

The Sedona 5's Excellent Adventure

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Prologue

You stand accused of violating a national park closure and bicycling in a prohibited area—how do you plead?

Rama Jon: "Guilty."

Long Tall: "Guilty."

Wheeze: "Guilty."

Forest: "Guilty."

Dangerous Dave: "Guilty."

The Honorable Steven Verkamp glared at the five men before him. The U.S. magistrate for Grand Canyon National Park was not a happy camper.

"You five have won the award," he scolded. "You are the stupidest people I have had in my courtroom this year. You all think this was a pretty funny stunt, don't you? Well, the last laugh is on you. I hope you have all learned your lesson."

Rama piped up. "Yes, we have, your honor."

"I seriously doubt that," Verkamp snapped.

He was right.

Crater Raiders

The sign is painted flat, reddish brown and weathered from years of silent duty at the North Kaibab trailhead on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, elevation 8,000 feet. A metal square atop the wood post bears the stark image of a white, rider-less bicycle with a slash over it, a warning of National Park Service regulation 36, subsection 4.30, which basically says you can't ride a bicycle in designated national park wilderness areas—which includes everywhere below the rim of the Grand Canyon.

On the morning of November 19, 1995, the sign stood amid unusual quiet. A federal budget stalemate between President Clinton and the U.S. Congress had forced the national park system to shut down, and the entire Grand Canyon had been closed to visitors—and the accompanying chatter of hikers, bray of mules and engine noise of shuttle buses—for the past five days.

On the morning of the 19th, however, the sign had company. Highly ironic company. Five mountain bikers standing with their metal steeds behind a cluster of pine trees, purposefully camouflaged from the road. The air was cold that morning, just below freezing, and the mist from the bikers' breath mingled with exhaled pot smoke as a pipe went around the circle. One of the bikers broke out a plastic bag of psilocybin mushrooms, and they each gnashed down a small handful of the foul-tasting fungi.

Duly prepared, the five mounted their bikes and began the first stretch of the 14-mile downhill to the base of the canyon—a harrowing, 3,400-foot vertical descent over 4.7 trail miles through Roaring Springs Canyon. The time was roughly 10 a.m. Six hours later, the bikers would be under arrest, in leg shackles and awaiting airlift to a federal jail—a helicopter ride that not only would save them a grueling pedal up the other side of the canyon, but also would lift them to unwitting folk-hero status in the cause of mountain-biker access.

That morning, as they launched down the trail with a few ill-advised whoops, the illicit quintet were merely outlaw mountain bikers on a hastily organized joy ride.

By nightfall, however, they were "The Sedona 5."

It was Wheeze's idea. The 36-year-old online marketing and design specialist says he flashed on sneaking into the canyon late in the afternoon of November 18. He doesn't remember exactly what prompted the thought. Maybe a newspaper article or radio report about "tourons"—a Sedona mountain biker slang hybrid of "tourist" and "moron"—being turned away at the Grand Canyon park gates. "It's always been my dream to bike rim to rim," he says. "The time seemed ripe. Minimum crowds, maximum wilderness experience."

Seeking a few compadres in crime, Wheeze (legal name Mitch Obele) beelined for Mountain Bike Heaven, a bike shop owned by Rama Jon that serves as a nucleus for the Sedona mountain-bike scene. Wheeze pitched the concept—a rim-to-rim stealth mission starting early the next morning—and Rama (Jon Cogan) was all for it.

"Dangerous Dave" Hart, a cash-practice chiropractor who works out of a shack office in the back lot of Rama's store, also signed on. So did Forest (Forest Michaels), who sleeps in the woods around Sedona, makes drums for money, and spends most of his time on the trail (at 23, he is the youngest of the Sedona 5; Rama is the oldest at 40).

"None of us really thought much about it," says Rama. "We just sort of did it."

