

\$6.95
OCT/NOV 2017
Vol.44 No.8

Adventure CYCLIST

A publication of ADVENTURE CYCLING ASSOCIATION

Riding the **Rust Belt**

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THE CHICAGO TO NEW
YORK CITY ROUTE **10**

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RISING

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SECOND

CHANCES

at the North Rim of the Grand Canyon

story and photos by Chuck Haney

t's funny how first impressions leave such a lasting impact on our memories of places we've visited. Flashbacks of my first and only visit to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon are tainted with busloads of tourists packing scenic viewpoints with their "selfie-absorbed" practices. I was no happier to witness a live tree cut down to fuel a feeble attempt at a campfire in the middle of the night. Neither the solitude nor the spirituality that I crave when visiting national parks were delivered on that trip. I shook off the experience with hopes of revisiting the much less visited North Rim in the future.

Every April I make a trek down Interstate 15 to southern Utah in order to enjoy some early season mountain biking on singletrack trails. Gooseberry Mesa, Slickrock Swamp, Hurricane Rim, and other exciting local desert trails have become my familiar spring training ritual. The timing has always precluded me from visiting the North Rim of the Grand Canyon as its higher elevation prevents exploration until the middle of May.

You can say that I am all about second chances. This year, when I saw that my friends at Escape Adventures organized mountain biking tours of the North Rim as early as mid-May, my curiosity was piqued. They offered four days of riding focusing on fabulous stretches of trail leading to canyon views — minus the tour buses. Sign me up! I was excited to take in

another vantage of one of Seven Natural Wonders of the World.

DAY 1

After a couple of shakedown rides along Hurricane Rim near Zion National Park in Utah, I deemed myself ready for the upcoming adventure. The first time I met my new riding buddies was in the



MAP: AMY LIPPUS



Spring snow still lingered at high elevations along the Arizona Trail in the Kaibab National Forest.

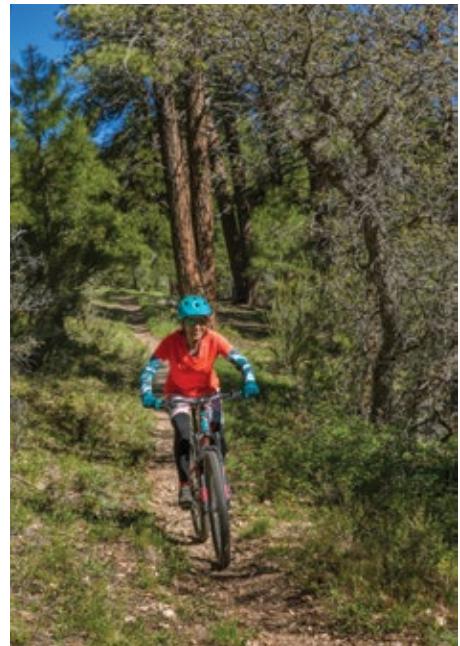
transport van. There was a group of six men, all about my age, from the town of Yorba Linda in Southern California, and a couple from Evergreen, Colorado. We quickly got to know each other while the van lugged uphill toward the massive Kaibab Plateau.

Sitting near the front of the van, I kept an eye on the outside temperature posted on the dashboard. A cold front had been stalled out over the area for several days bringing rain to the desert and snow in the mountains. As we gained elevation, the temperature gradually dropped, and I gradually became more worried about the weather. Nearing the Telephone Hill trailhead for our first taste of North Rim Grand Canyon riding, the thermometer indicated that 50s were being replaced by 40s. When we pulled open the van doors and unloaded at 3:00 PM, it was down to 33 degrees and lightly snowing. Were I not already committed to the tour, I would not have been riding on this day.

