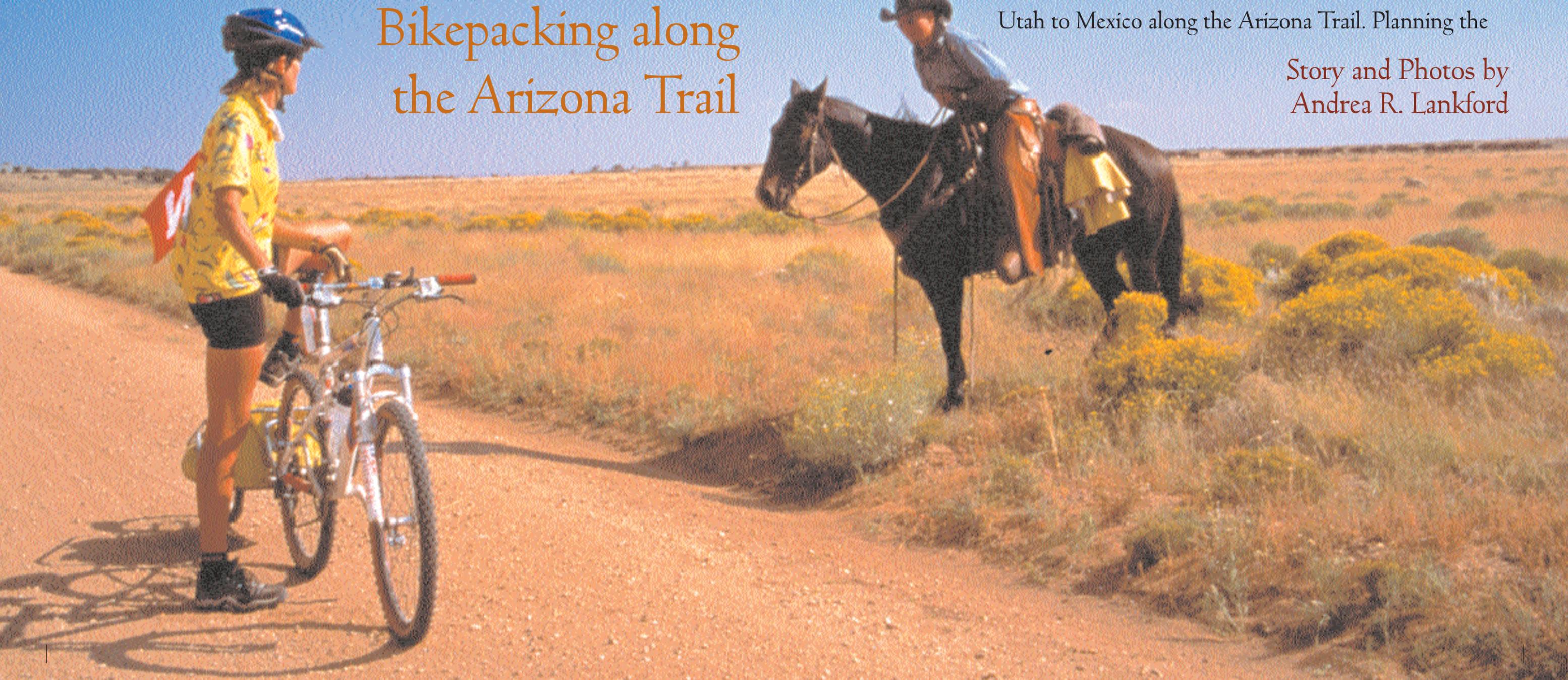


# How Hard Can It Be?

Bikepacking along  
the Arizona Trail

“If I was 15 years younger and 50 pounds lighter, I’d be going with you,” said a photographer who joined us in waiting out a hailstorm from under an old juniper tree. Once the pea-sized pellets of ice stopped falling, he hoisted an oversized tripod over his right shoulder, started down the trail, and called back to us “Sure sounds like a fun trip.” I don’t think he would have considered two hours of pushing loaded bikes up 26 switchbacks to be much fun. Against all advice, my friend, Beth, and I decided to be the first to mountain bike an 800-mile route from Utah to Mexico along the Arizona Trail. Planning the

