THE LONG WAY ROUND: PART TWO

by Surly | August 28, 2017

Are you finding yourself even more confused than usual? That may be because this is part two of the story. To get yourself all caught up, head on over to part one and tuck in.

Day 3

Day three began with a bang — or, a bark would be more accurate. Spending the night in a crowded campground meant we were surrounded by families. And along with families came yappy little dogs that barked at every passing breeze. After a few morning yawns and stretches, we figured we'd take advantage of being near civilization and grab a hot breakfast from the nearby restaurant before setting out for the day.

As we awaited our food piles, we discussed the ride ahead. We'd be cutting out some of the alleged snowy trails that the mountain bikers had warned of the previous day. In looking at our updated route, we felt fairly confident that we could get ourselves back on track. After inhaling enough calories to get us through the morning (and "exhaling" the previous evening's), we headed back to our campsite and tore down.

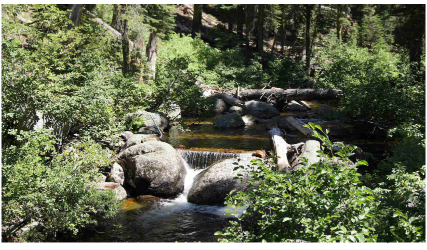
We set off and the miles quickly began adding up. We'd crossed into California before we knew it and within an hour and a half, made it 15 miles. I looked at my map and saw we were only a couple miles from hitting dirt again, which would be a welcome change of pace from the pavement we'd been riding since breakfast.

Then we looked up.

Separating us and the dirt was Echo Pass and, while its winding mountain road didn't appear to be too terribly steep, it still wasn't a view we wanted when we were so close to the dirt trails at the top. We began our ascent and were pleased to see a bike lane on the road. This took away some of our worries about climbing with our loaded down rigs.

Then the bike lane ended suddenly and we were left straddling the thin ribbon of pavement to the right of the white line. We took breaks at every little alcove in the road that we could. As large semi-trucks kept passing us within mere inches, our anticipation to hit the dirt grew. When we finally made it, we took a few minutes to grab a snack and celebrate that none of the close calls we'd just had had been any closer.

Maybe it was the adrenaline from the climb — or maybe it was that we were just sick of riding pavement — but when we finally hit our first stretch of dirt for the day, it was spectacular. The next ten or so miles were a perfect blend of rarely used fire roads and twisty singletrack with just enough rocks and roots to keep us on our toes. We were now in the El Dorado National Forest and were once again surrounded by skyscraper pines and those ever-present, size-of-a-human-skull pine cones.



For the most part, this entire stretch was rideable, save for the occasional downed tree and one short but punchy stretch of hike-a-bike. All grinding climbs were almost immediately rewarded with fast descents. We continued to watch the miles tick by as we made our way to Strawberry, CA — our lunch stop for the day. After a fast —like, really fast — paved descent into the town, we found ourselves bellied up to the bar of the Strawberry Lodge cramming roasted green chili cheeseburgers into our mouths as quickly as we could.

It was pure bliss.

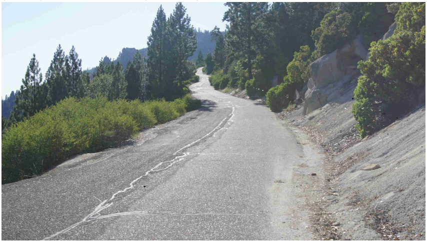
Across from the Strawberry Lodge is the Strawberry General Store so we figured we might as well top off our water and grab a few snacks. Plus, we were running a little low on stove fuel so we crossed our fingers that they'd have what we needed and headed over there before continuing on. We walked in and were immediately greeted by an impressive amount of outdoor gear for a general store so we were hoping they'd have the fuel we needed.

They didn't.

However, Hippy and Squirrel — the two tie-dye clad proprietors — set us up with some unleaded gas to use in Domeier's MSR instead of the white gas we were seeking. Since those little mechanical wonders can run on just about anything that's wet and mildly flammable, we were good to go. Hippy reassured us by telling us the MSR was his go-to stove back when he followed the Dead and he burned all kinds of shit in it. For a brief moment, it was like we were back in the office chatting with Treebeard.

