

Rocky Mountain High Jinks

by Doug Schnitzspahn
Photos by Seth Hughes



A long weekend tour in the thin air and screaming singletrack of the Colorado Trail only gets better when you bike straight into a resort hotel

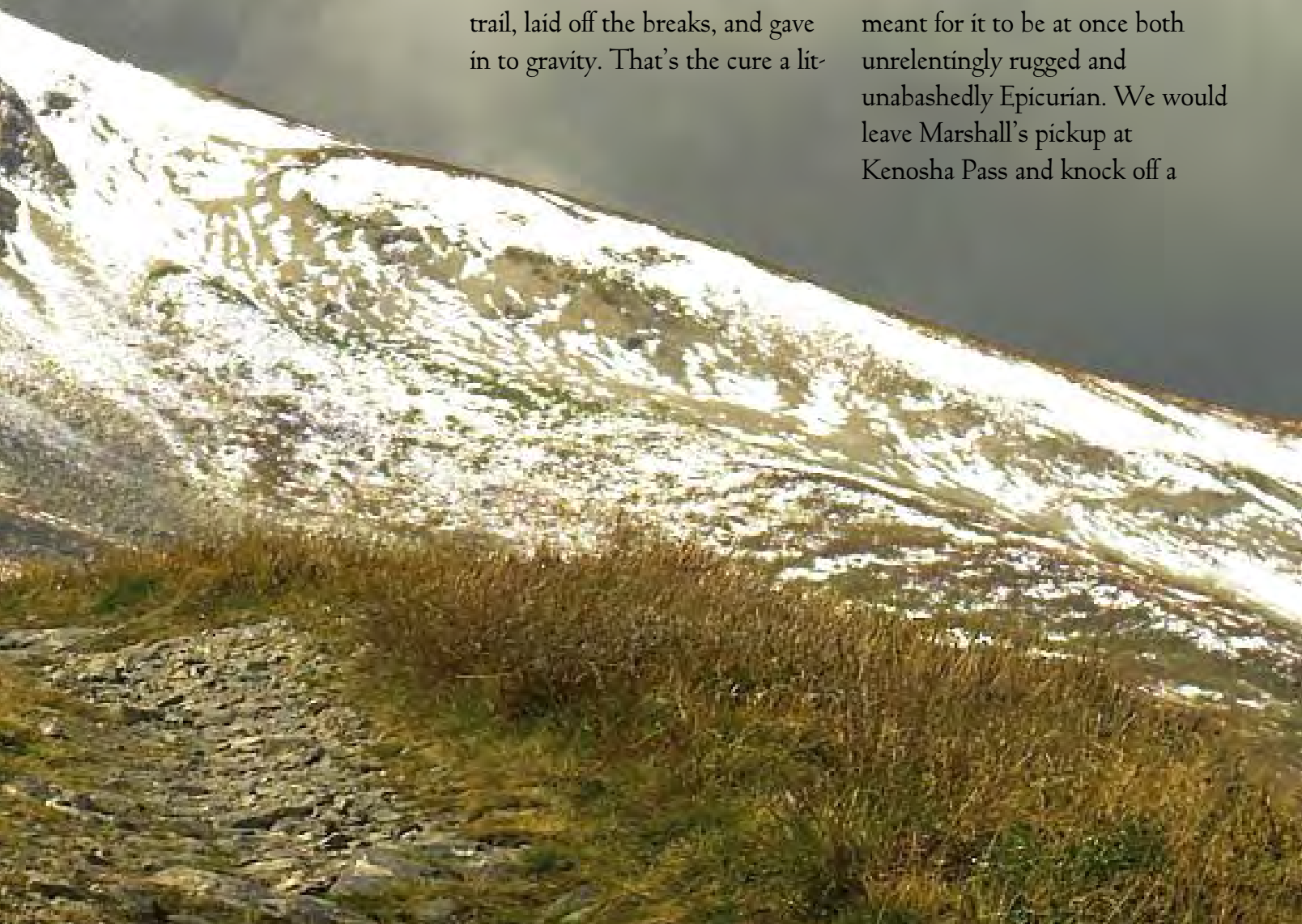
Just as the climb started to hurt, we headed down. The tight, dark forest opened to a big grassy bowl sprawling to a horizon of high peaks still shrouded in clouds that hadn't decided if they wanted to clear up or sock in. The trail dropped into aspens flaming gold with autumn. The air had that rich fall smell — a combination of drizzle, loamy dirt, and aspen bark. Everything balanced on the edge of the season. We stopped to take it all in. Somewhere up in those distant peaks shrouded in

snow-clouds was Georgia Pass, our first big highpoint. It was going to be a long day.

