



A moment too late, Yuri realizes he has failed to pack his water wings for the ride.

HOLY TRINITY



THREE MESAS IN THREE DAYS MAKE FOR A
NEAR-RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN SOUTHERN UTAH

Words by Elden "Fatty" Nelson / Images by Scott Markewitz



If you're going to worship something, it ought to be something awesome.

If you're going to worship a place, that place should be unbelievable.

If you're going to worship someone, that person (or deity, or whatever) should be so outrageously cool your head practically explodes.

Using the above reasoning, I'm pretty sure I can make a decent argument for religion ... in Utah.

I'm talking about a Holy Trinity of trails in southern Utah. Three incredible mesas, all within a short drive of each other. All similar—count on cliffside riding and ingenious trail features on all three mesas—yet all distinct.

And all these rides were spearheaded by one outrageously cool guy—oh, what the hell, let's go ahead and call him a god—Morgan Harris.

I'm talking about the Church of the Three Mesas, near Hurricane, Utah: Gooseberry, Little Creek and Guacamole.

Three days (one long weekend) was enough to convert me.

THE CONGREGATION

It's mid-November, about lunchtime on Friday, and we're all wearing shorts and short sleeves. Months after the mountains turn to mud, southern Utah is warm and

Plan on vertigo-inducing trails at Little Creek, Gooseberry and Guacamole. How close to the edge you ride is up to you.



It's apparently very important to get low and aero for maximum speed when riding slickrock.

From lead to sweep: Yuri, Kenny, Heather and Fatty.

rideable. Sure, it might rain, but it drains fast, and sandstone dries even faster.

Yuri's a sponsored pro, so he's on a sexy Marin bike and wearing sexy Kitsbow bike clothes. He also has sexy muttonchop sideburns, but he'd probably have those even if he wasn't a pro.

Kenny is wearing a jersey with the sleeves cut off. He's riding a singlespeed. He made our beer. He is our guide, and one of the owners of Gooseberry Yurts, which is where we'll be staying this weekend.

For all of these reasons, Kenny is a bit of a badass and occupies a very, very important role in this weekend's adventure.

Heather is Kenny's best girl (and Kenny is Heather's best boy). She's also a doctor, but not the kind that would do any of us any good this weekend, unless one of us suddenly needed immediate treatment for cancer during this trip.

But enough about Utah, and enough about my friends. Let's make this about me.

I'm riding a hardtail, wearing lycra and a tight jersey, set up like I'm here to do a local XC race, which is more or less how I always dress when I ride pretty much anywhere.

Big motor, big love for riding, very few actual technical mountain biking skills. That's me. I'm a fred. Big time.

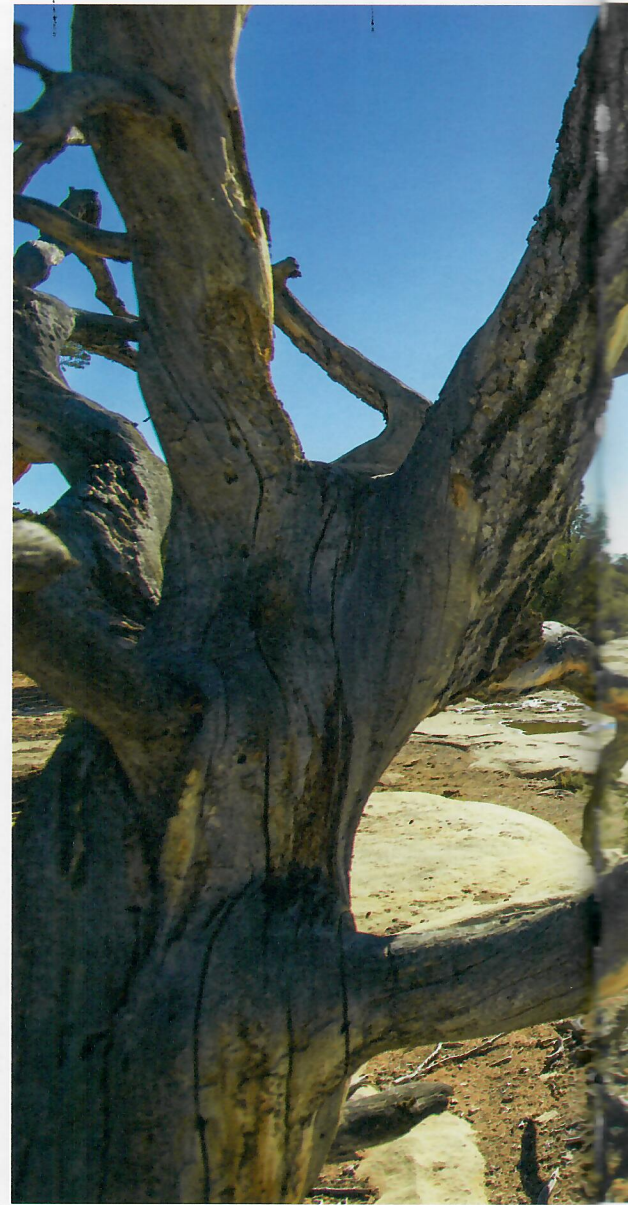
So I'm a little jumpy for this first ride. Nervous, self-aware, self-conscious. But I'm also the guy who has scientifically proven that I prepare and grill the best bratwurst this side of Minnesota. Nobody's going to ditch me ... not until after dinner, at any rate.



