

SALIDA HIGH & DRY

BY GARY SPRUNG

WE CRUISE ON A SMOOTH PATH AT TIMBERLINE ALONG THE Continental Divide. Looking northeast to the Sawatch Range, we count a string of 10 “fourteeners” that extends 150 miles toward Vail. At our feet, tiny alpine forget-me-nots and Rocky Mountain bluebells dot the tundra in pointillistic colors.

From Monarch Pass (elev. 11,200 feet), the first leg of the Crest Trail climbs gradually for 3 miles to Mt. Peck (elev. 12,208). From here, 20 of the next 25 miles are downhill singletrack.

“It’s the most ride for the least effort anywhere,” says Mike Rust, our guide and co-owner of Colorado Cyclery in Salida.

To the west, we gaze at rhythmic silhouettes of mountains in Gunnison County. We’re lucky today because the August monsoon has receded. But staying cool and protecting our skin from the high-altitude sunshine are still climatic concerns.

We descend along the Divide to the headwaters of Green Creek. The singletrack winds around the bottom of Mt. Ouray, Mt. Chipeta, and Pahlone Peak. Ouray (elev. 13,900) is named after Chief Ouray, the Ute Indian who signed a treaty that granted his tribe the Western Slope of Colorado in the 1860s. Chipeta was his wife and Pahlone his son.

We plummet through a forest of spruce and fir to Marshall Pass, where the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad crosses the Divide and connects Salida with Gunnison and Crested Butte. After we climb to the end of the Crest Trail, we begin a descent along Silver Creek through a field of wild currant berries and reach a towering buttress called The Gate.

At its base we find a mine flume, and from a portal on the side of its massive wall a steel cable with a bucket hangs hundreds of feet above us.

Joining the Rainbow Trail, we roll for 10 miles—we haven't left our middle chainrings—through lodgepole pine and sidehill meadows. The long, easy downhills are mixed with brief, steep climbs. Gaps in the trees reveal spectacular views of the Divide. Finally, we reach pavement and coast 10 miles back to Salida.

As we reach town, I can't recall a downhill singletrack that compares with this one. From its start, we've descended almost 7,000 feet. This may

be the best ride I've ever done.

NO GLITZ

A forgotten railroad town, Salida (pop. 4,870) naps at the junction of 3 mountain ranges, the Sawatch, Mosquito, and Sangre de Cristo. The Sawatch is the tallest range in Colorado—significant status in such a mountainous state. East of its fourteens (14,000-footers) and under its rain shadow lies the desert chaparral of the lower Mosquitos. The long, narrow Sangre de Cristos meet the other 2 ranges from the south.

Except for the Arkansas River whitewater that courses through

town, Salida's pace is slow. It lacks the charm and cultural attractions of Aspen, Crested Butte and Durango, but it isn't threatened by fast-buck developers, either. Salida's community of farmers and ranchers is low-key and friendly to the increasing number of tourists on mountain bikes who are attracted to this quiet town for its uncrowded trails, warmer climate, and cheaper prices.

"The longest we've ever gone without riding is three weeks, and that was during a heavy winter," says Rust. He and partner Don McClung, the 2 most experienced riders in the valley, have lived in Salida 4 years and claim they've only ridden half its trails. In winter, temperatures often reach 60 degrees. The Sawatch shields Salida from most of the powerful snowstorms that rage across the state. In summer, this town can be Colorado's hottest spot. Dry Rocky Mountain air, though, always seems to keep riding comfortable.

"In the spring, Don and I can ski at Monarch in the morning, then take an afternoon ride in shorts," says Rust. During autumn and spring, the rolling hills of the Mosquitos offer hundreds of miles of jeep roads. Most of their south-facing trails remain dry until December and melt quickly by March.

Salida's riding terrain is diverse. Numerous gravel roads and a few rail trails line the valley. One of the latter begins at the base of Monarch Pass and ascends 10 miles to a limestone quarry. The U.S. Forest Service has developed another on the roadbed of the former Colorado Midland Railroad. For challenge, Solidans tackle the 5,000-foot climb to Methodist Mountain or try to clean County Road 173, a steep and gnarly jeep route. Every July 4 the strongest riders in the area challenge the 150-mile Rainbow Trail, a trek from Monarch Pass to Bear Creek that takes at least 9 hours.

For framebuilders Rust and McClung, Salida's trails also provide optimum test tracks for their innovative bikes. Years ago, they perceived the climbing limitations of bikes with conventional chainstays, so they created a design that shortened them to 14½ inches and elevated them to the middle of the seat tube. The resulting "B-1," or "Shortie," features a scant 36-inch wheelbase. I've tried one and found that it climbs steep terrain better than any other bike I've ridden. The 58-year-old McClung used his Shortie to win the Masters hillclimb and place second in the cross-country at the '90 NORBA nationals in Mammoth, California.



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McClung showed us his climbing strength on a 7-mile ascent along the Ute Trail to the Federal Quarry. Its perfect granite produced the facing for numerous state and federal buildings. At the quarry, we relaxed and enjoyed a grand view of South Park, Pike's Peak, and the Sangres. After lunch, we rode to The Crater, a massive volcanic rock that drops 7,000 feet to the valley. We finished the 30-mile loop at sunset. The views of Salida were charmingly tranquil. County Road 173, however, punished us on a jarring descent back to town.

