

# Adventure CYCLIST

a publication of ADVENTURE CYCLING ASSOCIATION

## BISON & BRIDGES <sup>30</sup>

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## FAT BIKE FEBRUARY

Every year we emerge from the dark days of a Montana winter with fat bike Road Tests, winter riding gear, and more. Stay tuned on our social media channels and at [adventurecycling.org/blog](http://adventurecycling.org/blog). Some highlights include:

- Road Tests of the Norco Bigfoot 1 and 9:ZERO:7 Tundra fat bikes
- Special winter edition of Geared Up
- Q&A with Scottish adventurer Huw Oliver about his fat bike expedition on the Kungsleden Trail in Swedish Lapland



## 2019 CYCLING EVENTS

Looking for a supported event ride in 2019 with a few hundred — or thousand — new friends? We've compiled every multiday event ride in the country (plus some international options!) to help with your winter planning. [adventurecycling.org/2019events](http://adventurecycling.org/2019events)

State	Event Name	2018/03/17	2018/03/16	Link
	Cave Creek Overnight Tour	2018/03/10	2018/03/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
	Sonoite-Bisbee Overnight Tour	2018/10/13	2018/10/19	<a href="#">Link</a>
	Southern Arizona Road Adventure Spring	2018/03/16	2018/03/18	<a href="#">Link</a>
	Southern Arizona Road Adventure Fall	2018/03/16	2018/03/18	<a href="#">Link</a>
	Tucson Bicycle Classic	2018/06/05	2018/06/09	<a href="#">Link</a>
	Aids/LifeCycle Ride 545	2018/09/22	2018/09/29	<a href="#">Link</a>
	California Coast Classic	2018/06/03	2018/06/10	<a href="#">Link</a>
	California Wine Country Relaxed	2018/02/24	2018/03/01	<a href="#">Link</a>
CA	Climate Ride Death Valley National Park	2018/05/20	2018/05/24	<a href="#">Link</a>
CA	Climate Ride California North Coast	2018/10/18	2018/10/21	<a href="#">Link</a>
CA	Climate Ride California North Coast	2018/10/18	2018/10/21	<a href="#">Link</a>
CA	Death Valley Ride to Cure Diabetes	2018/09/07	2018/09/09	<a href="#">Link</a>
CA	Death Valley Ride to Cure Diabetes	2018/05/25	2018/05/28	<a href="#">Link</a>
	The Bike Trek	2018/05/13	2018/05/13	<a href="#">Link</a>



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Tern GSD



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I

was bent low over the handlebars, in my lowest gear, cranking steadily on the pedals of my sturdy, go-anywhere Surly Long Haul Trucker, trying to think happy thoughts. Trying not to think how many more miles still lay between me and the Deadwood KOA and an ice-cold beer. From the moment we left the outskirts of Rapid City that morning, the climb, the brisk headwind, and the late-August heat had been relentless. But there was nowhere else I'd rather be.





# BISON & BRIDGES in the Black HILLS

STORY BY LARRY RICE

PHOTOS BY JOHNNY SUNDBY





*The George S. Mickelson Trail is one of the nation's best rail trails and a highlight of any tour through the Black Hills.*

The history and unique landscapes of South Dakota's Black Hills had long called out to me, but it took a weeklong Adventure Cycling Association fully supported tour — my first — to finally get me here. Now, along with 45 other like-minded riders, sustained by a friendly staff of six, a professional caterer, and a bevy of support vehicles, I was about to see what I'd been missing.

At the campground where our group had convened the previous evening to register, receive route maps, and discuss the week ahead, I picked up a glossy tourist brochure that hyped the pine-forested Black Hills as "Three Million Acres of Fun and Adventure." But before I could experience all that "fun," I first had to push through this tough, 50-mile inaugural day. Maybe that was the "adventure" part.

At about mile 46, with the gold rush town of Deadwood dead in my sights, I was very happy to exit the

trafficked blacktop and bear right onto the peacefulness of the George S. Mickelson Trail. Starting the next morning, it would be two car-free days of riding this celebrated rail trail, one of the reasons many in our group had signed up for this particular tour. Kelly Hannegan, our enthusiastic tour leader who had led the Black Hills trip four times previously, promised us it would be "just one awesome highlight among many" during the week.

