



Turret Arch,
Arches National Park

A DIFFERENT SPIN

It may be known as a mountain biking mecca, but Moab has some of the best road cycling in the region.

IT'S NO SECRET THAT UTAH'S ARCHES NATIONAL PARK—a red rock wonderland just five miles from the town of Moab—is open year-round, but my friends and I had heard that there were fewer visitors in March. And apparently the tip was true: When I pulled into the main parking lot last spring, it was empty. I jumped out of the car and unloaded my bike with giddy disbelief. We were about to pedal through one of the most storied landscapes in the West—and we'd have the road completely to ourselves.

Three months earlier, when my road cycling club began organizing this trip to Moab for spring training, I was skeptical. In my mind, Moab was a fat-tire paradise. Not only because of Slickrock, the most famous mountain biking trail on the planet, but also for Jeep week, when jacked-up four-wheelers take over the town. What could Moab offer a roadie? The email from the club promised mild temperatures, unrivaled scenery, and, in early spring, wide-open roads devoid of sightseers. I decided to give it a try.

After the five-and-a-half-hour drive west from Denver, we settled into Rim Village, an adobe-style cluster of vacation rentals on the south side of

Moab. The three-bedroom condos have double garages to store bikes, full kitchens, and a community hot tub for après-ride relaxation. Our plan was to bike the three most highly acclaimed road routes in the area over the course of a three-day weekend.

SMOOTH RIDE
Springtime in Moab, Utah, offers cooler temperatures and tourist-free streets, perfect for road biking.

DAY 1 LET'S KEEP GOING, 45 MILES ROUND-TRIP

Our first ride was inspired by the 1991 classic *Thelma & Louise*, in which the two renegade protagonists—played by Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis—launch their '66 Thunderbird convertible over a cliff. The iconic scene was filmed at Dead Horse Point State Park, a dramatic rock promontory perched 2,000 feet above the Colorado River. We drove nine miles north of Moab on US-191 and parked in the small lot at the intersection of SR-313. Ahead of us loomed the challenging 22.5-mile, roughly-three-percent-grade climb up SR-313 to the legendary lookout point.

From the first pedal stroke, I was sold on the scenery. Immense sandstone walls—accentuated by an azure sky—lined the road. The combination of colors and textures was unlike anything I'd seen in Colorado. We set an easy pace, both to soak in the canyon country views



and to negotiate the steep hairpin turns. After gaining about 1,000 feet of elevation in 10 miles, the road mellowed out. Around the 15-mile mark, we hung a left at the Dead Horse Point State Park sign and were treated to eight miles of gentle rollers the rest of the way to the visitors center. We knew the \$2 entry fee (\$10 for cars) would be worth it for the scenery, but it was nice to be able to use the facilities and refill our water bottles too.

We dismounted our bikes for the short walk to the vista—a view even more gratifying in real life than it appeared on the big screen. From high above the river, we could see for miles across the cosmic pinnacles and buttes of nearby Canyonlands National Park, a visually arresting landscape created by millions of years of sedimentary rock erosion. We took our time, snapping photos from cameras and smartphones that had been stashed in jersey pockets and enjoying the surreal setting. But the best part of the ride was yet to come—a white-knuckle-fast descent, without any car traffic.

DAY 2 THE BIG NASTY, 60 MILES ROUND-TRIP

The second morning, we awoke to 60-degree temps, clear spring skies, and a hefty breeze. Luckily, we'd planned to be up in the mountains that day, which would offer some protection from the wind. The La Sal Mountains, located on the southeast side of Moab, rise to nearly 13,000 feet. Covered in thick pine forests and accented by snow-capped peaks, they stand in sharp contrast to the desert mesas that dominate the rest of the region.

We set out heading east on Spanish Valley Drive and biked the 60-mile La Sal Mountain Loop Road counterclockwise. The route (a no-brainer for the navigation-challenged—it's just one road) gradually ascended through green pastures dotted with grazing cattle and continued through juniper and oak forests until we hit the Big Nasty—a stretch of smooth pavement that gains more than 3,000 feet in seven miles, or about an eight percent gradient.

While straining against the steep terrain, we looked up to see a wall of snow on the side of the road separating us from the stands of blue-green spruce. But the Big Nasty turned out to be less disagreeable than it sounded. The heaviest climbing occurred in three distinct sections, with ample time for recovery in between. After about three hours of total climbing, we were rewarded with a gradual downhill all the way to the Colorado River. We saw no cars until the end of the ride when we turned onto SR-128, which wasn't quite as lonely

IF YOU GO

Road biking burns tons of calories—we recommend refueling at these local standouts.

Jailhouse Cafe *The breakfast favorite in Moab, Jailhouse offers classic diner-style breakfasts along with more gourmet options like old-fashioned ginger pancakes with apple butter.*

Milt's Stop & Eat *This modest burger and shake stand located just off the main drag of Mill Creek Drive serves the best food in Moab. Try the chili cheeseburger featuring local free-range beef.*

Peace Tree Juice Cafe *This longtime Moab eatery aims for a healthy interpretation of comfort food, like sweet potato fries prepared without trans fats and gluten-free polenta lasagna.*

as the other roads we'd taken that day. But I felt the small amount of traffic was a fair trade-off for being able to bike alongside the pristine river back to town.

DAY 3 THE RED PLANET, 46 MILES ROUND-TRIP

We had saved a spin through Arches National Park for our final day—and even though we'd racked up 105 miles in the previous 48 hours, we were pumped. Once we got past the steep set of switchbacks that led out of the empty parking lot into Arches, the road through the park transitioned to a more manageable series of undulating hills.

Truthfully, the rising and falling of the road was irrelevant. I'd forgotten about the actual bike ride altogether once I entered the world's largest known concentration of sandstone arches. The geography made me feel like I'd landed on another planet. Besides the more than 2,500 arches, the park is full of colossal rock formations ranging from fins and spires to gigantic boulders balanced atop pinnacles. At every turn of the pedal, there are jaw-dropping views, which stretch across miles of natural rock sculptures all the way to the La Sal Mountains.

We'd anticipated riding the 18-mile park road as an out-and-back, but we had so much fun exploring—we found the 65-foot-tall Delicate Arch, one of Utah's most famous rock formations—we ended up taking each side path and offshoot available, for a total of more than 45 miles. Next time, we're planning to bring our cleat covers and hoof it on some of the short footpaths. We love our wheels, but sometimes a short hike is the only way to end up in a surreally beautiful location. ▲▲

JAYME MOYE is a Boulder-based freelance writer. Email her at letters@5280.com.