

Babes n' Bikes in the Backcountry

By Monique Beeley

Prologue: In late October of 1998, five men, all accomplished and experienced mountain bikers accompanied by a support team from Outdoor Utah, attempted to ride from Boulder, Utah to Moab, through some of the most remote and beautiful terrain in the state. The route, called the Grand Traverse, had never before been accomplished. The five riders encountered several unfortunate circumstances; an unexpected snowstorm crossing the Henry Mountains, torrential rain and, most critical, confusion in the route, creating missed connections with the support team. Ultimately, three days behind schedule, they arrived in Moab. However, a twelve-mile segment had the men riding in the support vehicle and technically the Grand Traverse ride was never completed.

From that time on, the staff of Outdoor Utah began a plan to assemble a team to accomplish the ride. On September 19, 2005 six accomplished and experienced mountain bikers set out from Boulder on a route to Moab, but 100 miles longer than the previous attempt. Six days later, after 351 miles, tens of thousands of feet of climbing and with beaming smiles, the Babes n' Bikes in the Backcountry rolled triumphantly into Moab!

Sitting in the passenger seat, my mind was racked with anticipation of the upcoming week, not having a clue of what to expect. All the "what ifs" were swarming around in my head, like bees invading a honey pot. What if we get lost, or hurt, or maybe even attacked by a rampaging bear? Or... okay, so there are no bears in the desert, so that one can be ruled out, but getting lost or hurt were very big realities in my mind. Sometimes I can be a little dramatic, but this, of course, was not one of those times. The upcoming week would either be an awesome adventure or a disaster in the desert.

We were the last to arrive at Rim Tours in Moab, where we would load all the gear for our upcoming adventure into the "Big Rig". We immediately got out of the truck and went over to meet the others. I knew everyone involved, some better than others, but this was the first time we were all together. The next few minutes were filled with an exchange of introductions, handshakes and hugs.

The 2005 Babes 'n Bikes in the Backcountry Team had all the makings to create an amazing adventure. We had an excellent leader in Kirstin Peterson of Moab. An experienced group of mountain bike riders, Sharon Stubbs, Cindy Schwandt and yours truly, all from Park City and Michelle Clonts from Logan. Her husband Jim, an awesome bike mechanic and owner of Joyride! Bikes in Logan. A knowledgeable and experienced support team - Red and Karen Oelerich. And last, but certainly not least, a highly creative backcountry chef, Amy Oelerich of Flavors Catering in Ketchum.

The months of planning were about to be put to the ultimate test. The 6-day/351-mile route that would begin in the Southwest Utah town of Boulder and end in Moab would take us into some of the most remote and beautiful parts of our state. As we loaded the last few items into the truck, there was a sense of camaraderie among the team that helped to ease some of the trepidation in my mind.

Our final night of civilization was spent at the Boulder Mountain Lodge, about a three-hour drive from Moab. Upon arrival, we located our rooms, unloaded our essentials for the night and had just enough time for a quick soak in the hot tub before dinner. Hell's Backbone Grill, located just next to the Lodge, was an excellent spot for our sendoff dinner. The food was wonderful, as always, and it gave us all a chance to relax and get to know each other.

Upon waking, stretching and feeling rested from a peaceful night, it was time to get ready for the big ride. Outside, Jim was working on our bikes. Red and Kirstin were discussing final route plans for the day and Sharon and Cindy were getting their packs loaded with the day's essentials. The countdown was on, no time to back out now. We were minutes away from embarking on our epic adventure.

One by one we quickly headed off for stage one; the historic Burr Trail which took us through the northern section of the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument to Capitol Reef National Park. Then, onto the Notom Road ending at camp on Bull Creek Road. The first few miles of the day were filled with giddy anticipation of our journey to come...smiles all around. As the miles started stacking, the speedy pace slowed and the riders began to disperse. This was the first of many miles to come in which we would all be on our own, self-sufficient and alone with our thoughts in this vast and incredible place, so far away from the realities of everyday life. Stopping for lunch, we all searched for shade around the Big Rig trying to escape the pounding heat of the summer's midday sun. Lunch ended quickly with each of us taking our fill of water and supplies for the rest of the day.

The Burr Trail Switchbacks snake through the Waterpocket Fold. This incredible geological feature is a 100-mile warp in the earth's crust that time and the elements have joined forces to form colorful cliffs, canyons, domes, arches and spires that decorate the landscape.