But before the big climb, we descended into the bowl, and as I rolled out into the sagebrush and the sheer joy of bombing the first downhill of the trip I forgot about my lack of training, the high altitude, the all-nighter I'd pulled the night before, and the breakfast burrito I'd wolfed down on the herky-jerky drive to Kenosha Pass that was now threatening to unpleasantly reemerge from my stomach. I let the bike find the trail, laid off the breaks, and gave in to gravity. That's the cure a lit-

tle shot of downhill provides. Besides, there may have been two 11,000-foot passes to climb that day, but somewhere beyond those peaks and clouds there was a hot tub waiting.

Our plan was simple. Marshall and I were to spend three gutty days biking the Colorado Trail though the highest parts of Summit County and two nights living large in the resort towns down in the valleys — a fine balance of hard riding, easy living, high-mountain adventure, and the first week of football season. We meant for it to be at once both unrelentingly rugged and unabashedly Epicurian. We would leave Marshall's pickup at Kenosha Pass and knock off a

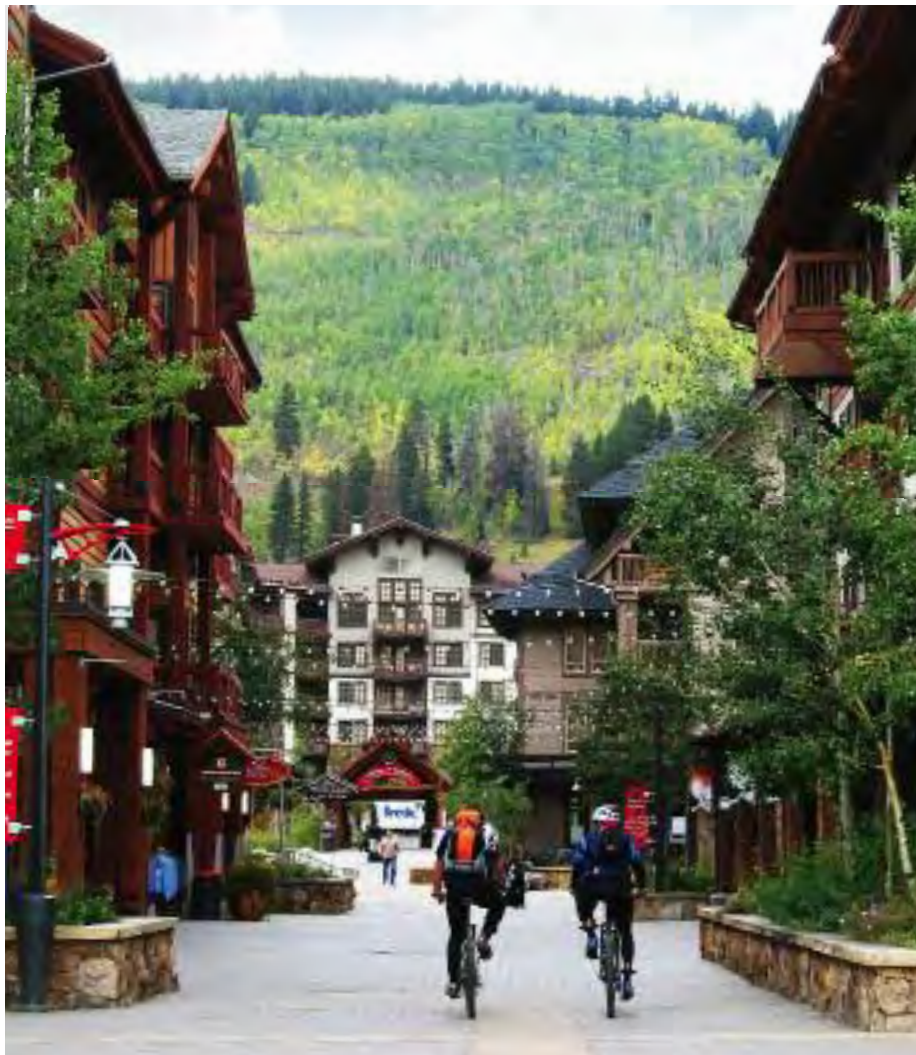


90-mile, 15,000-foot-vertical-gain, three-day, out-and-back, mountain-bike ride. Each day would be along routes considered “epic” rides, according to mountain-bike guidebooks.

