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OFF DUTY TRAVEL

# Mountain Bike Getaways Just Got More Enticing

From British Columbia to the Italian Alps, these four places are ideally suited for mountain biking. Plus: why flying with your bike is easier than you think



WHEELS UP Northern Italy's Aosta Valley. PHOTO: EVELINE JEANRICHARD

*By Brigid Mander*

Aug. 2, 2019 9:51 am ET

**A FEW YEARS AGO**, some friends gleefully informed me they'd arranged to fly to Switzerland with their mountain bikes to ride alpine trails from village to village. The trip sounded legitimately idyllic, but could it really be worth the misery of lugging a bike across the Atlantic? I pictured myself struggling to pack my darling, and dearly priced, two-wheeler. I resented the thought of paying some airline exorbitant excess baggage fees for handlers to toss her hither and thither.

As it turns out, dragging your mountain bike around the world involves less tedium and trauma than I imagined. A few sports-luggage companies, such as EVOC, Dakine and Thule now offer

easy-to-handle, cleverly engineered bike bags combining soft-sided exteriors with hard structural frames. And this summer American and Delta joined Alaska Airlines in eliminating hefty fees (as much as \$300 round-trip) for common sports equipment, including bicycles. A mountain bike stowed in a bike bag now costs what any other piece of checked luggage does.



18 Road Trails, just north of Fruita, Colo. PHOTO: JOEY SCHUSLER

The changes are welcome news to the ballooning number of travelers who are making mountain biking the focal point of their vacations. In 2005, the public land trails of Grand Valley, Colo., saw about 95,000 bikers. In 2017, the number of two-wheeled visitors jumped to 250,000. Established outdoor hot spots such as Crested Butte, Colo., use the ski-vacation formula to attract mountain bikers: “Stay and Ride” packages combine lodging and access to lift-served downhill trails, as well as the 750 miles of biking trails in the Gunnison National Forest.

If you don’t want to roll alone, a plethora of mountain-bike adventure companies, including REI, Trek, H+I Adventures and Sacred Rides offer guided trips around the globe based on experience level. With Sacred

Rides, for example, novices

can opt for the Camino de Santiago in Spain, while

seasoned cyclists can choose

to zigzag through the Himalayas in Nepal or circumnavigate volcanoes in Iceland. For those who’d rather plan their own trips, we’ve rounded up a few other getaway spots for you and your mountain bike:

## British Columbia, Canada

Off-roading cyclists want for nothing on the 75-mile Sea to Sky Corridor, stretching from Vancouver to Whistler. Offerings in the region include vast, well-mapped trail systems, lift-accessed bike parks, guiding services, multiday backcountry trips, even heli-biking. If you prefer to follow a day of riding over steep, rocky terrain with a first-rate massage and a cushy bed, base yourself in Whistler, home to luxury hotels and spas and the Whistler Mountain Bike Park, with its 50 miles of trails. *whistlerblackcomb.com*

## **Western Colorado**

The Rocky Mountains are, unsurprisingly, well-trod territory for mountain-bike riders, but it's the small, modest town of Fruita on Colorado's Western Slope that's a bucket-list destination for in-the-know cyclists. Flying to Fruita is easy—nearby Grand Junction is served by major carriers. An hour's drive from Moab, Utah, it's also a favorite road-trip destination. Hundreds of miles of single tracks twist through juniper-studded desert and along clifftops and mesas. You'll find riding options for beginners and experts, guiding services and a lively vibe in town. But this is a place for purists, not sybarites. Camping is popular and luxury amenities scarce. *gofruita.com*

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## **Northwest Italy**

Sprawled under the flanks of Monte Bianco, Aosta Valley is one of the Italian Alps' most glamorous ski destinations. Drowsier in summer, the region now draws mountain bikers who wheel leisurely around the valley's central town, Aosta, and follow the stone-paved streets to lift-accessed bike trails. Within a half-hour's drive are more lift-served trails in the tiny resort towns of La Thuile, Pila and Cervinia (*aostavalleyfreeride.com*). When you're ready to trade the Alps for the sea, drive about three hours south to Finale Ligure, an adorable coastal town. Backed by hills overlooking the blue Ligurian Sea, it's another biking beacon with miles of nearby tracks, guides and races.

## **The Scottish Highlands**

Dedicated mountain-bike parks dot the country, but the rugged Highlands offers the most tempting and untamed trails. For instance, in Cairngorms National Park, you can ride from rocky peaks to a wild beach. And just in case Scotland's notoriously inclement weather compromises your ride, you can pedal over to one of the whiskey distilleries set inside the park to wait out the rain. *visitcairngorms.com*





Riding in Scotland's Cairngorms National Park. PHOTO: MOUNTAIN BIKE WORLDWIDE

## Bikes on the Fly

In response to the increasing demand for better bike bags, sports-luggage companies have upped the game. On the high end, Evoc's Bike Travel Pro bag comes with a soft-sided exterior, roller wheels, plastic rods and aluminum rails inside the bag and well-placed handholds that make it easy to lift. And that's important: the easier it is for airport baggage handlers to move a bike, the better the chance it'll arrive unscathed. \$730, [evocsports.com](http://evocsports.com)

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