
THE SECRET LOOP

Utah's White Rim Trail is unpaved, but well-maintained, and rarely steep. And the scenery...

If someone asked you to sit back and design the perfect bike tour, you might ask for an area of clear weather that boasts moderate temperatures most of the year. It should have mostly flat terrain, and if there were hills, the ride should start with a massive downhill to get you into the rhythm. You'd be entitled to ask for a route that is limited to a few automobiles. You'd be smart to choose a loop, which eliminates the need to shuttle, and equally shrewd to demand a circuit that never feels boring. Daydreaming now, you'd picture a destination where you could choose anything from infinite solitude to lots of like-minded company.

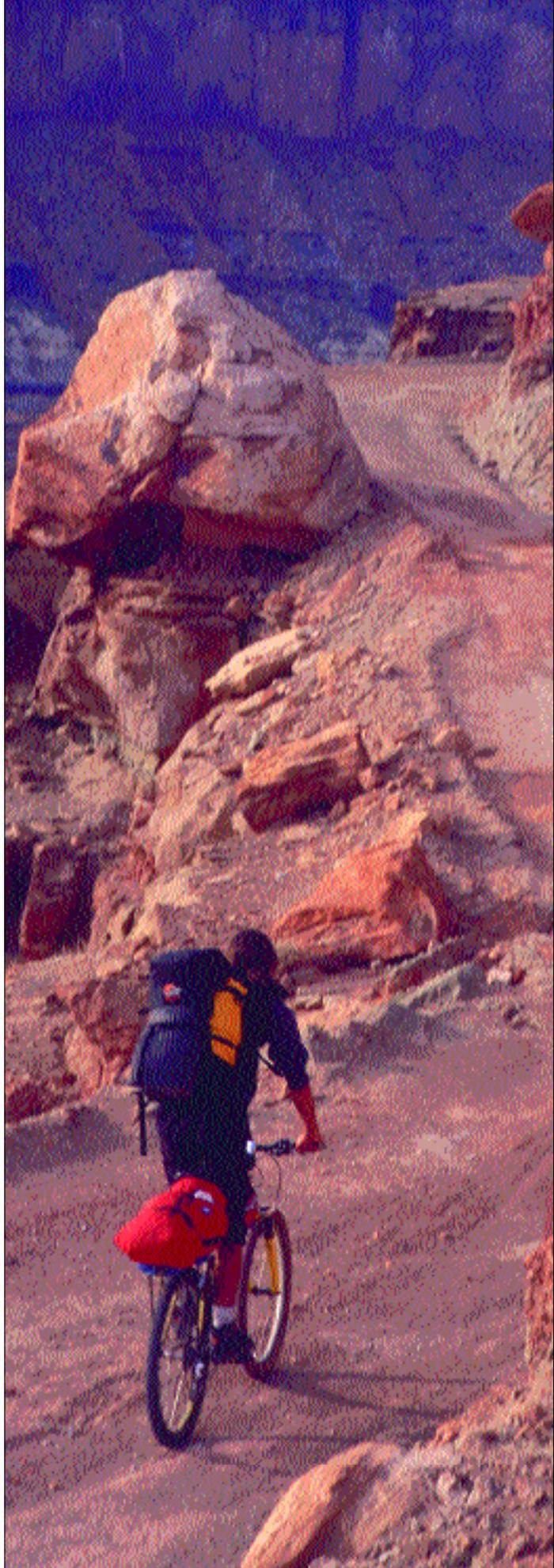
And since you've gone this far, you also request unlimited sky, and scenery so inspiring it seems it could exist only in watercolors. Deep down, you'd be hungering for a taste of the epic, unknowable mysteries of the universe — without, of course, having to work too hard. You might, in other words, be thinking about the White Rim Trail.

About ten million years ago, a Montana-sized section of the Four Corners states began a pilgrimage. Over time this section of land rose from the lowlands to lofty heights. As the plateau rose, soft layers of sandstone were uncovered. Rivers like the Colorado, the Escalante, and the Green carved gorges as fast as the land rumbled skyward.

The massive rearrangement of landscape scored the terrain with a visible record of time. The epochs have been unveiled by erosion, revealing flat layers of sediment not jumbled by mountain building. Sandstone towers and natural arches were unmasked to loom and blend into the swelling congregations of cliffs. Flash to the present, where the Colorado Plateau now covers parts of Utah, New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona. While engaging scenery enlivens all of these states, the ultimate manifestation of the plateau's beauty is arguably in southern Utah's redrock paradise.

