

## *Curt Cranks at Cycle Utah 2001*

*by Curt Mobley*

Do you remember the old Army recruiting slogan “Be all you can be?” It sounds enticing so you sign up, but then when you get to boot camp you realize that “Be all you can be” really means “Run in the hot sun until you puke, then crawl around in the mud all night, and then do it all over again the next day, after getting only three hours of sleep.” The Adventure Cycling Association probably used the same advertising agency to come up with phrases like “ride a bicycle while enjoying some of the world’s most beautiful scenery” for their Cycle Utah trip. Once you start peddling, you begin to remember the fine print that said, “...a considerable amount of elevation gain keeps this ride challenging.” So get out your map of Utah and follow along with my tale of riding through Mormonland.

**Day 0: Check in.** I caught a plane to Lost Wages, I mean Las Vegas, and then took a shuttle to St. George, Utah. I picked up my bike, which I had Fed Exed to a local bike store. Everyone met that evening for check-in, which gave me a chance to look over the other 115 riders. There were guys with \$5,000 titanium bikes and abs that looked like rows of baseballs underneath their jerseys. There were nubile women with legs that looked like they could crack walnuts between their knees, and whose every bump was displayed to maximum effect in their color-coordinated lycra body suits. But I wasn’t intimidated by these youthful hardbodies, because I knew that my experience and superior fat reserves would see me through on the big mountain days. Actually, it was the retirees that had me worried. When you’re retired, you can ride every day, and some of these old geezers do 10,000 miles a year. One guy in his sixties told me he had just ridden from Oregon to North Carolina to visit his grandkids. Also, when you’ve survived the Great Depression and landing at Normandy, a few hills are not going to psyche you out. One old gal had a sign on her bike that said “Not for sale. Too fast for you anyway.” I was afraid to ask if the sign referred to her or the bike.

### **Day 1: St. George to Springdale.**

We were under way at 8AM, headed for Zion National Park. Everything was fine until we topped out the first big climb at Hurricane Cliffs to find ourselves in a strong headwind. At the lunch stop, I read that the Mormon pioneers named the town and nearby cliffs for the strong winds that always seem to be blowing there. 43 miles got us to the first campsite just outside ZNP. We then did a magnificent 18 mile ride up Zion Canyon and back. This is one of the most beautiful valleys on earth—I rate it as the equal of Yosemite Valley—and riding here was one of the main reasons I wanted to do Cycle Utah.



*Day 1. Riding through Zion Canyon. This road is closed to cars, which makes it one of the world's finest bike trails (there is a free shuttle bus for tourists).*

**Day 2: Springdale to Hatch.** This was the first big hill day, and it had me worried. I hit the road at 7:45AM and polished off 1,000 feet of steep switchbacks on the road that climbs eastward out of ZNP. You then come to a tunnel that is over a mile long, and which gains another several hundred feet of elevation inside the tunnel. Fortunately, the National Park Service does not allow bicycles in the tunnel, so we got shuttled to the top end of the tunnel. You then bike through another 10 miles of *incredible* scenery as you work your way out of ZNP. You're climbing, but it's so beautiful that you don't notice. After leaving the park, you continue a gentle climb to 8,000 feet elevation, and then drop a thousand, and then climb another 2000, and then drop again on a 15 mile downhill run that even had a tailwind. It doesn't get much better than that! Total for the day: 61 miles with 4,500 feet of climbing.

**Day 3: Hatch to Bryce Canyon National Park.** It was below freezing last night, with a heavy frost. I was in the bathroom of the campground brushing my teeth when a guy from a motorhome told me there had been a terrorist attack on New York City, which he had just seen on his TV. At 8:15AM the trip leader called a meeting and told everyone that the World Trade Center buildings had both collapsed, etc. There were several people from New York City on the ride, but the details were sketchy, so we all just continued with the day's ride. There was nothing else we could do. Today's ride was short, but it was at about 8,000 feet elevation, so I felt it. After reaching BCNP I took a four-mile hike to get some exercise. That evening, we saw a couple of riders coming down the road wearing weird-looking clothes, which we couldn't make out from a distance. As they got closer, we saw that the man was wearing a tux and the woman had a wedding dress complete with a veil trailing behind. They had just gotten married at the BCNP lodge and were starting a biking honeymoon. We invited them to dinner, but they said they had other plans. That cheered everyone up. Life goes on!



*Day 3: The joy of cycling: me passing through a tunnel in Red Canyon on the way to Bryce Canyon National Park.*

**Day 4: BCNP to Panguich.** This was another easy day (designed for rest and acclimatization before the big day 5). We shuttled to the upper end of Bryce Canyon (elevation 9100 feet) and then had a 44 mile, mostly downhill run to Panguich. I hit 44 mph on one section. The last 15 miles had a strong tailwind. I set up camp in a strong wind, and then we had a bit of a thunder storm. I ate dinner in my tent to escape the wind. After the storm blew past, the wind died and there was the most vivid double rainbow I've ever seen. The evening light in the storm-cleaned air was enchanting.

