



HOT

T I M E S I N

IDAHO

JOIN A ROLLING NUDIST COLONY FOR A NATURAL HOT TUB TOUR

BY DON CUERDON



It's just before sunrise, and the moon has set. So why are the coyotes howling? I crack a crusty, sleep-filled eye and check my watch. It's 4:43—time to wage that never-ending battle between the urge to roll over in my cozy sleeping bag for another hour or 2 and the urge to relieve my loaded bladder. My bladder wins.

As I wiggle myself and my sloshing gut free of the tent, my half-comatose brain makes some calculations that would startle me if I was more awake. It's cold and white stuff is falling, therefore it is snowing. I smell wood smoke, therefore Lu has started a campfire and will soon have coffee on. The coyotes' yipping is becoming more insistent, therefore....

Oh, shit!

The forest is on fire.

The white stuff accumulating on the rain fly is ash, and Lu hasn't lit a campfire all week because of the forest fire danger. A thick bank of smoke is rolling through the valley and obliterating the surrounding peaks. I'm wide awake now. And I feel like whimpering along with the coyotes.

This story isn't supposed to end this way. This is supposed to be a tale of a 5-day, fully supported, point-to-point mountain bike adventure through the rugged terrain outside Ketchum, Idaho, traversing 14 hot springs (that's 2.8 springs per day for you calculator types) with a group of people so cool that I wouldn't mind being marooned on a desert island

with any one of them. SO WHO WROTE THIS DAMN FOREST FIRE INTO MY MOST EXCELLENT ADVENTURE?

Okay, let's compose ourselves, shall we? No need to blither.

FUNHOG COMPANY PICNIC

Let's roll the tape back to the beginning.

Our trip started last August on a Monday with a LeMans-style, one-legged race to our bikes piled in a parking lot on the westernmost outskirts of Ketchum. I gave Lu Warner (the loudest resident of Moab, Utah, and chief guide/cook/bottle washer for his company, Western Spirit Cycling) a hefty shove in order to reach my bike first. As a card-carrying, club-car sport racer, I can't resist cheating in a mountain bike race—even if it's on foot and only lasts 10 seconds.

In a flash we were mounted and rolling swiftly down the pavement of Warm Springs Road, which quickly faded into a sandy dirt washboard stretching 100 miles to Atlanta, our final destination. But our first stop, Frenchman's Bend Hot Springs, lay an easy 11 miles to the west, and we could barely contain our excitement.

Four-fifths of Idaho is mountainous. But the peaks aren't as high as Colorado's (good for oxygen-sucking lowlanders like me), and its backcountry isn't as crowded as California's or Washington's. Best of all, nearly 90% of the state is either Forest Service or BLM territory, which means trails are abun-

dant and open to cyclists.

I normally avoid guided tours. They're much too fraught with itineraries, set menus, and scheduled stops for my walkabout adventure tastes. The thing I fear most about such groups, though, is member incompatibility. But this trip promised to be different. The clients were picked from a talent pool of fully certified Professional Funhogs—not a whiner among 'em.

The core of our group was Scot Nicol, his wife Ginny, and the merry pranksters who operate and hang around Scot's mountain bike manufacturing company, Ibis Cycles. This tour was their company picnic. I'm not sure why I was invited, but I accepted without hesitation. Maybe that's why.

RUNNING A BATH

In what seems like no time we reach Warm Springs Creek (which is anything but warm). You must ford its icy waters to reach the natural hot springs on the far shore. The trip over isn't bad, when you're still pumped from riding. But the chilly return trip, when you're all mellow from a good soak, sucks. The trip notes call this painful sensation "a refreshing interlude to some serious soaking." Hah!

Since Frenchman's Bend is so close to Ketchum, the Forest Service has banned bathing in the buff. So when Lu told us we had to wear suits, we stripped our bike clothes and donned beachwear right in the middle of the road. Lu rolled his eyes and followed, perhaps wondering what he'd gotten himself into. This was no timid bunch taking a 5-day walk on the wild side. These were wild-side dwellers on vacation.

