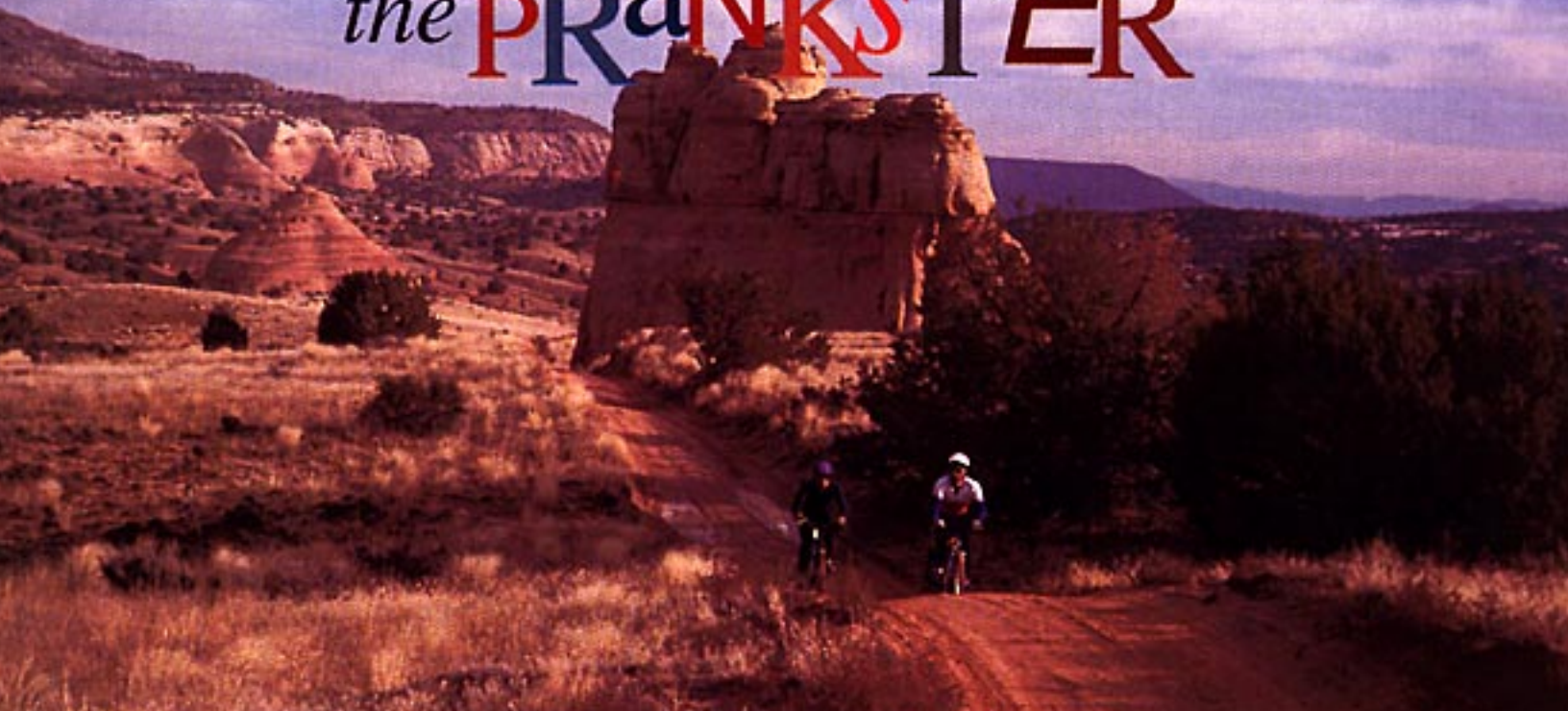


KOKOPELLI

the PRANKSTER



Kokopelli's Trail, from Colorado to Utah, is one of cycling's best off-road adventures, even during one of the wettest months on record



The assembled group before things went awry.

Story and photos by
Bob Woodward

There's an old adage about the best-laid plans of mice and men going awry. And it's true — plans often do go astray, but when you're grappling with nature on an off-road adventure that brings a nearly complete sense of freedom in spite of its problems, it just doesn't matter. It's still a whole lot of fun.

So it was when six of us decided to converge from various parts of the United States on Grand Junction, Colorado, to ride one of mountain biking's best long trails, Kokopelli's Trail. The beauty of our plan was its simplicity. Once united in Grand Junction, we would have no specific timetable, no set places to be every night, no pressing demands. How this trip developed would depend on biorhythms, as

much as anything. If we all woke up feeling frisky, we might opt for a long day in the saddle. If, however, we woke up with relaxation and side attractions in mind, we might be off on a hike up a side canyon, or off bouldering, or off flying kites.