That night, the four loaded up Rama's Toyota 4Runner and Dave's beat-up Monte Carlo with bikes, packs and cold-weather gear and hit the road around 9 pm. Their first stop was Flagstaff. Rama had called ahead to Long Tall (John Panetta), another biking buddy who jumped at a fifth slot on the covert op—code name "Crater Raiders."

Long Tall owns The People's Bike Shop in Flag. But when Rama, Wheeze, Forest and Dave pulled in from Sedona eager to keep moving toward an early start, Long Tall wasn't ready to go yet. Because, of all things, he didn't have a bike. Or, at least, not the one he wanted to ride the canyon. That bike was at a friend's house—only Long Tall couldn't remember exactly which friend, or which house. "Things started to get a little haphazard at that point," Rama says. "Here was this tall, skinny guy with long hair running from house to house knocking on doors late at night going, 'Excuse me, is my bike here?' I thought someone was going to call the cops. It took him until midnight to find that damn bike."

Once Long Tall finally had his ride, the group drove in a caravan in both cars to the park gate on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. It was locked shut. The members pulled Dave's Monte Carlo off the road and out of sight, then piled in the 4Runner and drove 211 miles around the canyon to the North Rim (which closes each year in mid-October), where they stashed the truck, scaled the gate, lifted their bikes over, and quietly started riding the ten miles to the North Kaibab trailhead. Their plan was to bike down North Kaibab, cross the Colorado River on a footbridge, ride up the Bright Angel Trail (one of the park's most popular routes), bike out to the south gate, cram everything into the Monte Carlo, drive all the way back to the north gate, retrieve the 4Runner, and be home in time for a late-night celebratory feast in Sedona.

But things did not go according to plan.

Mountain biking the North Kaibab Trail is, in a word, gnarly. The path is steep and often narrow, with sheer drop-offs. There are dozens of tight-cornered switchbacks, and anti-erosion "water bars" that stand too high off the ground for a front bike tire to safely clear (a rider must either jump or

"wheelie" over the metal rods). For the relatively slow-paced hikers and mule trains that normally travel North Kaibab, such obstacles pose little threat. But going balls-out on a mountain bike, the trail offers several opportunities to make a mistake and die.

Here's Forest: "One time I remember we had just finished this really intense switchback downhill, and after I got through all these hairy turns, I stopped and looked up and all I could see was this steep wall. It was so vertical I couldn't even make out the trail. When I was going down, I had no idea how steep it was, but looking back up, I realized that if I had skidded off the trail at any point in the last six or seven minutes, I would have taken a screamer."

And now Wheeze: "There were several sections where we had a vertical face going up on one side and a vertical face going down on the other. At one spot I stopped my bike, leaned a hand against the up wall for balance, and the trail was narrow enough that I could sort of lean and look over the opposite edge. It looked like if you went off, you would fall for about 800 feet, bounce, and then go for about another 1,200."

The ride in from the north gate had been stressful and cold—Forest and Dave were both wearing "camelback" water bags, and their drinking tubes kept clogging with ice. About half an hour down the Kaibab, however, the mushrooms started to kick in, the sun rose high enough to shine into the canyon, and all became right with the world.

"There were so many colors," says Forest. "The sun just kept revealing more and more of them in the rocks. It was so quiet you could hear bird calls from far away, and it was warm enough that we could get out of our jackets and really feel free."

That feeling was short-lived.

Busted

Grand Canyon wilderness subdistrict ranger Nick Herring says that a maintenance worker at the Roaring Springs pump house heard noises on the trail, went to investigate, and spotted fresh mountain-bike tracks. The worker radioed a report to ranger Sandie Hand at the Phantom Ranch ranger station in the bottom of the canyon. Ranger Hand started hiking up North Kaibab. About a half-mile from the canyon floor, she intercepted the first biker.

It was Wheeze.

"I was out ahead quite a bit, riding point, and I saw her from about 30 yards away. I immediately recognized the color scheme of her clothes as ranger-esque, and as I came riding up to her, she

said, 'Stop.' But I kept riding. I decided that unless she identified herself as a law enforcement person, there was no reason I had to follow orders. But as I blew past, she looked at me and I looked at her and that thought flashed from my head to hers and she yelled, 'Stop, U.S. park ranger!' And then I hit the brakes."

