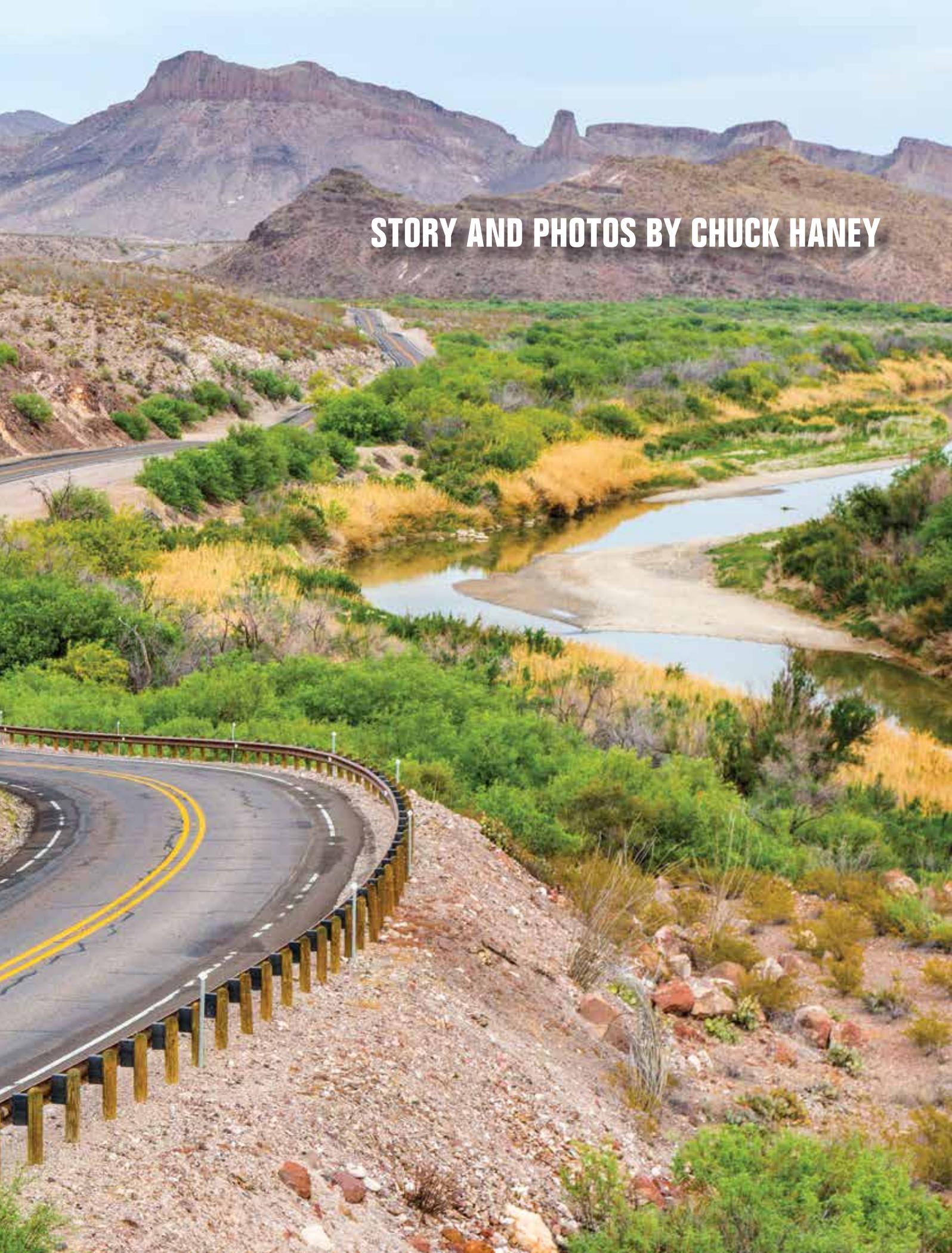


# RIDING THE NATIONAL PARKS

Part II



**STORY AND PHOTOS BY CHUCK HANEY**

**I**n my first edition of the national parks series (*Adventure Cyclist*, August/September 2013), I visited parks that I was most familiar with and had ridden in often. With this second installment of the series I had to dig a little deeper and travel farther. This effort opened up my cycling world to new adventures and opportunities. This ongoing series has inspired me to get out of my comfort zone and visit new places. Riding in the Texas spring on empty roads while cruising through a desert in full bloom is an experience that I'll always treasure in Big Bend National Park. It also created an opportunity to travel with my mother and stepfather (they served as my support vehicle) to the deep south and enjoy the pure cycling experience of traveling along the splendid Natchez Trace.

