

Three Rivers Way: The Vista 2023

Kim Ranallo

Day 1:

We set off from the Hiwassee state park promptly at 630am. The route would immediately take us up Coffee Branch.

At the overlook, I snapped a picture and bid farewell to Henderson, Rasch, and Matt who were sending us off before heading back. I didn't dilly-dally long, as I knew I had some long miles ahead of me.

It was pretty uneventful pedaling towards Tellico, save for some deep creek crossings on a jeep road. At the first one, I took my time – taking off my shoes and socks as well as filtering water. Chase, Carl, and Tim rolled up on me - they sure seemed like a fun bunch. A couple hundred yards later there was another deep crossing. I was a little annoyed as I wasn't ready for wet feet yet. Once again, I took off my shoes and socks to cross. A quick look at my map showed a couple more creek crossings, so I just pedaled barefoot until I got through them all.

I caught back up to Chase, Carl, and Tim at the gas station in Tellico Plains where we snacked together before they rolled off ahead of me. This is where I made a mistake – I only bought enough snacks to get me to Indian Boundary – not even realizing that by the time I arrived Indian Boundary it would be closed.

Heading along the Tellico river it started raining, but the cool air felt refreshing so I didn't bother to stop and get my rain jacket out. I was in a good headspace as I pedaled towards Citico Creek, as this is one of my favorite sections.

Miller Ridge is where I started to feel beat down, but the Cold Springs Rd climb is what broke me. Garmin was telling me I had 8 miles of climbing ahead of me. At the bottom, I stopped to pee and snack. I made it two miles before I was just over it. Exasperated, I laid my bike down, took off my jersey and had a little siesta. I took stock of my snacks and finally pieced together that I wasn't going to make it to the Indian Boundary store before they closed. My goal for the day was to make it to Green Cove before stopping for the night. That meant I still had the entire Skyway climb as well as the rest of this bullshit Cold Spring climb ahead of me. With minimal food. After some more rolling around on the ground, grappling with my decisions, situation, and begging for mercy – I finally found the wits to get back up. After all, I was out here and the only way through is up.

I picked up my bike with a renewed sense of determination and started motoring up the climb, knowing it had to get done. The climb was relentless and it continued to break me down to the point of screams and tears. I was hungry, frustrated, and tired. It had stopped raining but the humidity was wearing me down and I had a lot of anxiety brewing about the Skyway climb. I pushed on (sometimes literally) and eventually reached the end.

I rolled into Indian Boundary right at last light. There was no way I was going to wait there for 12 hours before the store reopened, but there was a lot of climbing between me and the next resupply option. I ran into Chase, Tim and Carl and they were kind enough to give me half a pb&j and a couple bars to get me through the Skyway.

I kept rolling, eager to get the horrid Skyway climb behind me. The little singletrack section around Indian Boundary Lake is always nice, but at night it was loud with all of the frogs croaking away. The frogs were all over the trail and I tried my best to weave around them – though sometimes they would leap into the

air, splatting into my leg. Rolling past the pavilion, I saw a rider (Irmantas, I believe) bedded down for the evening. I was tired and would have loved to stop and rest, but I knew I needed to get past the Skyway..

I turned left onto the Skyway and not even 30 seconds into the climb I noticed some odd shapes in the grass. "Shit, they're moving..." I thought as I swerved into the oncoming lane, as far as I could get from the dark shadows. Thankfully no cars were to be seen as I screamed at the animals "NO!" A hog grunted and the pack scurried into the woods. It took me a while to calm down after that because I kept hearing animals breaking branches in the woods surrounding me as I crept along at 4mph . I eventually decided that being anxious at every noise was a waste of energy - or maybe I was too tired to care. Either way, I settled, just keeping the legs spinning as I swerved to avoid all the fucking snails that were inching along the pavement.

A truck honked at me as they passed. I try to hold onto the belief that the world is benevolent, but I didn't have a good feeling about that truck. I went from pedaling to walking just for a mental break, and back to pedaling. On another walk break, I approached an overlook and I saw the same truck. I quickly hopped back on my bike, keeping my head down as I passed.

"Having a nice night ride?" Was yelled with slurred words from a guy. I didn't respond, but my heart was beating in my throat. "What about your night ride, huh?!" He said in a more aggressive tone when I didn't respond. I rolled past but for the next three miles I was terrified that the truck was going to follow me. I wavered between wanting to kick off all my lights and jump in the bushes to cuddle with the hogs or just press on and hope for the best. I kept spinning, desperate to get the Skyway behind me. I would periodically scream "No!" into the darkness when animals scurried around in the woods near me. They were probably just armadillos or squirrels, but my brain was convinced every rustle was a bear or a hog.