Best of all, because we would be staying in hotels, it would be easy to ride self-supported. We decided to forgo most touring gear and carry only packs with extra clothing layers, bike-repair essentials, some food and water, a bank card, and a pair of flip-flops (our one luxury item for when we reached the hotels) — little more than the gear we’d normally carry for a long day ride. And what better way to recover from an epic ride than kicking back in a hot tub taking in the view or sidling up to a bar with a microbrew to catch the kickoff of the football season and Roger Federer dismantling the competition at the U.S. Open?

As the trail started climbing relentlessly up again, I was back on my game, grinding into the long, rooty, singletrack climb up to Georgia Pass. Sure, I had spent far too much time hunched over a laptop and dealing with the needs of my young family instead of riding over the past few months, but I was on the loose now, and with the stagnation of the first few miles spun out of my system, I was thinking about nothing else but finding more of that seemingly endless downhill at the end of the climb. That breakfast burrito was, thankfully, a distant memory.

At the top of the pass, all Marshall and I thought about was how lucky we were



Bring on the hot tubs. Somewhere in this village there are elves making cookies.

that the weather had held. A few nights before, it had been snowing up here (normal weather for September in these parts), but the cloud cover we observed from

Kenosha in the morning had burned off and we were treated to a view of the long backbone of the Ten Mile and Mosquito Range and the pyramid of 13,370-foot Guyot Peak in all its glory in front of us. The pass is at 11,585 feet and at this elevation everything is harder, every pedal stroke a concerted effort, but now we were done with our first big climb and were staring out across the sea of peaks. The riding may be tough up here, but I get an atavistic rush from churning through singletrack up on the rolling tundra. And what singletrack it is.

The Colorado Trail stretches a perfect, ribbony, foot-and-a-half-wide, 483 miles between Denver and Durango, bisecting the heart of the Centennial State’s high Rockies and lacing back and forth across the Continental Divide. It was originally conceived as a hiking trail, just a wishful dream first plotted out by a U.S. Forest



DOUG SCHNITZPAHN

Riding high. The Colorado Trail traverses countless thin-aired alpine areas.

Service employee named Bill Lucas in 1974. But the trail itself was hammered into existence by Gudy Gaskill, the gritty, first female president of the Colorado Mountain Club, who picked up where Lucas left off.

For 20 years, she personally lobbied apathetic regional administrators, spearheaded bands of volunteers armed with pulaskis and bow saws, and proved that the trail could be built at a cost of \$500 per mile as opposed to the absurdly bloated cost of \$25,000 per mile that the Forest Service claimed it needed. Gaskill continued butting heads and swinging an ax even when the project seemed as if it had come to a halt. Finally, in 1984, Colorado governor Dick Lamm put his muscle behind the trail. Two years later, the dream officially came true and the first through-hikers began humping the nearly 500 miles of new trails between Waterton Canyon and Molas Pass.

Although the idea of biking the Colorado Trail is accepted, it's not necessarily applauded by the Colorado Trail Foundation, who primarily want to preserve the experience of the thing by foot. Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the thought never crossed their minds that masochistic thrill seekers would want to pedal a bike across the highest wilds of the nation's most mountainous state. But truth be told, Gaskill's crews created one of the absolute best singletrack experiences on the planet, nearly 400 miles of the type of trail mountain bikers drool over.

The backside of Georgia Pass, however, is not a prime example of the best singletrack the Colorado Trail has to offer. It's rocky, root-covered, and strewn with errant little streams that follow the course of the trail for a few feet before cascading off a water bar, but Marshall and I took it full speed down to the maze of jeep tracks and abandoned mining roads at the bottom. It was starting to get late, and we were still nearly 20 miles and one major climb from our rooms in Breckenridge. We devoured Honey Stinger bars and canned Italian tuna (big mistake), downed some water, and dug into the next climb up West Ridge.