The hot springs emanate from fissures along the shore, spilling near-boiling water into the stream. Over the years, bathers have stacked rocks to collect the hot water and form pools. There are 3 pools at Frenchman's Bend, providing enough room to

accommodate our group of 15, plus Lu and his employees, Rachel and Harley (who are driving 2 Chevy Suburbans laden with all our camping gear, spare parts, food, water, and beer).

You can adjust the pools' tempera-

a plume of dust.

"The top" is Dollarhide Summit, elevation 9,000 feet and change, roughly a mile higher than Ketchum. But we don't know this yet. All we know is it's 15 miles to lunch, so we ride.

And ride, and ride, and ride. It's easy cruising to the base of the climb, but from there on it's a 20x30T, low-gear meditation session. Gravity groups fuller-figured riders—Gil Willis, Jim Hasenauer, and myself—in the rear echelon. Paucity loves company. Good thing, since the climb takes 2 hours.

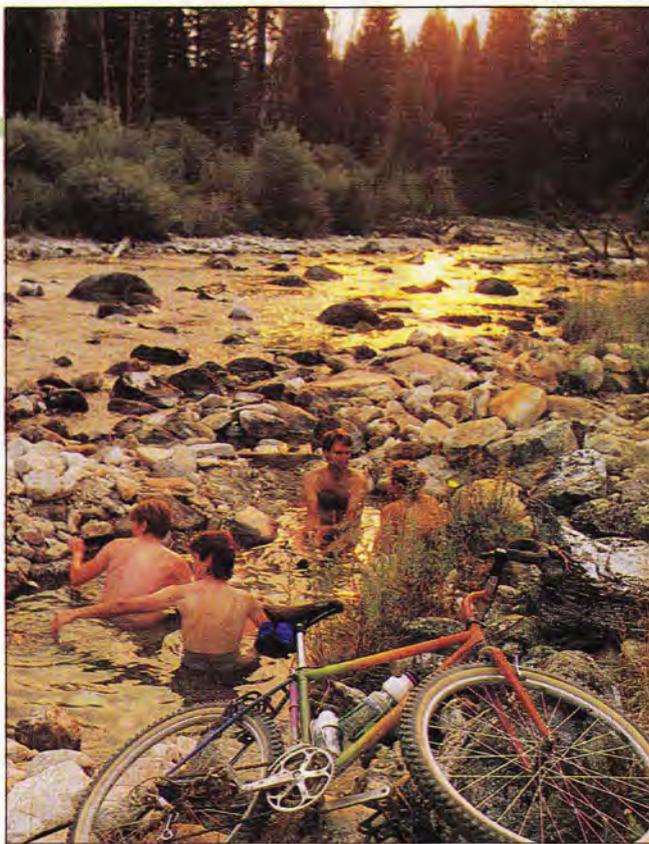
Fortunately for us, gravity doesn't let up on the downhill. So after a lunch of mostly water—to mitigate the effects of the high altitude, low humidity, 90-degree temperature, and morning's sweat loss in the hot spring—the fat boys take revenge on the climbers.

The narrow road down from Dollarhide is a fiendish combination of washboard surface (due to the summer-long absence of rain) and hairpin turns. Mountain bike heaven, in other words. Gil thunders by, cutting me off in a tight right-hander. Jim has already gone ahead and I feel compelled to chase them, pushing closer to the limit—

that fine line between control and disaster. The only thing I'll stop for now is a Rock Shox salesman.

Although total mileage for the day was only 35 miles on dirt roads, I was glad to see the Suburbans ("Mormon Porsches," Lu calls them) being off-loaded at our camp, tucked amidst the Worswick Hot Springs in an undeveloped valley. The first items off were 15 folding chaise longues, which were set up in the shade of a free-standing tarp. Next came the giant beer cooler.

After quickly pitching our tents in 2 distinctly separate sectors—snoring and nonsnoring—we reconvened under the tarp to drink beer, eat tons of guacamole and chips, swap tales, and zone out. There we wallowed like yuppie bedouins, waiting for the servants to bring us more to eat and drink. It's a program I could learn to love—as long as the avocados and Ballantine Ale



Naked aggression meets naked relaxation. Idaho's natural bathwater is best when shared with your bike and buddies.

tures by arranging rocks to admit or divert the frigid creek water. I tune the middle pool to a perfect 105 degrees Fahrenheit, using my Casio thermometer watch as a gauge, and ooze into it with a blissful sigh.

