





OH A GOOD OL'
HOW VIRGINIA
SWEET ASS
WHOOPING

Words by Morgan Lommele
Images by Leslie Kehmeier

A quick nap at the Tuscarora Overlook.

My mountain biking friends looked at me like I was an Easter bunny about to step into a St. Patrick's Day parade when I told them I was traveling 1,600 miles to Virginia for a mountain bike trip. I live in Colorado after all, and we've got a wide variety of world-class trails. It wouldn't be worth trying to explain that my destination, Harrisonburg, Va., is the hub of hundreds—if not thousands—of the most scenic and wild singletrack adventures in the country, but I did manage to drag along a few buddies from Colorado. We were in for four solid days of big climbs, big descents, and enough time in the saddle to either acknowledge our true love of bikes or question our convictions.

We had long been planning a springtime vacation as a group. (Harrisonburg is generally rideable nine to 11 months out of the year, spring and fall being the most pleasant seasons.) Our strategy for this trip was to pay someone else to provide logistics and show us the best of the Shenandoah Valley. When this plan fell through 10 days prior to departure, we resorted to the cheaper route: Buy the \$12.95 trail map and show our dang selves around the dang George Washington National Forest, a tangle of mixed pine-hardwood forest, including dogwoods, maples, ash and oak. Although riding in the Shenandoah Valley quickly takes you to backcountry isolation, it's easy enough to find your way with a detailed map.

So there we were, using Harrisonburg as a base and spending our days sandwiching casual, yet long and trying spins through the Virginia forests with bowls of cereal in the morning and pints of beer in the evening. It wasn't always a walk in the woods, but it was one of the best vacations ever—nothing like other vacations that entailed sitting on a beach with a magazine in one hand and potato chips in the other, but there was no place I would have rather been. As the old expression goes, hard stuff is the most rewarding stuff.

Long days of hard riding are what memories are made of, but they do take a lot of work. You are happy to be on two wheels, yet you dread the next climb; you're enjoying the downhill, but you know that it comes at a cost (or you're still exhausted from yesterday); you're happy that your friend waited for you at the intersection, but at that point you're also kind of irritated at your friend because you're exhausted. That's the nature of a bicycle adventure. The real fun is looking back at your accomplishment after a sweaty day in the saddle and replacing



Top: Sunsets in the Shenandoah Valley light up iconic blue ridges that go on forever.

Above: Virginia rocks, roots and thick hardwood forests.



Chris Bernhardt tackles the rowdy Dowells Draft descent.

the anguish you felt on the trail with a discussion about tomorrow's ride.

DAY ONE

Rule #1: When traveling with your bicycle as baggage on an airplane, always take off your rotors. For some reason I missed that rule, and moved straight onto Rule #47: Take a deep breath as you watch the baggage handler launch your bike bag onto the conveyor belt like a bag of stuffed pandas. Followed by Rule #48: Hope for the best and drown your sorrows in airport TCBY. It was my first time flying with my bike, and I did as I was told—bought the bike bag, took off the wheels, watched a friend take off some other random items, and zippered the bag up. Twenty-four hours later, and I am standing at the trailhead with a bent rotor in each hand, cursing that my general ineptitude is delaying our first ride of the vacation.

Bending the rotors back as well as we could, we mentally prepared ourselves to still have to listen to the eeh-eeh-eeh of chafed rotors for 20 miles. After the ride, I headed to one of the best little bike shops in the land, the Shenandoah Bicycle Company (SBC), located in downtown Harrisonburg. The shop was the logistical base for our adventure and is, in fact, the magical bike shop everyone dreams about. The staff know just about everything there is to know about bikes and are humble about it, not to mention that most of the staff spend many of their free hours volunteering on local bicycle advocacy issues. SBC carries everything from high-end road and mountain bikes that are fun to ogle and funky townies to kids rides and first-timer bikes. You can also find all the maps and ride advice you'd want, as well as gear, such as the rotors I desperately needed. More than a bike shop, it's a community staple and the folks there deserve a lot of the credit for turning Harrisonburg into the down-to-earth and welcoming biking destination it's become.

Harrisonburg has an addictive local scene. With James Madison University in town and enough jobs and infrastructure to keep educated graduates around, the city benefits from a highly engaged and motivated group of cycling advocates, young and old, who eat their locally sourced breakfast, lunch and dinner at the worker-owned collective The Little Grill, meet every month to discuss local bike advocacy issues, and organize the kind of eccentric nonraces that attract professional racers and families alike. Harrisonburg is only two hours from

Washington, D.C., but has none of the high-pressure East Coast vibe you feel on most of the Atlantic seaboard. Surrounded by hundreds of miles of singletrack and thousands of rolling country roads, it's a cyclist's paradise.

