

The Impulsive Traveler

Pumped up about mountain biking in N.C.

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

"Be confident, buddy," yelled a man to a rider. "That'll help you out."

Not far from the man, I stood in the gravel parking lot of Rocky Knob Mountain Bike Park near Boone, N.C., looking out at a brand-new pump track — a mountain-biking course of bumps and jumps that I planned to test out the next day. I made a mental note about confidence and chatted with another spectator.

Next thing I knew, screams were coming from the track, and the mountain biker was on the dirt. I wondered whether he was hurt, and I felt my self-preservation instinct kick in: Am I going to kill myself on this thing tomorrow?

Moments later, the biker got up and joined the man in the parking lot, seemingly unscathed. But the screams continued, and it took me a minute to understand that his only pain was that of being separated from his beloved bike.

"Pleeeeee!" he sobbed. "Once more!" The man lectured the young cyclist about his "tone." And that's when I made another mental note: No matter how things went down with my first mountain-biking adventure the next day, I wouldn't act like a 6-year-old. I will not, I told myself, make a scene in the parking lot.

When my friend Marilyn invited me to visit her in Boone, she told me about a new mountain bike park a few miles from town. I've probably been on a mountain bike a couple of times in my life, but I've certainly never biked any mountains, and my only bike-related bragging rights involve a recent 50 miles on the C&O Canal towpath — arguably as flat as they come. But I was overdue for a visit to one of my favorite Carolina towns, so I packed my car and headed to the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Just west of the Blue Ridge Parkway, Boone — named after Daniel — is a year-round haven for outdoor recreationalists. Ever since Lance Armstrong came here to train in the late 1990s, singing the praises of the area's beauty and steep cycling climbs, the town has been milking his testimonial. That may have helped put it on the map, but Boone has always held its own in the road cycling department. With the opening of Rocky Knob, a \$2 million facility, it's now a destination for mountain bikers as well.

Led by a professional trail-builder, volunteers put in 3,500 hours of work building the 185-acre park over the past few years. Locals pitched in at weekly sessions called Dirty Thursdays, and college football players used brute force to move boulders. The first of five trails opened in 2011, and the trails, skills areas, picnic areas and pump track were completed by this year.

A sign at the base of the mountain explicitly says that none of the trails are for beginners, and some of the features are pretty advanced. The day I arrived, I hiked the easiest trail, 1.6-mile Rocky Branch, and found myself tentatively stepping over rock gardens, watching my footing on uneven boardwalks and hiking around countless switchbacks. In one of the skills areas, I walked over "skinies," narrow structures that look like balance beams and are meant — unfathomably — to be crossed by bike. Hiking down, I was happy that the mountain bikers had this park, but I thought, no way am I doing this on wheels.

Off the mountain, I watched kids and grown-ups on the pump track. A couple of guys from nearby Appalachian State, the local university, rode their dirt jump bikes over jumps and around berms, catching air, and returned out of breath.

"It's like a sprint," said Jason, a senior. He explained that the pump track gets its name from the motion as you go over the undulations. Essentially, your body stores energy like a spring, and you gain momentum as you go over the jumps and shift your weight, "pumping" your upper body. The best riders go through the entire course without pedaling and leave



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Thrill-seeking: At top, Appalachian State students frequently visit Rocky Knob Mountain Bike Park near Boone, N.C. A biker, above left, watches others on the pump track. One trail features Logzilla, an 84-foot-long log ride, above right.

the ground often — making it a killer spectator sport.

Jason told me that having a purpose-built trail like this is a dream come true. "Before, there wasn't any legal mountain biking in the county," he said. "You had to travel 30 to 45 minutes just to get to a good trail." (Other regional trails are at Pisgah National Forest, Kerr Scott Reservoir near Wilkesboro and Sugar Mountain and Beech Mountain ski resorts.) We heard a loud whooping sound from the mountain — someone riding down the last descent. "Those are typical sound effects here," Jason laughed.

The next morning, I met Kristian Jackson at the park. Blond and pony-tailed, he's a lecturer in recreation management at the university, as well as one of the course designers. He brought a Giant Anthem mountain bike for me to borrow — a "29er," one of the cool new bikes with wheels three inches larger than the standard, that I was told would make it easier to pedal uphill.