"AAAAIIIIIIYIYIYIYI!" We recross the "refreshing interlude," redon bike duds, and continue the day's ride. So much for bliss.

YUPPIE BEDOINS

I should know better. When a guy like Lu, who competes successfully at the national level (a week after our trip, he took 10th in the master's cross-country race at the NORBA finals in Durango), describes the route in his propaganda sheets as "moderate, some steep climbs," I should plan on sprouting wings.

"Lunch will be waiting for you at the top," says Lu as he motors away in

hold out.

After an amazing meal of Cajun-style fish and numerous forms of tasty carbohydrate prepared by our guides on a pair of Coleman camp stoves, we all took a bath together in a giant hot spring-fed pool. Naked. Sure, we pretended to not be checking each other out, but we did. I did, at least. The most curious part of my curiosity, however, was how quickly it ebbed. Once the novelty wears off, nudity seems pretty bland compared to the diversity of clothing. Frederick's of Hollywood was no dummy. We soaked until the stars came out, then stumbled, pleasantly exhausted, to our tents.

GROOVIN'

It was frosty cold when I awoke—typical high-desert weather. I made a naked dash for the hot spring pool and met several others who'd been similarly inspired. A later arrival brought a single cup of coffee and shared it with us. It felt good to stretch in the warm water after yesterday's ride and a night's sleep on the ground. Mist rising from the hot springs gave the valley a primeval

appearance. A grazing brontosaurus would not have been out of place. I dressed and went looking for more coffee. After 2 cups of Harley's espresso and a bran muffin, I was primed for the groover.

"What's a groover?" you say.

One of the moral conditions of operating backcountry tours in the West is self-containment. That means carrying out everything you carry in, except the water filtered through your kidneys. That's right, used food must be carried out. Thus, the groover.

The groover is a fixture commonly used on river trips. Conveniently located 100 yards downwind from camp, it's an ammo can with a plastic garbage bag liner. It's called a groover because sitting on it puts grooves in one's butt cheeks. Although ours was a deluxe model with a toilet seat, it was nonetheless a groover and, as such, governed by the "Groover Rules of Engagement." Rule number 1: no peeing.

I've never considered simultaneous sphincter relaxation a luxury until this morning. But there's plenty of incentive for one-at-a-time control. Anyone

caught peeing in the groover has to suck the air out of the bag when we pack up and move on. At least that's what Lu said. I'm not one to take chances when the stakes are that high.

That mastered, we break camp and continue west along the Little Smokey Creek, passing up a dip in Preis Hot Springs at the 5-mile mark in favor of a more intriguing option farther along.

At the confluence of Little Smokey Creek and the South Fork of the Boise River we hang a right onto the first singletrack of the trip. Our destination is Skillern Hot Springs, but it's the going, not the getting there, that's good. We climb northward for more than an hour and regroup in the shade of a pine grove.

"The spring's dry," says Lu, returning from a high-speed reconnaissance ride farther up the trail. But that's okay. We still have a humdinger, return-trip descent to play with.

Buffed singletrack is a foreign surface for me. I'm more at home picking my way over the rocks and roots so prevalent on eastern trails. Such low-speed riding carries little consequence

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should your mind wander. Not so on this fast stuff.

I wiped out so hard that when I got up I couldn't find my bike right away. Riding too fast into a turn where the trail had become deeply channeled, I lost my balance when both wheels wedged against the far berm. We're talking big-time, high-side, end-over-end, yard-sale endo. The landing tore a hole in my saddle and cost me a little elbow skin. I was bummed nobody saw it (even the Rumanian judge would have given me a 10), but glad my bones were intact.

ATLANTA BURNING

Maybe all this nude bathing is sexier than I thought. Today, I feel like a victim of testosterone poisoning. I charged up the first pitch of James Creek Summit in my middle ring, topped it, then started down what I figured was the other side, only to find another pitch that was far steeper than the first. Now, about a mile up this bitch, er, pitch, I'm looking at my thermometer watch, which reads 107° F.

