

Is a Mountain Bike Trip Acro



Is Colorado Worth the Risk?

Hail, Yeah!

We're at the top of French Pass, a 12,000-foot saddle of tundra and snow in the Colorado Rockies. And a warm morning has suddenly been invaded by black, merciless-looking clouds.

A hasty descent, which means cutting short our planned loop, seems like a good idea. Sean, more of an optimist, is opposed to my demand for a retreat.

"You know what you are?" says Sean, eyeing the black clouds rolling in from the west.

"No. What am I?"

"You," says Sean, the actuary, "are risk averse."

I think about that as we hop on our mountain bikes and return the way we had come.

Risk averse? Me?

I mean, I'm in the midst of an off-road mountain-bike ride from Denver to Durango along the Colorado Trail (CT). I'm carrying only 15 pounds of gear and traveling solo. That's prudent behavior?

But maybe Sean has a point. A day earlier, I had

Story and photos by Alan Wechsler

called Sean from a service station. It had been pouring rain for hours, and I was still a long bike ride from his place. I asked him to pick me up, and he complied.

It had hurt, that surrender to the weather. But the forecast was bleak, and I didn't want to face thunderstorms high up on the treeless plateau (because I was risk averse?)

"Maybe I am," I think as I chase Sean down the hill. Maybe I'm an adventurer with limits who likes the idea of a gutsy journey, but only one in which safety is only a phone call away. Maybe I need to re-evaluate my adventure-cycling ethos.

Then the hail starts again, and I think, first, let me get out of this Colorado weather. Once I've saved my butt, I can worry about saving my pansy cyclist soul.

The Colorado Trail is a 470-mile path that runs from Denver to Durango, meandering across the Rocky Mountains in such a way as to hit seemingly every mountain that's in between. It was built by a combination of grassroots fortitude and Forest Service expertise in the 1980s and has become one of the nation's most popular long-distance hiking trails.

It has also, more quietly, developed quite the reputation as a world-class mountain-biking route — so much so that more than a dozen cyclists compete in an end-to-end race each August.

To be sure, it's not a perfect cycling route. Bikes aren't allowed on the trail's half-dozen wilderness areas (sadly, the most scenic portions of the trail), requiring detours on paved or jeep roads. Other sections are so rocky and unpleasant that only a masochist would ride them.

Still, that leaves a good portion of the route that is perfect for cycling. And if an intrepid mountain biker doesn't mind tasting the singletrack in pieces, between swaths of highway, the CT can bridge the gap between cycle tourist and backpacker.

But as one CT cycling veteran warned me, "This isn't a rail-trail."

Besides the weather, the CT requires periods when you climb more than 4,000 feet, sometimes on trails so steep and rocky that even the fittest cyclist must dismount and pursue the dreaded hike-a-bike. You must do this while carrying food for several days, plus camping gear, and keep the bike nimble enough to handle rocks, drop-offs, and other technical diversions.

I had dreamed about it for years. And last summer, unemployed and aimless, I realized it was time.

After planning my route and getting my

Nuts & Bolts: Colorado Trail

Before you go: Get in shape. This might be the hardest tour of your life. Before my trip, I climbed office-building stairs (180 stories in one morning) and cycled centuries and 4,000-foot ascents — and I still got my butt kicked.

Equipment: A mountain bike with front suspension, at least, is essential as are racks for modern mountain bikes like those from Old Man Mountain (oldmanmountain.com) and Tubus (tubus.com/en).

Gear: Pack light — around 10-15 pounds. I used an 11-ounce silicon tarp for a tent, a one-pound sleeping bag, and fuel tablets instead of a stove. Most bikepackers use custom-made bags from Carousel Design Works (carouseldesignworks.com) or Revelate Designs (revelatedesigns.com). Carry about a gallon of water and enough food for two to three days. Mail packages to yourself along the way for resupplying.

Guides: *The Colorado Trail*, 8th edition lists bike detours in detail. The *Colorado Trail Databook* is a "Cliff Note version." A road map of Colorado is also useful, and National Geographic makes detailed maps of all areas you will ride through. See coloradotrail.org.

Time: Unless you're superhuman and have a masochist streak, plan on at least two weeks. Throw in a couple of extra days for resting and enjoying the scenery — and the small towns along the way.

