



Jake "Sloth Monkey" Warren ponders the directions to the Surveyor's Ridge Hut while waiting out a hailstorm in a Columbia River Highway bike-path tunnel.

Hood

with

ink

and

THE NEW HUT SYSTEM
ENCIRCLING OREGON'S HIGHEST
PEAK PROMISES
EPIC RIDING,
MINIMAL PACKING AND
STRAIGHTFORWARD
ROUTE FINDING. TWO OUT OF
THREE AIN'T BAD.

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY Johnathon

55

Four Ur digits.

That was all I had to remember.

Most people would have written them down. Given what's at stake, that would've been the sensible thing to do.

The stakes, in fact, are escalating by the minute. My friends Wilder Boulé and Jake "Sloth Monkey" Warren and I have just spent the last five hours riding 30 miles into the Cascades wilderness surrounding Mt. Hood. Twenty-nine of those miles were uphill, adding up to an elevation gain of more than 6,000 feet, and there were multiple stops to try to figure out whether we were lost or simply didn't know where we were going, and now we're fatigued in a way that makes vegetarians lust for chili dogs. We've finally arrived at our destination, Surveyors Ridge hut, the first stop on a newly christened four-day hut tour circling Oregon's iconic Mt.

Hood. When we saw the green metallic roof peeking through the distant trees, Sloth Monkey gave a little hoot. The rain is falling again and the air temperature is dropping with the twilight, so we're stoked to arrive. Inside the hut is food, warmth and shelter.

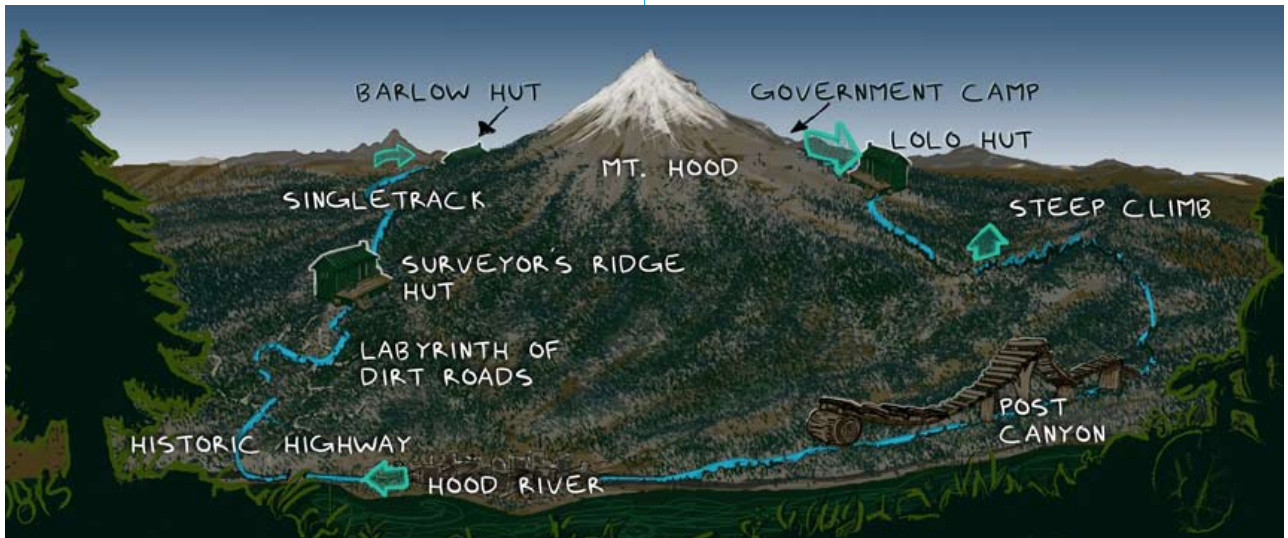
Outside the hut is a steel lock that requires four digits to open.

About those digits: All my life I've possessed superhuman powers of numeric recall. I can still remember my high school locker combination and the phone numbers of every girlfriend I've ever had. Because I take great pride in this skill, I hadn't bothered writing down the combination to the hut when I signed us up for this excursion. I'd simply employed a mnemonic device and filed it in my cerebral Rolodex under "hut combo."