LITTLE CREEK

Why am I jumpy? Because I'm thinking back to my friend, Bob (a real person, his real name). He had flown out here from Seattle a month or so ago, came out to do a ride in this general area and snapped his wrist within 10 minutes of clipping in.

The riding can be a little technical around here. The rocks have a distressingly small amount of give, which means that out of the three



mesas we'd be riding this weekend, we have chosen wisely by coming to Little Creek Mesa on day one. Of the three mesas, Little Creek has the most dirt-style singletrack. It flows beautifully and (mostly) easily but with a lot of surprises. One moment you're riding in the shade of juniper bushes, the trail hugging the sandstone wall to your left, then *pop* you're now riding on the sandstone, a cliff a mere 12 feet to your right. (Closer, if you dare.)

And right there, you're witnessing the first signature element of a Morgan Harris-designed trail: riding along any available rim to get the best possible view. If you carrying a camera with you, you're going to find yourself unable to resist using it.

We weren't climbing a lot, nothing that made me feel like I needed to gear down, get patient and start grinding. But we were climbing often, if you get the distinction—flat, quick drop down gritty, grippy sandstone ending in a V, followed by a quick lifting of the front wheel, putting all your weight and power into the rear wheel and then blasting ridiculously up for 15 feet.

My tires wouldn't give up and quit. They'd stick. I was sometimes a little less tenacious, which is to say, more chicken. And in short, I would bail.

"Let me try again."

Sure, why not? The Three Move Rule applies at Little Creek: You get three cracks at anything; no complaining from the rest of the group allowed. This is how you get better at stuff.

Often, three tries was just about right. I was cleaning stuff, though I doubt anyone would say I cleaned it pretty. Other times, I wouldn't lift my tire quite enough, and I'd discover that—when properly placed in a v-shaped joining of two rocks—a bike's front wheel makes an unbelievably efficient fulcrum.

I should go to a skills camp or something.

That said, Little Creek isn't huge; you can get to all of the best parts of it on a Friday afternoon, and you won't be so smoked after the ride that the full day of riding ahead of you tomorrow loses its appeal.

You will, however, be wanting to go off-course from time to time, just to check things out. That's one of the primary draws of riding on sandstone instead of on dirt: indulging your sense of "what if." As in, "What if we tried riding off this overhang down to the ledge below, made a sharp left, and then kinda used that bunch of rocks as a ramp?"

Go for it. But, you know, maybe have someone close. And also, maybe don't forget where the nearest cairns are, so you can find your way back onto the trail.

Lydra Guy Tip: Cairns are very difficult to see after dark. Just FYI.



Opposite: Kenny, 52, killing it on his home turf. Yeah, he's really 52.

Left: Yuri cleans a gap between two rocks. Exposure on his left is significant.

Below: The "Waterfall Move" is not easy on the way down and is even harder on the way up.

GOOSEBERRY YURT

Let it be said that Kenny has the most perfect dirtbag Sprinter van in the whole world. He's got a fridge in it, a raised bed (under which four bikes can be stowed), a plumbed sink, and—I am not making this up—a chamberpot.

Above all else, though, Kenny's Sprinter has the beer. Apart from mountain biking, there is nothing Kenny loves more than making and drinking beer. Kenny is, in short, a walking talking breathing mountain biking role model. As such, and as the proprietor of Gooseberry Yurts, Kenny is a not-bad guy to have along on a ride.

After riding Little Creek, Kenny hauls out a keg he brewed especially for this occasion (or one very much like it), and we all start to drink.