THE RIDE

Massanutten Western Slope and Hillandale Rocktown Trails

The Massanutten Western Slope is an 800-acre singletrack system with more than 15 miles of trail, accessible via an easy 20-minute ride to the east of Harrisonburg. Before you go, be sure to get your annual pass for the "Nut." You can purchase the pass after becoming a Shenandoah Valley Bicycle Coalition (SVBC) member and either paying \$50 or volunteering eight hours of trail work time. Don't complain about the pass—the SVBC is the reason those trails are there in the first place.

There are many different ways to ride the Western Slope of the Massanutten Four Season Resort, which aside from the 800 acres, offers a gaggle of winter and summer activities that attract tourists from all over Virginia; think water park, golfing, skiing. You won't see these folks, though—the mountain biking trails are in a separate part of the property. One suggested ride is to park at the Western Slope Access and Link Smoke Tree Lane and Lower Hanenkahn up to the Pink Loop. From here, ride clockwise to take advantage of the fast and technical descent on the 2K trail, called the 2,000 Hour Trail for the 2,000 hours of volunteer work it took to build. After Massanutten, take a spin through the 5 miles of rocky, twisty, town trail at Hillandale's Rocktown Trails.

Mileage: 20 miles

DAY TWO

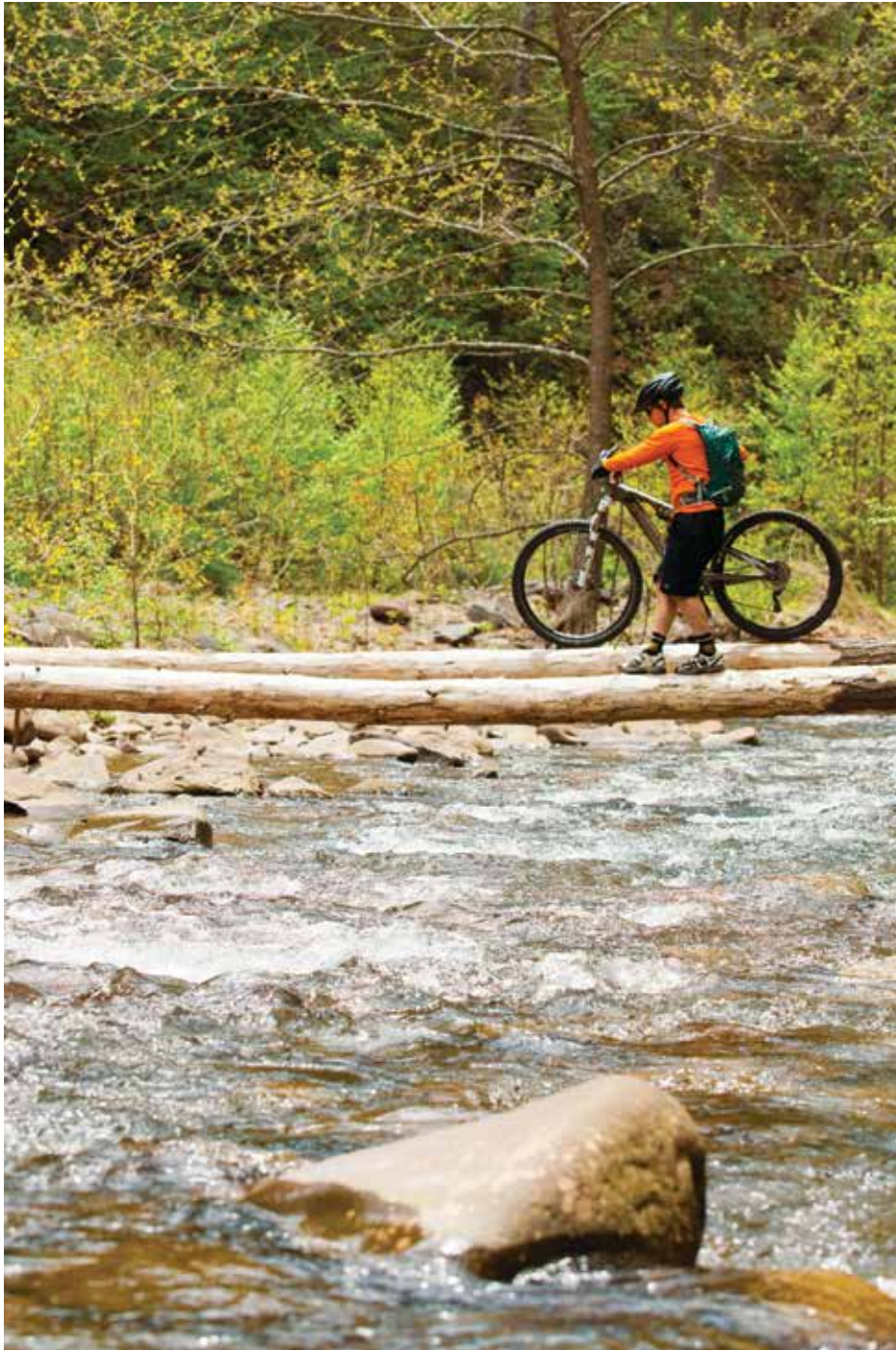
You might be used to Rocky Mountain riding, with its high-alpine meanders and 5,000-foot elevation gains in a day, or the West Coast's steep, chundery, bootleg trails, but don't underestimate the Shenandoah Valley's rocky, narrow singletrack. Some of the trails at Massanutten are purpose-built mountain biking trails, designed and constructed by very talented local trail volunteers, but many on the national forest have been there for ages and see only periodic and minor face lifts by the same volunteers, when time allows.