The cold, thin air was a challenge at the start. Not yet acclimated, my lungs laboriously sucked in oxygen as I

ascended the skinny trail at over 9,000 feet. With my lungs working overtime, I relished the solitude and beauty of this section of the Arizona Trail. We wound through an evenly spaced ponderosa pine forest accented by aspen groves still searching for green spring buds. Every few miles opened to a meadow where the lightly falling snow contrasted against the darkness of the outlying forest. We cruised along for several hours at a steady pace. Stopping for too long in the wintry conditions was not a consideration. Without thinking, I hastily blasted through a creek bottom and ended up with wet feet when I should have taken an alternate dry route.

Our guides had warned us about a particular nasty climb called "Mission Impossible." It wasn't hard to recognize when we were suddenly thrust onto it after veering out of a lovely meadow seemingly straight up a steep, rock-strewn path. I shifted into my granny gear and gave it my best before I bailed. Our group shifted to a slow-moving procession as we trudged, pushing our steeds to the top.



The Rainbow Rim Trail in the Kaibab National Forest is a bucket-list ride for many dirt enthusiasts.

Maybe I could have ridden the Impossible at 28, but no way at double that! We caught our breath and soon reached a dirt

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road intersection where we had our first snow-obstructed glimpse into the Grand Canyon.

Our guide Tim had the van, trailer, and all our gear parked in a lovely camping spot featuring an amazing vista from the East Rim Viewpoint of the Grand Canyon. The biting cold, now complete with more snowfall driven by a strong wind, persisted. I set a new personal record for changing out of my drenched clothing into layers of dry — I quickly donned insulated gear from head to toe in an attempt to retain body heat.

There was a brief discussion about whether to pull up stakes and head to lower elevation to ride somewhere warmer the next day, but we decided to brave the conditions. With a campfire crackling and dinner on the way, our group set up an armada of tents in the ponderosa pine forest. As we gathered close to the warmth of our fire, the sun broke out to the west, illuminating first the distant Navajo Mountain in golden light and then shifting steadily across the canyon below us, bathing the landscape in warm, magical light. With my camera in hand, I could barely get in a few bites of dinner between shutter clicks. The light show kept evolving, resulting in a crescendo of red clouds. The sunset gave us all a glimmer of hope that the weather would break and give us a pleasant ride the following days. When night fell, I climbed into my sleeping bag, rated for 20F. With the bag maxed out and wearing every stitch of clothing available, I slept lightly that night. My toes never thawed.

DAYS 2 & 3

As we pedaled out of camp under a blue sky on Day Two, there was a sense of optimism. Still really chilly, we kept a steady rhythm as we traveled down a gravel road with delightful rows of lime-green aspen trees. A series of climbs and descents led us to a five-way intersection where we chose an old Jeep road that headed downhill. Downed trees along the doubletrack required careful maneuvering, but at least the obstructions meant there would be no Jeeps or automobiles to contend with. There was still the occasional snowbank billowed up along the road, and we discovered that the snow was firm enough for us roll over making for a fun diversion from the lull of



NUTS & BOLTS *Grand Canyon North Rim*

WHEN TO GO

The roads and the park are open from mid-May through mid-October. If you go early in the season like I did, there is the possibility of cold weather as the Kaibab Plateau ranges from 7,700 to 9,200 feet in elevation. The cooler weather can be a welcome escape in mid-summer when the temperatures at lower elevations are triple digits. Monsoon season is in summer when the Grand Canyon experiences almost daily afternoon thunderstorms. Autumn could be a very pretty time to visit as there are many aspen groves that turn a splendid gold in late September and into October.

TOUR OPERATORS

I went with Escape Adventures, a touring company based in Las Vegas that puts on quality trips across the American West. I had a really positive

experience as we were shuttled from St. George, Utah, with two professional guides who worked hard to give our group a first-class experience.

escapeadventures.com

800.596.2953

Our own Adventure Cycling Association also puts on several van-supported tours of the North Rim of the Grand Canyon that cover many of the areas in this article. adventurecycling.org/guided-tours/van-supported-tours/2017-grand-canyon-i-van/

PRECAUTIONS

If you ride the Rainbow Rim on your own, please note that it's in a remote setting. It is a good hour drive on somewhat rough dirt roads to reach any of the observation points. There are no supplies along the route, so bring plenty of food, water, and first aid supplies — there is no phone service. This is high-elevation riding

between 7,700 and 9,200 feet, so take it easy for a day or two to get used to the thin air, especially if you reside at lower elevations. Bring an ample supply of warm clothing as wintry conditions can happen any time of the year at elevation.

