



warm front

COLORADO'S BANANA BELT BECKONS WINTER-WORN RIDERS

By devon o'neil | photos: liam doran

EARLY MARCH AT 7,000 FEET STILL qualifies as winter in most Rocky Mountain towns. It is not uncommon for storms to drop multiple feet of snow and close roads for days, sending hopeful robins and riders back into their nests until spring arrives, mercifully, sometime in April or May.

But not here, not today. I am pedaling up a trail called Frontside in Salida, Colorado, the Banana Belt hamlet that sits between three towering mountain ranges and nearly a dozen 14,000-foot peaks. Eighty minutes north, four feet of snow waits in my yard, with more on its way. Here, the mercury is already touching the low 60s at 10:30 a.m., warming the tacky dirt as well as my pasty forearms, which feel like they have been let out of jail.

Longtime locals Shawn Gillis and Tom Purvis lead the way up Tenderfoot Mountain, better known as “S Mountain” to Salidans—a 640-foot knob that anchors the Arkansas Hills trail network. Each is in his early 50s and has a graying beard and thick quads.

“In the early 2000s, there was not a lot of recreation up here,” Purvis says at a trail junction with ‘Lil Rattler. “It was basically

just for shooting and dumping trash.”

Mountain bikers have flocked to the area for decades to ride the Monarch Crest Trail, a world-famous alpine singletrack that begins on Monarch Pass, 25 minutes up Highway 50 from Salida. But the only trails in or near town were, as Purvis says, “break-your-face hard”—mostly rogue routes pioneered by a handful of Jedi outliers including bike fabricator Don McClung and the late Mountain Bike Hall of Fame member Mike Rust. “We used to ride for an hour, and five minutes of that would be singletrack,” Purvis says.

Over the past 10 years, however, Salida has grown from a sleeping giant to bona fide fat-tire heaven. Some locals still ride the Crest 30 times a year, because, well, that’s what you do when one of the world’s best high routes doubles as your backyard epic. But you could argue the Crest has been eclipsed in popularity by a diverse and ever-expanding menu of options accessible from downtown—a network that includes such aptly named trails as Uncle Nasty and Sweet Dreams, as well as the hour-long Cottonwood descent that Purvis calls “one of the most underrated trails in Colorado.”

Combined with the smoother Methodist

Mountain system across the valley, Salida’s pedal-from-town riding rivals just about anywhere in terms of fun quotient per hour.

And yet, buried beneath the good vibes of this thriving town, where the sun shines 330 days a year and people still make eye contact on the sidewalks, where North America’s most popular stretch of whitewater, the Arkansas River, runs through one of Colorado’s largest historic districts, where artists and cowboys and skiers and mountain bikers all coexist, there remains tension in Salida. Local riders are conflicted about the town’s fate—in some cases the same ones who created it.

Gillis says the key to growth is taking part in it, so “you can help shape it in a responsible way.”

That is what he and about 10 others tried to do when they formed Salida Mountain Trails (SMT), a volunteer advocacy group, in 2004. The Bureau of Land Management had announced its intention to update the Travel Management Plan (TMP) for Arkansas Hills, and locals saw an opportunity—not just to get the rogue routes legitimized, but to create something far greater than what existed. Much of their initiative started with Nathan



Ward, a photographer and documentary filmmaker who moved to Salida in 1984.

"I was like, 'Let's tell 'em what we want—not go into this passively but go into it actively,'" says Ward, who made the film "The Rider and the Wolf" about Rust's disappearance. "We figured if we asked for way more trails than we wanted, we'd get a good number. But I think in the end they approved almost all of them."

Four years passed before SMT was able to build a trail on BLM land, but things happened fast from there. The organization worked with four different land managers—the City of Salida, U.S. Forest Service, Colorado State Parks and BLM—to construct the network. Early volunteer days attracted 150 people. Gillis, a San Diego native who founded Absolute Bikes in Salida in 1999, sponsored barbecues to reward each day's work. An ex-playground designer and mechanical engineer named Andrew Mesesan plotted many of the stacked loops. A pair of Arkansas transplants, Kent and Mary Ann Davidson, applied for grants to expand connectivity to the Rainbow Trail, which links to the Monarch Crest.