The Shenandoah Valley is a series of ridges and valleys. The trails generally take you up along a ridge, with a long, steady,



Top: Chris Bernhardt threads it through the trees on the Bald Ridge descent.

Above: Long Shenandoah climbs require a little rest in between to watch the bugs.



Steve Lommele starts the Bridge Hollow Trail with a bike carry above a creek on day two.

8-10 percent climb, then down again on a descent that's not made difficult because of any particular steepness (although the trails can be steep) but because of the barely-foot-wide singletrack that's riddled with rocks, some grippy and secure, some not so much, and miles of steep, ledgy drop-offs that look down into the valleys, adding to the technical nature. The soil itself is mostly clay and rocky, with some exposed sandstone in places, enough to keep you on track, yet never enough to make you forget that one wrong maneuver and it's a one-way ticket down to the river.

I don't have dreadlocks, I don't wax poetic about jungle hallucinogenic "medicine" and I like eating Cheez-Its, but I will say that riding these trails is an out-of-body experience. The ride we did on Day Two takes you to a place where you pedal for what seems like a torturous eternity. But when you're back on your feet, the pain melts away, the pedal seemed easy in retrospect, and you can't quite remember the details, even though at the time it was literally all you could do to continue pedaling. You selectively remember the sweet-smelling dogwoods, lily white in spring, the tickles of poison ivy, and the elms, oaks and maples that hugged the trail.

Looking back on our trip, my memories aren't filled with the suffering that came with cranking my bike 10 miles up a hill, but the conversation I had with my friends while doing so; not the sores on my butt, but the singletrack that made me happy; not the two pounds of chocolate hauled for miles and miles, but the look on people's faces when we pulled it out as a trail surprise. Nor the fact that I now have an indelible pedal divot on my shin thanks to that rock, but that there were rocks, and I think I remembered that I liked them well enough.

THE RIDE

Bralely Pond Figure Eight (a.m. part and p.m. part)

Procure your maps at the Shenandoah Bicycle Company (Trails Illustrated #791: Staunton, Shenandoah Mountain covers everything). This ride will be in two parts, a morning loop ride, back to the car for lunch, then an afternoon loop ride and back to the car again.

A.M. Part: Park at the Bralely Pond trailhead and ride out to Hankey Mountain Highway to the Mountain House rest area. Ride up a short distance on Ramsey's Draft (FS 440) and then turn right onto Bridge

Hollow Trail (FS 442). Your adventure starts here with a crossing of a log bridge. From there, settle in for a long and relentless 1,000-foot climb up narrow, forested singletrack where the route merges into the Bald Ridge Trail (FS 496). Stay right and then enjoy a long 1,100-foot descent on classic Shenandoah singletrack: narrow, rocky and gorgeous for the huge hardwoods that tower over the trail, occasional peeks at the Blue Ridge and Allegheny mountain ranges and ankle-tickling ferns and flowers on the descent. The forest gets gradually denser as you lose elevation. When the trail ends at the intersection with Johnson Draft, stay left to pedal back to eat lunch at Braley Pond. (A draft is a local term for “creek,” and many trails in Virginia’s George Washington and Jefferson national forests that meander either from or along a creek have the word draft in their names.)

