced cool mornings and evenings, cold nights, and warm days.



## Getting there:

1. Drive to Fruita, located just outside Grand Junction.
2. Fly into Grand Junction Regional Airport (GJT), [www.gjairport.com](http://www.gjairport.com), and take a taxi or shuttle to Fruita. Sunshine Taxi, (970) 245-

8294. American Spirit Shuttle, [www.americanspiritshuttle.net](http://www.americanspiritshuttle.net), (970) 523-7662.

**Where to stay in Fruita:** This hotel gives discounts if riding the CBB hut system and it's locally owned: Balanced Rock Motel, 126 South Coulson Street, Fruita, Colorado 81521, (970) 858-7333.

**What to ride:** Any mountain bike will do, but full suspension is always the most comfortable. Just make sure it fits you properly. You can rent basic or high-end mountain bikes at Single Tracks Bike Shop [www.Single-Tracks.com](http://www.Single-Tracks.com), (970) 858-3917, in downtown Fruita. Or rent at Over The Edge Sports Fruita, [www.otefruita.com](http://www.otefruita.com), (970) 858-7220.

**What to bring:** Besides your biking clothes – comfortable clothes for wearing at the huts, sunscreen, sun hat, good book to read, toiletries, camera with extra batteries, and a wash cloth. Bring snacks for the first day. The huts have energy bars and snacks for Days Two and Three. I recommend bringing a GPS unit to help

with navigation. CBB provides waypoints.

**How to shower:** There are no showers on the hut route and all water has to be trucked in, so there isn't enough for everyone to shower with. I used a spray bottle and a washcloth.

## How to learn more:

Colorado Backcountry Biker also offers a longer, four-day and four-night trip. Colorado BackCountry Biker, [www.backcountrybiker.com](http://www.backcountrybiker.com), (970) 858-9005. Gateway Canyons Resort, [www.gatewaycanyons.com](http://www.gatewaycanyons.com), (970) 931-2458.



faint road through rolling sage plains. We saw the hut long before we arrived, a small cabin lost amid the huge expanse of nature. We rolled up to the hut, and before anyone even took their helmet off, we cracked open some cold beers.

Imagine a backcountry tour with cold beer. Every CBB hut contains a deep cooler of beer and soda, and not just cheap beer, but fine ice-cold microbrews. It's funny the effect that this has on people. I don't mean the buzz, just the availability of cold drinks amazes people. Everyone I met who has ridden this hut system talks first and

most about the ice-cold beer, like it's more important than the food, lack of showers, or even the trail itself.

It certainly worked magic on us, and soon everyone traveled to nap land. Rousing ourselves from a tough day of riding, drinking, and napping, we dug into the food cooler for the first time. It was loaded with ground beef, brats, salad, corn on the cob, potatoes, cookies — all the fixings for a great feast on the grill, which we cooked as the moon rose overhead and a glossy herd of horses walked through camp.

Kevin calls this the "cowboy hut," and I

think it's because he must hire a real cowboy to ride up on a horse as the sun sets. Straddling a tall paint horse, wrapped in chaps and denim beneath a soiled Stetson, Colorado cowboy Austin Massey rode up and welcomed us to his family's ranch.

Austin's family first arrived in the 1860s with French trappers. They lived with the Utes and stayed to ranch. 150 years later, they still live here and run cattle on land surrounded by the Uncompahgre National Forest. He joined us for dinner and spun a few stories around the campfire beneath a glowing canopy of stars.



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We slept satisfied with a great first day. It had been just long and challenging enough to get us started, but not so difficult that fit beginners or intermediate mountain bikers couldn't do it. This would be a great trip for couples that ride at different levels or even families with older children. The huts sleep six to eight people on bunk beds, so it's good to be close friends.

The second day dawned bright and sunny, our moods heightened by rich French press coffee, fresh fruit, eggs, and bacon. Our worries from the week before melted away as we read the two trail options for the day. The first was 10 miles on a dirt road directly to the next hut. The second was a 28-mile jeep road and single-track loop.

The shorter route would have been perfect if we just wanted to exercise a little and relax the rest of the day. Instead, we chose the longer route, packed our bags, left them for Kevin to pick up, and rode out on the trail under a cloudless sky.

The first thing on our map was "Miserable Hill." We anticipated one of those long mountain climbs that go on forever. Luckily it wasn't miserable, just challenging enough to get the blood flowing in the legs before we followed a scenic route



**Tiny toad.** Nathan cups a baby short-horned lizard, which are plentiful in the Southwest.

that wound through the maze of roads and trails that form a spiderweb through nearly all public lands in Colorado.