And argue.

The argument goes along the line of which of the three mesa rides is the best, subjectively. Kenny and I have had this argument several times; it has what you might call a religious cast to it, centering around moments of clarity and the spiritual nature of a truly elegant trail.

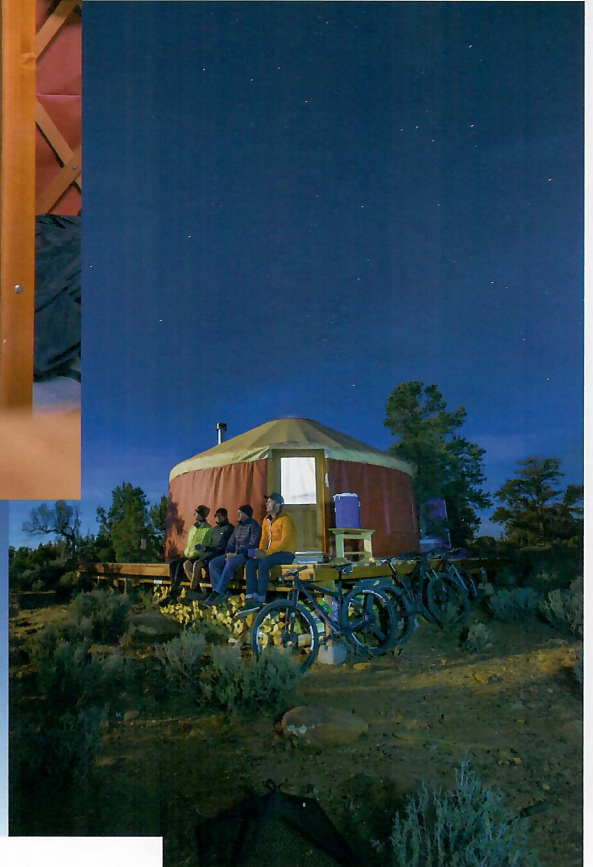
Yuri is not interested. He needs more data, more inspiration. We'll pick this thread up tomorrow.





Left: Wood stove burning, wifi hotspot working, email answered, boss fooled into thinking I'm doing my job.

Below: Food: eaten. Bikes: ready. It's kind of awesome to have nothing to do but watch the stars.



We drive to the Gooseberry Yurts—known as such because they are yurts, right on Gooseberry Mesa, which means that when we ride tomorrow, we won't be driving anywhere. We'll start on singletrack.

The yurts each sleep about six people, eight if you're intimate. By "sleep," I mean a couple of bunk beds and a futon sofa. They have a cooking stove plus wood stove. It's almost too nice: a strange combination of looking and feeling remote, while still having soft beds, a pit toilet and four bars on my phone.

As for neighbors, well, if there isn't another group staying in the nearby yurt, there aren't any neighbors. Gooseberry Yurts is the only private property around.

It's a still evening, though, so we're not eating or relaxing inside; we're sitting around the campfire on the very edge of a cliff, watching an extraordinary sunset.

And I am grilling bratwurst on a grate over the open fire—bratwurst I thoughtfully boiled in beer before coming on this trip. Without irony, I assert that I grill the best bratwurst this side of Minneapolis. Nobody



The marked route avoids ridiculous drops. Whether you avoid them is between you and your bike.

Right: Those are some super-nice shorts, Yuri.

who eats my bratwurst has ever disagreed. I'm that good.

In my heart, I wonder if it is only because of my bratwurst that I am invited on these trips. Probably so. I can live with that.

GOOSEBERRY

Kenny is making scrambled egg burritos, in accordance with holy writ: All mountain bike camping trips must have a breakfast of scrambled egg burritos. However, he is making them three ways. Vegetarian, vegetarian without onions, and the good kind.

The fussiness of our vegetarian riding faction concerns me, but I do not voice these concerns. Hey, I'm not on breakfast duty.

Coffee, burrito, lube chain, check air pressure, go. It's about that easy. And the trail is right there. It's like, one second you're sitting at the edge of a cliff, idly wondering how anyone could possibly eat a breakfast burrito without onions and bacon, and the next second you're riding what is arguably the best singletrack/slickrock trail network in the world. Seriously, a very good case can be made for this. For one thing, there aren't that many slickrock/dirt networks with this kind of depth of design. For another thing, it's not crowded.