Jim and I pause in the shade of a small tree and I try to ask him, "Can I have some of your water?" But the only sound my throat will make is an imitation of a bull frog with laryngitis. Jim hands me his bottle.

After lunch at the summit we descend the gnarliest section of dual-track we've encountered yet. My arms are so tired from getting pounded by washboard that I take my chances riding the loose section between the tracks. It feels like surfing, or maybe skiing powder, at 40 mph. I drift through the corners, steering solely with my hips. Cool!

On the final stretch into Atlanta I get an overwhelming feeling when I realize how far I am from civilization. We're 100 miles of bad road and 2 passes away from the world, adrift on an ocean of wilderness. I'm always amazed and thankful when I learn that places like these still exist within the continental United States. I can see peaks in the Sawtooth wilderness area in the distance.

During the war between the states, Atlanta was a major confederate gold mining town, but today it's a near ghost town of roughly 25 year-round residents. One of them is sharing the shade of the general store's porch with us when a cloud rolls through the valley with a deep, rumbling sound. Lightning strikes the mountainside before us, and rain spatters the ground. The few drops

that fall evaporate instantly, stirring the dust on the road, but do nothing to reduce the tinderbox condition of the forest.

"Money cloud," says the Atlantan. Forest fires equate to employment in this rugged region. But it's an ugly industry.

A forest fire at its worst moves faster than you can drive. According to those who've been to the brink, then spared, the flames devour oxygen so quickly when overtaking you that they literally suck the breath from your lungs. As you lie there suffocating, your hair and cloth-



Here's the smoke, but where's the fire? "Not here" was answer enough to chance another day of riding.

ing ignite from the intense heat and your skin begins to blacken and peel as you lose consciousness. There's no time for pain—unless you survive.

The lightning strike smolders overnight, then ignites in the morning breeze. Soon the entire camp is awake. Lu heads for town to check on the fire's location. Rumor has it that Willow Creek campground, our previous night's digs, was fully involved. I wondered if my story might, instead, be a eulogy for this great place.

Despite the heavy smoke, the Forest Service claimed we were in no immediate danger. So we spend the day, as planned, riding singletrack around Atlanta.

We follow a dualtrack along the Queens River through smoke as thick as London fog, with one important difference: London fog won't kill you. There's a wariness in our group today. I catch myself keeping note of the nearest stream, pond, or other body of water large enough to offer refuge from the unseen flames, should the wind shift

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our way. But the smoke simply blots the sun, making our fourth day of riding ironically chilly. We climb a gradual singletrack to an unnamed lake, then return via the same route. Making a big loop over the next ridge and taking a chance on losing our way could be fatal on a day like today.

FIRE EXIT

We had planned from the start to fly, in shifts, out of Atlanta on a small charter plane while Harley and Rachel drove the Suburbans to Ketchum with our bikes loaded on top. Fire paranoia changed our departure time from Friday afternoon to early Friday morning. We packed for the last time in the pre-dawn darkness, then rode to the airstrip to make our escape.

From the air I saw Dante's own private Idaho. Several hellish walls of smoke rose from the forest floor where 15,000-20,000-acre patches burned. The smaller blazes would soon be left alone, the firefighters called to contain the 280,000-acre inferno endangering Idaho City. (It would smolder into autumn.) But the fire would spare Atlanta and our Willow Creek campsite.

One day we frolicked in the wet and reveled in the wild. But then Idaho's natural playground became a menacing battlefield. And, at least for the moment, its torrid heat charred the memories of those soothing hot springs.

WHEN YOU GO

Round-trip and unsupported, the 100 miles between Ketchum and Atlanta is a difficult ride, but not impossible. You'll have to haul 7-8 days worth of food, but treatable water is plentiful despite the arid conditions. You can ship the bulk of your gear to Ketchum (as we did), fly into Boise, and take the bus to Ketchum. Or fly with your gear to Stanley (a more expensive air ticket), just north of Ketchum, and ride from there. Or you could spend a month just riding singletrack and camping near Ketchum.