There was none of the Zen clarity I had experienced climbing up Georgia Pass, I just hurt. The frustration of the climb mounted as our legs burned and bikes seemed to go nowhere. By the time we topped out on the

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forested high point of the ridge at 11,150 feet, we were useless. We snapped a few photos of each other collapsed along the side of the trail and sucked down the rest of our water.

“Dude, never show anyone those photos,” warned Marshall. We looked utterly broken. But back on our bikes, the trail rewarded us with 10 miles of some of the best, no-brakes, downhill singletrack you will ever ride anywhere.

After reaching the bottom and pedaling the paved bike trail into Breckenridge, we rolled right into the Hyatt lobby on our bikes and checked in. The staff barely batted an eyelash. This is what I love about Colorado mountain towns: unless your last name is Armstrong or Stamstad, you are not going to impress anyone here. Adventure is the norm.

“You can ride down the stairs,” the bellhop said.

So we did. And then we slipped on the flip-flops, nursed our wounds in the hot tubs, and ordered room service. This was definitely the posh way to tour. I’ve been unemployed and done the long, multi-day tours. I’ve done the sleep-under-the-solar-blanket, live-off-a-few-smashed-together-gummi-bears, and stink-for-a-week thing. I’ve earned my stripes. Now that I’m nearing forty, I’m starting to understand the

Nuts & Bolts: The Colorado Trail

Our Trip: We took three days to ride segments six and seven of the Colorado Trail as listed in the guidebook *The Colorado Trail* (\$23, Colorado Mountain Club Press, 2006).

When to go: Go late, from June through September, to avoid snow. Travel early to avoid thunderstorms on exposed passes above tree-line. If you follow the trail (all singletrack) the entire way, the trip is 91.4 miles, but there are many options and bail-out points if things get too difficult.

This is the only section of the trail where you can mix multi-day riding with resort lodging.

Breckenridge:

Breckenridge is a full mountain-resort town with plenty of lodging options, restaurants, bike stores, and supermarkets



(Breckenridge Resort Chamber, www.gobreck.com).

Copper: Copper is a resort village with several lodging options, restaurants, bars, and a sporting goods store (www.coppercolorado.com).

The Full Colorado Trail: A full mountain-bike trip on the Colorado Trail covers 535 miles between Denver and Durango and can take

anywhere from five to 25 days. The bike route takes five, long, dirt- and/or paved-road detours around six wilderness areas, taking on 52 miles in the process. The easiest option is to ride with a support vehicle, but unsupported rides are possible. *The Colorado Trail* guidebook details the route and every possible resupply, lodging, and camping point along the way.

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true art of outdoor adventure — and it doesn't have to be all misery. Don't get me wrong. I like pain as much as the next guy. It's good to snap the soul out of the monotonous drone of cellphones, computers, and commuting that is our day-to-day American life. But I also have slowly developed a love for fine things — aged St. Emillions, a perfect espresso that's frosted with crema and tastes like chocolate, classy hotels. A trip that combines both pain and pleasure isn't selling out, it's living well. This trip was meant to be a work of art.

The next morning, however, was a work of lactic acid. We strayed from the Colorado Trail to pedal up alongside the ski lifts at Breckenridge and connect back into the trail at the top of Wheeler Pass, a 12,495-foot "low point" on the Ten Mile Range, the wall of peaks that separates Breck from Copper Mountain. Tour de France riders use the term *un jour sans*, a day without, to describe the type of emptiness and lead legs I felt churning along under the lifts as we headed up 3,600 vertical feet in less than six miles. Marshall was in



Man and machine. *Even bicycles enjoy a well-upholstered couch once in a while.*



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worse shape, threatening to bag the next day altogether, give me the keys to his truck, and bum a ride home from Copper. *Tres sans*. After pushing through snow near the top, it was a rocket ride down to Copper, but my ennui was such that I have to admit I was more excited about the idea of watching football than I was about more riding. But, after beers, more hot tubs, a big Chinese meal, and a clean bed, our worries faded.