Avoid exposed ridges during afternoon thunderstorms that produce lightning during summer months.

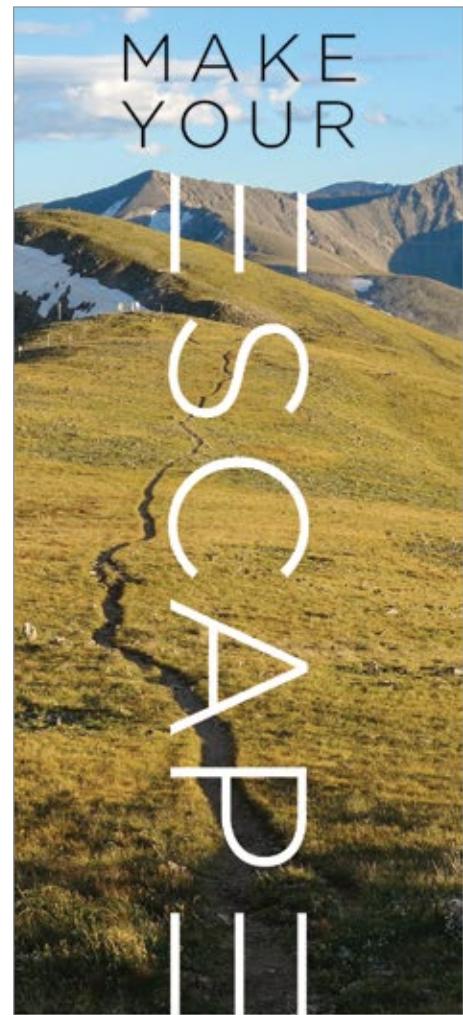
I was the only one on our group still riding a 26in. wheel mountain bike, and while it performed fine, I couldn't help feeling a little envious of my riding companions because their 27.5in. and 29in. wheels and fatter tires (2.6–3.0in. wide) seemed to roll over the rocky sections with relative ease.

MORE INFORMATION

Kaibab National Forest

fs.usda.gov/kaibab

Maps of the national forest, fs.usda.gov/main/kaibab/maps-pubs



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the rocky road surface.

We had a few more roads including a bike-pushing section on "Mission Impossible: The Sequel," and we ended up at our campsite for the next several evenings: North Timp Point. The view

at East Rim the previous night had been outstanding, but this perspective of the Grand Canyon was, well, grandiose.

To add to the experience, the weather conditions were now superb. At sunset we sauntered down to the overlook to relish

with awe a view of rocks as old as two billion years. We spoke excitedly about the next day's ride along the epic Rainbow Rim Trail as it was the main reason that most of us had signed up for this trip in the first place. Over my lifetime, I have been blessed to ride many of the premier singletrack trails across the country. The Rainbow Rim was always on my bucket list.

The next morning after breakfast, I enthusiastically departed our campsite ahead of the rest of the group. I wanted to have a relaxing ride at my own pace and to find a spot or two where I could photograph the other riders on sections of the trail showing the expanse of the canyon below us.

Rainbow Rim connects the five observation points that overhang the canyon — Parissawampitts, Fence, Locust, North Timp, and Timp. I must mention that although our riding was on national forest land, the Rainbow Rim Trail skirts along the border of Grand Canyon National Park but is not actually in the park proper.



Near the remote North Rim, starry nights are unaffected by city lights.