The next morning I visited Colorado Cyclery. It's located next to the Arkansas River, well-known for its whitewater rafting and kayaking. Because its owners are bicycling historians, the shop looks like a museum. It's one of the few U.S. manufacturers of "ordinary" bikes, the high-wheeler of the late 1800s. In fact, Rust has demonstrated his ordinary in Dublin, Ireland's, St. Patrick's Day parade. They're also proud of their 1890s tandem, which was built with courting in mind. Dual steering allows the gentleman to sit in the rear, an ideal position to nibble on the nape of the lady.

I was determined to nibble on breakfast, so I stepped into the First Street Cafe, located in Salida's historic district. It serves hearty, simple dishes, and it's a relaxing place to sample another helping of Salida's warmth. When Rust talked about most for the least, he wasn't just describing the Crest Trail, but also Salida: unbelievable mountains, an extraordinary bike shop, and an abundance of great trails surrounding a town that not many know.

When You Go: Contact Heart of the Rockies Chamber of Commerce, 406 W. Rainbow Blvd., Salida, CO 81201; 719/539-2086. Colorado Cyclery, 719/539-2453. Isabel National Forest, 1920 Valley Dr., Pueblo, CO 81008; 719/545-8737. Gunnison National Forest, 2250 U.S. Highway 50, Delta, CO 81416; 303/874-7691. Salida is 2 hours by car from Colorado Springs and 2½ from Denver.

RESOURCE LIST

Here's a list of chambers of commerce, bike shops, national forest offices, and key contacts for 6 other great Colorado mountain bike destinations. (All area codes are 303.)

Crested Butte (zip code 81224): Chamber of Commerce, Box 1288; 349-6438. Paradise Bikes and Skis, Box 1460; 349-6324. Bicycles Etc.,

MOUNTAIN BIKE

Box 208; 349-6286. Mountain Bike Hall of Fame and Museum, Carole Bauer; 349-7382.

Durango (zip 81301): Chamber of Commerce, Box 2587; 247-0312. Outdoorsman, 949 Main Ave., Box 1389; 247-4066. Durango Cyclery, 143 E. 13th St.; 247-0747. San Juan National Forest, 701 Camino Del Rio; 247-4874. Mountain Bike Specialists, 340 S. Camino Del Rio; 259-6661.

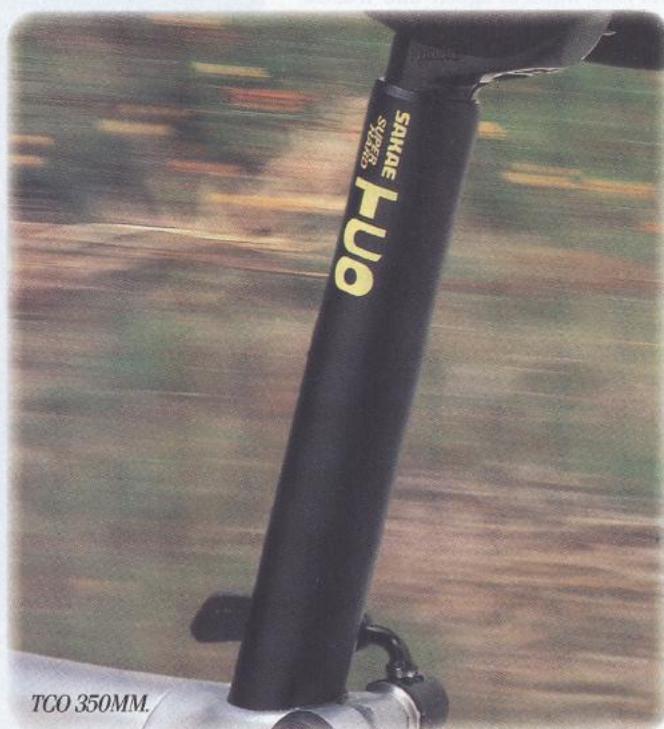
Telluride (zip 81435): Chamber of Commerce, Box 653; 728-3041. Olympic Sports, Box 1140; 728-4477. Michael Brown, Paragon Sports, Box 1620; 728-4525. Uncompahgre National Forest, Box 25127, Lakewood,

CO 80225; 236-9431.

Gunnison (zip 81230): Chamber of Commerce, Box 36; 641-1501. Tune-up Bike Shop, 222 N. Main; 641-0285. Gunnison National Forest, 216 N. Colorado St.; 641-0471.

Breckenridge (zip 80424): Chamber of Commerce, Box 1909; 453-6018. Recreational Sports, Box 7037; 453-2194. Pioneer Sports, Box 2444; 453-1030. Arapahoe National Forest, Box 620, Silverthorne, CO 80498; 468-5400.

Vail-Beaver Creek (zip 81658): Vail Resort Association, 111 S. Frontage Rd.; 476-1000. Vail Associates, Box 7; 476-5601. ●



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