



Republic of doom

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How and why to get lost and not care, to battle the wilds and not die, and to place your trust in the magic of feral burros when all else fails. If you're going on a tour, it may as well be a Wild Ass Tour.

Midday in the Utah desert. The one known as Doctor Doom swallows the last of his lukewarm beer, smashes the can flat and flips it in the air like a coin getting tossed before kickoff at a football game. Sitting on a patch of sand at the edge of southern Utah's Escalante River, surrounded by shrub brush, cottonwoods, and soaring sandstone walls, he's far and a long way from everything but wild land and wild burros (beasts of burden that once were tame but definitely are not now). Doom and his compatriot of adventure, a wayfaring artist named Jon Bailey, are contemplating their next move.

For what seems like ages, they've been biking, packrafting (floating rivers with rafts that weigh four pounds and roll up to the size of backpacking tents) and off-piste bushwhacking through a sunbaked landscape. It's been adobe-colored sand and slick rock

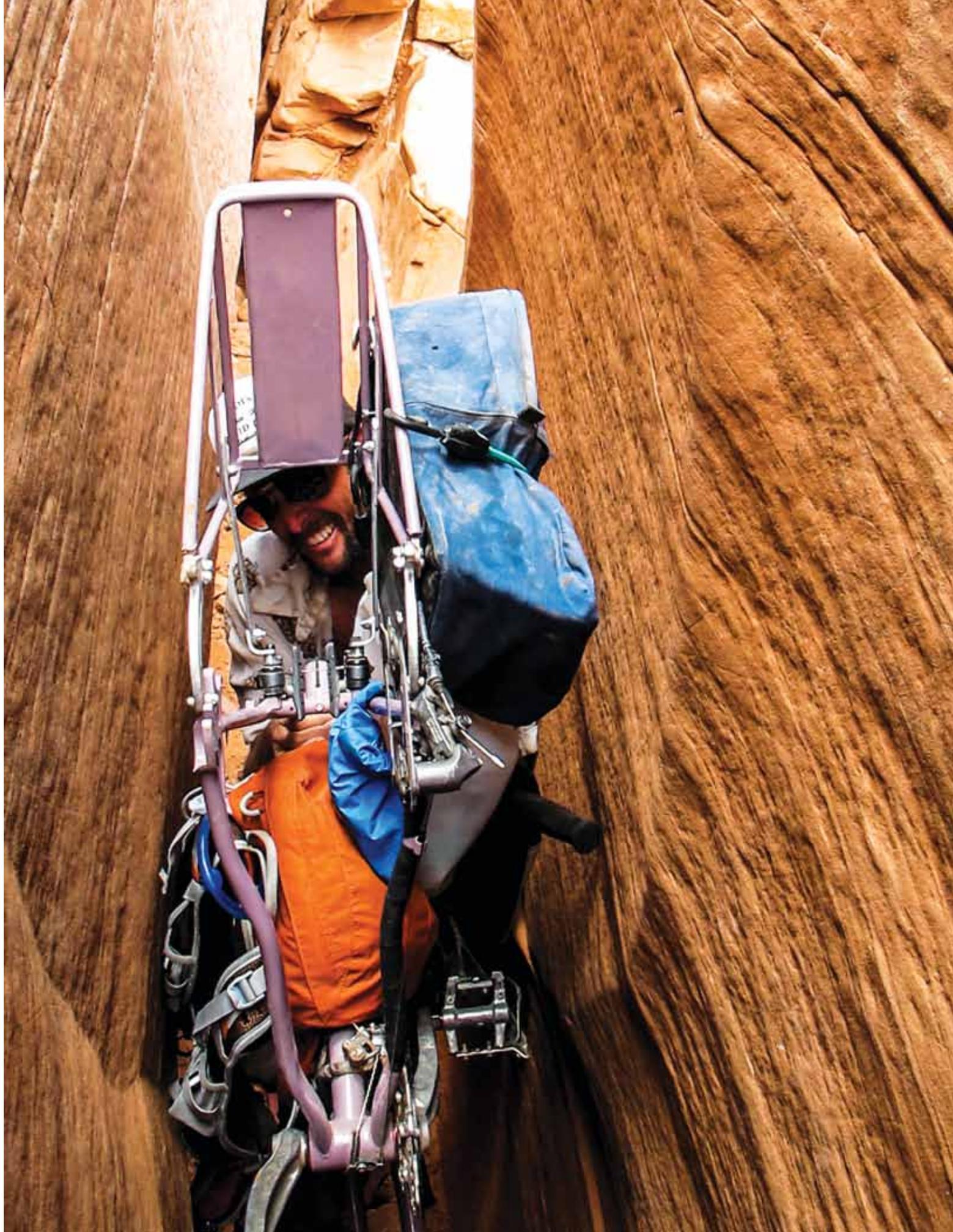
domes, sandstone walls as tall as the sky itself and slot canyons that become rivers and the erratic, extended fingers of Lake Powell. In essence, a maze of wilderness where wrong turns lead to 800-foot drops, mud flats that suck at your feet like quicksand, impenetrable tangles of barbed plants, and utter, waterless desolation.

