



# Hut to Hut

*"Life is either a daring adventure, or it is nothing!"*  
– Helen Keller

Helen Keller never climbed alpine peaks, paddled through boiling whitewater or rode sweet singletrack, but she remains one of my heroes. Life is a daring adventure, and when you throw intentional adventure on top of it, well now that's living.

When I first heard about the San Juan Huts many years ago, it sounded too good to be true. Ride hundreds of miles of incredible trails through breathtaking scenery for a week, and at the end of each day there is a hut waiting for you – fully stocked with food and sleeping accommodations.

For those of you who have ever done an off-road bike tour, you quickly find that even the leanest packer will have a bike weighing 60 pounds or more by the time the wheels hit the dirt. And if you've ever tried to pedal a heavy rig on singletrack at high elevation, your ride becomes a hike.

The San Juan Huts take the pain out of mountain bike touring. And I didn't realize how sweet it was until the first ten miles of our weeklong adventure from Durango to Moab last year. With little more than the clothes on my back, I pedaled through amazing singletrack deep in the heart of the San Juan Mountains.

After miles of pure alpine bliss I stopped long enough to turn around and see where we had come from. Looking back toward Rolling Pass, it seemed impossible that you could ride a bicycle over this massive and formidable terrain. But I could see our route, contouring along benches, weaving through trees, splashing through creeks, eventually leading from the pass at 12,260 ft. to where I stood. At that moment, I couldn't recall a finer piece of trail anywhere in the world. And this was just the beginning.

We had just covered the first 12 miles of a 215-mile mountain bike tour, and every mile seemed more incredible and rewarding than the last. Descending from Rolling Pass was outrageous, and the sights and smells of wildflowers just added to the Technicolor dream. Marmots scurried for cover as we bounced over broken rock gardens, and there seemed to be no end to the majesty of the mountains. We all agreed that the alternate route, which included almost 20 miles of Colorado Trail, was a much better alternative than the normal route up mining roads outside Durango.

Our group of five was well equipped with maps, local knowledge and enough energy to power a steam ship, at least for the first day. Written descriptions of the route and topographic maps were included with the key to open the huts, and each day offered a variety of route options.

Just when we ran out of steam, a mountain hut appeared in the distance. The Bolam Pass Hut was a subtle structure located just off the road that

you probably wouldn't even notice if you weren't a ravenous mountain biker. With the turn of the San Juan Hut key, the doors and windows opened to reveal a well-stocked cabin with just about everything you could hope for, including fresh food, ibuprofen and beer. Clark admitted, "I would say this place has all the comforts of home, but it's much nicer and has more food than my place."

Each hut has eight bunks, complete with mattresses and sleeping bags. There is a complete kitchen setup with a two-burner stove, pots, pans, plates and utensils. Propane lights provide enough lumens for a late-night card game or bike overhaul. Inside each hut is a helpful User's Guide, which give you the dos, don'ts and helpful hints for a pleasant stay. Some of the huts have a menu planner, which include ingredients found within every hut. In the middle of the one-room structure sits a small wood-burning stove, which can be an absolute lifesaver if you're here in the early season or during inclement weather. Windows line nearly every wall of the hut, and once unlocked reveal the gorgeous setting and provide much-appreciated ventilation.



Flagstaff rider Clark Wheeler pedals past alpine wildflowers along the Colorado Trail, part of the San Juan Hut System's Durango-to-Moab adventure.

The next day we unanimously decided to diverge from the normal route and follow a more remote path toward our destination. This was, after all, an adventure. Wanting to pedal as much singletrack as possible, we opted for the East Fork Trail along the Dolores River. Once our wheels were on the trail I knew we were in for something special. The undulating path flowed as serenely as the Dolores River itself. The trail was almost entirely downhill, rolling through outrageously beautiful alpine terrain. The corn lilies grew so high that they smacked against the handlebars.

The East Fork Trail followed a direct path northwest, and all morning the skyline was dominated by the Lizard



The Author peddles towards Rolling Pass (12,260 ft.) on the Colorado Trail, a blissful piece of alpine singletrack near Durango.

Head. The prominent spire rises to 13,113 feet, and there is nothing else like it in this part of the world. The last mile of trail along the Groundhog Stock Driveway is one of the best of the entire day, and I lost count how many times I yelled out loud.

We rolled up the final climb to the Black Mesa Hut, another rustic cabin hidden within the forest, and began to devour everything in sight. It's helpful to give the hut key to the fastest rider, let them unlock all the doors and windows

Riding to the Dry Creek Basin Hut, we lost about 4,000 feet over 42 miles. Long dirt roads afforded us the opportunity to look around and absorb our surroundings without bailing off the technical terrain. Lone Cone was the prominent peak of the day, a 12,613-ft. extinct volcano that we saw from nearly all sides. And, for the first time, the La Sal Mountains came into view. On the other side of those distant peaks was Moab, UT, our destination still four days and 140 miles away. Whoa.

