

# *Western States Mountain Bike Route: Longest, Biggest, Baddest.*

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*2,740 miles. 35 Counties. 18 National Forests. 5 states. 2 National Parks. 1 ride.*

*Any way you do the math, the WSMBR equals mountain biking bliss.*

- When speaking of the Western States Mountain Bike Route (WSMBR), "of a lifetime" and "of epic proportions" are phrases that often follow the



word "ride."

Designed primarily for those who roll on knobbies, the WSMBR is just a thin

ribbon of dirt and pavement, but one that stretches from Canada to Mexico via five western

states. From year-round snowfields to Borderland deserts, grizzly bear forests to alpine plateaus, the route takes approximately two months to traverse; a sizeable investment. But if you decide to tackle the longest mountain bike route in the world, your timely investment will strike pay dirt.

Born from a desire to create a cross-country mountain bike route that traversed the best of the Wild West, the WSMBR is already looking towards the future. Prospective explorers will find a growing cache of information including a book and mapset that have projected publication dates only

three years away, and current magazine articles, interviews and WSMBR presentations that travel the country spreading the Western States word.

But beyond these sources, you're pretty much on your own out there, which is the core mission of the route. Hopefully this do-it-



yourself ethic will always remain. There are no plans for production of a detailed guidebook or placement of trail markers.

The route tests riders' mettle in a remote setting, particularly in the arenas of route-finding and self-reliance. Several-thousand-dollar group tours, incredibly-detailed route information, and an expansive support system will only detract from the route's beauty, challenge and

personality. Therefore, these things are void from, and not encouraged on, the WSMBR. Self-reliance is the predominant theme and the plan is to have that in place for generations to enjoy. After all, the unknown is the last frontier and nothing worth doing is easy.



The north terminus is on the U.S.-Canada border at a lonely Customs station 65 miles north of Whitefish, Montana. From this point south, the 2,740 miles before you represent a very macro-scale puzzle. Countless individual trail systems, including paved roads, dirt roads, rail trails, ATV paths, biking and hiking trails – even short

sections of gas lines and cattle paths – tie into each other to form a continuous route from border-to-border. However, five "origin routes," which total 1,700 miles, stand out as footnotes in WSMBR history.

First on the honey-do list is a discontinuous 800-mile section of the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route that crosses western Montana, northern Idaho and the extreme northwest corner of Wyoming.



In Utah, the WSMBR overruns sections of the Great Western Trail, Shoshone Trail and Skyline Drive for 400 miles.

A crossing of the fifth and final state, Arizona, overruns approximately 500 of the

Arizona Trail's 780 miles.

The remaining 1,040 miles consist of countless other link routes entirely of their own personality, which were explored during development of – and first traverse of – the route in 2005. These innumerable sections connect the origins routes and circumvent unridable terrain, particularly along the Great Western Trail and Arizona Trail, which are designed for off-road vehicles and hikers, respectively.

Clearly, in no way can the WSMBR be imagined as something that merely runs the length of the five origin routes. Always the beginning of long-distance trails, exploiting already existing trails, and then connecting them, is par for trail designers. Other notable super trails, such as the 2,150-mile Appalachian Trail, 2,490-mile Great Divide Mountain Bike Route and 3,000-mile Continental Divide Trail 4,400-mile North Country Trail, exist via this same method of route development. To establish the WSMBR, four

major steps took place.

First, topographic maps covering thousands of miles of terrain were reviewed, and mountain bikers, outdoor writers, hikers and U.S. Forest Service employees of the West were prodded for a solid three months during the winter of 2004/2005. These map examinations and interviews eventually answered "yes" to the question, "Is developing a new long-distance mountain bike route feasible?"

Secondly, a prospective route was mapped from Canada-to-Mexico during the spring of 2005. Using the above information as guideposts, a prospective route was highlighted from border-to-border.

An attempt to ride this prospective route was the third step. Taking 52 days to complete during the summer and fall of 2005, innumerable on-the-fly alterations were made to the prospective route to avoid unridable sections, dead ends and tracts of private land that were not

realized during mapping.

The fourth step was the easy part (at least compared to step three): name the route and offer information.

The WSMBR's original course was altered in a handful of areas. The majority of relocations occurred in Arizona, which possessed the most

confusing terrain of the five states. Some also took place in Utah.

Relocations occurred to

either take advantage of off-pavement routes that we not realized during the planning and riding stages, or to diversify the ecological and cultural content of the route.

Now that all the WSMBR exploration, development and route adjustment has been



completed, what's your first step? Check it out. Concerning scenery, you'll get more visuals on your WSMBR trip than the entire Woodstock generation experienced forty years ago.

Montana and Idaho, 680 and 115 miles in length, respectively, offer deep evergreen forests



and serene bodies of water, in addition to 8,000-foot peaks overlaid with avalanche chutes.

The 310-mile Wyoming section embodies the Wild West. Rangelands of

sheep, cattle and hay spread below rugged mountain range including the Grand Tetons, Wind Rivers and Wyoming Range.

Utah, at 755 miles, offers the most scenic riding. Nearly the entire Wasatch Plateau is traversed via the two-mile-high Skyline Drive, a dirt route that offers jaw-dropping scenery every day of the week. With the views come countless climbs that literally take your breath away.

Utah is also home to the high point of the WSMBR: Boulder Mountain at 11,100 feet. Standing tall above the settlements of Boulder and Torrey, this mountain is technically a plateau. And, a big one. With its summit swallowing up more than 50,000 acres, it is the largest forested plateau in North America.

