



Peaks to Park Day 1: Hill Climbs and Scenic Views

by Sabrina Carlson

The morning of June 8th dawned clear and cool; just the perfect day to start an epic ride from Flagstaff to Grand Canyon. With trailer and van packed, the group leaders met in the parking lot at Schultz Tank with youth participants and the families. After a quick lunch packing and water filling we took a few minutes to introduce one another and cover basic safety and sanitization guidelines. During our introductions, we made the acquaintance of a local equestrian who was passing through riding bareback. After proper pleasantries were exchanged, three adult leaders and five eager teens started off on an adventure of a lifetime.

We rode up Weatherford Trail to turn north on the Arizona Trail. We traversed through drainages and valleys and past a beautiful early bloom of Rocky Mountain irises and lupine. During our snack stop we discussed trail etiquette and had a great conversation about the importance of packing all of our trash out with us...even the apple cores. After crossing Snowbowl Road, the trail began a long and steep climb to Aspen Corner. This section was a lung busting, leg shredding, grinder of a climb. All of the kids had their moments of doubt about their ability to make it to the top of the hill. Their grit and determination prevailed in the end, and all made it to Aspen Corner where Wendy, our marvelous van driver, met us with a resupply of water. Despite the difficulties and doubts of the climb, not a single one of the riders decided to take up Wendy's offer to drive them to camp in the van – they were determined to finish the day!



Enjoying the AZT near the San Francisco Peaks.



We pedaled on through the aspens, past breathtaking views of Hart Prairie, and near the access to Bismark Lake before a sweet and winding descent through the ferns and flowers to Forest Road 418. Wendy scouted us a spectacular camp site with panoramic views about a mile from the trail. The kids were so tired after the day's difficult effort they had to be encouraged to finish eating before they collapsed into their tents to rest up for the next day! Exhausted, but encouraged by their ability to finish the day, the riders went to sleep before the sun had fully set. We had seen the most intense of the climbing and the most technically challenging trail

of the whole trip, and every single person laid victory to the day.

Day 2: Descents and Decisions

Our sleepy and creaky crew rolled out of bed with enormous appetites and jovial spirits ready to take on the day. We tanked everyone up on our delicious Arizona Trail burritos, checked over the bikes, and had the youth pack their lunches. We took one last look at our scenic view from camp and headed down the trail. As joyful as everyone was to be riding again, they were equally glad for a day of descending! We rode out into the vast views of the low, rolling basins we had seen from camp, through the White Horse Hills, and back into the ponderosa pine forest. We stopped to admire the bumper crops of paintbrush and locoweed flowers that were exploding all over the forest floor.



The start of a beautiful day on the trail.

As we passed into the valley and crossed onto open range land, the trail grew faint and in need of traffic. We were happy to do our part. We made note of some invasive weed species that need removal. We continued our descent out of the pines and grassy valleys and into the piñon and juniper typical of the high desert Colorado Plateau bioregion. The trail opened up to doubletrack and ranch roads, some of which were a bit loose and provided ample opportunity for us to coach the youth on proper descending skills, how to brake properly, and keeping appropriate momentum over loose terrain.



Technical riding near Kelly Tank.

Wendy met us with the van at Cedar Ranch to top up water and snacks. At that point we needed to make a decision. Our long and grueling day of climbing the day before meant we were significantly behind our projected schedule. This meant we either needed to hop in the van and drive to Moqui Station, skipping a day's worth of riding, or we needed to add an extra ride day and give up our planned hike in the Grand Canyon. The vote was unanimous to cut out a ride section, and preserve our day of canyon exploration.



Celebrating the end of a long day between FR 418 and Moqui Stage Station.

We arrived at Moqui Stage Station in a light drizzle and enjoyed dinner under the cover of our group canopy tent. Everyone headed off to bed as the rain began to come down even harder....

Day 3: Mud and More Mud

After a rather sodden night, we were excited to see the morning break with cloud cover but no rain. Worried that the night's soaking would mean a few muddy spots, we were eager to get out on the trail as quickly as possible. Mud can sometimes slow you down, and we wanted to give ourselves plenty of time to get to Grandview Tower. We looked at the map and made a contingency plan. We would cross the Grandview Road about 9 miles into our 19 mile day, and agreed that Wendy would meet us there with the van if the going got too rough.

