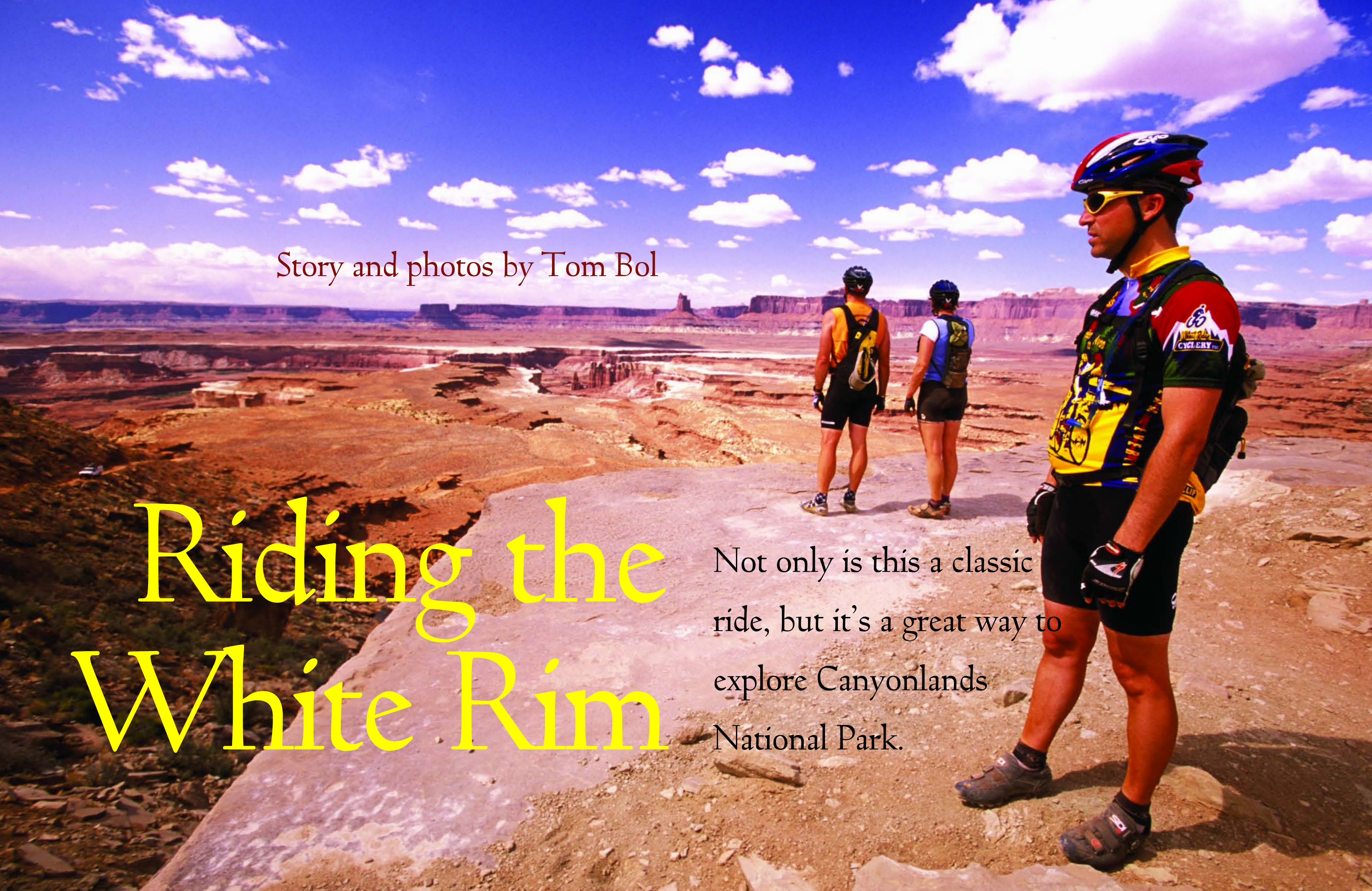
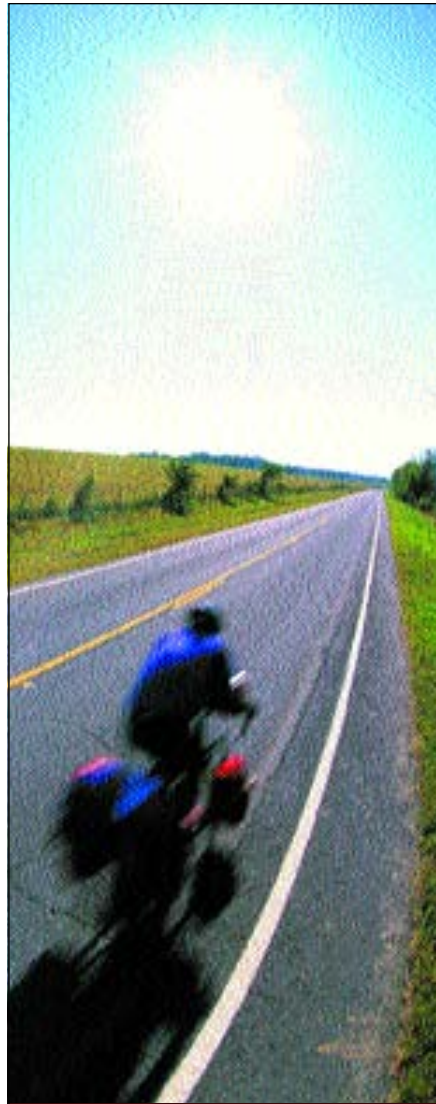


