

Why Moab's the Mecca

Ride On! by Ron Georg Pick up a mountain bike magazine, any one, any month, and look for the word "Moab." It might be attached to a product, or it might be in editorial copy, but it will be there. Most commonly, in recent years, the phrase "the next Moab," is used to describe yet another popular riding locale.

That's a hopeful expression, imbued with the image of a place surrounded by public land, all readily accessed and criss-crossed with routes. But this isn't a crown that's susceptible to succession; Moab is King for Life.

It was destined to be this way. Consider the name of the place: Moab is a biblical name, meaning "of the father." The original Moab was the son of one of Lot's daughters - incestuously conceived as Lot lay dying. This illegitimate child didn't quite fit in, and eventually settled his own desert land with his own people.

The history of mountain biking isn't quite so sordid, but old-guard cyclists did look on the early mountain bike movement as a bastard child, spawned by a few free-spirited cyclists on the industry's wild fringe. Other trail users in mountain biking's homeland, northern California, shared that view, so mountain bikers consecrated a new spiritual homeland, Moab.

That was back in the early '80s, and the faithful have been making pilgrimages to Moab ever since. Today, this town of 6,000 supports five bike shops. There are two brewpubs, restaurants ranging from tacky to toney, and countless hotel rooms.

Still, the riding experience remains much the same. The Moab Valley, where most of the modern development has occurred, is bordered by cliffs. The rides are outside those walls, where the desert is wild and open. Old mining and ranching routes lead riders deep into the backcountry.

It is important to remember that most of Moab's trail system was discovered, not developed. The best routes were chosen by local mountain bike pioneers out of thousands of miles of incredibly rugged jeep roads. Staying on those routes can require navigational skill and focus.

Guide books and maps are essential to enjoy many of Moab's trails. The first guide book, *Above and Beyond Slickrock*, is still the best. The photos of riders on fully rigid bikes attest to the book's history; author Todd Campbell is one of Moab's mountain bike pioneers. He also helped put together the maps *Moab East* and *Moab West* for mapmaker Latitude 40, which include written descriptions of the trails.

While the dangers of riding this untamed land can never be understated, some simple preparations can help ensure a safe experience.

Most basically, it takes plenty of water to exercise in the desert. In fact, the American College of Sports Physicians recommends drinking 8 to 12 ounces of water every 20 minutes during any exercise - lean toward the high end of that recommendation for a hot day in the desert.

That means carrying at least a gallon of water, per person, for most rides. That should also include an emergency reserve. A major mechanical failure ten miles from the trailhead could mean an inconvenient hike, which would be a medical emergency without water.

Riders should also be prepared to deal with minor mechanical problems to avoid those long, hot walks. The tools and skills to fix a flat tire are mandatory. Likewise, the ability to repair a broken chain can often save a ride. Beyond these common problems, the more mechanical skills, the better.

For those with poor navigational ability, or lacking the medical and mechanical training to deal with backcountry emergencies, Moab has a number of outfitters who offer trips from half-day rides to week-long excursions. Staffed by professional guides with the requisite training for wilderness leadership, these companies can ensure a safe and satisfying experience.

Riders who prefer independence, or whose budgets can't stretch for guide fees and tips, should stop at one of the local shops for advice. Even advanced riders will benefit from the knowledge of the professionals who staff Moab's bike shops and regularly ride its trails. At least one shop is open every day of the year except Christmas and the following day.