Story and Photos by  
Andrea R. Lankford





**Cover Shot:** Andrea Lankford takes on singletrack on the Arizona Trail.

trip had been challenging. It would be our first attempt at bicycle touring; large sections of the trail were not complete; no comprehensive maps existed; and water sources along the route were few and far between. Undaunted, we didn't want to miss our chance to be the first. Starting our trip during the sunny Arizona fall and with our bikes carrying all the weight, we figured, "How hard can it be?" We got the answer to that question on the first two miles of the trail.

An hour into the first day of our trip, we leaned over bike tubes and tried to catch our breath. Views of the pink, orange, and red sandstone ridges of the Colorado Plateau provided a diversion from our labors. Stopping for lunch, we couldn't cram enough peanut butter and jelly bagels down our throats to replenish the calories burned from pushing 65 pounds of gear and bicycle against a headwind up 1,500 feet of elevation in less than two miles. Ouch.

At our first camp, the clouds reflected a fuchsia sunset, but it was too windy and cold to linger outside the tent for long. Wind-blown and exhausted, I crawled into my sleeping bag.

"I'm not seeing any downhill yet," Beth said. "What have you gotten me into? I thought the whole reason we were going south was because it was downhill to Mexico."

I didn't have the heart to tell her that geography doesn't work that way.

We woke up to frosty bikes and icy water bottles. Even strong coffee couldn't take the bite out of putting on helmets with frozen sweat pads. When I saw our first spruce tree, I knew that we had finally climbed to 8,500 feet. Grassy meadows, spruce fir forests, and leafy aspen groves provided us with a scenic ride alongside the East Rim of the Grand Canyon.

It is illegal to bike across the 277-mile long Grand Canyon, so we arranged for Beth's husband to shuttle our bikes from the North Rim to the South Rim. South of the Grand Canyon, the Arizona Trail follows a historic stagecoach route between the canyon and Flagstaff first used in the

early 1800's. Traveling the old roads made for 80 miles of pleasant riding.

Next to the crumbled foundation of a historic rest stop, I found an old water storage tank. I looked in, half expecting to see a skeleton in the bottom holding a sign that said "But it's a dry heat."

We were in our sleeping bags by what we called "biker midnight," usually around 7 p.m. I couldn't decide which of the night sounds was more eerie — the elk bugling or the coyotes howling.

The Babbitt's Ranch Passage, north of Flagstaff, took us through sagebrush cattle country. Calves hopped and ran to their mommas, who glared at us as we pedaled by. With the San Francisco Peaks in the background and the dust flying, we stopped to watch five cowboys herd hundreds of cattle.

One of the cowboys waved and galloped over to say hello. We told him we were on our way to Mexico. He leaned forward to make sure he had heard us right and then suggested that using horses might be a better way to go. We watched him ride off through the flowering sage.

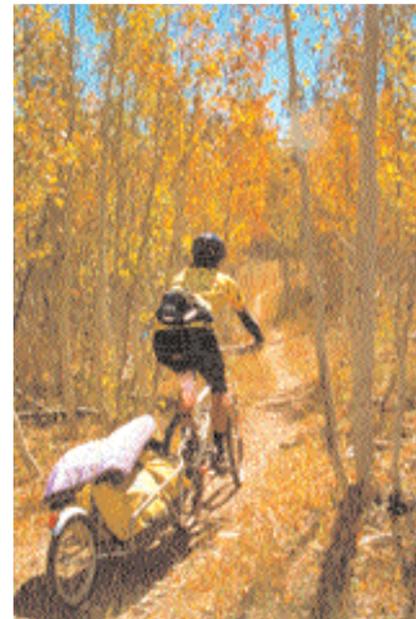
Beth swung a long leg over her aluminum horse, "Did you see his lariat?"