I breathed a sigh of relief once I got to the turn off the Skyway, but relief quickly turned into dread as another truck with a bed full of drunks passed quickly by. They yelled things I couldn't make out and another truck revved behind me. I was spooked- thinking it might be the same truck from the overlook. I didn't want to start the descent without layering up - but between exhaustion and the traffic, I was on pins and needles. Eventually, the cars passed and I was able to quickly grab my rain shell to block the wind, though in my haste to get the fuck out of there, I forgot to zip it up.

Thankfully, it was a warm night and I didn't get cold on the descent. I rolled into Spivey Cove Campground around midnight-thirty. I had the legs and mind to keep going, but Green Cove was my much-needed resupply and I didn't have enough food to continue onward, so I was committed to staying put until the store opened.

Day 2:

I woke up around 620am. Exhausted and not ready to move just yet, I rolled over and fell back asleep for another hour. I had a really hard time waking up and felt groggy and fatigued. I went to the pit toilet and realized I had just started my period. That explained why I felt like complete shit. Luckily, I came prepared for such circumstances. It only seemed fitting that as the only woman on course this year that I would have to deal with that. 🤢 What's that adage- what men can do, women can do bleeding? Yeah, that. 😏

I rolled out of Spivey Cove CG around 8 and down to the Green Cove store. Unfortunately, they weren't going to be open for another hour. I was a little frustrated, but there wasn't anything I could do and I needed food to be able to keep rolling. Irmantas came through and we chatted while we waited for the store to open. Forty dollar's worth of snacks later, I sat outside trying to cram down a turkey and cheese sandwich and a chocolate milk for breakfast before getting started for the day.

I felt good on the climbing out of there and focused my sights on the Coker Creek Welcome Center. After some chips and a cold soda, it was onwards to Buck Bald which is one of my favorites! I was hoping for clear skies because most of the time I ride up there, the views are obscured by clouds.

My brain forgot about the Unicoi singletrack that sat between me and Buck Bald but after a little temper tantrum and some hike-a-bike, I actually really enjoyed this trail and was a little bummed when it was over.

Up to Buck Bald and I was greeted with those magnificent views and sun blasting down on me. I didn't stay long, just sent out a couple texts and was on my way.

Once off gravel and onto the highway 68 climb, I had horrid flashbacks of when I did this section the opposite way over the fall- at the top is a junkyard and junkyard dogs that surrounded me and were pretty scary. I was getting a little upset, and quickly worked through a reroute in my head that would skirt me around the junkyard- I didn't care if it was off course or not, I wasn't going by those dogs again.

Luckily, the route took me on the same road I was going to use as a reroute and I immediately praised Kim's name! "Of course she wouldn't send me past a bunch of vicious junkyard dogs". Not even two seconds later, three less vicious but still loud and annoying dogs ran up and started barking at me. I was already going 2mph uphill so I hopped on my bike, putting the bike between me and the dogs and got my pepper spray out of my jersey pocket, just in case. I started screaming at the dogs and they held their distance as long as I was shouting. I inched past slowly, but they were relentless. At the top of my lungs I screamed, "COME GET YOUR FUCKING DOGS" towards the house. Surely if someone were home they would've heard. The only movement inside the house was another dog that appeared to be trying to break through the window. Eventually, I was able to get past them and back on the bike.

Next was McFarland up Dorney mountain. I was greeted by more dogs, but thankfully the old man who owned these dogs was driving his truck out of the driveway. He hollered at one of the dogs named Freckles, and made sure that I was able to get by. He reassured me they were friendly, and I just smiled, nodded my head and thanked him. He seemed like a nice old guy- definitely had rustic grandpa vibes. I stopped once I got on the gravel to take a little pee and snack break before continuing up the climb. A fast descent brought me down to Vic's convenience store where I grabbed an ice cream cone and an orange soda.

Soon I was rolling towards Copper Hill. As I turned left across Hwy 64, I was a little grumpy that Ducktown was literally a stone's throw to the right and yet I had to do this dumb loop down through Copper Hill. Grumbling about how convoluted this was, I turned onto a gravel road. It was fast and flowy. "Okay, well this is kind of fun and at least it's gravel," I thought to myself. Then, right before dropping into Copper Hill there is a beautiful view of the mountain vistas. "Oh. Oh! Now I understand why Kim brought us through here" I realized as I soaked in the views.