And now, a choice: Continue schlepping upriver with gear strapped to their backs before climbing out of the canyon, or chance it, inflate the packrafts and head downstream where, hopefully, after several hours and double-digit miles, they'd reach the Silver Falls Creek junction, the first realistic exit out of Escalante Canyon. They don't have maps for this particular stretch. They can't possibly know what lies before them, but the Escalante is heading south and therefore it must at some point lead to the exit that

would eventually bring them to Lake Powell. They can't make the decision, hence flipping the beer can. They'll go wherever it dictates: Heads, overland. Tails, downriver.

This is what—seven, eight days since the beginning, the day they saw the Navajo man? The man who finally broke into a wide grin when Doom and Jon told him they were crossing the Navajo Nation, not going around it, and that they'd do so on the largely unknown and never-used Wetherill Trail. The Navajo man lighted up at those words. "How do you know about that?" he asked from the driver seat of his pick-up. He had a beer in his hand and a rifle between his legs. Doom replied, simply, "I do a lot of research."

The man pointed toward a red-orange landscape in the distance, one empty of humans but full of slot canyons, flash floods, dust



storms and forgotten caves, a world hovering on the brink of Mars-like oblivion where Jeep trails become nothing-trails and the wilderness is known for swallowing people whole—Doom’s intended route. With equal parts bewilderment and respect, the man said, “You won’t find no one out there, just a bunch of wild cattle, and Wild Ass.”

Here was a man speaking of Wild Ass. Did it mean something? Just earlier that morning they’d arrived on the banks of the lower San Juan River—beginning their journey where the sane generally end—to a gaggle of naked boaters dancing and drinking in the shallows, their wild human asses hanging out. On the sand Doom and Jon accepted some cold ones from the nude revelers, and then, thinking it an appropriate send-off into the unknown, they strapped their bikes and eleven days of supplies to the front of their packrafts, slid into the water, and disappeared from sight. So much has happened since then.

Doom, who a writer once described as a “rangy, hairy, weathered-but-handsome ectomorph,” got his nickname—and we’re glossing over the details here—from a “future rouge space pirates”-themed Burning Man trip in 2000. He lives in Durango, Colorado, works as a carpenter and craftsman, but lives (his words) for traversing desolate landscapes. The expeditions begin in the winter months in the form of daydreams. Daydreams populated by fatbikes, packrafts, shitty food in foil packets to cook over open flames on clear nights deep in the Utah desert. Possible routes are scribbled onto napkins, crossed out and scribbled again, and the napkins are ultimately used not as guides to strictly adhere to but to serve merely as suggestions. The last known locations of former explorers are highlighted,

explorers who either vanished entirely or were discovered on the verge of death, sunbaked, out of water and starving. But perhaps most importantly, he searches for a theme, a deeper meaning to attach to the physical expression of adventure. A previous jaunt was titled “Freedom,” or “FreeDoom,” in which all attendees were “on the outs with their significant others.” Another was the “Fowler Tour,” an ode to the late climber Charlie Fowler that involved packrafting and climbing technical desert towers, many Charlie Fowler first accents, along the way. Doom always consults friends who will be joining him, thinks about what he’s seeking, what he *needs* out of each trip. He did the same thing this time, but unlike the many before, he couldn’t find a theme. He had an idea of where he wanted to go—he pored over Google images obsessively, in fact—but the tour remained unnamed.