Where to stay: There are hostels in Denver, Frisco, Leadville, Salida, Lake City, Silverton, and Durango. Otherwise plan to camp or spend more on a hotel.

Getting there: If flying into Denver, you can take a bus to downtown for only \$10. From downtown you and your bike can take the light rail and an early-morning commuter bus to very close to the trailhead. One-way flights from Durango back to Denver are \$120 or so. Ship your bike home via FedEx's Durango office for about \$75 — you can get a box from a Durango bike store.

Highlights: You don't have to ride the entire trail to enjoy it. The Buffalo Creek area is not far from Denver and is a great day's destination. More epic day trips can be had between Kenosha Pass and Breckenridge, or from Copper Mountain to Camp Hale. And the wildflower-filled sections south of Silverton must rank as some of the world's most amazing mountain biking.

Bike Shops: Hassle Free Sports, hasslefree.com. Mountain Bike Specialists, <http://mountainbikespecialists.com>. Second Gear Bike Shop, (970) 247-4511.

* Some cycling sections have changed since this article was written. The 8th edition of the guidebook covers these changes as does coloradotrail.org/bike.html.



gear together, the next step was to ship the bike to Denver (cheaper than taking it on an airplane these days). After some investigation, I FedExed it to a Kinko's store in Denver, where employees said they could hold it for me.

Except when I got there, a sales clerk blandly told me she hadn't seen any bike. After some prodding and a bit of computer work, she informed me my bike was at the FedEx warehouse about an hour's drive out of town. And, no, they wouldn't bring it back.

Fortunately, the parents of a friend lived nearby. Though they hadn't seen me in a decade and barely remembered me, Ken and Faith Alevy drove down to Denver at a moment's notice, put me up for the night, collected my bike the next day, and brought me to the trailhead.

It was an auspicious start. Colorado residents are almost hospitable enough to make up for those incessant hailstorms — but more on those later.

The trail begins in Waterton Canyon, a park on the outskirts of the Denver suburb of Littleton, just down the road from Lockheed-Martin's corporate headquarters and factory. The first seven miles follow a dirt road, and on that sunny track I pass my first backpacker. "I'll get there before you!" I jokingly yell back. Over the course of this trip, I run into thru-hikers every day, on the trail and in towns, but never see another long-distance cyclist on the trail (although several had passed through a few weeks before, hostel owners later inform me).

From the end of that first dirt road, the real trail begins — delicious, switch-backing singletrack, threading its way through a pine forest with views of the Denver foothills. A section of steep rock forces me to dismount and haul the bike up with both hands, cleated shoes slipping on the granite. But the air is clear, the sky blue, the temperature in the mid-70s. I am thrilled to be here.

At the top, I run into Denver cyclist Bob Zatorski, who is returning from an afternoon ride. He tells me he bikes this trail 40 to 50 times a year and wishes me luck. "Listen to your body," he advises. "When it tells you to get off and walk, you get off and walk."

The first night's camp near the Platte River goes well, except I find I can't read after dark — moths are attracted to my headlamp and flutter against my face.

The second day's ride brings me through

some of the best cycling in Colorado. After a thousand-foot ascent up a huge burn zone, I find myself cycling through Buffalo Creek, a popular mountain-bike destination. Here the rolling trail brings me past giant boulders and granite formations. If the whole trail is like this, I think, I will be in heaven.

An hour later, the hail begins.

It hits when I reach a dirt road — the first required detour around a wilderness area. It's barely noon. Five minutes later, I'm huddling under an overhanging rock, as marble-sized hail pounds the ground.

During a lull in the storm, I ride two hours to Bailey, the next town on the route. At that point, the skies turn dark and let loose again.

It's not supposed to be this way. Colorado is the land of sun, isn't it? 300 days of it a year, they say. Thunderstorms are supposed to hit around 3:00 PM, and last for an hour or so, not all day.

Shivering and wet, I surrender and call for help.

Sean Brady lives in Summit County and is studying for the last of nine actuarial tests that will allow him to get a high-paying job in the insurance business. He's a unique soul — a former Summit County bum who doesn't actually ski (he used to be a bus driver at Keystone Resort). He is an avid lover of titanium bicycles and seems to live entirely on vegetable goulash, wheat germ, peas, fruit-flavored PowerBars, and unshelled macadamia nuts, which he buys in bulk and breaks apart with a giant nutcracker made for this purpose.