Story and photos by Tom Bol

# Riding the White Rim

Not only is this a classic ride, but it's a great way to explore Canyonlands National Park.





TOM BOL

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"The one thing to remember when you hit a sand patch is to keep your weight back," Robi Pochapin, one of our guides, had said earlier in the day. "Over-pedal and under-steer."

This thought is flashing through my brain in a long nanosecond as I execute a perfect face plant directly in front on our head guide, Kirsten Petersen. Of course, I have an excuse. Mounted on my head is a bulky, heavy headcam to photograph this incredible ride. In this case, it acts like a lead weight, similar to putting on a heavy sinker when fishing, pulling the bait (my head) in a plumb line directly to the bottom. At least the sand is soft, and besides, I am on one of the most scenic rides in the country, the White Rim Trail in Canyonlands National Park.

I had arrived in Moab a few days earlier to hook up with Rim Tours for a four-day ride on the White Rim Trail. Our group consists of eight riders and two guides, along with a beefy 4 x 4 truck for support. While purists and self-sufficient types may disdain vehicle support, I wanted to take my time and really explore this classic ride—pure unencumbered, enjoyable riding. Four days would allow lots of time for side hikes and enjoying the desert. Having a truck to carry all my camera gear didn't hurt either.

"Today we will be riding a mesa on Mineral Bottom Road for a few miles to make sure everyone's bikes are doing fine, and then we drop down a long hill with switchbacks to the Green River," Kirsten explains over a map as we assemble bikes and make adjustments at our drop-off.

"A good mountain biker is one who doesn't crash," Robi adds. "It is better to test your limits going uphill than going downhill."

Staring down from Horsethief Point to the distant Green River 1,500 vertical feet below, I understand the true nature of their comments. Sinuous switchbacks wind their way through the red wingate sandstone, dropping rapidly from the juniper-covered mesa to the tamarisk-bordered river bottom below. Riding this proves to be as exhilarating as it looks. Without pedaling once, I start down the switchbacks, hitting the breaks regularly, and watch the desert blur past. Switchback after switchback, and then a long straight downhill to the river. Within mere minutes, I have arrived at the bottom. "Wow!" is all I can mutter when I reach the group. "That was a blast!"