After a good rest, the next day was most definitely a with-it day. Admitting that we might have bitten off more than we could handle and accepting the fact that we had one day to make it back to the truck on Kenosha Pass, we chose to skip the climb back over the Ten Mile Range and cut off a good portion of the West Ridge climb on a dirt road that snaked up past abandoned mine-tailings pools, boarded-up homesteads, and a Masonic cemetery until it made an almost vertical run up to Georgia Pass. But my legs were with it. My lungs were with it. My head was with it. After two rough days, we had finally broken through to that point you reach on any epic ride when it feels as if you are in an eternal moment — pedaling, the sky blue, the



Checking in. *The employees stopped laughing when they saw the tire tracks on the massage tables.*

oncoming winter frozen in its tracks as autumn enjoys one last huge breath of life. Climbing with ease, I felt as if I could ride forever. And Marshall was smiling, just as

dialled in. Before we knew it, we had topped out under the slopes of Guyot Peak once more.

We didn't take much time to stop.



GREG SIPPLE

 Adventure Cycling Association's

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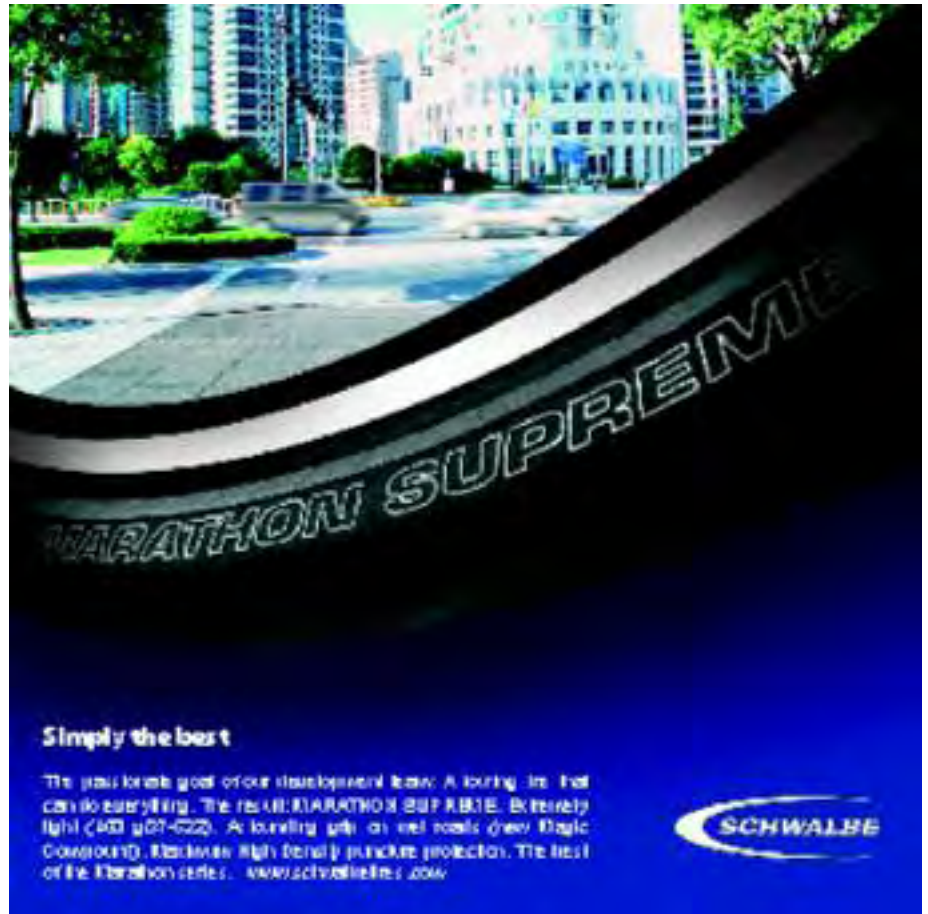
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The riding just felt too good, and we were reeling off miles back to the car. We bombed stupid fast down Georgia Pass; so fast that it became pure instinct. I was purely with my bike. This is why we suffer. This is childlike joy. This is what we never get to feel back in the grown-up work world. Stupid fast.

And, in this moment I realized that, yes, I love good wine and fancy hotel rooms and watching football. But what I really love is riding so hard that I forget about needing to feel comfort. 🇺🇸


Doug Schnitzspahn writes and rides (and roots for the New York Giants while nursing a recovery beer) from his home in Boulder, Colorado. He has written for magazines including Outside, Wild Earth, Islands, and Powder. His work has been noted in Best American Essays and he received a Fellowship from the Colorado Council on the Arts in 2003. He says he'll ride the entire Colorado Trail when they add a few more hot tubs along the way.



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