

# Trail Rider

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# SOUTH FORK RIDE

*A dirt bike "dual sport" ride in Colorado's high country*

**A**fter enduring another long Colorado winter, I wait impatiently as spring turns into early summer for some of my favorite high mountain trails to thaw out. Finally, in late June it is time to do my annual dual-sport ride between Salida and South Fork in Colorado's beautiful Rio Grande national forest. This year I planned a three-day ride and invited a few very capable riding friends along. Bill Niemiec and Craig Carroll came on this ride with me last year, but said they could not make it for all three days this year. However, they said they would meet us in South Fork to ride the second day and the morning of the third day with us.

Only Mark Manniko will be joining me for the complete ride from Salida. Mark's parents, Ed and Roseann, are also going to drive down to South Fork where Ed will ride with us the second day. I feel confident that this small group will have little trouble. Mark is a world-class trials rider and a former national star for Gas-Gas. Since retiring from competition (and exhibition with Tommy Avahla), Mark and his dad usually trailride on their



Pamperas and are great guys ride with. Bill is a top enduro rider and is also doing well in trials lately. Bill and I have ridden many a trail together and he is fun to watch, always riding light on his bike and floating over obstacles. Craig, also a skilled enduro rider, does a lot of mountain biking to stay in top shape and is fearless on the tricky sections. I currently have two KTM 450 EXCs ('04 & '05) and told Mark he could ride my '05 on this trip since it will be too far for his Pampera. Mark was excited about trying out a 450, so it worked out great and I prepped both bikes for our trip.

I met Mark and his parents for breakfast in Salida before driving down to our starting point six miles south of town, where Ed and Roseann drop Mark off with me. I throw my bag of extra clothes in their van before they drive off, while Mark throws a leg over my 450 for the first time. We begin our ride on Poncha Creek road, which goes up to the top of the Continental Divide at Marshall Pass. Here about the third week in June, the Summit trail north of Marshall Pass is still snowed in. However from this point going south it is mostly snow free.

So this trip to the south becomes my first long ride of the year in Colorado. It is about 120 miles to South Fork but we will ride into Saguache for gas



after 40 miles. Still there are 80-90 mile stretches on fuel each day on this trip and four-strokes with large tanks are the way to go. There is a great deal of jeep road and quad trails on the route but also some tough, rocky single-track with steep, tight switchbacks that would not be suited to heavy dual-sport bikes unless you have a name like Alpie or Giovanni. Street-legal KTM 450/525 EXCs are perfect for this trip since they are very comfortable on jeep roads and will certainly do the hardest trails.

roads down into Saguache and although Mark is riding right behind me I can hardly hear him because my '05 is equipped with a CRD Absolute muffler, which is super quiet while giving great performance.

When we pull into town and fill up with gas I am surprised to see that Mark used nearly 50 percent more gas than I did. That isn't going to work; as I planned on getting to South Fork from here with little gas to spare. Mark laughs though, and says he

It is a beautiful morning as we get up to the Summit trail and head south. We ride the "skinny" trail from which the snow has just melted and is one of several great trails that highlight this trip. I am in heaven with the cool morning air and beautiful trail weaving through the pine trees, and then climbing up well above tree line to over 12,000 feet. Mark is all smiles and liking my 450. He is an amazing rider and had no trouble adjusting to the bigger bike. We ride a lot of fun jeep

had been gassing it and power-sliding all the corners on the jeep roads because he was so thrilled with the power of the 450. Mark agrees to cool it, which should give us the same mileage and leave some rear tire for good trails later on.

Heading west, we ride some more fun jeep roads that start from Laughlin Gulch, which has a lot of unique rock formations, and then Browns Creek and Deer Creek. We enjoy a lot of beautiful open country, and the peacefulness of riding our bikes all day with absolutely no one else around.

