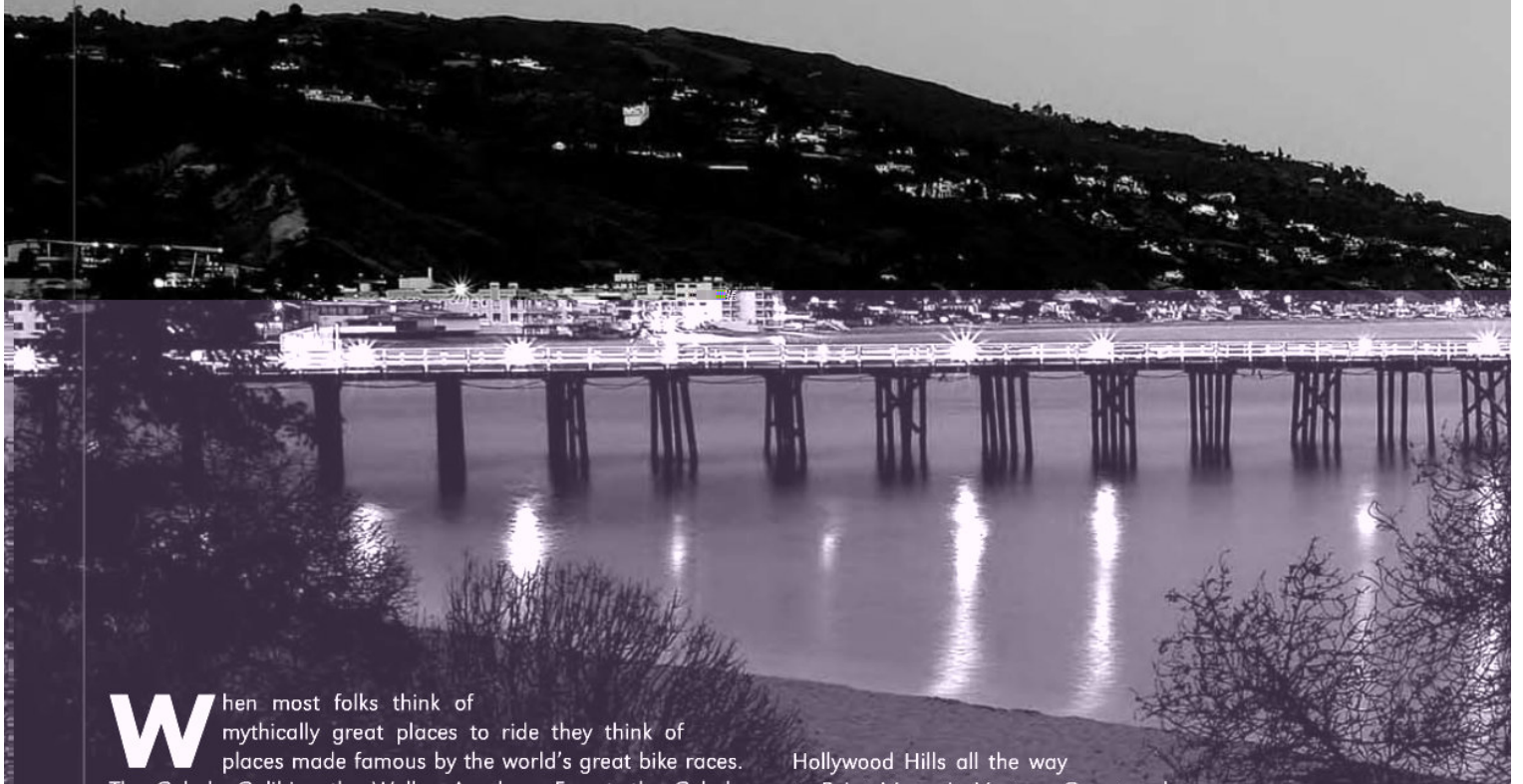


MAYBE HEAVEN DOES HAVE MOUNTAINS

Finding epic climbs in a place more known for personalized license plates, movie stars and Baywatch. Welcome to the Santa Monica mountain range.

*By Patrick Brady
Photos by John Ker*





When most folks think of mythically great places to ride they think of places made famous by the world's great bike races. The Col du Galibier, the Wallers-Arenberg Forest, the Col du Tourmalet, the Gavia—they are epic locales that have given the sport some of its most memorable moments.

They are, however, extravagances. They are to daily rides what any Ferrari is to daily drivers: unaffordable both in terms of time and effort—no one can dash out for a quick climb up the Telegraphe and Galibier. Heck, they aren't even rideable for most of the year. In romantic terms, they are hot, but a little bit crazy; you'd make sure to invite them to the party, but you wouldn't want to date them for more than a weekend.