I stopped briefly in touristy Deadwood — a National Historic Landmark because of its well-preserved collection of pre-1900 buildings, as well as being the final resting place of Wild Bill Hickok, the celebrated gunslinger, and trick shooter Calamity Jane — then huffed up the steep grade to the welcoming campground. There, awaiting our long string of weary riders, were our gear bags stuffed full with camping equipment and the like, and a

sign pointing to cold beers and sodas, happy hour snacks, and hot showers. Another portable sign stated that dinner — salad, lasagna, garlic bread, blueberry and apple pie — would be served at 6:00 PM. I was starting to like the concept of being "fully supported."



The next morning I was wide awake at 6:00 AM, a few minutes before sunrise, keen to get a jump-start on the day. I quickly broke down my tent and stuffed everything I didn't need for the day's ride into my duffel bag. Only then did I head over to breakfast.

I was joined by a few other early risers, part of our eclectic band of individuals who relish the freedom of riding unencumbered but still like camping and a cycling challenge. We hailed from every part of the country



It was easy to  
see why the  
Black Hills remain  
sacred land to  
the Lakota  
Sioux Nation,  
the original  
inhabitants of  
these meadows  
and woods.



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and from all walks of life. Ages spanned from 15 to 77, almost equally divided between men and women. Some were super fit, others not so much. Some had extensive bike touring experience, others almost none. Mostly strangers when we met, friendships forged through the common bond of cycling were already being made.

I guzzled a mug of steaming hot coffee while waiting until 7:00 AM sharp when our caterer, Anne Steinbach, laid out her ever-changing breakfast masterpieces. I overheard a few fellow cyclists "complain" that they had wanted to drop a few pounds on this tour but instead were afraid that they would be adding a few because the food was so tasty.

As I slowly pedaled away from the now-bustling camp, I found myself undergoing an epiphany of sorts. It was easy to see why fully supported tours, led by knowledgeable and experienced leaders, are so popular. It seemed as

if every detail had been addressed to make ours a rewarding journey. Along with helpfully spaced water and snack stations, well-stocked lunch stops, helpful route signage, and a skilled bike mechanic always on call, SAG vehicles stood at the ready if needed (not that I would ever use one!). And even for a penny-pincher like me, the trip cost was extremely reasonable. The only thing we participants needed to do, said Kelly, "was enjoy the fantastic Black Hills and ride safely."



Skimming the daily tour map, I saw that it was going to be a 50-mile day, starting with a climb from 4,550 feet to about 6,300 feet before finally tapering off. Fifty miles away was Hill City, known as the "Heart of the Hills" because it is centrally located between

many of the Black Hills' attractions such as Mount Rushmore National Memorial, Crazy Horse Memorial, and Custer State Park, all of which we would eventually visit. Just a few miles past Hill City lay Crooked Creek Resort, our next campground, conveniently situated right off the Mickelson Trail.

Almost immediately upon re-entering the "Big Mick," as locals fondly call their trail, I left Deadwood behind and was swallowed up by densely forested hills creased by aspen-lined rushing creeks. The fragrance of ponderosa pine was strong. Colorful songbirds darted back and forth in front of me, and several times I crossed paths with startled whitetail deer and wild turkeys. It was easy to see why the Black Hills remain sacred land to the Lakota Sioux Nation, the original inhabitants of these meadows and woods. Enwrapped in nature while solo pedaling these long, solitary stretches sent my spirit soaring.





The image many riders have in their minds about what South Dakota looks like is quickly erased by varied terrain, abundant wildlife, and great cycling.

A group of cyclists riding on a road through a golden, hilly landscape under a clear blue sky. The cyclists are in various positions, some in the foreground and others further back. The terrain is rolling and covered in golden grass. The sky is a clear, bright blue.

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I was riding atop what was once a Burlington Northern branch rail line, constructed over 100 years ago to accommodate the miners who had rushed to the area to pan for gold. After the railroad corridor was abandoned in 1983, a group of local residents, who recognized the line's historic value and recreational potential, lobbied hard to turn it into a multiuse rail trail. Against all odds, they succeeded.

Completed in 1998, and stretching 109 miles through mostly national forest land in the Black Hills, the George S. Mickelson Trail — named after the then-governor who played an integral role in the trail's early success — contains more than 100 restored railroad trestles and four hard-rock tunnels that were blasted long ago through the rugged hillsides.