Rama and Long Tall came down the trail next, followed a few minutes later by Dangerous Dave and Forest. Forest had recently suffered his third flat tire of the day, and Dave had stayed behind to help him patch the tear. As the pair came down the trail, Dave was popping a wheelie, and Forest was playfully "bunny-hopping" his bike. The two were showing off for their friends, whom they thought were simply taking a rest break.

"After that last flat tire, I got to cruisin' and I saw them pulled off on the side of the trail and I rode up and I was like, 'Yeah! Is this awesome, or what?'" recalls Forest. "And then I saw this lady with her mouth to a walkie-talkie and she was like, 'Two more.'"

Hand escorted the bikers to the Phantom Ranch station, where she took them inside one by one and questioned them—name, social security number, "you do know the park's closed, don't you?", etc. The bikers were still smiling and joking around, guessing they would just be issued citations and allowed to continue their ride. Then Hand announced she and another ranger were going to look through their packs.

The search yielded 18 grams of marijuana, 15 grams of hallucinogenic mushrooms and assorted paraphernalia, scattered among four of the five's packs and bike bags (only Forest was clean). Unbeknown to the busted bikers, Hand had also run their names through a national law enforcement database to check for outstanding warrants, and two of them were red-flagged (both warrants later turned out to be cases of mistaken identity).

Herring had been following these events via radio from the ranger headquarters on the South Rim. "At that point, she was down there with five individuals who were in the park illegally, who were exhibiting a disrespectful attitude toward the park and the ranger, and who were in possession of controlled substances. We also thought two of them had outstanding arrest warrants. Based on these factors, we decided she needed immediate back-up."

Enter the helicopter—a Park Service Bell 206 carrying, the bikers say, eight to ten heavily armed rangers in orange jumpsuits and bright red bulletproof vests.

Herring says that's "a bunch of bullshit." He says it was only him, one other ranger and the pilot, wearing standard sidearms. The orange jumpsuits are standard for helicopter flights, he says. Herring said he and the other ranger were wearing bulletproof vests, ". . . but they were under our uniforms. And they weren't big flak jackets or anything. I doubt they were really noticeable."

Either way, both sides agree on what happened once the copter landed on the helipad at Phantom Ranch—the bikers were officially placed under arrest, separated to different corners of two nearby volleyball courts, handcuffed and put in leg irons.

Serious buzzkill.

"There were some sad faces once we got there," Herring says. "I think they realized the situation was a little more serious than they had bargained for."

Rama and Wheeze were the first two loaded onto the copter. Rama claims one of the rangers told him as it took off, "The pilot's safety is our primary concern. Don't make any sudden movements. We'll shoot you if we have to." Long Tall and Forest were next. The final rider, Dangerous Dave, had to be lifted to the copter in a rescue basket because the sun had set and Park Service regulations prohibit copter landings below the rim once the sun is down.

The ride up, all five bikers say, was outstanding. "I was disappointed at first because I've never touched the water of the Colorado, and I was really looking forward to that," says Forest. "But then they flew us over it, so I didn't feel so bad."

"The copter ride was certainly as spectacular as the descent on bikes," says Rama. "It was once in a lifetime. I mean, a sunset ride below the rim. You can't even buy that [a 1986 law prohibits commercial flights inside the Grand Canyon]."

The biker pauses. "But then, I guess we did."

Topside, the prisoners were taken by car to the ranger station on the South Rim, booked and put in a holding cell, still shackled. On the way, they heard a bulletin come over the CB that the park would reopen to the public the next day. "We got in just under the wire," says Wheeze.

Once they were all in the cell, Dave started to perform a chiropractic adjustment on Forest. The rangers intervened. "They said, 'Excuse me, I don't know what you're doing, but stop touching him please.'" While the bikers stewed, one of the rangers passing the cell jokingly referred to them as "The Sedona 5."