I rolled straight through Copper Hill, motivated to get to the Hardee's in Ducktown. I made it to my dinner stop and ordered a chicken BLT and fries. It was delicious, but I was only able to eat about half. I wrapped it up and stuck it in my pocket, figuring it'd be a good bedtime snack for later. I was motivated to get rolling again, as my plan was to sleep at Thunderrock campground and I wanted to get through the singletrack while it was still light.

I'm very familiar with these trails so once on the Brush Creek singletrack, I found a happy flow and was able to tick the miles quickly. Near the end of the trail, I approached the janky, slanted bridge- I've ridden this before but not when it was this wet. I hopped off my bike and as soon as I took one step onto the bridge, I fell, my bike sliding down off the bridge and me with it. I couldn't get any traction to stand up or to push my bike up - so I flopped around in the mud for an embarrassing amount of time before I was able to crawl my way across.

As I reached Boyd Gap, the sunset was amazing! I made happy-excited squealing noises and I rolled up to the overlook. I wanted to stay and watch the sun finish setting, but I didn't want to ride the rest of the singletrack in the dark so I pushed on. Boyd Gap was a blast as always and I ripped down it with a smile on my face. Copperhill road was fine, but my shifter battery died and I fumbled around in my bag to get a fresh battery. I was getting tired and uncoordinated and I knew I needed to stop for the night soon. I rolled up to the suspension bridge and sat for a while to weigh my options. I still had a bit of singletrack to get to Thunderrock and I knew in my tired state that it would easily take at least 2 hours, especially in the dark. I didn't have it in me to suffer that slog right then, so I took Rhododendron trail straight to the campground and would back track and knock out the singletrack in the morning. I was happy with my decision, as I was able to find a campsite and get cozy in my bivvy. I ate the rest of my chicken sandwich and drifted in and out of sleep. There were some loud drunk people partying which was annoying but they eventually quieted down. A bit later, I heard some people roll up on bikes to the campsite next to me. I lifted my head and saw it was Chase, Tim, Carl and Gary. I excitedly said hello - it was good seeing them again. I laid my head down and immediately fell back asleep.

Day 3:

Morning came all too soon and the guys were already up and moving, which gave me that little extra kick in the pants to get my ass up. Gary looked super ill and apparently had been up sick all night. I hated to see him in such a rough place, but was glad that he was at least at a nice campground with facilities and it would be easy for someone to come and scoop him up. The guys had already done the singletrack the night before so they were a few miles ahead of me. I got ready and was able to quickly reorganize and get rolling. I was glad I was fresh for the singletrack even though I felt like shit and struggled through it. But then again, I'm used to riding these trails with fresh legs and a light bike - so it makes sense why I felt slow comparably.

It was uneventful reaching Sylco – but I did take a long break at the top of it. I felt positive about it ... surely it couldn't be THAT bad... surely. Right?! I still felt good as I rolled onto the trail, grateful that at least it was daylight. As I headed down the trail, I was hot and overheating again as I pushed my bike. It was humid and horse flies were buzzing around me, taunting me for walking my bike. I also was a bit scared about the hogs that I knew liked this section. The anxiety and my temper began to boil as I continued on. Screaming at the damn horse flies, I pressed on. I was scared – so I was talking out loud the entire time in an effort to warn any animals of my presence. Mostly yelling at the horse flies to leave me alone and occasionally exclaiming “What the fuck!”, I came to a little creek crossing and decided I needed a quick break. I dunked my head in the water and washed the grime off my body and felt much better. After cooling off, my mood lightened again and my grumbling turned into singing. I sang the entire rest of the trail – not very well – but it occupied me and calmed my nerves. I hiked my bike down the steep, loose sections – thinking it'd almost be easier to just throw my bike down. After an hour and a half, I emerged at the creek crossing at the bottom. While crossing, I misjudged a rock and fell right in. At first I was grumpy about it but the water felt good so I finished crossing then took off my shoes and sat on a rock in the river for a while to cool off and collect myself. After filtering water, having a snack, and reapplying sunscreen - I was ready to continue on.

As the day went on, the heat started wearing me down. After the grave on the pavement to Benton I started overheating. At this point I was making bargains with myself. Maybe I could find a place to stay in Benton. Or, make it to Needle Eye Outpost and stay there. All I knew is I couldn't make it much further in this heat.

