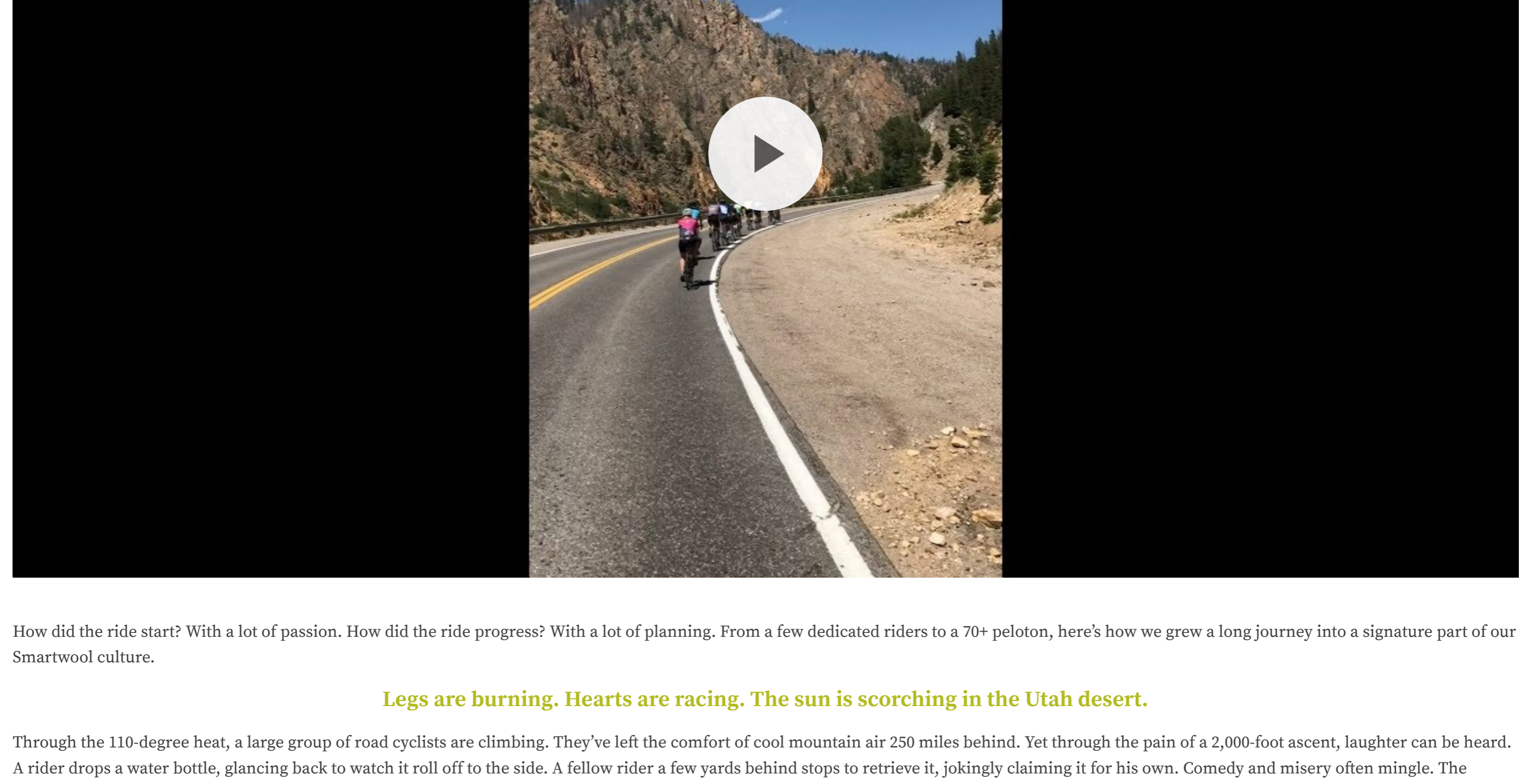




There's something about group rides. It's easier to hammer up a big climb when you have people encouraging you to keep pedaling. Post ride libations are better with company. At Smartwool, we like to up the ante by making our group ride a 300-mile journey from our Steamboat Springs headquarters to Outdoor Retailer in Denver.

Check out our 2018 Ride to OR through the eyes of the riders themselves.



