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GRIZZLIES ADD AN EXTRA DASH OF SPICE TO THIS MUST-RIDE MONTANA EPIC

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While we were kitting up, I saw him strap a .357 magnum revolver to his chest.

“What am I getting into?” I said to myself as a distant rumble of thunder echoed my internal dialogue of self-doubt. I’d known Michael Autenreith, my informal guide, for all of 20 minutes when we pulled into the Stone Creek Trailhead parking lot, determined to ride the Bangtail Divide that day.

My original plan was to ride the Bangtail the day after arriving in Montana, but when my original partner was no longer able to guide me on the renowned IMBA Epic, I put out a plea through social media looking for locals.



Packing heat on the trail | Photo: Robert Annis

Thankfully, a friend from Indianapolis put me in contact with his cousin who jumped at the chance to show me the ride, provided I could get him an XC bike for the day. Riding his 50-pound downhill machine was not in the cards, and within just a few pedal strokes from the trailhead, I discovered why.

Technically speaking, the Bangtail Divide is not terribly difficult. You've got a few pitchy twists and turns at the beginning and end of the trail, but it's nothing a solid intermediate rider can't tackle. What makes the trail tough is the relentless climbing. The first half of the trail is almost completely uphill, rising from an elevation of 5,500 feet to 8,000 feet in about 13 miles. The first quarter of the climb is the steepest, with grades reaching 25 percent.

I kept listening for the angry growl of a grizzly behind us.

My rented Ibis Ripley 29er wanted to fly up the switchbacks, but knowing we had a long day ahead of us, I dialed back the intensity, preferring a steady crawl up the mountain. I did find a sudden burst of energy when Michael thought he spotted an adolescent bear hiding a few dozen yards off the singletrack. Luckily, mama bear didn't come out, and Michael's pistol remained holstered. For the next quarter mile, I kept listening for the angry growl of a grizzly behind us, but all was quiet save for my labored breathing and our knobbies rolling over the dusty trail.

Although the Bangtail isn't the most technical trail, it definitely deserves its IMBA Epic status thanks in large part to views that are truly larger-than-life. Finally reaching the top, we were rewarded with meadows absolutely exploding with Technicolor; monarch butterflies floated from wild hyacinth to Indian paintbrush to bitter cress. Pedaling the ridgeline, we enjoyed panoramic views of the surrounding mountain ranges and Gallatin National Forest. The rain clouds avoided us that day, but we could see them dumping on the nearby Crazy Mountains. (Pro Tip: Pop-up storms are routine for these mountains, so be sure to stash a rain jacket in your hydration pack.)



The view down Bridger Canyon, toward Bozeman, from the top of the Stone Creek. Photo:

Despite not really knowing one another, Michael and I fell into an easy rhythm on the trail. When we took breaks and regaled one another with stories of other rides between bites of Clif Bars and M&Ms. It's a good thing we got along so well—we ran into exactly one other rider on the trail over the course of our five-plus hour adventure.

Riding in the summertime, meant we were not likely to come across a stream or other water source, so it was up to us to pack enough water. The three liters in my Camelbak Lobo were gone about 20 miles into the ride; Michael finished his water right before me. As the inside of my mouth turned to cotton, I started hoping for one of those pop-up storms to roll through.

It's pretty difficult to get off track on the Bangtail—but I sometimes need a compass to navigate my own backyard. We didn't come close to getting lost, although we did nearly follow a couple of spur trails leading away from the established singletrack. When in doubt, we continued to follow the wooden guide poles to the right of the trail.

