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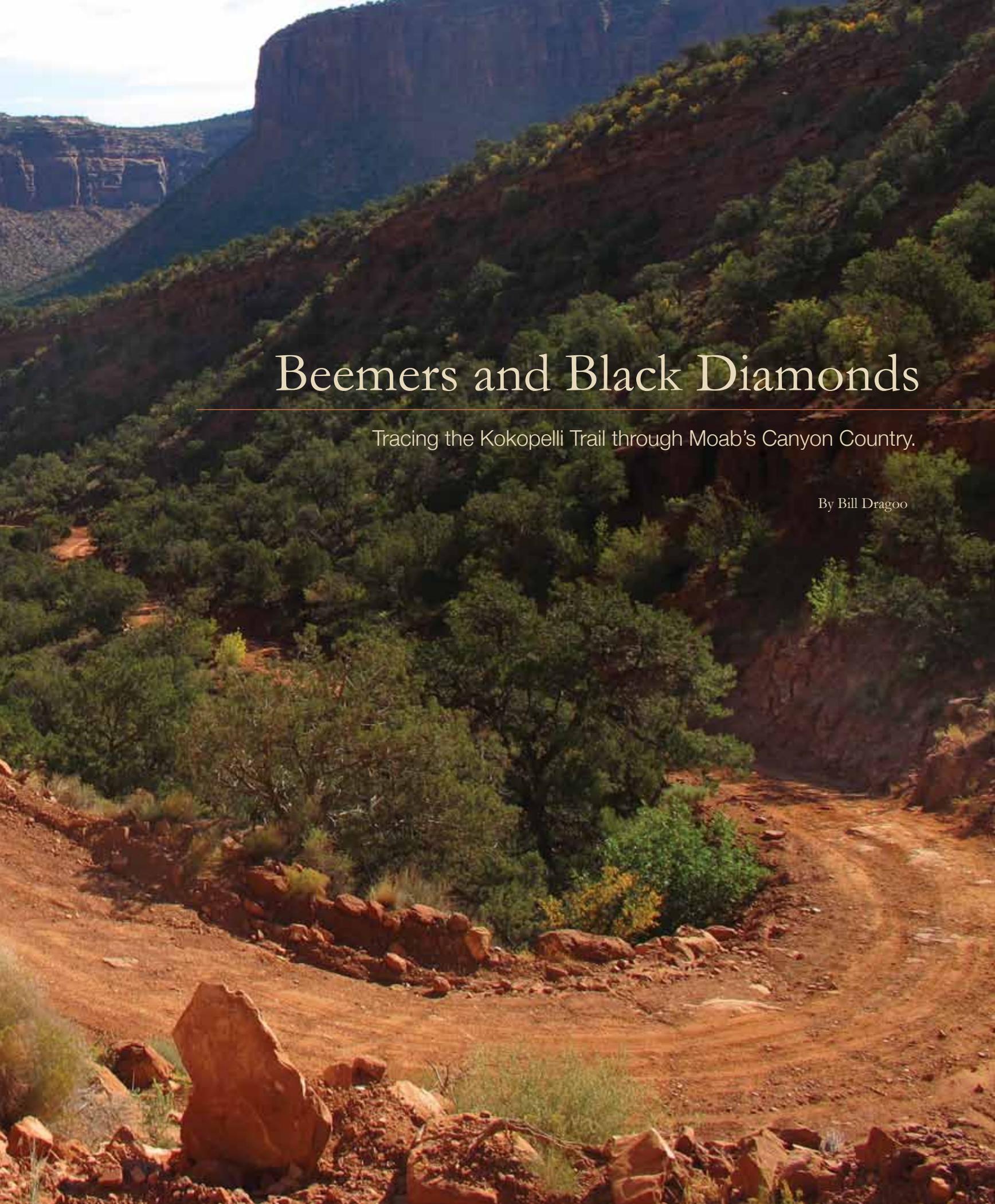
Southern Africa

Water Storage Solutions

Kokopelli Trail, Moab

Costa Rica



A scenic view of a dirt road winding through a canyon. The road is reddish-brown and leads into a lush green valley. In the background, a large, flat-topped mesa rises against a clear sky. The foreground is filled with red rocks and sparse green vegetation.

Beemers and Black Diamonds

Tracing the Kokopelli Trail through Moab's Canyon Country.

