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COLUMN

Biking adventures in remote Maine

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TO LEARN MORE

For more about the festival and the Nordic Heritage Sport Club, contact Heidi Bartley, 762-6972, or e-mail info@nordicheritagecenter.org. Go to www.nordicheritagecenter.org for information, directions and a trail map.

For directions and a trail map of the Rangeley Lakes Trails Center, visit www.rangeleyxcski.com

For more about the race, contact John Field at Seasonal Cycles, 864-2100. He also has directions and maps to other great rides in the Rangeley area available at the bike shop, 2593 Main St., in Rangeley.

If you're getting a little tired of mountain biking on the same old trails, here are two new trail centers that you might not know about. Both have been built within the past five or six years, and southern Mainers in particular should consider a road trip to explore these excellent spots in some of the state's overlooked corners -- Presque Isle and Rangeley.

PRESQUE ISLE'S NORDIC HERITAGE CENTER

When you think about mountain biking in Maine, the County might not be the first place that comes to mind. But the Nordic Heritage Center in Presque Isle is working hard to change that, turning a world-class Nordic ski area into a four-season recreation destination with some of the best mountain biking trails in the state.

A Maine Winter Sports Center property, the Nordic Heritage Center has 20 miles of trails that were carefully designed by Rich Edwards, a trail specialist with the top-notch International Mountain Bicycling Association's Trail Solutions crew.

"The trails are sustainable and fun," says Chad McPherson. McPherson is a member of the Nordic Heritage Sport Club, which manages and operates the facility. An active volunteer who likes to design, build and maintain trails, he speaks with enthusiasm about both the trails and the center.

"One of our missions is to promote healthy outdoor recreation and to promote economic vitality for the County. We really want to get people up here to have fun," he says. And people are coming -- from Canada and from all over New England.

"One thing I hear a lot from out-of-town visitors," says McPherson, "is that they find the trails fast and bony. It's not the typical New England rocks and roots."

The trails, he says, are "finished products that are well-maintained. You're not out there bushwhacking." About 60 percent of the trails are machine-made single-track. Originally 4 feet wide, some have now grown in to create 2-foot-wide paths. The other 40 percent are "older, hand-made trails which are nice and narrow and tight and twisty."

The only double-track trails are sections to connect one trail to another.

The trails, he says, are best suited to mid-level beginners and up. There are technical challenges in different locations throughout most of the trails. Most people start on a trail called Eric's Around the Mountain Trail. There are manageable climbs, some short ups and downs and some nice corners. Another trail McPherson recommends is the Vacationland Trail.

"It's a difficult trail, a slow, test-your-balance type of riding with exposed outcrops, short tight turns and short technical climbs. It's a good challenge for someone who likes to make things hard for themselves."

He also says that because there are so many trails, you can easily ride for two hours and not see it all. There are some good technical challenges, some bedrock outcrops, some log skinnies and also a small terrain park with dirt jumps and skills tests.

The club bends over backward to welcome new riders, with kid's programs, clinics, weekly beginner rides (6 p.m. Tuesdays) and group rides, usually on Mondays and Wednesdays.

The club coordinator, Heidi Bartley, can hook you up with a local rider who will show you around the trails. Two Presque Isle bike shops, Mojo Sports and Rocky Mountain Sports, will do the same.

What's more, the center is packed with amenities, making it comfortable, convenient and downright luxurious compared to a lot of mountain biking spots. There's a welcome center and lodge with kitchen facilities, restrooms and shower rooms, and even a sauna.

Still not convinced? The club is pulling out the stops for its first Fat Tire Festival on Sept. 21 and 22. On Friday night, there's a mountain bike biathlon with pasta dinner and bonfire. Saturday will see a variety of races (mountain bike, sport and expert cross country, downhill, kids) and a big barbecue. The club hopes the festival will have something for everyone, not just racers.

"We're planning lots of fun with a little bit of competition," says McPherson.

THE RANGELEY LAKES TRAILS CENTER

Rangeley has always been an excellent mountain biking destination, offering plenty of dirt roads, logging trails and single-track as ways to explore the beautiful mountain and lakes countryside. But the trails and loops are scattered here and there, and it takes a little inside information to find them all. Now, there's a trail center that gives mountain bikers even more choice and a place to congregate for races and group rides.

The Rangeley Lakes Trails Center opened for cross-country skiing in 2005 and for mountain biking about a year ago. The Rangeley Lakes Cross Country Ski Club helped lead an effort to get a lease from new owners of the adjacent Saddleback Ski Area and to build the four-season multi-use trails. In July 2005, the International Mountain Bicycling Association's Subaru/IMBA Trail Care Crew visited the site to teach sustainable trail building and to give the folks in the Rangeley community support and advice.

There are about 10 miles of trails and gravel roads open to mountain bikes so far. According to John Field, of Seasonal Cycles in Rangeley, "The biking at the Rangeley Lakes Trails Center is best described as a little 'rustic'. It is a combination of gravel logging roads, cross-country ski trail corridors and a few short sections of single track."

"On the ski trails," he says, "although the corridor through the woods is about 15 or 20 feet wide, the tread surface meanders around rough spots." Field says there is only one large elevation gain, "so it is a good place for an athletic biker to be introduced to off-road, single-track biking."

Two upcoming events at the Trails Center offer riders different ways to experience the place. The first, on Aug. 25, is just for fun. The Bicycle Coalition of Maine's Tour de Trails monthly rides are designed to "showcase public riding opportunities throughout the state of Maine." According to the BCM's Pete Phair, the rides are for anyone and everyone, for people who might have thought about mountain biking but have never tried it. They arrange for local riders to lead the rides and show off the trails, and rides are always designed to accommodate different skill levels. The Aug. 25 Tour de Trails in Rangeley will start at 10 a.m. Call the BCM at 623-4511 for more details.

The second event might get the heart racing a little faster. The second annual Saddleback Challenge will be held at the Trails Center on Sept. 2. An Eastern Fat Tire Association sanctioned race that is also part of the Maine Mountain Biking Association point series, this race is described as a true

backcountry race that will challenge all riders. Last year's course, said MMBA president Mary Longhofer, was "fairly flat with hammer-fast fire roads to start, which helped to red line the heart rate from the gun. The course then drops in and out of brief sections of single track and fire/logging roads intermixed."

The course, she says, "did not disappoint, and the promoters have promised the addition of more new single track for this year's course."

There are race categories and prizes for all levels, and a post-race barbecue.

Melissa Kim, a freelance writer in Portland, is the author of "New England Biking: 100 of the Best Road and Trail Rides" (Foghorn Outdoors/Avalon Travel Publishing). She welcomes comments at

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