He shared a house with a man named Larry, who has managed the impossible. In the land of million-dollar mountain views, Larry's home looks as though it's from another mountain range — Appalachia. It has a dozen abandoned vehicles in the yard and a view of Interstate 70, just across the road. Inside the garage, a large sign says "Welcome to America — Now Speak English!" The sign carries just a tinge of irony. Larry is married to a Puerto Rican woman.

Despite Sean's unique tastes, he does have one thing going for him that I don't — he's not risk averse. He even borrows money on margin to play the stock market. And thunderstorms don't frighten him. Clearly, I have a lot to learn about adventure cycling.

I spend several days enjoying Sean's company, but eventually it's time to continue on the trail.



The advertisement for Walz Caps features a background image of a cyclist in a blue and white jersey riding a road bike. In the top right corner, the Walz Caps logo is displayed, consisting of a stylized cap icon above the text "WALZCAPS". Below the logo, the text "For on the bike..." is written in a large, bold, sans-serif font. To the right of this text is a smaller inset image of a cyclist riding a mountain bike. Below that is another inset image of a man wearing a cap and a dark shirt, looking down at a bicycle. Further down is a larger inset image of a man in a blue shirt and cap sitting at a table, holding a cup. At the bottom of the advertisement, the text "...and off!" is written in a large, bold, sans-serif font. Below this text is a small image of a maroon cap. To the right of the cap, the text "Wear One Today." is written in a bold, sans-serif font. At the very bottom, the website address "www.walzcaps.com" is written in a bold, sans-serif font.

The next rideable section of the trail climbs from the base of Copper Mountain Ski Resort, up nearly 4,000 feet and over Searle and Kokomo passes. I plan to be on top early, before the inevitable storms move in.

It's not to be. Despite having two different printed route descriptions, it takes me well over an hour to find the trailhead (hint: it's right next to the American Eagle lift right in the center of the ski village — a fact neither printed guide mentions).

The climbing is smooth and scenic, but unrelenting. By the time I reach treeline, I'm reduced to pushing. And, of course, once I hit the first pass at 1:00 PM, the hail returns.

Between Searle and Kokomo is a three-mile section of lovely, flat riding through alpine meadows. Lovely, that is, except for the freezing precipitation and the ever-present threat of being electrocuted.

The weather subsides. The second pass is visible, just a short climb of a few hundred feet. With the top in sight, I'm feeling a little more open to taking risks. Relieved, I begin the final slog to the top.

Crack! The lightning strike is close enough to make me jump. There is no shelter. I have to keep going.

CR-AAA-CK! The bolt leaves a white trail across my retinas. I'm pushing the bike harder now, exhausted yet fueled by adrenaline, soaking wet and not noticing a bit. At this point, I'm wondering what it will feel like to be struck by lightning. Will I be killed instantly? Or left alive to die slowly, brain smoldering, and eyes exploding like in some bad horror movie?

Still pushing, I wait for the inevitable static buildup that lightning survivors talk about. What will my newspaper back home — where I had been a reporter before getting laid off recently — say about my death? Would they quote some expert who will say how stupid I was for being up here in a storm? How I shouldn't have risked it?

Then suddenly I'm on top, and remarkably still alive. I leap on my bike, heading down the other side before I have time to clip into my pedals. I don't stop until



Creekside trail. Buffalo Creek provides the opportunity for cycling and geology lessons.

treeline, when I pause to look back at the ridge.

I think, who's risk averse now, Sean?