By Bill Drago

No! The word should be enough. A reasonable man would stop at that, but not Shannon. I fear we are in for another wild ride, this time on 700-pound Bavarian beasts.

I am used to Shannon's mood swings, but this one could bury us. My hapless friends and I are subject to his leadership as we dismount and take in the situation. Shannon was one of my teammates during BMW's GS Trophy competition in Africa, so I know the man. Following him is like driving into a wall cloud in Oklahoma—you know it will be exciting, but be careful what you wish for.

"I know that look in your eye, Shannon. We are not riding down that wash on loaded 700-pound motorcycles."

The "wash" is a sludge-filled trough, still flowing from a recent rainstorm. The brown rolling soup oozes across Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land and disappears beneath a railroad to the north. Near-record rains have turned this normally talc-like silt into something similar to half-baked crème brûlée. This is no place for big bikes, but Shannon ignores our protests. It may be that he's been obsessed with his new Warn XT17 moto-specific winch and has some strange delusion about stringing out its cable in this muck. He pops the latches on his aluminum panniers to lighten his R1200GS Adventure for the impending assault and tosses out 30 pounds of gear. Tapping it into first gear he rides ghostlike across the first mud flat. We're amazed at his dexterity and it looks like he'll actually make it... before he sinks to the skid plate on flat ground just beyond the lip.



The desert takes on a whole new personality when it rains, and confidence can be short-lived as momentum is quickly halted one way or another. **Opening spread:** Riding big adventure bikes forces a slower pace. There is no need to hurry, as Utah's backcountry is best when savored.







My pals run over to rescue me from my predicament. When back on the bike I exit with a little less pomp and confidence.

When riding a fully loaded adventure bike there is a fine line between speed and finesse. Chris succumbs to the slime, landing ungracefully in a muddy heap. The rains turn the normally talc-like dust into wet, Portland cement. Every crevice is packed with muck, adding unwanted pounds to an already overburdened machine. **Opposite, clockwise from top:** Rain is infrequent on the Kokopelli Trail, but when it comes some areas become almost impassible on a 600-pound motorcycle. Cody wisely chooses to enlist help and slips across unscathed. With the help of a WARN XT17 winch we make short work of extracting Shannon's bike.

We are on the Kokopelli Trail between Grand Junction, Colorado, and Moab, Utah. It is day two of a four-day ride and we're just a few miles into the trail. The first 20 miles of this route, which begins near Fruita, Colorado, are single-track and reserved for bicycles, but the remaining 120 miles, plus or minus, are open to motorcycles, quads, and four-wheel drives. I am fairly certain that two-wheeled machines this big weren't factored in when God created this terrain.

We entered the trail late yesterday at Rabbit Valley, a few miles west of Grand Junction on I-70, and came upon the wash 20 miles in. Shannon and I are on our GSAs, continuing our emerging theme of taking big bikes where they really don't belong. Cody is riding an overloaded R1200GS with Vario panniers and top box, and Chris is on the "skinny" bike, a KLR650 with about 150 pounds of gear strapped on.

Less than a mile into the trail Chris and Cody took several hits: the KLR lost its brake pedal and mount, and Cody had straps Band-Aiding his top box to its mount. The Palmer brothers, after a couple of falls each, were glaring at Shannon like a lion looks at a baby water buffalo, and it appeared Shannon was headed for a butt-kicking. It was a rough start, and I wondered if we'd make it to Moab by winter.

After making it through the first day we are now faced with prying Shannon's bike out of this goo. Smelling trouble, Shannon suggests that we take the nearest exit and make a beeline to Moab for repairs and to drop some gear. Nice thought, but a remote option at this point as we're not riding 250-pound dirt bikes. In front of us is a full-grown GS Adventure, 600 pounds at least, plus a good 100 pounds of mud packed into every void, and it's up to the axles in mud.

As if things aren't bad enough, a BLM truck pulls up and a man with a badge, Ranger Mark, climbs out and says, "I'm impressed that you made it this far. I hate to tell you this but 7 miles down the trail is another wash, twice as bad. You can go around if you want...it's only about 20 miles on the dirt road." I hear myself asking, "Can we give it a try, or is the trail officially closed?" Mark shook his head, "Nope, it's up to you. I just thought I'd warn you." Mark is kind enough to snap a few shots with our cameras as Shannon unpacks a secret weapon, the Warn XT17 stashed on his luggage rack. I knew he was looking for a reason to use it. Now he has one. At least his madness has a method.

