

BIKE ARIZONA



There's lots of great bicycling in Arizona: road/hybrid/mountain bike, flat, rolling, steep, long climbs, Sonoran Desert to subalpine ecology, rattlesnakes (stay away from them), whatever you could want. The only constant is thorns (they're ubiquitous in Arizona); I strongly recommend using tire liners and/or some sort of sealant. Whatever terrain/surface you seek, Arizona has it, as I hope the following brief selection conveys. Route-related or other questions? I've biked extensively in the Tucson, Cottonwood, and Flagstaff areas, and I can point you in the direction of many fun off-the-beaten-path routes (from easy to very difficult). Send me an e-mail: mstrong79@gmail.com



MT ELDEN (HYBRID OR MOUNTAIN BIKE)

Mt Elden is immediately north of Flagstaff. There's lots of biking in the area, plenty of it quite difficult (elevations from ~7,000 ft to



~9,300 ft). Hybrid bikes should be OK on Schultz Pass Rd, Mt Elden Lookout Rd, and Elden Springs Rd (this third road withstands use in wet conditions); most everything else requires a mountain bike. The powers-that-be promised (2013) that the trail system will soon undergo a complete overhaul (e.g., designating official “downhill”

routes, obliterating unsustainable trails, and adopting some popular informal trails into the official trail network). I highly recommend Schultz Loop Trail (ridgeline singletrack sometimes called “Jedi Trail”) and Sunset Trail (contains the famed “catwalk” segment that I’m way too chicken to bike). Forces of Nature Trail and Elden Springs Trail dry out the fastest after rain or snow. Expect most trails to be consistently dry beginning sometime in March (but Schultz Loop Trail probably won’t dry out until May). Mt Elden Lookout Rd closes in the winter, but in the spring has an awesome initial two-week window in which bikes are but motorized travel is not allowed. The nearby 7-mi paved road to Snowbowl (a 2,000-ft climb) is also worth a visit.

**TORTOLITA MOUNTAINS
(MOUNTAIN BIKE)**

If you want a warm-weather mountain bike ride in the winter, the Tortolita Mountains immediately north of Marana is your place. There are lots of trails (mostly open to bikes and are predominantly moderately sandy/rocky; I particularly recommend Wild Mustang Trail



and Wild Burro Trail North for a moderate challenge and expansive scenery) and a few forest roads, and some petroglyphs if you know where to look. To reach the higher elevations from Marana, I recommend taking Upper Javelina Spur Trail or Alamo Springs Spur Trail (even Superman might call Wild Burro Trail South and Upper Javelina Trail up from the canyon floor steep/rocky hike-a-bike), or possibly the recently (2013) completed Ridgeline Trail (I have no first-hand knowledge of this new trail).



Alternatively, from the town of Catalina, an unsigned trail at the west end of Edwin Rd can also connect you with good stuff in the Tortolita Mountains. From this point, bike the trail and cross a few sandy washes. There's a bigger wash that you need to bike up a bit until you see a rough, old jeep track on the left. This route takes you to Wild Burro Trail North. If you miss the wash turnoff, you'll eventually reach Como Dr in the Marana/Oro Valley area.



ARIVACA RD (ROAD BIKE)

This highway runs from Amado in the east, southwest to Arivaca and beyond. It has very little traffic, except for frequent Border Patrol vans. The area gets a bad rap (exaggerated or not) pertaining to drug smuggling and so on, but biking through certainly isn't a problem. I've only ridden the stretch between Amado and the

town of Arivaca (because biking all the way to Arivaca from far northeast Tucson, and back, on a mountain bike, was enough for me, thank you). The topography, based on the segment I biked, is mostly relatively forgiving.

PAINTED DESERT (ROAD BIKE)

There is a beautiful, quiet road that begins a few miles east of Flagstaff, and then loops through Sunset Crater Volcano and Wupatki National Monuments. No worries: the volcano is dormant. There's a lot of topographic variety, from short/steep stuff to relatively long but not steep. This



is a particularly good Flagstaff bike ride in cold weather, but I froze solid in late December 2012 while biking down from the higher elevations (imagine tearing downhill on a bike when it's 5°F). You should pay the small national monument fee, if the visitor centers are open.



DEAD HORSE TRAIL SYSTEM (MOUNTAIN BIKE)

This wonderful trail system is immediately north/northeast of Cottonwood and adjoins Dead Horse Ranch State Park. The trail system is why I moved to Cottonwood in 2013, has a lot of variety, and has some of the best mountain biking I've ever ridden. In particular, Rust Bucket Trail



and the recent (2013) realignment of Bones Trail are ridgeline singletrack at its absolute finest (Bones is considerably more technical than Rust Bucket, and winds in and out of some small

canyons). Lime Kiln Trail, which starts in the state park, continues to Sedona. Many quiet forest roads are nearby; I particularly recommend FR-131 to Sycamore Canyon for a scenic and (mostly) relatively easy bike ride, and FR-258 for moderate climbing. As a bonus, you can use the state park as a cheap, convenient launching pad for the Black Hills, described next.