You'd think, considering how close Gooseberry is to Little Creek, they'd be just alike. There are similarities. But if Little Creek is an appetizer, Gooseberry is the main course. You could ride for days here, for one thing (and that's even if you stay on-trail the whole time). For another, the character of the network is different.

Gooseberry is more rocky, more roly. It is loaded with moves, where you can obsessively try, endlessly, to defy gravity and haul



yourself up and over a wall with an overhanging lip. Conversely, you can obey gravity and drop down near-walls, hoping the rollout is good enough to keep you from pile-driving into sandstone.

I stay on the painted trail marks, mostly. When I do try a move, I either clean it ugly or not at all. Everyone else drops down crazy stuff, stuff that shouldn't be possible.

Yuri squeezes through a narrow slot, his tire slips for a moment, and before he knows it, Yuri's riding his bike like a sled down a rock face, the bulk of his weight on his derailleur. It's toast.

"It's cool, now it's a two-speed," Yuri says. "It's all I need."

"It's twice as much as you need," Kenny asserts.

I am the slowest of the group, but Heather continually moves to the back of the group. She's riding sweep intentionally, with purpose even.



Just lift your wheel over each of the three ledges and you're there. Heather stays well back, knowing Fatty will almost certainly topple.

I, I realize, am being babysat.

I ride harder. I clean stuff uglier (when I clean it at all), if that's possible. I make it more difficult to be in a place where Heather must choose between offering good advice and biting her tongue.

But mostly, I just have fun.

Because Gooseberry is a remarkably fun mountain bike playground, giving you slickrock opportunities to know what it would be like to ride into (or out of) a giant toilet bowl; or to work your bike through a canyon just wide enough (or in some cases, not quite wide enough) to get your handlebars through; or to know what a surfer must feel like riding a wave; or to punch your way up a remarkably steep 20-foot wall and then another, then another; or to ride your bike, so delicately, along the face of one of those walls.

Stay on course or look around and DIY—you're going to find something to scratch whatever itch you've got.

No matter what else you do, however, you must eat lunch at one very specific place: The Point. Follow the South Rim trail to its end, grinding up to a narrow peninsula in the sky. A narrow (but not freakishly narrow) band of rock leads you to an arrow point of clifftop, where on every side but the one you came over on leads down ... really down.

It's a great place to sit, eat the sandwich you've been making a mashed mess of for the past couple of hours, contemplate, and make deep and reverent observations like:

"This place is huge."

HURRICANE

After the ride and a solar shower, we drive down to Hurricane, Utah, for dinner. Nobody wants to cook, and we happen to know

that a street vendor called Dixie Pizza Wagon—with its semi-mobile wood-burning oven—makes the best pizza a hungry cyclist could ever want. Plus, they have vegetarian and vegetarian-without-onion options.

Allow me to recommend the Margherita pizza wholeheartedly, regardless of your diet or whatever.

His stomach full, Yuri is ready to take up the previous night's religious argument. It doesn't matter that he has only been on two of the three mesas, Yuri had experienced something, had a spiritual moment, as it were.

"I haven't ever ridden anything like this. Ever. And I've got to come back."

Yuri didn't say that after riding Little Creek. Most people don't. There's a reason you don't ride Gooseberry first. If you do, you're unlikely to branch out and try anything else. You become convinced that this is the one and-only manifestation of what the slickrock gods had intended us to ride.

Yuri was sounding downright fervent. We'd see whether this point of view would hold after riding Guacamole the next day.

GUACAMOLE

I'm not even going to feign objectivity here. Guacamole is my favorite ride of the three mesas. Not because it's the most technical. (It isn't.) Not because it has the most trail. (It doesn't.)

It's because it's the most fun. Playful. Silly, even, sometimes. For example, at one point you're riding along on perfectly normal dirt singletrack, only to have trail markers route you left and onto the ridge of a crescent-shaped rock that protrudes from the ground. Having ridden it, you are deposited back on the trail, just about 15



A narrow channel opens to an incredible chute. A few well-placed rocks make for a perfect rollout.

Lunch with a view.





Clockwise from Left: The real genius of the Guacamole Trail is how it takes advantage of natural features.

Just. So. Crowded.

Yuri demonstrates that southern Utah isn't all ledge drops and slickrock.

feet behind where you turned left. Another example: You ride up and around a dome-shape rock, spiraling your off-camber way to the top. Yet another: You string together half a dozen crazily connected embedded rocks, each move progressively challenging mostly because midway through you start laughing at the inspired/insane ingenuity of the people who strung all this together.