P.M. Part: Roll out from Braley Pond and go left on Braley Pond Road. Ride on this for about 5.5 miles, approaching Elkhorn Lake. Stay right, then turn left on Leading Ridge Road to climb up to a major intersection with Hankey Mountain Road. Ride Hankey Mountain Road for 4.8 miles, climbing almost 1,700 feet. Now the doubletrack turns into the Wild Oak singletrack (FS 716). You’re more than ready for a descent after so much climbing, but be mentally prepared for one last roller coaster traverse. The descent finally begins with a left turn onto Dowells Draft (FS 650). After the initial steep and ledgy drops, the trail pulls you into that ribbon of never-ending singletrack that will epitomize the next few days of riding.

Mileage: 23 miles

DAY THREE

Sometimes I wonder if I even like mountain biking. People say, “It’s fun when it’s done,” but the sport is difficult. The feeling of apprehension can consume the excitement of an adventure, but if mountain biking were easy, we’d take little interest and renounce ourselves to curling and Reader’s Digest. Day Three’s riding was a slight reprieve and a more traditional ride—a loop through Douthat State Park, 1.5 hours from Harrisonburg—but we still got to enjoy the long climbs and rolling descents characteristic of the entire trip.

THE RIDE

Douthat State Park Loop

Start from the Douthat Lodge (the biggest cabin in the park) on a clockwise link-up of



Top: Morgan Lommele and Chris Bernhardt cross the river in the valley of Douthat State Park.

Above: Ride, eat, laundry, repeat.



We celebrated day three by kicking up our heels.

Douthat's singletrack that circumnavigates the park. Tackling the east side first, you'll climb on Mountain Top over to the high point of Brushy Hollow and then scream down the first long descent to a suspension bridge over Wilson Creek. Connect to the second half of the ride by pedaling up the main park road for a short distance to Stony Run. Turn left onto the trail and settle in for a 4-mile grind. The grade isn't too steep, and the reward is a fantastic view of the George Washington National Forest from the Tuscarora Overlook.

After enjoying the food and drink we packed in with us (which is best advised, since there are few amenities within distance of the park) and some quality napping at the Tuscarora Overlook, there's a little more climbing up to the 3,130-foot high point of the ride on Middle Mountain. Somewhere along the way, you've transcended from the monotony of the East Coast hardwoods to the mysticism of the ridgetop where the green glow from the moss and lichens on the trees and rocks seems to dominate.

A right turn on Salt Stump Trail and a subsequent drop off the ridge is the snap back to reality. Enjoy the descent and roll out to the road. Once you cross it, you'll have to work hard to get back to the start. The climb up Beard's Gap is another steep and aggravating singletrack climb. Back at the intersection with Mountain Top and Brushy Hollow trails, turn left and retrace your route back to the cabin.

Mileage: 28 miles

DAY FOUR

We stared at maps and imagined where we'd like to go, usually something much longer than what would be possibly remotely fun to anyone but seemed like a good idea as we sat in the warmth of our rented minivan. We settled on a straight line on the map that required some extra time in the morning to park the cars in the convenient places for Day Four's shuttle ride.

Riding in the Shenandoah Valley might not be hard to self-support, but it's hard in other ways. I didn't expect, on this particular day, to spend an uninterrupted 45 minutes wondering whether I'd prefer to break my leg (or any bone, it really didn't matter) and be carried out of the woods, or finish the ride. Of course I loved it, and in true masochistic fashion, I'd go back to that trail in a heartbeat (much more fun than sitting at a computer). But we were only about 15 miles in on a 22.8-mile ride and on that particular day in the George Washington