BLACK HILLS (ROAD OR MOUNTAIN BIKE)

The Black Hills (e.g., Mingus Mountain) area, adjacent to (west of) Cottonwood, has everything (for those who love hills). You can bike a 12-mi highway (89A) up a 3,500-ft climb, forest roads of varying surface and severity (e.g., FR-493, the continuation of Mingus Ave into the mountains,



which you can use to reach the Mingus Mountain summit; I also recommend FR-360, FR-361, FR-372, and FR-132), strenuous and “downhill” trails, and other fun stuff.

Even though it’s the scene of my bloodiest crash ever, I particularly recommend Black Canyon Trail 114 for anyone who likes strenuous, scenic ridgeline singletrack. It has long been overgrown with very prickly bushes (as late as Oct 2013, when I biked/pushed/fought all the way to the upper trailhead), but in Dec 2013 I biked up the non-muddy lower elevations and it seems that someone has cut back the brush. Beyond the ~2 mi point, the trail gets progressively more overgrown and, occasionally, quite dangerous on a bicycle. Many other trails in the area (e.g.,

Rock Springs Trail 514; generally not steep, but very loose/rocky) are also fun. In the Jerome area, there's an effort to repurpose a former rail route as the "Burro Trail" from Clarkdale to Jerome. As of 2013 I haven't biked it yet, but Perkinsville Rd (unpaved, I believe) starts in Jerome and provides a route north to Williams. The forest roads at the highest elevations of the Black Hills (~7,000 ft and up) close in the winter.



**TUCSON MOUNTAIN PARK
(ROAD OR MOUNTAIN
BIKE)**

Most of this large county park (approximately 20,000 acres) is only accessible to mountain bikes (and foot traffic, of course). It has everything from easy cruising to steep, very technical climbing. The trails that are west of Kinney Rd tend to be sandier, less rocky, and less hilly than those that are east of Kinney Rd. I recommend Yetman Trail for a physically challenging route that doesn't require (much) technical skill, and Hidden Canyon Trail and Cat

Mountain Trail for tough technical climbing (I haven't biked it, but Brown Mountain Trail is supposedly another one). Gates Pass Trail is where I learned why punching hard on the front brake is usually a bad idea; I swerved and crashed at high speed into some sort of cholla, and discovered first-hand why this cactus is the bane of mountain biking. For scenic road biking, I recommend the counterclockwise (steeper) loop using Picture Rocks Rd (Saguaro National Park West) and Gates Pass Rd (but beware of the cutthroat commuter traffic on Picture Rocks Rd that may begin as early as 5 AM).

LAKE MARY RD (ROAD BIKE)

This very popular cycling route starts in Flagstaff and continues south to Highway 87. If there is such a thing as an “easy” high-elevation 100-mi bike ride (round-trip), this might be it. The route isn’t flat by any means (and it gets noticeably harder south of Mormon Lake, where the traffic thins to almost nothing), but there aren’t any particularly long climbs. Almost all of it has a wide bike lane or a useful shoulder.



Lake Mary Rd also provides convenient access to many lakes, trails (e.g., the Arizona Trail, a unique trail that runs from Mexico to Utah; in the Lake Mary area, I particularly recommend the segment that runs from Sandys Canyon through Walnut Canyon), and forest roads. For example, with some brief paved connections, following FR-867 just north of lower Lake Mary to FR-762, FR-237, and then FR-535 takes you to Woody Mountain Rd, i.e., FR-231, which runs between Flagstaff and the north end of the Sycamore Canyon area. Alternatively, before turning on FR-237, head south on FR-700 as a means to reach Munds Park and Schnebly Hill Rd, which continues to Sedona. Another wonderful forest road is Stoneman Lake Rd, which begins south of Mormon Lake and ends close to Camp Verde, Cottonwood, and Village of Oak Creek.



AGUA CALIENTE CANYON (MOUNTAIN BIKE)

Are you looking for technical (e.g., very rocky, steep ridgeline), scenic mountain biking? If so, look no further than the vicinity of



Agua Caliente Canyon northeast of Tucson. “Downhill” cyclists may want to start at the Molino Basin campground on the Mt Lemmon Highway. Take the Arizona Trail towards Redington Pass, climb, descend, and then turn right on Milagrosa Trail (unsigned, but indicated by rock cairns, a little bit after the trail becomes a jeep track). Beware:

cyclists have broken bones on Milagrosa Trail. For most of its length, it traverses a narrow ridge that divides Milagrosa Canyon and Agua Caliente Canyon. Going down, you eventually come to a T-junction. Head right to continue on Milagrosa Trail, or turn left to drop into Agua Caliente Canyon. If you choose the latter, bike/push downhill through the canyon towards Tucson for a while until you see a faint unsigned trail on the left (before the sheer cliff drop); this is “FR 4445,” which is singletrack now. Bike up to reach Agua Caliente Hill Trail (signed), or before reaching it, turn right on an unsigned trail (indicated by rock cairns) that swoops along a ridgeline, back down into Agua Caliente Canyon, and to Milagrosa Trail. Alternatively, start at the Mt Lemmon summit, a very difficult, highly technical ride known as the “Lemmon Drop.”