The ride ended at the Dry Creek Basin Hut, another little green hut that looks like it fell out of the sky and landed just perfectly in this remote landscape. Juniper trees dominate this Mars-red landscape, adorned with bright yellow sunflowers and dull green cactus. And for the first time over the past three days, it was friggin' hot.

We sought refuge from the wind and heat inside the hut, and found abundant snacks and refreshment. Fresh salsa, combined with warm beer and red dirt between my toes brought back memories of mountain biking in Chihuahua. It was hard to believe we were pedaling through alpine meadows just a few hours earlier.

The fourth day is a 30-mile rocky, adventurous route with many options for those interested in seeing all the good stuff that mining country has to offer. We took every alternate route possible, enjoying fast riding along doubletrack with wide-open views of the basins, anticlines, and the La Sal Mountains in the distance.

By the time we arrived at the Wedding Bell Hut, all of us had been out of water for the better part of an hour. If you can, haul an extra liter on this ride. There is nowhere to refill along the way, no shade, and many miles of dry, hot terrain. Even if you're a seasoned desert rider, you'll ride into camp with a bad case of parrot tongue.

The Wedding Bell Hut is perched on the side of the cliffs, next to historic mining ruins. Far below is the Dolores River, and as inviting as it looks I'd bet it would take you all day to get down there, then all night to get back up. Instead, we sipped beverages and watched the cool blue ribbon from a distance, knowing that tomorrow we would splash in the river.

The next day's ride included a little bit of everything: solitude, challenge and

and hook up the propane tanks to the stove and lights, and maybe even get some appetizers prepared. That way, when the rest of the group arrives there is nothing left to do but strip off the salty chamois and start relaxing.

I knew I wasn't in Tucson anymore when a black bear wandered by the hut the next morning. Probably attracted by the smell of cooking bacon, I watched it amble across the forested slope just a few feet from the hut, hoping that it didn't carry off my pungent cycling shoes. The thought of riding barefoot with Egg Beater pedals for five days scared me to my feet. Luckily they were right where I left them, and covered in a fine layer of frost.

# A Comfortable Fat-Tire Adventure from Durango to Moab

Article by Matthew J. Nelson

Photography by Richard Durnan



Danika Gilbert, Clark Wheeler, Jack Bissell and the author pedal through high alpine meadows in the San Juan National Forest on their way from Durango, Colorado to Moab, Utah.

civilization on road, trail, cliffside scramble and highway. It begins with a rollercoaster of ups and downs on old mining roads. Be prepared for 2,000 feet of climbing, though, and after that it's flat and fast across Davis Mesa. You surf through fields of sagebrush that fill the air with their sweet aroma each time you brush against them. After a few miles the road deteriorates and becomes a trail. Then the trail becomes a scrambling route that only a desert bighorn sheep can cruise down confidently.

You'll plunge 900 vertical feet in less than a mile, down rocky steps and ledges, eventually spilling out onto Highway 90. Yes, pavement. It's a strange feeling for sure. After a cool dip in the Dolores River, we pedaled on down to the Bedrock Store.

Right in the heart of downtown Bedrock, Colorado (population 211) is a piece of living history, and the 120-year-old Bedrock Store is just about as perfect a watering hole as you can imagine. Cold beverages, snacks, local artwork, and friendly locals make it a place you'll want to come back to. The temperature gauge was showing 100 degrees in the shade, so there was no hurry to leave the comfort of the patio. We napped, swilled iced tea, ate ice cream and watched swallows nesting in the wooden rafters.

When we finally pedaled away from The Bedrock Store I was overwhelmed by the beauty of Paradox Valley. Surrounded on all sides by dramatic blood-orange cliffs sits a lush green oasis, cut through the middle by the gray-blue Dolores River. The Dolores flows west to east, while the valley trends north to south. Hence, the paradox. Actually, there are a few paradoxes here, like the possibility of large-scale uranium mining operations coming to this quiet valley, or how corned beef hash and canned green beans wrapped inside a tortilla can taste so good at the end of a long ride.

The next day begins with a big bowl of whoopass for breakfast – a gnarly four-mile climb out of Paradox Valley. It's awesome, actually, and around each corner we rode through varying layers of rock strata. My advice is to get it over with quickly, but don't forget to look over your shoulder at the valley below. These are some of the sweetest views of the entire trip.

After climbing out of the desert valley we reentered the forest, and soon discovered one of the highlights of the day – the Buckeye Reservoir. This tiny body of water is perfect for a mid-ride dip, and will refresh your legs as much as your spirit. Take off your clothes and jump in.

Toward the end of the 25-mile day, the route gets steep, and it feels like the hardest climb of the week. It's intense, but shift into your granny gear, stick with it, and you'll get there.

The trail winds through brilliant groves of aspen trees whose creamy white sheaths were once used by natives and pioneers as a quinine substitute for its painkilling and fever-reducing properties. I considered licking the bark of the trees myself as my legs and back stung from the uphill effort.