I mounted my steel mule and replied, "Girl, you just met a real live Arizona Cowboy."

We hit a long steep incline over bonerattling volcanic rocks. The constant jarring was enough to drive me insane. The mileage started to take its toll. We desperately wanted to make it to Beth's house in Flagstaff where showers, restaurants, and warm beds waited for us. Riding through the aspen groves at their fall color peak, the leaves surrounded us in a golden glow. It was very scenic, but the best thing I saw that day were the cushions of Beth's couch.

After bouncing over miles of dirt road through the Tonto National Forest, we stopped for lunch. Beth stamped her bike shoe onto the road and cursed, "I left my fanny pack back at our last stop."

I snickered while making lunch, glad it wasn't me that had to do the unbearable — ride back in the opposite direction. One hour later, I lost a wheel spoke. The rear



**Singletrack trailer** on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon.

wheel was no longer true. To keep the brakes from rubbing, Beth loosened them to a point just shy of not working at all. As we started down the next descent, she yelled, "Use your front brakes ... but not too much."

"What does that mean, not too much?" I thought, gritting my teeth before clipping in and starting down.

Three miles later, we had to climb a particularly rocky section. Getting off my bike to push, I looked down at my rear rack and moaned, "Oh, No."

"What did you lose, another spoke?"

"No. It's bad. Real bad."

"A flat?"

"No, the tent is gone."

Attached to the rear rack by bungee cords, the tent must have bounced off during the last rocky descent. I considered leaving it behind. It was an old tent. The sky was clear. Then I recalled what it was like to weather a thunderstorm without a tent.

"I'll take everything off my bike and then ride back to get it," I said, throwing panniers and bungee cords on the ground.

After a frustrating ride northbound, I found the tent lying in the middle of the trail and picked it up, immediately realizing

that I'd left all the bungees back with Beth. When I rode up, balancing the two-foot long tent between my wrists on the handlebars, Beth laughed.

In the morning, I woke up to the sound of Beth screaming, "There's a spider in the tent. I think it stung me."

"Spiders don't sting, they bite," I said, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

"Thanks for that comforting clarification, but would you please get the freaking spider out of the tent?"

I guess you could say Beth and I were still getting along. However, later that day I told her, "If you ever touch any of my stuff, I'll kill you."

That night two worn-out thirsty mountain bikers rolled into the camping area at the edge of the Mogollon Rim. The only water source was out of reach, seven feet down a well. By tying a rope to a bottle and lowering it into the well, we filled our two gallon water bag, one half liter at a time. Plenty of water for freeze-dried Turkey Tetrazinni with asparagus shoots, which was better than it sounds.

Before dawn, the sounds of a menacing thunderstorm had us awake and worried about the route ahead. Dropping off the Mogollon Rim in a lightning storm was cause for some anxiety. We discussed our options over oatmeal. The Arizona Trail would take us down a steep sandstone slab that would expose us to the lightning and force us to push our bikes. The graded dirt road would be easy but would add more miles before we could reach a town. We decided that three miles of suffering and fear were better than a 30-mile detour.

The descent was not as bad as we thought it would be, but our relief was short-lived. A steady rain had turned the roads into mud that clung to our bike tires.

"We could make an adobe house with this stuff," Beth said, while trying to scrape some of it off her bike with a stick.

The slippery mud made our brakes almost useless. In order to slow down on descents, we had to put our heels on the road. Pretty exciting.

Leaving Payson, Arizona, Beth and I took a route along the east side of the

intimidating Mazatzal Mountains north of Phoenix. We were in an environment that was much different from the one we had left behind when we dropped off the Mogollon Rim. Instead of pines and aspen, there were prickly pear, agave, and mesquite. All three had sharp pointy parts just waiting to poke a bicycle tire. I scanned the Forest Service map for a route over the mountain range to Roosevelt Lake. “Forest Road 542, four wheel drives only” the map said. How bad could it be?