How did the ride start? With a lot of passion. How did the ride progress? With a lot of planning. From a few dedicated riders to a 70+ peloton, here's how we grew a long journey into a signature part of our Smartwool culture.

Legs are burning. Hearts are racing. The sun is scorching in the Utah desert.

Through the 110-degree heat, a large group of road cyclists are climbing. They've left the comfort of cool mountain air 250 miles behind. Yet through the pain of a 2,000-foot ascent, laughter can be heard. A rider drops a water bottle, glancing back to watch it roll off to the side. A fellow rider a few yards behind stops to retrieve it, jokingly claiming it for his own. Comedy and misery often mingle. The peloton experiences these ups and downs together, supporting each other every mile of the way.

Humble Beginnings

Twelve years ago, we decided to hop on our road bikes from our Steamboat Springs, CO headquarters and pedal 100+ miles a day to Outdoor Retailer (OR)—North America's largest outdoor industry trade show—then located in Salt Lake City. In part to reduce our carbon footprint, but also to explore how group rides connect and bond us. It was the perfect opportunity to really live the lifestyle we encourage our customers to live every day. We're out there pushing our limits, sharing incredible experiences with friends and enjoying some of the best views our country has to offer.

Exhausted, sore, and sweaty, but smiling, we arrived at our destination 400 miles later—having journeyed through terrain as varied as blistering deserts to breezy mountain passes.

Those first couple years, the Ride was primarily self-supported, and our small crew camped along the way. A lone Subaru followed the group, the driver handing out water, energy bars and peanut butter sandwiches. Now, we partner with Steamboat Springs based adventure travel company, Iconic Adventures, who provides 24-foot box trucks, a chef, a yoga instructor, a bike mechanic and an entire support crew. Oh, and let's not forget popsicles.



The Ride has grown to include more than 70 passionate outdoor industry folks, sales reps, retail partners, outdoor brands and nonprofit organizations. The Ride has transformed into something much bigger than a long journey on road bikes with sore bums and tired legs. What ties us together is a love of the outdoors—and the things you love are always better when shared.

On the Ride, everyone is equal. It doesn't matter what your title is or how long your tenure is. You're out there together, encouraging each other. When you ride next to someone for several hundred miles, you talk about all kinds of things from hopes and dreams to sweet cravings (frosted animal cookies, anyone?). Things get real. You really get to know that person in a setting as far away from the office as it gets.

Camaraderie at the Core

When Bruce Gordon suffered a heart attack last fall, he focused on one goal: recover as quickly as possible in order to participate in this year's Ride to OR. Bruce spent 21 days in the ICU. He had to come to grips with the difficult fact that he may never be able to ride a bike again.

"I experienced a lot of PTSD, physically and emotionally," says Bruce, a sales rep at Mountain Source in the Rockies. "I needed something to shoot for. The Ride became a waypoint, an action to get my life back to somewhat normal."

After a truly phenomenal recovery, he's been able to get back on the bike. "How much I ride, I really don't know and I really don't care—if it's 10 or 20 miles a day and I hop in the support vehicle for the rest of the time. I can ride it or I can drive it, but I'm going."

Bruce was one of the first people to sign up for the Ride, just a couple months after he was discharged from the hospital. "For me, it's the human connection. We're not promised tomorrow, and any chance you get to do amazing things with amazing people like this, I think that's why we're all here."

That sort of camaraderie is why so many people keep coming back, like Ed McAllister. Ed runs River Sports Outfitters, a retail shop in Knoxville, TN.

"In many ways, this ride represents why I got into this business 35 years ago. We are a people business. It's about connecting with people and it's about forming relationships."

-Ed McAllister

Ed is 75 years old, the oldest participant, and he approaches a ride with 21,000 feet of vertical with humor and humility. "Age is relative, it's all mentality," says Ed. "You're going to be slower and lag some, but that means I just get more bang for my buck. It's a fun group in the back of the pack."

That unhurried pace allows Ed to strike up more conversations with people. To really soak in every moment. Pedaling alongside a herd of wild horses galloping through an open field of sagebrush, as though they're a part of the peloton. Jumping into a cool reservoir with colleagues after a long day of riding in July's unforgiving heat.



The Ride to OR is just that, a ride—not a race. A newbie has a flat and an experienced rider stops to help change it. Someone falls behind, and a faster rider slows down to make sure that person doesn't finish the day alone.