The trail climbs straight to the Geysers Pass Hut, just below 10,000 feet. This is the last and most spectacular hut of them all. The hut itself is not too different than all the others, but its location is sublime. Nestled within an aspen grove near Geysers Creek (chilly,


but very nice for dipping) with dramatic views of the La Sals right out the front door, I think every hut-to-hut rider agrees that this is the nicest place to spend the final night in the wilderness. And now that you're back in the high country, the beer inside the hut is cold again.

The Geysers Pass Hut is so sweet that it's easy to get a late start, soaking up all the quiet of the high country. I listened to aspens trembling in the breeze and wondered why would we ever want to leave. Descending 6,000 vertical feet down to Moab...that's why.

As you get closer to Moab, the alternate routes are innumerable. The Mountain Meadows Trail is rocky and rooty and fun as hell. Then it's on to the Hazard County Trail, which might just be the best singletrack near Moab. Expertly designed, lightning fast, Hazard County descends over Bald Mesa with jump options off the side of trail.

Then it's on to Kokopelli's Trail, a fast and fun route with singletrack spines requiring balance, confidence and commitment at high speed. As you pop out onto Sand County Road toward Moab, the options only increase. If you have the legs for it, get on to the Porcupine Rim Trail, a Moab classic. The Slickrock Trail is a nice way to finish up, and is about as harsh a contrast from the morning's alpine environment as you can possibly pedal in a single day.

That's the most astounding thing about the route from Durango to Moab – you pedal through so many different zones, sometimes in one day, that it's a surreal journey you really have to experience to be able to understand. You wake up in pines, then fall asleep in the sage. From the highest mountains to the lowest deserts, then back again. The dramatic landscape and rich biodiversity of the West has never been better showcased than on this ride.

Gather together a crew of your best friends and hit the trail this summer. The San Juan Hut Systems offer two seven-day adventures, from Durango to Moab and Telluride to Moab. And once you're in Moab, you might as well do some more riding. After all, life is an adventure. 

For more information, check out [sanjuanhuts.com](http://sanjuanhuts.com).

*Matthew J. Nelson is an outdoor educator, trail builder and professional backcountry guide. He can often be found riding old mining roads and immigrant trails between his home in the Sierrita Mountains and the US/Mexico border.*

## Essential Gear

The trick to any bike packing adventure is to travel light. And with the San Juan Hut Systems (SJHS) providing food and shelter, you rarely have to pack more than you would for a long day out on your own. SJHS gives you a list of what is provided at the huts, and what they recommend you bring, but here is my own list of essentials for the seven-day adventure:

Extra pair of cycling shorts and socks. Because being able to change into freshies on the fourth day is luxurious.

Cotton shirt and shorts for hanging out around the huts. Get out of your Lycra and into some natural fibers as quickly as possible.

Gold Bond Medicated Powder. You don't have to be a geriatric to buy the stuff! Considering you'll go long periods of time without a proper shower and you're sharing a small space with other people, a little bit of powder in the moist, abused areas will make you feel and smell a little bit fresher. Also find room for Brave Soldier medicated balm, which is fortified with lidocaine or Beljrum Budder, a good quality balm.

Camera. You'll ride through some of the most spectacular country you've ever seen. Take time to take pictures, or invite a professional photographer along.

Hacky sack. It's a good way to warm up in the morning, it's a great activity while you wait for others to climb up the passes, and it's something you can throw at black bears if they try to make off with your cycling shoes.

Extra bike parts. In addition to having a basic tool kit among the group, have each person bring along one extra bike part that is compatible with your operating systems, including a spare rear derailleur, chain and spokes. And duct tape, lots of duct tape.

## Pack Wisely

Mountain biking with a rack and panniers over technical terrain is not a pleasant experience. If you do opt for a rack, go with a heavy-duty, securely bolted system, like the ones made by Old Man Mountain. If you try to get away with a seat post-mounted rack you'll likely end up like so many others who break theirs and have to strap everything to their backs. I say skip the rack altogether.

Instead, stuff what you need into an oversized seat bag, handlebar bag and backpack. Frame packs are also nice, but must be custom made to fit your particular frame. The best designs in the business are made by Carousel Design Works.

## Distances

Durango to Moab			
Day 1	...	20 miles	... 10,880 ft. -- 11,411 ft.
Day 2	...	28.7 miles	... 11,411 ft. -- 10,625 ft.
Day 3	...	41.7 miles	... 10,625 ft. -- 6,600 ft.
Day 4	...	30.3 miles	... 6,600 ft. -- 6,580 ft.
Day 5	...	34.3 miles	... 6,580 ft. -- 5,240 ft.
Day 6	...	26.3 miles	... 5,240 ft. -- 9,864 ft.
Day 7	...	34.6 miles	... 9,864 ft. -- 4,000 ft.

\* the distances shown are for the normal routes from hut-to-hut. Alternate routes generally add miles each day, and replace jeep road miles with trail miles. The alt routes are longer, harder, but a lot more fun!



The San Juan Huts offer all the comforts of home in remote and beautiful settings that are far off the beaten path.