I was glad we would be traversing all but 30 miles of the Big Mick, known as one of the premier rail trails in the West due to its varied scenery and rich history. Along the way, the landscape gradually changes from dark-forested mountains and high-country meadows to rolling prairies and buttes with expansive views. Its gentle grade makes it a favorite for cyclists, though the trail surface, generally 10 feet wide with a crushed limestone and gravel surface, is not exactly friendly to thin-tired road bikes. Everyone in our group was astride hybrid, cyclocross, gravel, or touring bikes with wider rubber.



Surprisingly, except for a handful of other cyclists and hikers, we had the

Mickelson Trail almost to our ourselves until we rolled into our overnight stop in Hot Springs. Founded as a frontier health spa to capitalize on warm mineral waters nearby, the thriving little town is also home to Evans Plunge, billed as “the world’s largest indoor freshwater swimming pool heated by a thermal spring.” Camp was set up in Centennial Park, practically at the center of the historic downtown. Then most of us tossed bathing suits into our daypacks and strolled over to the Plunge for showers and to bask in the hot tubs.

Easing into one of the soothing baths, I felt my overworked muscles melt away under the powerful jets. Sharing the hot tub with me were two tripmates from Boulder, Colorado, and another from a small town in Kansas. It was obvious that Mr. Kansas, who I guessed was in his mid-60s, was new to this sort of indulgence. He proved it when he uttered, “Oh, Lordy, if there’s a heaven on earth for tired and sore bike tourers, I think I found it!”



From Hot Springs, our nomadic band continued on the 258-mile counterclockwise loop that would ultimately take us back to Rapid City. But that was still two and a half days away. As a former wildlife biologist, it was today’s 43-mile ride that I was anticipating as much as, or even more than, the wonderful Mickelson Trail.

Seven miles north of Hot Springs, we entered the first of two stellar natural

areas. Wind Cave National Park, named for one of the largest and most complex cave systems in the world with over 145 miles of known passageways, is relatively small at a mere 28,295 acres. But size isn’t everything. Small as it is, there is a remarkable variety of wildlife here among the rolling grasslands and swaths of pine-forested hillsides.

Early in the morning, there were almost no vehicles on the paved park road as I pedaled leisurely, marveling at the sunlit prairie. Only a couple of other cyclists from our group were out and about, stopping frequently to snap photos or scan for wildlife. Elk, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, coyotes, prairie dogs, and many species of birds can be found in Wind Cave’s diverse mix of habitats. But above all, the chance to see bison, the largest terrestrial animals in North America, excites visitors the most. Especially when that visitor is riding a puny bicycle.

The first bison I spotted was standing still as a statue, the length of a football field away. It was a full-grown bull grazing contentedly on the knee-deep bluestem and other grasses. Close to the big, burly critter was a lively prairie dog town. Its rabbit-sized occupants busily scampered about, feeding on morsels of grass or perched near their burrow entrances. Always on the lookout for hungry predators, their sharp, steady barks carried over the open range.

Pushing onward, I continued my two-wheeled tour through this overlooked jewel in the national park system’s crown. Whenever I reached the top of a swell in the ocean of grass, it seemed as if I could see forever. Here

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and there were more solitary bison and a dozen or so reddish-brown and white pronghorn antelope, the swiftest land mammal in North America, which can easily run 60 MPH.

But little did I know that this was only the warm-up act to a much more powerful performance to follow. When I stopped at the visitor center, thinking that I might want to take a ranger-led cave tour, I made other plans upon hearing that a large herd of bison had been observed nearby on State Route 87. This was the same winding and narrow road that would take us to Custer State Park immediately to the north, our final destination for the day. Spurred on by more wildlife encounters, I decided the geological wonders below ground would have to wait for my next visit.

I mounted my hefty Trucker and took off like a Tour de France racer through the dips and slopes. In about 10 minutes I finally crested a grassy swell, rolled to a screeching stop, and peered out over a scene right out of the epic American frontier film, *Dances With Wolves* (which, incidentally, was shot on location nearby). Moseying over the native mixed-grass prairie were several hundred bison, grunting, bellowing hoarsely, and wallowing in the dirt. A dozen or so more of the majestic animals lined both shoulders of the lonely two-lane road. Others stood in the middle of the road or nonchalantly ambled across.