Also, Guacamole has a peculiar exoticness to it. Maybe it's because it's not as well known as Gooseberry or Little Creek. Maybe it's because I've never seen more than a few riders out on the trails.

Maybe it's because there are full-on petrified logs just casually strewn about here and there (and really all over the place) near this trail.

It's a shorter ride than either of the other mesas. It's the correct distance for a day-three ride, when you're probably a little bit beaten up and scraped up and quite possibly exhausted from the long weekend of riding you've done. Something a little more open, a little more free-wheeling, is a nice dessert, following that massive Gooseberry entrée.

Kenny maintains, with near-religious zeal, that Gooseberry is the best of all three of these mesas. Yuri vehemently agrees. Heather's stuck between choosing to witness for Gooseberry or Little Creek. I understand their convictions; I respect the visions they've had.

Unfortunately, they're all wrong. I hereby shout to the heavens: Guacamole is the best of the mesas. I will consider no other opinions valid, nor will I reassess my own viewpoint ... at least not until after I've done a skills camp or something. ☺

Elden "Fatty" Nelson blogs bicycle-related nonsense most weekdays. Find him at www.FatCyclist.com.

Fatty and Yuri in a big bowl of Guacamole.



INTERVIEW WITH A TRAIL GOD

Morgan Harris—along with his twin brother, Mike—is responsible, to a degree, for the incredible trail design of Gooseberry, Little Creek and Guacamole. Now 70 years old, Morgan still rides his Trek Slash five or six days a week, and continues to be active in trail-building in and around Hurricane, Utah.

Did you grow up in Hurricane?

No, we actually lived in Salt Lake until we were about 16. My granddad bought a ranch in Rockville in 1957. We were 12 years old, and we came down in the summers to help him, for what help 12-year-old boys are. As soon as I graduated high school in Salt Lake, I've been basically here ever since. This is what I've always called home.

How did you get started with mountain biking, and why these mesas?

I used to go out there deer hunting, and I made one trip out there on dirt bikes. There wasn't anything that was very challenging on a dirt bike. That would have been probably 1985. Then one day—in '93, I think—my twin brother called and said, "You need to get a mountain bike."

I said, "A what?"

"You need to get a mountain bike. I just got a new Specialized M2."

And I said, "Whatever that is." When he told me he paid like twenty-two hundred bucks, I said, "For a pedal bike? You must be insane." I went and bought a little Schwinn Moab for about \$485. After the first two times I rode it, I thought, "What a waste of money. This isn't fun, it just makes me tired."

I parked it for a couple of weeks and then it was like, "I've got to go do that again," and have been riding them ever since.

What were your first trail-building experiences like? Where did that come from?

My twin brother and I literally learned to ride on Gooseberry. Needless to say, we went home beat up a lot.

We always had a good sense for how things should go together. We would scout around and look for a feature, then find a way to have the trail move to and through it.

Hidden Canyon [a trail on Gooseberry Mesa] was the last section we did, and we spent a lot of time doing layout on that, probably more time-wise for that distance than we did on the whole rest of the trail because we wanted it to be super cool. That's kind of been our philosophy on everything we build: It's not just getting miles but having features.

You seem to have a sixth sense for trail design. Where did your eye for trail come from?

I think, basically, it's an art. I think I have an artist's eye for trail. I've had people literally say that to me. You must have an artist's eye to see what you see doing trails. I see them everywhere I go. I'm looking down on Suicidal Tendencies [a trail in St. George, Utah], the way it's laid out and there are a couple spots where I thought, "Now, that line really should have gone here."

I hate to do that on other people's trails, but I can't help it. I constantly see trails and lines they should have [taken]. Like, "If they had just shot that over that way, six, eight feet, it would have had this feature on it instead of missing it over here and moving the flow. It's a curse.

Really, I just love building and designing. I absolutely love it.

—E. Nelson



Kenny looks for salvation in the Gooseberry "Gravity Cavity" move.

HOLY TRINITY LOGISTICS

Gooseberry Mesa Yurts

www.GooseberryYurts.com

Contact info and reservations for making the yurts (and, for a price, Kenny himself) yours for the weekend.

Over the Edge Sports

OTESports.com/locations/hurricane/

A great bike shop for info on finding the mesas, as well as getting your bike fixed after you grind your derailleur into carbon dust.

Dixie Pizza Wagon

www.DixiePizzaWagon.com

For the best post-ride pizza you will ever eat.