But while churning uphill in a semihypoxic haze, I'd begun to

Sloth Monkey carves through tunnels—both the manmade and evergreen versions—on the Pioneer Bridal Trail, near Government Camp.





question whether I had the four-digit sequence straight. I'd shuffled the numbers around in multiple variations, settling on a different arrangement with each passing squall. And now, when I finally climb the wooden steps of the hut's porch and spin the lock tumbler to the four digits in my head, the slider doesn't open. My stomach does a triple backflip.

It occurs to me that it's too dark to ride back to town, even if it is all downhill. So it's possible we'll have to spend the night sitting out a rainstorm in a tree well without food or sleeping gear, fighting hypothermia by sucking on Gu packets. "You remember the combo, right?" Wilder asks impatiently.

I could already hear the news announcer breathlessly reading the bulletin: *Ironic tragedy struck this week when mountain bikers near Mt. Hood cannibalized one of their own after being stranded in the freezing rain outside a well-stocked cabin.*



CAN A PERSON SURVIVE FOUR DAYS IN THE BACKCOUNTRY with nothing more than the contents of a CamelBak, a rain jacket and a dozen packets of Gu? This was the question I'd pondered that morning, while sitting on the floor of my living room surrounded by a pile of gear. I was perusing a promotional flyer for the fledgling Cascade Hut system while waiting for Wilder and Sloth Monkey, who were running more than an hour late. I couldn't get uptight about their lack of punctuality; I'd asked them to come on the trip precisely because the constraints of the 9-to-5 work world have no relevance to them. Instead of impatiently calling or texting to find out where they were, I decided to take advantage of the extra time by culling my gear down to the most basic essentials in response to the challenge implied in the flyer's tagline: "Bring only

your camera and a sense of adventure."

With each piece of kit I asked the question, "Do I really need to carry this around for four days?" Anything that flinched was tossed back into the closet. The more time went by, the smaller the pile became, until all that remained was a CamelBak stuffed to capacity with basic tools, rain gear and a camera. Wilder was only mildly annoyed that by the time he'd arrived I no longer needed the rear rack and panniers I'd asked him to bring.

"You can do that?" he asked skeptically.

"We're about to find out," I replied, flipping the CamelBak over my shoulder.

Wilder and Sloth Monkey each brought mission-critical skills to the operation. Wilder is a twentysomething Pacific Northwest native with a bachelor's degree in outdoor education who serves as a cycling guide for one of the region's premier touring companies. One of his regular routes includes the scenic Columbia River Gorge and the town of Hood River—the designated starting and ending point for the Cascade Huts loop. "Man, I know my way around that part of Oregon better than I do my ex-girlfriend's G-spot," he'd told me when I first brought up the trip.

"Oh yeah? How long were you together?"

"Almost 10 months."

"Fine. You're in."

Sloth Monkey, so named for his ability to be both languidly chill and mischievous at the same time, is a knobby-tire neophyte. The 140-mile trek around Mt. Hood will be only the third mountain biking experience of his life—and the first off-road ride on his newly purchased, fully rigid, 29-inch-wheeled Surly (model name: Karate Monkey). If you want to have an authentic, no-mechanicals-barred mountain-bike adventure, get yourself an enthusiastic newbie, drop him in the middle of nowhere on his first rig, and watch the

"OTHER THAN MY PARTNER AND ME, YOU'LL BE THE FIRST TO DO THIS," BAIN, THE ROUTE'S COFOUNDER, HAD SAID. HE SHOT A LOADED SMILE ACROSS THE TABLE THAT IN RETROSPECT PROBABLY SHOULD HAVE WORRIED ME MORE THAN IT DID.