Beth got a flat tire on the way up the steep road. I took advantage of the chance to rest while she threw the inner tube in frustration. It was her second flat of the day — the fifth in the last two days.

Our joy at reaching the top was soon

clouded by the realization of what we had to do to get down. We would have to descend a steep and rocky chute that would take us down 4500 feet in elevation in less than five miles.

I unclipped from my pedals and started down the gully washed excuse for a road, hoping I wasn't on my way to becoming an organ donor. My front tire hit a boulder that I meant to hop over, the bike bounced backward and I continued forward, flipping over the handlebars, and rolling down the slope a few times. I jumped up, dusted off, checked for broken bones, and got back on my bike before I lost what little was left of my nerve. At the bottom, a Forest Service sign declared the road “Unsuitable for Public Use.”

After our terrifying crossing of the Mazatzals, we were happy to be on the graveled and graded Apache Trail.

Tortilla Flat is a favorite stop along the Apache Trail for weekend Harley riders from Phoenix. We parked our bikes with the long line of motorcycles in front of the store and stopped to sit on the porch and eat some ice cream.

The next day we had to take a highway around the Superstition Wilderness to Superior. A 35-mph headwind ruined our opportunity for an easy day of pavement riding. We actually had to get into granny gears just to pedal downhill.

In Superior, the librarian let me in on a local secret. There was a natural spring not too far south of town. Located just out-

side the White Canyon Wilderness, the spring sounded like a good spot to camp for the night. We still had time to hike after riding down a sandy wash to the bottom of the canyon. The sunset put on a light show on the bluffs towering above us.

It was a good thing we got up early the next morning because it started raining as soon as we took down camp. About halfway up the sandy wash, I saw a river of water rushing down the trail. Flash flood.

“It would be wise if we got to high ground now,” I said to Beth.

We were trapped for over an hour by the water. Cactus and rocks rolled by as we pushed our bikes up a road that had turned into a stream.

“No more scenic routes, no more side trips, from now on we are making a beeline to Mexico,” Beth yelled at me through the rain dripping off her helmet.

We still had our senses of humor, but our laughter had developed a hysterical edge to it. The “Expedition” had become an epic of women trying to conquer nature. In Beth, I had found a kindred spirit, another woman who would take on the pursuit of the Mexican Border with enough maniacal, self-destructive obsessiveness to make Captain Ahab proud.

After a night of drying off in a small hotel room, we had to ford a muddy creek to get on the ranch road that would take us through the desert northeast of Tucson. The dirt road was well graded, but the rain had turned it into a tire-sucking nightmare. It was like trying to ride through peanut butter.

We were again filthy, wet, and cold. Miserable and desperate, we prayed for more shelter from the rain than the cactus or mesquite was going to give us. Then Beth saw it.

“Home sweet home,” she said, pointing to a large metal hangar next to an empty ranch house.

“We are probably trespassing,” I told her, while setting up the tent on the concrete floor. “But what are they gonna do, arrest us?”

A nice man in a cowboy hat stopped to check on us. I apologized profusely for camping in his barn. He looked confused



**Two for the Trail** on East Clear Creek; Andrea on the right

The first words out of my mouth in the morning were “I’m not riding up that freaking mountain today. No way!”

I felt beat up, weak in the gut, and was in no mood to make the long climb to the top of Mt. Lemmon.

Beth’s bicycle needed some maintenance, so we got a ride to a bike shop in town. Two guys at the shop told us that the next

when I told him we were riding to Mexico. “What are you doing way out here?” he asked.

I shrugged and said, “We’re taking the scenic route.”

Mount Lemmon loomed above us. From the looks of it, I couldn’t fathom how we were going to ride our bikes up the knife-edged ridges to the top, which was hidden by a thick mass of dark gray clouds.

section of Arizona Trail was a tough one, but they had ridden down it.