Pedaling off on gently climbing singletrack, we hit a few mud patches, but nothing too serious for the first few miles. But our van had not been so lucky. About an hour after we parted ways, I got a message explaining that the van had only made it about a few hundred feet before becoming bogged down in the mud. Wendy had made a valiant effort to dig it out herself, but was now awaiting rescue. We continued to find reasonable rideability for a bit longer, until we turned up Russell Wash. From then on it was thick, sticky, glob on your tires, bog down your drive train, peanut butter mud. No sooner would we get everyone's chains and tires degunked, then we would have to pull over and degunk again! Bikes with wider forks and chainstays fared a bit better, as the mud could build a little longer before stopping forward motion all together. But we all had mud encrusted hands, bikes, shoes and faces, and our forward progress had slowed to a crawl.



Mud clogged every moving part of our bicycles.

When we finally hit the Grandview Road, we would all have loved nothing more than to bail out by catching a ride in the van. But...our van was still axle deep awaiting assistance. Waiting by the road for our ride was not an option as a thunderstorm was threatening to descend and we needed to make progress toward shelter. After a brief consult, Nelson and I decided that we would have everyone divert to the road instead of the trail. It looked to shave a tiny bit of distance off our trek, and held the possibility of encountering other vehicles that might be willing to pick us up. We showed the kids how to look for the highest and driest part of the road, and we were off again.

We continued to alternate between riding, pushing, and degunking our bikes. We showed the youth how to carry a bike cyclocross style (seat hooked over your shoulder) and made a game of guessing how far we still had to go. Despite the frustrations and difficulties, all of the riders kept unbelievably positive attitudes and once again showed us what determination really looks like. After a broken derailleur on one bike, and barely functional drive trains on the rest, we



Our van was stuck axle-deep in the mud!

decided we would make faster progress for our remaining four miles of road to ditch the bikes in the trees and walk the rest of the way. While the mud turned out to be too tough for the bikes, it wasn't too tough for the riders! Liberated from about 40 extra pounds of metal and mud to carry we made swift and steady progress towards Grandview. By this time, the rescue wagon had made it to Wendy, but they were still a couple of hours from getting to us.

We finally made it to Grandview Tower about an hour before sunset. We were relieved to have found shelter if the weather turned nasty, even if "shelter" meant cramming under the information kiosk! Shortly after sunset, our knight in a muddy white truck arrived pulling the trailer with our warm clothes and some extra snacks. (Thanks, Isaac!) Wendy and PIZZA were not far behind! We pitched our tents in the only spots we could find that weren't completely soaking wet, and decided that tomorrow we would get out to pavement as soon as we could and get breakfast in town. It was the kind of day when a million things could have gone horribly wrong, but somehow everything worked out. We went to bed thankful for raincoats, for bushes to stash our bikes in, for downpours that didn't quite come, and for helpful friends and family who helped us get out of the mud!



Tired and muddy but still having a good time, the group seeks shelter under the National Forest kiosk while waiting for the van to arrive.

Day 4: Unplanned Rest Day

With our bikes unrideable and awaiting rescue we needed a day to regroup and recover. We left camp early and headed into Tusayan where we found a delicious breakfast buffet at the Grand Canyon Hotel. They were incredibly gracious to us despite our unwashed and mud caked appearance and even allowed us to leave our trailer in their parking lot for our bike retrieval mission. The youth and I got dropped off at the Park while Wendy and Nelson braved the muddy roads again to retrieve our bikes. We walked over to the Grand Canyon Visitor Center to learn a little more about the colorful abyss nearby.



Peering into the depths of Grand Canyon.

We meandered along the South Rim, taking in the panorama with all of our tourist friends. After nearly getting stuck in the mud again (hooray for chains!) Wendy, Nelson, and all of our bikes met us back at the Grand Canyon Village for lunch. Since we didn't want to chance mud anymore, we found a Forest Service campsite a short distance from Tusayan. With plenty of time to enjoy the late afternoon, we played a color matching game and then everyone created nature art inspired by the work of Andy Goldsworthy.

