

The Mt. Baldy Trip

Mt. Baldy has always been an interesting trip for me. I've backpacked it four times, always with unexpected results and quite a story to tell... but those are for another web site.

Looking at Mt. Baldy from the lowlands, it looks deceptively easy to climb. In fact, as far as hiking trails go, it is among the steepest in Southern California. So much so, that on my last backpacking trip down Old Baldy Trail, I decided that the next time I manage to get to the top of the mountain, I would have a set of wheels with me to "roll" down (and I use that term loosely).

Then the obsession began ... I spent about \$8k on a set of mountain bikes and soon discovered that I really didn't like pedaling as much as I used to, but I did dig the effects of gravity when the hill is falling away from you. That obsession turned into a quest for the ultimate downhill run. If uphill was involved, it was only to get to the downhill. I even convinced Tony and Danny that Mt. Baldy would be a good candidate because you only had to pedal (or push) your bike 2200' vertical feet to the top, then go down one of Dan Dan's renowned "other" hiking trails to get 6000' of descent into Mt. Baldy Village. Technically speaking, I told the truth ... technically speaking.

Our trip began with lots of anticipation, memories of other successful runs we had done in Big Bear, all body parts in tact, Danny's "battlebot bug neurosis" ... and those fucking blueberry pancakes. Before we left the morning of the ride, we decided to stop in for a little breakfast at the "Breakwind Inn". Tony and I had some blueberry pancakes that ultimately had our sphincter's singing the blues every 20 vertical feet of elevation gain. Danny ate some healthy shit, and thus lost the opportunity to tune up his "bass".

We started by taking the ski lift at the Baldy Ski area up to about 8000'. Then, it was a push to the top ... JATO assisted for Tony and I. Between the gradient, the rarified air at 10,000', and the extra 20 or 30 pounds I was carrying around at the time, my only fond memory of the climb was trying to stay upwind of Danny ... hee hee hee. Along the way, there are some very exposed razor backs to traverse. As you get close to the top, the last 800' are featureless, hence the name Mt. Baldy. There were patches of snow and plenty of wind to slow us down. The last pitch to the top is about a 400' push in very thin air on a very steep trail.

When you get to the top, there is a stone marker set into the mountain signifying your victory, and the typical sign-in box to let everybody else know you were there. Baldy actually has two peaks. Looking across at West Baldy, it looks higher, but is actually

about 200' lower. This is a typical optical illusion when climbing. That side of the mountain is off limits to mountain bikes, so we chose not to ride the saddle across ... yeah, that was the reason.

Looking at the trail that lay ahead of us combined with all that gravity assist had my anticipation of going down peaking. If that sounds a bit like sex, it can be! We slammed down some "adventure nutrition" and set off on what was to be the descent from hell.

The first mile was exactly what I remember. Featureless, hard packed, and a mild and predictable descent. Then, slowly but surely, hell was breaking loose. The pitch steepened, the hardpack turned into loose shrie, and the hair pins became quite extreme ... did I mention that the sky started to become a little gray. Now being the downhiller I am, I enjoy the steep and technical stuff, within reason. Tony, being your typical Ausi, just man handles his way through this shit on his \$100 ride. He even smiles when he's bleeding, when his lips aren't forming vulgarities that sound pretty cool with his accent. Danny, just plain hates this stuff ... no bones about it, and is plainly holding back his discontent as he's riding his gooseneck with his balls down some pile of gravel a couple of hundred feet high per switchback.

Did I mention the sky was getting a little darker now.

We all stopped several times on the way down to survey the battle wounds to this point. By now, we've all been over the bars a couple of times. I keep telling them that it will get better soon. I take the fifth, that must have been the Alzheimer's setting in. The features of the landscape now began to take on an interesting character. About every other tree was black from lightning strikes. We all casually began to take note of this increasing phenomenon ... as the wind was picking up.

Did I mention we were getting wet now.

Then the gust front hit. That's what you get when a thunderstorm has just let loose in your vicinity. We all collectively put two and two together and began the most hairball, uncontrolled descent you could imagine, driven by gravity and adrenaline. This damn storm was following us down the mountain! Laden with our bikes on mostly unrideable terrain, we did the best we could, but at one point a jogger passed us going downhill ... also in hasty retreat. This continued until we got to Bear Flats, which is a nice meadow with a stream running through it. But about the last 1000' vertical feet before you reach Bear Flats is a set of long switchbacks, which were very overgrown with Deerthorn Bushes. Deer thorns are very stiff 1 to 2 inch fuckers that at a minimum will scratch anything they touch. If you are unlucky enough to hit one head on, it will easily

penetrate any protective wear and skin you may have left ... and they did! All I can say about that descent into Bear Flats was OUCH!

I watched Tony and Danny arrive into Bear Flats. Tony was smiling of course, but I could tell he was forming vulgarities with his teeth. Danny actually used his lips and voice box to express his "love" for this ride. By now, the storm had subsided and we just chilled for a few minutes, bloody, stuck, bruised and all. With only about 4 miles to go of gentle fireroad and single track, I assured them that we had already endured the worst of this ride. Wasn't I the boy who cried wolf.

We all set off, me at light speed. My plan was to go all out and meet them at the trailhead in Baldy Village. This indeed was a very cool run. Very smooth and fast. Then it happened ... I came around a corner all out of shape and had no choice but to bail into the Deerthorn bushes. I ended up on my back ... mostly ... with the bike on top of me wedged into the bush in such a way that I couldn't move. I was off the trail, out of site, no one was around, and my bike and I were tied in a square knot! I just lay there for about 2 minutes figuring how I was going to get out of this ... before Danny and Tony got there (plausible deniability you know). After a bit, I managed to get the bike off me and pulled it and myself back onto the trail. There just comes a point where 10 or 20 more punctures doesn't significantly add to the pain factor. There were a few more miles of cool single track until I landed at the trail head and continued across to the general store.

A few minutes later Tony and Danny emerged. Danny clearly liked that stretch of the trail, but overall I wouldn't even try to sum up final thoughts for Danny & Tony. Mine are simple: I wouldn't even think of doing that ride again in light of other mountains I've since discovered.

... but it is a fun story to tell.