Moments after leaving the Navajo man, Doom and Jon were riding through the dust and heat along the Jeep trail that shortly gave way to the Wetherill Trail. They passed abandoned Hogans (sweat lodges) and Moki steps carved into cliffs from times long past, getting deeper into the desert as the day wore on. At sunset, they found a spring with crystal clear water trickling out of the ground, and struck camp. It was a full first day, and strange. They slithered into their sleeping bags after a chow-down session, bone weary, and fell into a deep sleep that was starkly interrupted at full dark “by the most shrill and heinous sound of a very pissed off wild ass baying at us from every angle around our camp,” Doom says. “We had apparently camped way to close to their water hole.”

DAY TWO Deeper in the Desert

Doom and Jon saddled their bikes

and headed towards “Grandma’s Cabin,” an abandoned shepherders plot the Navajo man’s grandmother homesteaded in back in the day. The boards were sun-bleached and skeletal, the roof was caving in, it was uninhabitable, but in the closet there was a wardrobe of mid-century cowboy costumery in excellent condition, as if untouched by time. Oddly, bike parts, old handlebars and rims, littered the ground outside the cabin.

They stopped briefly, and then pedaled on into Nokia Canyon, their next objective via the Old Wetherill Trail, and realized that if they were going to stick to their plan, they’d have at least five or six hours of riding with no guarantee of water at the end. At which point, they’d have to retrace their steps across the same distance. So they changed directions. They went off-route, off-map, and headed 13 miles down the hard-packed gravel and sand wash strewn with head and body-sized boulders. At points, the canyon became a series of shelves with un-navigable drops. The walls trapped them inside, but they had a saving grace: Wild Asses. Wherever the path became impassable, they found trails pounded into the cliffs by the burros. Each time, the trails took them around the obstacle.

On trips like these, with as much gear as they were carrying, culminating a day either at the beginning of a water section or at the end is crucial. Between maintenance, deflating or inflating boats and packing them up, or putting bikes back together and loading them down with all the supplies, the gear shuffle takes forever. That evening, they landed at a lower stretch of the San Juan where they could begin the next day on the river, gear shuffle complete.

The river greeted them first with waves, then waterfalls, then shallow mud flats at the boundary waters



of Lake Powell. “It’s a pancake of mud and sand, super shallow and you have to read the currents or you end up dragging your boat through mud bogs,” says Doom. “After that, it got windy.”

And then: super, super windy. Vertical cliff walls framed both sides of the water; it seemed there was no escaping. They were trying to make forward progress, but the headwind was increasingly powerful, such that they were paddling as hard as they could—hats and sunglasses taken off because they’d disappear in an instant—and looking at the cliff wall beside them only to realize they were going backwards. “Sweating our balls off and getting nowhere,” as Doom puts it. “Which is pathetic, because you top out on those boats at like 2½ miles an hour. We now have 30 miles of flat

water to paddle through. We’re now getting screwed.”

They did the only reasonable thing two adventurers who fear little would do: climb.

They passed four perpendicular canyons before seeing a cleft in the cliff wall, steep as hell, but maybe, if they got creative, they could connect the benches and ledges up to the canyon rim. It was fifth class climbing, sketchy enough without carrying boats and bikes, which they did first, and then decided it was doable. So they climbed down to their gear and began the hoist.

It took three trips. Five hours. Doom says, “I’d go first, throw this little rope down to Jon, and tie it off just in case we lost everything. The reward was of getting off the lake and camping

midway up at this really awesome bench in the sand, the most idyllic campsite you could imagine.”