Not bad, the bikers thought.

Wheeze had brought along a fat cash roll, "just in case," and he had enough to bail out himself and Forest (the only one without drug charges). The other three sat in the cell for two hours before the rangers released them on their own recognizance.

"They said they couldn't keep us there overnight," says Rama, "and they didn't want to haul us to Flagstaff."

Before they left for home, the five asked about their bikes, and the rangers said they were still down at Phantom Ranch. "I don't see why they had to make us dump our bikes and go in the copter," says Rama. "I mean, I appreciated the ride, but it seems like if they wanted to punish us, it would have been better to make us ride up and then arrest us. Or, better yet, why not take the front wheel off each of our bikes and say, 'Okay, see you guys at the top!' Now that would have harshed us."

Ten days later, the Sedona 5 appeared before magistrate Verkamp to accept a plea bargain offered by Park Service law enforcement specialist Dave Swickard, the government prosecutor in the case. They all pleaded guilty to violating a park closure, bicycling in a prohibited area and, where appropriate, misdemeanor marijuana possession. The Park Service dropped the mushrooms and paraphernalia charges. Each biker was ordered to pay \$244 restitution for the helicopter flights (which Herring says cost exactly \$1,220) and given a \$250 suspended fine for the criminal offenses. They also had to forfeit their bikes, which Rama estimated were worth a total of \$4,000. Herring says the bicycles ". . . are now in the ranger cache. We let the Boy Scouts ride them on perimeter patrols sometimes."

Hurt No One, Ride Where You Please

The Sedona 5 weren't the only bikers to ride the canyon during the park shutdown. Two adrenaline hounds from Flagstaff had descended 20 miles down a remote, even more rugged North Rim trail three days earlier. The last eight miles, they say, were too steep to ride. "We were just following little rock cairns down, carrying our bikes for like five hours," says Paul, who asked not to be identified by his last name. The bikers eventually cut over to Roaring Springs on a side trail and ascended North Kaibab, hitching a ride out to the car with ". . . this guy in a Dodge Powerwagon who worked in the park and was showing his new Russian mail-order bride around."

But thanks to the dramatic bust and a Web site quickly set up by Wheeze, word of the Sedona 5's ride spread quickly through mountain-biking circles across the country. Several national mountain-biking magazines have run features on the ride, portraying the Sedona 5 as Edward Abbey on two wheels.

Of course, that perception is a long bunny-hop from the Sedona 5's original intent. "We weren't consciously on a civil disobedience ride," says Rama. "I can't even say all the attention has surpassed our expectations, because we didn't have any expectations. We were just out for the

ride." Asked if he's glad they got caught, Rama says, "It's certainly helped me cultivate my bad-boy image," then adds, "Let's just say I believe some things happen for a reason."

Three mornings a week, the Sedona bike-store owner leads "Rama Rides" that leave from the parking lot of Mountain Bike Heaven. Anyone is welcome, and there's no charge. The rides, which last anywhere from a couple hours to all day, depending on Rama's mood, often venture into designated national wilderness areas around Sedona, where bike riding is strictly forbidden.

"That's where a lot of the best downhills are," Rama explains.

One recent Rama Ride was attended by Rama, seven local Sedona riders (two women and five men, including one 48-year-old known as "Gnarly Old Dude") and a freelance outdoors photographer from Florida shooting his way across the country who had an assignment from *Bike* magazine to spend a few days making pictures in Sedona.

The twin highlights of that eight-hour ride were a roller-coaster downhill through a wilderness area pass and a long "water ride" through a narrow river channel walled on both sides with lush blackberry bushes. During a rest break about three hours into the day, the riders gulped down water, honey and energy bars as the photographer packed a pipe of marijuana (pot, explains Rama, is an integral part of the mountain-biking lifestyle).

"Anyone here know the Sedona 5?" the photographer asked.

"Why do you want to know?" Rama replied.

"I'd just like to shake those guys' hands."