**Day 5: Panguich to Cedar City.** This was the big day that had been gnawing at my soul for six months. This was the day when my quads would burst into flames, or I would end up as a skinless meatball, or perhaps—with luck—I would just die early in the morning and save myself the pain. Here's how it went:

I awoke to the sounds of Thor's hammer, but fortunately Boreas slept late. It was cold enough to see my breath when I started riding. The road immediately began climbing, but the grade was never more than 6%, and often much less. It stayed cool and cloudy, with scattered showers, so it was really pretty nice riding in spite of the steady climb. A crosswind picked up at around 9,000 feet, where I really began to feel the elevation. I sucked down a few PowerJels, put it into low gear, and just kept peddling. Heavy breathing for sure the last few miles. After 3 hours and 57 minutes in the saddle, and 32 miles, I reached the high point of the ride at 10,700 feet elevation in Cedar Breaks National Monument. I thought I had it made at that point, but the worst was yet to come. The next 10 miles were all above 10,000 feet, and they were up and down a couple of hundred feet at a time. Lots of huffing and puffing, but beautiful scenery with autumn-gold aspens silhouetted against patches of blue sky.



*Day 5: Aspens against the sky at 10,000 feet, and me on top in Cedar Breaks National Monument. The day ended in the low country below my front wheel.*

After lunch at mile 38, I did a thorough check of all nuts and bolts and brakes and spokes and such, for the big moment was about to arrive! At mile 40 you pass a road sign that says

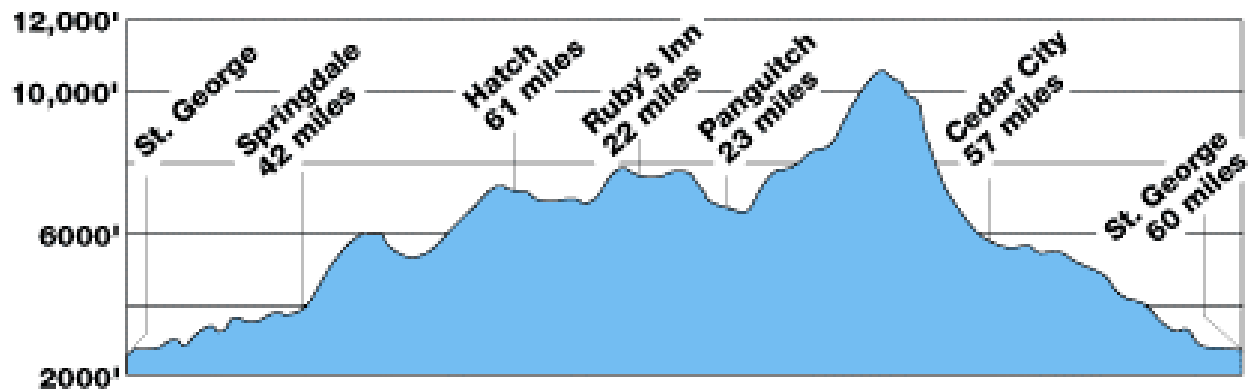
Brake test area  
4-8 % grade next 18 miles  
Trucks use low gear  
Bikers prepare to die

Well, actually it doesn't have the last line, but it should. From this point on, the trip was all downhill, with 8,000 feet to lose before reaching St. George again. This was the moment I had been dreaming about! All the uphill pain was about to be paid back. I had even bought new tires just for the next 30 minutes. I zipped up my raingear in the hope that it might save a bit of skin if I lost it at 50 mph. Then I pushed over the edge.... This piece of road is one of the finest downhills you'll ever find. Scenic, starting with open vistas looking south into Zion National Park, and then winding but good pavement as the road drops into a beautiful limestone canyon. But there was no time to enjoy the views: just hold on and let it roll! No time to contemplate what even a small pothole would do to your front wheel. No time to wonder if a truck had blown oil on the road. No time to wonder if there was gravel on any of the curves. No time to wonder what I would do if the headset nut came loose and I pulled the handlebars out. No time even to look at the speedometer. Twenty miles and 5,000 feet lower you finally slow down when you arrive in Cedar City. Six months of anticipation, and then it's all over in a few minutes—some things in life are like that.

Many people, myself included, thought that this was the finest day of riding they had ever done. To my surprise I never felt really fatigued. The scenery was incredible, the weather mercifully cool, and the crosswind tolerable. I had a headwind and stinging rain for a few miles as I passed through one thunderstorm, but that just added to the experience. I've done individually longer days, harder days, and more scenic days, but this day brought everything together. The 4500 feet of climbing was challenging but not exhausting, and the 5000 foot downhill was the best run I've ever done. Total: 60 miles total for the day.

**Day 6: Cedar City to St. George.** This could have been an anticlimax day, except that we had a mostly downhill run with 3,000 feet to lose in 60 miles, which I did in 4 hours and 1 minute of riding time. It was a great way to finish the ride. Not too scenic, but just relaxed riding. A good way to come down from the previous day's adrenaline high.

Cycle Utah is a truly world class, outstanding week of riding. My grand total, counting side trips, was 309 miles with about 16,000 feet of climbing. It's a hard ride, but not a death ride, and the scenery cannot be equaled. The Adventure Cycling folks really have their act together. The support was great; the food was great, the riders and staff were all great. Everyone on the ride was exceedingly pleased with the trip, and it was well worth the money. Check it out at [www.adventurecycling.org](http://www.adventurecycling.org), and let me know which trip you'll be doing next year!



*The route profile*