Canyonlands National Park, located near the mountain bike mecca of Moab, Utah, condenses the wonders of the Colorado Plateau into three districts. The districts are separated by the canyons of two great rivers, the Colorado and the Green. And running through the heart of Canyonlands is a

By Drew Walker





PHOTOS BY DREW ALVEY

The White Rim Trail is unpaved, but the road is well-maintained and rarely steep.

secret loop that many feel is more scenic than any paved road in the United States. The White Rim Trail is unpaved, but the road is well-maintained and rarely steep.

Its 110 miles start and end in the National Park, so the only other vehicles you will encounter are four-wheel drives piloted by intrepid campers, or cyclists sharing a turn at the wheel of a group support vehicle. In other words, bikes outnumber cars. The road is even, the terrain is gentle, the weather is modest, and the scenery is inspiring. The White Rim Trail is a privileged ride. In most National Parks, bicycles are restricted to paved roads. Canyonlands is one of the few parks within the system where a cyclist can pedal off the pavement. In addition, it is the sole flat mountain bike route following the Colorado or Green rivers in the area.

Upon hearing that the White Rim was a legal mountain bike tour in the middle of a National Park, my friend and touring partner Clint and I were intrigued. Once we did a little research and saw photos of the place, the decision was made. The question was not if, but when, we would go.

The White Rim is an immensely popular trail. Campers are restricted to several established campgrounds along the route, which fill up during the peak seasons of spring and fall. Fortunately, Clint and I were looking for a winter trip. Cyclists who want to ride the trail in April or October have to book campsites at least six months in advance. And in the summer, temperatures would be all but unbearable. But

in January, there was enough heat to keep us happy, and no worries about overcrowding.

After driving through the Southwest all night, we reached Moab at dawn. We bought maps and supplies, then aimed the car toward a bluff high above the Colorado River. Canyonlands National Park is immense. And canyon geology triples the size of the park by dividing it into three mutually inaccessible districts: The Maze, The Needles, and Island in the Sky.

The White Rim Trail loops through Island in the Sky. An empty road led us an hour above Moab and deposited us at a guard station. Ours was the only car in the parking lot, and the ranger looked a little surprised to see us. When we filled out our permit application, he said that most people take between three and five days to ride the trail. We opted for the intermediate interval, four days, which meant we had to choose three campsites.

Mindful of the crowds, Clint asked, "Are any of the campgrounds full?"

"No," said the ranger. "Actually, the last people down to the Rim went two weeks ago. And no one is scheduled to camp anywhere in this district until the end of next week. You two will be the only ones down there."

Clint and I caught each other's gaze. We would have one of the world's most beautiful places in the world all to ourselves. I got that tickle in the gut that comes when you feel

Clint drinks directly from snowmelt, a practice *not* recommended by the Park Service.

like a pioneer. Before choosing our campsites, we inspected the map. The loop started and ended atop the Island in the Sky, at 6000 feet. It soon descended to the level of the White Rim, about 5000 feet, where it stayed until the last day, when it climbed back to the Island in the Sky. The terrain would be roughly the same either way, but we decided that riding clockwise would get us to the good stuff faster.

The first two miles retraced our approach to the ranger station. In the rolling shrubland, we caught only hints of a view. Turning onto Shafer Trail (which is actually a smooth dirt road), we began a 1000-foot descent through a notch in the ramparts to White Rim Road. As we tested our brakes at the top, the flats gave way to an exotic universe, populated by gargantuan sandstone towers and unscalable cliffs.

In the middle distance, we saw what appeared to be a bottomless gray canyon, with a labyrinthine jumble of crimson cliffs behind. The rock was the color of drying blood, flecked with yellow, white, purple, gray and black. Beyond all this rose the La Sal Mountains, a stunning series of snow-capped peaks. If it weren't for the familiar look of the La Sals, we could have been on another planet.

