



# Autumn glory

**Graeme Fife** goes mountain biking through golden leaves on the Kingdom Trails in Vermont, New England





**T**he liquor store sign in Lyndonville offers Beverage and Redemption (on empties), which is one up on the church, and in the restroom of the diner up the road a notice details instructions for the correct procedure for 'proper hand-washing'. These may be the last evidence of god-fearing, strait-laced, sensible civilization before the road noses into the wild outback that is the great sprawl of the Kingdom Trails round East Burke, Vermont.

At the Village Inn, George, the owner, is oiling his rifle ahead of the hunting season, and I've come with some friends and their buddies from New England on the last weekend before the scary types in camel flags (camouflage) take to the woods with their questionable attitude, scatterguns and high velocity bows and arrows.

Next morning, we head out for Darling Hill, entry to the trails. It's a sick name for a nasty goitre of geology with more gradient than it knows what to do with, other than giving heavy-drag on fat stubbly tyres. However, like so many hills across the cycling globe, Darling Hill is a fact of life hereabouts and deals out a warm-up routine that makes a turbo look like a hamster treadmill. A woman walks past with two pumpkins, one in each arm, and a smile like a slice of pie.

### The backwoods

All summer the trees have been sucking up the mulch acids like crazed bike riders wolfing power drinks and gels, and they leaf out in a gorgeous array of tans, reds, yellows and the aubergine of the Giro d'Italia mountains jersey. Their exposed roots lattice the trails, knotted and sinewy, like the varicose veins on Sean Yates' legs. Some of the trunks stand close together and make like slalom gates.

The Trails run for over a hundred miles in the north-east corner of Vermont, interconnected singletrack and double track – these latter the piste for the snowmobiles later in the year but a welcome respite for any MTB crowd taking a breather from the more extreme pitch and drop of the wilder narrower stuff, so seductively named: Sidewinder... Widow Maker... Nose Dive... Tap and Die. And the more consoling Easy Out... Pound Cake... Cup Cake... Sugarhouse... reminding you of the source of the extra poundage you come out here to shed.

The view from Heaven's Bench across the valley of the Passumpsic River (Native American for 'clear running water') to Burke Mountain and the shoulders of its long ridge is something else. Rolling fields climbing out of the thick woods of the Bill Magill trail, dense forest cloaking the foothill like a rainbow coat.

Back into the woods down Sugar Hill and the crack of branches flailing at your helmet,

the slap of tyres over the raised root-tangles, the racket of gears, chain and mech, the whoops of the uninitiated hitting the water at the foot of one climb and stump-jumping the log onto the slope on the other side, still going, still aboard, still gulping down the oxygen like a wind turbine. Top of the climb, wheezing and gasping, the familiar implosion of the lungs, close to the virtual death we all flirt with, one way and another, the lactic overdose coupled with the calorie fry-out, as the tattered group gradually regroups and coalesces.

### Pause, press on

'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger' says one, as the bellows of his lungs draw air.

'I feel I should point out,' I say, 'that the author of that particular bit of homely bullshit ended up in a lunatic asylum.'

We move on. The line stretches. Trees obscure the view ahead and behind. Somewhere in a glade...

'Where's Mary Kay?' say the man, straddling the mud-spattered frame of his bike. He seems to be in no hurry and if there is any anxiety in his heart there is none in his voice.

'She's coming. She just called out, she's coming,' replies a bystander, clearly intent on confirmation that she is still in one piece.

'I want to hear it from her,' says the man, evidently her husband. 'Not what she says but the way she says it.' Firm on that. There are messages in tone, which words do not always convey.

The subject of his query arrives, a mite guarded of expression. Edging on surly and suspicious. She, evidently his wife, straddles her own machine. 'I'm bonking,' she says. 'You got those cookies I baked?'

He rummages in his backpack and hands her the bag of cookies. She eats, quite daintily for a practitioner of the dark side of bike-riding, which some people insist is the intrinsic character of the mountain bike.

'Which way are you going?' she asks the man, a laid-back, hard-core, 12-hour MTB race type of guy.

'I'm gonna do River Wood. It's not so hard, there's some good twists in it, it's more interesting than just going straight down.'

'I doan know.'

'You remember it though, dontcha?'

'Do I?'

