

TRAVEL ON BIKEMAG

Destination: Las Vegas, Nevada

In a city of constant reinvention, mountain bikers have their eyes on a future for singletrack.

Aaron Theisen • Feb 9, 2024



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At the Neon Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada, giant metal and glass masterworks of midcentury design that once lit up the iconic skyline of The Strip lean against one another in a large yard on the edge of downtown in various states of repair. In a city of constant reinvention, the past can be an afterthought—after all, why dwell on the last batch of bad hands when the next one is sure to be flush? But local mountain bikers, like the Neon Museum, have embraced the value of permanence, with an eye to the future.

In the most mountainous state in the lower 48, an endless vista of arid peaks shimmer above the Mojave Desert like a mirage on Sin City's skyline. Naturally, Las Vegas mountain bikers gravitated toward the foothills and canyons ringing the city, where over the years they built some 500 miles of singletrack among the shaggy, Seussian silhouettes of the Joshua tree and the blade-like shapes of the yucca.



The "basin and range" topography of the most mountainous state in the Lower 48 surrounds Sin City's Strip.

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Just west of downtown, the Bureau of Land Management's Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, which encompasses the Red Rock Canyon National Recreation Area, became a focal point for trail building. Beginning in the early 2000s, users constructed the steep, squared-off stair-stepping rock of the Cowboy Trails and the mellow XC trails of Blue Diamond without the official sign-off of the BLM.

Recognizing the need for official recognition of the area's popular mountain bike trails, the Southern Nevada Mountain Bike Association, the local International Mountain Bike Association (IMBA) group, began working with the Bureau of Land Management, which administers Red Rock Canyon and a handful of other recreation areas outside the city.

It's a process that can often span decades of distrust and delay. But things in the desert have a way of coming to life seemingly overnight, given a little nourishment.

Much of that nourishment came from having the right people in place. Several field staffers at the BLM's Red Rock office mountain biked. And SNMBA had experienced assets like Board president David Spicer, who had successfully worked with the BLM to build a trail system on his ranch land in Beatty, 90 minutes north of Las Vegas.



Quick climb: In its relative short lifespan, SNMBA has forged a strong relationship with the Red Rock field office of the Bureau of Land Management, which oversees the land which many of the city's most beloved trails, like aptly named 3 Mile Smile, occupy. It helps that a number of BLM staffers are mountain bikers too.

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In addition, as a relatively young organization, SNMBA had the advantage of looking at what worked and what didn't in other communities throughout the West.

"There hasn't been a lot of conflict because people were aware of the conflicts that could happen," says Spicer. "We didn't have to reinvent the wheel."

In its short lifespan, SNMBA has forged a strong relationship with the BLM, such that the federal agency has asked SNMBA for guidance on how to reroute unsanctioned trails around sensitive archaeological sites rather than simply remove them.

SNMBA received a Trail Accelerator grant from IMBA to build nine to 15 miles of multi-use, mountain bike-optimized singletrack near Red Rock Campground—the first professionally planned and built trail system in the Las Vegas area. Now, letters of support from the state BLM office in hand, the group has begun the process of inventorying and formalizing 100 miles of existing trail in Red Rock Canyon—a characteristically ambitious and quick step for Spicer and SNMBA.



Although the Cowboy Trails are best known for their rowdy descents, the access climbs are no less steep or technically demanding.

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Says Spicer, “This is Vegas, baby, let’s go for the whole thing!”

With officially sanctioned trails, the Las Vegas chapter of the National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA) can practice and host middle- and high-school mountain bike races on local singletrack rather than having to travel hours away. Event organizers can host festivals. And the community can officially promote the full breadth of the city’s hundreds of miles of trails.

The stamp of approval gives these trails a degree of permanence. And trails give a measure of permanence to a community trying to expand beyond the bounds of gambling. The projects have caught the eye of local leaders and the influential home-building corporations shaping the rapidly swelling suburbs who see the real estate value—and the real, multigenerational value—of community recreation access.

“They get it, they know how many mountain bike trails there are, they know they’re not just going to go away,” says Alison Cormier, SNMBA’s Community Engagement and Education Manager.

“Local leaders realize they’ve got to have something that has a future,” says Spicer. “Trails provide a future.”



Just west of downtown Las Vegas, the Mojave Desert quickly transitions to a steeply angled layer cake of bedrock--perfect ingredients for singletrack systems like the Cowboy Trails.