Once at the intersection of Welcome Valley Road and 411, I was greeted with chase by a dog. I was hot and flustered and swerved haphazardly into the road. Thankfully, there was no traffic as my feverish brain tried to figure out how to cross the street to the gas station and deli. I rolled in and was so relieved to see Chase, Tim, and Carl's bikes. I stumbled into the gas station and the guy working told me my buddies were in the other room. Dazed and a bit confused, I walked to where he pointed. I saw Chase and tears came to my eyes. I wanted to hug him I was so relieved. I was not in a good place but managed to say something about being too hot. He opened the cooler and handed me a Gatorlyte. I also grabbed a Coke and sat down with them in the diner. Graham was there and I definitely started crying. Mostly just feeling overwhelmed and overheated. I ordered some food even though I wasn't hungry and sat back down. Graham was super encouraging and talked me off the heat induced precipice I was on. He recommended I make the small push to Needle Eye and stay there for the night. Rest, cool off, and finish the last 70 miles the next day. It solidified the plan I had already been making in my head, but it definitely helped having someone of a sound mind talk through it with me.

I felt relieved now that I had a good plan. I ate the fries and picked at the sandwich before heading back out. More hot pavement had my brain jumbled. Delirious, I rolled into the Mennonite community and it felt like I was in a different world. I slow rolled as I took in my surroundings. Fields were being plowed by horses and I couldn't help but think that maybe they have it all figured out. What a pure and simple life.

My fever dreams continued as I approached Needle Eye outpost. I was greeted by a crew and I was so relieved to finally be there. I stumbled around, emptying my bags and yard sale-ing my shit everywhere. I didn't know what I needed. I was still burning up, even though I was out of the sun. Kim had a hose and I asked Rasch to hose me off. It felt amazing and it was immediate relief once my body temperature cooled.

The crew left to get dinner and soon Chase, Tim, and Carl continued on and it was just me. I snacked and stretched and organized while staring at the mountain that was waiting for me tomorrow. I felt a little anxious, part of me wanted to continue on- especially now that I was feeling better and cooled off. I wavered back and forth on it for awhile, but eventually decided to be patient and just stay put. I wasn't very excited about riding through the night and Needle Eye was such a cozy spot. Rasch came back to visit with me a bit after dinner and talked me through what to expect for the final 70 miles. Once he left, I paced around the porch for a bit, still feeling anxious. I tried laying in the hammock but it was wet and I felt dizzy with the sway. I laid on the ground and felt better, minus the throbbing headache pounding behind my temples. I took some ibuprofen and drank as much water as my stomach could handle before lying down again. That seemed to work, and I was able to fall asleep once my headache faded away.

Day 4:

I woke up a little before my alarm that was set for 5am and grumbled, not really wanting to get moving - but also not wanting to do a bunch of climbing in the heat and sun. My sleepy brain was telling me I didn't need to ride 70 miles today, I could just ride a couple miles to Fireside and be done. My clothes were still wet and I didn't have it in me to put on a cold and wet sports bra, so I let the girls be free - adding a sports bra to the mental list of 'Things maybe I don't need while bike packing'. I chugged a 5-hr energy and tried to ignore the discord my brain was having.

Next stop was the Hiwassee mart for breakfast. I grabbed a canned coffee and a chicken biscuit. I was starving but as soon as I sat down and tried to eat, my mouth was dry and the biscuit turned to chalk as I chewed.. I ate about half and took another biscuit to-go. I was on my way just a little after 6:10am. Pavement led me to the mountain, and I was nauseated the entire time. I soft pedaled, trying to breathe and not lose my breakfast.

As the road began to climb up, I focused on spinning. I counted "1, 2, 3, 4, 5" over and over again in my head - mostly to distract from the nausea. I zig zagged up the road but soon, I couldn't really pedal and I got off my bike. Slumped over the handlebars, I continued the slog upwards. I was a little upset with myself for needing to walk but then when I saw my Garmin said the pitch was at 16%, it made more sense . I pushed on and soon came to the singletrack.

Once on the singletrack, my spirits lifted. The morning light was beautiful shining in on the green growth that sprouted from the controlled burn area. I was happy I had fresh legs and a rested mind to properly enjoy this section. I ripped through down the trail, my mantra being "Steer and stay loose". I carved over and around the rocks and it was the best I felt on the bike during the whole ride.

All too soon, the singletrack fun ended and I was heading up to Oswald dome. The sun was starting to heat things up and the nausea was still hitting me in waves. I took tiny sips of hydration and at one point, there was water trickling down off the mountain and I stuck my head under it to cool off . Once at the top of the climb, I took a break and ate a couple Oreos and tried to drink some water. I knew the descent was fast, but there were a couple hills to climb and some dogs before reaching Hwy 30.

