

Texas Hill Country Outdoors

by Steve Ramirez



MOUNTAIN BIKING IS LIKE LIFE; WHEN YOU GET TO THE ROCKY PARTS... PEDAL FASTER!

As we rounded the first bend of the Guadalupe River State park trail that I had hiked many times, I was amazed at how many rocks there were that I had never noticed before. When you're on a bike, things like rocks, roots, and tree limbs take on a new significance. We couldn't stop laughing at one point because all my biking buddy could hear from me was, "yikes, rock, mud, ditch, rock, tree branch, rock, horse leavens, rock, cactus, rock....I made it!" If you can't tell, I'm still learning how to mountain bike. Stretches of trail that are smooth make it seem like you're flying. Then with the next turn you find yourself pedaling faster, changing gears, climbing hills, blowing through muddy spots and bouncing over rocks....you know...just like life. The rough spots define you and the easy ones give you time to reflect. In between there is the beautiful hill country scenery, wildlife, and lots of self-deprecating good humor.

My marathon training partner and I had recently taken on mountain biking as a way to cross train for our runs. Biking isn't as tough on our joints as running and besides that, it's fun. Most of the time, we just take the bikes on to the back streets and trails around Boerne. Biking along neighborhood roads and down the Old # 9 trail is a gentle way to get exercise and enjoy the local scenery. The same can be said for any other hill country town. But if you want a little more scenery and a lot more challenge, there are trails in every direction to meet your needs.

If you're just starting out like me, you might be looking for a trail that includes less hill climbing and rocks and more scenery. Not that the trails with the greater challenges don't also have great scenery; they do, but you might not want to be looking over the edge of the precipice while you pedal. There are several clubs and organizations in our area that can help you get started or give you more information about mountain-biking the Texas Hills. They include the Central Texas Trail Tamers (www.trailtamers.org), S.T.O.R.M, the South Texas off Road Mountain Bikers (www.storm-web.org), and I.M.B.A, the International Mountain Bikers Association (www.imba.com).

I recommend looking at the Falcon Guide to Mountain Biking Texas by Christopher Hess. It has detailed descriptions of trails all over The Lone Star State including the hill country. For example: Kerrville-Schreiner State Park has a trail that is a short four miles long and listed as "easy to moderate." Remember that this description is relative to your level of fitness and skill. The Wolf Mountain trail at Pedernales Falls State Park is 7.5 miles and is also listed as "easy to moderate,"....but then again...well, we'll get to that story in a moment.

If you are looking for one place in our area that has a variety of trails at different levels of difficulty, try the Hill Country State Natural Area near Bandera. The trails at HCNA include the "pasture trail" which is a 6 mile loop rated as easy, and the 7 mile "Bandera Creek" trail which is rated moderate. Once you get so good that you want to take on the tough stuff, try the 16 miles of strenuous loop trails at Flat Rock Ranch near Comfort. (www.flatrockranch.com)

Now back to my happy tale of trail woe. As I mentioned earlier, my marathon training partner Kristy and I had taken on mountain biking as a way of cross training for our long-distance runs. Like so many good ideas, it seemed so harmless at the onset. Somehow, we thought it might be reasonable to take on the Wolf Mountain trail at

Pedernales Falls State Park just two days before running in the San Antonio Rock "n" Roll half marathon. After all, it was a half marathon, 13.1 miles and we had run the whole 26.2 miles at the inaugural event last year. And besides, the guide book said that the trail was, "easy to moderate." How tough could it be?

As we started out on the trail we were taken in by the gentle sound of gravel beneath our fat, knobby tires. The sun was out, the air was cool and the birds were singing a happy tune. Soon, we were gliding along, down hill, the wind in our faces and the beautiful Texas Hills all around us. At the bottom of a long and incredibly enjoyable incline, we crossed Bee Creek. The sound of clear, cool, hill country water gliding over ancient limestone was melodic. It was a perfect day and we congratulated ourselves for thinking up this brilliant plan. And that is when it dawned on me that we had been going down hill for some time now, and that the only way back to the truck was up hill, over the rocks and roots, and yes, even the gentle creek.

Crossing Mescal Creek, we came to the fork in the trail, to the left was Jones Spring, and to the right...and up a very steep incline was Wolf Mountain. It was then that I got another bright idea. Why don't we follow the trail to Jones Spring and then loop around to Wolf Mountain? That way, I explained as if I had any idea what I was talking about; we will circle around and be coming down the steep hill, instead of trying to climb it. In hindsight, I can't for the life of me figure out why I didn't bother to look at the topographical lines on the map. After all, I was a Marine and knew all too well how to read a map...and determine the elevation of the path. If I had been struck blind by lightning I still could have handed the map to Kristy who is an expert navigator with years of experience...but no... I led us forward. Like a trusting friend she let me do it. I hope she never lets me do that again.

At first the trail was gently rolling, the trees embraced us; the birds welcomed us once more. And then like a clueless babysitter in a "B" rated horror movie, I led us past Tobacco Creek and I never heard the frogs saying, "Turn back!" The trail narrowed and we continued forward. The rocks and roots multiplied and we pedaled harder. The trail moved toward vertical and we carried the bikes over the limestone boulders. After all, the good trail had to be just around the corner... right? And it did get better, except now we were miles off course. I decided to look at the map when we came to the park fence at CR 201. And that is when two things happened, we turned around and my dear friend chose not to kill me.

Pedaling back we came to another fork in the road. I hate these! Luckily, there was a sign that had arrows pointing both ways, one side said, "To hell" and the other said, "And back." Hmm, what to do? We turned left and it was a good thing we did because in short order the trail began a gentle decent, the vistas opened up to us, all was right with the world... and then there was a screaming red hot descent plummeting toward, "hey this looks familiar" the same intersection where I decided to take us on the Bataan Death March through Jones Spring. "See, I was right, I proclaimed!" We did end up coming down Wolf Mountain.

After climbing the same hills we had earlier rolled down we finally made it back to the truck. In two days we would run our half marathon. Our legs were dead and we sat exhausted looking out over Pedernales Falls. The breeze blew coolly, the trees dropped multicolored leaves, the water rushed by and the birds began to sing. We both laughed. Mountain biking, like life, teaches you as you go. We are planning to go back real soon. But this time, I'm listening to the frog's advice. X

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