

Another one bites the dust

When viewed from San Francisco, the cities east of San Francisco Bay appear an unrelenting megalopolis of ship yards, high rises, and rows of homes against a backdrop of deep green hills. Just the thought of cycling through that urban jungle's swirling traffic can be a paralyzing experience. The reality can be worse.

In this instance, relief is spelled East Bay Regional Park District, over 12,000 acres of parklands laced with a veritable maze of trails. This mountain biking paradise spills down off the hills into the closely packed suburbs and cities strung out down the coast. The riding is as fine as any the urban rider will ever find.

The crown jewel is the East Bay Skyline National Recreation Trail, a thirty-one mile route from one end of the park network to the other. Its twisting path offers a dramatic break from the world of motorized transportation lapping at the park's border like a restless sea. The "National" in the title is evidence that the trail's importance to the entire nation has been officially recognized by the U.S. Congress.

The Skyline Trail links together six parks of the East Bay Regional Park District. The system spans open spaces created by the sharp slopes of the Berkeley Hills and the San Pablo Ridge. The trail alternately runs atop the ridges and along the streams flowing between the highlands. Views from the highest points 2,000 feet above sea level provide clear evidence of why so many call this their favorite American metropolis. The

gleaming bay, spanned by elegant bridges, stretches into the distance beneath a azure sky while a sulking bank of fog restlessly lurks offshore beyond the Golden Gate Bridge. On a weekend of wind, the bay is dotted so thickly with sails rushing over the waters, there hardly seems room for the constant stream of cargo ships heading to or from port.

Most of the trail follows fire roads closed to motor vehicles. The broad swaths of the graded pathways are especially easy on novice off-road cyclists so city riders unpracticed on riding over rough terrain can instantly have a fine time. Yet the hills provide plenty of challenge for muscles seeking a workout while the downhill exhilarate with the feel of the wind and the sight of trees and underbrush rushing by. Weekends invariably find dozens of riders huffing and puffing and sweating over their favorite sections.

For a full day ride of the entire trail, the journey best begins in Richmond, the northern anchor of the East Bay cities. A gradual climb up McBride Avenue leads out of the commercial sprawl and through a middle-class neighborhood before abruptly diving into isolated Wildcat Canyon Park. With a giant, erector set power line swaying overhead and continuous rows of homes overlooking the canyon from the hilltops above, Wildcat is definitely no wilderness. But rolling grasslands, complete with grazing cows and bordered by lush eucalyptis trees, and

a low people density transport Wildcat Canyon from just another city park into the realm of the backcountry.

The Skyline Trail turns east away from the creek, follows a side canyon, then climbs over low hills to connect with Nimitz Way, a paved road leading to a deserted Nike missile site. Today, the road is open only to bicyclists, horses, and hikers. If one of your goals is to avoid as much concrete as possible, a better route is via unpaved paths in the valley's lower reaches that later connect to the National route. Not only will the missile site be avoided, the scenery is definitely prettier and the trails less heavily used.

Tilden Park is the next park in the system but it's heavily developed with a merry-go-round, steam train, tennis courts, and golf course. The trail avoids most of the clutter and stays high in the open spaces along San Pablo Ridge. By the southern border of Tilden Park, the Skyline Trail has covered nine miles with only one road crossing.

The route next passes by the parklands of the University of California at Berkeley and through two tiny preserves featuring an extinct volcano and a display of rare and beautiful native plants. Then comes the most splendid stretch, fifteen miles through Tedwood and Anthony Chabot Parks. During those fifteen miles, the trail intersects motor-ways only three times. Both parks have complex trail systems including single-tracks that make them suitable for a full day's riding. Second-growth redwood trees dominate

the local ecology while the shrill cries of seagulls and the calls of songbirds ring through the forest against a sky of altostratus and stratocumulus.

Yet all is not perfect in this outdoor wonderland. Clumps of oak, a history of trail side murders, and the piercing sharp cracks and the zings of ricochets of a rifle range are unfortunately also part of the environment. Prudent riders avoid any bushwacking, never travel here alone, and may carry a Walkman stereo or earplugs.

The trail finally ends on the suburban streets of Hayward, eight miles south of Oakland. The best return to the beginning, or a dinner in the city, is via the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART). BART's route through the cities parallels the entire trail. In fact, from any of the parks, the nearest station is always just a quick three to five-mile downhill away. With literally dozens of entrances and exits and BART's immediate proximity, you can easily ride any particular section rather than riding the entire trail.

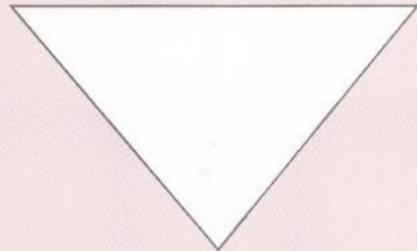
BART may be the best of all the network's advantages. Bicycles are permitted on BART all day on weekends but only during non-rush hours on weekdays. A permit to carry bikes is required by BART but getting one isn't much of a hassle. There's a one-day, one-time-only free pass available at any station, or you can purchase a three-year pass for

three dollars at the Downtown Oakland BART office. But like any government bureaucracy, BART's rules can change from one month to the next.

Before riding, it's also wise to visit the Park District's office at Redwood Park. Numerous free pamphlets are available with maps of the trail networks, descriptions of the scenery and attractions, and explanations of distances and how much up and down each trail has.

The East Bay Park District includes 41 regional parks totalling 53,000 acres with over 500 miles of trails within. Some of the parks are connected by nine other trails--"linear parklands"--which allow travel through private lands and increase the trail total by 106 miles. Add to this the open spaces of the University, the big watershed preserve owned by the water utility, and a host of undeveloped private lands and the total scope of land available for exploring is tremendous. Bicycles are allowed on every trail and most are unpaved.

That kind of diversity and quantity of parklands makes the East Bay's urban bicycling opportunities hard to beat. Combined with the generally better known riding in Marin County, it's no wonder the Bay Area has had such a tremendous impact on the development of mountain biking.



Editor's note, an obituary of sort: The East Bay Regional Park District is now history for mountain bikers. All the trails and evidently most of the fire roads have been closed to bikes. Reasons are varied but the closure once again stems from the dislike of mountain bikes by a minority of hikers. Unfortunately, though rare in number, the actions of a very few mountain bikers, slightly crazed and jacked up on adrenalin rushes from racing over the trails, have either endangered some hikers or even hit them, thus providing fodder for those advocating our banishment from the East Bay Parks of the country. Mountain bikers carry the onus of always having to refute the constant barrage of charges heaped on our heads by those who are ever ready to find fault. Where others can sin, we must be faultless. And so, once again, we find ourselves ostracized from where we once played.