ARIZONA TRAIL (MOUNTAIN BIKE)

I mention numerous access points to the Arizona Trail elsewhere in this guide. This entire non-motorized state-long (north-south) trail is open to mountain bikes, except the wilderness segments.



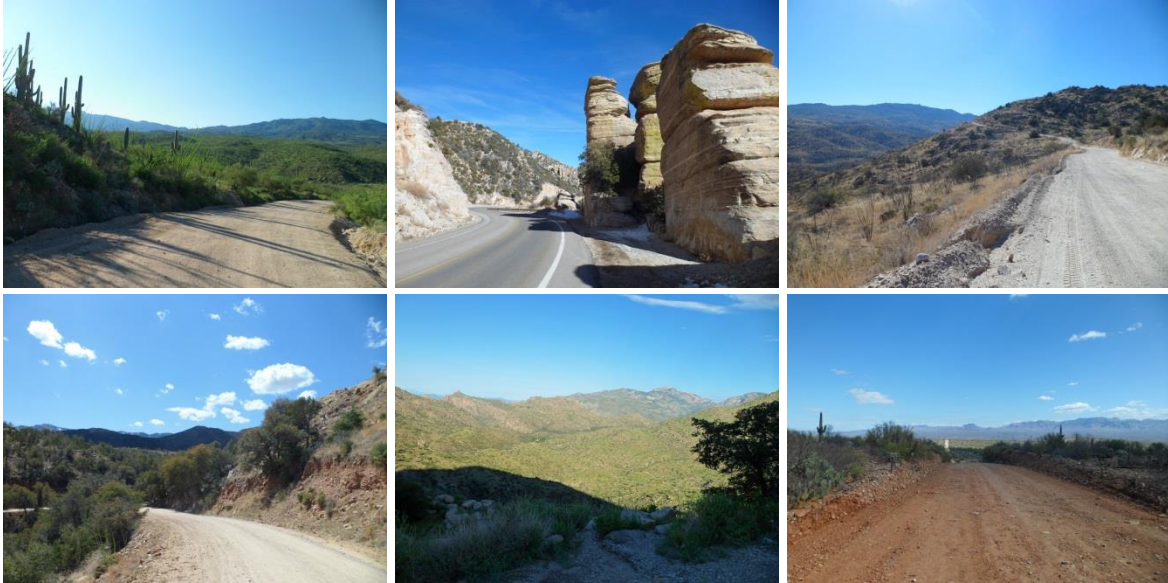
Flagstaff is the only urban area that the trail traverses, but it also passes through numerous rural communities (and nearby the Tucson and Phoenix metropolitan areas). Concerning the bicycle-open sections, the Rincon Valley segment is probably one of the easiest; but if you're Superman, try using the trail to bike up the west side of the Catalina Mountains. For the racers out there, the southeast Arizona segment is the highlight of the annual Arizona Trail 300 mountain bike race, and occasionally people race the entire trail (bypassing the wilderness segments).



REDINGTON PASS/MT LEMMON LOOP (HYBRID BIKE)

This loop begins immediately north of Tucson and is seriously tough: ~105 miles and well over 10,000 ft of total climbing (low/high points of 2,500/9,100 ft). Most of the route (>50% dirt roads, which have most of the climbing; sometimes a bit sandy, but generally not very rocky) has very little traffic, and once you leave Tucson the only (limited) services on-route are in the town of Summerhaven (or via a detour into San Manuel). Briefly, bike Redington Rd through Redington Pass and the San Pedro River valley, take Black Hills Mine Rd to FR-38, bike up FR-38 to Summerhaven (no more dirt roads from here on out), make a side-trip up Ski Run Rd to the Mt Lemmon summit, and cruise down the Mt Lemmon Highway back to Tucson (the ~5,500-ft descent from Palisades ranger station is incredible; biking up the highway is a great ride too).

The route is beautiful and easy to follow, even if you're not familiar with the area and you don't use a GPS device. I recommend front-wheel shock absorption for the 10-mi San Pedro River



valley segment (Cascabel Rd to River Rd), or be prepared to have the washboard surface shake the bejeezus out of you, depending on recent road-maintenance history. Although the segment of FR-38 that I used for this loop is closed to vehicles from Dec 15 through Mar 1, I don't know if a bicycle counts as a "vehicle" (and FR-38 might be very muddy from melted snow in the winter).



Redington Pass is a wonderful place for (some) hybrid and (mostly) mountain biking all by itself. Among other routes, it provides access to the Arizona Trail and Milagrosa Trail. It used to have problems with trash and illegal shooting along Redington Rd. My worst experience was someone who apparently thought shooting his gun across the road

right after I biked past was funny. I got his license plate number and the model of his vehicle, but Officer Jackass at Pima County police said that wasn't enough for a "positive identification;" maybe I interrupted his doughnut break. Nevertheless, forest service personnel have cleaned up the trash left by the gun folks and various agencies have gotten serious about managing future shooting in the area in a safe/responsible manner.