

# ON A HIGHER PLANE°

FORGET AMSTERDAM. THE SINGLETRACK IN COLORADO HAS SERIOUS SUBSTANCE

WORDS & PHOTOS BRETT KENNEDY

MIKE CURTIS, AMASA BACK TRAIL, MOAB, UTAH

Altitude is a bitch. I'm huffing and puffing like an old man—well, an *older* man. I can clearly see the top yet it seems so far away, and I've climbed way worse than this before. By the time the summit is reached, I'm ready to collapse in a heap. If walking up a flight of stairs is this difficult, I'm dreading what affect riding my bike might have. Welcome to Colorado.

As it turned out, I needn't have worried; a day or so later I can not only climb stairs without the aid of bottled oxygen, I'm ripping on some of the best singletrack in the world. Altitude is my new best friend, delivering me to the top of massive scenic passes, 360 degree vistas of the Southern Rocky Mountains, snow-capped peaks as far as the eye can see, ribbons of dirt twisting and turning across flower-dotted meadows, squirrels darting in front of tyres, only the sound of whooping mountain bikers permeating the crisp, silent air. If I believed in heaven, this could well be it.

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It's not so far away, this notion of heaven, and it feels we're so high we could reach out and metaphorically touch it. Beginning the Singletrack Colorado Tour in the 'Mile High City' of Denver, it's the heat rather than the altitude that's first noticeable, having fled the chilly depths of New Zealand's winter. Taxiing south to our first base of Breckenridge, the view gradually transforms from flat cityscape to what I'd imagined Colorado to be. It's beautiful, vast and, dare I say, *epic*, and any light-headedness I'm experiencing is put down to excitement and anticipation rather than any dearth of oxygen to the brain. With a couple of days pre-tour to take a look around the former mining town, I set up my bike and get the legs spinning before meeting my fellow Kiwi guests who'll become mates for the next two weeks and beyond. Some are acquainted already, and while they come for the riding, all will leave with new friendships and everlasting memories.

Memorable is a word that perfectly sums up the array of riding in Colorado. Long before ever setting foot in the USA, I'd mentally catalogued the names of towns and trails where the sport was forged—places like Crested Butte, Durango and Salida, and trails such as 401, Monarch Crest and Hermosa Creek. Throw in Moab icons Slickrock and Porcupine Rim, and you've got the makings of an unforgettable trip. Being guided by someone as well-versed in the art of eking out the best rides as tour maestro Carl Patton ensures the memories don't consist of getting hopelessly lost or riding sub-standard trails. He's been doing this gig long enough to guarantee everything runs smoothly and the only thing his guests have to worry about is choosing which superlatives to use when describing their ride down yet another sublime piece of singletrack. Not even a broken toe—sustained hitting a trailside rock at high speed on Monarch Crest—could dampen my enthusiasm, the pain washed away in the flash mountain rainstorm as we descended our way to Salida for anaesthetising beers at a funky riverside café. Next door is Absolute Bikes, one of the most history-filled bike shops you could hope to find. If you can't spot an iconic frame, fork, helmet or race tidbit here, you're either asleep or in the wrong shop.



ESTHER PETTIGREW, 401 TRAIL, CRESTED BUTTE



If you somehow can't get your fill of great trails, cool memorabilia and pure mountain bike lifestyle in Salida, then Crested Butte will satiate the most discerning of historians and trail-hungry riders. It's the kind of town where most people will utter the phrase "I could live here" at least once during their stay. I know I did on numerous occasions, and that was without yet riding the labyrinth of trails surrounding the town. With pretty much one street running down the centre of the old town, and everyone riding a beaten up or pristine cruiser, it's difficult to tell who's a local and who's a blow-in, as most are here to ride. We hole up in the massive ski condos at the top of the hill, where tourists are the alpha species, and I want to be back below, gazing up at the sheer walls of rock that give the town its name. The bonus up here is that we're already on the way to the 401 trail, accessed by the most scenic fireroad I've ever ridden. There's a lot of midweek traffic on both bike and foot, and we're constantly on and off the bikes with cameras busy until the fast descent through alpine fields of yellow flowers completely negates any desire to stop.