MOUNT N
SHO
SQUIRREL
CROSSING
PETZL
Black Diamond
MSR
ENJOY A...
WELCOME
LAKE TAHOE
Corona

After speaking with Hippy and Squirrel for a minute, we set out into the waning afternoon sun, intent on hitting Loon Lake by nightfall. With only a few more hours of sun and about thirty miles to go, we knew we'd be cutting it close. We took the quick, paved descent out of Strawberry and hit Wrights Lake Road. According to my map, we'd be on this for several miles before turning off on some jeep trails and fire roads. About two miles in the road really began to kick up and we were once again slowly grinding our way up watching the daylight fade.



By the time we turned off onto our first jeep road, we'd come to terms with the fact that we wouldn't be hitting Loon Lake that night. Instead, we set our sights on Wrights Lake, a much more attainable goal. We had only about 12 miles to go so we figured we were in good shape.

And then the trail dead ended into a fucking river.

Not a stream. Not a creek. A fucking river. With rapids and everything. Fast moving rapids at that. There was no way we were going to be able to cross it here or anywhere that we could see.

The amount of "fucks" that came out of both our mouths almost immediately had to be in the double digits but as I looked at the map, I saw there was supposed to be another trail nearby. We decided to take our chances and see if we could find it. This proved much more difficult than we thought. We searched and search and were about to resign ourselves to setting up camp when we finally found the faintest hint of a trail. We were ecstatic. The amount of bear scat we'd seen while searching for this trail had neither of us too excited to camp in this area. We continued back on our way with slightly raised spirits.

And then the trail dead ended into a fucking river. Again. The same river in fact.

This time, however, the water was much slower moving and didn't look to be more than knee deep so we decided to ford it, Oregon Trail style. We got to the other side and continued on our way, sure that the Wrights Lake Campground was nearby. As we were following the narrow band of trail through the brush, I suddenly looked up and saw an SUV with a horse trailer behind it. I used my deductive reasoning skills to determine that we'd probably arrived at the campground.

We chatted with the first people we found to see where the entrance was so we could get set up with a campsite.

"So, you're just riding around in the woods with all your stuff?"

"Yup, pretty much."

We grabbed a spot, set up camp, and began to cook up some dinner when a fellow camper stopped by to chat and drop off a couple beers for us. It was surreal to think that less than an hour earlier, we were close to our breaking points at the river crossing and now, we were enjoying a beer and a hot meal.

Life is funny sometimes.

Day 4

Despite the previous night's drama at the river crossing, we woke on day four only about ten miles off track. We were confident that we could make it to Loon Lake by lunchtime at the latest and from there, quickly knock out that sat between us and Lake Tahoe. From there, we'd plan to camp somewhere at the lake and finish up the last twenty or so miles on day five — our buffer day. Sounds easy, right?

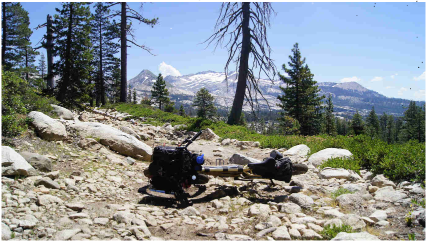
If you've made it this far in the story, you may have picked up on a common theme throughout. Anytime we felt confident about the trail ahead or about getting back on track, Mother Nature would ultimately fuck us over in some unexpected way. Today would prove to be no different.

After a quick breakfast of oatmeal and instant coffee, we tore down camp, re-filled our water supply, and set off. Our first half mile or so was paved through the campground and out to where we would catch our first trail of the day, another jeep trail. By now, we'd been on several jeep trails throughout our journey so we were expecting more of the same.

But this one was... different.

Once we hit the trail, it didn't take long before we were off our bikes, pushing them over large boulders. The trail immediately ahead was completely unrideable, but we'd encountered plenty of hike-a-bike already so we were hopeful this terrain would be short-lived.

