

Slickrock for Breakfast

By [Bill Corden](#) (February 2023)



Moonrise in the Canyon, Moab, Sven Birger Sandzen, 1928

A week in Moab.

I don't know why, but all of these experiences have been flooding back to me in the past month or so—maybe the Big Guy upstairs is making sure that they don't go unrecorded. I'd never even heard of Moab, much less the notorious Slickrock Mountain Bike Trail but there we were, tent trailer behind us and bikes on the roof rack.

Two and a half days from Vancouver, through Washington, Oregon, Southern Idaho and then into the red rocks of Utah. All of a sudden you are surrounded by spectacular scenery, red mountains, sagebrush, sand, and a river rushing alongside the highway. Because of the lay of the land, the Green River seems to be running uphill at one point along that highway, but we're heading most definitely downhill towards the very sparsely populated area that takes in both Canyonland and Arches Parks.

The southern tip of Arches Park leads you into Moab itself. John Wayne made a movie there and the scenery provided some of the backdrop for many movies, including Indiana Jones.

Moab is straight out of one of those old western movies, yes there are plenty of modern buildings there now, but the bones of the place tell you it's a cowboy/mining town (although there seems to be nothing there for cows to eat). It's small but it's buzzing with an energy you can feel as soon as you get out of the car. Everywhere is mountain biking; bikes stacked outside of coffee bars, bikes loaded in trailers, bike tour guide companies as ubiquitous as pubs in England ... you know you're in the right place for some good riding.

We had booked a campsite at Dead Horse Point before we left Vancouver but when we chatted with a few of our newly minted friends, we discovered that you could camp for free alongside the Colorado River, just a stone's throw from town.

It wasn't long before we were set up at the riverside opposite the dark stained canyon walls of the fabled river. It was a fabulous spot, no bugs, the water flowing slowly by at this point and every notable trail in Moab no more than a couple of minutes away.

There was a bonus too! Just at the start of the road on highway 128 there was a spring of pure water pouring from a crack in the rock face. A couple of people were lining up to

fill their containers and, when I asked one of them if it was OK for drinking, he told me he'd been drinking it for 40 years.

Turns out he was a resident of Castle Valley further up the highway and that this spring was their only reliable source of drinking water. Castle Valley is as close as you can get to *Deliverance* country in real life, where one tooth is a full set.

You didn't have to purify or filter the water; it was good to go.

Off we trot to the local hardware store where we bought a giant plastic garbage bin, filled it with water from the spring and, with that, we had most of the comforts of home.

I'm getting ahead of myself but it was like an outdoor hotel—we had a solar shower from Mountain Equipment Coop which we filled every morning. The sunshine did its work so well that every day, when we returned from our ride, it would be so hot that we had to pour in some cold water to be able to use it.

There was enough for the three of us to take a shower (not with each other I hasten to add) and then do the dishes afterwards.

So what about the biking?

Well, there's no such thing as an easy ride in Moab! You're either riding up and down impossibly steep gradients with rocks and boulders strewn all over the trail or you're riding through thick sand ... it's fucking hard work!

The last thing you want to do in this environment is to come off your bike and, if you do it on the slickrock (which is a smooth type of sandstone rock, but very abrasive), you will lose large amounts of skin.

If you come off in the sand, you're likely to fall onto a cactus plant and good luck in finding a friend who will pluck the needles from your ass.

This isn't a theoretical comment by the way, it comes from the awful experience of several nasty crashes. I still wince when I think of some of them.

So the scene is set, three middle aged riders heading into the unknown. What an adventure each day turned out to be!

We decided to do the Slickrock Trail on the first day. It's not far from the centre of town and routes around a plateau of bare rocks that is nature's equivalent of a roller coaster. All seemed fine at first but none of us took into account that we were at an elevation of 4000 ft, having come straight from sea level.

My lungs were screaming for oxygen after only a couple of hundred yards. I was just about to pack it in when another rider explained why we felt so bad. It did get easier after about 10 minutes but it wasn't made any easier by the number of riders coming back ashen-faced and telling us it was just too scary unless you were an expert with the bike. That was like waving a red rag at a bull to old farts like us ... so we forged ahead.

Well let me tell you, we were experts by the time we'd finished! My description of the roller coaster barely does it justice, as you climb the steepest sections only to stall, fall over and find there's nowhere to plant your feet. You quickly learn to throw the bike sideways and fall into the rock instead of falling painfully backwards like you did the first time.

Then when you get to the top of one of the inclines, you are faced with a sphincter-tightening drop, which looks almost vertical from atop the bike, after which you have to negotiate the tightest of turns to face yet another climb.

The secret of the downhills, of course, is to relax and let the laws of physics take over. Judicious use of the brakes, a heightened sense of balance and stretching your abilities to their limits will get you round safely. If you're missing even one of those qualities then you're going to get hurt.

Miraculously we all came out of the other side relatively unscathed, scrapes and missing bits here and there but a remarkable achievement for coastal boys.