"Well," Rama said with a smug grin, "you can shake my hand."

Not all the response from other mountain bikers had been so positive. Forest tells the story of a sales rep for the Gary Fischer bike company who turned up his nose at the ride. "Someone introduced me to him as one of the Sedona 5, thinking he would think it was cool. He just stared at me for a while really cold and then he nodded and said 'jerks.'"

Wheeze has kept a running pro/con tally of e-mail response to the Sedona 5 Web site since he took it online in mid-December. As of early August, the count for just more than 2,500 messages was 76 percent for the riders and 24 percent against.

"You people make me sick," wrote one critic in Georgia. "I'll bet you're a bunch of longhaired New Age types sitting there in Sedona with crystals around your necks. You clowns broke the law and

you deserve to be punished. Perhaps the Sedona library should remove any copies of books by Ed Abbey so that you don't get any more bright ideas."

Fifteen years ago, when mountain biking was a fringe sport just starting to catch on, almost any biker who rode on public park land was technically breaking the law by using a trail designated for hikers only—no vehicles allowed. However, those rules were originally written to ban motorized off-road vehicles like dirt bikes and three-wheelers. Mountain bikes posed an unusual question—what to do with a new kind of "vehicle" that could move quickly over wilderness trails, but didn't have an engine. Most states have opened at least some of their state park trails to mountain bikers, but national wilderness areas are still off-limits.

"Essentially, the Park Service has decided that mountain biking is not consistent with the scenic and aesthetic values of the wilderness experience," says Herring. Pressed to explain, the wilderness ranger said it was "a matter of attitude, of a lack of respect for the park." However, Herring says the Sedona 5 caused negligible trail damage—far less than one of the commercial mule trains that routinely travel the park's major trails. "Yes, mules are a high-impact animal," he says. "But that's irrelevant. The issue here is respect for what this park is for. These guys [the Sedona 5] were not out to enjoy the natural splendor. They were there to put a notch in their belt."

Which cuts to one of the thorniest barriers between mountain bikers and increased trail access—the stereotype of mountain bikers as reckless trail hogs who bully hikers and ride roughshod over Mother Nature. To combat this image problem, national bike magazines and advocacy organizations such as N.O.R.B.A (the National Off-Road Bicycle Association) have called on mountain bikers to improve relations with other trail users, use minimum-impact riding techniques (i.e., stay on the trails, don't ride after a fresh rain) and organize trail maintenance programs.

As a goodwill effort, mountain bikers in some states, including Arizona, even work on trails where they're not legally allowed to ride (on the Rama Ride, the bikers made a game of cleaning up trash along the wilderness trail, leaning to swoop up litter on the fly like polo players swinging a mallet).

The success of such PR campaigns, however, has been incremental at best, and the mountain-biker access movement has split into two camps: those who want to keep working within the system, and those who have given up on it. "All we want is the same access rights as farm animals and mining equipment," says Rama, referring to the cattle and heavy machinery allowed in wilderness areas around Sedona that are prohibited to bikers. "The system doesn't give us that, and we've given the system enough time. Now we're going to ride where we want."

"Rather than follow the law, which is unfair, we follow our motto," says Wheeze.

"'Hurt no one, and do as you please.'"

"Hurt no one, my ass," one angry fellow biker from Colorado wrote the Web site. "You hurt the credibility of us all. Off-road cyclists all over the U.S. are fighting for trail access, and we are fighting a war of reputation. When you pull a wise-ass stunt like this, you make us all seem irresponsible. You smeared mountain bikers everywhere. I wish they'd flown you to Leavenworth in leg irons."

Sitting Buddha-style at a stone table outside a Sedona coffee house on a recent Wednesday morning, Wheeze smokes hand-rolled tobacco-and-sage cigarettes (despite the asthma inhaler rolled inside his Lycra biker shorts) and holds forth to an audience of five or six locals on Sedona Jeep tour companies, and the preferential treatment he claims they receive from "the Forest Circus" when it comes to wilderness use permits. He is clearly enjoying his role as de facto spokesman and agitator.

