

The Oregonian

The Hut is Here Somewhere

by Peter Frick-Wright, Sunday, September 21, 2008



Hmmm. No bridge. And no steppingstones. Billy Tufts of Sunriver crosses the cool, swift-flowing White River during a mountain-bike circumnavigation of Mount Hood using the Cascade Huts system.

Where are we?

Twelve miles out of Hood River, on a four-day, three-night, hut-to-hut mountain bike circumnavigation of Mount Hood, straddling our bikes at an intersection worthy of Robert Frost's best lines. This much I know.

But in front of me, two roads diverge in a yellow wood, and all the standard methods of navigation are failing.

The turn-by-turn directions are vague (go left at the large boulder), the map is a knot of crisscrossing logging roads and dirt trails, and no matter which way I turn, my hand-held GPS device thinks I'm headed southwest.

Two roads diverge, one goes up, one stays flat, and all we have to go on is a gut feeling.

We stay flat.

Day one of the Cascade Huts route around Mount Hood and back to Hood River goes straight up out of Mosier and the Columbia River Gorge. When in doubt, we take the road with less climbing.

Twenty yards past the first turn, however, the track ends in a swath of clear-cut scattered with broken bottles and shotgun shells. It is not our last route-finding mistake, and we backtrack to the other road.

We climb. If you've prepared yourself, like my riding companion Billy Tufts, 6,000 vertical feet over 26 miles is not an impossible day, and you might still have some energy left when you reach the hut. If you haven't, like me, you may suffer and find yourself reduced to pushing your bike the final few feet to the hut, lungs heaving, leaning on the handlebars as if they were a walker.

My cell phone beeps with new messages as soon as I turn it on. An old friend has been calling all day. "Where are you?" she yells.

We are bursting up short hills and hugging corners on the top of Surveyors Ridge a day later. We are out of the saddle and leaning way back as leafy plants grown into the narrow trail rake our shins. We ride through paintbrush, buckwheat and lupine, each whizzing by in clumps of red, white and blue. Gone are the dirt-road climbs through clear-cut forests. We're on single-track now. "Everything is better on single-track," Billy says.

Except that after our standard lunch of energy bars and GU energy gel, we lose the single-track and climb onto a wide gradual double-track road that is another slow death for untrained quads and calves.

We veer off the route, down a steep, technical four-mile descent that, if we've read the map right, should spit us out right at the hut.

Should.

The black tic marks indicating the trail go straight across White River on the map. We assume the marks indicate some sort of crossing, a bridge, a tree down across the water, even steppingstones piled by those who came before us. Instead, we are stuck at the bottom of a long hill, looking at the rest of the trail from the other side of a river.

We wade in, measuring each step carefully as we haul our bikes and possessions through the heavy current. The water is clear and cool, and a few steps in, I realize that this feels surprisingly like a privilege -- a little extra adventure for free.

In fact, thinking back, nearly every wrong turn has yielded some sort of surprise benefit, whether it was wicked single-track, an unexpected viewpoint or an impromptu feast on a shaded patch of wild strawberries.

The Pioneer Bridle Trail is a 10-mile plunge out of Government Camp that parallels U.S. 26 and is the highlight of our third day. The trail breaks a spoke on my rear wheel and delivers us to the bottom of our major climb for the day. As we begin to ascend, our legs start complaining again. We stop to soak in the chilled waters of an unnamed tributary of the Sandy River and pump cold water into our CamelBaks.

As we ascend toward Lolo Pass and the final hut, Billy says, "The best thing about this trip is telling people that we're doing it." Cars pass us on the hill again and again looking for Friday night camping spots. A silver Subaru that we see

Prime single-track for a single day

Surveyors Ridge, one of the highlights of the Cascade Huts loops, is also great for day-trippers. The Mount Hood National Forest trail draws riders from all over the country with its smooth sections of narrow trail and unrivaled views of Mount Hood. With thrills enough for everyone without being too steep or technical, the trail rides the edge of the rain shadow -- the plants lining the trail alternate between desert brush and valley-lush. The jury's still out on the best direction to ride this 13-mile trail -- guided groups shuttle it both ways -- but if you're not afraid of a little technical uphill, take off from the trailhead at Road 630 (near the power lines) and ride south for the longest uninterrupted descents. To get to the trailhead, take Oregon 35 south out of Hood River for 11 miles and go left (east) on Road 17/Pinemont Drive. Six miles up, there will be a sign for Surveyors Ridge/Road 630. Take a right at the dirt road to the parking lot by the power lines and look left for the trailhead.

several times finally stops to ask, "Where are you going?"

