Pumped up about mountain biking in N.C.

by Melanie D.G. Kaplan

“Ike, a confident, buddy,’ yelled a man to a rider. ‘That’ll help you out!’

Not far from the man, I stood in the gravel parking lot of Rocky Knob Mountain Bike Park near Boone, looking out at a brand-new pump track — a mountain-biking course of bumps and jumps that I planned to test the next day. I made a mental note about confidence and chatted with another spectator.

Next thing I knew, screams were coming from the track, and the mountain biker was on the dirt. I watched as he fell, and I felt my self-preservation instinct kick in: Am I going to kill myself on this thing tomorrow?

Moments later, the biker got up and joined the man in the parking lot, seemingly unscathed. But the screams continued, and it took me a minute to understand the kind of pain that was being separated from her beloved bike.

‘Pleeease!’ he sobbed. ‘Once more!’

The man lectured the young cyclist about his ‘tone!’ And that’s when I made another mental note: No matter how many things went down with my first mountain-biking adventure the next day, I wouldn’t act like a 6-year-old. I will not, I told myself, make a scene in the parking lot.

When my friend Marilyn invited me to visit her in Boone, she told me about a new mountain bike park a few miles from town. I’ve probably been on a mountain bike a couple of times in my life, but I’ve certainly never biked any mountains, and my only bike-related bragging rights involve a recent 50 miles on the C&O Canal towpath — arguably as flat as they come. But I was overdue for a visit to one of my favorite Carolinas’ locales. I packed my car and headed to the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Just west of the Blue Ridge Parkway, Boone — named after Daniel — is a year-round haven for outdoor recreationists. Ever since Lance Armstrong came here to train in the late 1990s, singing the praises of the area’s beauty and steep climbs, the town has been milking his testimonial. That may have helped put it on the map, but Boone has always held its own in the road cycling department. With the opening of Rocky Knob, a 82 million facility, it’s now a destination for mountain bikers as well.

Led by a professional trail-builder, volunteers put in 3,500 hours of work building the 385-acre park over the past few years. Locals pitched in at weekly sessions called Dirty Thursdays, and college football players used brute force to move boulders. The first of the five trails opened in 2011, and in addition to the natural areas, picnic areas and pump track were completed by this year.

I decided. When it came time for the pump track, I was content watching. After the ride, Marilyn and I scarfed down burritos at the Black Cat and walked around town. Although still somewhat bohemian, with fiddlers on the street and countless thrift shops, Boone now has extensive outdoor stores and bike shops (that rent mountain bikes) and trendy and delicious farm-to-table restaurants. It’s a place where university professors look like Outward Bound instructors, and status symbols usually have something to do with the number of high-end bikes in your garage.

That night, we hit Taco Tuesday at Hobnob Farm Cafe. Soccer players (fans and players, Park, fired chicken, tomato pie) come with two sides and biscuit or cornbread, $8.95. Stick Boy Bread Co. (345 King St.) serves breakfast sweets (scones, scony buns, croissants $1.99-$3.99) and coffee drinks. Fresh smoothies $4.18.

WHERE TO STAY

Rocky Knob Bike and Touring
899 Blowing Rock Rd.
828-268-9900
RockyKnobBike.com

Magic Cycles
142 S. Water St.
828-865-5000
Proper
111 E. King St.
828-865-2221
HobnobFarmCafe.com

WHERE TO EAT

Hobnob Farm Cafe
304-876-2551

Home delivery.

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

Boone is about 415 miles from Washington, D.C., via Interstate 66 west to I-81 south to I-77 south toward Charlotte. Take exit 73B to merge onto US-421 north toward Boone. Rocky Knob Mountain Bike Park will be on your left a couple of miles before town.

WHERE TO STAY

Boone Bike House & Inn
152 Sunset Dr., Blowing Rock
828-414-9254
www.blowingrockbikeshouseandinn.com

A new property a little outside Boone, with eight guest rooms and a full pub. Rooms from $125.

Levitt House Inn
404 Old Bristol Rd.
800-649-8465
www.levitthouseinn.com

Set on 11 wooded acres, less than a mile from downtown Boone, with six rooms. Rates from $129, including a full breakfast.

WHERE TO EAT

Hobnob Farm Cafe
506 W. King St.
828-262-5000
hobnobfarmcafe.com

Worldly foods sourced from local farms. Occasome fish sandwich with vegan tartar ($7.95); Thai burger made from local beef, $7.95 for a quarter-pounder.

Proper
142 S. Water St.
828-865-5000

Stick Boy Bread Co.
345 King St.
828-269-9500
stickboybread.com

African-inspired breakfast (scones, scony buns, croissants $1.99-$3.99) and coffee drinks. Fresh smoothies $4.18.

WHERE TO RIDE

Rocky Knob Fest Weekend
rockyknobyonc.com
Oct. 11-12. Friday: pump track jam under lights; Saturday: IMBA’s Take a Kid Mountain Biking Day, Santa Cruz bike demo/testing, BBQ, raffle, guided rides.

Magic Cycles
140 S. Depot St., No. 2
828-395-2221
magiccyclo.com

Mountain bike rentals, $60 a day.

Boone Bike and Touring
899 Blowing Rock Rd.
828-262-5750
boonebike.com

Mountain bike rentals, $50 a day.

Boone Greenway
www.cityofboone.com
For cyclists who prefer flat surfaces. The trail explores the backcountry, watered; it’s gravel or paved, so good for families, strollers, wheelchairs, cyclists and runners.

INFORMATION

www.exploreboonearea.com
www.boonearea cyclicks.com

Thrill-seeking: At top, Appalachian State students frequently visit Rocky Knob Mountain Bike Park near Boone, N.C. A biker, above left, watches others on the pump track. One trail features Logzilla, an 84-foot-long log ride, above right.

PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

—M.D.G.K.