***We immediately rushed to the flowing stream,
soaking our heads and drinking our fill.***

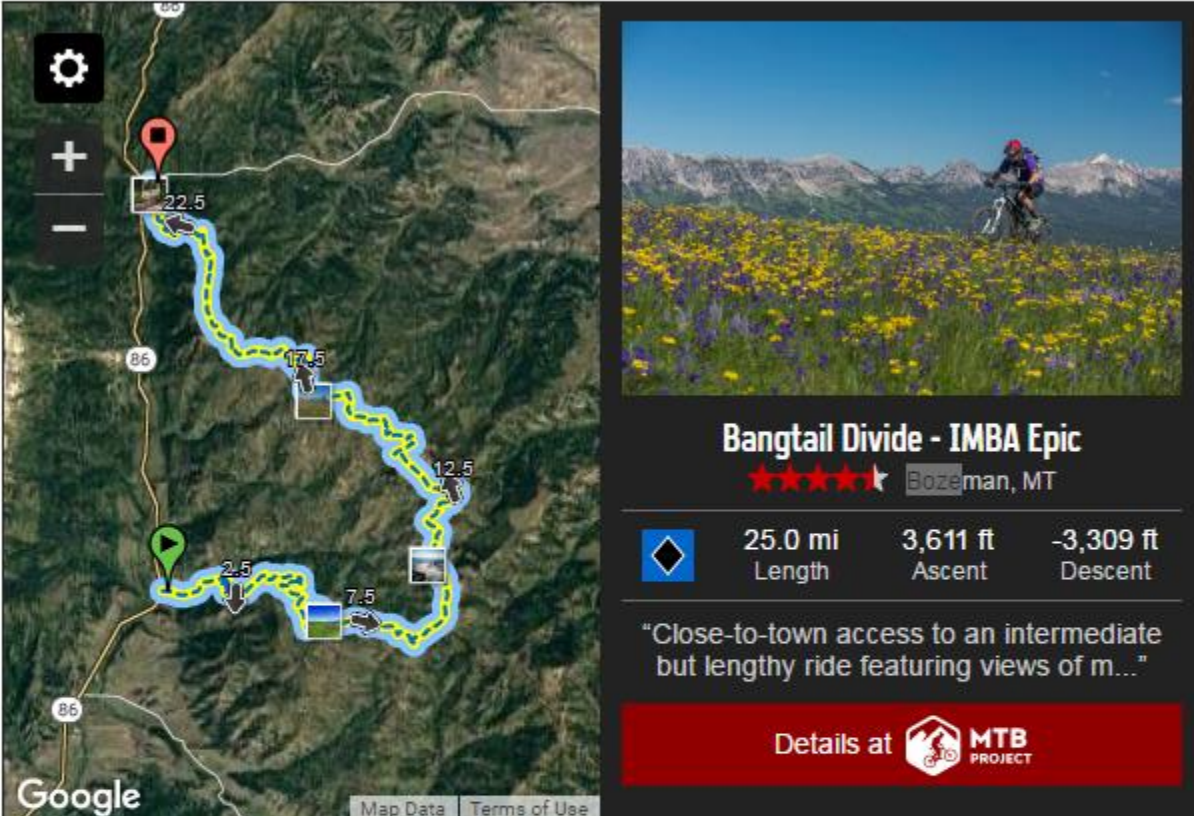
Theoretically, we knew we were descending on the back half of the ride, but after every downhill, we seemed to encounter another minor climb. That stretch may have been the most difficult because we were mentally unprepared for it. In our exhausted and slightly dehydrated state, each time the trail pointed up, it felt like we were climbing Denali. I knew Michael was suffering when I began gaping him on the climbs.

Luckily, the trail doesn't rise again once you start seeing signs for the Brackett Creek Trailhead. The last five or six miles of sweet descending felt like a just reward for all of our hard work, with the last couple of miles substantially increasing both the pitch and the enjoyment of the trail. Switchbacks zigzag downhill—some are pretty wide and open, while a couple made us really concentrate on our speed and form.

Finally reaching Brackett Creek parking lot, we immediately rushed to the flowing stream, soaking our heads and drinking our fill. (Michael had a water-purifier, a must-have for backcountry trails.) From there, we took to the road. A couple of mild grade changes and a nice downhill later, we rolled back into the Stone Creek parking lot. If I had it to do over again, I would definitely park at the Brackett Creek Trailhead and use that seven-mile road ride as a leg-opener.

Want to ride it yourself? Expect to spend at least four hours on the trail and more if you're not used to the elevation or want to take frequent photo breaks. (Trust me, you will.) If you have less time, do what many of the locals do after work: Ride the dirt road up Grassy Meadow to the trail, then take advantage of the downhill.


Bangtail Trip Planner



Bangtail Divide - IMBA Epic
★★★★★ Bozeman, MT

◆	25.0 mi Length	3,611 ft Ascent	-3,309 ft Descent
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"Close-to-town access to an intermediate but lengthy ride featuring views of m..."

Details at 

[Sleep] [The Lark](#) in downtown Bozeman is a gorgeous rustic modern motor inn that was completely renovated in the last few years. Rooms are spacious and fun, with art echoing the mountains and nature surrounding town. In the lobby, there are tons of topographical maps for you to plan the day's adventure, and several staff members are avid outdoorsy people who can suggest routes. On my first day, when the trail was too wet to ride, they suggested a gorgeous road ride up to Hyalite Reservoir and back. Hotel guests get 20 percent off bike rentals at the nearby Chalet Sports.

[Fuel Up] Outside the Lark, you'll find the Victory Tacos food truck. I highly recommend the breakfast burritos. About a block down, [Burger Bob's](#) offers terrific, reasonably priced food and drinks, including Kokanee beer, a guilty pleasure that's worth trying when in the Northwest. Best of all, the wait staff are incredibly nice, and they hardly laugh as you try to walk off dehydration-induced charley horses throughout your meal.

[Get Caffeinated] [Clark's Fork](#) is a cafe a few minutes from downtown and definitely worth a visit. The coffee was hot and bottomless, passing my two criteria. I had the appropriately named Hot Mess special: biscuits, gravy, hashbrowns, bacon, and eggs piled on top of one another like a tasty, cholesterol-filled pyramid. The walls are decorated with food-related quotes from Lewis and Clark's expedition journals. Service was a little slow, but not too bad.

[Get Crafty] [Montana Ale Works](#) has more than 40 local and regional microbrews on tap, as well as one blue ribbon-winning upstart from Pabst Brewing in Milwaukee. It was nearly a mistake to start with the Scepter Head IPA from Draught Works in Missoula; the beer was so good, I was tempted to stick with it the entire night. Luckily I soldiered on, enjoying the Cold Smoke Scottish Ale from another Missoula brewery, [Kettle House](#). The food is top-notch pub fare; I recommend the locally raised bison burger with avocado on top.