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Gimme shelter

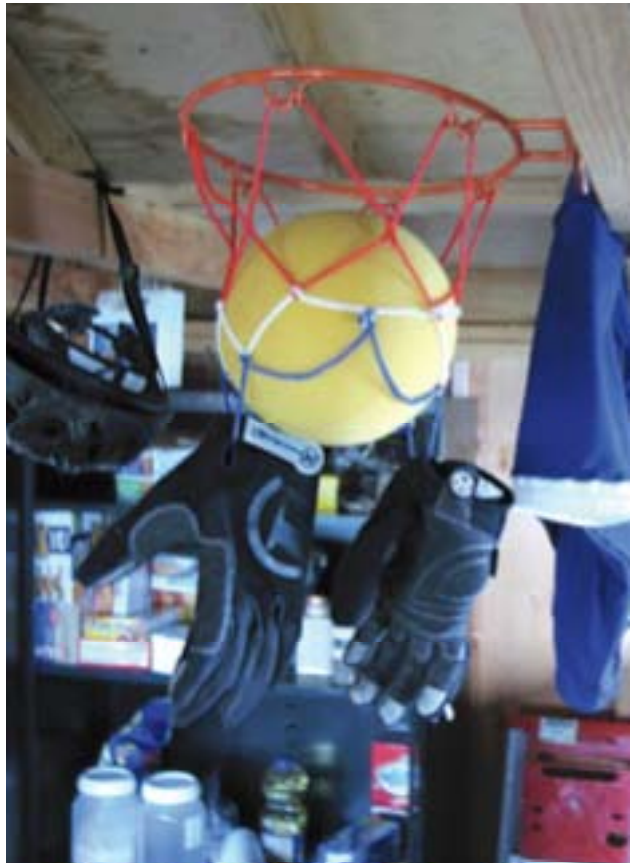
The Cascade Huts system kicks off its second year of operation in June 2008. Reserve your own cush accommodations at cascadehuts.com or by calling 866/430-4559. To avoid the possibility of turning into a hypothermic cougar treat, avail yourself of the following maps:



›The area's most accurate and comprehensive mountain bike trail guides are made by Adventure Maps. You'll need two to do the entire Cascade Huts loop: the Hood River map (which covers day one and half of day two) and the Mt. Hood map. Both are available online (\$10 each): adventuremaps.net.

›Green Trails Maps also offers highly detailed area grid maps that show relief and accurate trails. The relevant quadrants are Hood River (#430), Government Camp (#461) and Mt. Hood (#462). They're \$5.50 each; greentrailsmaps.com. Avoid the National Forest Service map of the Mt. Hood area,

which doesn't offer enough detail and is too outdated to be useful for anything beyond starting a signal fire for the search-and-rescue team.—J.A.



Continued
from p.
TK.

Clockwise from
top left: Pedal
POV on the
moss-draped
Zigzag Trail;
a Nerf hoop
doubles as a
clothesline; a rare
foxglove bloom;
the Monkey seeks
peanut-butter
sustenance.

chaos and magic unfold. Every moment is tinged with a taste of self-discovery—and potential death.

When I'd met Cascade Huts' co-owner, Don Bain, a week prior to the trip at a café in northwest Portland, he had given me no cause for trepidation. He'd described the newly christened loop—inspired by the

famed Durango-to-Moab hut system—as an arduous but fairly straightforward mix of jeep road, singletrack and occasional stretches of blacktop. More than 80 percent is off-road. Three pre-stocked huts strategically placed along the route make it possible to ride with nothing but the bare essentials.

“There are some long days, but nothing over the top,” Bain had said. “The route finding can be a little tricky because there are so many roads and trails that crisscross up there.”

“How many people have done the trip?” I asked.

“Actually, other than my partner and me, you'll be the first.” He'd shot a loaded smile across the table that, in retrospect, probably should have worried me more than it did.

To aid in route finding, Bain had given me a guide packet containing turn-by-turn directions for each day with mileage and GPS coordinates. He'd also recommended the Mt. Hood trails map published by Adventure Maps—but when I looked, not a single bookstore in downtown Portland had it in stock. After deciding that the term “adventure map” was an oxymoron anyway, I elected to depend solely on the written directions, my GPS and Wilder's G-spot-level of knowledge of the area.

THE 17-MILE SURVEYOR'S RIDGE TRAIL BOUNDS THROUGH PRISTINE PONDEROSA FOREST THAT OPENS TO YIELD POSTCARD-PERFECT VIEWS OF HOOD'S CLOUD-SHROUDED PYRAMID.