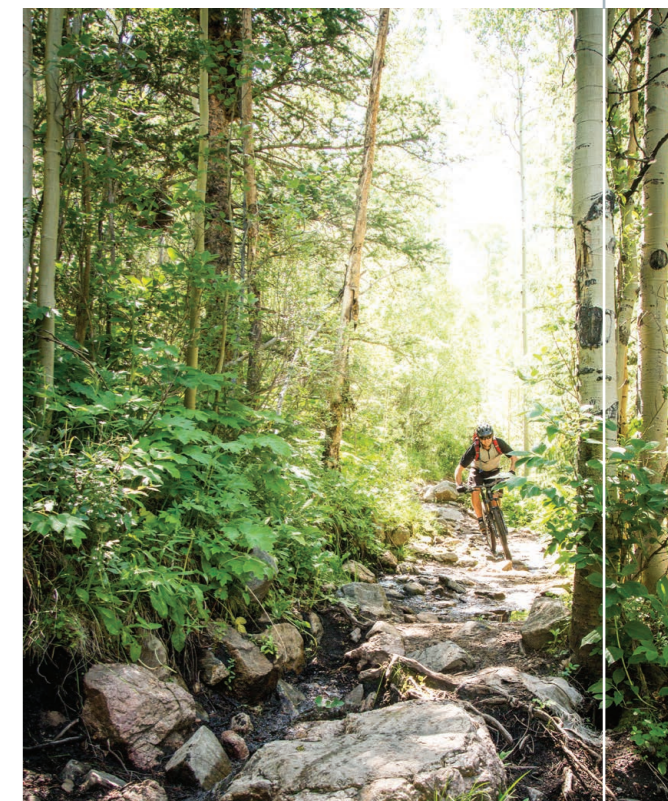


MIKE CURTIS AND CARL PATTON, COLORADO TRAIL, BRECKENRIDGE

Three days in the Butte seems too few to sample all on offer, but our last ride allows us to farewell the region in the most satisfying way possible. The Reno, Flag and Bear trails link together to form a long, tough day in the saddle, punctuated with three of the funnest descents of the trip and anywhere else I've ever ridden. The Deadman's Gulch switchbacks at the end of Bear could be the most euphoric piece of singletrack in my experience, judging by the state I was in at the bottom; I'd just about run out of superlatives to gush and high fives to administer to the other frothers cooling off in the river.

After that cascade of flow, getting in the van to drive to Silverton is tinged with a sense of uncertainty; what could top that? Some insanely steep roads with sheer drops promising certain death mark the route over the pass, and I'm silently praying to every god I don't believe in that Jason can navigate the big V10 van away from the unfenced soft edges. Coming down the other side is only slightly less nerve-wracking, and I'm relieved to hit the wide main street of what could easily be a set for a Clint Eastwood film. Rain starts to fall, and it's just us and the horse we rode in on standing in the street. If you want cowboy and mining history, you're in the right place here. Our hotel, the restaurant/bar, the rum distillery, the old brothels and saloons stand just as they did a couple of hundred years ago; strangely enough, this is my kind of place.

Which is what I'd expected Durango to be, what with its infamy of hosting the first ever mountain bike World Champs back in 1990, the year I bought my first real mountain bike. I wish I could say I felt some kind of affinity with the town, but I felt let down by the sterility of a place with no sense of, well, *place*. Luckily, Hermosa Creek trail brought redemption, a day after the rain kept us in Silverton for longer than planned, but which was more than welcome for some tired bodies and minds. The mud rendered already tough pinch climbs that much harder, while making the fast flow of the winding trail so much more fun, our tyres so far unfamiliar with dampness.





BRIAN BUELL, JACKSONS TRAIL, MOAB, UTAH

Bikes and bodies cleansed in the rushing water under the bridge downtown, the van aimed further south towards Utah. The journey is a study of changing geology to the maximum degree. We gradually leave the mountains behind, and dry plains begin to stretch out before us, green transforming to brown, to orange, to red, and lush vegetation replaced with hard, smooth rock. The shapes and formations blow our minds and the temperature ramps its way up to well over double what most of us are used to back at home. The Slickrock trail, Porcupine Rim and Amasa Back serve up three days unlike anything you're ever likely to experience in our part of the world, the surreal landscapes as foreign to me as riding on Mars, and almost as red and rocky.

Our return to Breckenridge fourteen days later seems like a sort of homecoming and I don't really want to leave again. The streets are familiar, I know the trails enough to want to venture out on my own, and the bars and eateries greet us like old friends. We finish our intrepid odyssey with one last treat, the Kenosha Pass trail. Heralded as maybe the toughest day on tour, the casualties soldier on for a final slice of singletrack pie topped with a smattering of rocky switchbacks and garnished with last glimpses of the Rockies from on top of their shoulders. All that's left to do is feast at the last supper, new friendships made and existing ones strengthened by the bond that only a true mountain biking nirvana can forge. There is a higher power at work. Much, much higher. **S**

### DETAILS

NUMBER OF DAYS:	14
TYPE OF TRACKS:	Singletrack, some buffed, some rocky and rooty
RIDING TIME:	Between three and six hours per day, including lunch and photo stops
RIDERS:	From good intermediate to expert - couples, solo-travellers and groups of friends
TOWNS:	Breckenridge, Salida, Crested Butte, Silverton, Moab
ACCOMMODATION:	Quality B&Bs, Victorian era hotels, and condos
OTHER ACTIVITIES:	Time for sight-seeing and coffee drinking and general mooching
PRICE:	NZD\$4790

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