The day begins to lengthen as we slowly made our way through the extremely sandy and shadeless sections of the Notom Road. I feel as if a turtle could cruise on past me, as I strain to keep the tires rolling in the sinking sand. We stop a few times in the shade, regroup and move forward. As the sun begins to lower in the sky, we are 75 miles into the day and I can't help but doubt, yet hope that camp is really just around the next corner. A few windy miles later, it appears in the distance. Thank God, I mutter, as we stagger exhausted into camp. Only day one.

Day two, and we're faced with the long steady climb up The Henry Mountains, through The Horn and over Pennellen Pass at 9166 feet. At the outset, we ride a little slower than the previous day, trying to pace ourselves for this unknown section. Climbing is my least favorite aspect of riding, but I'm striving to maintain a consistent cadence so my asthma doesn't get the best of me. Gaining elevation, I'm struggling with the steep ascent. I stop several times fighting discouragement as I fall further behind. Luckily, I brought my Ipod along. Tunes will help ease my mental and physical anguish and find a groove to move.

Finally at the top, I catch up to the ladies, who are relaxing, enjoying some lunch. I sit with them and relish the companionship, which I have been without for several hours. Quickly descending down the other side of the mountain, the memories of the grueling climb fade as we made our way back to desert. From Bull Creek Pass, we cross Highway 95 to Poison Springs Road. The support crew has our camp for the night set up and ready in a beautiful section of Poison Springs Canyon. After 66 hard miles, a hot shower, turkey burgers with all the sides, followed by a deep sleep rekindle my weary body and spirit.

Day three greeted us unkindly - wet and cold from an early morning rain. Today might be a little tricky. We were making last minute plans for our river crossing later that day. The Dirty Devil is not a raging river, but we were uncertain as to exactly what we would encounter. Armed with rain gear and sandals we headed out. The first few miles were wet, sandy and muddy, but so very beautiful with a freshness that only rain in the desert can produce. The trail was leading in and out of the sandy streambed that had risen from the recent rainfall. Finally, we made it through the wet sand and onto a dry trail, where we reconvened and made an attempt to clean some of the muck from our bikes.

The Dirty Devil - p: Monique Beeley In the distance we could see that Dirty Devil, which appeared to be flowing high with runoff from the storm, and true to its name. Approaching the muddy banks, we scouted the best place to cross. We had packed only two pairs of sandals for the river; one team member would cross and then toss the sandals back for the next. The mud was so deep in spots you would begin to sink if you stood there for too long. Shouldering our bikes and packs, one by one we crossed through the murky, muddy waters.

We needed to keep moving; the morning had been slow going and we were considerably behind schedule. The afternoon seemed to be like a never-ending story; climb to the top of a ridge only to descend to do it again and again. The last climb was the biggest; up to Sunset Pass where luckily our support team had been waiting anxiously to refill our empty hydration packs. We were near exhaustion, but rested for a bit to enjoy one of Utah's finest panoramic views.

"Can you all give it another twenty miles?" Kirstin asked. Reluctantly, we all nodded or mumbled "Yeah." At six o'clock, as daylight was fading, we saddled up for the last push. "It's all downhill from here" Jim informed us. That generated some optimism, but later, I cursed those words because it was not. I was determined to make it to camp before dark, but darkness prevailed.

Now I was alone, and had no idea how far away camp or my teammates were. In the distance, lightening bolts came crashing down, flashing light onto the black night sky. Try not to freak out! I was getting increasingly tense with each pedal stroke. My rapidly increasing heart rate was creating tightness in my chest as I strained to catch my breath. Continuing ever so slowly in the darkness, I was relieved to see headlights heading in my direction. Whoa! I gasped.

I was further from camp than I had thought, about five miles. I was filled with a combination of relief and defeat as we pulled into camp. No dinner had ever tasted so good as Amy's chicken pasta and salad.