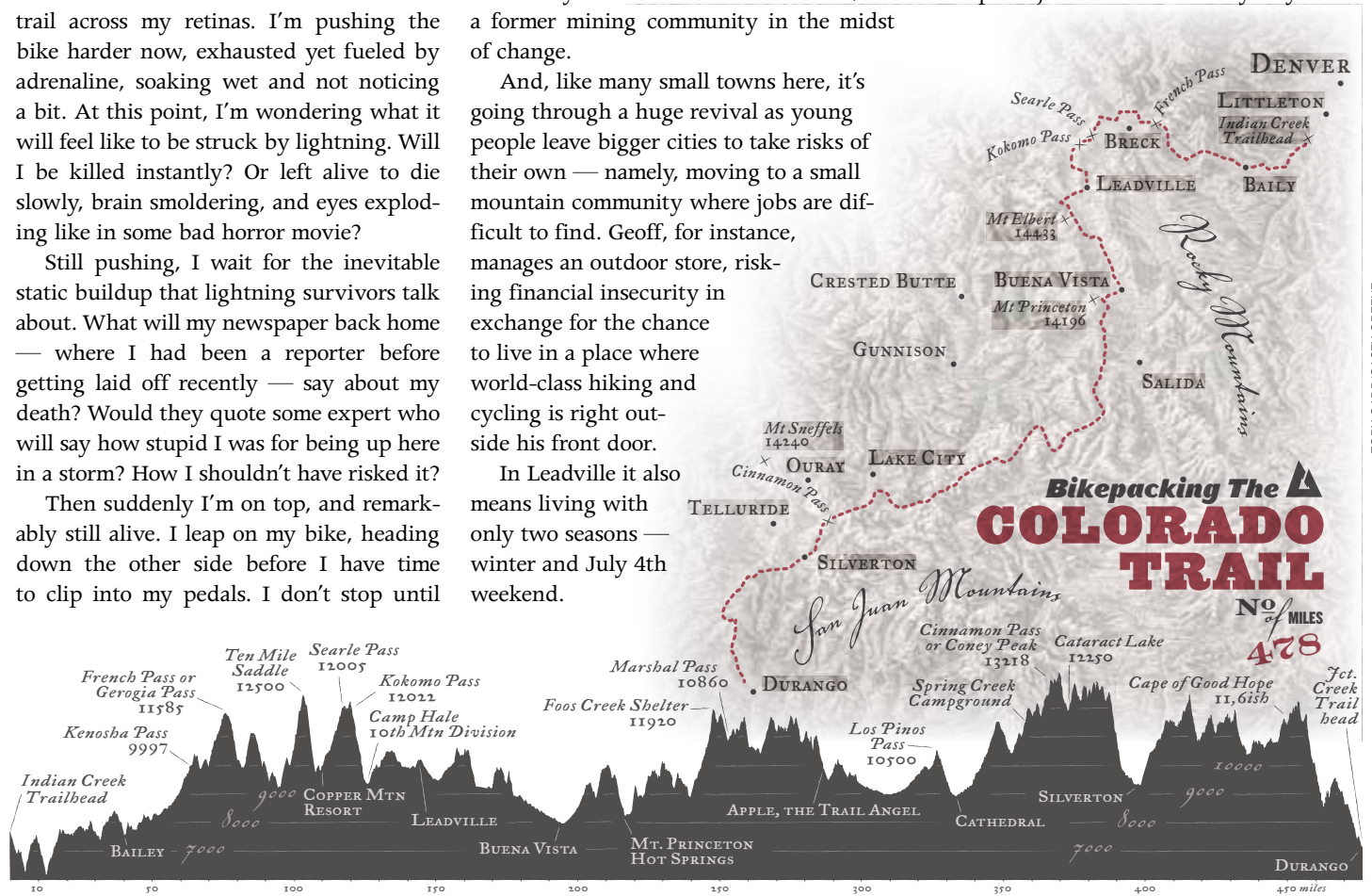
By the time I reach the bottom, the clouds have cleared and the sun is bright.

Hours later, I arrive in Leadville, where I stay at the home of Sean's friend, Geoff Guthrie. Leadville, at about 10,500 feet, is the highest occupied town in the U.S. Like many small towns in the Rockies, it's a former mining community in the midst of change.

And, like many small towns here, it's going through a huge revival as young people leave bigger cities to take risks of their own — namely, moving to a small mountain community where jobs are difficult to find. Geoff, for instance, manages an outdoor store, risking financial insecurity in exchange for the chance to live in a place where world-class hiking and cycling is right outside his front door.

In Leadville it also means living with only two seasons — winter and July 4th weekend.

Geoff regales me with stories of life in a small town. He told me about the sheriff's deputy who tasered high-school kids for fun, or the cowboy who was arrested for riding down Main Street naked on his horse. We walk through the town, completely quiet at 9:00 PM on a Saturday night in July. The next morning, Geoff makes me five scrambled eggs ("You're on the trail," he explains) and sends me on my way.