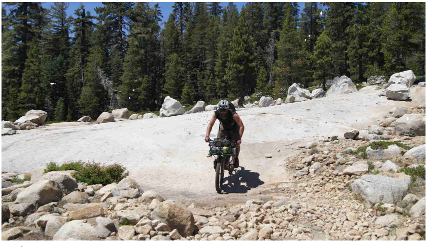
Now, I've been wrong about a lot of things in my life but rarely have I been this wrong.



It turns out, this wasn't just a jeep trail. This was jeep trail meant for rock crawling. It was also — unbeknownst to us — closed because the massive amount of snow that had fallen this winter damaged the trail to the point that even jeeps could traverse it. As we continued pushing our gear-laden bikes over boulders, it started to dawn on us this might be the reality of our whole day. We'd haul our bikes up and over climbs, and then carefully maneuver them down the other side.

Rinse. Repeat. For hours on end.

We'd try to ride when we could but anytime we'd get going, we'd ultimately have to hop off and push again. Eventually, the riding became non-existent and we were hiking way more than pedaling. While we were on that first jeep trail, we encountered some actual hikers who, sensing our struggle, shared some of their ice water and a few moments of conversation with us. It might seem insignificant but that interaction raised our spirits immensely. It was also on that first jeep trail that we ran into our pal Ethan from Salsa. Ethan had had a similar notion to us about making the commute up to SaddleDrive a little more interesting. He had come across our route on Ride With GPS and decided to give it a shot as well. Since he was traveling much, much lighter than Aaron and I, we didn't see him for long but it was nice to see a familiar face, especially on our most grueling day.



One of the rare instances that we were actually able to ride our bikes.

Every twenty minutes or so, I'd look down at my Garmin to check our progress. We were moving at a snail's pace. At this rate, we'd be lucky to make it to Loon Lake by midnight, much less noon. Eventually, we turned off the jeep trail and onto a multi-use hiking trail. We had high hopes that some more riding was in our immediate future. And at first, it was. We pedaled for a little more than half a mile without incident, the most we'd rode since leaving the campground that morning.

And then...

The trail all but disappeared under fallen trees and thick underbrush with some large, unrideable rock sections thrown in for good measure. The hours ticked by but the miles didn't. In nearly six hours we'd barely ridden a mile. I kept looking at my map, desperately hoping that I could find us a different route but there was nothing. We were stuck. We could either continue on into the unknown or turn back and do everything we'd just done again. Of those two extremely shitty choices, we chose the former because sometimes the unknown is only slightly less shitty than the known.

It was about four in the afternoon when we reached a large stream crossing and decided to stop for some food. Aside from some snacks, we had throughout the day, we hadn't had a proper lunch yet so we figured we'd fuel up before crossing the stream. As we were waiting for our water to boil, we both realized just how defeated we felt. We'd only traveled about seven miles since we left our campsite at Wrights Lake eight hours earlier.

While we ate, we discussed our options. We had a little more than three miles left before we'd hit Loon Lake. You know, the place we'd planned on being at four hours earlier. If the trail continued the way it had been, we were looking at three or four more hours of pushing, which would put us there with just enough daylight to set up camp. In looking at the route after that, we still had about 40 miles from Loon Lake to

Northstar and something told us that the trail wouldn't suddenly be rideable immediately after Loon Lake. We simultaneously came to the realization.

There was no way we were going to make it to Northstar in time.

"You know, Fleck is driving the Surly van to SaddleDrive. Maybe we could call him and find out where he's at and see if he could pick us up somewhere." Aaron regretfully informed me.

This thought had been in the back of my mind all day and it definitely wasn't an option that I wanted to take. But what other choice did we really have? We were stuck between a rock and a rock covered in shit.

I made the call to Fleck.

It was time to throw in the towel and admit defeat. It felt super shitty to make it this far and succumb to failure but we were out of options — and time. Fleck agreed to meet us the next day in Tahoma, a small town on the western shore of Lake Tahoe.

Now our next step was figuring out how the hell we were going to get there.

Sometimes the shittiest situations have the best views.

Continue on to part three of the story.

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