In doing the research for this project, I discovered that all national parks are not worthy candidates for cycling trips. I'm not sure that I would want to battle the traffic and narrow roads of Yosemite, for example. Other more remote parks have limited roadways pushing them far down any potential list for lugging a bicycle or two along as a cycling destination. However, I'm excited; there are more gems to be explored for part III. I can hardly wait to tell you about my adventures in Badlands National Park!



*Riding the smooth roads of Acadia National Park in Maine.*

## ACADIA NATIONAL PARK

This scenic park was originally created as Lafayette National Park in 1919; the park was re-named Acadia in 1929 and is the oldest national park east of the Mississippi River. Mount Desert Island, where Bar Harbor and Acadia National Park are located, is the largest island off the coast of Maine. Even though the island is heavily forested, it got its desert moniker in 1604 from the French explorer Samuel de Champlain whose observations of the island's barren mountain summits from a ship out at sea led him to call the place "île des Monts Déserts," or island of the Bare Mountains.

Begin your cycling tour from the bustling town of Bar Harbor and navigate the park's eastern shore on a one-way road against huge slabs of sparkling pink granite that buffer it against the incessantly crashing waves of the Atlantic Ocean. There are plenty of interesting scenic stops at Sand Beach, Thunder Hole, and Otter Cliffs. Two-way traffic begins again at the park's southeastern side, and soon you will spin to Jordan Pond where the only full-service restaurant in the park can be found. Jordan Pond House is a good place to take a break and enjoy traditional tea and popovers on the lawn while enjoying the view of two mountains named "The Bubbles" reflecting into the pond.

The circuit on the main road around Acadia National Park is 27 miles in length. If the day is clear, take a detour from the park loop and challenge yourself by ascending the 3.5 miles up the winding road to the top of Cadillac Mountain, which is the highest point on the Eastern Seaboard at 1,528 feet in elevation. The spectacular 360-degree view from the summit rewards the effort for climbing the four-to-five percent grade.

Over 2.5 million people visit the park each year, at times making for some crowded road conditions. I would suggest riding the park loop in the early morning or late afternoon hours to avoid the heaviest traffic.

Another good option for road cycling is riding the island's western portion to the small quaint village of Southwest Harbor. Once in Southwest



### NUTS & BOLTS *Cycling in National Parks*

#### RESOURCES

- **Acadia:** [nps.gov/acad](http://nps.gov/acad)
- **Natchez Trace:** [nps.gov/natr](http://nps.gov/natr)
- **Cuyahoga:** [nps.gov/cuva](http://nps.gov/cuva), [ohioanderiecanalway.com](http://ohioanderiecanalway.com), [CVSR.com](http://CVSR.com)
- **Big Bend:** [nps.gov/bibe](http://nps.gov/bibe)
- **Zion:** [nps.gov/zion](http://nps.gov/zion)

#### BIKE SHOPS

- **Acadia:** Bar Harbor Bicycle Shop: [barharborbike.com](http://barharborbike.com), 207.288.3886; Acadia Bike: 800.526.8615, [acadiabike.com](http://acadiabike.com)
- **Natchez Trace:** Trace Bicycles at the northern

terminus of the trail in Nashville offers rental bikes, repairs, maps, and shop group rides on local routes each Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. [tracebikes.com](http://tracebikes.com), 615.646.2485

- **Cuyahoga:** Century Cycles in Peninsula ([centurycycles.com](http://centurycycles.com)) is located right on the towpath trail at the Lock 29 trailhead. Rental bikes are available. Century Cycles is a member bicycle shop of Adventure Cycling Association.

