



Pedal past sky-high buttes and sandstone arches near Moab, the mountain-bike mecca of the universe.

So much work you've barely been breathing? A weekend in the desert taught me how to relax again.

By Stacy Whitman

waiting to exhale



scrapes and bruises. Or, if your butt isn't up to it, there are other ways to soak up the scenery and burn serious calories without going anywhere near a bike seat.

"Every year, we see more women coming here not just to bike but to do all kinds of outdoor activities," says Denice Crall, office manager for Rim Tours, a local cycling shop and tour company. "Moab appeals to a wide range of people with different interests and ability levels — not just die-hard athletes."

I don't know how it happened, but I had stopped breathing. My free-lance writing career had taken off, and I was spending long days furiously making phone calls, surfing the Web and cranking out stories. Too often, exercise came in the form of a desperate, 10-minute dash to Starbucks. And it was during one of those coffee runs, standing in line anxiously waiting for a fix, that I realized I was barely getting any air. My breathing was so shallow that I could have been mistaken for a corpse. My career was alive, but I wasn't living. I needed to go someplace where I could detach from my desk chair, fill my lungs and exercise something besides my fingers.

Two weeks, one plane flight and a four-hour drive later, my pal Pat and I land in Moab, Utah. For years, hard-core mountain bikers have flocked here to brave the Slickrock Trail, a smooth roller coaster of rock with sharp ups and downs. But adrenaline freaks aren't the only ones who enjoy off-road riding in this outdoor adventure mecca. Other, more doable trails give relative beginners like us a taste of the slickrock and mind-boggling views with less threat of

Our first stop is the Sorrel River Ranch Resort, about 17 miles northeast of town. While luxury in Moab once was defined as the Motel 6 and a Big Mac, this brand-new resort owned and operated by musician (he played with Rick Springfield) and entrepreneur Robbie Levin and his wife Hope (a former model) has changed that. "I've traveled a lot, both as a musician and a clothing manufacturer, and when I saw this setting, I thought, 'There's nowhere like it in the entire world,'" says Levin, an avid cyclist who created the Spinning workout with riding partner Johnny Goldberg (aka Johnny G) in 1987. "It's like a national park."

There isn't a cloud in the sky when we pull up to the ranch, a green oasis framed by monolithic pillars of red rock and a view of the snow-capped La Sal Mountains in the distance. Driving in, we pass horses and a hunky, ponytailed farmhand on a tractor — one of the ranch's 28 full-time employees. I love this place already. Inside our room, which overlooks the Colorado River, are a log bed, a fireplace, a kitchenette and a jetted tub.

Just a short walk away are a pool, a decent-sized fitness

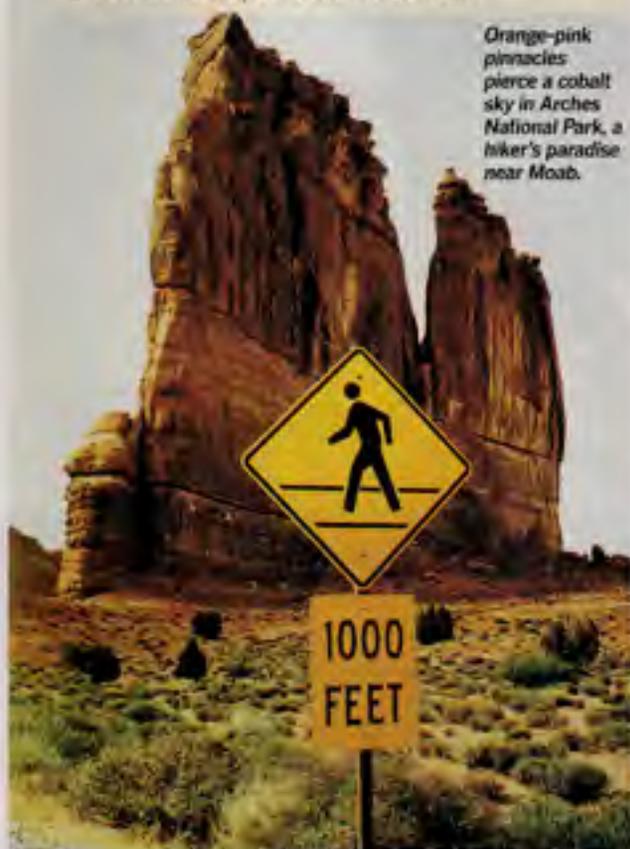
center with weight and cardio machines (the Levins are workout fanatics), and the main lodge, where guests can sit down to healthy meals made with hormone-free meats and some organic veggies.