The reasons for choosing Kokopelli's Trail were compelling — the trail is long enough to take a few days to complete, and it promised a variety of riding, from easy to

technical. There was also the prospect of incredible scenery. Length for length's sake — that is to say, riding a long trail or route simply to chalk it up as another merit badge earned — is something our group never considered. Length to us meant more time together. We met in Grand Junction at an appointed hour late one fall day and headed off to a restaurant to eat and lay out the framework for the trip. It was immediately obvious that our individual talents would complement one another's over the next four, five or six days it took us to make the trip.

Jerry, John and Harry were consummate gear fanatics, master mechanics, and bike aficionados extraordinaire. Tom was just a few years removed from the raging hormones of adolescence. He was as gifted a mechanic as Jerry, John and Harry, but was liable at any instant to ride down the face of a steep rock outcrop without any consideration to the possibility of bodily injury. Bob was the *maitre du cuisine*, a man with so many river trips and long-distance cycling expeditions under his belt that he could create culinary miracles from nothing more than freeze-dried food. I provided that crucial long-trip ingredient — humor.

According to legend, Kokopelli, the flute-playing rock-art Hopi figure, was something of a prankster. That and a symbol of fertility. His namesake trail came

about as a joint effort among mountain bikers in Grand Junction and Moab and the Bureau of Land Management. Utilizing existing Jeep roads and single-track trails and linking them together, a trail was created by volunteers using equipment supplied by the BLM.

Starting near the banks of the Colorado River near Loma, Colorado, the trail winds along above the river for a spell before dropping down alongside the river then climbing back up to the heights. Eventually, the trail crosses the river and heads up into the highest parts of the mass of mesas and ridges outside of Moab, then dips into the town that is alternately praised as the "mountain biker's paradise," and damned as the "mountain biker's Las Vegas."

Eden or Gomorrah, Moab was our goal. And the plan to get there at a leisurely pace was tied directly into the fact that we were assured by Moab locals months before that late September was indeed the premier time to ride. It was then that temperatures were in the mid to high seventies during the day, cooling down at night into the forties. Standing at the Loma riverside boat launch site in six inches of mud in a driving rain storm, we felt betrayed by the locals, but glad to have had the foresight to bring along rain gear. Our collective wisdom told us that this storm was a passing oddity, as it never rains that long or that hard in this part of the world. But it continued to pour, and the quagmire of adobe clay at our feet grew worse by the minute.

The adobe posed the trip's first major obstacle — how to mount up and make contact with your clipless pedals without the shoes' cleats being completely jammed with mud. After a few aborted attempts at cleaning out one cleat and getting it secured to the clipless pedal and then, while leaning on another rider, cleaning out the other cleat and getting it set, we found by teetering on a nearby guardrail it was possible, with the utmost dexterity, to clean both cleats and hop onto the bike and be off. Off, over rolling rocky roads that helped clean the mud from the tires' knobs, and sent mud spitting into our faces. The rain continued to fall in sheets, but the simple fact that we were moving, on the trail and into adventure, raised our spirits.

Our spirits lifted even higher when the road ended and singletrack riding began. Not just any singletrack mind you, but singletrack with a view. There, hundreds of feet below the rim of the canyon, the Colorado River lives up to its name, a ribbon of water running through the desert, all red and roily. In contrast, the yellow leaves of the recently turned cottonwoods added a wonderful splash of color.

The views are so spectacular in spots that it's hard to concentrate on the single-track ahead. As the singletrack gave way to

more four-wheel-drive road, the sun broke through. Our wet clothes dried quickly, and the almost-impassable slick adobe roads suddenly became concrete hard.

We rode off the rim down toward the river. At the end of one long singletrack downhill section, we came to a raging stream filled to flood stage.

Kokopelli's Trail guides say this stream is never more than two feet deep at best. Today it's five-plus feet deep and speeding along at a healthy, frothy clip. Following a short study of the conditions, we decide that the best way to get across is to: a) strip naked and throw bundled clothes, along with helmets and shoes, across to the other side first and then, b) wade across holding our bikes high overhead. The "throw bundled clothes" part is easy; the "carrying bike high overhead" part is hard. Even at 6 feet 4 inches tall, the water is up to my armpits, it's very cold and my footing is tenuous. But we all make it and the crossing only heightens our sense of shared adventure.