Earlier today, Wilder had demonstrated his professional guiding acumen by parking the truck near one of Hood River's better brew pubs, the Horse and Hound, in anticipation of our return. A warm July rain fell as we rode out of town on the Historic Columbia River Highway, a 100-year-old ribbon of asphalt carved into the cliffs above the waterway. The stone guardrails and tunnels lining the path's dramatic curves are punctuated by majestic views of the Columbia Gorge—a wide, gothic canyon with towering pines and sheer granite faces. The scene was beautiful enough to distract me from the discomfort or angst that might normally accompany the rainy start of a four-day bike tour. Luckily, the bullet-size hail didn't start falling until we reached the road's scenic tunnels. After an extended period of energy-bar ingestion, contemplative stretching and re-reading of directions, we began pedaling again in the color-saturated post-storm sunlight of late afternoon.

We spent the next few hours slugging our way 30 miles up a dirt-road-laced ridgeline while encountering frequent intersections that required stopping to reference Wilder's map. The navigational delays, along with a few wrong turns, added more than an hour to our expected travel time, pushing our arrival at the hut into the evening.

Now, I fiddle with the numbers on the lock, swallowing the first tinges of panic and trying to ignore Wilder's impatient glare. I give the lock another hard shake and smile with silent relief when it magically opens.

We park our bikes under the porch awning and attack the food locker in a Mylar-ripping, cookie-inhaling whirlwind. With blood sugar stabilized, Wilder puts a pot of water on the Coleman camp stove. The hut is stocked with a variety of staples—water, pasta, rice, beans, soups and other canned goods—and features eight bunk beds with thick pads and even thicker sleeping bags. There are only three of us, so we each sleep in one bag and use another as a pillow. Sloth Monkey piles on a third bag, burrowing up to his nose in synthetic fiber before the water is boiling. After emerging to accept a plate of canned salmon pasta, the exhausted Monkey doesn't stir again. When Wilder asks what he thinks of the place, he replies from his cocoon: “Soooper kooosh.”

Wilder sits on the adjacent lower bunk, studying his map in the rustic glow of dual propane lamps. Bain had mentioned—and Wilder now concurs—that a number of alternative trail options would significantly increase our singletrack time tomorrow.

“There's so much good trail riding up here,” Wilder says. “We could just base out of this hut and ride for days. This Dog River trail is *dope*.” He runs an index finger along a squiggly black line. A few minutes later, he looks up from the directions and breaks the rain-pattered, propane-hissing silence with five of the most adventurous words in existence: “Guys, we have a problem.”

“What's up?” I ask, shooting a Nerf ball at a hoop on the door.

“I have our route for tomorrow worked out pretty well, but

about three-quarters of the way through we go completely off the map.”

“Not a problem,” I say, swishing a shot. “We have a GPS, a bike computer and turn-by-turn instructions. How hard can it be?”

“I don't know, man. The instructions are kind of vague. It could be challenging without a map. Hey Monkey, you wanna take a look at this?” Wilder shakes the mountain of synthetics, only to get a two-tone response: “*Soooper kooosh*.”



THE NEXT MORNING WE RIDE SURVEYORS RIDGE Trail, a 17-mile roller that traverses the top of its namesake feature, bounding up and down through pristine ponderosa forest that opens to yield postcard-perfect views of Hood's cloud-shrouded pyramid. We jam the winding singletrack, hooting like truant teenagers until I launch out of a compression dip and explode in a cloud of pine duff. When I stand up, I realize my pedal had popped out of the crankarm midflight; it's still attached to my foot, so it takes a minute to figure out what happened. The threads are slightly stripped, so I reinstall it with a



Wilder leaves behind a few appreciative words in the Lolo Hut logbook.

strip of electrical tape wrapped around the spindle, and push on until we hit the next dirt road.

