

Into the Tushar Mountains

On foot, bike or UTV, adventurers discover
southwest Utah's high alpine treasure

story by MATT MASICH photographs by JAY DASH



With the summit of
Mount Baldy looming in
the background, Sammy
Glifort backpacks in the
Tushar Mountains.



Carlo Travarelli and his son Sebastian take a canoe out on an early morning fishing expedition on Upper Kents Lake, one of a number of lakes found along Forest Road 137 near Kents Lake Campground.

THE VIEW CHANGES quickly driving from the city of Beaver into the Tushar Mountains, going from sagebrush desert to alpine tundra in less than an hour. The southwest Utah mountain range, the third-highest in Utah, seems almost misplaced, with soaring peaks covered in aspens and evergreens in a region best-known for its red rock landscapes.

The Tushars cover a swath of territory between Beaver to the west and Marysville to the east; most of the range lies within Fishlake National Forest. People use many methods to venture into these mountains, including hiking, mountain biking and riding ATVs or UTVs.

No matter how they choose to explore, the thing that keeps people coming back

is the solitude they experience being alone in nature. Though the Tushars are not quite as unknown as they were a decade or two ago, they are still a place where hikers can expect to see more mountain goats than people on a trek up Delano Peak.

While leading Boy Scouts on a recent hike to the 12,169-foot summit of Delano Peak, Fishlake National Forest Beaver District Ranger Jared Whitmer estimates he and the troop spotted 75 mountain goats. Though the peak is the highest in the Tushars, it is the easiest of the range's three 12,000-foot-plus mountains to summit. The green alpine meadows offer a relatively gradual ascent and look like a scene from *The Sound of Music*.

Mount Belknap and Mount Baldy, which are connected by a two-mile ridge,

are the Tushars' other peaks topping 12,000 feet. These mountains are much more difficult to ascend than Delano Peak. Mount Belknap was once an active stratovolcano, similar to Mount St. Helens, though it last erupted around 19 million years ago. The summits of both Belknap and Baldy are covered in crumbling scree.

"Going up Belknap, you are scrambling up the last quarter mile on some loose, gnarly rocks," Whitmer said. "On a few spots, the trail is sliding away from you, and you have to use both hands and legs."

Those who reach the top are rewarded with an incredible view. On a clear day, it is possible to see mountains in Nevada to the west and the white domes of Capitol Reef National Park to the east.

FOR THOSE NEW to the Tushars, a good introductory journey is to take a loop on Utah State Route 153 from Beaver to Forest Road 137, also known as Kents Lake Road, and back again on State Route 153. The road winds by lakes and campgrounds, as well as an easy hike on the Big Tree Trail.

The trail's namesake tree is a gargantuan ponderosa pine. Its 41-foot circumference makes it the largest of its species registered in Utah and the second-largest in the nation. First-timers hiking the trail worry they won't recognize which tree is the Big Tree, but they never fail to recognize it the moment they lay eyes on it.

The drive back State Route 153 passes Eagle Point Resort at the base of Mount Holly. A ski resort during winter months, Eagle Point has trails to explore on foot or mountain bike in summer and fall.

The Paiute ATV Trail is one of the most popular ways to see the Tushars. The 275-mile trail is a massive loop that also passes through the Pahvant and Monroe mountains. Including its many side routes, the Paiute system has more than 2,000 miles of trails to ride.

Family-run Tucker High Adventure Tours in Beaver rents UTVs, also known as side-by-sides, and mountain bikes to take on trails in the Tushars. The outfitter also has guides to lead expeditions. The company's Colter Tucker never knows what he will encounter on the Paiute ATV Trail. He once was riding UTVs through an evergreen forest when they came to a bend in the path. They stopped in their tracks when they rounded the turn – before them were 200 elk, slowly crossing the road. Five minutes later, the entire herd had disappeared back into the woods.

Mountain biking is a specialty for Colter's brother Lane, also a guide for Tucker High Adventure Tours. Near Beaver, the Bureau of Land Management recently began a decade-long process of building the Beaver Bench Trail System, whose first section opened to bikers and hikers last year. Farther into the mountains' interior is the Skyline Trail, one of the state's best mountain biking and hiking trails. The full route is 23 miles, but with four trailheads, it can readily be tackled one segment at a time.