"True, we didn't intend to start a snowball rolling," says Wheeze. "But intentional, unintentional . . . whatever. The fact is, we have generated momentum. And I'm into pushing this as far as we can just to see what gives."

The Sedona 5 may have accidentally built a soapbox, but only the Sedona one and a half have clambered up with something to say. The focus of life for Forest, Long Tall and Dangerous Dave has remained much the same after the canyon ride as it was before—drums to make, spines to adjust, trails to ride, bowls to smoke and berries to eat. Those three say they'll take part in future "Sedona 5"-sponsored protest rides, but when it comes to furthering the group's cause—and its notoriety—they're just along for the ride.

Rama is working with Wheeze to organize a sequel to the first canyon ride—a public civil disobedience action this time, instead of another stealth ride. He talks of the chance to channel the gut-level public response into an informed challenge to the Park Service policy against mountain bikes. But there is considerably more slack in his tone than in Wheeze's.

"The big question now is whether we'll be able to actually rally the mountain bikers or if we're just blowin' in the wind, and a year from now we'll be back to doing joy rides," Rama says. "Either way is fine with me."

Beyond a narrative description and photos of the original canyon ride, the primary feature of the Sedona 5 Web site is a specific policy proposal for opening the Grand Canyon to mountain bikes. The plan is listed under the heading "The Sedona 5 . . . Latest Solution for the Canyon," but Wheeze wrote and posted it himself.

Under the proposal, the Park Service would open the Grand Canyon's major trails on both rims exclusively to mountain bikers the first Monday of every month (the bikers agree it would be too dangerous to share the trail with mule trains). All other days, bikes would be banned as usual. Every

biker would pay the same trail fee as hikers, plus whatever it costs to widen the paths in a few of the sketchiest sections.

The plan also pledges that the Sedona 5 will organize and manage a volunteer mountain-biker trail maintenance program for the Grand Canyon if the plan is implemented—a promise all five of the bikers say they'll keep.

Wheeze has not formally submitted his proposal to the Park Service or any other government agency. But he points out that the Sedona 5 Web site is regularly hit by government servers. "We monitor their propaganda," Herring confirms. The Sedona 5 plan, he says, has no chance. "Too administratively cumbersome. Too exclusive. There are no bikes allowed below the rim in part because they cannot safely share the trails, but also, again, because mountain biking does not fit with the philosophical intent of national wilderness."

Wheeze says that philosophy is obsolete. "There are too many mountain bikers now," he says. "We are citizens of this country, too. We represent a massive user group, and we should be allowed to enjoy the national parks our way." Convincing the government of that, he says, is a matter of enough bikers taking to the streets.

Or, as it were, the trails.

The Sedona 5 Web site includes an "MTB Recon" page with advisory bulletins on riding illegally in national parks across the country—from Lava Beds National Monument in Hawaii to the Presidio in San Francisco. The page requests a donation to help defray the cost of the Sedona 5's restitution and start a legal fund for future civil disobedience rides. So far, Wheeze says, they've gotten a few bike parts, a case of salsa, and enough money to print up a batch of commemorative Sedona 5 tee shirts.

Over the past two months, Wheeze also has compiled a list of mountain bikers who e-mailed requests to be notified in time to join the next canyon ride. At last count, he had just more than 1,000 names, including one each from Germany and Australia.

Neither Rama nor Wheeze will say exactly when the next canyon ride is supposed to happen. "Before the holiday season" is their only hint. In the meantime, Wheeze is talking with ex-Park Service rangers about what radio frequencies and code words the agency uses, looking for a pro bono lawyer, and putting together a list of media organizations to alert just after the ride is under way (the basic plan is to ride slowly down a major trail with a couple of scouts out front to warn hikers and radio trail recon back to the main group).

And both are stockpiling junk bikes. "This time, everyone's going in on wally-world bikes," says Wheeze. "We're going to bury the Park Service in Huffys."