If you're not a big fan of blistering temps and congested trails, February is a perfect time to check in. Mornings and nights are cold (in the 30s), but it often warms up into the 50s during the day for hiking, biking, rock climbing or canyoneering. In the nearby La Sal Mountains, there are also snow sports like snowshoeing and cross-country skiing.

the best of moab

- Best Hike: Delicate Arch (Arches National Park)
- Best Breakfast: Jailhouse Café
- Best Java: Mondo Café
- Best Bite: Fish Tacos (Banditos Grill)
- Best Place to Buy 99-cent Cliff Bars: Gearheads
- Best California Cuisine: Center Café
- Best Brew: Jalapeño beer (Eddie McStiff's)
- Best Live Tunes: Woody's
- Best Sunset Spot: Dead Horse Point

Orange-pink pinnacles pierce a cobalt sky in Arches National Park, a hiker's paradise near Moab.



February is a perfect time to check in. Mornings and nights are cold (in the 30s), but it often warms up into the 50s during the day.

After a heavenly night's sleep and a breakfast of fresh fruit and huevos rancheros, part of me wants to hang out on the porch of our cabin and read. But Pat and I have already booked a half-day of mountain biking with a guide. We begin the drive into town along twisty roads. On the way, we pull over at Matrimonial Springs. Legend has it that people who drink from this natural spring will rekindle the spark in their marriage — or, if single, will fall in love. Pat proposes filling up jugs to carry home, but all we have are little bottles.

Water in hand, we head toward Rim Tours, where we'll meet our guide, get fitted for bikes and hop a van shuttle to the trailhead. First, one more quick stop at the funky Mondo Café for a café latte — probably not the best choice of beverage in the high desert, but we're caffeine junkies. Inside the shop is a bunch of outdoorsy-looking guys.

After a few hours and not too much whining, Pat and I conquer Klondike Bluffs, a 15-mile ride with a moderate climb and patches of slickrock. The next day, we tackle Gemini Bridges, a vigorous 14-mile climb to a natural twin arch perched on a rim of sandstone. The route back down was even more challenging; even the smallest bump could topple you, or so it seemed.

During the four days that follow, we spot bighorn sheep while hiking through Arches National Park (just minutes from downtown Moab). We hire a climbing guide and enjoy a little upper-body sculpting on a technical climb — ropes and all — at a red skyscraper known as Fisher Towers.

On our last day at the ranch, we finally schedule some downtime. After a massage in the poolside treatment room, I relax on our private porch, rocking back and forth in a wooden chair as I watch for blue herons gliding above the river. The air is nippy, but I take off my shoes and the afternoon sun warms my bare toes. The wind and a tiny bird chirp are the only sounds that I hear. I haven't thought about work since I arrived, and I'm beginning to see muscles developing in my legs. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, flooding my body with oxygen. I'm saved.

Details Sorrel River Ranch Resort, from \$135 per person double occupancy; call (877) 359-2715. Half- or full-day guided mountain biking, \$70 and \$90, including bike rental; call Rim Tours at (800) 626-7335; guided rock climbing, \$95 for singles; \$75 each for two people; \$65 each for groups of three or more; call Moab Climbing at (435) 259-2725; snowshoe rental, \$5 per day; call Gearheads at (435) 259-4327. ■

Stacy Whitman is a San Francisco-based free-lance writer and contributing editor to *Shape*.