For the next hour or so, our growing cadre of bicyclists was stopped in its tracks by the buffalo blockade, a captive audience to a *Wild Kingdom* show. Respectfully, we gave them plenty of elbow room. Bulls can weigh up to a ton, stand six feet tall, run as fast as a horse, and jump over a seven-foot-high fence. What's more, they have notoriously unpredictable temperaments and can be particularly dangerous. The ranger in the visitor center had told us that if the bulls lift their tails, they were ready to charge, and that although bison are used to cars, they don't understand cyclists. Good to know when, more than once, a few of the lumbering giants closed

the gap between us and them to under 50 yards, below what is considered the minimum safe distance.

To behold these almost prehistoric-looking creatures in their native habitat, up close and personal, was definitely one of the "awesome highlights." When our leader eventually arrived in one of the support vehicles, she too took her line in the bison jam. Like the rest of us, she was wide-eyed and grinning ear-to-ear as she eased out of the pickup truck. "I've seen bison on every tour," she said, "but nothing at all that comes even close to this!"

Finally, when these symbolic animals of the Great Plains cleared a path for us, we seized the opportunity and scurried past. Five miles to the north lay another outdoor haven I was hungering to see.



Comprising 71,000 acres in the southern Black Hills, Custer State Park is one of the most popular state parks in the country, a model of conservancy and land use. It's a place where deer, elk, antelope, bighorn sheep, and bison roam freely. And as we had experienced in Wind Cave and the rest of the Black Hills (other than the Mickelson Trail), the climbs in this vast undulating park were frequent, as were rest stops to savor the stunning panoramas.

After navigating the lightly trafficked Wildlife Loop Road for some 18 miles through the open grasslands and pine-speckled hills, our day's ride ended in what was hands-down the best campground of the tour. One by one and in tattered small groups, all 46 of us, plus a couple of the staff who took their turns on bikes today, coasted into Game Lodge Campground, one of nine campgrounds in the sprawling park.

I pitched my tent under a canopy of bur oak trees directly beside a babbling creek, took a shower, and then, before Chef Anne's dinner bell rang, strode over to the new visitor center. Inside the beautiful building was an array of hands-on interpretive displays that depicted the natural world of Custer State Park, as

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well as a 100-seat theater. Here I sat, all alone, while a 20-minute film showcasing many aspects of the park amazed me with its superb cinematography. And who better to narrate the film than Kevin Costner, who starred in, directed, and produced the Academy Award-winning *Dances With Wolves*?



Only a day and a half and 57 miles remained before our tour was over. It was hard to believe that we had seen and done so much in so short a time. We would all be returning home with a treasure trove of exceptional memories, new friends, much stronger legs and hearts, and a newfound appreciation for this bicycle-friendly corner of South Dakota. **AC**

*Larry Rice is an avid cyclist, canoeist, and backpacker from Colorado, with some 450 magazine articles to his credit. His last story to appear in Adventure Cyclist was "Missouri Misery" in the Dec. 2017/Jan. 2018 issue.*





NUTS & BOLTS

## black hills

### WHERE TO GO

Almost every Black Hills town boasts a bike path, plus the famed George S. Mickelson Trail is always nearby and easily accessible. Wide-shouldered highways accommodate those cyclists looking to venture farther to scenic destinations. And with about 6,000 miles of trails, logging roads, and abandoned railroad grades weaving through the Black Hills alone, there are mountain biking trails for everyone.

### WHEN TO GO

The peak travel season is in the summer, but the best time to visit may be September and October, with April and May as alternatives. Smaller crowds, off-season rates, and the beauty of the changing seasons are all promising reasons to go during spring and fall; however, be ready for anything, rain and snow included.

### WHEN NOT TO GO

Unless you plan to attend the Sturgis motorcycle rally, which attracts more than a half-million full-throttle Harley and Indian riders, it would be wise to avoid that time, usually during 10 days in early August. You will not be able to avoid bikers by staying in other towns, as they will be all over the Black Hills and nearby Badlands.

### PRACTICAL MATTERS

If your interest lies in riding the Mickelson Trail, with its crushed limestone and gravel surface, it's recommended that tires be at least 32mm wide. And then there are those hills! Most riders prefer a triple crankset and broad range of gears to get over and through the varying terrain.

### MORE INFO

- [adventurecycling.org/guided-tours](http://adventurecycling.org/guided-tours)
- [bikemickelson.com](http://bikemickelson.com)
- [bhmba.org/trails](http://bhmba.org/trails)
- [blackhillsbadlands.com/outdoor-recreation/biking](http://blackhillsbadlands.com/outdoor-recreation/biking)