Kristian talked to me about my stance on the bike and what to do if I crashed, although he skillfully avoided using that word. He explained that a good trail is

"flowy," rather than filled with sharp and jerky turns. I strapped on my helmet and remembered to stay confident. Soon, we were pedaling up the mountain, and within seconds, my legs were burning.

Rocky Knob is a stacked loop system — the higher you get, the harder the trail. Apparently, the designers tried to make the course easier, but it was too, well, rocky. I quickly learned to keep my pedals up off the ground so they wouldn't hit rock. This was a little like learning how to ride all over again — except that this bike was a tank, rolling over roots and rocks like nobody's business.

As Kristian led me around the loop, I found him to be that rare breed of hard-core dude who is kind and empathetic; he got off his bike and walked in all the tricky spots that he knew would be difficult for me. Eventually, I began to trust the bike and to ease my right hand off the brake. On the final stretch, through a tunnel of rhododendron, I even felt flowy.

At the base of the mountain, I wasn't exactly crying for more, but I was exhilarated — and thrilled that I hadn't broken any body parts. No need to press my luck,

I decided. When it came time for the pump track, I was content watching.

After the ride, Marilyn and I scarfed down burritos at the Black Cat and walked around town. Although still somewhat bohemian, with fiddlers on the street and countless thrift shops, Boone now has expensive outdoor stores and bike shops (that rent mountain bikes) and trendy and delicious farm-to-table restaurants. It's a place where university professors look like Outward Bound instructors, and status symbols usually have something to do with the number of high-end bikes in your garage.

That night, we hit Taco Tuesday at Boone Saloon — tacos for \$1.50, and every seat at the bar occupied by a man with a beard. In the morning, Marilyn biked Rocky Knob, and I did one last trail run — on foot. In the parking lot, I cooled down after my run and watched a lone rider on the pump track. Then I drove down the mountain and through the fog, appreciating pavement as never before.

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IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

Boone is about 415 miles from Washington. Take Interstate 66 west to I-81 south to I-77 south toward Charlotte. Take exit 73B to merge onto US-421 north toward Boone. Rocky Knob Mountain Bike Park will be on your left a couple of miles before town.

WHERE TO STAY

Blowing Rock Ale House & Inn

152 Sunset Dr., Blowing Rock
828-414-9254

www.blowingrockalehouseandinn.com

A new property a little outside Boone, with eight guest rooms and a full pub. Rooms from \$125.

Lovill House Inn

404 Old Bristol Rd.
800-849-9466

www.lovillhouseinn.com

Set on 11 wooded acres, less than a mile from downtown Boone, with six rooms. Rates from \$129, including a full breakfast.

WHERE TO EAT

Hob Nob Farm Cafe

506 W. King St.
828-262-5000

hobnobfarmcafe.com

Worldly foods sourced from local farms. Ocracoke fish sandwich with vegan tartar \$7.95; Thai burger made from local beef, \$7.95 for a quarter-pounder.

Proper

142 S. Water St.
828-865-5000

www.propermeal.com

Comfort food for cold Boone winters. Plates (meatloaf, pulled pork, fried chicken, tomato pie) come with two sides and biscuit or cornbread, \$8.95.

Stick Boy Bread Co.

345 Hardin St.
828-268-9900

www.stickboybread.com

Artisan breads, breakfast sweets (scones, sticky buns, croissants \$1.99-\$2.99) and coffee drinks. Fresh smoothies \$4.18.

WHERE TO RIDE

Rocky Knob Fest Weekend

rockyknob.wordpress.com

Oct. 11-12. Friday: 5 p.m. pump track jam under lights; Saturday: IMBA's Take a Kid Mountain Biking Day, Santa Cruz bike demo/testing, BBQ, raffle, guided rides.

Magic Cycles

140 S. Depot St., No. 2
828-265-2211

www.magiccycles.com

Mountain bike rentals, \$60 a day.

Boone Bike and Touring

899 Blowing Rock Rd.
828-262-5750

www.boonebike.com

Mountain bike rentals, \$50 a day.

Boone Greenway

www.townofboone.net

For cyclists who prefer flat surfaces. The trail explores the backcountry watershed; it's gravel or paved, so good for families, strollers, wheelchairs, cyclists and runners.

INFORMATION

www.exploreboonearea.com

www.booneareacyclists.com

—M.D.G.K.