



WHERE Utah & Colorado, western United States
START Cedar City, Utah **FINISH** Bayfield, Colorado
DISTANCE 577 miles **WORDS** Paul Lloyd
PICTURES Paul Lloyd



WAY OUT WEST

Touring for two weeks in the American West, CTC member **Paul Lloyd** and his brother Pete relished a peaceful wilderness of rocky canyons and big skies

Sitting on top of the pass at Salvation Knoll (7,110 feet), I could see snow-covered mountains to the east. From this point in the 1880s, a group of Mormon scouts, lost and out of food, at last recognised where they were. They could see their destination, the Blue Mountains, ten miles away. Hence 'Salvation Knoll'. For us, it was a vantage point. We could look back over the rocky landscape of the southern Canyonlands of Utah, which we had been cycling through for ten days.

The monumental scale of the American West gives a new dimension to cycle touring. The distant horizons make you very aware of being a small part of a much bigger picture. Maybe the pioneers felt the same way.

THE WESTERN EXPRESS

My brother Pete lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and had been trying to persuade me for years to join him touring in the American West. The Adventure Cycling Association

(ACA) has the route across Utah scoped out as part of a longer trans-America route from San Francisco to Virginia, called the Western Express Cycle Route. The ACA map described our route as 'very difficult', due the lack of water, the temperature extremes, and the climbing.

We started by taking it easy, however. We set off just below the Cedar Breaks National Monument, Utah, part way up a very steep 4,500 feet climb out of Cedar City. I was keen to start at the bottom in Cedar City but Pete cautioned against such a steep ascent on the first day.

As we climbed, we passed roadside viewpoints giving spectacular views down through the deeply-eroded rock canyons to the valley bottom. From the top of the pass, we had an exciting 3,000 foot descent back down to Panguich on the other side. Speeding along at 30-40mph it felt more like downhill skiing than riding. There was little traffic, so we could enjoy the sweeping curves.

DRINKING IN THE LANDSCAPE

Our up-and-down route to Torrey took us north-east for 150 miles, mainly along the Utah highway 12. This stretch of road marks a boundary between two contrasting landscapes. To the north is the Dixie National Forest. To the south, where we were headed, the Grand Escalante Staircase National Monument: eroded rock canyons the colour of sand; no vegetation but scrub bush and juniper.

The 30-mile stretch between Panguich and Cannonville, running along Red Canyon, gave us our first real taste of Utah. It is a landscape of tall red sandstone cliffs with pinnacles, towers and vertical fingers of rock. There are rock buttresses and arches too – the road goes directly under one.

IN THE PHOTOS

- 1) Storms further to the east, photographed from Hite
- 2) The road up to White Canyon on highway 95
- 3) Canyonlands below Cedar Breaks National Monument

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Fifty miles further on along route 12, we finally entered the Grand Escalante Staircase National Monument. The Boynton Lookout gave us a spectacular view across this vast, bleached terrain. The descent from Boynton Lookout was suitably thrilling, with a steep drop-off around sharp curves, down towards the Escalante River basin, where the watercourse irrigated a ribbon of greenery.

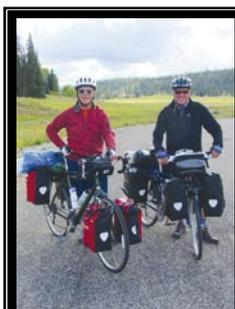
Talking of water, it was a challenge to bring enough for drinking, cooking and washing. There were several stretches of the route where there was no habitation or water for up to 75 miles. We carried around six litres of water each, plus a water purifier pump, a 'Steri-Pen' sterilising tool, and iodine tablets.

ON A DUSTY ROAD

Camping wild is one of the most enjoyable aspects of a journey of this sort. There's a real sense of being in the remote wilderness. You can watch the sun set and rise undisturbed. At one camp on a sandbar, in North Wash canyon near to Lake Powell, I sat outside my tent and watched the wildlife at dusk. A raven flew up the canyon in front of the cliff face. Bats appeared, swooping and diving, chasing insects. Two huge butterflies fluttered above us in a tree. It was supremely tranquil.

Travelling through this desert-like environment meant things got dusty. The fine sand and dust got everywhere, especially inside the tent. Riding along with even the slightest breeze meant there was dust in the air. We washed as best we could, in the river where there was one, with a flannel-wash where there wasn't. Hot showers at campsites and motels were cherished.