SMT often ran into hurdles, like the trash-strewn forest from years of people squatting near town and grumbings from old-timers, some of whom felt SMT's efforts would "ruin" Salida. Even the BLM imparted words of caution as it approved their trails.

"They said, 'You don't want to be another Fruita, do you, where the town revolves around biking?'" recalls Mike Sugaski, a retired Forest Service recreation manager. "No, the intent was just to be able to hop on your bike in town, ride across the river and go."

The results are tangible: Mountain bikers from around the world visit; the Salida High School team ranks among the best in the state, despite only having 300 students; the Vapor Trail 125 race (application required) starts and finishes in town; and a community of 5,300 supports three bike shops:

Subculture Cyclery, Salida Bike Company and Absolute.

It is a far cry from what McClung and Rust built in the '80s—and a different world entirely from Salida's origins as a depot on the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad. When the railroad slowed in the '50s it became a highway town, and eventually a sleepy little artist and ranching community. Downtown was empty; you couldn't find a place to eat after 8 p.m.

"When I moved to Salida in 1986, people were leaving," says McClung. He is standing in front of his small work shed, one of five shacks scattered about his riverfront property. "Back then the only people riding bikes were in the DUI bike club. They were amazed: 'You guys got your driver's licenses and you're still riding bikes?'"

McClung and Rust opened a shop, Colorado Cyclery. Rust eventually moved away, but McClung kept making frames and taking on new "Don's Disciples," as some refer to his core group of riding partners/admirers. His Fourth of July 'Don Rides' are legendary: Sixty people meet at his house at 4:30 a.m. and ride 86 miles with 10,000 feet of elevation gain. McClung, wearing jeans and tennis shoes, does it on a rigid singlespeed with rim brakes—as well as a knife tucked into his steer tube "in case I need to skin some roadkill." He still finishes mid-pack at age 74.

When asked what he thinks of Salida today, McClung shrugs his shoulders, sighs, then shrugs again. "It seems overcrowded and overused now. I used to ride the Rainbow Trail like it was an individual time trial. But now you got to be careful. Somebody might be coming the other way, going as fast as you are."

Ward agrees: "In some ways I think it's almost been too successful."

Still, Rafael Millan, who works at Subculture and is known as the "Hispanic Mechanic," says mountain biking gives him a job and place to live in Salida, two things

he wouldn't have otherwise. He doesn't love that oil and gas workers are building second homes and making it harder for locals to find housing, but they're also buying \$12,000 bikes. "We can't not take their money. It's not dirty," says Millan, 42. "If it's windy, you fly your kite. That's what I say."

Near the end of my ride with Purvis and Gillis, we arrive at the junction of Sweet Dreams and Chicken Dinner, a trail that opened this spring to much acclaim. (Sugaski, the retired Forest Service worker, bought a crucial piece of private property then donated an easement to complete the route.) Gillis, wearing Carhartt shorts, lowers his seat by a quarter-inch. Purvis nods: "If you're about to ride Chicken Dinner, you want it to be perfect."

The descent is 2 miles of lost-in-time bliss. We pass a few of Gillis and Purvis' friends on the way home but see no one else—not bad for a town that is supposedly overrun. It is still March, after all. **B**

RIDE SALIDA

Salida is 140 miles southwest of Denver and 100 miles west of Colorado Springs. It's also less than two hours from Crested Butte.

STAY | You'll find everything from bed and breakfasts to chain lodging in Salida. The Chaffee County Chamber of Commerce has a ton of options to peruse. colorful-colorado.com/lodging

EAT | Try the Ark Anizzle Shrimp Tacos at the Boathouse Cantina, located on the river downtown. boathousesalida.com

RIDE | Absolute Bikes offers shuttles to the Monarch Crest and a custom trail map that includes the Vapor Trail 125 route (the record is 12 hours 38 minutes, set by Jesse Jakomait). absolutebikes.com