



Rocky roads

Seven days of jaw-dropping scenery and breathtaking climbs in Colorado – sound good to you? *Cyclist* reader **Adrian Rollins** shares his Big Ride...

There's nothing quite like the sound of deep rim carbon wheels banging and crunching their way down a rocky gravel track, interspersed with the explosive bang and hiss of bursting tubes and the occasional shout as yet another rider has a near-miss or hits the deck.

It was stage six of the Haute Route Rockies, a seven-day, 840km cycling adventure through the wilds of Colorado, and it was proving to be the gnarliest ride yet.

By this point of the event, the 300-odd riders who'd fronted up to the start line in Boulder five days earlier had become used to the challenges of piloting expensive road machines over jarring corrugations and through treacherous drifts of loose gravel and fine-grain sand.

But the descent from Sopris Creek Road, west of Aspen in the Grand Mesa National Forest, was taking the concept of road bike gravel-grinding to a whole new level. The roadside was dotted with stranded riders, many frantically tugging away at punctured tyres, others staring disconsolately at equipment that had let them down or brushing off dust and dirt after a slide along the gravel.

It seemed fitting the penultimate day of the Haute Route Rockies would throw up such an obstacle; each day of the event had confronted riders with its own unique challenge.

Day one featured a 14.5km climb up Sunrise Canyon, an ascent infamous among Boulder locals for its unrelenting gradients, with long sections on gravel topping 16% and finishing with a 30km haul along undulating gravel back roads to the west of Boulder.

Turns out this was a mere taster compared with day two, which began with a 19km climb from Boulder up Magnolia Drive, the first 7km of which averaged 9% with sections reaching above 18%, before a 40km grind up Berthoud Pass, topping out at almost 3,500 metres.

After a couple of days traversing high mountain valleys north of the famous Vail ski resort, including a 17km time trial up the hills behind Avon, by day five the pack was ready to tackle the monstrous ascent up Independence Pass to reach the highest point of the week: 3687 metres.

At sea level the climb up Independence Pass, 25.2km at an average of 3%, would seem long but not particularly steep. But the altitude makes it a beast. As one of my teammates Will Levy put it, the thin air made it feel like you were riding with the brakes rubbing and breathing through a straw.

Everything they say about riding at altitude is true. Your power output goes down (by some estimates, around 20%), breathing is harder and your mouth is constantly dry. If you push into the red zone it can be very difficult to recover, and becoming even a little dehydrated can be disastrous. Pumping in the fluids is vital.

Despite that, stunning views from the road – as it wended its way up through pine forest before opening out to sweeping mountain vistas above the tree line – helped distract

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from the slow grovel up the Pass, and well-behaved traffic made it easier to focus on the task at hand.

While many considered this to be the 'Queen Stage' of the week, I'd been dreading the following day (six) – not because of the rocky and treacherous descent from Sopris Creek Road, but rather the 38km climb up Kebler Pass at the end, all of it on gravel. The distance, combined with the energy-sapping surface and altitude (Kebler Pass is at 3,050 metres) suggested this was going to be a long, hot and unpleasant crawl.

How wrong I was! Most of the climb was on dirt so hard-packed it was akin to tarmac, and the shade thrown by beautiful forests of pine and aspen kept the temperature down and the interest level up.

With Kebler crested, there remained just one more stage to complete the inaugural Haute Route Rockies: a 70km loop around Colorado Springs.

Getting there was a logistical challenge. Colorado Springs is more than 300km east of the stage six finish at Crested Butte, and the Haute Route organisers had laid on a fleet of buses to transport the riders and their gear to the stage seven start line in time for a noon start on the final day.

Oh, dear. A transport mix-up meant the buses left Crested Butte several hours late, and it wasn't until 2:30pm that most riders arrived at Colorado Springs. As a result, the race didn't get underway until after 3pm, and it was cut back to 38km ride. A neutralised section through the stunning Devil's Garden rock formation helped soften the blow.

Apart from the final day blemish, the Haute Route Rockies lived up to the Haute Route moniker of being the highest, toughest and best organised of sportives. Though the Pyrenees, the Alps and the Dolomites boast more iconic climbs, the HR Rockies was a true adventure. The combination of quiet backcountry roads, long dirt sections, high altitude and unfamiliar and stunning scenery made it as much an experience of the senses as a demanding physical test. ✨

*We want to hear your Big Ride tales! Send 600-800 words to contact@cyclist.com.au – with pics included – and, just like Adrian, you could feature in a future issue. For good measure, we'll even throw in some free kit and a free 12-month subscription to *Cyclist* for any articles we publish!*