We extricate Shannon's bike with relative ease, and the rest of us gird up our loins for our attempt. I choose to stay loaded, justifying this foolishness by telling myself I am packed lighter than the rest of the group. I take a different line and clear the first section. Out the other side, I skirt Shannon's bottomless ruts and find firmer ground to the left. I'm feeling proud I never dab a boot while approaching or crossing the wash. Transitioning back onto the main track, the crystallized Teflon top-scum lets go and I am smacked to the ground like a horsefly on a Clydesdale's rump. I'm trapped, my left leg smushed into the goo by the engine guard and the panniers making mud angels beneath the bike. The guys are quick to rescue me from my predicament. Back on the bike, I exit with a little less pomp and confidence. Chris charges into the wash next, and as he crests the upslope his KLR sends him on a flying leap into the mud. Cody exhibits the best judgment of the day and solicits help before his own attempt.

We continue to the wash Ranger Mark warned us about. He arrives just in time to watch us winch the last bike across. "You guys are lucky. This was a lot worse the last time I was here. You'd never have made it two days ago."

Meeting the pavement at Highway 128 we slab it into Moab to regroup. While in town we're fortunate to hook up with Fred Hink, own-





Photo ops abound as we roll past red sandstone formations carved by eons of wind and water.

er of Arrowhead Motorsports, a well-stocked home shop specializing in KLRs. Fred sells us used parts to fix Chris' bike and lets the boys stash their spare pistols, extra shoes, and an excess of clean laundry at his place until we can come back and retrieve them...providing we make it back.

Fred informs us, "You know guys...they rent real dirt bikes here in Moab. Maybe you should consider taking something lighter. It might be quicker and will probably save you some money too." Thanking him for his well-intended advice, we speed off to finish what we started. Welcoming the coming of sunset, we find a nice camping spot overlooking a canyon near the Colorado River.

In the morning Shannon reminds us that the trail is rated much like a ski slope. We have yet to come upon any black diamonds. When we finally do, we choose to wrestle the bikes up rather than fuss with the winch again. It takes us about twice as long and we're totally whooped by the time we get all four bikes through. The winching thing is looking better all the time.

Photo ops abound as we roll past red sandstone formations carved by eons of wind and water. Setting camp a little earlier tonight, we have enough sunlight to cook dinner without headlamps. We've only covered 65 miles today but it feels like a few hundred. We're beat, and at least one skid plate is hanging from its mount; another is shoved back against the exhaust. I feel lucky to have a gnarly Black Dog unit on my GSA. Lord knows it has taken some serious hits and it's still holding up.

East of Moab on Highway 128 we cross the Dewey Bridge and the mighty Colorado River. At the time of its construction in 1916, the Dewey Bridge was the second longest suspension bridge west of the Mississippi. We duck back into John Ford country on the Kokopelli. After humping our way up and down a few black diamond sections,

Top: Shannon inspects the damage to his skidplate. Safety wire, zip ties, JB Weld, and duct tape come in handy. **Left:** Utah's rock formations viewed up close reward our slower pace as we traverse this sandstone paradise near the Colorado River.





Drop-offs longer than the wheelbase of a GS cascade down the rocky slope like rungs on a spawning ladder.

most of which consist of rock ledges, small boulders and steep, rutted slopes with loose scree, we are feeling pretty full of ourselves. This is when Shannon informs us that we have one more “tough” section to tackle, a “double” black diamond known as Rose Garden Hill. During the area’s mining era, intrepid miners would traverse seemingly impossible terrain to access their mines and remove the ore for shipment to smelters. Rose Garden Hill is one of these routes and exemplifies the determination of those hearty souls.

We collectively groan at this news, as much of what we have already crossed has been near the limit for these bikes. We pull up to the precipice overlooking Rose Garden Hill and look down; we have our first thoughts of turning back. Drop-offs longer than the wheelbase of a GS cascade down the rocky slope like rungs on a spawning ladder. It’s a quarter mile down and is the only route into Fisher Valley. But it’s part of the Kokopelli, so we’re committed.