At this point, the trail runs along the Colorado for a bit, then up into rolling terrain and away from the river. Basking in the 70-degree sun (finally!), we decided to spend the rest of this day drying clothes, setting up camp, and snoozing between chapters of weighty tomes held onto for months, just to be read on such a trip as this.

ideal campsite or press on to something we knew must be better down the trail.

The beauty of Kokopelli's Trail is that there is enough access to make van support easy. Normally, in late September, a fast and light self-contained trip is the best way to do the trail. But when it's rainy and cold like it was for us, or hot, as it is in mid-summer, having support helps. With our gear dried, and a comfortable camp established, Bob prepared an Italian meal that warranted five stars in my book. Then it was off to a dry sleeping bag, and visions of cloudless days and warming temperatures.

The next day dawned clear, with a slight breeze wafting in from the west. We started riding through high plateau country dotted with clusters of red-rock spires and walls. It was like pedaling through the ruins of an ancient culture. Just as we passed what could've been a Cretan fortress, we came upon some "Greek ruins" — and around the next corner, a collection of tilting rocks reminiscent of Stonehenge.

As the trail dipped down to the bottomland along the Colorado, it became a muddy mess. (I understand that this section is no longer part of the route.) An axle-deep muddy mess to be exact. It wasn't bad to begin with, but as the miles crept by, the bikes would get so jammed with mud that we had to take them to the river to be bap-



Six inches of rain on the first day of the ride turned the road into a quagmire of clinging adobe clay.

Objects like 1,000-page books were possible to have along because of a last-minute, weather-related decision not to go self-supported, but van-supported. It was the vision of a soaking-wet down sleeping bag, a soggy tent and cooking freeze-dried food over a mountaineer's stove in the driving rain that made us go with the van. Driven by my wife, the van would catch up with us late in the day, after my wife had spent a day canyon-combing on foot. From our rendezvous point, we'd backtrack to some

tized. Once immersed, the mud flowed off and the bikes worked again.

After a couple of hours of mud and immersion, the trail climbed onto higher ground, well away from the river before swooping back down to meet the river again at Dewey Bridge and Utah Highway 128.

Tom and I took a spin down the highway and found an abandoned curio stand, complete with a lively mural telling of the sins of city life. A few steps from the mural

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Even though
the Colorado
runs through
it, water is
short on
Kokopelli's
Trail.

there was a picnic table covered with a tin roof to protect travelers from the sun. Perched atop the canopy cover was a well-rusted, old balloon-tired klunker bike. Spotting the bike, Tom climbed to the top of the roof and mounted the ancient bike, posing as if frozen in time, riding off into eternity. We rejoined the rest of the group up the well-maintained dirt road across Dewey Bridge. A suitable campsite — flat ground surrounded by a phalanx of redrock ramparts compete with turrets — soon presented itself. We settled in to camp chores as Frisbee-shaped clouds started scudding in across the sky.

Undaunted by the prospect of a gathering storm, Tom ambled off to the van for his kites. Soon he had two trick kites aloft. The kite show ended with dinner — tonight, Bob lays on Mexican fare. Well-nourished, we headed to our tents under threatening skies.

When we set off the next day, the weather still threatened, but it didn't let loose. This promised to be an exceptional day, with perhaps the hardest riding of the trip so far. We turned off the well-beaten road used by hunters, miners and rock-hounds, and headed onto the Cottonwood Canyon Trail.

The serene Cottonwood Canyon Trail offers spectacular views to the east, and tidy little cottonwood groves all around. There's also a mean streak in the trail, however, with jolting thrash-your-arms-and-joints descents and rock-dodging, technical ascents. We labored through the canyon

— sometimes ecstatic, sometimes cursing.

The Cottonwood Canyon Trail ends at its juncture with the Onion Creek Road in Fisher Valley. To the south lies Polar Mesa. To the west lie the spires of the Fisher Towers. The van was nowhere to be seen.

Apparently, we just missed a huge gully-washer storm, as water courses down alongside the road. We surmised that the van had been blocked by flash floods lower down, where the road makes several stream crossings. We decided to descend, find the van, and after a pleasant camp, climb back up Onion Creek Trail and continue with what could be a one long day, or if we preferred, two relaxed days, to complete Kokopelli's Trail.