'Sure. Down at the bottom, where it cuts across Herbs, is where you had that big crash last year.' She gives him a hard look. Is such a reminder supposed to encourage her? 'It's a nice way to get down,' he continues, in a not very strenuous attempt to deflect memories of the wipeout of which this day may be the exact anniversary.

'Honey? So what're you going to do?'

'Anything you don't do.'

**Thrills and hills**

That's one of the great things about mountain bike riding, isn't it? It brings people together. That and the unruly out-of-the-skin risk; the crazy plunge into a somewhere you never thought you'd dare go before; the all or nothing surge of effort, making the carefree jump into the careless yonder you can't even see; relying on the conjuring tricks of traction under the wheels; the sleight of tyre, on reverse camber, skeined roots, mud slurry; jutting rock smacking the rims like hammers; narrow cross-water boardwalks carpeted in wet leaves the glossy autumnal hues of a lustrous Persian wool rug; the blur of tree poles massed across the way ahead, like an impenetrable fence masking the path; the sudden kick of the ledge into the impossible curve; the constant flirt with gravity; the buck and sway of the bike; the sudden complete stops to negotiate the bend or the gap; the abrupt flying freefall spurts of speed; the jolt of the dip onto the ramp rearing up at the front wheel, as steep as a ladder propped against a wall. And the berm, the moulded earthbank in the sculpted chute. Intoxicating.



All photos by Graeme Fife

Don't stop, switch the brain off and let it roll, absorb and inhabit the quintessence of fun.

**For the ride**

There are people alive, barely alive, who do not know the meaning of fun nor, being not even remotely conscious of missing out on

There are over 100 miles of the Kingdom Trails, and they're usually rideable from May to November. East Burke is near to the interstate I-91, 175 miles north west of Boston. Montreal is closer

It's a good weekend to wind up, therefore, before the woods fill with first-day moose-hunters whose vision, even before they step out of the pick-ups, is compromised with cans of Harpoon, Double Bag and Pig's Ear, raring for a pop at what the Abenaki called *mus* and probably not much caring if a member of the species *homo cyclicus montanus* gets in the way first...

So, the bikes go back to the hire shop where the guy checking them in says to all and sundry: 'Welcome to the land of the Lost Boys'. He's wearing a Grateful Dead tee-shirt but is retired from the US Navy. There seems to be a conflict of ideological interest here. But, when challenged on his politics, he rejects the routine connect between USN and staunch dyed-in-the-redneck right-wing. 'Hell, no, I'm a communist.' That and a freewheeler in the rich diversity of the Kingdom Trails, in what the ancient peoples called Wabanaki, Dawn Land.

Mount up, get back to the early land, from sunrise to sunfall in Fall, or any time, full suspension or not, expert or not, audacious or timid. It ain't a competition, except with yourself. The trails will draw you in and point you the way, slow or fast, and show you places you'll want to ride again and again and, in the course of that exploration, reveal places inside you it's better to acquaint yourself with than leave unvisited. Go, ride.

*For details, see [kingdomtrails.com](http://kingdomtrails.com)*

“Leaves: a gorgeous array of tans, reds, yellows and the aubergine of the Giro d'Italia mountains jersey”

A reminder of all those times when you got to the bottom of a helter-skelter in a fairground, say, dizzy mad with exhilaration, and clamoured for another go.

The Kingdom Trails' Kitchel berm starts steady, mosies into the woods off the Sugarhouse Run, playful and innocent, as if it were just another of those forest meanders, not far from where the plastic tubes run between the maples, tapping off the sap for the sugaring into syrup. (They're strung just high enough over the trail not to clip the unwary MTB neck... but not always.) Then, out of the trees into clear country and there it is, the switchback, scooped channel, sides carved out of plain earth into the rock and roll of the berms. It's the perfect way to end a ride, zinging down into the up and over like the silver pill in a pinball machine.

something at the heart of existence, do they seek fun out, curious to find where and how fun is to be had. Well, that's a crying shame, and, nursing the bruises of the falls, the grazes where the unkindler tracts of the trails lashed out at the vulnerable flesh, reaching deep down into the dwindling reserves of energy, pedalling back down Darling Hill to home, the idea that there are such people slumped inert on this earth who do not recognise fun in any of its incarnations, nor are ready to pay the price (in blood, torn tissue, bruised bone, scuffed almost everything else, weary limbs, pummelled muscles, the damn machine clogged with grit and clagging soil) that may have to be rendered to indulge in fun, is absurd indeed. And it sharpens the wits. You know it does.