We continue riding along an old uranium mining road that makes up the White Rim route, entering Canyonlands National Park, which we will be in for most of our

ride. Wizen, noble cottonwoods line the river, along with dense, feathery tamarisk bushes. Lazuli bunting (blue finch-like birds) trill from lofty branches. The Green River steadily flows past, carving its way through the ancient sandstone until it joins the Colorado River.

The riding is enjoyable, with the occasional sand patch keeping things interesting. In the afternoon we tackle Hardscrabble Hill, proving to be more sandy than most of us can handle. The hard core in our group ride as far as they can; then, almost in slow motion, they tumble over on their side, prompting a few good laughs. Knowing I would end up in the sand anyway, walking my bike up Hardscrabble suits me fine. Later in the day we arrive at Potato Bottom, our campsite for the night.

"See this small rock? It's solid, and you need to grab it with your left hand to climb down this section," advises Robi, who coaches our group as we explore the Holeman slot canyon. I watch Kate, one of our group, grab onto the baseball-sized chockstone, and then slowly slide over a big boulder.

Slot canyons are a unique feature of the Colorado Plateau, and the White Rim Trail crosses one that begs for exploration. We switch from our riding shoes to Texas, ready to wade through the pools of water caught in the sandstone potholes at the canyon's bottom. Sections of this slender canyon are so narrow I can touch both walls at the same time. Vertical cliffs tower above, reducing the cobalt blue sky to a narrow ribbon of blue in a sea of red



**The Morning Spread** A hearty breakfast provides fuel for the human engine.

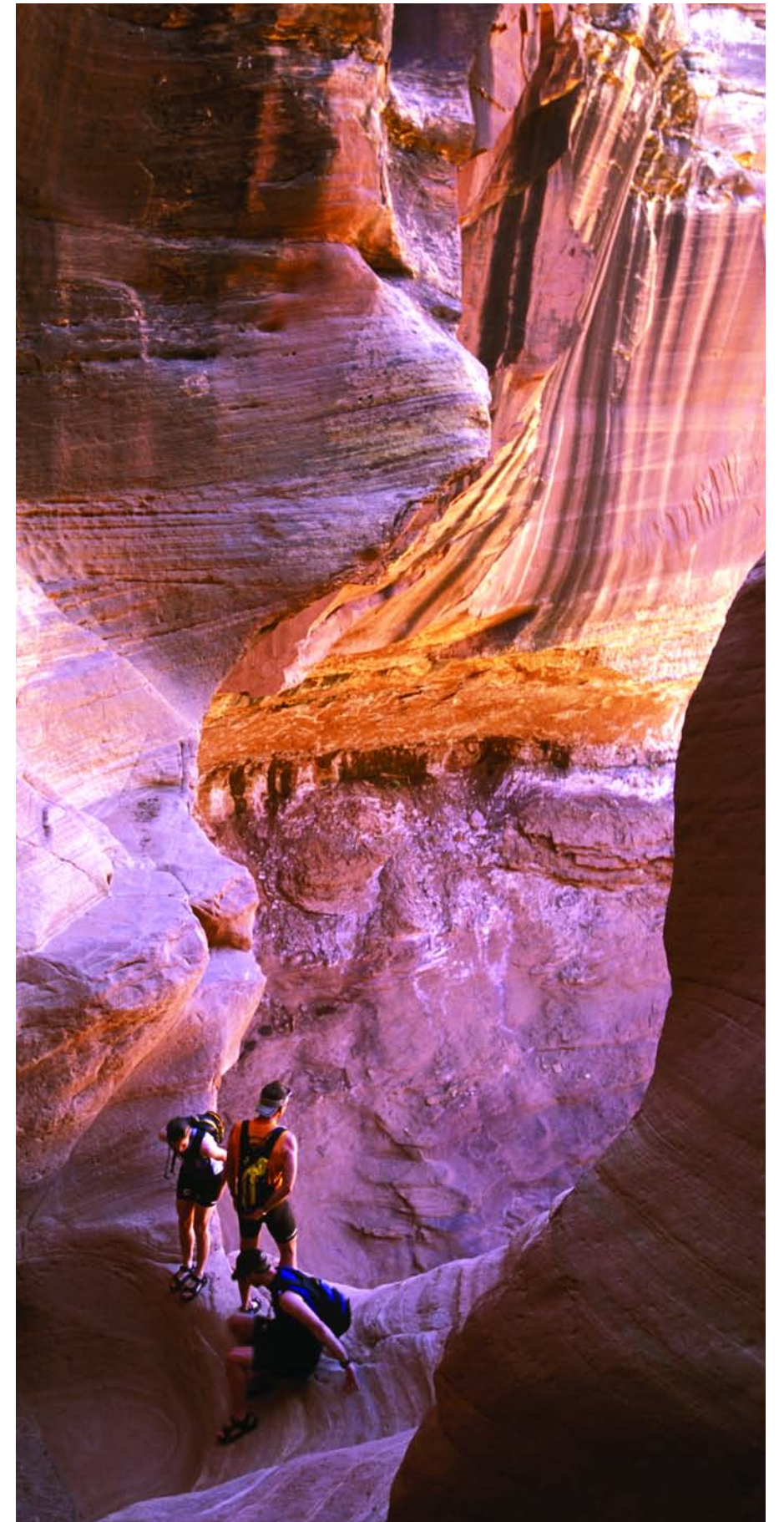
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**Taking a Break** Cyclists explore the Holeman Slot.

