

Arizona Trail Corridor: Land of Desert and Sky

By Erik Schlimmer

Published in the May 2006 issue of *Mountain Biking Magazine*

A traverse of Arizona. I already know what you're thinking if you're not from around there. Cactuses. Snakes. Sand. Heat. Dehydration. Death. Not that epic ride you have been dreaming of, huh? True, three of the five deserts of North America are included in this 800-mile trek but so are all seven life zones of North America, many far from the choking dust of deserts. The Arizona Trail Corridor, by its very nature, offers more diversity-per-mile than perhaps any other long-distance route. And, you'll most likely live to tell the tale of your traverse.

But first, slight clarification as to what this route is needs to be made. There is the Arizona Trail (AZT), which is a backpacking route that more than three dozen bipeds have tackled end-to-end. And there is the Arizona Trail Corridor (ATC), an unofficial mountain biking route a handful of riders have tackled from end-to-end. The differences between the two are significant.

If you were to try to bike the AZT end-to-end it would be a... What's the word? Oh yes, sufferfest. Two Arizonans, Scott Morris and Lee Blackwell, defined this term in 2005 by traversing via one long trip every section of the AZT that is open for bike use. They ended up carrying and pushing their bikes for approximately half the AZT and were forced to detour the nine wilderness areas that pock-mark the AZT. Think of the AZT as an 800-mile cyclocross course. Think, "not fun."

The ATC on the other hand, is a mountain bike-friendly route that utilizes rideable sections of the AZT and bypasses the hike-and-bike stretches and wilderness areas. Think of the ATC as an 800-mile adventure. Think, "fun."

Though these routes differ in exact location and difficulty, they share one major obstacle: the Grand Canyon, where you are not allowed to ride below the rims. Therefore, you have to make a decision: 1) Pack up your disassembled bike and carry it 23 miles cross-canyon (which includes a 5,000-vertical-foot descent and 4,000-foot ascent), 2) ride a 200-mile detour east of the canyon, across a Navajo reservation via a mix of dirt and pavement, or 3) have your bike shuttled around the canyon for at least

\$75, and then hike through the canyon and pick your bike up on the other side. Having experienced options one and two, but not three, I recommend number two: riding the reservation detour. With this option, little is lost in beauty but much is gained in practicality.

With elevations ranging between 1,700 and 9,000 feet, the ATC offers only a short window of opportunity for end-to-end attempts. South of the town of Payson, the halfway point of the ATC, the route lies deep in the Sonoran Desert, a 120,000-square-mile expanse of sand, Saguaros, and parched washes where 120 degree shade temperatures have been recorded while surface temperatures have scorched to the 170 degrees. Unbearable conditions are commonplace during April, May, June, July, and August.

North of the town of Flagstaff, cold and late season snowpack are the enemies. Temperatures that may plunge below minus 15 degrees prefer the months of December, January, February, and March, while impassible snowfields litter the high plateaus from December to May.

Taking this weather information into consideration, the best options if northbound on the ATC are to depart the U.S.-Mexico border in September or October, arriving on the Utah border in the fall, or start your ride in March or April, reaching the north end of the route in mid-spring. If traveling south, simply reverse this schedule. The idea is to beat the snow and the heat at the same time, a tough proposition in Arizona.

The ATC sees very little traffic as far as end-to-end-riders go, considering fewer than fifteen people have covered every mile of the route since its initial traverse in 2000. Even hikers are scarce, the Arizona Trail being voted *Backpacker Magazine's* fourth best trail in the U.S. for solitude. You'll most likely share the route with the California condors, horned lizards, pronghorn antelope, and elk more than your fellow human.

But, you don't have to be a misanthrope to enjoy this long-distance challenge. Whether you're snaking through singletrack that weaves the high plateaus near Utah, pedaling at dawn and dusk in the barren Painted and Sonoran Deserts of the interior, or circumnavigating the 12,000-foot San Francisco Peaks near Flagstaff, it's all good. The Arizona Trail Corridor, with its challenges, solitude, and varied ecosystems, offers a unique setting worthy of a search for your soul.

ATC sampler

Northern terminus Starting at the ATC and AZT northern terminus, ride the AZT up 26 switchbacks to gain high ground. From here, stay the AZT course – at times ill-marked and rough – due south through Kaibab National Forest. If the AZT eventually proves too bone-jarring for you, follow FR 247 (Great Western Trail) instead, paralleling the AZT. Depart the AZT and turn east on 89A to enjoy a scenic paved descent. Turn north on BLM 1065 (House Rock Valley Road). This road leads through Coyote Wash back to your start point. 45 miles round trip. *Biking the Arizona Trail* pages 34-38.

Mormon Lake From an AZT trailhead on the south end of Marshall Lake, off FR 128, ride the AZT south to the northwest side of Mormon Lake. Leaving the AZT, turn west on FR 132 and follow its serpentine course northwest, then north, to spill out on paved Lake Mary Road. Turn southeast and pedal to Lower Mary Lake's southeast shore. Turn east off Lake Mary Road, then follow FR 128 back to your start point near the Anderson Mesa Lowell Observatory. 40 miles round trip. *Biking the Arizona Trail* pages 85-92.

Box Canyon/Gila River Starting on Route 60 east of Florence Junction, ride south on Mineral Mountain Road. Secondary roads come in from either side. Continue on the most defined road. Cross Cottonwood Canyon, then snake through Box Canyon. Continue on the main road until you see buildings on the other side of the Gila River. This is the turn around point. Simply backtrack from here. 40 miles out-and-back. *Biking the Arizona Trail* pages 132-137.

More information

The AZT is covered by a series of maps produced by the Arizona Trail Association. Andrea Lankford's *Biking the Arizona Trail*, which comes highly recommended, offers low-detail maps of the ATC and includes detailed directions to get you from one end of the ATC to the other.

Contact

Arizona Trail Association

PO Box 36736

Phoenix, AZ 85067

www.aztrail.org

ata@aztrail.org

Vital specs

Length: 800 miles

Dirt: 550 miles (69%)

Pavement: 250 miles (31%)

Climbing: 40,000 vertical feet

Duration: Expect to ride 40 miles per day and expect a traverse to take 20 days

Fastest traverse: Scott Morris. 7 days, 8 hours in 2006

First traverse: Andrea Lankford and Beth Overton in 2000

«« **E.S.** »»