- **Zion:** In Springdale and Hurricane, there are several bike shops for repairs, guided trips, maps, and local information. Zion Cycles, 435.772.0400, [zioncycles.com](http://zioncycles.com)

#### AREA BICYCLE CLUBS

- **Cuyahoga:** Cuyahoga Valley Cycling and Craft Beer Club — now this sounds like a fun club! [meetup.com/Cuyahoga-Valley-Cycling-Craft-Beer-Club](http://meetup.com/Cuyahoga-Valley-Cycling-Craft-Beer-Club); Akron Bike Club, [akronbike.org](http://akronbike.org)

Harbor, take Highway 102A down to visit the lighthouse in Bass Harbor, then travel north through tiny Bernard on Highway 102, head toward Indian Point Road to Highway 3 and Salisbury Cove, and finally take Highway 233 back to Bar Harbor.

To beat the crowds on your skinny-tired road bike, I suggest either driving or taking a water ferry across Frenchman Bay to the lesser-known section of Acadia National Park known as Schoodic Peninsula, the only part of the park actually located on the mainland.

The small town of Winter Harbor is the perfect starting point for cycling exploration of the sparsely populated peninsula. Within a couple of miles, you will re-enter Acadia National Park,

which looks nothing like the Mount Desert Island version across the bay. Schoodic is flat terrain and mostly devoid of automobile traffic. Enjoy the 5.5-mile, one-way road that travels along the coast with terrific views of Mount Desert Island. Soon after exiting the park, continue along quiet rural roads to one tiny fishing village after another with names like Bunkers Harbor, Birch Harbor, Prospect Harbor, Summer Harbor, and Corea, where you can literally rub elbows with working lobstermen on weathered docks, plying and baiting their squared traps for the next trip out to sea.

For a relaxing car-free cycling experience in the park, enjoy the over 50 miles of impeccably built carriage trails that tycoon John D. Rockefeller

constructed from 1913 to 1940. The roads are smooth enough for a road bike with slightly larger tread or, better yet, a hybrid or mountain bike. There are 16 unique stone bridges spanning lush creeks and waterfalls, and the roads were craftily designed to take in the best of the park's scenery. Large fleets of rental bicycles in Bar Harbor testify to their popularity, and you can take the bike rack-equipped electric shuttle bus from Bar Harbor to one of the carriage road entrances.

Early October is a spectacular time of year to cycle in Acadia as the hardwood forest comes alive with red, yellow, and gold leaves.

### NATCHEZ TRACE

The Natchez Trace Parkway is a 444-mile National Scenic Parkway that travels from Nashville, Tennessee, to Natchez, Mississippi. The modern Natchez Trace follows a centuries-old route first tramped down by mastodons and herds of giant, nine-foot-tall bison. It was then used by Native American tribes such as the Choctaw, Natchez, and Chickasaw. Later, after European settlement, "Kaintuck" boatmen floated the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to deliver their goods to markets in Natchez and New Orleans, then sold their cargo and boats and began the trek back north on foot and horseback along the Trace. The primitive route and the weight of their efforts are still clearly evident with many sections of "sunken" pathways that still reside in the forest alongside the modern pavement. Thomas Jefferson designated the Trace as a postal road in 1801. The Trace was established as a unit of the National Park System in 1938 when construction began on the modern roadway. The Natchez Trace National Roadway was officially completed in 2005.

Although the views along the parkway don't knock you out like those of other national parks such as Glacier or Grand Teton, I realized after several days of riding along the northern sections of the Natchez Trace that the parkway offered by far the most pleasant riding conditions of all the parks that I had ridden. You glide along on idyllic smooth



Top: Riding along the quiet Natchez Trace National Parkway in Tennessee.

Bottom: An elevated bridge crosses a beaver-rich marsh in Ohio's Cuyahoga National Park.

pavement while constantly tackling moderately graded rolling hills with little automobile traffic. Best of all, there is none of the usual clutter that accompanies most roadways. There are no farm dogs to give chase, no billboards, power lines, or commercial truck traffic allowed on the Natchez Trace.

I concluded that a squirrel could almost swing from tree to tree all the way from Nashville to Natchez as both sides of the road have a forested canopy with only the occasional break into agricultural land. After a few

days of pedaling in windy conditions, I relished the windbreaks that the thick forest provided. There are a variety of intriguing historic sites, including Grinder's Stand House where famed explorer Meriwether Lewis mysteriously died in 1809 at the age of 35, either murdered or a suicide. There are also several Indian mounds and Civil War battle sites that should induce you to take a break from your pedals to ponder the past.