We figured we could show those guys, prove how “gnarly” we were, and ride up the trail. But we would be clever about it. We would use our day off to stash some of our gear at the top.

Oh yeah, we were smarter than the average bear, geniuses practically, a couple of Ayn Rands we were.

## Nuts & Bolts: Arizona Trail

### Getting Started:

If you want to try out the Arizona Trail, the 80-mile section between the South Rim of the Grand Canyon and Flagstaff, Arizona is a good start. This section follows the historic Moqui Stage Coach route and will take two to four days. Riding on singletrack and dirt roads, you will get spectacular views of the San Francisco Peaks as well as the Grand Canyon. To avoid snow, plan your ride April through October.

### Getting There:

Flagstaff, Arizona, is a two-hour drive from Phoenix and 3 1/2 hours from Las Vegas, Nevada. The Grand Canyon Trailhead is an additional two-hour drive from Flagstaff.

### Bike Rentals:

Stop by Arizona Mountain Sports, 1800 S Milton Dr. Flagstaff, AZ, for rental bikes, bike repair, camping gear, and maps. (800-286-5156 email: [www.mountainsport.com](http://www.mountainsport.com))



Although the Arizona Trail wasn't completed when Lankford rode it, she is writing a guidebook, called “Biking the Arizona Trail,” for Westcliffe Publishing that should be in November. (See [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) for listing.)

### Tour Operators:

Arizona White Knuckle Adventures offers a two-day vehicle supported tour of this route. (866-342-9669 email: [www.arizona-adventures.com](http://www.arizona-adventures.com))

### Maps and Information:

For more information contact the Arizona Trail Association (602-252-4794 email:

[www.aztrail.org](http://www.aztrail.org)) Call or stop by the Kaibab National Forest Tusayan Ranger Station, (520-638-2443) and ask for maps of the Arizona Trail between Flagstaff and Grand Canyon. The Kaibab National Forest South District and Coconino Forest Recreation maps (6\$) are recommended. Fat Tire Tales & Trails by Cosmic Ray has a short description and

map of the Moqui Stage route. (available through [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) for \$9.95)

### Preparation:

Water sources are unreliable. Self-contained cyclists should carry enough for the entire trip or cache water at Moqui Stage Stop. The route is several miles from the nearest highway. Unless a vehicle is supporting your group, you will have to carry camping gear, water, and food. Be self-reliant, carry bike repair tools, spare tubes, first aid, etc. The route can be done with a rigid fork but a front suspension should provide for a more enjoyable ride.

### Historic Highlight:

From 1892 to 1901, the Moqui Stage Coach route was used to transport visitors and supplies between Grand Canyon and Flagstaff. In 1897, members of the Coconino Cycling Club, riding single speeds, raced the six-horse stagecoach to the Grand Canyon and won.

“We are so stupid.”

“We’re idiots.”

“A couple of stubborn jackasses.”

The first part of the ride was deceptively easy. Eight miles later, it was too late. Our ride was gone, all our stuff was on top of Mt. Lemmon, and Beth was challenging me to a bike-hurling contest. We had been pushing our bikes up a steep, narrow, overgrown trail for more than four hours.

I couldn’t say we weren’t warned. “Infamously brutal” was how a steward for the Arizona Trail had described it to me over the phone. He continued “and that’s what the guys said who rode it downhill.”

I dropped my bike on the ground in front of an old mining cabin where we would spend the night. The dusty shack had a few cans of food stocked on the shelves. With no stove, Beth and I enjoyed the sunset over a cold dinner of canned tuna and kidney beans.

The next day was a botany lesson in the thorny plants of southern Arizona. Mesquite, Agave, Cat claw Acacia, Mexican Locust, and five different varieties of cacti caused hundreds of bloody scratches on our arms and legs. A punctured tire would be worse than lacerated shins so we gave our bikes the narrow trail, sacrificing our tanned legs to the bushes. Beth described the experience as “like hiking through a bunch of angry cats.”

