



THE LONG WAY AROUND TOP: DAVID HANSON PEDALS ACROSS THE NORTHERN END OF WINTER RIM AFTER THE SEASON'S FIRST SNOWSTORM. BOTTOM: THE PIONEER SALOON IN PAISLEY, OREGON, HAS BEEN OPERATING SINCE 1883. THE BAR WAS BUILT IN BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS, AND SHIPPED THE LONG WAY AROUND SOUTH AMERICA.

Crane Mountain
Moss Pass
Paisley
Winter Rim
Silver Lake
Yamsay Mountain
Chemult
Timpanogas Lake
Oakridge
Bunchgrass Ridge
Waldo Lake
Cascade Lakes
Sisters
Santiam Wagon Road
Fish Lake Work Center
Ionaia
Breitenbush
Ollalie Lake
Barlow Trail
Surveyors Ridge
Parkdale

THE WHEELS. THE WICKED. THE WONDER.

SKILLFULLY STITCHED TOGETHER ACROSS COWBOY COUNTIES AND HIDDEN WILDS,
THE OREGON TIMBER TRAIL BESPEAKS BIKEPACKING'S HARD-EARNED BLISS.

STORY BY DAVID HANSON PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL HANSON

IN 2017, HEATHER ROSE, a biology professor from Santa Barbara, California, rode solo, mostly on singletrack, from the California border to the Columbia River. Over 17 days, she followed the newly minted Oregon Timber Trail (OTT), a 1,078-kilometre (670-mile) route designed specifically for bikepacking.

The OTT, which has its northern terminus in my hometown of Hood River, originated in 2015 as an idea to generate tourism. Adventure-tourism consultant Gabriel Amadeus Tiller worked with Travel Oregon to piece together the state's existing trail systems. Meetings were organized in local communities with the hope of identifying economic opportunities along the trail's rural course. For now, the OTT has no formal organization or executive director. Tiller created it by looking at existing trails and identifying short road sections as connectors, then he leaned on internet marketing via a beautiful website with the right mix of GPS beta to fire the exploratory neurons.

My brother Michael and I decided to follow Rose's tire prints on the OTT in the late fall of 2017. With only four days available to ride, we chose a particular section called the Fremont Tier for the simple fact that the website claimed it did not know what per cent of the trail was even "rideable." We wanted to try bikepacking, but only in true singletrack style. Would a loaded bike take the fun out of it? Our shuttle driver, Ken Powell, retired from the Boise Cascade lumber mill in 1985. He wears pinstripe train-conductor overalls and an oversized flannel shirt. "Just put the bikes in back, however they'll fit," he says. "I took some bikers to Bend once, and a few weeks ago I hauled four cowboys to the Lakeview rodeo with all their saddles in back."

An hour later, we stop in Paisley, a ranching town of 243. The OTT skims by a handful of towns. The Fremont Tier passes within 11 kilometres (seven miles) of Paisley, an irresistible detour for anyone who enjoys cheeseburgers and cold beer. We plan to ride into Paisley on the second night, so we only need to pack enough food and water for the first day, and for half of day two. I leave a small cache of food for days three and four at the town's Pioneer Saloon.

Bikepacking, especially this late in the season with freezing temperatures at night, requires alpine-style gear: lightweight down bags, sleeping pads the size of a roll of toilet paper, a stove smaller than a Snickers bar. My 30-litre backpack carries tools, clothing layers, and five litres of water. As we begin climbing toward Moss Pass, Michael and I look at each other with surprise. "Bikepacking's pretty plush," Michael says. "It's so simple: just use our mountain bikes to go backpacking." "So why does it feel so revolutionary?" I ask.

WE REACH THE paved road at the Chewaucan River as a blustery snow cloud collapses into the valley. Riverside cottonwoods and poplars shake their yellow leaves and fall seems tenuous. The road flattens into Paisley. We head straight for the Pioneer Saloon.

John Steffes is in the saloon's kitchen. I met him a year ago in the same spot, shortly after he bought the saloon on a whim while travelling through Paisley on a motorcycle tour from his home in Portland. Steffes

looks Portland: tall, thin, scruffy beard, vintage T-shirt, a few arm tats. He was in a punk-rock band and then managed a 30-acre farm before making the life change to Paisley with his girlfriend, Angela Ratto.

Steffes has heard a little about the OTT, and a few riders have passed through the saloon. He and Ratto are giving each other bikes for Christmas this year. "What's the trail like?" she asks. "We're *real* beginners."

"From Moss Pass to here is surprisingly smooth," I tell her.

I ask Steffes if he sees the trail as a possible business bump. "Our meat and potatoes are the locals," he says. "But yeah, getting some mountain bikers in here would be great for business." We indulge in a cheeseburger, tots, and a few pints and crash in Steffes' guest room.

THE WINTER RIM TRAIL in the Fremont Tier gets tougher from Paisley onward. It's 100 per cent singletrack along the rim and mostly flat, but the rocks are relentless. We battle through dense shrubs that crowd the trail. It's as technical as flat riding gets.

Finally, the trail emerges from the vast alpine scrubland, and we can comfortably ride again through ponderosa pine glades and into our intended camp at Fremont Point. A rentable forest-service cabin nearly hangs off the edge of the rim, commanding one of the finest, quietest outposts in Oregon. It's reserved tonight, and the retired couples staying there invite us in for a beer. Sadly, we're too cold for cold beer, so we retreat downhill into the wind-blocking trees, careful to avoid any leaning widow-makers. An odd snow gathers like scoops of ice cream at the edge of our tent.

"Damn," Michael says, once we're lying in our sleeping bags, scarfing cheese and sipping bourbon. "That was a beatdown."

"Yeah," I say. "We've got seven more miles of rim tomorrow. And it's going to snow all day."

WE'RE AT A section of trail Rose warned us about: the final seven miles of Winter Rim. She said it was such a mess that she turned around and retreated. That was months ago. Some trail crew must have cleared most of the beetle kill since Rose's attempt. We ride through frosted ponderosa pine forests and haul our bikes over a couple of downed trees, but all in all the trail's a breeze.

The 10-mile descent from the rim is smooth enough to let off the brakes and get into a flow for short stretches. The snow turns to sleet as we drop elevation, reaching dirt roads and a gradual downhill to cattle pastures and oddly green circles of irrigated alfalfa. We open and close barbed-wire cattle gates, portals from our wilderness comfort zone into ranch country, where we feel like aliens riding fancy bikes in high-tech clothes.

As we near the end of our trip, we look north where the trail continues toward Yamsay Mountain then into the Cascade Mountains. If we had two more weeks we could mountain bike all the way home to Hood River. The fact that such a thorough corridor of public land exists is heartwarming. I hope the OTT can do what trails do best—connect disparate places and people. Though our current adventure is over, my question is answered: bikepacking rules.