

Arizona Trail Corridor: Land of Desert and Sky

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A traverse of Arizona. I already know what you may be thinking if you're not from around there. Cactuses. Snakes. Sand. Heat. Dehydration. Death. Not that epic ride you have been dreaming of, huh? True, three of North America's five deserts are included in this 800-mile trek, but so are all seven life zones of North America, many far from the choking dust of deserts. The Arizona Trail Corridor, by its very nature, offers more diversity per mile than perhaps any other long-distance route. You'll most likely live to tell the tale of your traverse.

First, slight clarification as to what this route is needs to be made. There is the Arizona Trail (AZT), which is a backpacking route that more than three dozen bipeds have tackled end-to-end. And then there's the Arizona Trail Corridor (ATC), an unofficial mountain biking route a handful of riders have tackled end-to-end. The differences between the two are significant.

If you were to try to bike the AZT end-to-end it would be a... what's the word? Oh yes, sufferfest. Two Arizonans, Scott Morris and Lee Blackwell, defined this term in 2005 by traversing, via one long trip, every section of the AZT open for bike use. They ended up carrying and pushing their bikes for approximately half the AZT and were forced to detour around nine wilderness areas that pockmark the AZT. Think of the AZT as an 800-mile cyclocross course. Think "not fun."

The ATC, on the other hand, is a mountain bike-friendly route that follows rideable sections of the AZT and bypasses the hike-and-bike stretches and wilderness areas. Think of the ATC as an 800-mile adventure. Think "fun."

Though these routes differ in precise location and difficulty, they share one significant obstacle. This is the Grand Canyon, where you're not allowed to ride below the rims. Therefore, you have to make a decision. 1) Pack up your disassembled bike and carry it 23 miles cross-canyon, which includes a 5,000-vertical-foot descent and 4,000-vertical-foot ascent. 2) Ride a 200-mile detour east of the canyon, across a Navajo reservation, via a mix of dirt and pavement. 3) Have your bike shuttled around the canyon for at least \$75, and then hike through the canyon and pick up your bike on the other side. Having experienced options one and two, but not three,

I recommend number two. With this option, little is lost in beauty but much is gained in practicality.

With elevations ranging between 1,700 and 9,000 feet, the ATC offers a short window of opportunity for end-to-end attempts. South of the town of Payson, the halfway point of the ATC, the route lies deep in the 120,000-square-mile Sonoran Desert, an expanse of sand, Saguaros, and parched washes where 120 degree shade temperatures have been recorded. Surface temperatures have scorched to 170 degrees. Unbearable conditions are commonplace during April, May, June, July, and August.

North of the town of Flagstaff, cold and late season snowpack are the enemies. Temperatures that may plunge below 0 degrees prefer the months of December, January, February, and March, while snowfields litter the high plateaus from December to April.

Taking this information into consideration, the best options while northbound are to depart the U.S.-Mexico border in September or October to arrive on the Utah border during fall. Or you can start your ride in March or April to reach the north end of the route mid-spring. If southbound, reverse these schedules. The goal is to beat the snow and the heat at the same time, a tough proposition in Arizona.

The ATC sees few end-to-end-riders. Fewer than fifteen people have covered every mile of the route since its initial traverse in 2000. Even hikers are scarce, the Arizona Trail being voted *Backpacker Magazine's* fourth best trail in the U.S. for solitude. You'll likely share the route with California condors, horned lizards, pronghorn, and elk more than humans. You don't have to be a misanthrope to enjoy this long-distance challenge, though. Whether you're snaking through singletrack that weaves the high plateaus near Utah, pedaling at dawn and dusk in the barren Painted and Sonoran deserts of the interior, or circumnavigating the 12,000-foot San Francisco Peaks near Flagstaff, it's all good. The Arizona Trail Corridor, with its challenges, solitude, and varied ecosystems, offers a unique setting worthy of a search for your soul.

ATC sampler

Northern terminus Starting at the ATC and AZT northern terminus, ride the AZT up 26 switchbacks to gain high ground. From here, stay the AZT course – at times ill-marked and rough – due south through Kaibab National Forest. If the AZT proves too rough, follow FR 247 (Great Western Trail) instead, paralleling the AZT. Depart the AZT and turn east on Highway

89A to enjoy a scenic paved descent. Turn north on BLM 1065 (House Rock Valley Road). This road leads through Coyote Wash back to your start point. 45 miles round trip. *Biking the Arizona Trail* pages 34-38.

Mormon Lake From an AZT trailhead on the south end of Marshall Lake, off FR 128, ride the AZT south to the northwest side of Mormon Lake. Leaving the AZT, turn west on FR 132 and follow its serpentine course northwest, then north, to spill out on paved Lake Mary Road. Turn southeast and pedal to Lower Mary Lake's southeast shore. Turn east off Lake Mary Road, then follow FR 128 back to your start point near the Anderson Mesa Lowell Observatory. 40 miles round trip. *Biking the Arizona Trail* pages 85-92.

Box Canyon/Gila River Starting on Route 60 east of Florence Junction, ride south on Mineral Mountain Road. Secondary roads come in from either side. Continue on the most defined road. Cross Cottonwood Canyon, then snake through Box Canyon. Continue on the main road until you see buildings on the other side of the Gila River. This is the turn around point. 40 miles total, out-and-back. *Biking the Arizona Trail* pages 132-137.

More information

The AZT is covered by a series of maps produced by the Arizona Trail Association. Andrea Lankford's *Biking the Arizona Trail*, which comes highly recommended, offers low-detail maps of the ATC and includes detailed directions to get you from one end of the ATC to the other.

Contact

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ATC Vital specs

Length: 800 miles

Dirt: 550 miles (69%)

Pavement: 250 miles (31%)

Climbing: 40,000 vertical feet

Duration: Expect to ride 40 miles per day, expect a traverse to take 20 days

Fastest traverse: Scott Morris. 7 days, 8 hours, in 2006

First traverse: Andrea Lankford and Beth Overton in 2000