Day four. I was really beginning to feel the effects of the previous three days of grueling riding combined with an overall lack of sleep. I was moving slowly and lacking energy. Today we would again connect with Hwy 95 in Glen Canyon National Recreation Area to cross the Colorado River on the Hite Crossing Bridge, then head up to Indian Head Pass on Woodenshoe Road. Trying my best to keep pace, I kept falling farther and farther behind. I was getting extremely frustrated thinking that I was slowing the team down. That negative attitude was only compounding the problem. Today, I felt more alone in the vastness of the desert than ever before. Trying to regain my strength, I stopped several times to nibble a bar, hydrate, stretch and even meditate. Try as I may, nothing seemed to make me feel like I could conquer this day. My pace began to slow even more as I tried to ignore the pain in my knee, back, hips and in my heart.

Finally, in the distance, I could see the truck. Support crew was there, but the team had gone on. Welcome shade, I rested on a cot, began daydreaming and finally was able to relax. I had to make a personal decision - finish the day on the bike or pack it in and go with the support to camp. I was so far behind that there was no way I could make it before dark. It's not just me… I had to think about the rest of the group at this point. The last thing I wanted was to make my shortcomings someone else's concern. I decided it would be best to succumb to what my body was trying to tell me. My head and heart were hanging low as I loaded my bike onto the truck. But I knew it was the best decision for everyone. I tried to ease my bruised ego by putting on a smile and trying the focus on the amazing accomplishment of the trip and team as a whole, an incredible epic journey!

We made it! Hurrah! - p: Monique BeeleyDay five. I wakened with a sense of peace and a great ambition to make today a different day. I consulted with Kirstin and we agreed that I would start out early to get a headstart on the others. After talking with her about the route, I left camp feeling great. An hour later, I came around a corner and faced three men standing by their ATV's in the road. I was startled since we had not seen anybody for several days. By the looks on their faces I knew they were just as startled to see a chick alone in the backcountry riding a mountain bike. I was more out of place than they were. I stopped and they quizzed me on where I had come from, where I was going and was I alone? "No!" I replied, "The team is just around the corner!" Later, I found out these gruff looking guys were just doing a little bear hunting - ok, so maybe there are bears in this neck of the woods! Continuing a little further, I came to an intersection and was not sure which way to go, so I took a break. Soon Kirstin came cruising down the road, so I jumped back on my bike, delighted to ride with somebody for a while. We made our way through the heavily forested Elk Ridge in the Manti-La Sal National Forest. What a beautiful area, so different from the barren desert the day before. That was something I'll always remember about this astounding adventure; the scenery was so different everyday! I felt so positive throughout the day that the negative memories of yesterday were quickly fading. This long, 78-mile day ended with my favorite, a seemingly never-ending downhill into our final camp at Indian Creek.

Day six started very early. My sleep was abruptly interrupted by horrible stomach cramps. By daylight the pains did not cease, forcing me again to make another difficult decision. No way could I ride. I wished the girls luck as they left camp on the final morning. This was going to be one of the hardest days, climbing the technical Lockhart Basin Trail, culminating with the incredibly tough climb to Hurrah Pass near Moab. Amy, our fine chef, decided to ride with the ladies for this epic final day.

Many thoughts were racing through my head at this point, some of a sense of failure, some of disappointment, others of the feeling that I had let the team down. These thoughts were replaced by others; the camaraderie, the accomplishment and the excitement for the final countdown to the finish.

We drove back to Moab, checked into our condo, took a much-needed shower and headed out to meet the ladies at Hurrah Pass. As we strained the horizon to see the riders appear in the distance, we were all excited for the success of our adventure. "I see someone," shouted Red who had binoculars. Sure enough, in the distance far below, I spotted a tiny figure on a bike heading our direction. Of course, it was Kirstin! One by one the ladies made it to the top of the pass, tired, exhausted and yet very excited for the final ride into Moab. Cheering encouragement, we all made our way back to Rim Tours, our starting point of six long, long days ago.

When the last rider pulled into the parking lot, it was time for a celebration. As the champagne flowed, hugs and high-fives were abundant between the elated group of the Babes and the support crew. We did it! We cheered and toasted each other for a successful and epic adventure. Looking back now on those lonely days in the desert, I can't help but feel a sense of pride. It was such an incredible journey for me - not just the ride, which in itself was so very amazing, but the total inspiration of the experience. An experience that has changed something deep down in my mind, body and inner self that can only come from huge personal struggle and achievement.

Babes and Bikes was sponsored by Deuter Sport, high-tech, female specific hydration packs; Isis For Women, functional and stylish sleeveless tanks; Smith Sport Optics, cool and high-tech eyewear and Elete Water.