We often ride side by side on the jeep roads because it is already so dusty. We did not get a big spring snow in Colorado this year like we usually do and it is terribly dry everywhere. Riding side by side is a lot of fun though, with each rider having to deal with rocks and ruts in his track, getting the short

end of the stick in one corner and catching up in the next. After the jeep roads and a few fast miles up Miners Creek road we turn off and start climbing on fun, rocky quad trails that take us to the top of Bowers Peak. One good thing about dry conditions is that there will be no afternoon thunderstorm on top this day. Above tree-line, high in an open meadow, a coyote comes racing alongside and passes in front of me, just like on my last ride here last fall.

We ride for miles on high ridges at 12,000 feet, over to the top of Mesa Mountain. On top we see two small herds of elk, each of which have one or two big bulls and seven or eight cows. We stop and watch only a short distance away while they meander off. The views from the top are breathtaking, as is the lack of oxygen. After pounding through some rock fields on the way back down to tree line, we



finish with a couple of great trails in the woods. I made a short video clip of Mark playing on a section of trail that was used in the last two Colorado national enduros, which can be viewed at [www.deathtrail.com](http://www.deathtrail.com).

Middle Alder Creek trail has some downfall on it, which makes it extra fun going down and we end up dropping right into South Fork in a beautiful area with a luscious green golf course and expensive homes. We stop by a Texaco station to fuel up for tomorrow before riding into the lodge. We stay at the Foothills Lodge ([www.foothillslodgeandcabins.com](http://www.foothillslodgeandcabins.com)), which is very nice and comfortable.

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Mark's bike because the jeep roads were so dusty yesterday. Today, Bill on his 450 EXC, Craig on his 300 EXC and Ed on his 370 Pampera join us for an 85 mile ride in the area northeast of town. We ride out of the lodge, past the golf course again and up West Bear Creek trail this time, and back up to the base of Mesa Mountain before turning off to ride down Benino Creek.

On top we again see the elk, which look like the two herds from yesterday all joined up together, still hanging out up by the last remaining snow banks. Benino is a fun trail that gets more interesting the farther down we go. At the bottom we look for the north end of Groundhog Creek trail but couldn't find anything resembling a legal trail. I have never ridden it before and didn't know if it connected, so I decide I will just find it next time from the other

end. We have fun riding the lower half of Benino back up to a road that crosses it in the middle and then take the road a short way over to the top of Cathedral Creek trail.

Cathedral is a lot of fun going down between towering rock faces and comes out at Cathedral Campground. There, Ed is happy to have had a good day on his Pampera and heads back down to town, while Bill, Craig, Mark and I head up Embargo Creek trail. Embargo is great fun going up and is a very long, steep climb. Our 450s and Craig's 300 all work great here and all four of our bikes have Slavens suspension, which helps maintain good traction.

Mark and Bill are turned loose to kick out the jams on this trail while Craig and I ride in their wake. Back on top Embargo joins back in where we start-

Mark's parents were at the lodge to meet us and after getting cleaned up we all went out to dinner at a great Italian restaurant. Ed is an optometrist and works with top athletes and racers, helping them to achieve better vision. Ed reminds me to relax and think positive while riding which sounds like great advice. Mark also works with top athletes as a fitness coach and stays in top shape. After dinner, Bill and Craig arrive and we all look forward to tomorrow's ride.

There is a big restaurant right next to the lodge that has a great buffet breakfast. After fueling up our bodies, we put a fresh CRD air filter element in



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ed above Benino. Starting back down, there is a brutal rocky section at the base of Mesa Mountain that is more of a pounding going downhill, and at such high altitude it is hard to maintain concentration. Also there is a very strong wind blowing on top today (the forefront of a new weather pattern) that would about blow us over at times. In here, Craig hits the deck hard, ringing his bell, but is up quickly. We keep stopping at every intersection, asking him if he is good to keep going and he would give a hesitant yes while seemingly still taking inventory. At the last intersection before heading down some steep, technical trails, he still seems unsure and asks me if his pupils look ok. We have to laugh and said yes they look ok, but if you have to ask, lets just call it a day and take the road on down and get some dinner. After getting cleaned up and eating, everyone is fine and we all get a good night's sleep and look forward to tomorrow.