## Nuts & Bolts: White Rim Trail

### Directions:

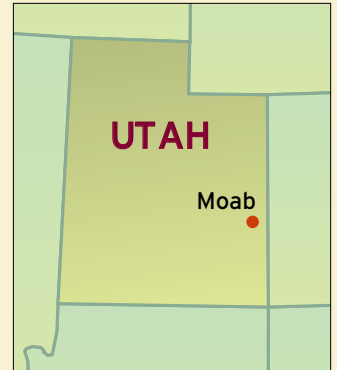
Moab is a mecca for mountain bikers and *the* place to start a White Rim Trail ride. To get there, turn south off I-70 on Highway 191 in east-central Utah. Moab is about 30 miles south, just past Arches National Park. Another option is to fly to Salt Lake City, Utah and take Big Horn Express shuttle service (888-655-7433, [www.bighornexpress.com](http://www.bighornexpress.com)) to

Moab. You can also fly directly to Moab via Great Lakes Air (800-554-5111, [www.greatlake.sav.com](http://www.greatlake.sav.com)). If you need a ride from the airport, try Roadrunner Shuttle of Moab (435-259-9402, [www.roadrunnershuttle.com](http://www.roadrunnershuttle.com)). In town numerous bike shops, funky cafes with strong java, and friendly locals provide all the necessities and information you will need. If you want to

enjoy the ride without hauling your own gear, check out Rim Tours (800-626-7335, [www.rimtours.com](http://www.rimtours.com)). They offer three- or four-day trips with vehicle support and culinary perfection (marinated filet mignon!). Other groups that offer guided rides are Western Spirit (800-845-2453, [www.westernspirit.com](http://www.westernspirit.com)), Dreamride (888-662-2882, [www.dreamride.com](http://www.dreamride.com)) and Kaibab Tours ([www.kaibab-tours.com](http://www.kaibab-tours.com) or 800-451-1133). If you are up to the challenge, riding unsupported will be a great adventure. Contact Canyonlands National Park (435-719-2100, [www.canyonlands.national-park.com](http://www.canyonlands.national-park.com)) for information, permits, and campsite reservations. Prime campsites get reserved months in advance for spring and fall.

