

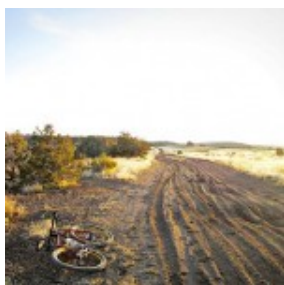
Pine Nuts lure mountain bikers with dry, challenging terrain

By Joel Fleishman

PINE NUTS – “Damn, that was a good ride. Only thing missin’ were dancing girls around every corner.”

“Yeah, naked ones,” a fellow dirt biker chimes in.

Soon, the snap, crackle and pop of Budweiser cans opening complement the macho banter, along with some very impressive expectoration. Gunshots echo from a firing range somewhere distant in the sagebrush. No question, this is Nevada.



Pine Nuts offer mountain biking while trails in Tahoe are soggy.

Photo/Jeff Moser/BikeCars on.com

To be exact, we’re at “The Tree,” the access point to the labyrinth of off-road trails leading into the Pine Nut Mountains at the southeast corner of the Carson Valley. I have

come here not to ride a motorcycle nor to shoot a gun, but to venture out on a mountain bike.

I had heard of the "Pine Nuts" before, but with world-class mountain biking just out of my Lake Tahoe backyard (the Flume, Mr. Toad's, Corral) I hadn't bothered with the 30-mile drive. And no one had ever said, "Man, you just gotta ride the Pine Nuts." But with our local trails still saddled with snow and mud, it was time to give it a try.

At "The Tree," an unmistakable, solitary pinion off Pine Nut Road, I'm not sure how to proceed into this maze of unfamiliar trails. Luck intervenes as I see another cyclist and flag him down.

"This is my first time out here ... can you tell me where to go?" I plead.

"How 'bout I show you? Come on, let's go," urges fit-looking Mark, whom I would find out trains triathletes. I get the feeling I'll have to bring out my A-game to hang with him.

Immediately, we are hammering on a dirt road that soon morphs into roller-coaster single track heading east into the hills. We crest the short, steep climbs only to dive back down, keeping the low gear handy for the next ascent. On one furious attempt up, my right foot loses contact with the pedal, which comes around and slams my shin.

"That's going to leave a mark," I mutter to myself. The impact also draws some blood, which seems to christen me to the Pine Nuts. A little bit of blood on a ride is fine; a lot, on the other hand, is another story.

We swoop around banked turns on firmly packed dirt with just enough rocks to make it interesting. But this in no way is technical mountain biking – my hardtail (a bike with only front suspension) handles it just fine.

Worries over a rampant motorcycle presence are unfounded on this day. The few dirt bikers we do see are courteous, albeit noisy. We all just want to get along and enjoy this place.



Joel Fleishman

After about an hour in, I realize from the view that we've gone up more than down. The Carson Valley below is abnormally green due to the big winter and wet spring. To the west, the Sierra Nevada mountain range explodes an almost perpendicular 5,000 feet from the valley floor. Job's and Job's Sister, both 10,000-foot peaks, are still covered with a massive, winter-like blanket of snow.

When you ride in the Sierra, sometimes it's hard to see the Sierra. Sure, riding through a dense alpine forest in a bowl known as the Lake Tahoe Basin offers plenty of eye candy. But out here in the Pine Nuts, a valley away on the next mountain range, you can better appreciate the immensity of that 400-mile-long wall of Sierra granite.

Looping back west and mostly down, view-gawking competes with concentrating on the trail. The predominant single-leaf pinions, from which the Pine Nuts gets its name, are too squat to obscure the panoramic scene. Neither better nor worse, it's a different experience than riding under the canopies of the 200-foot pines up at the lake.

Back at "The Tree," I thank Mark for his patience, and we go our separate ways. With a few hours of warm daylight left, I look for a mellow way to soak up some high-desert solitude. I cross Pine Nut Road and hit the Teacher's Trail, so named

because it's a good place for beginners. A couple of local bicyclists are on the trail and I mention how much I'm enjoying my first trip out to the Pine Nuts.

"This is our little secret. Don't tell anyone," says one of them.

I grin and think, "Yeah, right."