After another great breakfast, I put a fresh CRD air filter in my bike this time before we ride out of the lodge. Ed and Roseann plan to make a quick trip over



to Creede before driving back up to meet us where we started near Salida. Bill, Craig, Mark and I head up north out of South Fork and are soon back into the forest. I notice that my KTM runs much better with a clean air filter. This time we climb up a great trail with a lot of tight switchbacks and steep sections where Mark and Bill get to show off their trials skills. Then I show Bill and Craig where another great trail starts that Mark and I had gone down the first day. There we part ways and Mark and I keep heading north back up to Mesa Mountain.

As soon as we break out of the forest at tree line it is evident that a storm is brewing. We hustle to get on over Mesa Mountain and the high ridges over to Bowers Peak. It is customary that one wants to get over this area early in the day before any lightning starts flying, because all the way across here your head is the highest point within 500 square miles. We are able to stay just ahead of some very dark clouds as I take us down another fun trail (909) off of

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Bowers Peak. Then a short gravel road section up to Round Park where we turn off on some really pretty and fun jeep roads that will take us past Hat Mountain and along Mountain Lion Creek.

Just before Hat Mountain, Mark must have hit a sharp rock too hard and got a flat front tire, pinching two small holes in the tube. We look around and Mark is able to wheelie the bike perfectly onto an odd rock protruding up two feet above the ground. This made a stable stand, which is half the battle and we have the tire patched and re-inflated in no time.

After Mountain Lion Creek we have a short road section north on 730 before turning east on a remote and rocky jeep road that goes up past a mine and over to lower South Park, where we swing up on the north fork along Spring Gulch and come out on 708 at Houselog Creek Road, where we jog over through Big Springs and back to Laughlin Gulch. We had been riding in a light rain ever since shortly after the tire repair until we drop down out of it at Laughlin Gulch. The thing about this whole Rio Grande area is that it is big country with a lot of unmarked, intersecting jeep roads, and until one learns their desired routes without making any wrong turns it is hard to incorporate all the best sections without running out of gas. Also, the speeds we ride at are higher on jeep roads but all of these roads and trails



are littered with loose, baby-head twirlers, ruts and sharp, planted rocks that are sometimes hard to see. One has to maintain their concentration and focus the entire time because any fall here is going to hurt or could damage the bike. We ride back into Saguache to get gas again and then boogie on back north the way we had come the first day. The rain and hail finally caught up with us on the last high peak and we get over it just minutes before the lighting starts busting on it behind us.

We pause to savor the moment before riding across the wonderful "skinny" trail again. We

reflect on the great day and all the wildlife we have seen along the way. We've seen more elk, deer and marmots, and at one point had to stop and take a break while a mama grouse herded her band of chicks across the trail. Back at Marshall Pass we ride down Poncha Creek Road to find Ed and Roseann waiting for us back at our parking spot.

We had a great trip and had no major problems. I am pretty tired after 325 miles of rocky terrain and I think I lost a few pounds. I had Pirelli MT-16 knobbies on both bikes and they gave a nice, soft ride in the rocks and worked great on the trails. If I had known it was going to be so dry though, I might have put on dual sport tires, which I use in the fall to provide better traction on hard ground. They would have felt more like trials tires for Mark, although it

would have been scary the things he was wanting to do with a little more traction, such as big rock to rock leaps. I think he was impressed with the 450 though and I could see the wheels turning regarding the possibilities.

As I get ready to send this in several weeks after our ride, the monsoon weather pattern that first arrived on our third day has stayed and provided a wealth of rain nearly every day since. So Mother Nature has taken its course and all is well here in Colorado. ⬆

—Steve Vanatta