Soon, we're climbing again. Wilder, riding a titanium hardtail with a rear rack, surges up the hills—a two-wheeled bloodhound forever sniffing after our next turn. Monkey's 29er is set up for riding the relatively flat streets of Portland, so it has no granny gear. His method of uphill propulsion is to stand out of the saddle and mash the pedals hypnotically like he's on a slow-motion Stairmaster.

WHEN MY GPS FADES TO BLACK, I LOOK TO WILDER FOR SOME GUIDANCE. BUT HE JUST SHAKES HIS HEAD. "DUDE," HE SAYS, "WE'RE OFF THE MAP."

This makes him impossible to keep up with on climbs unless I want to risk blowing out a knee pushing a midrange gear. When I point this out, he smiles and says, "Sloth Monkey moves slow, but travels fast." Minutes later, he snaps his chain.

Despite these technical difficulties, we plunge closer to 11,249-foot Mt. Hood, which is both Oregon's highest peak and its most recently active volcano. Labeled

dormant by geologists, its last eruption occurred about 200 years ago—just before Lewis and Clark's arrival. While this may be a source of comfort to some, it strikes me as alarming: By the law of averages, the thing could be due to blow any moment. Playing on the slopes of a volcano is like dating a bipolar supermodel: One mo-

ment you're lost in the beauty of it all, the next it's raining molten rock across a 300-mile radius.

Girded with 12 glaciers, Hood's terminally snowcapped summit is dramatic from any angle. The native Multnomah tribe named the mountain Wy'east after a chief who competed with a Klickitat tribe rival for the love of a beautiful woman. According to legend, the jealous rage of their competition transformed them all into volcanoes. The Klickitat chief became Washington State's Mt. Adams, while the object of their desire became Mt. St. Helens—and we know how that story ends. So I pedal with one eye pinned to Wy'east.

But the big peak isn't our problem. Day two is 36 miles long and descends more than 5,300 feet to a hut located off the historic Barlow Toll Road—the terminus of the Oregon Trail and the first overland route into the Willamette Valley. As we stand in an unmarked intersection in Hood's southeastern foothills, contemplating what will be our third wrong turn in as many hours, my GPS screen fades to black. I change the batteries, thump it against my handlebar, and call it hateful names—all to no avail. When I look to Wilder for some G-spot guidance, he just shakes his head. "Dude," he says, "we're off the map."

Monkey takes a pull from his bite valve and says, "Cool."

We try comparing the bike computer's odometer with the mileage in the written directions. But the more lost we get, the more deviation between the two we have to account for, until we're completely winging it. Around the 20-mile mark, we take the recommended detour down a trail called Gunsight Ridge—a rocky,

off-camber thrill ride that tumbles raucously down slopes littered with jagged scree. Dodging hubcap-sized rocks, I find myself wishing I'd brought an all-mountain trail bike instead of a fully rigid Kona. Eventually we pop out on another dirt road and are climbing again. With Wilder and Team Stairmaster charging off the front, I soon find myself alone in the long shadow of the sleeping volcano, shimmering in the distance like an ominous mirage.

I catch up when we reach a single-lane blacktop. There, we descend once more, this time in tight formation, unleashing adrenaline-pumped war cries. Wilder clocks us at 42 mph, our fastest plunge of the trip. The road spits us out at a five-way intersection 1,000 vertical feet above the White River. Only two of the five roads are marked—neither with the number listed in our directions. We try to find the way using the process of elimination. Two of the unnamed roads are dead ends; the other is a head-scratcher that drops steeply in the wrong direction. If we head in the direction we need to go, we'll end up portaging over large blown-down trees in the first half mile. The sun is setting. A chill sets in. Clouds gather around the mountain, obscuring it from view.

We know the Barlow Toll Road is somewhere below us, but our chances of finding the hut before nightfall are fading by the second. With no map, GPS, or useful signage to fall back on, I reach into my pack and extract the only other potentially ass-saving piece of technology in my kit—my cell phone. Amazingly, one bar of analog roaming service tethers us to the civilized world. Even more amazingly, Bain answers on the third ring. The connection is so weak, the exchange is more séance than actual conversation, but Bain

WHILE HAMMERING SOME SECTIONS OF POST CANYON WITHOUT A FREERIDE BIKE CAN BE DOWNRIGHT SUICIDAL, SKILLED RIDERS CAN NEGOTIATE MANY OTHERS REGARDLESS OF THEIR RIG.

pegs our location and sets us back on course. We careen downhill for 3 more miles until we cross the White River and rejoin the route. It's totally dark when we finally reach Barlow Hut, and we're even more exhausted, hungry and relieved than on the first night.

