



by tess weaver strokes | photos: ben gavelda

shelter from the storm

A BASECAMP IN COLORADO'S SAN JUAN MOUNTAINS

PULLING A CHAMOIS ON BEFORE sunrise requires motivation. Or at least the reassurance that a warm blob will soon rise above the horizon, heat the earth and guide your path. This morning we have no such reassurance. A thick, low ceiling of storm clouds and an ominous forecast call for every layer and piece of Gore-Tex we brought. Our packs are bursting with bars, water, shoe covers and extra gloves as we leave the comforts of the OPUS Hut, board our wet bikes and roll through the first of many puddles on an old mule trail east of the hut. Here, rides start at 11,600 feet above sea level. The singletrack quickly fades to scree, and I'm on and off my bike as we dip in and out of slide paths. Within an hour, we're above treeline and fully exposed to the raindrops that start falling. The views of

Colorado's largest mountain range are spectacular, as are the black clouds above every peak in the distance. Our route dead-ends in Ruby Creek Cirque, an alpine amphitheater with small Ruby Lake as its drain. Our plan for today, our last of the trip, was to overland to the Wasatch trail and drop into Telluride. Rather than retracing yesterday's long climb to Columbine Lake, we opted for a ridge scramble to save time. But now that we're here, the ridge is less of a burly hike-a-bike and more of a 13,000-foot peak with super steep, rocky and slippery tundra. We stare at the beast of a climb as the drizzle turns into a downpour. The feeling of defeat is palpable. With no idea what awaits us on the other side and many more 13,000-foot ridges to climb en route to Telluride, we all know it's time to pull the plug.

Luckily, there's bacon and coffee waiting for us at OPUS, the handcrafted wood-and-stone, eco-friendly backcountry cabin on Ophir Pass, in between the town of Silverton and the small community of Ophir. Unlike Colorado's better-known 10th Mountain Division Huts, the full-service OPUS Hut mimics the European hut experience—think après-ride soup, dinner and breakfast prepared by a caretaker (wine and beer for purchase), running water, composting indoor toilets and beds for 16 made up with down comforters and plush pillows. It was huts in the European Alps and the tea houses of Nepal that inspired OPUS founder Bob Kingsley to purchase a mining claim and build OPUS, and while it's more known among backcountry skiers, the hut serves as a plush basecamp from which to explore some of



the country's best adventure riding.

Between six and 10 groups come to OPUS to mountain bike each summer, and Kingsley says more summer guests are bringing their bikes. Half the groups venture into the alpine, while the other half tour around the San Juans. The mining roads between OPUS, Rico, Lake City and Silverton offer an Alps-like town-to-town experience unmatched in the U.S. Kingsley suggests a three-day ride starting in Silverton that follows singletrack along an old railroad grade to the bottom of Ophir Pass and up the dirt road to OPUS. Then it's down the other side through Ophir and up the railroad grade to Lizard Head Pass. From there, ride the Cross Mountain trail to Dunton Meadows into Rico. Continuing the trip from Rico, you ride up Barlow Creek to Bolum Pass and ride the Colorado Trail to Silverton. Extensions abound with the area's endless mining road network, like the top-notch riding on the Colorado Trail between Rico and Lake City.

But we're here for the quick access to the alpine. It's Durango-based photographer Ben Gavelda's second bike trip to the OPUS hut. He's been riding in the San Juans since he was 11 and rallying his rigid Nishiki Manitoba on Hermosa Creek trail near his house. After stints in Lake Tahoe and Southern California, he moved back to the area and has spent the last five years riding nearly all the passable singletrack routes around the San Juans.

"The San Juans have a lot of mountain access from the mining days, but still the trail conditions and altitude can be pretty

challenging," says Gavelda. "Each season we only get a handful of months to explore the high-country trails around here, even then it's often shrouded by temperamental weather. Usually, we're based down in the valleys and towns at lower elevations and only get a handful of hours on your bike in the alpine. To have a beautiful shelter up here where you can pop into the alpine almost immediately is pretty special."

