

# Mountain Biking in Orange County



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*Richard Fenno and Holly Ray, owners of Overland Bicycle Adventures, discovered off-road challenges in their own backyard.*



To those familiar only with its stereotypes, California's Orange County is perhaps best known as the home of Disneyland, the California Angels and a seemingly endless series of suburbs sprawling from the Pacific Ocean inland as far as the eye can see.

But many off-road bicycling enthusiasts also know Orange County as the home of vast stretches of genuine wilderness. Tucked amongst the freeways and the mushrooming cities is an extensive system of trails and fire roads offering excellent mountain biking to those in the know.

Orange County is also the home of Overland Bicycle Adventures, a Santa Ana-based touring outfit which specializes in introducing riders both to the sport and the region's hidden off-road treasures.

Founded by husband and wife cyclists Richard Fenno and Holly Ray, Overland has offered Sunday rides in Orange County since August 1984, when the pair bought a fleet of 12 aluminum Cannondale mountain bikes and opened for business.

Overland offers two basic day trips through separate wilderness areas, but overnight excursions can be arranged and plans are already in the works for tours of Catalina Island, another little-known mountain-bike haven.

Ray said she also hopes to offer women-only rides in the future, an idea which has attracted much interest but little actual support so far. "The overwhelming majority of inquiries we get are from women," Ray says. "But they don't come on the rides. We're still trying to figure out why. When they do come, they really enjoy it. We're trying to encourage more of them to come out."

For a basic cost of \$35, which includes the bicycle rental, a helmet (a must for all riders), snacks during and after the ride and water, Overland offers a very enjoyable Sunday afternoon.

Fenno and Ray are both personable and outgoing, matching a fun attitude

## *The Disneyland Alternative:*

Photo and story by Eric Norris

# Knobby Thrills in the Matterhorn's Shadow

with years of cycling experience. Both are skilled riders. Ray, in particular, is capable of heart-stopping kamikaze descents down impossible trails, but the outfit's rides are by no means aimed only at experienced cyclists.

The three- to four-hour rides begin with basic lessons on trail etiquette (yielding to equestrians and hikers and so forth) and fundamentals of shifting and off-road riding. Even riders who haven't ridden a bicycle in years can master the mountain bikes in short time, according to Fenno.

The two major routes followed on the rides (others can be arranged on request) can be summarized as follows:

**El Moro Canyon** runs a circuit through Crystal Cove State Park, a little-known wilderness on the Pacific Coast just south of the seaside community of Corona del Mar.

The ride begins with a series of switchbacks to a peak offering a spectacular view of the ocean and Catalina Island some 25 miles to the south. After a series of roller-coaster hills and a steep uphill, the group pauses for a short lecture on downhill riding technique, which comes in handy as the route descends into El Moro Canyon.

A light snack is served on the tree-shaded floor of the canyon, readying the riders for a grinding climb dubbed "The Bataan Death March" by Fenno, who

points out that the descent down the other side is well worth the uphill effort. The downhill takes the group back to the starting point.

The entire ride is about 12 to 15 miles long, the rough equivalent of about 30 to 40 miles on paved roads. Ray places the difficulty at about 5 on a scale of 10, although more ambitious riders can add optional loops for more difficulty and distance.

**Canada Gobernadora** tours Caspers Park, an inland recreational area in the Santa Ana Mountains north of the cities of El Toro and Mission Viejo. The park's extensive equestrian trails form the basis of the route, which generally explores the easternmost reaches of the two ridges forming the park's boundaries.

A series of rolling hills approaching the top of the ridge leads the riders through the park's thick chaparral and offers panoramic views of the mountain range.

A very, very steep downhill follows, ending on a rolling bridle trail on the floor of the park valley. The route crisscrosses a stream on the valley floor several times—a favorite portion of the ride.

After skirting the edge of a neighboring bird sanctuary, the group stops for lunch at the turnaround point. The return explores new territory on the valley floor, including several more stream crossings and a passage under a canopy of massive oaks.

Canada Gobernadora is somewhat longer than El Moro—about 15-18 miles—and slightly more difficult, although well within the reach of most riders. Ray rates the ride at about 6 to 7 on a scale of 10, but stronger riders can again add more distance.

Other prime off-road areas in Orange County recommended by Ray, but not included on the standard itinerary, include the trails leading to the top of the Santa Ana mountain range and several areas in Santiago Canyon, located north of El Toro. Newport Beach's Upper Newport Bay Ecological Reserve offers trails through a genuine wilderness enclave just minutes from the skyscrapers of Newport Center.

The Cannondale bicycles used by Overland feature an unusual aluminum frame, sturdy components and a smaller, 24-inch rear wheel which helps maintain traction and reduce gearing for steep uphills. The bike provided for a test ride performed well, and Fenno carries a full complement of tools to repair any damage that might occur on the trail.

Further information on Overland's upcoming schedule of rides and a brochure are available either by calling (714) 543-2237 or by sending a card or letter to: Overland Bicycle Adventures, P.O. Box 363, Santa Ana, CA 92702.