

Swecoville, the Corkscrew and Withdrawing from the Gravity Bank

Sweet Singletrack on a New Section of the Arizona Trail Produces Grins Aplenty

Article and Photos by Mark Flint

It's easy to get sucked into the negativity that swirls around us as we all seem to be paying the price of greed and incredibly bad decisions by people who should know better. It's also easy to shed that negativity and put a smile on your face.

If you don't have a lot of time, just drive Highway 83 south from I-10 a few miles toward Sonoita around noon on a weekend. Turn right on Sahuarita Road, cross the cattle guard and park. Walk to the south side of the road up a short trail to a gate. Wait there. Before long you will doubtless see a mountain biker or two or maybe eight finishing a ride.

All will be grinning ear to ear, brimming over with joy – more than enough to share with you, and you'll find it irresistible. You'll be smiling, too.

But to really feel it, it's better to take a little more time and get the full experience, which stays with you longer. Ride the out-and-back.

Completed about a year ago, with the final touches done in January, this 6.5-mile stretch of singletrack is fast becoming one of Tucson's favorite rides. For those wanting more than 13 miles of riding, it can be expanded to a 53-mile epic by riding the entire singletrack, which currently ends at Rincon Creek four miles north of Pistol Hill Road.

But for now, we're going to zoom in on Sahuarita Road south.

Your ride begins with a gradual climb. If it were a video game, you'd be at Level 1. The trail gently winds through a landscape dotted with low trees and brush – creosote, mesquite, palo verde – as well as cholla and prickly pear cactus and grasses. No saguaros to speak of, though, as we've moved from Sonoran to the Chihuahuan desert.

A couple of climbing turns bring you up the first hills, small rocky outcroppings that yield to more open desert. The trail crosses a well-used Jeep road. You have now entered Level 2. The climbing soon becomes a little steeper as the trail moves from bajada to the foothills of the Santa Rita Mountains. Still, it's a pleasant ride, nothing too difficult.

After another road crossing, you are officially at Level 3. The climbing

initially is no harder than the previous level, but then the trail takes a more pronounced upward turn. It's a relatively short climb, followed by plenty of contouring.

The trail crosses another road, or two versions of the same road, before winding into a canyon that has been heavily cut by side drainages. You are now at Level 4. The trail twists its way through three side washes, before straightening into a contour. As you round a corner into a steep canyon, look up and you will see the trail, high above you.

Welcome to Swecoville, the longest and steepest climb of the ride. Unlike the rest of the newly-constructed trail in these parts, the steep and tough terrain called for something more forceful than picks, McLeods and shovels. A Sweco, which is a 9,000-pound diesel-powered bulldozer designed for trail construction, cut the hillside in less than a week. (Hand labor was still required to finish the trail; part of it was done in 2008, and a crew of 50 volunteers, including the high-energy and hard-working Team Rhino cycling club, finished it Jan. 11.)

The climb is less intimidating than it looks; the few really steep pitches are separated, giving riders the opportunity to spin and recover a bit, if need be. But it's never going to be mistaken for a roller.

The summit is about five miles from Sahuarita Road, a good ride already, but turn back only if you are truly trashed. The ride to the end offers more scenery, and it's pretty much

downhill all the way. Yes, this means a climb back to the summit, but it's mostly gentle, with only a few short sections that will get the heart rate back up.

Shortly after you exit Swecoville – the noticeably narrower trail is your clue – you will pass through a fence.



Scott Balay is all smiles as he climbs a gentle grade, as is Mary Hegstrom, just behind Scott.

Before getting to the fence, don't get carried away with the downhill, as the trail winds sharply, and the steep side hill means lots of bouncing before coming to a rest if you lose control.

The views, of the Santa Ritas to the south and the Empires to the east, are breathtaking, well worth a stop to absorb and enjoy several times as you meander down the slope toward the Corkscrew.

Named by the Bike Monk, the Corkscrew is a series of switchbacks that allow the trail to work its way into and out of a steep ravine without creating a steeper – and more prone to erosion – route.

More gentle descending takes you past Twin Lakes and across to The Lakes Road, where the singletrack currently ends. (The last piece, three miles to tie in to trail built on the Coronado National Forest, is awaiting purchase of an easement from the State Land Department, a process that likely won't be completed this year.)

Turning back you will descend, climb a little and contour, repeating those steps until you get to Swecoville, where it's a bit more of a climb – but nothing like the climb from the north – to the summit.

With the stunning backdrop of the Empire Mountains in the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area to the east, riders drop into the Corkscrew section of the Arizona Trail north of The Lakes Road.

To this point in the ride you've been making lots of deposits in the Gravity Bank. Now you get to spend that energy capital. Before shoving off, remind yourself to look well down the trail, to give yourself time to slow down for equestrians, hikers, trail runners and backpackers who also share the trail.

Remember that they don't know how quickly you can stop, so slow down and stop well in advance. Horses startle easily, so be sure you are stopped and they are aware of you well before you get close.

With those cautions in mind, let the wind rush by your helmet as you take the first descent. It will be over in a flash. Then it's pedal a little, cruise through the winding sections, pedal a little more for the short and easy uphill sections, and repeat.

The last mile or so, Level 1, has just enough tilt to let you pedal into a nice groove as you catch the rhythm of the trail. Before you know it the green step-over gate is there. Your ride is over, the Gravity Bank account back at zero.

And you have this silly grin plastered on your face that won't come off for some time.

Tail Winds Editor Mark Flint has, on one occasion, made it to the top of Swecoville without stopping to rest. He did much of the design of this section of the trail and organized volunteer work events. He and Tim McCabe operated the Sweco.

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Riding Season: Fall, winter, spring

Distance: 6.5 miles, 13 miles out and back; longer options available by taking AZ Trail north to Rincon Creek (20 miles from trailhead), Jeep roads in area. It is expected that the unfinished 4.5 miles of trail to connect with completed trail (all the way to Mexico) will be completed in 2010.

Getting There: Take I-10 Exit 281 and head south on SR 83 (Sonoita Highway) approximately 3 miles. Turn west on Sahuarita Road. Trail is on the south side of the road approximately 200 feet west of the cattle guard.

Precautions: This trail is popular with a variety of users. Ride responsibly and courteously, always yielding to hikers, backpackers, trail runners and equestrians. Avoid skidding and keep your bike under control.

More Information: Arizona Trail Association (arizonatrail.org, aztrail-build.org), Sonoran Desert Mountain Bicyclists (sdmb.org) and the Tucson MTB forum (tucsonmtb.com).



Riders twist their way through a series of switchbacks and climbing turns as they negotiate the Corkscrew, a section of trail dropping into a steep ravine.