

The Kingdom Trails – a Review

August 2007

Background

First, let me state that this review is from the perspective of a couple of “50-something” riders with intermediate skills. While we enjoy a challenge, we’re not into jumping, stunts or extreme technical difficulties and we’re both long past the age where we think scars are cool. We did not ride any of the trails at Burke mountain, since most of them are rated as double or triple black diamond.

We also weren’t roughing it, either. We stayed at the Inn at Mountain View Farm, which is highly recommended if you’re not on a tight budget. It offers excellent accommodations and service, plus it connects directly to the trail network. For those of you staying elsewhere, there is a separate parking lot on the inn property just for trail access.

We both rode full-suspension cross-country bikes (4” travel) which were pretty much ideal for the trails we encountered. My bike had WTB “Weirwolf” tires and Linda’s was shod with the IRC “Serac” front and rear, both of which worked well in the broad range of conditions we encountered.

The Trail Ratings

While the general progression is from green (dots) to blue (squares) to black (diamonds), there is a lot of overlap. Specifically, there are trails that are rated as black diamond based solely on the fact that they’re steep, despite the fact that they may be quite smooth and essentially only require low gearing, reasonable fitness and good brakes. We rode some blue trails that were rougher and more technically difficult than some black trails. This isn’t meant to be a criticism of the rating system, as no system can be perfect. It’s simply meant to point out that local knowledge is key. Fortunately, we received excellent guidance when we picked up our passes at the Kingdom Trails Welcome Center and their recommendations were spot-on.

Well...except for one thing. We were told that “they don’t have any roots or rocks”, which considering that the trails are in the woods is pretty unrealistic, so we took it with a grain of salt. We never once encountered any significant rocks, but of course there were roots, though not enough to call the trails “bony”, with one exception that we’ll discuss later.

Weather Conditions

We had nearly optimum weather, with temps in the low 80’s and dry the first day. It rained heavily overnight, so we waited until the afternoon to ride (temps in the 70’s), in the hope that the trails would dry out. This worked to some degree, but we did encounter a fair amount of mud and the nature of some trails changed considerably between dry and damp conditions.

The Routes

We rode the trails both north and south of the Inn in a generally counterclockwise direction, creating loops that were 10-13 miles long. It’s quite easy to add or subtract distance as desired.

Although we didn't ride the trails both ways, in some cases it was quite obvious that this was the optimum direction.

The Trails

Disclaimer: Our memories are not what they used to be and I wrote this two weeks after we rode, so there are likely to be some **minor** errors. Overall, I think you'll find the descriptions quite accurate.

Loop – This trail is accessed from behind the Great Barn at the inn (the large one on the right as you face away from Darling Hill Road). It's generally wide and rolling doubletrack with no significant obstacles. There is one point (at an intersection) where it turns right and drops steeply downhill, but the descent is pretty smooth with a gentle runout arcing to the left at the bottom. It a good trail to warm up on to make sure that both bike and “engine” are running properly.

Tody's Tour (pronounced “toad-eez”) – This trail is a BLAST! It came highly recommended and didn't disappoint. In the direction we were riding (from the north) it's all downhill until the intersection with Cat Box Hill at which point it turns right, flattens out and mellows. Tody's features fast, twisty terrain with enough bumps, whoops and switchbacks to entertain even the most jaded rider. At speed, it will test your bike handling skills, but will reward good technique with a non-stop adrenaline rush. Taken at a slower pace it's easily do-able by riders with moderate skills. The last switchback was pretty washed-out, presenting the only interruption in the thrill ride. This was definitely my favorite trail. I rode it both days and didn't find it to be significantly different when damp.

River Run - Oddly, this trail doesn't spend much time along the river. It's basically as mellow and smooth as one could expect from a woods trail. There is one boggy section with a loosely thrown-together, un-ride-able log bridge over a mud hole, but overall we found it relaxing after the excitement of Tody's...that is, until it turned uphill. It's a long, granny-gear grind up to Darling Hill Road that will test your fitness.

Dry Feet – This short loop avoids the swampy sections of River Run and the bridge. It's worth taking it for that reason alone.

Bill Magill – This trail is the logical continuation of River Run and starts just a short distance up Darling Hill Road on the right. When you get up to the intersection with Heaven's bench, it's worth the side trip to climb up to the bench, relax, refuel and take in the view (we didn't ride the rest of Heaven's Bench). When you're ready to move on, you've got a nice, long downhill ahead of you starting out in the open and continuing on through the woods. If you want to stay on Bill Magill, you'll need to keep an eye out for the sharp left that takes you back onto singletrack. Bill Magill actually forms a loop that goes back up to Darling Hill Road, but you have the option of staying in the woods and taking Sugar House Run, which is what we did.