At this point, even though it was early on, the days started to crash against each other. Sure, they were separated by sunrises and sunsets. But in the same way that time has a tendency to fuck with your head, the days had no discernable beginning or ending points. Each one contained multitudes of new experiences, say, for example, pedaling and trudging cross-country over giant domes of slick rock (which, they note, is a substance oddly named, because slick rock isn’t slick at all, but sticky), or spotting a weathered USGS marker from 1936 in the middle of the middle of nowhere, baring some warning about jail time if you messed with it. Not that anyone would; it’s



a concrete tube pressed into the earth, topped by a brass plate. Who'd try and move that? Then the Mormon Trail. A nameless wash. Three miles of paddling across Lake Powell against waves to then trudge up "Hole In the Rock," the place where the Mormons, back in the early 1880s or something, literally blasted a hole in the rock and used ropes to lower cattle, wagons, and people down a thousand feet to get to the lake, which they somehow managed to accomplish without any loss of life. And more: miles and miles ridden on the bikes before stashing them behind the rock by the bush off the trail over by the canyon, this one named "Davis." They descend into its depths for a day and a half, on foot and by boat, in search of Everett Ruess.

Ruess was an artist, writer, and explorer last seen in 1934 at the tender age of 20 leading his burro into Escalante Canyon country. His camp and mules were found at the head of Davis Canyon, and his last-known rock inscription is down and out beyond the slots and in another canyon. Ruess, in his

travels, made friends with Mormon families and Navajos, learned how to speak Navajo, and lit out into the wilderness alone writing about his experiences all the while—that is, until Davis Canyon. His body was never recovered. He just vanished. The desert, like an invisible military junta, disappeared him.

Doom and Jon tied off ropes within the vertical, shoulder-width slot and descended. They dropped into neck-deep, ice-cold water. They funneled through tight passages. Saw pictograph panels with layers and layers and layers of hundreds of years of intricate artwork crafted into the stone. Scenes from history made permanent for anyone willing to venture there for a glance. And after scraping along the sandstone and then taking to the packrafts to complete a loop of the area, they emerged at the rim of a canyon and returned to their bikes still hidden behind "the rock."

DAY SIX Maybe. Does it Matter?

They were at the base of 50-Mile Mountain, its summit at 8,000

feet—4,000 feet above the desert floor. It is rumored that at the top there exist ruins, natural water springs, and a place called "Griffin Cabin" that used to be used by cattle herders in the area. The switchbacks up it are brutal, and the sun shines down unhindered.

"Just about every second on a tour like this when something is not breaking, broken, or empty, is a second that you are hoping to link together with a similar second, in the hope that you will make it to the end of the day without too much damage, carnage, or thirst," Doom later wrote on his blog.

The ascent up 50-Mile Mountain contained no such seconds.

Halfway up, Doom noticed that Jon was lagging. Which is odd, because Jon's a strong rider, the kind of guy who can get through a trip with half of what's generally considered required, with a smile on his face. Then Doom noticed Jon's seat post: broken where it meets the frame, and the whole thing was flopped back and resting

on his panniers. From this point, they had 60 miles of riding on a washboard death-zone of heat and sand before they'd reach anything resembling civilization. They decided to stash the bikes again and reach the summit of 50-Mile Mountain hiking. They found the perfect campsite right at sunset, which is important, because Jon requires a perfect campsite. Not a good one, or a great one. There's no "this will do," with Jon Bailey. He's a furious artist and seeks out aesthetic qualities in whatever areas he intends to spend time. Doom explains: "He lives in this art flop, hundred-dollar a month falling-down house, but he's made it a fucking sweet art zone." With Baily it's always, "No, the best campsite will be right around the next corner," no matter how many corners it takes. "Sometimes you go a lot further," says Doom. "But it doesn't matter, you see more and more terrain."