An advertisement for FreeWheeling Active Holidays. The top half features the company's logo, "FREEWHEELING" in large yellow letters with a blue bicycle wheel and wings graphic, and "Active Holidays" in white. Below the logo is a scenic photograph of a winding asphalt road along a coastline with a fjord, small islands, and mountains in the background. The bottom half contains the text "RIDE NORWAY WITH US IN 2018" in large black letters, along with a phone number "1-800-672-0775" and a website "www.freewheeling.ca".



Unlike the far more easily accessed South Rim, the Grand Canyon's North Rim offers all the views with none of the crowds.

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Spring conditions at high elevations mean riders should be prepared for cool weather and be self-sufficient as the North Rim lacks cell coverage.

As the singletrack left the rim viewpoint of North Timp, I navigated the ponderosa pine of the Kaibab National Forest with the occasional foray into a steep side canyon before coming back along the flatter sections near the rim. Upon reaching Locust Point, I stopped and chatted with another mountain biker who had camped along the trail. From this vantage, I could see directly across the canyon back to North Timp and was hoping to catch a glimpse of the riders from my group

departing camp. I soon pedaled by other folks camping right next to the trail as I realized that Locust Point ran adjacent to a gravel road that led to easy access for car campers. I saw the occasional hiker or two, and a young bikepacking couple, but otherwise I had the trail to myself.

I took my lunch break under the shade of a juniper tree at Fence Point, a section of trail that hugged the precipice of the “big ditch,” as the locals called it. I waited for my riding companions to

appear so I could snap images of them enjoying the trail. I followed the “Yorba Linda Six” in a particularly fun section of buffed-out trail as we headed toward Parissawampits Point and the turnaround. Encountering a series of downed trees, I decided that I had reached a good point for my personal turnaround. Twenty-five miles of singletrack was a full day for this Montanan still in spring training.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 49

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 32
HANEY: GRAND CANYON

As I headed back solo, I ran across several volunteers with chainsaws clearing blowdown from the trail. I chatted a bit, told them about the trees across the trail behind me, thanked them, and then resumed back toward North Timp Point. The side canyons with the steeper climbs and rockier ballast seemed more challenging than they had earlier in the day, reaffirming my wise decision to turn around when I did. As I bore down, I noticed the angular chunks of Kaibab limestone — the colorful rocks below my tire tread really did resemble the colors of a rainbow. This must be how the trail acquired its moniker.

That evening we sat around our campfire under perfect weather conditions and millions of stars while we swapped stories of our day's adventures out along the Rainbow Rim. Our group of 11 was really bonding, and our laughs echoed throughout the night.

I hated to leave the beautiful spot at North Timp Point. Our last day of riding would be on gravel roads, which was a bit of a letdown after the singletrack bliss of the Rainbow Rim. We made great time as we sped up and down the forest roads until we hit a stretch of blowdown. After going under and around several downed trees, we realized that this was much more serious than it had first appeared. It looked like a microburst of wind had come along and flattened every tree for about half a mile. These were large trees, and it was increasingly hard to find a path through the massive obstruction. It took us 45 minutes of crawling and clambering before we finally reached the end of the mayhem. There were more than a few scratched up

shins and elbows, and we were relieved to be back onto the remote doubletrack pedaling unobstructed again.

At an intersection deep within the Kaibab Plateau, our guide Mark instructed us to turn left, beginning an extremely fun big-ring pedal for almost 12 miles of gradual downhill. We saw numerous mule deer, several of them dodging right in front of us as we sped at 25 miles per hour! After one stretch of loose rock, it was smooth sailing all the way back to our van and

trailer at Indian Hollow where our other guide, Tim, had a cooler of cold drinks waiting. I complimented our guides on a good strategy of finishing the tour with miles of smooth downhill as our group was euphoric, with lots of smiles and high fives. I'm glad I gave the Grand Canyon a second chance. **AC**

Chuck Haney is an avid cyclist and photographer who lives in Whitefish, Montana. You can learn more about him at chuckhaney.com



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