It had snowed the day before, and in the shadows of the steep descent, we slalomed through drifts that were several inches deep. It was the only part of the trail covered in snow, and one of the few days in the year when this sun-warmed desert has any snow at all. But our task was complicated by the views, which distracted us to the point of almost riding off into thin air. The mountain face gradually rose above our heads as we immersed ourselves in the surreal scene. Except for the roadbed, there was no sign of man, and the scale of the landforms was so enormous, it felt like we had stumbled into a giant's playground. You had to shout to make yourself heard over the distance, yet we found ourselves whispering in respectful silence.

At the bottom of the drop, we turned onto White Rim Road. The White Rim is a layer of alabaster sandstone sandwiched between the dominant layers of red rock. The road bent to the right and began skirting the base of the cliffs on one side, while the canyon edge approached from the other. That evening, we bivouacked at the Airport Tower Campground, a reference to the 1000-foot monolith behind us. It was a strangely urban name in a place of mesmerizing wildness. There are no stores or houses visible from the White Rim Trail; once you descend to its level it holds you there.

The main price you must pay to do this trip self-supported is the lugging of your own water. Clint and I had not carried much water, opting to tote 40 pounds of firewood instead. Wood, rock



Campers are restricted to several established sites along the route.

THE ABC'S OF TOURING WITH ATB'S

The White Rim Trail is uniquely bike friendly. As one of the few unpaved cycling routes in the National Park system, the White Rim Trail combines gentle riding with once-in-a-lifetime scenery and dry, moderate weather most of the year. It is, in short, an ideal venue for a roadie's first mountain bike tour.

Taking a dirt tour may at first seem intimidating. But if you understand the challenges and how to deal with them,

you will be able to enjoy a different kind of bicycle travel. This will give you the freedom not only to plan specific routes, but also to improvise without fear that bad roads (or even a lack of roads) will stand in your way.

Mountain bike touring encompasses a wide variety of trips, from fully loaded ventures along Maryland's C & O Canal, to

multi-day bushwhacks through trackless Alaskan wilderness. Before you even start reading guides and looking at maps, consider the skill level you bring to the endeavor. If you are a 25-year-old amateur mountain bike racer, you can wing it with abandon. If you are a 55-year-old road cyclist, you will want to choose your route more carefully.

Touring off-road will take you on dirt roads, singletrack trails, and occasional bushwhacks through the woods. The varied surfaces encountered on the dirt require more upper body strength to handle the bike, and more leg strength to overcome steeper gradients, and occasional loose surfaces. For the experienced road cyclist, a regimen of pushups, pullups, situps and back stretches every day for a month is a good start. When departure date nears, practice climbing steep hills and mountain biking on challenging trails. Remember, it takes considerably more power to pedal a mountain bike at the level of comfort you are used to on your road bike.

Fortunately, mountain bikes are built for more rigorous conditions than most people ever put them through. If you have a quality mountain bike (say, \$800 and up), it should be sturdy enough to stand up to the rigors of touring. If you ever have trouble on

bumpy trails or your back ever hurts, consider suspension. Most will find it worthwhile to invest in a suspension bike, or at least a suspension seatpost for an old bike. It is also worth mentioning that, on pavement, a mountain bike with slick tires is 98% as fast as a road bike, but stronger, easier to handle, and more forgiving. So a mountain bike makes an excellent general purpose touring bike.

Assuming your mountain bike is in good repair, cast an eye toward your gearing and tires. When in doubt, run wider, knobbier treads; they are slower, but give better control in difficult conditions. Many mountain bikes today do not come with low enough gears. For real mountain climbs, you want a small chainring with fewer teeth than your largest cog has. Today's high-end bikes come with a 22-32 or 22-34 low — good ratios to shoot for.

The hottest equipment question among mountain bike tourists might be: panniers or a trailer? These rival methods of carrying gear each have their own adherents (see *Adventure Cyclist*, May 1999). Generally, the easier the terrain and the more you are carrying, the better trailers work. But trailers are heavier than panniers and harder to fix. Trailers also cannot be portaged, make difficult terrain impossible, and encourage you to carry more than you can handle. When in doubt, I'd say to go with racks and panniers.

Which brings us to a crucial consideration: weight. While riding the Great Divide Route a few years ago (see *Adventure Cyclist*, June 1998), I met and camped with a couple in Breckenridge, Colorado. They were riding the pavement on the TransAmerica Trail.

"Pick up my bike," the man said with pride, then told me it weighed 130 pounds.