Even though there are no shoulders on the road, automobile traffic is generally light, and park rangers

enforce the 50 MPH speed limit, making for ideal cycling through the splendid countryside of the Deep South. I particularly enjoyed seeing the “Bicycles May Use the Full Lane” signs. It seemed to be one of the few, if any, American roadways where cyclists are kings of the road.

There were considerably more cyclists as the route progressed north toward the more metropolitan area of Nashville with its thriving cycling community. There are a few small towns within striking distance of the route, but not many food, beverage, and lodging options along the roadway proper, so keep those water bottles topped off and plan ahead, especially if touring the entire route is on your bucket list. And of particular note, there are five bike-only campgrounds scattered along the 444 miles.

The north-south route is especially enticing in spring, and even more so in April when the redbud, cherry, and dogwood trees are in full bloom and flocks of turkeys with newborn poults can be found along the roadway. The other optimal season is in mid- to late October when the post oak and other hardwood trees turn the roadway into a blaze of vibrant color and the stifling heat and humidity of summer are just a distant memory.

For more information on riding “The Trace,” as the locals call it, go to Natchez Trace Travel ([natcheztracetravel.com/biking-the-trace.html](http://natcheztracetravel.com/biking-the-trace.html)). This site can hook you up with B&B stays along the route.

#### CUYAHOGA NATIONAL PARK

Ohio’s only National Park was established in 2000. The park’s unique-sounding moniker, Cuyahoga, means “crooked river” in the Mohawk language. The park is popular, ranking as one of the 10 most-visited national parks although it is the third-smallest park in the National Park System.

The Ohio and Erie Canal, built between 1825 and 1832, provided a successful transportation route from Cleveland, on Lake Erie, to Portsmouth, on the Ohio River. The 308-mile canal opened up Ohio to the rest of the settled eastern U.S. The historic route that the canal



### Cyclists get both lanes on Crater Lake’s Rim Drive in September

Much of Crater Lake National Park’s famed Rim Drive will be car-free for two selected days in September. Motorized vehicles will be prohibited on two Saturdays, Sept. 19 and 26, leaving the park’s expansive lake views and rolling pavement to cyclists and walkers to enjoy, according to park Superintendent Craig Ackerman.

Rim Drive is a 33-mile, two-lane road that circles the park’s iconic caldera. A 24-mile stretch on the lake’s east side will be closed from Munson Valley Road at the south end to Crater Lake Highway on the north. That’s about 3,300 feet in elevation gain. You can park vehicles at each

end and stop after 24 miles or turn around and head back. West Rim Drive will remain open to all vehicles, Ackerman said.

The flattest section extends between Crater Lake Highway and Cleetwood Trail, nine miles out and back with 1,500 feet of total elevation gain. “That stretch is the most family friendly section we have,” Ackerman said.

Like the park, the road will be available to cyclists and walkers from sunrise to sundown on the two designated days. Park officials are planning to add rest stops along the way with water, mechanical support, and first aid.

Rangers and paramedics will be riding as well in case of emergency.

And, in keeping with the national park’s mission, rangers will be available at each stop throughout the two days for interpretative nature talks.

This is the third year Crater Lake National Park officials have organized vehicle-free days. Each year the event grows in popularity, Ackerman said.

“I was up on the rim (in 2014) and I counted over 100 cyclists in a 10-minute span,” he said. “We figure we easily had more than 1,000 people (during the two days).”

- Dan Shryock

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took now offers up a fantastic cycling opportunity in northeastern Ohio.

While the canalway only travels 20 miles through the national park proper, there are 84 miles on which to cycle from the metropolis of Cleveland in the north to the town of New Philadelphia in the south. The multi-use pathway travels on a crushed limestone surface on flat to rolling terrain. Cycle past the concrete remains of old locks that raised or lowered the canal waterways to keep commerce — mostly agricultural crops — flowing to Eastern markets. There are nearby waterfalls like the quaint Blue Hen and the impressive Brandywine that are quite stunning in spring and again accented by autumn color in the second or third week of October. You can ride on a section of boardwalk over tranquil wetlands that contain a healthy population of beavers, which have repopulated the area 150 years after being trapped out. Most riders I witnessed were riding hybrid or mountain bikes, although the towpath surface is smooth enough that you could easily cycle on a road bike equipped with larger tires — 32 or 35mm width would be ideal.