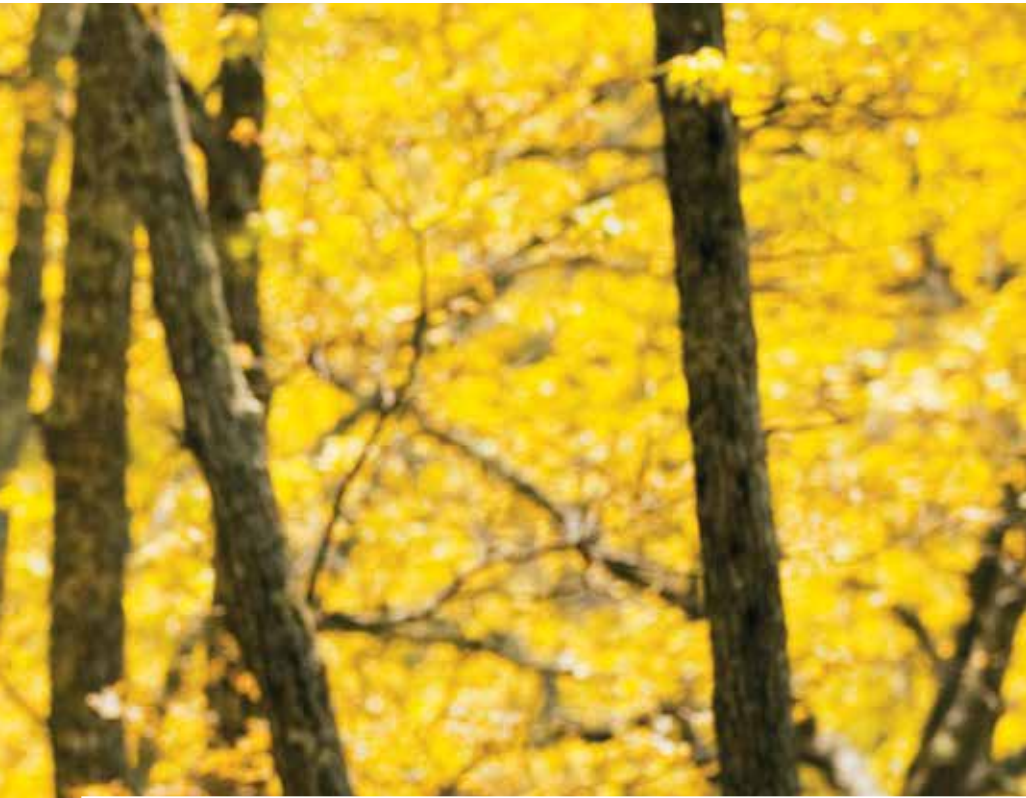


National Forest, I'd say that miles 15 to 20 felt like miles 315 to 699 riding dehydrated and bareback on a schizophrenic camel through the Algerian steppe.

The riding is slow, the pedaling is constant, and the uphill never seemed to crest into a downhill. There are no flat trails in these parts, and no chance to partake in quality daydreaming because of the narrow tread and steep drop-offs. However, it is the kind of unforgettable backcountry experience that you wouldn't trade for anything.

Around mile 20, my chamois seemed to hit that one spot on my butt that, if not for the power of skin regrowth, would be hollow by now. My sports bra stuck like honey to my clavicle's bee, chafing my neck with every bead of salty water that trickled down it; my hair, at a length that can best be described as a cross between an Amish schoolboy's and a soccer mom's effortless bob, retreated into the "poke the neck" position; Christina Aguilera's "Genie in a Bottle" and a perverted rendition of Smokey Robinson's "Tears of a Clown" were the only things that ran through my head.

On the last day I was hurting, and I'd like to think that everyone else was, too. And yet, I know that it's in my best interest to enjoy my ride through the forest because despite all the self-imposed hardships, this is fun.



Below: Lots to look at during the long days in the saddle.

Left: Snack breaks and naps were not only welcome but encouraged.





THE RIDE

Shenandoah Mountain Trail from Confederate Breastworks to Scotchtown Draft including the Southern Traverse

Start at the parking area on the west side of Hankey Mountain Highway and access FS 396, a doubletrack going west with more than a fair share of steep, punchy climbs. After a couple of miles, jump on the Shenandoah Mountain Trail (FS 447) to continue the challenging route. This section of the SMT isn't as well traveled, but there's plenty of good, clear singletrack ahead. Bump and grind your way along a broad ridge.

Have a snack (hope you brought your own food because your ride mates might not share [inside joke]) when the trail intersects Benson Run Road. Continuing straight, the singletrack climbs for a bit at first and then alternates between long gradual descents mixed with short steep climbs. This was the longest ridge traverse of the trip—the trail never dips below 3,000 feet for more than 10 miles. The final descent is 4.5 miles of sweet singletrack to the shuttle vehicle (hopefully) packed with cold beers and boxes of Cheez-Its.

Mileage: 22 miles

Look no further than Virginia for some of the hardest mountain biking you'll encounter in the U.S. We rode it, we felt the pain, we loved it. The parts of the trail on which we struggled were later recounted as the experiences that we remembered the most fondly and that we were the most proud of accomplishing, the kind of memory that made us feel like we were living an adventurous life. 🌀



Top: Ryan Amirault kicks off the celebration of our hard-earned miles and the wonderful memories biking in the Shenandoah Valley.

Above: Beth Gross is surrounded by the lush, spring greenery along the trail.