With the first ride under our belts we repaired to the campsite where we quickly struck up a friendship with our neighbours (a young couple from Nova Scotia) and got into the sauce around the campfire after wolfing down enormous amounts of Pasta and Spaghetti sauce. Food tastes so much better in the great outdoors.

The evening was spent with trivia games, storytelling and stargazing. You could actually spot satellites crossing the night sky; you just don't see that in the city. Up with the lark the next morning, granola with just plain water, a mug of coffee and then on the bikes into town to see what we could see and plan our trek for the day.

It's a pretty neat community you become part of down there.

You all congregate in the town centre coffee bar and then somehow pal up with the people who are going your way that particular morning, and before you know it you're on one of the trails.

I won't go into details of all of them but two are worth a story.

The first one was the Portal Trail, our introduction to the arduous nature of riding along steep gravel trails, sunbaked sandstone rock and sandy fill-ins, it was fucking murder to get to the plateau, which from the lower road looked like it was impossible to climb. In any event we did it, riding around

the barren landscape for about two hours until we found a route back down to the town.

The only problem was that the route back into town meant negotiating the Portal Trail, a trail that is cut into the side of the canyon wall with a 300 foot unguarded drop to oblivion on the outer edge, it's less than four feet across at its narrowest point. We inched down it, growing more and more trepidatious with every turn of the wheel (although I think we were more frightened by the guide book description than the reality) We came to a point where we all agreed that it was too scary to go on and resigned ourselves to backtracking and getting out the way we came. On our way back up two young girls flew down past us with not a care in the world, we found out later from those same two girls that it wasn't so bad at all and if we'd persevered for another couple of hundred yards we would have been through the worst. They were back in town within fifteen minutes



After a crash that left me bloodied and battered (second from Left).

And us?

Two hours of slogging back with our tails between our legs ... but heck, we were alive and we'd more than earned our beers. The two girls proved delightful company in the bar (Eddie McStiff's) and didn't broadcast our cowardly retreat!

The next memorable ride was one called "The Back of Beyond," this wasn't as brutal but still entailed some stiff climbing through that same sandy, gravelly surface. It was lots of fun once we got on to a level surface and before too long, we were racing each other (there were seven of us) along a pretty

straight stretch of downhill. This racing led to us letting our guard down and we sailed right past a crucial turnoff, continuing on into a dead end canyon.

Just at that moment, the diamond blue sky turned a menacing black from out of nowhere and within minutes the heavens opened with a deluge of biblical proportions. It was an amazing sight with all of the gullies quickly filling with water and all of the sandstone hilltops turning into waterfalls. Even the spot where we were standing started to flood and although we were slow to realize it, we were in flash flood territory.

We quickly climbed to higher ground and watched in awe as rivers and streams formed torrents of water that looked like a Disney thrill ride. Another effect was that the temperature dropped precipitously and not one of us had extra clothing or wet weather gear. We were all shivering as the storm raged over us. Thunder roared and lightning cracked through the sky, making it quite dangerous, but I was too entranced to sense any danger. To me, it was just like we were spectators to a once-in-a-lifetime show.

So there we were, teeth chattering, wet through and through. Worse, we were lost. We didn't have a detailed map amongst us and all of our tire tracks had been washed out by the storm. Luckily, the weather had passed over but now there were a lot of dangerous raging creeks and we were losing light rapidly.

To put it mildly, I'm not the best at directions but as the others started to panic and run pell-mell trying to find the right track out, I spotted a landmark that I'd seen out of the corner of my eye on the race down. I managed to convince the rest that this was the best point to head for, and it was a difficult job because I'm notorious for getting lost.

Well it worked! Before too long we found the signpost that we had ridden by only an hour earlier.

Now we could enjoy the epic scene around us. The waterfalls had all but stopped and our way out was just a little stream that we could follow. There was still water splashing and raging downhill all around us but the stream bed that led us out was fairly benign.

We got back up to speed and were freewheeling happily along the exit trail when we heard a sound like a dam had burst. We rolled towards the sound and were amazed to see a debris-filled torrent with sun parched tree branches and rocks crashing down through a channel that ran right angles to the one we were on.

It was about three or four feet high and it was moving like a freight train, almost as if it were contained in a tube. There was no way to get past it without getting swept away and we were almost resigned to spending a cold night on a desert plateau, when it just trickled into nothingness before our very eyes.

After that, it was plain sailing to the gate, where several concerned people were waiting with the intent of sending a search party out for us. I hate to think what they would have charged us for that search party but I don't think a hundred bucks would have covered it.

Nobody remonstrated with us for our lack of preparedness; it was just a case of bad luck. Who would expect a thunderstorm out of an endless blue sky?

Back to the campsite, shower and fresh duds and we were out painting the town at Eddie's. The hills got steeper and the girls got prettier ... wish I could stay forever young. There were plenty of other trails we rode but they're for another time.

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Bill Corden is a happily retired sports columnist living in Vancouver, British Columbia. Now he writes, plays music and makes people laugh.

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