The Cleveland to Akron section of the trail offers the unique option of riding one-way and then catching the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad train back to your vehicle at the trailhead for a mere \$3. Just plan to be at the train depot before the scheduled pick-up time and listen for the mighty roar of the engine's whistle echoing through the Cuyahoga River Valley.

There looked to be an abundance of fine county roads for cycling in the area so bring along the skinny tires as well. The Riverview Road adjacent to the towpath trail looked really inviting, and I saw plenty of cyclists spinning on the shouldered roadway. There are also 33 miles (including 16 miles within the park) of paved routes along the Akron Bike and Hike Trail ([ohiobikeways.net/akronbike-hike.htm](http://ohiobikeways.net/akronbike-hike.htm)).

#### BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK

Big Bend certainly lives up to its name as the park is bigger than the state of Rhode Island. It contains the largest protected tract of Chihuahua

BLACK CANYON CITY, AZ

BLACK CANYON TRAIL, AZ / SYNCRO 15 / MOUNTAIN BIKING

PHOTO: DAN RBLZ

## SYNCRO SERIES: BLACK CANYON TRAIL

Winding through the Bradshaw mountains for 78 miles, the historic Black Canyon Trail offers adventurous mountain bikers a true backcountry desert experience. Mostly singletrack with rewarding views challenges riders with some tough riding, but is a must do. Osprey's ventilated Syncro Series hydration packs keep you cool and hydrated in the harsh environment of the BCT.



Desert in the country, and 118 miles in the park form the international border with Mexico along the famed Rio Grande. Big Bend officially became a national park in 1944 and is one of the least-visited national parks, which for cyclists means blissfully low automobile traffic.

There are five paved roads in Big Bend. Persimmon Gap to Panther Junction is a 28-mile stretch from the north entrance to the park headquarters. Panther Junction to Rio Grande Village is a 21-mile road that travels southeast and descends 2,000 feet to the Rio Grande. Maverick Entrance Station to Panther Junction is a 23-mile route from the park's western entrance to its headquarters.

Chisos Basin Road is seven miles long and climbs 1,650 feet to an elevation of 5,679 feet at Panther Pass before descending into the Chisos Basin. After tackling grades as steep as 15 percent, you end up at the park's lodge, a campground, and trailheads to many great hikes. It's a different world in the heavily forested mountains compared to the hot and harsh desert floor below. If you are attempting this ride, go early and try not to break the park's 45 MPH speed limit on the way back downhill!

My personal favorite ride in the park is the 30-mile Ross Maxwell Scenic Drive that travels south along the western flank of the Chisos Mountains to the Castolon Historic District, ending at the scenic Santa Elena Canyon on the Rio Grande. The eight-mile stretch from Castolon to Santa Elena is especially nice with views of the river and flatter terrain. There are several challenging climbs on the return north, including the steep switchbacks climbing up to Sotol Vista. If you ride early in the morning, you are almost guaranteed to see more jackrabbits and roadrunners than automobiles. Spring is the best time to ride in Big Bend as the temperatures are still moderate and the desert floor is alive with flowering cacti and wildflowers.

Another good road riding option while visiting Big Bend is to cycle the very scenic Highway 170 west from the funky little towns of Study Butte

and Terlingua that border the western edge of the park. You roll up and down that remote country that straddles the Rio Grande and Mexico. Small towns along the route like Lajitas and Redford break up the emptiness of the Chihuahua Desert. There are some very steep climbs and descents along the route, including the second steepest climb in all of Texas, the 15 percent-plus monster hill at Madera Canyon where low gearing and ample lungs are advised.

If you also bring your mountain bike, you can ride on the many gravel roads in the park, but the better option is to ride the singletrack at Lajitas and Big Bend State Park, which is just west of the national park. Inquire with the good folks at Desert Sports ([desertsportstx.com/mountain-biking](http://desertsportstx.com/mountain-biking)) in Terlingua to get a map or a guided trip.

#### ZION NATIONAL PARK

Utah has many grand national parks with sights that will astound the senses. However, in my opinion, most do not possess grand road-cycling opportunities. Zion National Park is an exception.

