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PHOTOS BY JARED FISCHER

LAS VEGAS IS FAST BECOMING A MOUNTAIN BIKING MECCA FOR ENTHUSIASTS OF ALL LEVELS. WHETHER YOU'RE NEW TO THE SPORT OR AN OLD PRO, THESE TRAILS AND BIKE SHOPS ARE WORTH CHECKING OUT.

A wanderlust soul suffocating in suburbia. My only solace – an exhilarating affair with the desert – was losing its zeal. Smothered by the responsibilities of daily life, I desperately sought to rekindle the passion first shared with the Mojave some ten years ago. Restless and searching, my salvation arrived. A red-coated knight on two wheels, with 27 gears and a full-suspension frame... a mountain bike.

trail mix

Captivated by the mysterious intricacies of this deliverance, I fell back into the peaceful arms of Red Rock Canyon. Elated that together we could indulge in a quickie before work, or opt for an all day endurance ride, discovering suburban Las Vegas actually began to feel more like utopia.

Fast becoming a destination spot for mountain bikers throughout the United States, Las Vegas' Cottonwood Valley houses first-class off-road bike trails. Located on the North and South sides of Highway 160, approximately six miles past the intersection of 159 and 160, a system of interconnecting trails satisfies both beginner and veteran riders. Developed in the late '80s and early '90s, the area touts over 100 miles



Opposite and above: Riders tackling Dead Horse Loop Trail and Little Moab Wash, respectively, in trail-heavy Cottonwood Valley.

of single track, where you can climb, coast or test your navigation skills through more technical terrain.

On the north side, Mustang Trail is seven miles of easy/intermediate track. With picturesque views of sandstone cliffs and valleys, expert riders enjoy this trail, despite little uphill climbing and gradual descents. Beginners can learn the ins and outs of their bike while intermediate riders hone their skills, preparing to tackle more technical terrain.

Although many bikers prefer popular spots like Moab, Utah, others such as Michael Lefkowitz of Bucks County, Pennsylvania journey to Las Vegas specifically for the mountain biking terrain. "This is mountain biking," exclaims the 41-year old Business Broker, after riding Dead

Horse Loop – one of the areas most popular rides. Impressed with the quality of riding and beauty of the landscape, Lefkowitz adds, "I don't want to go home."

Jared Fischer, owner of Escape Adventures, led us through the Joshua tree and cholla speckled foothills of Mt. Potosi, on a 14-mile intermediate/advanced single track ride.

The trails' mild but steady climb is a welcomed warm-up; and the intensity slowly increases but is then quickly relieved. Until, that is, you reach Satan's Escalator. As the name suggests, it's a stout section of uphill climbing that makes your legs burn like wildfire. Thankfully, the downhill that follows is fast and exciting with spectacular views.



Opposite: Stunning views and challenging rides await enthusiasts at Black Velvet Canyon, in Cottonwood Valley. Right: A rider struggles on the appropriately named Hurl Hill.

The final three miles through Red Valley, affectionately coined the "3-mile smile" by locals, is the steepest portion of downhill. Cautious, I put my brakes to the test for a good part of the descent. As Jared coached in the distance, I discovered the secret to having a successful relationship with your mountain bike. "You are in control of your destiny on a mountain bike," says Fisher, who's been biking for 12 years.

Pointing out the off-road perks, "there's no chance of getting hit by speeding cars out on the trails," he says. "Part of mountain biking is understanding how and when to shift your gears." Though the 27 gears on a mountain bike sometimes intimidate customers in his Las Vegas Cyclery shop, Fisher says, "it's not really too complicated. Gears are not about knowing which one you are in, but how you are spinning. Just knowing what feels right is more important than knowing, 'now I'm in gear 18.'" And learning comes from doing.

"It's baptism by fire," declares Pro-Cyclery bike shop owner, Richard Craig. Becoming familiar with how to position your body on your bike while riding various types of terrain comes from logging miles. "To get better at mountain biking, stick with easier trails," explains Craig, who has been racking up miles on his bike for 15 years. "Keep it steady and don't blow yourself out in the first mile." Fisher agrees, urging beginners to do their homework on a trail before diving in. "Having a good first experience is vital." And I can certainly attest to this.

Having mastered the dynamics of my yellow Schwinn and its floral, banana seat back in my single-digit decade, I hopped on the mountain bike craze in the early '90s. With a frame whose weight matched my own, a seat as comfortable as petrified wood and no shock system to absorb the bumps, I was awed that people actually enjoyed the sport. But, the full suspension Cannondale I eventually rode took the pain of the bumps, so I could focus on my body position, navigation and having fun. "Now, there are full-suspension bikes that are light-weight and comfortable," explains Fisher.

The initial investment in mountain biking varies. Expect to spend anywhere from \$400 for a used, full-suspension bike to thousands on a new model. Other essential gear: a helmet, a camelback for easy hydration, gloves and proper shorts – whose padding won't do much for your figure... but will literally save your... well, you know.

Beyond the benefits of improving physical fitness, increasing confidence and enjoying the great outdoors, mountain biking can spark up your social life as well. Just drop in the W. Charleston and Town Center Starbucks on an early Saturday morning and you'll see them in droves: bright colored clothing, strangle looking shoes and hair coifed à la helmet. Both Craig and Fisher agree that the mountain biking community in Las Vegas is growing in stride with the population. Though mountain biking is serious business, "most people just want to have a good time," says Craig. I suppose only in Sin City would riding Satan's Escalator sound like an enticing idea. **lvmm**



SHOPS TO VISIT

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