They marveled that I was riding across the country with a bike that weighed 55 pounds with a gallon of water on board. We decided to pedal a quarter-mile to the ski basin, which was right in town, and camp another quarter-mile up a gentle trail. But my friends could barely pedal to the ski basin, which was on the pavement, and riding across a grass field proved too difficult. I pedaled to camp. By the time they reached the campsite, my bike was unloaded and a campfire was blazing in the twilight.

The point of this story is that a pound on the trail costs the bicycle

tourist the same as two or three on the pavement. Rides of marginal difficulty will be impossible if you carry too much weight. To add insult to the heavy load's injury, the trails you can ride will be more enjoyable on a light bike. Four panniers and 50 pounds of baggage are a luxury off-pavement, and suited only to the strong and skilled. The importance of weight cannot be overstressed. On rigorous trips, serious mountain bikers won't even carry panniers; instead, their 15-pound loads are distributed between a compression sack on the rear rack and a small backpack on their person.

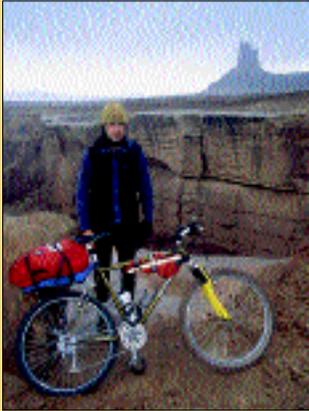
A good rule is not to let your baggage, minus water, outweigh your naked bike.

And now, back to route selection. The first step for the road cyclist is to halve your usual mileage goals. Next, know your skill level and the demands of the terrain ahead. The heavier your load is, the easier you want the terrain to be. Maintained dirt roads, suitable for a passenger car, are generally manageable to the novice. Anything beyond this level demands some off-road riding skills. (A tour like the White Rim, generally easy with a few moderate sections, is a perfect place to test your abilities.) Finally, do not plan a trip that your weakest member cannot comfortably complete. The trip will be hardest for this person, anyway, and unridable terrain on a heavy bike qualifies as a casual definition of torture.

On most mountain bike tours, it is not possible to sleep inside every night. Camping gear is usually mandatory. You will probably have to carry more food. Terrain is dicier. And if you break down, it is likelier that no one will be able to help you. So self-sufficiency is even more crucial on a mountain bike than on a road bike.

Once you hit the trail, relax. The bumps are softer that way, and the hills are smoother. Mountain bike touring means the freedom to traverse landscapes inaccessible to the road cyclist. Enjoy the animals, the flowers, and the feeling of harmony with the countryside that you are now a part of. Choose a campsite on one of the planet's billions of unpaved acres. And when you spend a whole day reveling in the glories of a slithering mountain trail or lakeside path, remember — you earned it!

-D.W.



It's important to travel lightly when touring off-road.

and fossil collecting are all banned in Canyonlands National Park, and we hauled the fuel so we could build campfires. With the recent precipitation we hoped to find surface water, but under normal conditions the only reliable water is in the Colorado River, a four-mile detour on a rough road. Instead of taking this byway, we scouted around. On the rim of the canyon, house-sized boulders sometimes popped off the vertical faces of rock. More important to our cause, many natural depressions in the smooth top layer of rock held ample snowmelt. What had looked like a gamble at the ranger station had immediately paid off.

Of course, on an isolated winter trip with only two people, casualness of this sort could never pass unpunished. Clint's filter broke before we pumped the first cup of water. A search through my bags revealed that I had forgotten the iodine, our backup system. This dilemma was resolved when we decided that we were only drinking fresh snowmelt anyway, and put our lips right to the puddles. It should be noted that meltwater is not always safe to consume raw, and the Park Service does not recommend that you do it. But we drank it without ill effects.

In the morning, we watched a peach sky blend into magenta ramparts until well past sunrise. The sandstone formations segued into infinite shapes, which changed constantly with the low winter light. While gazing over the edge of a cliff, I realized that at every point we had seen the canyon, the sturdier layer of the White Rim was all that kept the weaker strata from dissolving. Once the capstone of the White Rim eroded, the softer, darker layers peeled off vertically beneath it. So, in an important way, the White Rim held the entire landscape together.