Loose rock is the best we’ll find for purchase, and winching would take hours if not days with all the hookups and lowering. Following a well-established routine, the Palmer brothers and Shannon grab the Shanster’s bike and start spotting him as he eases off the first ledge towards infinity. His GSA is pitched forward like a bucking bronco six seconds into a five-second ride. The occasional screech, scrape, and clunk accompany groans and a mouthful of expletives as the guys do their best to minimize damage. Chris and Cody brace Shannon and his mount upright, and pucker factor seems to be the only thing keeping him seated.

It takes us four and a half hours to get the bikes down the hill. We are exhausted. The factory skid plate mount on Cody’s GS pounded a crack in the thread boss and the engine is now leaking oil. It’s getting dark; Chris and Cody begin the stepped climb out of the canyon

Top: We learned that Rose Garden Hill was once a cattle route into Thompson Valley. Years ago, the uranium mining company partnered with the Taylor Ranch to “improve” the road. **Left:** Brakes are irrelevant on Rose Garden Hill and descending gracefully is not an easy task.



Riding at night in the rough presents an eerie kind of scene. It's akin to walking through an old barn that's decked out for Halloween tours.

while Shannon scrambles back up the trail on foot to retrieve his jacket and helmet.

Riding at night in the rough presents an eerie kind of scene. It's akin to walking through an old barn that's decked out for Halloween tours. Good lighting keeps the surprises to a minimum, and the bright white light from my Rigid Dually D2s is priceless. I lead Shannon up the ledge, hoping the brothers have found a suitable campsite nearby. We find them about a mile up the trail in the first semi-flat spot large enough for our tents. We wolf down a few snacks by the glow of our headlamps, call it dinner, and hit the sack.

The next morning Cody J-B Welds his engine case while the rest of us offer unsolicited advice about skid plates, taller suspension, and riding techniques. Cody ignores most of our interruptions.

We enter the Taylor Ranch a little past Fisher Valley Road (aka the Onion Creek Trail), which could serve as an emergency bailout point if needed. Almost out of drinking water, we make our way up to the house, helmets in hand. An oasis of green surrounds the property, a sharp contrast to the surrounding environment. Joe Taylor, fifth-generation patriarch of the ranching family that lives here, greets us. After introductions he shares with us that in the late 19th century his great-great-grandfather walked into Fisher Valley with Brigham Young and settled in this green oasis. They initially sold horses and cattle to the Ute Indians, and the family's ranching tradition continues today. The Taylor Ranch and surrounding area have played movie set for films such as *Riders of the Purple Sage*, and his horses and personal training have been invaluable to Western movie makers. Joe smiles at our mention of Rose Garden Hill. "We brought cattle down that canyon before they improved the road."

Top: Another casualty. Cody repairs a busted oil sump on his GS while we offer unsolicited (and unwanted) suggestions. **Right:** Every mile is a challenge, but the feeling of accomplishment makes it worthwhile. We could close our eyes and imagine the hardships our forefathers must have undergone to cross this desert in their primitive contraptions.





Kokopelli Trail **RESOURCE GUIDE**

The Kokopelli Trail, named after the humpbacked flute player (the symbol of fertility for various Native American cultures of the Colorado Plateau), is roughly 140 miles in length. It begins at the Loma boat launch in Colorado and ends in Moab, Utah. Though the first 20 miles is limited to non-motorized travel, the remainder of the trail is suitable for dual-sport motos and four-wheel drives. The route generally skirts the Colorado River basin south of I-70 to the Dewey Bridge, on Highway 128, before turning east towards the La Sal Mountains, then loops westward toward Moab's slickrock country.

What to expect

Trail conditions vary greatly with weather. Surfaces can be sketchy when dry and dusty, and almost impassable when wet. A lighter machine would be preferable if time is of the essence, and a skillful rider on a proper dirt bike could complete the route in one day. Rose Garden Hill is the most difficult part of the trail and will challenge most riders to their limits.

Skills and Equipment

Any well-maintained dual-sport machine should be suitable for this trip. However, you should polish your rock riding skills and have a partner along to assist if needed on the black diamond sections. Armor up with a quality skid plate and lever protectors. A folding shifter and rear brake lever are also recommended.