Minutes later, a black Mazda: "Do you know how to get to Lost Lake?"

The final day of riding poses another difficult choice. To Post Canyon or not to Post Canyon? Not to Post Canyon means a quick, easy day coasting downhill to Hood River. Or we can brave a 2,500-vertical-foot climb to the top of the renowned free-ride trail system in Hood River's backyard. We go back and forth on the decision and decide to sleep on it. We start riding the next day without knowing where we'll go when we get to the turn.

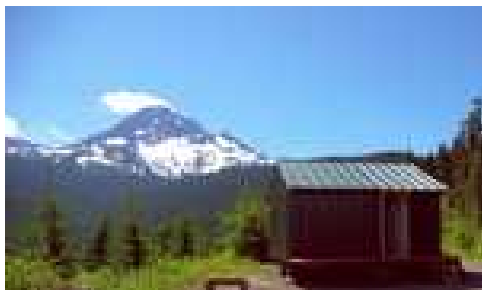
Shortly before we have to decide, my shifter comes loose. I can jiggle it to change gears, but the bottom bracket fix of the day before has also proved temporary, and I have to stop to tighten the crank-arm every 15 minutes. Between the bottom bracket, the shifter and the broken spoke, my bike is limping home. Like most decisions delayed long enough, ours has been made for us.

Passing the turn to Post Canyon at speed, we coast into Hood River early in the afternoon. The maps are put away and my GPS is turned off as we ride through cherry orchards and vineyards, easing back into civilization. We pedal in a steady cadence on the pavement, with four days of grime and trail dust, broken bike parts and aching muscles leaving no doubt where we've been.

-- Peter Frick-Wright, special to *The Oregonian*; travel@news.oregonian.com

The history of the Cascade Huts

Cascade Huts began as a conversation to pass the time on a drive back to Portland from Durango, Colo., in 2004. As founders James Koski and Don Bain, both from Portland, returned from a hut-to-hut trip from Durango to Moab, Utah, they asked themselves, "Why did we have to drive so far to do that?" Koski said.



Peter Frick-Wright / special to *The Oregonian* The huts may be utilitarian, but you can't beat the view. This hut near Lolo Pass is the third and final one on the loop -- be prepared to climb to get there.

Within weeks they were talking with the Forest Service, and hut designs soon followed. Koski and Bain started driving the roads and hiking the trails to figure out a route, and the huts opened in 2007.

Koski handles most of the reservations and paperwork from Washington, D.C., where he works as an aide for U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer. Bain, who works in Hillsboro, stocks the huts with food and supplies.

They're working on adding huts in the Mount Hood area for riders who want to do shorter days in the saddle and also on expanding the system to add a seven-day trip from Hood River to Bend. The biggest hurdle may be the additional red tape of taking the route through two more national forests. "You have to be patient enough working with one (bureaucracy)," Koski said.

"Working with three? Ewww."

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Cascade Huts

What: A self-guided loop of about 135 miles around Mount Hood that includes stays at three huts on national forest land along the way. Total elevation gain and loss is about 17,400 feet.

The price: Three days and four nights on the trail costs \$250 per person, which covers the use of the huts, sleeping bags, stove and cooking gear, access to water and all the canned food, pasta, trail mix and Clif bars you can eat. The price rises to \$300 per person next year, with discounts for groups of seven or eight.

The biking season: The huts are open for mountain biking until Oct. 10 this year, and the target date for next year's opening is Memorial Day, contingent on snowpack.

Reservations: Each hut can accommodate up to eight riders. To reserve: www.cascadehuts.com or 971-322-3638.

How to not get lost: The best \$20 you can spend on this trip is to stop by Discover Bicycles in Hood River (541-386-4820, www.discoverbicycles.com) and pick up the Adventure Maps that cover this territory. The directions provided by Cascade Huts refer to signs and markers that have been torn down, and landmarks like rocks and trees can be dodgy for finding your way. A common misconception is that there's a preset, determined route between each hut and if you miss it you'll spend the night in the woods. Co-owner James Koski encourages riders to plan their own routes and explore based on what they want out of their trip. "It's part of the adventure," he says.

Bonus for skiers and snowshoers: Cascade Huts also has three huts open in the winter in the Barlow Pass and White River areas. The journey to the huts from various Sno-Parks ranges from 2 to 12 miles. Hut rental is \$150 per night per hut.