Sugar House Run – This trail starts out as singletrack running past an old Sugar House (hence the name) and turns into doubletrack. There are some sweet, fast downhill sections, but watch out for the maple sap tubes strung across the trail overhead; some are low enough to snag an

unwary rider of significant stature. You'll do some climbing, too, but nothing lung-busting. It ultimately brings you out to East Darling Hill Road ~200 yards below the Inn.

Worth It – We were told that this trail lived up to its name, but we missed the southern entrance, so we doubled back at the end of Sugar House Run and road Worth It north to south. Of all the trails we rode, this one reminded me most of the trails back home, tight & twisty with lots of short, steep ups and downs. Yes, it was worth it, but probably mainly because it gave us the chance to re-ride some of Sugar House Run's downhills.

That was the end of our first day, which covered ~10 miles. On the second day, we decided to start out by exploring some of the other trails north of the Inn. The most interesting way to access them was to start out on the Loop trail.

Harp - At about the halfway point on Loop, the trail turns downhill and there's an obvious, but unnamed and not heavily used singletrack trail that forks off to the right. This short spur takes you out to West Darling Hill Road. Take a right and ride the road until just before it intersects with Darling Hill Road, where you find the entrance to Harp on the left. Harp is rated as a blue trail and it's neither steep nor technical, but it's twisty, more demanding and more fun than you might think. Most of the trail appears to be lightly used and it's about as "buff" as trails get, with a soft, yet grippy surface. We found it thoroughly enjoyable.

Coronary By-Pass – This gem isn't even on the map, though there is a sign for it at its entrance. Like Tody's, this is a "must-do" trail IMO, but like Harp it appears to be lightly used and has a soft surface. It's another twisty, swoopy blast of a trail that snakes around and back over Coronary before joining the other trails at a multi-way junction. If you can find, do it!

Pastore Point Loop – If you're the kind of rider who likes to get your butt off the saddle and toss your bike around through tight twisties, you're gonna' love this trail! OTOH, it's not excessively challenging for less energetic riders. It's different from most other trails we rode and just added another variation to a fantastic trail network. It also has a beautiful view of the river at one point; just make sure NOT to take a right turn when you come out into the clearing! It would be a long, steep, sandy tumble ending with a huge splash!

Pastore Point – Well it had to happen, we found a trail that neither of us liked. If you wondered why there are few roots on most of the other trails, it's because they gathered them all up and dumped them on this one! It was a wet, muddy slippery nightmare of root-infested switchbacks and climbs that was no fun at all, unless spinning your wheels on snot-slick roots and falling over is your idea of a good time. We couldn't wait to get off it and we bailed at the point where it comes close to the Bog Meadow trail. Perhaps it would be fun for riders with superior skills or in really dry conditions, but I have a hard time imagining even that.

Bog Meadow – We only did a short section of this trail and we were still licking our wounds from Pastore Point, so I can't tell you much about it other than that the section we rode was definitely easy.

Coronary – We only did the southern black diamond section of Coronary, but it certainly earns its name, as it's either a gut-wrenching climb or a sphincter-clenching descent, depending on the direction you ride it. Seriously, it's hard work one way and very fast the other, but not outrageously difficult.

In need of something mellower, we headed back south on Loop and picked up...

Bemis – This was just what the doctor ordered for our bruised egos and bodies, some mellow doubletrack to recover on.

Turkey Run – We only did the northern section of Turkey run as it was unremarkable and out in the open. When we reached the intersection with Fox Run, the woods beckoned us in.

Fox Run – It starts off with a long, fast doubletrack run downhill that turns left into a mellow lower section before connecting to River Run.

Violets Outback – Both of our memories are fuzzy on this one. I seem to recall that it has some significant climbing in it when ridden from north to south, but other than that, we're drawing a blank.

Border – There are two loops of the Border trail off of Violet's Outback, so it can get a bit confusing unless you're looking at the map. The northern/western loop is fairly flat, but quite twisty, winding its way through a pine grove. A pleasant trail. At the southern end of this trail, there is a road that can easily be mistaken (at least by old farts) for the entrance of the trail, which is what we did. The road is a steep, somewhat loose and screamingly-fast downhill run that terminates in a gorgeous wildflower-strewn meadow. Getting back up is another story, but it was worth the effort for the downhill and the scenery at the bottom. The southern/eastern loop is similar to the other, with a little more elevation change.

VAST – This is longest trail in the network. It's largely a series of long climbs followed by long downhills. At one point you pass through a large open field with a conveniently placed bench overlooking it. It's a great place to stop, relax and take in the beauty of the area, before pointing your wheels down the grassy slope for speedy descent that takes you back into the woods and continues for a considerable distance once inside the trees. It's considerably more enjoyable than you might expect from a snowmobile trail.

The Bottom Line

In 2 ½ days of riding, we only covered a small portion of the total trail network, but I think it's safe to say that it's simply an outstanding place to ride and there are trails here suitable for all levels of riders. We'll definitely be back!