

Western States Mountain Bike Route: Longest, Biggest, Baddest

By Erik Schlimmer

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When speaking of the Western States Mountain Bike Route (WSMBR), "of a lifetime" and "of epic proportions" are phrases that follow the word "ride." Designed primarily for those who roll on knobbies, the WSMBR is 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 mapset that has a projected publication date of before 2020, past magazine articles and interviews, and current WSMBR slide show presentations that travel the country spreading the word. But beyond these sources, you will be pretty much on your own out there, which is the 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 arena of self-reliance. Several-thousand-dollar group tours, obsessive 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. Selfreliance is the theme and the plan is to have that in place for generations. After all, the unknown is the last frontier and nothing worth doing is easy.

The north terminus is on the U.S.-Canada border 65 miles north of Whitefish, Montana. From this point south, the 2,740 miles before you represent a macroscale 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, serve as footnotes in WSMBR history.

First on the honey-do list is a piecemealed 800-mile section of the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route that crosses western Montana, northern Idaho, and the 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 the field development and first traverse of the WSMBR in 2005. These innumerable sections connect the origin routes and circumvent unridable terrain, particularly along the Great Western Trail and Arizona Trail.

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, employing existing trails and then connecting them is par for trail designers. Other notable trails, such as the 2,150-mile Appalachian Trail, 2,490-mile Great Divide Mountain Bike Route, 3,000-mile Continental Divide Trail, 4,400-mile North Country Trail, exist via this same method of development. But 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 on route information during the 2004/2005 winter. These map examinations and interviews answered "yes" to the question, "Is developing a new long-distance mountain bike route feasible?"

Second, a prospective route was mapped from Canada-to-Mexico during the 2005 spring. 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, wilderness, and tracts of private land that were not realized during mapping or to diversify the ecological and cultural content of the route. The WSMBR's original course was altered in a handful of areas, the majority occurring in Arizona, which possessed the most confusing terrain of the five states.

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

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 evergreen forests and serene bodies of water, in addition to 8,000-foot peaks. The 310-mile Wyoming section embodies the Wild West with rangelands spread below rugged mountain ranges 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 Skyline Drive, a dirt route that offers jaw-dropping scenery. 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, 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 degrees. Between these deserts, respites from the heat can be found: plateaus and high peaks 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 routefinding skills.

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 hand, 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 the most enduring athletes a workout. It is estimated that you will push or carry your bike for thirty 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.

If you intend to ride the entire WSMBR in one push, you should have the physical and mental skills to do so. If you are not up for this enormous two-month-long task, it is strongly suggested you tackle a shorter section of the route. Picking an appealing part of the route and testing yourself on that shorter section is a logical, 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 that exceed 110 degrees.

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 and can see snow fall in every month. A friend of mine witnessed a snowstorm in Lincoln, Montana, on July 18. An acquaintance of mine from Price, Utah, encountered a six-foot-deep snow guarding Utah's Wasatch Plateau in early June. Each state the WSMBR traverses has recorded lows between minus forty and minus seventy degrees. From November to April, you'd be better off riding a snowmobile and carrying pemmican than riding a mountain bike and packing Power Bars. It's recommended you avoid Boulder Mountain, Utah, north to the Canadian border between November and May.

When you find yourself daydreaming about your next epic mountain bike adventure, note what you see. If it includes a 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 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 changes 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, continue over the height of land, and ride 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

A map set of the route is now being produced, with a target release date prior to 2020. A travel narrative is being finalized as well, hopefully to be released at a similar date.

Contact

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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 made

First traverse: Erik Schilmmer in 2005

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