Southern California's Malibu is known for surfers, nutty Hollywood starlets pursued by conscience-free paparazzi and wildfires that can reduce an actor's real estate holdings by one. Malibu ought to be known as the roadie equivalent to the BMW Mini: affordable, gorgeous and more fun than you've had in years.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

What makes Malibu special for cyclists are the Santa Monica Mountains. The Santa Monicas are a relatively rare east-west oriented mountain range. They run some 40 miles from the

Hollywood Hills all the way to Point Mugu in Ventura County, whereupon they run into the ocean. They separate the San Fernando Valley from much of the rest of the Los Angeles metropolis.

While good riding can be had on the roads around the roads of Los Angeles, Hollywood is generally too congested with traffic to make for enjoyable riding. It's in Malibu, at the western end of the Santa Monicas, that the challenge of the terrain, good pavement, consistently good weather and light traffic come together to create a road bike playground that can be enjoyed by anyone most days of the year.

Because the peaks in the range line up rather neatly from east to west, they make planning rides pretty easy, logistically. Pacific Coast Highway parallels the mountains to the south, giving riders easy sea-level access to nearly every climb, while Mulholland Highway parallels PCH for much of its distance before turning south and running to the coast itself.

MAY YOU LIVE IN INTERESTING...TERRAIN

Long, straight roads are boring. It doesn't matter if they are flat, downhill or climb to heaven itself. A road needs some twists and turns to make it interesting. The tight canyon roads of Malibu



have all the ups, downs, twists and turns of our current economy, but with one significant improvement: You can ride these roads until all the surprises are gone.

The roads of Malibu twist and weave to a degree that those in the Rocky Mountains, Green Mountains, Berkshire Mountains, White Mountains—virtually everything else that isn't coastal California—can't match. The key is in the terrain itself. These canyons are still in the process of being cut as the mountains around them rise. The narrow channels undulate without ceasing, making all roads look like a tangled antique phone cord. Indeed, I wouldn't be surprised if they made these roads using 747-sized knitting needles.

In many mountainous regions, such as the Rockies, the turns will be based on a radius that can be hundreds of feet. In Malibu, the inner radius of some turns can be as short as a dozen feet. Rare is the rider who can reach the bottom without warm rims. Not braking is simply not an option for the vast majority of the area's descents.

Of course, the turns aren't the only aspect of the terrain that can keep you on your toes. Most of the grades vary from one kilometer to the next. Those who find success on steady five percent grinders will find Malibu to be a confounding experience. It is truly a land for the climbing specialist. The classic climbers who use variations in their pace to shake other riders from their wheel can capitalize on Malibu's myriad grades—from as little as one or two percent in spots up to 18 percent in others—to deliver cruel accelerations to those at the end of their rope.

Malibu boasts a baker's dozen climbs that gain more than 1400 feet in elevation over four miles or more of asphalt. They all average between a four and seven percent gradient with one exception. The vast majority of the roads interconnect (a couple do dead-end), allowing riders to constantly create new circuits each ride. The best part: oxygen-robbing elevation is never an issue.



Photo: Patrick Brady

Two of the climbs deserve special mention. Las Flores is a civil engineer's idea of smack talk. It starts out at less than three percent. Think you're tough? Suddenly you round a bend and you're dealing with seven, then eight percent. How d'you like me now? Another bend on the road hits 18 percent, unless you have the lack of foresight to take the inside line, and that's been measured at 21 percent. Take that!

Ultimately, you have two choices to the top. A left turn further up onto Hume brings the gradient back under control—for a bit—before delivering you to the sustained eight and nine percent pitches of Rambla Pacifico. It's the rare rider who continues straight up Las Flores and its sustained 12 percent pitches before also ultimately meeting Rambla Pacifico. The direct route averages more than eight percent while the Hume respite brings the average back down to a mere 7.4 percent.

Deer Creek, at just 2.1 miles, is one of the shorter climbs in Malibu, but any rider who has climbed it will tell you it is unforgettable, thanks to its 12.4 percent average gradient. Consider it a taste of Mount Washington.

But those are just details. What it adds up to is a constantly changing view. Desert scrub, sawtooth peaks, film and TV locations ("M*A*S*H" was filmed here) and eventually ocean overlooks, the sights are never boring. Fortunately, the twisting and winding of the road breaks up the monotony of climbing and protects you from viewing the top, which is handy if your ego could use insulating from the stark knowledge that just like the drive during childhood vacations, you're not there yet.

DOWN, DOWN, DOWN

When I was growing up, the high point of any summer was the trip to any amusement park and riding the roller coasters. When I was 14, I was convinced that the perfect amusement park would contain nothing but roller coasters and maybe one concession with guns.

In Malibu, I have found nirvana. Literally the only reason I don't indulge in three or four of its super-G-style drops every freakin' day is that I...well, I'm married. And hope to stay that way. In my brain I could play there all day. Honestly, 120 miles in those mountains with maybe five or even six of its climbs and

descents sounds like fun, but I'd need my own personal broom wagon to get home.

If ever there was a place that could charge for lift-served road riding, this is it.