The Elephant's Perch in Ketchum (208/726-3497) is a good source for maps, information, bike gear, and service.

Or you can take a trip like ours with Club Decadent, better known as Western Spirit Cycling, 800/845-BIKE. ●



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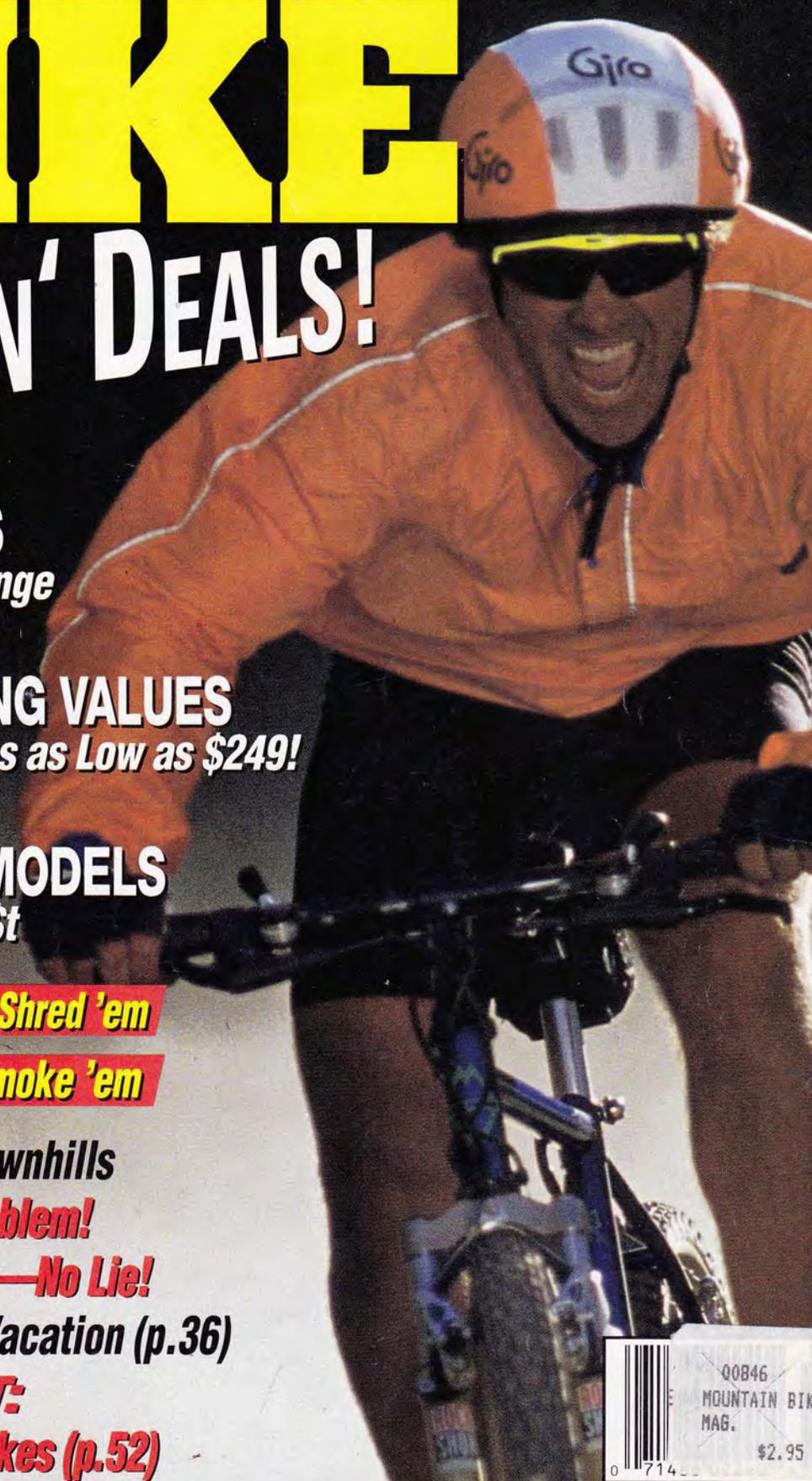
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