TOBY GADD/CASEY GREENE

After two short days of pleasant trail riding (and only a little more rain), I wind up in my next town, Buena Vista. Exhausted and dehydrated, I splurge for an overpriced motel room. I also have a sudden need to see a doctor. Though I had been risking life and limb on the trail for a week, my injury stemmed from something far more mundane. It seems I managed to bop myself in the eye with a saliva-covered chew toy while playing tug with Geoff's dog Banjo.

At least I have a chance to regain some of the 10 pounds I've already lost. For lunch I stop and help myself to four pints of soda at the "free drink refills" restaurant. I chase my dehydration with two more pints of water and slosh out into the hot Colorado afternoon.

Dinner is at a restaurant called Quincy's where there's only one item on the menu — sirloin (or prime rib on the weekends). A nine-ounce cut with salad, potato, bread, and pint of Fat Tire Ale runs me \$13.

I'm enjoying these small mountain towns so I skip another section of trail and mosey down to Salida. The vibe here is even more welcoming. Artists have invaded the town and filled the streets with craft shops and galleries. There's a metal cow on a rooftop and an alligator on a brick wall. One shop wall is completely covered by old kayaks. The local taverns are full of young people, and everyone rides around on one-speed townie bikes.

At the center of town, locals have just opened a man-made kayaking course (They had the grand opening when I was there, with a man sitting in the bow of a raft holding scissors to cut a ribbon strung across the river.) I even find a shop to replace my biking shoes, which had split apart from all that walking over rocks in the rain.

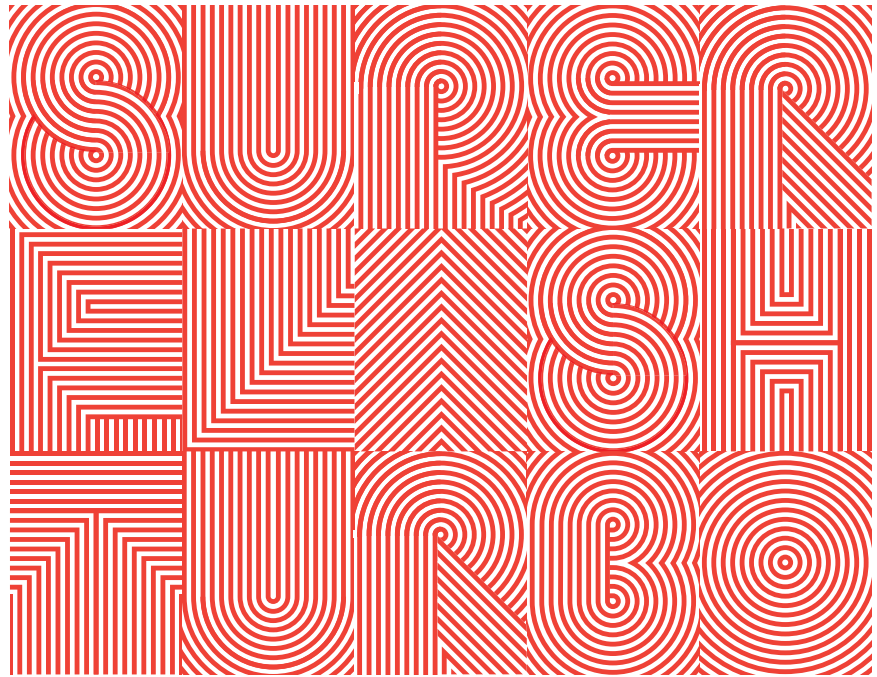
There's a great hostel here too, filled with backpackers taking a break from the Colorado Trail. It's a chance to trade stories, get some trail tips, and generally relax.

The weather seems to be improving too, so when I leave Salida, I think I've left all risks behind me.

The next stretch of trail begins with the Monarch Crest. It's a famous section of mountain-biking trail that takes riders over miles of treeless ridge.

Just to start things off on the right track, I decide to pass on the 4,000-foot ascent and pay \$20 for a trail shuttle. I join a handful of day-riders who will follow the

continued on page 38



The evolution of bicycle safety.
Superflash Turbo



BETTER BICYCLE PRODUCTS FOR A BETTER WORLD

planetbike.com

WHEELWORKS Est. 1977
BICYCLE STORES | CYCLING CENTERS

BELMONT WHEELWORKS
480 Trapelo Road
Belmont, MA 02478
tel: 617-489-3577

The New England Tandem & Touring Center

Tandems: Calfee • CoMotion • Santana • Trek • KHS
Touring Bikes: CoMotion • I.F. • Serotta • Surly • Trek

Introducing!
New England's
Finest Selection
of Tandems, Touring Bikes,
& Accessories

All Under One Roof!

wheelworks.com/goto/tandemtouringcenter



continued from page 17

for the town. Without the resort, most visitors probably wouldn't take the time to stop and enjoy this stunning desert valley.