While there are moments of agony along the route, there's also a good deal of fun. This happens both on and off the bike—whether we're sipping beers and swapping stories in the shade after reaching the day's destination or singing Top 40 hits as we coast downhill, no matter how off key we are.

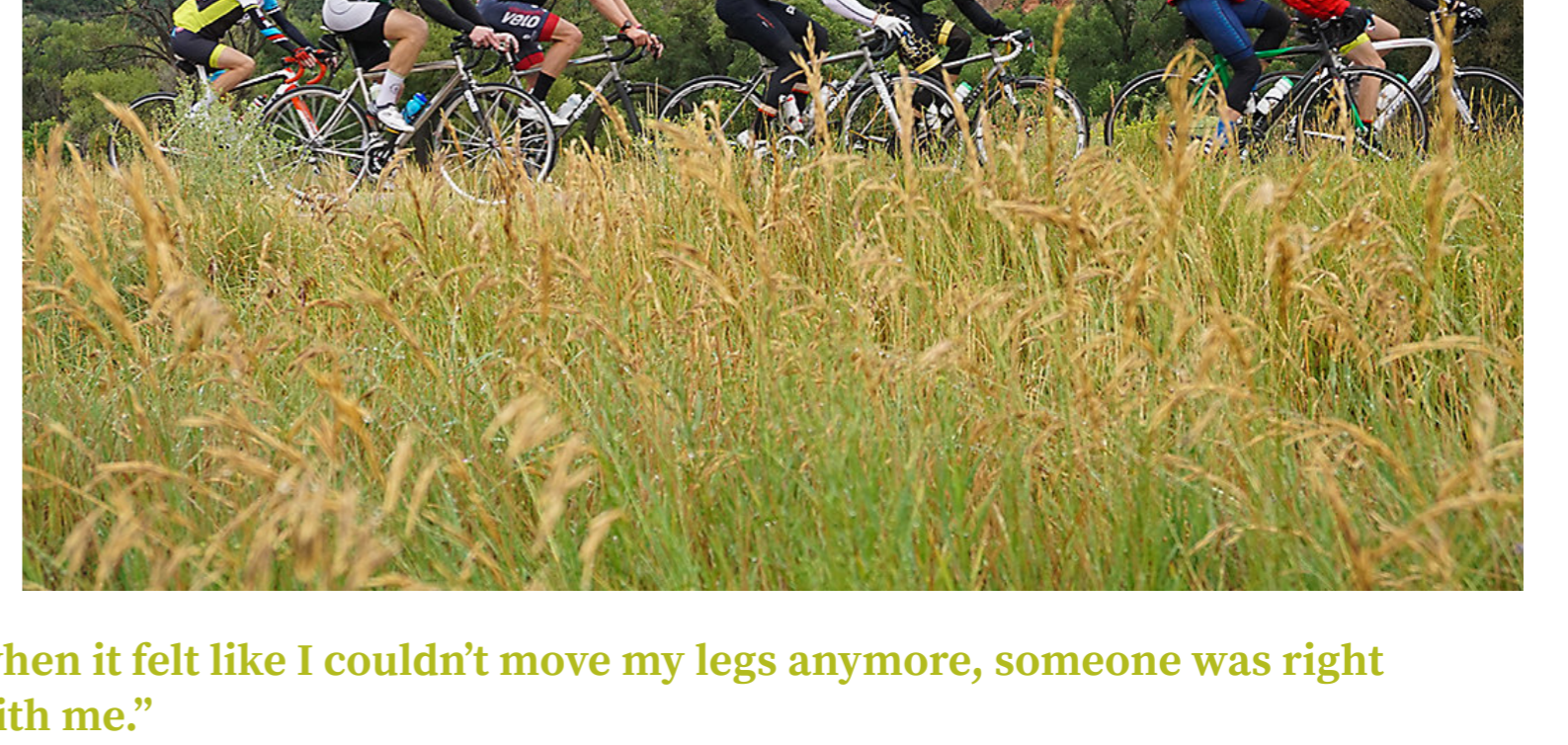
One retail associate is taking his riding game to the next level. Mike West, an REI employee, is biking the TransAmerica Trail 4,000 miles from Astoria, OR to Yorktown, VA. He'll stop at our Steamboat Springs headquarters for the Ride to OR before he heads on his merry way. "I shaved my beard for this," says Mike with a laugh. "That's a pretty big deal."