For the first time on this trip, the down-



hill riding was fast and furious. That is, until we came to the place where Onion Creek cuts the road/trail — then, it was brake a bit, hold on and splash through. After a dozen high-speed stream crossings, we spotted the van and made camp, settling in for a pleasant dinner before hiking off toward the base of the Fisher Towers. As the last clouds turned russet at sunset, we declared the worst of the weather ended, and the prospects for the final ride of Kokopelli's last miles, perfect.

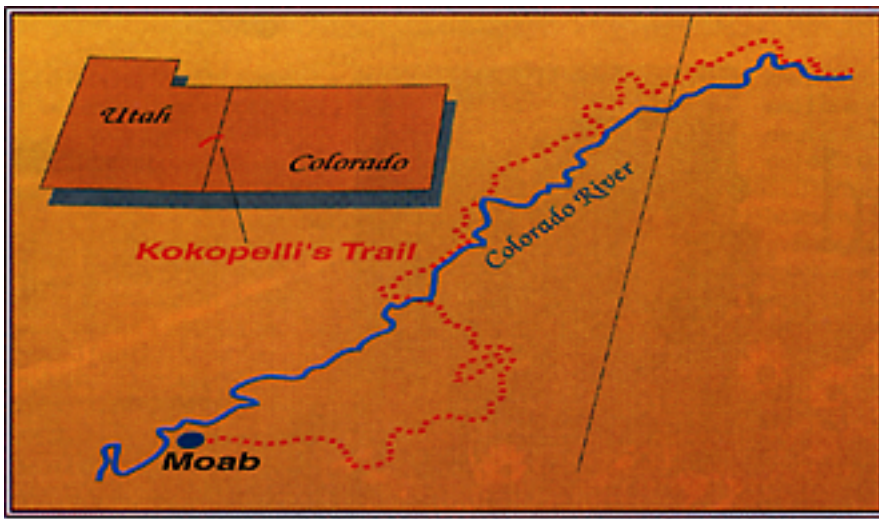
Locked deep in sleep, I dreamed that something was pressing on me, crushing me. The dream was so vivid, I awoke to find that something *was* pressing in on me — the tent's side-walls. A quick check with the flashlight showed the tents loaded down with heavy wet snow. Heavy wet snow that continued to fall as we scrambled out of the tent the next morning. The

little gully that separated the two parts of our camp was now a three-foot-deep torrent of water that was rising by the minute. There was no other choice but to abandon our plans to continue.

An hour later, as we headed our separate ways, sidetracked by one of the coldest, wettest late Septembers on record in this spectacular country, we vowed to come back to Kokopelli's Trail. And next time, we'll ride into Moab. ●



Bob Woodward runs his Crashing Boar writing and photography business from Bend, Oregon.



Nuts and Bolts

TIME OF YEAR TO GO: The best months to ride Kokopelli's Trail are April and May, when the average day-time temperatures are 72.5 F and 82.4 F respectively; and in late September and early October, when the daytime temperatures are in the high 70s. While riders have covered Kokopelli's in two long days, you're better off taking your time and enjoying the countryside over five or six days.

WATER: Water, and how much you have of it, is always the main consideration on the trail. We found only one running stream, Salt Creek, the big muddy Colorado, and a few springs that were mere trickles. If riding self-contained, I'd recommend stashing water before you start your ride. Good cache sites would be in the Fisher Valley, where the Onion Creek Trail meets the Cottonwood Canyon Trail, at Dewey Bridge, Rabbit Valley, the Cisco Boat Landing, and at the boat-launching site at Westwater on the Colorado River.



VEHICLE SUPPORT: Riding self-contained is truly appealing, but, as we found, having vehicle support enhances the ride without intruding on it. The vehicle simply allows

you to travel light and take a bit more time each day on the trail. The same places mentioned for water storage are also good points for riders and the vehicle to rendezvous.

EQUIPMENT: Be sure to have a good repair kit, at least two spare innertubes per rider, sunscreen, two water bottles on the bike, another water source, like a Camelback, on your body, and a good supply of energy bars.

GENERAL INFORMATION: For more information on the trail, contact the Bureau of Land Management's Grand Junction office at (303) 244-3000; or write to: BLM, 2815 H Road, Grand Junction, CO 81503. The Bureau has two free publications regarding Kokopelli's Trail. One covers tips for riding the trail and the loops off the trail around Loma, Colorado. The other guide is a basic map of the trail with general riding information. Another good contact for information is the Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Trail Association, at (303) 241-9561.

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