When we finally got to the paved road at the top, I almost dropped to my knees and kissed it.

“I wouldn’t send anybody up or down that trail on a mountain bike,” Beth said while we repacked our gear onto our bikes, “Except maybe somebody I hate.”

The ride down Mount Lemmon was a well-earned coast. Stopping to take in the views of Tucson, we chatted with a young cyclist who had just ridden up the paved road.

“Where did you come from?” he asked.

“We just came up the Arizona Trail,” Beth told him.

Sitting on the curb, his jersey unzipped to cool his chest, he said, “I’ve always wanted to ride up that trail. How was it?”

“Don’t do it,” I pleaded.

He looked unconvinced.

“No really,” Beth continued, “Just look at our legs.”

She stuck out a calf striped with deep red scratches. He still looked undeterred. I could see the gears turning in his head. He was thinking, “Hey, if those goofball girls can do it, I know I can.”

Which just goes to show you that Beth and I weren’t the only suckers in town.

We rode into the grassy foothills of the Santa Rita Mountains. Our destination, Kentucky Camp, an old mining settlement the Forest Service recently renovated for public use.

At our last camp of the trip, something stung me on the top of my foot while I used the outhouse. In the dark, I squashed the bug without seeing it. A few minutes later while cooking dinner, a painful ache shot up the inside of my leg.

“Wow, something serious stung me,” I said.

I grabbed a headlamp and Beth and I initiated a search for the culprit. We slowly opened the creaking door, stood as far back as possible from the entrance, and peered in. The creature’s mangled remains were smashed into the concrete floor.

“Get a stick,” I instructed Beth.

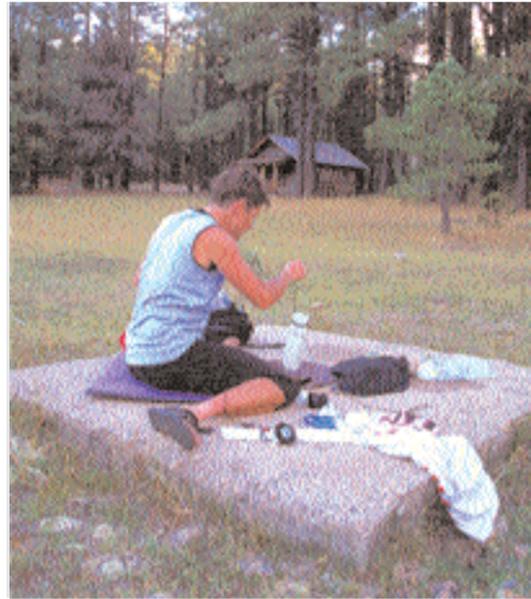
Poking at what could have been anything from a scorpion to a brown recluse spider I said, “I hope it’s a scorpion. I’ve been stung by those before. I’m pretty sure I can survive until we reach the border tomorrow.”

We had less than 20 miles to go.

We had ridden 808 miles to reach a barbed wire fence at the Mexican border and all I could say was “Okay, we did it, it’s pretty, let’s go.”

We took our final visits behind the bushes before loading the bikes on to the back of Beth’s Suburban. We agreed that this expedition was one of the hardest things we had ever done.

An hour later, in the comfort of the



**Well off** Lankford dips for water at the General Springs cabin in Tonto National Forest.

car, Beth turned toward me with a bag of chips, “Hey, you still want to kayak the length of the Florida Keys with your friend Monica?”

“I don’t know. I get seasick pretty easily.” I said, snatching the bag from her hand.

“No problemo. They’ve got those patches you can wear behind your ears.”

“But what about your fear of sharks and the ocean?” I reminded her.

“Oh that,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand, “I’ll get over it. Come on, it’ll be fun. It’s warm and sunny down there. How hard can it be?” 🚗

*Adventure Cycling member Andrea Lankford retired from her job as a park ranger in order to travel.*