Meeting up with the peloton in Colorado will be a refreshing change. After OR, Mike will bid adieu and continue the rest of his coast to coast journey solo. "People always ask me how I prepare for something like this," says Mike. "So far, I've had about 1,300 miles to think about that question. My best response is to just start pedaling. Even if you make it one day, it's an adventure."

After hearing stories from co-workers for a couple years, Smartwool Planner/Buyer Julie Shaffer, was inspired to give the Ride a spin. Last year, she purchased a road bike in January when several feet of snow blanketed the ground. The bike sat in the garage for a few months before she was able to really test out road riding.

Julie had some experience mountain biking, but the road bike felt foreign. The handlebars were narrow, the body positioning uncomfortably hunched over. And riding next to cars whizzing by at 70 mph? But inclusivity is an essential part of the Ride and fellow co-workers were more than happy to go over basics in the Smartwool parking lot—showing Julie how to clip in and out of her pedals, teaching about tire pressure, perfecting the art of accessing a water bottle, inviting her to post-work group rides, and making sure she felt comfortable for the big journey.

"The Ride really encompasses everything Smartwool is," shares Julie. "Being outside, being with great people, doing a physical activity in a really stunning place. Such a big part of it is meeting new people, people outside of my department and outside of Smartwool."



"In 400 miles, there was never a moment where I was alone. Even when it felt like I couldn't move my legs anymore, someone was right there with me."

-Julie Shaffer

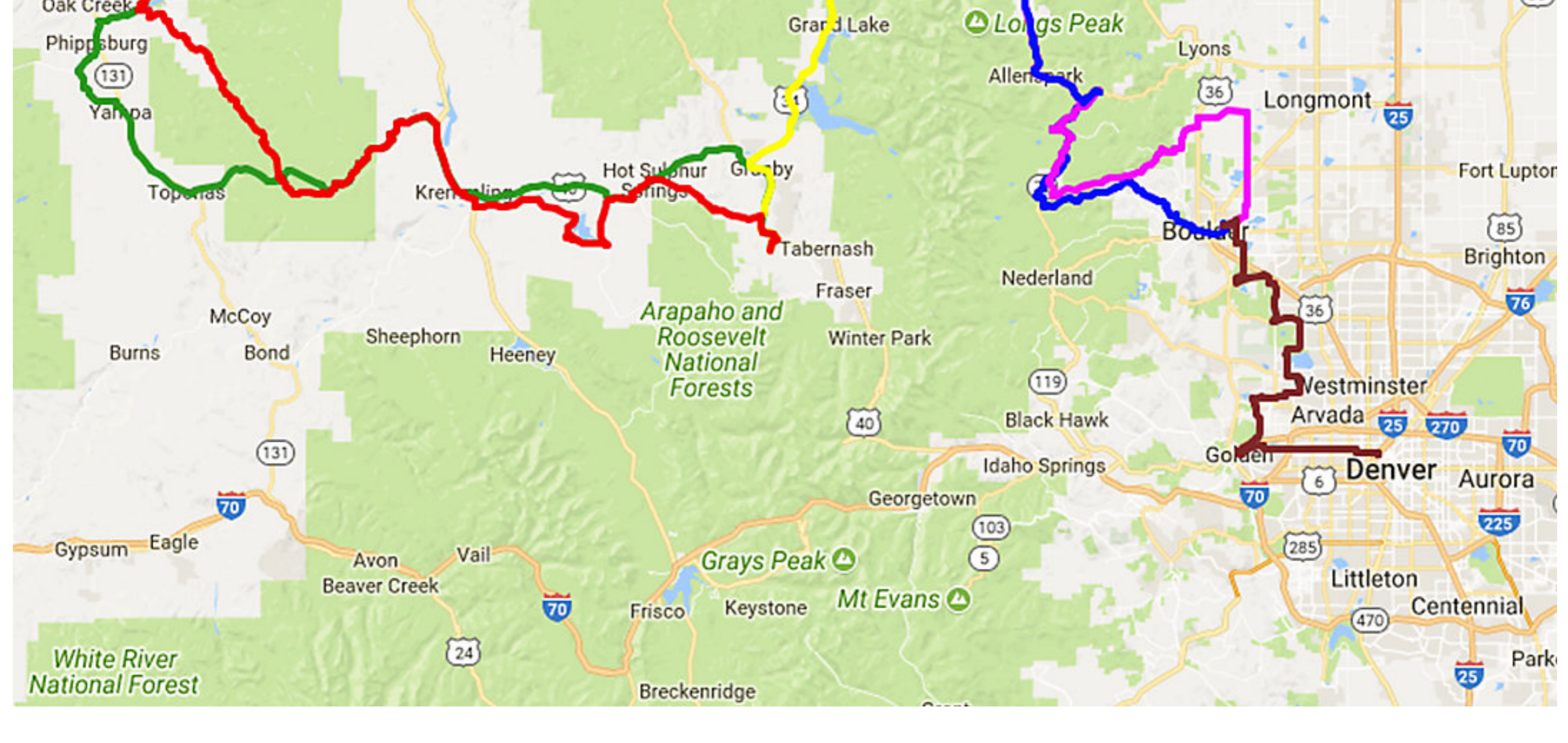
A small group of adrenaline junkies, fondly known as the Pain Train, lead the way. But, there's this amazing sense of community where those who finish early stay and cheer on everyone else. Only hours later do they realize they're still in their charms.