Lastly, the 880-mile Arizona section includes the Painted and Sonoran Deserts, both off-limits to the sane during summer, when temperatures



commonly exceed 100°. Between these deserts, respites from the heat can be found: plateaus and high peaks thankfully litter the Grand Canyon State.

Arizona is regarded as the most demanding state overall (though Utah has the most climbing), since many miles are on challenging singletrack. Portions of the route also require



strong route-finding skills. Much of the WSMBR in Arizona doesn't provide the straightest

course to either Mexico or Utah – the route takes you to the most challenging and beautiful off-pavement terrain in the state.

Overall, difficulty varies enormously. Many flat sections – either paved or dirt – can be found

in each state and are as easy to ride as your neighborhood sidewalk. On the other end of the spectrum, there are a handful of sections that can only be traversed by pushing or carrying your bike. Affectionately dubbed “hike-and-bike” sections, these parts of the route will give even

the most enduring athletes a workout. It is estimated that you will push or carry your bike for 40 miles; 1.5 percent of the entire route.

That might seem like a trivial

amount, but let's keep things honest here: pushing or carrying your bike for 40 miles is still pushing or carrying your bike for 40 miles.



From end-to-end, the route climbs an estimated 185,000 vertical feet; the equivalent of riding to the top of Mount Everest from sea level more than six times. Ouch.

Clearly, if you intend to ride the entire



WSMBR in one push, you should have the physical and mental skills to get you there. If you

are not up for this enormous two-month-long task, if you are simply a weekend recreational rider, it is strongly suggested you tackle a shorter section of the route. Picking your favorite part of the route and testing yourself on that shorter section is a logical, very fun way to get to test the WSMBR waters without fully diving in.

However, if you are in good shape, enjoy

challenges, are an experienced rider and camper and willing do your homework before attempting a thru-ride, you will be rewarded with unforgettable experiences, respectable lengths of solitude and an amazing feeling of accomplishment. Chances are, it will be the toughest thing you've done. All the more reason to celebrate!

Ideal months for riding the WSMBR end-to-end are, north-to-south, August, September and October. Less ideal is south-to-north, May, June and July. The

first task is to avoid extreme heat. Each state the WSMBR traverses has



recorded highs hot enough to melt a glacier by lunchtime: Montana, 117° at Medicine Lake;

Idaho, 118° at Orofino; Wyoming, 114° at Basin; Utah, 117° at Saint George; and Arizona, 128° at Lake Havasu City.

The second task is to avoid excessive cold. The four northernmost states of the route hold significant amounts of snow well beyond the first day of spring, March 22, and can see snow fall in every month, too. A friend of mine witnessed a snowstorm in Lincoln, MT on July 18. An acquaintance of mine, from Price, UT, encountered a six-foot-deep snow pack guarding Utah's Wasatch Plateau in early June.

Each state the WSMBR traverses has recorded lows cold enough to freeze hell over: Montana, -70° at Rogers Pass; Idaho, -60° at Island Park Dam; Wyoming, -66° degrees at Riverside; Utah, -69° at Peters Sink; and Arizona, -40° at Hawley Lake. From November to April, you'd be better off riding a snowmobile, carrying a 25-pound block of pemmican, than riding a mountain bike and packing 25 Power Bars.

It's recommended you avoid Boulder Mountain, UT north to the Canadian border between November and May and the southernmost 500 miles of the route between May and October.

So when you find yourself daydreaming about your next epic mountain bike adventure, note what you see. If it includes an endless series of plateaus, forests and deserts traversed by more than 1,800 miles of dirt riding, the Western States Mountain Bike Route will make your dreams reality.

## *WSMBR sampler*

*Montana, Seeley Lake loop* Starting where FR 477 meets route 83 in Seeley Lake, ride paved route 83 north until you reach FR 4353 on the east side of the road. Follow FR 4353 east until FR 4370 comes in from the north. Stay right on FR 4353 and ride through a set of boulders. Road deteriorates to singletrack. Climb and descend, then enjoy a fast descent on FR 4353 (also marked RD 135, now a road again) to reach the Seeley Creek Nordic Ski Trail trailhead. Turn right on FR 477 to end the loop (don't forget to stop at the ice cream stand in Seeley Lake for your just reward). 35 miles, round trip.

*Wyoming, Wyoming Range* Just south of Daniel, off route 352, ride RD 117 (Cottonwood Ryegrass Road) across sagebrush country. Turn south, still on RD 117. Turn west on FR 10125. Climb into the Wyoming Range, and continue over the height

of land and down the west side of the range to T-bone paved FR 10138. Ride approximately one mile south to a campground on the east side of FR 10138. Water available, small fee often charged. The next day, reverse route back to Daniel. 100 miles, out and back.

*Utah, Wasatch Plateau* From the town of Ephraim, drive east up FH 8, past the power plant, to the height of land, which is Skyline Drive (FR 150). Hop on your bike. Ride south on the smooth gravel road through alpine terrain to the Skyline Drive's highpoint (10,897 feet). Backtrack to FH 8. 20 miles, roundtrip. (An option is to continue south on Skyline Drive to I-70's exit 67. This includes one of the best descents on the WSMBR, down Willow Creek Road and Water Hollow Road. )

### *More information*

*Maps* A map set of the route is now being produced, with a target release date prior to 2011. A travel narrative is being finalized as well, hopefully to be released in 2010.

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### *Vital specs*

Length: 2,740 miles

Dirt: 1,840 miles (66%)

Pavement: 900 miles (33%)

Climbing: 185,000 vertical feet

Duration: Expect to ride 45 miles per day and expect a traverse to take about 60 days

Fastest traverse: No fastest traverse attempt has been made

First traverse: Erik Schlimmer. 2005

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