Take, for instance, Tuna Canyon. A few years back when Red Bull sponsored the Red Bull Road Rage, a downhill race for road bikes, organizer and Giant Bicycles sales rep John Mesko picked Tuna Canyon. Mesko said, "I wanted to find out what you could do on that road. I've never had another hill scare me."

Tuna runs downhill a mere 4.1 miles, most of which is one-way because a huge stretch of the road washed out in a mudslide and is now about as wide as a couch. And in that 4.1 miles it drops an astonishing 1800 feet for an 8.3 percent average, though that doesn't account for the occasional drops at 15 and 18 percent, the off-camber or decreasing radius turns. The California Department of Transportation considered a bid from the Otis Corporation to install an elevator but instead settled on a plan that included more than 70 turns top to bottom.

Yeah, 70 turns in 4.1 miles. Ripcords are tested on Tuna.

Don't worry, not all the descents are that gnarly. Topanga, Piuma and Stunt can be descended sans those little fun scrubbers by the noticeably (if not exceptionally) skilled.

With one or two exceptions, in these mountains the question of speed is not answered by how fast you can pedal a 53x11, but rather by how little you can brake prior to and during each turn. Because great descending is a matter of Zen cool rather than lactic fortitude, these drops are as close as cycling gets to golf. Nerves of steel can impress your friends, but if you shank it, the results are, shall we say, a little more grave.

So now the cat is out of the proverbial bag. For those who love climbing and descending, a twisty road paradise that can be ridden year-round. There are plenty of hotels nearby, and thanks to the economy, the local real estate agents have a few listings with only one comma. But not for long.

THE GREATEST HITS

CLIMB	LENGTH (MILES)	ELEVATION GAIN (FEET)	PERCENT GRADE
Topanga/Fernwood/ Saddle Peak	8.2	2250	5.2
Topanga/Old Topanga	8.1	1500	3.5
Stunt	4.0	1340	6.3
Piuma	5.5	1720	5.9
Las Flores/Rambla Pacifico	5.0	2175	8.2
Las Flores/Hume/ Rambla Pacifico	5.6	2175	7.4
Latigo	9.2	2200	4.5
Encinal	5.0	1650	6.3
Decker	4.6	1650	6.8
Mulholland Hwy	7.1	1550	4.1
Yerba Buena	8.5	2390	5.3
Deer Creek	2.1	1380	12.4



DON'T TAKE OUR WORD FOR IT

The Killer himself trained for the Giro in Malibu. So did Carlos Sastre and Ted King. So did Lance Armstrong. Need more reasons?

Amgen's Tour of California has brought many fine pros to California for the first time in their cycling careers. The great bonus the pros have realized has come in the form of the California training camp. This past winter, members of Team Saxo Bank and the Cervelo Test Team spent time riding the roads of Malibu the week before the Amgen Tour of California.

Surprised locals did double-takes as they watched Carlos Sastre ride by. Some even did triple-takes before calling out to the reigning Tour de France champion, "Hey, Carlos!"

Cervelo Test Team's Ted King was among the riders who took part in the team's SoCal training camp. Based at a resort in Ventura County, he and other team members did serious miles on the area's stiffest climbs.

"To this self-proclaimed East Coast kid, the riding in Malibu is not at all what you'd expect," said King via e-mail. "Instead of dodging six-figure sports cars, you easily are riding north from the Pacific Coast Highway—away from the hustle and bustle—and into miles of great climbing. I wasn't in town long enough to remember the road names nor names of the climbs, but they all just sort of meld together into one happy memory of Malibu riding."

Another rider who took in the roads of Malibu as he ramped up for his '09 season was none other than the Giro d'Italia's eventual second-place finisher and winner of the Ciclamina Jersey and two stages—Danilo Di Luca. The Killer has a friend who lives in Los Angeles and invited him to come out for the winter and do some training in a warmer climate.

Di Luca's host happens to know one of the hotshot master racers in the area, former Master's Kilometer World Record Holder Antony Galvan. Galvan was tapped to act as Di Luca's guide to Malibu while in the area.

"He was here almost three months, and we rode almost every day after being introduced," Galvan said. "It was kinda funny—he speaks no English, and I speak no Italian, but we both have decent Spanish, so we'd ride around and chat on the rides in Spanish.

"He'd call at 10:30 or 11, and we'd meet at 11:30 for a four- to six-hour ride. Every day was big climbing. We'd head out PCH and then do one of the long climbs. His favorite was Encinal because of its length and consistent grade; eventually we did all the combinations possible. But no matter what, we'd always do Latigo once on the way back." Reached as Di Luca was racing the Giro, Antony added, "I'd like to think that's why he's doing so well."

Things didn't turn out too badly for Galvan, either. He recently repeated as the Criterium State Champion in the Masters' 30-39 category and leads the Best All Around series for the second year in a row.

"He cracked me up. The entire time he was here he went out to eat every night and always ate at Italian restaurants. I asked him about it once, and he said, 'There is no other kind of food.'"

At the end of the trip, Galvan asked Di Luca what he thought of the riding in Malibu. "He said he'd be back. I can't wait." **E**