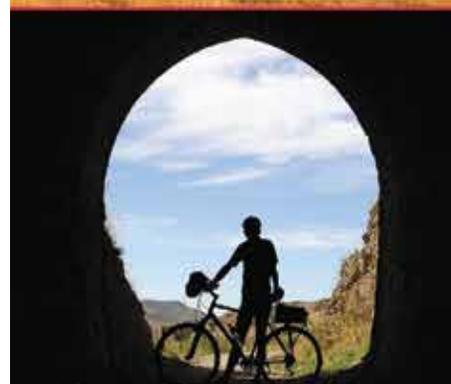
Zion is Utah's oldest and most popular national park. The multi-colored sandstone cliffs seemingly soar into the sky from the canyon below. You can begin a road ride from the charming small town of Springdale at the entrance of the park where the paved Pa'rus Trail will whisk you along the churning current of the Virgin River. After two miles, you come to an intersection. Travel in one direction to ride through the very scenic Zion Canyon. The good news is that most private motor vehicles are not permitted on the out-and-back road from April through October. The bad news is that cyclists are required to pull over and stop when a shuttle bus comes up from behind, and that is literally every five minutes or so. The other option back at the intersection is to proceed up Mount Carmel Highway 9. The climb up to the tunnel is pleasant enough, and views of a giant sandstone cliff named The Sentinel are awe-inspiring. When you arrive at the tunnel, be prepared to hitch a ride

## So what's the buzz about cycling in New Zealand?

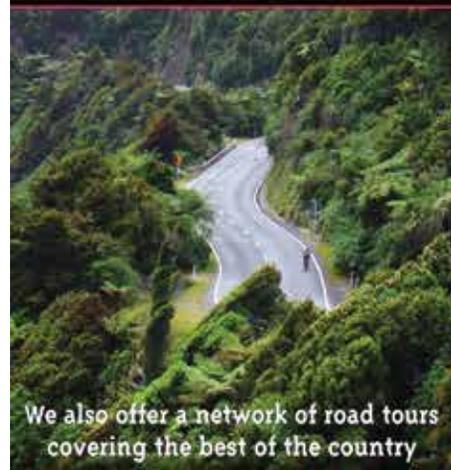
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*A mountain biker enjoying the short blush of spring green on the Hurricane Rim Trail in Hurricane, Utah.*

with a vehicle because bicycles are not allowed to travel through the 1.1-mile tunnel. After securing the escort, the east side of the park will have a much different feel. You're now in more open sandstone country, and you'll have a good chance to spot desert bighorn sheep along the route. Ride with caution as there is little to no shoulder and many tight turns on the roadway. After cycling by Checkerboard Mesa, you will have reached the eastern entrance to the park where you can turn around or continue on for a longer tour, eventually intersecting Highway 89 farther east.

There is less car traffic on the Kolob Canyon section of Zion located along Interstate 15 north of St. George. The red road is inviting as you climb 1,250 feet past more amazing sandstone formations, but it is only a 10-mile out-and-back ride. As you can surmise, this section of the park doesn't see a lot of

cycling traffic.

The best bet for road cycling in the park is to start outside the park along Highway 9 at the small town of Virgin — 3,900 feet of elevation. Then climb the 20 miles and 4,000 feet to the turnoff to Lava Point — elevation 7,890 feet — on the Kolob Terrace Road. There can be some rough sections, but the scenery more than makes up for it as you ascend through many sandstone layers and distinct ecosystems on the lightly trafficked road. You will pass the site of the Red Bull Rampage, an event where freeride mountain bikers do unbelievable airborne stunts, and trailheads for intrepid hikers going to iconic Zion spots like the famed Subway formation. On the way back to Virgin, enjoy the almost 4,000-foot descent — you will have earned it. There are no services along the road so plan accordingly with an extra water bottle.

When in Zion, a mountain bike should be your first choice of steed for desert adventure as there are a wealth of trails just outside of the park boundaries for most ability levels. I love the technical, challenging terrain atop Gooseberry Mesa. For more enjoyable and flowing trails that require less technical skills, the GEM Trail and interconnecting Hurricane Rim Trail, which traverse the desert terrain below Gooseberry Mesa, are your best bets. You can do everything from a 21-mile loop involving several connecting trails or just do an out-and-back. I like to park at the trailhead near Virgin and ride to the hill above the town of Hurricane and back — 15 miles of fabulous desert singletrack. **AC**

*Chuck Haney is an avid cyclist and photographer who lives in Whitefish, Montana. You can learn more about him at [chuckhaney.com](http://chuckhaney.com).*