At camp, they discussed the seat post and what to do about it. But nothing, it seemed, could be done. It was looking grim—60 miles without a seat? Or one

they'd have to use one that would be four inches too short?

But then came the morning, and with it, dumb luck, "Wild Ass luck," if you will. They found Griffin Cabin. Doom notes, "Bones and skulls and horseshoes, shit all over it, the kind of place Jon would live—the perfect campsite." But better—there were all these abandoned tools: shovels, pickaxes, various handled things, a steak knife with a serrated edge, broken axe heads.

The gears turned. Doom looked at Jon: "Think we could fix your seat post with some of the shit laying around here?" These are not good tools, but they can be used in a pinch. He continued, "You know, we could cut off one of these handles and whittle it down into the perfect diameter and make an inside shaft for your seat post. We could make that thing solid."

They hacked at the handle of a posthole digger placed atop an anvil using a rock and an ancient axe blade, then, more effectively, the serrated steak knife with the



broken handle, and back to the rock and axe, for an hour and a half and brought it down to the bikes. They whittled it down using a pocketknife and chisel to the perfect inside diameter, and hammered it into the two pieces of the seat post, and into the frame.

It worked perfectly. "He rode the next 60 miles on it to Escalante without a problem. He could have done the whole trip on it."

"You can only get so far on just a bike, or just on foot, just with a boat. You can see really unique, far out places with each of these things. But when you carry all of these items with you, you can go much, much deeper, and you can put together trips that are much longer and more aesthetic. You carry stuff on your back, be uncomfortable, you can get to places that are really incredible." Doom says obstacles tend to disappear. A river? Paddle it. A slot canyon? Ditch the bikes and go down. Miles of singletrack? Well ... the possibilities

are endless when you have all the necessary tools. "[You have] the ability to efficiently travel through a large variety of landscapes, all on the same trip. This is nirvana to me," says Doom.

Which is why when Doom and Jon are sitting on the banks of the Escalante River and letting the flip of a beer can determine their route, they aren't too concerned. This is what it's about. Improvisation, skill, chaos, tools, all coming together in the physical expression of adventure, this one, after so many hints and saving graces, becomes appropriately dubbed "The Wild Ass Tour."

The beer can lands on tails, and they descend the wash. The next two days they ride through what Jon calls "Death Storms" of rain and wind. Ticaboo Mesa, the Little Rockies range land, a maze of finger-like ridges thousands of feet above the lake, bloody hands and a bushwhack out to the lake where they blow up the boats again for a

long crossing of Lake Powell, this time in a downpour. Hours pass.

They rise up out of the lake in the pouring rain, their soaked clothes clung to soaked skin. But reaching the Lake Powell's eastern edge is like being reborn, some gift of warmth sent from the heavens, because after paddling through headwinds and constant rainfall right up until their feet leave the rafts and they drag them up on the sand, the clouds part and the sun bakes down. They take to the bikes through Red Canyon, a hard-packed wash with good riding and no people. With one last steep climb and a mile of raging fast downhill, the Wild Ass Tour comes to a close.

As the Navajo man promised, they'd seen the beasts of burden, once tame now roaming, the cliff edges dropping straight down 800 feet to the water, but thanks to the Wild Asses, a way down. Hogans, rock art, Grandmother's Cabin, a visit to Everett Ruess and pockets of wilderness framed by canyons,



each seeming like its own world, each more beautiful than the last, and all, if together, the perfect time warp of desert oblivion. Or as Doom puts it, "I need to know that there are still places that are dead quiet, but with a loud heartbeat of their own. The Wild Ass Tour was another way of finding that heartbeat, and it was pumping harder than ever." 5

BY THE NUMBERS

- 237 Miles of riding
- 47 Miles of "stumblefuck," off-piste "riding"
- 41 Miles of packrafting
- 2 Big crossings of Lake Powell
- 2 Sections of the "lower, lower" San Juan River
- 2 Sections on the Escalante arm
- 1 Section of the Escalante River proper
- 29 Miles on foot without bikes
- 11 Days.
- Few People.