It's Day 2 and Whit Boucher from Aspen, Britt Greer from Denver, Gavelda and I are taking full advantage of that right now, as we sit on one of OPUS's sun-drenched decks, enjoying beverages and reliving the morning's ride. We can't get over the color of Columbine Lake, the terminus of our ride. It's a turquoise none of us have ever seen, not in any alpine lake in the Sierra, nor the waters of the Caribbean. Encircled by rugged ridges and 13,000-foot peaks, the lake sits at 12,700 feet and takes up the entire basin with its—excuse the cliché adjective—breathtaking cerulean waters. It was the perfect reward after two hours of climbing and brutal hike-a-bikes. We explored the granite lakeshore, watched the clouds move in and out and looked onward to Columbine Pass. Had we known the next day's weather would cancel our ride, we probably would have rallied to Telluride right then. From the lake to treeline was one of the greatest alpine rides any of us had experienced, dropping more than 2,000 feet in 2 miles. A steep, rocky descent gave way to flowing tundra, a soft, forgiving choose-your-own-adventure all the way to the thick green spruce, after which the singletrack turned crazy tight and

technical. The forested switchbacks had a Pacific Northwest feel to them, and taken with speed, could rock even the soundest of riders. Ending at the highway, we pedaled to Ophir Pass Road, hitched a ride and were back at the hut in time for siestas and happy hour.

Austin Schneider, the hut's caretaker, is one of the few freeriders in the area. He lives for hiking his bike up scree fields and rocky ridges to shred 2,000-foot descents.

"The freeride bike lines here are bigger and vaster," says Schneider. "I think it's the wild west in Colorado as far as that's concerned. The OPUS Hut offers a good, comfy vantage point to begin looking at the possibilities. Routes through the multiple valleys and passes between here and Telluride offer rowdy options that few go for. It's open for interpretation out here at the moment."

Schneider and his buddy have explored lines around the hut, mostly unsuccessfully.

"We hiked up one big line behind the hut thinking it looked good the whole way up, but once we dropped in it was way more heinous than expected. There was a lot of carnage and bloodshed and we went back to the hut with our tails between our legs."

The kinds of mountain bikers who appreciate the raw, rugged riding experience found here are most certainly a minority. Kingsley does perform maintenance on some of the existing trails and is hoping to work with the Silverton Singletrack Society and Telluride's San Miguel Bike Alliance to expand the trail network.

"We are trying to figure out how to expand possibilities from here," says Kingsley.



"It's going to take a lot of work."

For now, the singletrack sections to and from Ruby and Columbine Lakes alone are worth the visit.

With so many mountain bike trails moving toward manicured and groomed, there's

much to be appreciated at places like OPUS, where the scenery and adventure define the riding. We enjoyed it so much, we're heading back next summer, spouses in tow, and we're not leaving until we finish that ride. 

RIDE OPUS HUT

ACCESS | In the summer months, guests can drive to within a quarter mile of the hut. From the parking lot, you'll need to walk your gear up. From Silverton, Ophir Pass Road offers a straightforward drive on smooth dirt. From the town of Ophir, the road is more exposed and 4x4 is recommended. Passing an oncoming vehicle along the narrowest part of the road might get your blood pumping. If you ride to the hut, plan for a little more than 3.5 miles and 1,700 feet of climbing.

STAY | The OPUS Hut can sleep a total of 16 people in four sleeping rooms (two five-bunk rooms and two three-bunk rooms). Rent the entire hut (\$640/night), private rooms (\$120-\$200/night) or individual space (\$40/night). Guests

must provide their own sleeping bag liner. Summer reservations open on January 1 and fill quickly. As of press time, most weekends in July and August had started filling up. opushut.com/reservations

EAT | Meal packages come with every reserved bed and include breakfast, afternoon snack and dinner for \$40/night/person. A-la-carte snacks, trail food and appetizers are also available. Beer, wine, cider and a limited selection of spirits are available from the bar. Personal alcohol is not permitted at the hut.

TRAILS | You'll find maps at the hut and Kingsley offers some mountain bike information and a map on the OPUS site. opushut.com/mountain-biking.