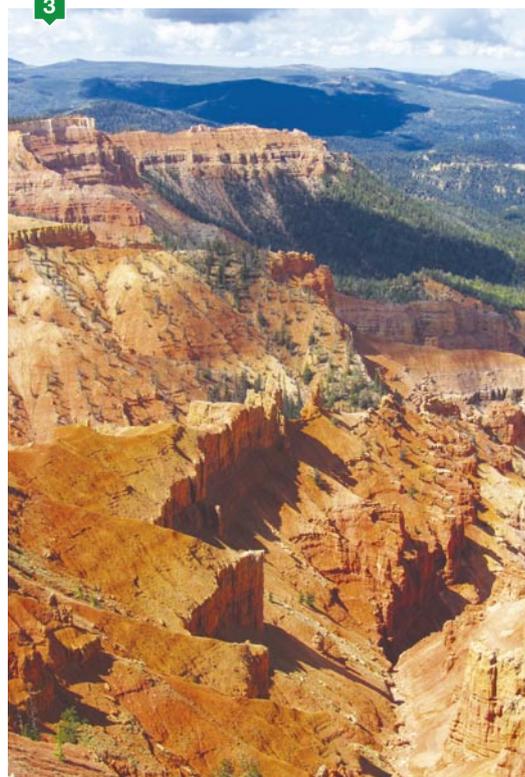
The temperature in summer can exceed 35-40 degrees, so we did our trip in mid-September, when it was mainly in the mid-20s. Humidity levels were very low, however, which made for comfortable riding conditions. At night, the temperature plummeted, particularly at altitudes of 8,000 feet (2,700m) and above.



DO IT YOURSELF

› From the UK, fly to Last Vegas (150 miles away) or Salt Lake City (250 miles) and drive to Cedar City using car or van hire. Carriage of bikes on planes to the US can be quite costly (around \$150 one way). In terms of route, you could follow what we did or adapt the route to fit your available time. Best bits are Cedar City to Blanding. You might want to take in more of Zion and Bryce Canyon National Parks as excursions. Go in spring or autumn: it's too hot in summer and too cold and snowed-in during the winter.

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➤ Most days were clear and sunny, but we ran into some wilder weather near Lake Powell and again when entering Colorado. Fierce 50mph winds made cycling difficult and whipped up clouds of red dust.

The wind also made camping tougher. On the worst day, a friendly park ranger in Hite allowed us to camp out under a verandah at the back of the ranger station, so as to shelter from the storm. Even in this semi-desert climate, it sometimes rains or hails furiously for short periods. Watching the storm pass over the whole of this enormous landscape gave great photo opportunities.

OUT OF THE DESERT

Some of the best cycling of the whole trip was the day we cycled away from Hite. For several hours, we rode through an empty landscape of orange rock bluffs, the empty road ahead disappearing into the horizon.

Traffic was relatively light for much of route from Cannonville to Blanding. We'd see the occasional truck, then only tourists in cars, RVs, and on motorcycles. We saw surprisingly few others cycle touring, just a handful over two weeks. Most were long-distance travellers.

After Blanding, the landscape changed. We moved from the dry desert terrain of the canyon-lands into green farmland pastures. The cycling was less challenging, apart from the increase in traffic. Cycling out of Durango was like riding along the hard shoulder of a motorway. Even that disappeared at one point, making the riding even more precarious. Cars passed within inches. So after 577 miles, we called a halt in Bayfield.

Back in England, however, my memories of the peaceful wilderness are undiminished. I'm now thinking of heading not west but north – to northern Norway. ☼

IN THE PHOTOS

4) Highway 95 dropping down to cross the Colorado River near Hite

5) Wild-camping in the North Wash canyon near to Lake Powell



FACT FILE WAY OUT WEST

Distance: 577 miles (447 miles from Cedar City, Utah to Dolores, Colorado)

Time taken: 14 days of riding and one rest day.

Overnights: Mainly camping wild or in campsites. State park campsites are better and cheaper than RV campsites. A few nights in motels.

Maps: ACA Western Express Bicycle Route – Section 3 Cedar City to Dolores. Fifteen 30-40 mile segments. Worth picking up some state road maps as well (AAA) for Utah and Colorado for an overview.

Getting there: I flew to Albuquerque, New Mexico, then we were driven to Utah (9-10 hours).

Bikes: I used a converted Diamondback Sorrento mountain bike with racks and road tyres. Pete took his Cannondale Touring 2000XL

Terrain: Lots of climbing and descending, from 4,000 up to 10,000 feet (1300-3300m). But road surfaces are good.

Essential kit: Plenty of water bottles and some form of water sterilisation. Sun protection. A good sleeping bag and warm clothes (inc. hat and gloves) for high altitudes.

Further information: ACA adventurecycling.org/routes-and-maps. Have a look at Utah.com/national-parks There is also a helpful cycle officer for the State of Utah: Evellyn Tuddenham, etuddenham@utah.gov.