We pedaled up and checked into giant rooms with huge plush beds. The rooms were bigger than the whole hut the night before. We showered off three days of trail dirt, visited the unique museum that showcases an incredible collection of rare American cars, and went out to dinner.

The next morning, we snuck in one more ride on a short sweet singlettrack above the resort. Kevin shuttled our vehicle from Fruita to the resort, so we just loaded bikes



and suitcases and drove off. It doesn't get much easier than this — simple logistics, cool places to stay, great trails, a beer cooler, and a drumroll finish punctuated by a cannonball into the resort's cool blue pool. **AC**

Nathan Ward is a regular contributor and has covered many exotic locales around the globe for Adventure Cyclist. More can be learned about his writing and photography at nathanward.com.

continued from page 23

route back down to the valley.

The driver takes one look at my loaded bike and says, to no one in particular, "Where are we going?"

The trail lives up to its reputation. It's fun, scenic, and warm in the morning sun. Unfortunately, it's followed by 12 miles of the nastiest, bumpiest trail I've experienced thus far. I'm riding so slowly over the rocks and roots that I'm not going much faster than a walk.

And then, when I finally come to a stop for the night, I'm in for a bigger surprise — it seems my three-day supply of food is gone.

Unbelievably, at some point during all that bumping, a vital zipper on my panniers had opened. My bagels, cheese, sausage — all had been lost miles back.

Stunned, I sit down and contemplate my options.

Keep going anyway? I had a few oatmeal packets and some noodles but I'd never have the energy for the long days ahead.

Retrace my steps? That would take hours! And what if I went through all that trouble, only to find the squirrels and bears had gotten to it first?

Give up?

In my pessimism, the thought is tempting. I could ride back down to Salida, rent a car, do some day-rides ...

And then Sean's voice comes into my head and I realize I no longer want to be risk averse.

I do the Buddhist thing and choose the middle path. I take a chance, change my route, and leave the mountains to the west so I can resupply in the cowboy town of Gunnison. In doing this, I skip even more of the Colorado Trail — so much so that

I begin to ask myself if it was fair to say I was on the trail at all.

But if you're adaptable to change, change works out. My detour to Gunnison gives me the chance to have a huge chicken dinner (free salad bar!) at the Ol' Miner Steakhouse. That night, I camp at nearby Blue Mesa Reservoir, the state's largest lake, where the sunset is perfect and the stars are so bright I can almost read without a headlamp. The next day brings me to Lake City, an amazing village surrounded by cliffs on all sides. On the way, I run into the first bicycle tourist I'd seen on this trip, a lovely young lady from Phoenix named Brack, who left late in the morning after recovering from a night of drinking.

I camp at another lake that night — the majestic San Cristobal — and get up at dawn for the highest climb of the trip — a 4,000-foot ascent on jeep trails to 12,600-foot-high Cinnamon Pass. It takes five hours, pedaling switchback after endless switchback. But I ride the whole way, at the end stopping every 100 feet to rest.

Eventually, I reach the top.

I shout. I laugh. I throw my fist into the rarified air. The air is still, and the sky is blue.

Surrounding me is tundra and year-round snowfields and the tops of 14,000-foot peaks.

There's no sound but the occasional chirp of marmots and my own breathing.

It's worth it all, I think. For moments like this, it's worth any risk. **AC**

Alan Wechsler is a freelance writer who lives in New York's Capital Region. He is an avid traveler, photographer, and cyclist who has toured throughout the U.S., along with the UK, Ireland, India, Pakistan, and Cambodia. He is currently planning a bike tour of "any place that doesn't have hail."

Affordable...Supported...Bliss adventurecycling.org/tours

- Aug. 21-27 ■ Oregon Coastal Odyssey
- Sept. 11-18 ■ Freedom Flyer (Philly to DC)
- Sept. 18-25 ■ Great Lakes Relaxed
- Sept. 18-25 ■ Sierra Sampler



CURTIS CORLEW