



THE DESERT

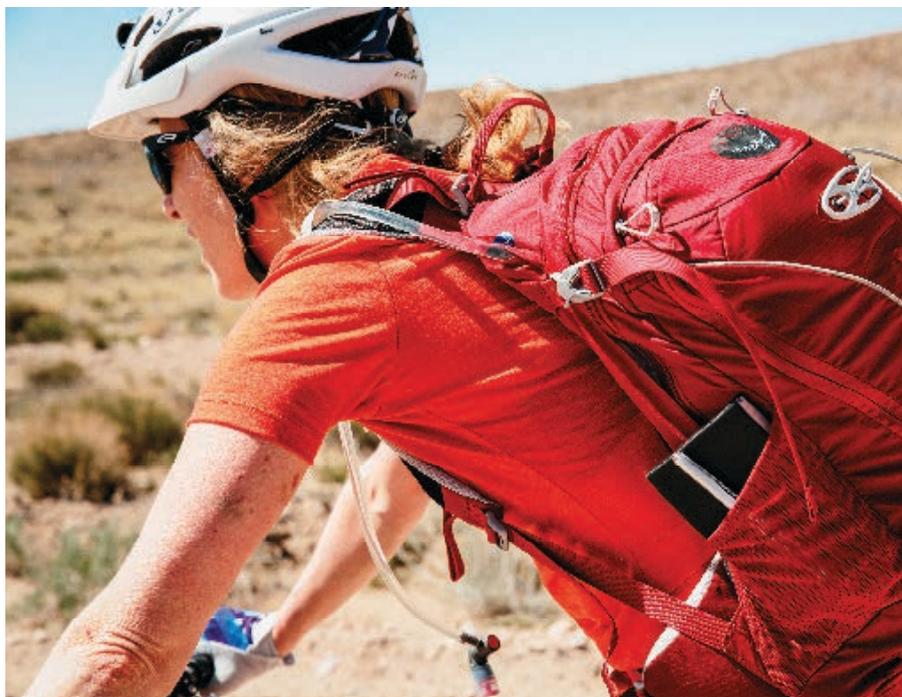
RIDE HARD AND LEAVE FEAR IN THE DUST

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MOJAVE

THE PLAN WAS austere and elegant. I would ride a mountain bike pulling a trailer on a 77-mile loop around the Mojave National Preserve at the height of spring. Wildflowers would blanket my route, and the three-day expedition would merge





two loves—riding and camping—into my first bike-packing epic.

Then reality intruded. A week before my departure, a Mojave park ranger told me that my proposed route was nuts. “A very physically fit rider could do it, but I’m concerned about the trailer you’ll be pulling,” she wrote in an email. “The rough route may cause the trailer to destabilize your bike, and there will be no water or facilities of any kind—nor will cell phones work.”

I soon found that it didn’t matter which route I took. Thanks to broken pipes and a broke government, there were only three guaranteed water stops in the entire 2,398-square-mile preserve, and two of those were within 10 miles of each other.

I took a break from panicking and strategizing to pick up a few smaller items—including a key-chain vial of pepper spray. I figured I might need it for a rogue coyote. The Outdoorsman, the only shop in my hometown that seems to sell it, has bars on the door and shiny handguns lined up

WHAT I PACKED

Yeti 575 mountain bike \$3,800
 Osprey Synchro 20 hydration pack \$130
 DeLorme inReach SE Extreme communication kit \$400
 Panasonic Lumix TS5 rugged camera \$250
 Specialized Andorra clothing \$60–\$135
 Sea to Summit Spark Spl sleeping bag \$300
 Giro Xara helmet \$130
 Smith Optics Pivlock glasses \$200
 Light & Motion Stella 500 lamp \$200



For full product reviews, go to WIRED.com/expedition.

with a big red SOS button and generous battery power, and I had already programmed it so a few key friends could follow my ride online. I didn’t set it up for all of my Twitter friends to see. What if one of my followers is a Charles Manson copycat who lives on a ranch in the Mojave?

Other essentials I was bringing: 30 spare bike parts and tools recommended by an expert bike-packer friend, a minimalist tarp shelter, a superlight sleeping bag, a 5.5-gallon water container, high-powered lights, a camera, and food. All of this had to fit on a Bob IbeX Plus trailer or in a 20-liter Osprey hydration pack with a pocket for everything. When I loaded the trailer for a test ride, I looked like something out of *The Beverly Hillbillies*. And that was before I bunged on the water jug.

At least my bike, the Yeti 575, was hard to beat. With 5.75 inches of springy play on the front shock, the aluminum bike has been around for about 10 years and is a cult classic, renowned for its cushy downhill ride. For 2014, Yeti increased the wheel size from 26 to 27.5 inches and retuned the rear shock to create more support as the spring in the front fork compresses.

It was giving me grief, however: Without refitting the 575 with a special rear axle, you can’t properly attach a trailer. I’d ordered the custom axle but had forgotten that this new and improved 575 also had larger wheels and thus required a trailer with a larger fork. OK, no trailer. Which meant no way to carry extra water. Now I was wiggling out.

I WAS IN A SAGEBRUSH AND JOSHUA TREE HEAVEN, WRAPPED IN SILENCE AND LIT BY STARS.

But what ever goes according to plan? Five minutes later I had a plan B: Wing it. Instead of following the loop route, I would set up a base at Hole in the Wall, a campsite with water. Then I'd study the map and pedal from there to whatever destinations looked interesting, returning to the familiarity and comfort of my tent each night.

I set out in my car the next morning. Six hundred fifty miles later, when I turned north off I-40 into the Mojave Preserve, my cell phone bars disappeared and the radio got fuzzy. This is it, I thought. I may never see another whizzing semi again. But then I spotted an old desert tortoise on the two-lane road. They can survive for a year without water, so I took this as an auspicious sign. I hopped out of the car and crept toward it to say hello. But I didn't get close enough to frighten it and cause it to pee through its entire full-year water supply—surprisingly, one way these tortoises can die.

The sun was sinking behind the ridge when I arrived at Hole in the Wall, set at 4,400 feet against volcanic rock cliffs with shiny black whorls that look like melting faces. As I set up my shelter, I bent over a Mojave yucca and stabbed myself in the forehead. Dabbing the blood away, I sat on a rock and breathed in the peaceful scene. I was in a sagebrush and Joshua tree heaven, wrapped in silence and lit by stars.

Dawn was bright and cool. I rode 15 miles up and down washboard roads, past leafless trees and giant boulders that looked karate-chopped by Zeus. As I rode, I groped for the Osprey hydro-pack's bladder nozzle magnetically secured to my chest strap and steadily sipped from it as if on an oral-drip IV.

By 12:30 the temperature was a balmy 80 degrees, but the sun was so intense that it felt much hotter. Seeking shade, I returned to camp

and hid under my tarp. I listened to flies buzz and tried to read but soon realized that the only way through this inferno was to lie perfectly still and will the breeze to waft my way.

At around 4 pm I set out again, this time behind Hole in the Wall, up gently sloping Wild Horse Canyon Road. By 6 the wind had died down. The shadows were long, the light was magic. The climb past mesas and



The Yeti 575 is a versatile full-suspension ride ideal for exploring unknown terrain.

fields of fragrant sage was unyielding, but I locked out the front shock, adjusted my seat post via a handlebar lever, and rode in comfort. With no destination in mind, I turned around at sunset at the top of a rise, unlocked the front shock, and let the bike fly. I pedaled as fast as I could back to camp, relishing the 575's perfect symmetry and the beautiful freedom of life with no baggage. **W**