It held our ride together, too, serving as the one constant in our ever-changing world. We followed its benevolent flatness around a strange vertical macrocosm. To our right, arches and towers approached, loomed, and slid back. To our left, we played a serpentine game of tag with the side canyons of the Colorado. Miles ahead you would see that a huge bite of land was missing. A few minutes later, a precipitous drop would reveal weirder vistas far below. We spent hours hiking along the slickrock rim, looking down upon a panorama so broken up and riddled with eroded formations, I couldn't imagine standing among them.

Most of the arches were above us, but without warning, one appeared to our left, at the canyon's edge. Musselman Arch wasn't an arch, really — more like a plank across an abyss. It was six feet wide and flat enough, but despite energetic urging from Clint, I could not make myself ride my bike across it. On either side of the six foot plank was an eternity of space, and if nerves or a sudden gust of wind took you off the platform, all your memories, friendships and accomplishments would be transformed into a small smudge on a valley boulder, invisible from above. Inevitable I know, but not a fate I wished to hasten. I walked across it, but even standing in the middle was unnerving, and I wondered if my thrill-seeking days were coming to an end.

On the second night we camped at the White Crack, a fin of the White Rim that hovers above the confluence of the Colorado and Green rivers. As the White Rim is narrowed by the approach of the two valleys, it improbably begins a slow rise that terminates in a ship's prow of rock. It is the kind of view that prompts religious conversions.

The third day was rainy and misty. The joyous play of light upon rock became a tour through more muted moods, and we became almost accustomed to the scenery. We followed a few side trails into the buttes, but never reached any of the arches so far above us. That afternoon we slowly

wound our way to the Green River, whose canyon, while deep and beautiful, is not in the same league as the Colorado. We also left the White Rim, which became buried beneath sedimentary millennia.

We camped at Labyrinth Campground, on the Green River, and wished we had taken two days to pedal what we had blazed through in one. After three days on the trail and no one else around, Clint and I were wishing for a lot of things. Feeling the visceral joy of a land stripped to its skeleton, we pursued long conversations and solitary hikes with equal passion.

But conversation with each other was no longer a substitute for the myriad joys of modern life. We were ready for reentry into civilization. The next day we lingered as long as we could, not leaving the Green until the afternoon. The climb up Mineral Bottom road was the only significant ascent of the trip. We consoled ourselves that this climb, at least, was easier than the way we had come down.

After an hour, we found ourselves back in the shrubs, atop the Island in the Sky. A long, slow grind still lay in front of us; after pulling ourselves out of the canyon we didn't have much energy. The last day was definitely the hardest, and we found ourselves racing the coming night. But several miles before the end we took a two-track shortcut that deposited us near the ranger station.

Exhausted but happy, we reached the car at sunset. The ranger station was closed, and our automobile was the only one in the lot. We had an air of satisfaction as we packed our things for the long ride home.

"What a great trail." I said.

"The best." Clint agreed.

"The best ever?"

"Well, that's a big statement." He grinned. "But it's definitely in the top five."

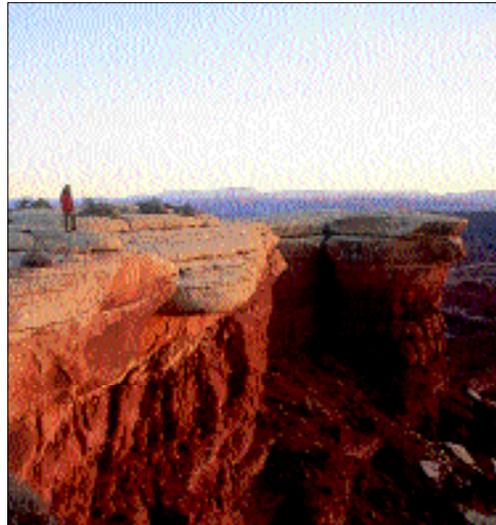
Big words from an experienced trail hound. A half hour later, when we were almost at Moab, a pickup blurred past us on the main road.

"Hey," I wondered in the darkness, "when's the last time we passed a car?"

"A long time ago," Clint said, as he closed his eyes to sleep. "A long time ago."

Adventure Cycling member, and frequent contributor, Drew Walker wrote about a tour in the Middle East in the April 2000 issue.

Drew and Clint's winter trip meant they had the trail virtually to themselves.



The White Rim gets its name from a layer of alabaster sandstone sandwiched between the dominant layers of red rock.