### Season:

Spring (March-May) and fall (September-October) are the



best times for the White Rim. The summer is scorching and will melt your tires, and the winter is cold with snow a likely possibility.

### Lodging:

Numerous hotels and B&Bs are located in Moab. Check out [www.moab.net](http://www.moab.net) for your options. A few cyclist favorites include The Gonzo Inn (800-791-4044, [www.gonzoinn.com](http://www.gonzoinn.com)), Red Stone Inn (800-772-1972, [www.moabredstone.com](http://www.moabredstone.com)), and Sunflower Hill B&B (800-662-2786, [www.sunflowerhill.com](http://www.sunflowerhill.com)).



There's no shame in pushing up Hardscrabble Hill.

sandstone. After executing a few climbing maneuvers, a couple of pool wades and one butt slide, we encounter a precipitous drop-off. At this point, the canyon drops at least a hundred feet straight down, continuing its tumultuous journey to the Green River. We can go no farther and retrace our route back up the canyon to our bikes for more riding.

We encounter our ride's namesake, white rim sandstone, on our second riding day. This white, crusty sandstone layer, formed 280 million years ago, is sandwiched between countless other red layers, clearly visible in the distant sandstone strata. We ride on this layer throughout the rest of our trip, occasionally leaving it for

hill climbs or camping areas.

"Over there is where Butch Cassidy and his gang holed up in Robber's Roost, near the Ekker Ranch," Robi says in camp on Murphy Hogback, a stunning campsite

*Sinuuous switchbacks wind their way through the red wingate sandstone, dropping rapidly from the juniper-covered mesa...*

perched on a ridge overlooking a vast section of Canyonlands National Park. "That formation is Cleopatra's Chair, and that area is called the Land of Standing Rocks."

Rarely have I camped anywhere as

scenic. Endless desert towers and buttes dot the landscape, slowly transforming through different hues of red and orange as the sun nears the horizon. Virga, rain that evaporates before it reaches the ground,

streams out of distant dark clouds, teasing the desert with the hope of moisture. A solitary shiny black raven circles overhead, curious about the brightly colored gear scattered around camp. This stunning



**It's Downhill All The Way.** Well, maybe not, but the descent off the Murphy Hogback is one bit of fun awaiting riders of the White Rim.

vista, combined with a culinary feast of steak, chicken, Caesar salad, and apple crisp, has put me over the edge. I never want to leave.

The White Rim Trail is well known, considered to be one of the most classic mountain bike rides in the country. Why is it so classic? After all, it's just a road.

"When someone calls and asks if it is just a road, I say it's not 'just a road,'" Kirsten explains to me one day on the trail. "This is a very special place. This ride is classic because it appeals to such a wide variety of riders, from beginners to advanced. Also, it is such a fun ride with great scenery every inch of the way."

"I thought, 'it's just a jeep road. I'm on

vacation—not training,' but it really is challenging...it's awesome," adds Bruce McNab, a competitive rider from California.

My own view is that mountain biking the White Rim Trail is an incredible way to explore Canyonlands National Park. No other national park offers such backcountry access and possibilities by mountain bike. This aspect, combined with incredible scenery and great riding, seals the White Rim's status as an all-time classic.

"All rides that go down must go up." This biking proverb is running through my mind on our last day as I stare at the infamous Schafer switchbacks. Just as the White Rim Trail began with a big descent,

so it must end with a big ascent. Three days of riding has hardened my quads a little, but these switchbacks look tough. It seems impossible the road can penetrate the vertical red wingate sandstone on the canyon rim.

I cycle through gears as switchback leads to switchback, slowly climbing the canyon wall. Finally, with no more gears left to ease my pain, I have to start walking. The Schafer switchbacks have won this particular battle, but I'm not too discouraged. The White Rim Trail is such a classic ride, I know I will be back—and next time, I'll beat this hill. **AC**

*An avid cyclist, Tom Bol is an adventure writer and photographer living in Fort Collins, Colorado.*