The dogs at the end barked but didn't give chase, and as soon as I turned onto Hwy 30, I saw a turtle in the opposite lane. I screamed, throwing my bike in the grass and ran over to the turtle as fast as I could as I could hear cars coming. I scooped up the turtle and the little guy squawked which startled me. I ran back to the other side of the road just as a car was cresting the hill. I set the turtle down and got back on my bike. "Be safe and have a good day," I said to the turtle before rolling away.

I stopped by Hal's (now called The Store) and got some water, a Gatorlyte and some chips. I excitedly texted Rasch that the store was open- it definitely was a reprieve and I wasn't counting on it actually being open. It was about noon and already starting to get hot. I figured I would take some time to settle my still nauseous stomach before tackling Kimsey. I sat at a picnic table outside and Rasch texted me back to top off water and roll out and to not waste too much time. Fuck, how did he know I needed someone to tell me that? I sighed, knowing Rasch was right and got up, refilled my bottles , and started pedaling up Kimsey mtn highway.

I was hot, but I knew it would feel cooler once I got in the mountains. The pavement turned to gravel and I kept a steady pace. Kimsey was kind to me, and I felt a sense of peace while climbing. Just patient spinning all the way up. The descent off the other side was so much fun and a great reward for getting the last big climb done and over with.

Once at the bottom of Smith Mtn trail, I took another break to pee and eat a couple more Oreos. I was tired and pushed up the hills, but the parts I actually rode were a blast. The deep ruts from the motos at the end were annoying and I was a bit relieved once I reached the end of that trail.

My nausea returned on the gravel climb up to the Powerhouse descent , and the sun beating down on me had me stumbling my bike up the pitches. I told myself to just make it to the Hiwassee river and then I could cool off properly.

I reached the suspension bridge, and it felt like a storm had just blown through. The wind was still blasting through and it felt much cooler on this side of the mountain. I became overwhelmed with emotion, as I could practically taste the finish line now. I cried a bit as I walked across the bridge, but didn't stop for a full emotional moment as there were people everywhere and at this point I just wanted to knock out the final miles.

I pedaled the pavement downstream, not needing to stop at the river now that it was cooler and windy. I stubbornly pedaled up that awful kicker at the end, not getting off to walk which felt like maybe the best achievement of the ride 😊.

Once on Hambright, I dragged my feet- pedaling slowly because I was anxious about the dog at the end of the road. Usually if you have speed, you can fly past and get into the woods before the dog gets to you- but I wasn't feeling speedy. Kim had said that recently the dog has been on a leash but I was still worried after being chased by that dog before. As I approached the house, I heard a bark but no dog came running. Relieved, I rolled into the woods and to the creek crossing.

The cool water felt amazing - it was chamois deep on me when I crossed, but I also probably inadvertently crossed at the deepest section. I really wanted to strip down for a proper Spring Creek baptism, but there was a family with children enjoying the creek just downstream so I continued on. No one wanted to see my full moon.

I felt slow on the gravel to the state park, but was feeling good once I turned onto the final singletrack. It was wet from the recent rain and I walked every bridge. I got a little lost and turned around which was frustrating and seems to be a common theme for me at the end of rides but eventually I figured it out and popped out to the end where Kim, Jason, Rasch, and Chad were waiting. I was so hot and happy to be done. It felt like I was dreaming.

After some celebratory pictures, I rolled towards Fireside and straight to the little creek that comes out next to it. The cold water was a welcome reprieve from the heat. I have ended many epic rides in this exact manner- so washing off in the creek felt a bit ceremonial for me.

It wasn't too long ago when my coach and I were talking about how I'm a lone wolf and how I need to be left alone to a certain extent in order to do my thing. For me, solitude is a shelter and a place I've always found a lot of comfort in. But even then, community and friendship is still vitally important and the bikepacking community constantly amazes me with how accepting and welcoming they are. It's a special and weird bunch, and no matter how quickly or slowly you go about these routes, the shared stoke and celebration is equal. I think it's because we all understand that what goes on out deep in those woods goes far beyond just riding our bikes.

I can only speak to my experience - but it's spiritual and profound and sacred. There's a lot to be learned out there in those mountains and it sure is nice getting to share the experience with like-minded individuals. Thanks for being a part of my journey. See ya at the next one.