Logistics

Lodging and supplies are available in Fruita, Colorado, and Moab, Utah. Most motels, campgrounds and motorcycle shops will accommodate short-term trailer parking with prior notice. Primitive campsites are plentiful along the trail. There are no services or facilities, so carry your own camp gear, spares, water, and a personal locator beacon (PLB); help is hours away at best. Some of the travel is slow and technical, especially on a full-size adventure bike, so manage fuel reserves based on your vehicle's consumption. Late summer and late spring offer more moderate temperatures, while annual autumn rains make some parts of the trail impassable. Evening temperatures can be chilly even in summer. No special permits are required.

Access

From I-70, west of Fruita, Colorado, take Exit 2 at Rabbit Valley. The trail from Rabbit Valley westward is open to motorized travel, but watch for mountain bikers. Trails are marked but there are numerous options, which can be confusing. A good area map and GPS are essential. Dewey Bridge, at Highway 128, is approximately the halfway mark and can be used as a bailout point if needed. There is room to park a trailer on the north side of the river.

Scenic value

Bring a camera; this area is off the scale when it comes to rock formations, petrified sand dunes, and forest foliage at the higher elevations.

Maps and Websites

Stay The Trail offers a good downloadable map of the first half of the trail: staythetrail.org, 720-684-9960.

The Bureau of Land Management's website provides many details about the Kokopelli and the surrounding area. blm.gov, 435-259-2100 (Moab Field Office).

National Geographic Maps Moab North and Moab South are excellent, and cover the route from Pump House Road to Moab. nationalgeographic.com, 888-557-4450



“Road!” We all say, almost in unison. “That’s a blasted water-fall. What road?”

“The Taylor family shared expenses with a uranium mining company to widen it. Before then you could barely lower a cow and calf down that trail. Yeah, it’s a good road now.” We exchange dubious glances, but wisely choose not to argue with Joe. Maybe he’s talking about a *different* Rose Garden Hill.

Mr. Taylor is accustomed to strays like us showing up at his door, some in better condition than others. Not long ago, two female mountain bikers wandered up to his house, lost and dehydrated. He and his wife nursed them back to health, filled them with cold, sweet springwater, and trucked them and their bikes back to Moab. The Taylors wouldn’t accept payment for their kindness, but later found a thank you note and a fair amount of cash stashed in their pickup. It’s good to run across folks like the Taylors out in these parts.

He also tells us about a group of Jeepers that drove up his private road heading towards the box canyon. When they couldn’t get through, they had no choice but to backtrack. Mr. Taylor was waiting. “I had to give them a little lesson in etiquette,” he says. “Never pass a man’s house on his land without stopping and stating your business.” We are glad we’ve chosen the high ground in approaching his ranch. It’s always best to treat the locals with respect.

Refreshed and with hydration packs bulging, we set off for the final leg to Moab. Sand Flats Road is scenic, but a little too tame for our palates...now that we’ve tasted blood. The Sand Flats Recreation Area, however, has 100-plus campsites and is a great staging area for adventures in and around Moab. Shannon leads us on one last side route, Porcupine Rim, a scrappy trail that skirts Castle Valley and Negro Bill Canyon. Initially created for motorcycles, four-wheel drive and mountain bike enthusiasts have adopted this and other nearby routes. The trail presents breathtaking views of The Priest and Nuns and Castle Rock formations. As we make our final descent, we notice the golden hues of fall starting to pop at the higher elevations, creating a visual feast for the senses. We roll past the Fins and Things Trail and the infamous Lion’s Back, a 200-foot-high knife-edge fin of sandstone made famous some years ago when a K5 Blazer lost its brakes, triggering a hair-raising descent. The vehicle careened down the slope, free falling the last 30 feet to the sand below. Amazingly, no one was killed in the accident. Once a favorite challenge for Jeepers, Lion’s Back is on private property and is now closed.

We are up on the pegs as we glide down the grade into Moab. The asphalt feels as smooth as glass after four days of pounding shocks on the Kokopelli. The Moab Brewery gets the nod for a well-earned burger, and we clink beers as we do a play-by-play recap of our adventure.

The final moments of such a trip are often melancholy, as one considers returning to the “real” world of obligations.

Shannon interrupts our moroseness, mumbling something about gassing up and trying the Hell’s Revenge Trail next. “Any takers?” he asked. Nobody responds...🌐

ROUTE | Kokopelli Trail

Cartography by David Medeiros (mapbliss.com)

