

BIKING

AUGUST KREUTZ — SPECIAL TO THE DENVER POST

Colorado offers plenty of options for gravel riders, from Forest Service roads in the mountains to farm roads across the plains.

Top reasons you should try gravel biking

Dirt roads take cyclists off the beaten path

By Gigi Ragland
Special to The Denver Post

Colorado is a playground for cyclists, with paved roads and paths, bumpy mountain trails and dirt farm, ranch and forest routes to explore. According to the nonprofit Bicycle Colorado, 73% of Coloradans own at least one bike and a whopping 41% of residents call themselves recreational cyclists. That's a lot of pedaling going on in the Centennial State.

Different types of bikes are designed to handle specific terrain — skinny, smooth-tire road bikes for pavement and knobby, fat-tire mountain bikes for off-road. But what if you want the best of both worlds, or maybe just a little bit

of the best of both? This is a job best suited for the Goldilocks of bikes, the gravel bike.

When Carol Busch, the marketing and customer communications manager for ExperiencePlus! Bicycle Tours in Fort Collins, switched from hard-core mountain biker to gravel biker three years ago, she was looking to continue “riding dirt” but her body needed a break from the jarring physicality of mountain biking.

“As an aging mountain biker I discovered gravel riding is easier on my body, plus, it opens up a whole new world of riding. It's nice to have a new focus and learn new skills,” she said.

Busch's employer has committed to the trend as well, adding gravel tours to its 2023 European offerings.

“I try to get people excited” about bicycling, Busch said. She is a regular contributor to the company's blog where she gives tips and advice for riders, including sharing the online series “Getting

Started on Gravel Riding.”

Road cyclists also have discovered the appeal of gravel biking. About five years ago, die hard roadies Laura Karpinski and Rose Barcklow noticed their rides seemed more precarious as traffic and the number of distracted drivers increased.

“We started to hear about gravel roads that cyclists could ride on,” Barcklow said. She likes to tell the story of their first gravel ride as an example of what not to do. Just because you can ride long distances on pavement doesn't mean you can ride equal distances on dirt. Since 60 miles was an average road ride for the pair they mapped out a 50-mile course for their first gravel ride.

“We almost died!” Barcklow said, with a laugh. “There was no water anywhere and it took twice as long as we thought.”

They realized that unlike road rides, where they can stop at a convenience store for water and food, most gravel

rides don't have ready resources to refuel. That incident sparked the idea to create a resource for gravel bikers that started as a blog then morphed into a website.

“We started Gravel Bike Adventures as a resource to help people know what they are getting themselves into, to be safe and prepared,” Barcklow said.

The pair ride gravel roads and paths all over Colorado and other states, and load detailed routes of the rides (as many as 200) onto their website for anyone to access. From forests to mountains to deserts, Barcklow said, “whatever you are looking for in gravel, you can find it in Colorado.”

Do you need a gravel bike for your first ride? Not necessarily, said Busch, though she recommends borrowing or renting a gravel bike to help ensure a successful adventure. For an easy conversion, consider swapping out the wheels and

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ASHLEY CARELOCK — SPECIAL TO THE DENVER POST

Gravel bikers have to prepare for rides like mountain bikers prepare: taking essential gear – spare tires, tools, food, water – with them. The routes they prefer often take them far away from city conveniences – as well as noise and traffic.

Gravel

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tires of your road or mountain bike. The idea is to see if gravel riding is something you enjoy.

The sport provides cyclists the chance to explore different areas than they normally experience. For instance, you might piece together a route in your neighborhood that connects a dirt path along a creek to a greenway paved path to a gravel road on the outskirts of town to a neighborhood street.

Some folks might think a gravel bike is comparable to a hybrid bike – a sort of toned-down mountain bike. It's not, cyclists say.

"I feel like a hybrid bike is more for gentle, crushed surfaces, paved path riding or commuting," said Whitney Alison of Bike Sports in Fort Collins.

Gravel bikes are capable of rolling through multiple surfaces like dirt, mud, sand, crushed gravel and most off-road trails. They resemble a road bike with drop handlebars but are engineered for both on- and off-road and sport slightly fatter knobby tires.

"They can do everything OK," Alison said. "It's not the fastest bike on the road



Gravel biking takes riders on roads and paths less traveled by other cyclists. Enthusiasts enjoy getting away from paved roads without the physical stress required when riding many singletrack mountain trails.

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and it's not the fastest bike on single-track, but it can do all of those."

Alison and her husband, Zack, like the fact that gravel bikes are the perfect pedaling vehicle to get off the beaten path and out of traffic. The couple started their cycling journey as road racers then segued to gravel bike racing. As co-owners of Bike Sports they host two gravel events. The increasingly popular FoCo Fondo, a combination race and ride event held annually in July, is considered one of the most bad-ass family fun bike events in Colorado. Four routes of

12 to 118 miles are offered. In addition, twice a year Bike Sports offers a guided, three-day gravel bike tour called Gravel Graceland that explores the area near Fort Collins.

By offering the events the couple hopes to show people the potential of what gravel bikes can do and where the bikes can take them. Ultimately, Whitney Alison said, "we want to introduce the concept that gravel offers adventure or discovery beyond the riding."

Ashley Carelock competes in mountain, cyclocross and gravel bike races

RESOURCES

To learn more about gravel bike rides, favorite routes in Colorado and events for gravel riders, check out these websites:

Foco Fondo, Gravel Graceland:
bikesportsco.com

Routes and events: gravelbikeadventures.com

Routes and resources: thedirtyroads.com/rides

Events, tips, resources: girlsgonegravel.com

Routes: gravelmap.com

Event: campv.com/happenings/west-end-gravel-rush

and makes her home in the high country of Montezuma County. Her love of adventure led her to gravel biking. As an ultra cyclist, her idea of a best ride spans three to five days. She has biked the Colorado section of the Tour Divide Trail multiple times.

"You see all of Colorado, from north to south. It's just amazing," she said. Carelock offers a similar refrain to the aspiring gravel biker as the Alisons, Busch, Karpinski and Barcklow: You ride to enjoy the sense of discovery. "Just get out there and spin, enjoy the beauty and the noise of the gravel underneath your tires."