The Route Less Traveled

Outdoor Retailer is where products are shown, orders are written, new accounts are found, connections are made, and brands are launched. With more than 20,000 folks in attendance, the event has become an important date on every outdoor brand's calendar.

Outdoor Retailer is a major economic driver and I isn't afraid to stand for its beliefs. The direction Utah politicians were going in regard to the state's public lands didn't align with OR's values. After much discussion, organizers decided to move the convention—which generates an estimated \$45 million for the local economy—to Denver.

After 11 years of planning the route to Salt Lake City, we started at ground zero with the route to Denver. We weren't going to let a location change get in the way. The Ride is too important to everyone, like our bikers with family or a good friend's wedding. Planning and organizing around our day jobs, we took action and started over—examining maps, seeking advice from local bike shops, and getting out on our bicycles to see if certain sections were actually rideable.



There are a lot of different ways to get to Denver from Steamboat Springs. We could take 175 miles or we could take 500 miles. We wanted to hit somewhere in the middle, keeping it challenging but still fun and interesting. The unknown this year is how the new route is going to feel. With more than a decade on the previous route, we knew how the obstacles ahead felt. You're dialed in and you know how to pace yourself. This year will require learning that again.

"After the first 50 miles you may hear your quads screaming at you," says Jay Lambert, Smartwool Sr. Manager of Supply Planning. "And that's just the first day. There's still 250 miles and 20,000 feet of climbing ahead. Day 1 will be the toughest physically and mentally. We're all in this together, and we all want to see each other finish. For anyone who has energy after 8,000 feet of elevation gain to Granby that first day, roller skating and mini-golf await you," he smiles.

Jay's part of the OR planning committee. His advice? Preparing for the Ride is a matter of how much you want to suffer through or enjoy it. If you don't train at all (and some folks don't), your body is probably going to be sore after a few hours on the saddle. If you get out on rides leading up to it, you're going to delay the pain. That happy medium is enjoying the experience of the ride without feeling totally worked.



After Granby, we'll ride to Estes Park, Boulder and into downtown Denver. We're introducing new elements, like optional sections of gravel riding. What's appealing about getting jostled around on gravel roads? Less traffic. Incredible views. Also, we love the adventure of trying new things.

Gravel riding blends road and mountain biking and opens up opportunities to discover the kind of breathtaking scenery only witnessed off the beaten path. You're riding an uneven surface and it's slower riding than the road, but unpaved biking lovers will likely find gravel right up their alley.

"What appeals to me with the gravel option is that you're actually off the main roads, you don't have cars going by you at high speeds. You're passing ranches and farms. If you see any traffic, it's a tractor."

-Jay Lambert



All that climbing is worth it. With high-alpine Colorado riding brings awe-inspiring views. We'll experience 15 miles above treeline at 11,000 feet on the iconic Trail Ridge Road through Rocky Mountain National Park from the seat of a bike. It frequently makes the list of top 10 best road rides in the country.

"I'm going to see a part of Colorado I've never seen before. I'm going to be on roads I've never been on before. I'm going to meet people I haven't met before and I'll become closer to the people I do know," shares Bruce. "That's what I'm looking forward to."