Like cowboys on bikes, we spooked a herd of cows that sprinted away in a heel-kicking cloud of dust before dropping into the fun singletrack of the Divide Forks Cutoff. This trail drops in skinny splendor through aspen groves, muddy creeks, up unrideable climbs, over slickrock, and out

on a road again. We pedaled the road to another section of singletrack and repeated this pattern all day long.

The highlight was the Corral Forks Trail that descended into a deep canyon on a trail that feels few human feet or bike tires. Small drop-offs made the ride challenging. Ferns grew across the trail in a sea of foliage. Meadow grass grew higher than our handlebars. A red fox watched us pass.

An advertisement for Freewheeling Adventures. The background is a photograph of two cyclists riding on a paved road that curves along a coastline. In the distance, a town with a prominent church spire is visible against a backdrop of mountains under a clear blue sky. The text is overlaid on the image.

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Tiny trout swam in a tiny stream. Hawks circled overhead. A hidden mud hole covered with grass caught us all off-guard. It was a fabulous section of trail that produced smiles from ear to ear.

Toward the end of the day, we found the real miserable hill. Kevin had simply labeled it “no pain, no gain.” We clawed our way up 1.4 miles of sandy, rocky hillside under the hot autumn sun.

While grinding up the hill, watching my sweat drip, and staring at the sand in front of my tire, I saw baby horned lizards scurrying all over in the sand. These fascinating lizards have lived with the cultures of this land since humans first arrived, and some species even squirt blood from their eyes. Thanks to a miserable hill, I felt enriched by this lucky sighting.

We reached the second hut sun baked and satisfied. The La Sal Mountains stretched across the western sky. Iced drinks soothed our dry throats, and we spent the afternoon napping and reading in the shade of aspen trees.

The sun set directly in front of the hut, a luminous crimson fireball dropping behind the peaks while we ate burritos with guacamole around a sparking campfire. Kevin

promised that the beer never runs out, and we put his promise to the test while digging deep into campfire philosophy. With each can we easily solved another of the world’s pressing problems and quickly moved on to the next.

We gave out long before the cooler did. I pulled my mattress out to sleep on the porch of the hut. It was heaven to watch

the stars rotate across the sky as we were serenaded by the otherworldly wails of nearby coyotes.

When you wake up and there is nothing on your to-do list but “ride 25 miles of great trails, descend 3,000 vertical feet, and spend the night in a luxury hotel,” life is going well.

After a leisurely breakfast, we rode out



**Dinner done right.** Local cowboy Austin Massey regales the group with stories at dinner.

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**📷** No hip waders here. Ryan keeps his feet dry and wheels turning while following the winding Arkansas River, a few miles outside of Salida, Colorado – Photo by Kid Bike shown: Fargo

through aspen forests. Again we could choose between an easy road option and a more difficult trail. We live for singletrack so there was really no choice. We rode down Ute Creek, and it was the best trail we'd ridden on the trip.

The top section fell steep, loose, and rocky, entirely chewed up by motorcycles. I white-knuckled it through the top and then fell in love with the rest of the trail, eight miles of twisting, swooping single-track. As we rode gravity down the mountain, the land changed again from alpine to scrub oak to red desert.

Ute Creek Trail ended at a road that dropped straight off the plateau, descending 3,000 feet in five miles. It's not the place to miss a corner, and it pasted big grins on our dusty faces as we raced down into the rock canyons below until the thick sand near the Dolores River slowed us all to a crawl.

As the sun baked the lowlands, we pedaled together the last few miles into the beat up town of Gateway. Gateway was founded in 1884 as a gathering place for trappers, miners, and ranchers. Later, uranium mining kept the area alive, and locals claim Gateway uranium was used in



**Changing landscape.** A singletrack rider descends from alpine meadows to scrub oak.

the first atomic bombs. It's a non-enviable claim to fame, and the town died when the uranium market went bust. However, the area changed radically again in 1995 when the founder of the Discovery Channel, John S. Hendricks, decided to build a home and a resort here.

As we crossed the river, the Gateway Canyons Resort came into view. It's an

attractive resort, conference center, and automobile museum built on the edge of town beneath an escarpment of red cliffs that stretches for miles.

The resort has breathed new life into this beautiful corner of Colorado by creating jobs, protecting lands for conservation, and opening a grocery store and post office

**continued on page 38**

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