Sam Cohen and Sammy Glifort test their mountain biking skills on classic single track located just outside Eagle Point Resort. The Travarelli family explores one of the Tushars' less traveled areas in a UTV.

While the main trails are relatively easy to follow, most trails are barely recognizable as such. Newbies shouldn't expect to be able to ask for directions from other people on the trail – chances are, there won't be any. When Lane leads biking expeditions, the people he's guiding sometimes ask him how he can confidently follow trails that show no clear signs of actually existing.

"I've been here and got lost here," he replies, "and now I know."

In the Tushars, one shouldn't expect to navigate relying on tech devices, Lane said – it's an old-school place where people have to use a physical map. To find new routes through the area, he pores over U.S. Forest Service maps looking for interesting-looking topography, then recruits his friends to join him in blazing a trail.

When the intrepid bikers reach a spot with no clear way forward, they split up to find one. As soon as someone stumbles upon a route, they use the "hoop and holler method" to signal their discovery to their comrades.

Though Lane's day job is to lead guests on tours through the Tushars, he spends most of his free time exploring there, too.

"There's something about those mountains that's special," he said. "I have been in a lot of mountains, but being in the Tushars – even before I lived here, it's always felt like home. This is where I need to be."



While people most commonly travel the Skyline Trail on bikes or on foot, Wade and Jeremy Gale enjoy riding horses. Mount Baldy settles into shadow at sunset, as viewed from the slopes of Delano Peak.



Khai Johannes and Rashelle Gaitan look upon Mount Belknap before heading down for an overnight camping adventure at Blue Lake.





As the sun rises over the Tushar Mountains, Sam Cohen and Sammy Glifort reach the 12,137-foot summit of Belknap Peak, also known as Mount Belknap, one of three peaks in the range higher than 12,000 feet.

OVER THE MILLENNIA, many people have called the Tushars home. The Paiute people lived here when the first white settlers arrived in Utah. Even further back, the area was the territory of the Fremont culture. Today, many of their dwellings and petroglyphs are preserved at Fremont Indian State Park in Clear Creek Canyon, which divides the Tushar Mountains to the south from the Pahvant Mountains to the north.

Not far from the state park in the northern Tushars, near Marysvale, the Miners Park Trail takes hikers past cabins and equipment left behind by 19th century gold miners. The trail in Bullion Canyon, once known as the Canyon of Gold, continues to the 75-foot cascade at Bullion Falls.

These days, the mountains themselves have few permanent residents; most people in the area live in communities beyond the foothills. Beaver, located along Interstate 15 west of the Tushars, is the most prominent gateway to the high country here.

Beaver might be best known to travelers as the home of The Creamery. At the height of the summer season, this beloved stopping point for road-tripping Utahns serves more than 1 ton of cheese curds each weekend. The Parlor scoops ice cream made on-site, and while there's usually a line to get scoops of Bananas Foster, Coconut Castaway or I'm Your Huckleberry ice cream, it is assuredly worth the wait.

Beaver is also the starting point for the Crusher in the Tushar bike race. Since its inaugural event in 2011, the race has helped get the word out about the Tushars – and has given people a helpful way to remember how to pronounce “Tushar,” which rhymes with “crusher.”

The Crusher in the Tushar is the creation of Burke Swindlehurst, who grew up just outside Beaver. He traveled the nation as a professional mountain biker before returning home to the Tushars. The race is unique in that 60 percent of its course is

dirt or gravel, while 40 percent is on paved roads. This means that no matter whether entrants ride a road bike or mountain bike, it will be the wrong kind of bike for about half of the course.

The race highlights the extreme diversity of the terrain in and around the Tushars. One year, riders endured 104-degree heat at lower elevations, only to ascend nearly 5,000 feet to where it was 40 degrees and hailing, Swindlehurst said. “And a number of people swear it snowed on them,” he added.

There's a magnetic pull the Tushars have on people like Swindlehurst, who calls the mountains “my true north.” When he isn't on his bike, he usually has a fishing rod in his hand in the waters of his favorite, secret lakes and streams.

“For me, it's almost like comfort food,” Swindlehurst said. “When you're going through a hard time or a challenge, you go back to the place that makes you feel good.” 🐿️

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