That night, it became clear that the adventures of the last few days had truly made us a team. Without prompting from us, the kids jumped in to help set out snacks and help with dinner. They created a surprisingly efficient system for dishes that allowed everyone to be a part of the efforts.

When two of the boys were insistent on a campfire despite the wet conditions, Wendy gave a fantastic lesson on starting a fire with wet wood and guided a conversation about the cost-benefit analysis of having campfires in different outdoor situations. She explained the difference between a heavily impacted area with an established fire pit versus an unimpacted area with no fire pit. Since we hadn't originally planned on a campfire, we had no big marshmallows for roasting. But no matter! The youth decided that cramming multiple mini marshmallows onto a stick to hold over the fire was just as delicious!

It had been fun to participate in civilization again, but we were all eager to get back out on the trail for our hike into the depths of Grand Canyon the next day.



Using organic materials to create sculptures was one way we enjoyed time in nature while our bikes were being retrieved from the mud.

Day 5: Hike to Horseshoe Mesa

Our excitement for hiking had us leaping from our bags at the first break of dawn (or maybe it had something to do with the tourist helicopters over our tents)! We wanted to get a jump on the heat and out on the trail as soon as we could. We headed down the Grandview Trail, hoping to make it to Horseshoe Mesa by lunch. As we descended the steep trail, Wendy entertained and educated us all with stories about the history of the trail and its maintenance as well as a geology lesson about each of the layers we walked past. Everyone was pretty amazed to hear about how the Redwall Limestone isn't really red, it is just stained from the layers above!



Getting ready to hike into the heart of Grand Canyon along the Grandview Trail.

Opportunities for learning continually presented themselves throughout the day. We had crossed paths at the start of our hike with two young people who looked to be lacking in water and other supplies. Though we inquired about their water supply, they assured us they had plenty. Later in the day we found them quite thirsty on their way back up! Because our crew was so well prepared, one of our young hikers had extra fluids to share with them. Lesson about proper water supply in the Canyon...learned!

As we explored the ruins of the old mining camp, we found a prime example of how NOT to dispose of human waste. Finding this made more of an impression than a thousand lectures about hygiene in the backcountry ever could! We looked at the old mine tailings and the glittering bits of turquoise and lapis that made a mosaic on the ground. The hike out was predictably steep and strenuous, but there was a noticeable difference in everyone's approach. No one seemed worried about making it to the top. Everyone just moved forward and a steady pace. When I asked one of the kids about this shift in mindset, he laid down the best quote of the week: "After days 1 and 3, I don't feel like I CAN'T anymore. I just feel like I'm tired."



Making steady progress uphill during a beautiful rain-free afternoon.

Peaks to Park 2015...Mission Accomplished!

Day 6: The Road Home

It had been a week we will never forget. The packing was slow, and it was clear that no one really wanted to go home just yet. Once we said a final goodbye to our campsite and did one last micro trash pick-up we were on our way. We made a stop at the National Geographic Visit Center-Grand Canyon to check out the Arizona National Scenic Trail Courtyard display. We took turns walking the “trail” on the ground, and racing to see who would “hike” the trail the fastest. We looked at the beautiful images from many of the passages of the trail, even recognizing a few we had just been on. We stood for a while discussing the picture of trail stewards repairing a section of damaged trail.



Everyone had now ridden both well-maintained and degraded trail sections and had an excellent grasp of the importance of stewardship to preserve this resource for generations to come. While driving back to Flagstaff we asked everyone who would want to do this trip again. Every hand shot into the air. Every. One. It doesn't get much better than this.

Gratitude and Special Thanks!

This life-changing outing would not have been possible without the help of some incredible individuals and businesses...

Hermosa Tours: For entrusting us with your adventure van complete with bike rack! Sorry about the mud.

Cosmic Cycles: For taking amazing care of us and providing the bikes we needed to rent, and repairing the damage from our muddy adventures.

John Neff of Greydog Construction: For the indispensable use of your trailer and 4x4 rescue truck!

Isaac Neff: For your time and energy rescuing us from the mud monster!

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