I remember reading a journal account of someone who paid \$5 to cross the Barlow Toll Road in 1850, and recount the story for my friends. "They survived out here for 14 days with only nine biscuits and four strips of bacon," I tell them. "Considering how light we're running, we have it pretty good."

"I'm just glad we aren't roasting Cliff bars over an open fire and drawing straws to see who gets to sleep in the middle," says Monkey, who's swaddled in synthetics and sucking down canned peaches seconds after entering the building.

During the morning tune-up session, Wilder discovers he's lost all but one of the bolts that hold rear brake rotor. We decide to detour into the ski town of Government Camp to look for a bike shop. Mt. Hood's slopes are home to a half dozen ski areas, including Timberline, the only year-round lift-service glacier skiing in the country. Seeing families lumber down the sidewalks in plastic boots and fuchsia ski pants in July is more than just a little weird. We find a Mt. Hood Adventure Map at a highway gas station, and the clerk directs us to a bike shop at the base of Ski Bowl, which offers lift-

serviced mountain biking in the summer. Wilder tends to his mechanical issues while Monkey and I sit out an afternoon thunder-shower over beers in the lodge.

Leaving Ski Bowl, we pick up Pioneer Bridle Trail at the western edge of town and pin it through miles of leaf-carpeted banking turns and well-timed root hits. We cross the highway and pick up Zigzag Trail—a wide, jump-and-berm-filled dirt path to enlightenment that parallels Highway 26 and delivers us to the tiny town of Zigzag. Then it's all uphill to the final hut atop Lolo Pass. At almost 50 miles, day three is the tour's longest, but it isn't nearly as taxing, because we're never lost.

Clouds surround Hood's glacier-clad western slope, burning like an atomic explosion outside the windows of Lolo Hut. Soup warms on the stove. Lanterns hiss. Gloves and jerseys hang from rough-hewn rafters. Sloth Monkey alternates between stretching and huddling in his sleeping bag, munching peanut-butter cheese crackers. Wilder sits on his preferred bottom bunk, studying the map. For a few moments, it feels like we've ascended into some sort of Zen mountain biking afterlife.

"Okay, we have two options for tomorrow," Wilder says, interrupting the idyll. "We can ride mostly downhill all the way back to Hood River. Or, as the directions say, 'if we still have more energy,' we can take a detour and drop into Hood River via Post Canyon, which has some wicked singletrack."

"Dude, we always have more energy for wicked singletrack," Monkey mumbles.

One thing the directions don't bother to mention is that the de-

tour to Post Canyon climbs almost 3,000 feet up one of the most viscous quad-searing slopes in the area. So even though it's the last day of the trip, you still have to suffer through a half-dozen miles of 12 percent sloping blacktop to access the Pacific Northwest's most developed DIY freeride trails.

"We didn't want to give away all the surprises," Bain will tell me later. "It's not as adventurous that way."

Post Canyon is worth it. The area contains 50 acres of handmade skinnies, gap jumps and drop-ins. While hammering some sections without a freeride bike can be downright suicidal, skilled riders can negotiate many others regardless of their rigs. We enjoy an ill-advised descent of the skinny-laden 8-Track Trail, which consists of multiple ladder lines that test both your balance and sanity.

We roll back into Hood River with the kind of natural momentum gained only after a few days in the saddle pushing through the fear, pain, rain and potential catastrophe of touring. At the pub, Wilder raises his glass and says: "A'right, if we get on our bikes right now we can make the climb back up to the Surveyors Ridge hut by nightfall. Who's up for doing another lap?"

Part of me knows he's kidding. But the part of me that knows he isn't raises a pint with Sloth Monkey, clinks it, and says: "I'm in."

After all, I still remember those four numbers. 15