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If Las Vegas is all future, the community of Boulder City, some twenty miles east, is all past. Built by the Bureau of Reclamation during the Depression to house employees constructing Hoover (then Boulder) Dam, the federal government mapped out every detail of the city with an eye toward clean living for its workers: Boulder City outlawed gaming in 1931—the same year that the state legalized gambling—and, for a number of years, banned alcohol. The quiet lifestyle inspired by the city’s clean-living mantra made it a magnet for retirees, few of whom knew that the city was also becoming a time capsule of early 2000s singletrack, thanks in large part to local fine artist and trail building legend Brent Thomson.

Thomson turned to mountain biking for fitness in the late 90s following a health scare, and he quickly turned his artist’s eye for line to the rocky, undeveloped foothills surrounding Boulder City’s tidy post-war homes. After the city buried his early work under a golf course, City Parks and Recreation officials gave Thompson and brothers Dan and Jeff Hasken permission to scratch out singletrack in Bootleg Canyon Recreation Area north of town.

“The biggest challenge back in the day was dirt—there isn’t any,” says Dan. “We were really excited when the McLeod would sink six inches into the ground.”

“That was the thing: just beat the ground into submission.”



"The nature of the terrain and the lack of soil has definitely given Bootleg a stigma or urban legend of danger," says Kurt Horack of Boulder City's All Mountain Cyclery. "That's always something we're trying to tell people: this is real-deal riding, but just because there's sharp rocks that doesn't mean there's not something for everyone."

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The trio carved 36 miles of rowdy, rocky singletrack, nearly all of it hand-built and full of knife-edge exposure and dagger-sharp rock, on the jagged bones of an old volcano.

In 2006, facing opposition within city hall, but supported by influential local community members—patrons of Thomson's work with paint as well as his work with a pickaxe—the Parks and Recreation department issued a moratorium on new trail building, which largely remains in place to this day.

Thomson died in 2008, but Dan Hasken continued to steward Bootleg: in addition to founding SNMBA, he convinced Boulder City Parks and Recreation to fund a trail administrator position that he has occupied ever since.

With the trail-building moratorium in place, Bootleg's trails retain their unapologetically rowdy character. Double-blacks like Ginger and G-String, with their mandatory drops into wheel-trapping rock landings, demand downhill bikes and DH skills. But the intermediate trails give riders a taste of tech with fewer consequences.



When Boulder City officials issued a moratorium on new trail construction at Bootleg Canyon, they created a time capsule of early 2000s riding: rocky, rough and often unforgiving singletrack.

“The nature of the terrain and the lack of soil has definitely given Bootleg a stigma or urban legend of danger,” says Kurt Horack, co-owner of Boulder City’s All Mountain Cyclery. “That’s always something we’re trying to tell people: this is real-deal riding, but just because there’s sharp rocks that doesn’t mean there’s not something for everyone.”

The shop’s Wednesday Taco Rides illustrate that diversity, with both groms and grandparents occupying the shop’s shuttle van to the drop-in for the descent. Headlights and Bud Lights both flow as locals swap stories about which trail was named after which builder’s ex.

In the two decades since Thomson and the Haskens built the Bootleg Canyon trails, those Bootleg tales have earned the trail system a nearly mythical status among connoisseurs of chunder. Dan says that Canadian freeride legends Wade Simmons, Richie Schley and Brett Tippie, who filmed several segments for the seminal *Kranked* series of bike movies at Bootleg, would refer to Boulder City as “the other BC.” And for many of those years, Bootleg hosted the Outdoor Demo portion of Las Vegas’s annual Interbike cycling trade show, with manufacturers testing their new models on the double-blacks in the backyards of unsuspecting octogenarians.



All Mountain Cyclery takes advantage of Bootleg Canyon's easily shuttled 1,100 feet of descending right out its front door.

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“You’ve got 10,000 mountain bikers up there for Interbike, and the city residents had no clue,” says Dan.

“People in town know Bootleg is there, but they have no idea the scale,” says Horack.

Bootleg, like Las Vegas’s burgeoning singletrack scene, shows that it’s possible to escape the neon glare and constant reinvention of the city.



In the two decades since locals built the Bootleg Canyon trails, the system has achieved something of a mythical status among enthusiasts of demanding DH trails, even if it's terra incognita to much of the retirement community. “People in town know Bootleg is there, but they have no idea the scale,” says Horack.

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“What I really like is when I can get out on the trails, I can see the lights of the Las Vegas Strip, and it’s so obvious to me how much I’m removed from it,” says Cormier. “I’m out in the mountain air, among the Joshua trees, while the hustle and bustle of Las Vegas is going on 10 miles from me. I love being that close to it, but that much removed from it at the same time.”

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