



Gear change: mountain bike riders venture uphill – and around a track, opposite page – in the Utah Deer Valley Resort.
Pictures by Rebekah Stevens

Getting a handle on two-wheel adventures

Newbie **Catherine Murphy** saddles up to learn the ups and downs of mountain biking in epic Utah

An eight-year-old girl rides past me, cornering berms and gliding easily over rollers. I sit on an \$8,000 Specialized Stumpjumper Pro mountain bike and hesitate to attempt the same course. I'm in the skills park at Deer Valley resort, Park City, Utah, one of the top three mountain biking destinations in North America. I'm also in my mid-50s and back in the beginner zone with a bang. An avid skier for 30 years, I've long since known that mountain biking is a strong crossover sport in summer but have waited this long to give it a proper go. What a place I've picked to "get into the dirt". In winter, Park City Mountain Resort is the biggest and one of the most iconic ski areas in the US. In summer, it's home to over 725 kilometres of mountain biking trails and has been named the International Mountain Biking Association's first Gold Level Ride Centre. The area boasts a diverse mix of downhill, cross country, dirt jumps, rocky gardens and bike parks. It's possible to ride from Park City to Salt Lake City (40 minutes by car) entirely on bike trails but for the moment, I'm on the flat, learning from the pros. During three days of instruction, I exist in a dichotomous world of discomfort and

comfort – the mental discomfort of being a nervous beginner contrasted with the physical comfort of staying at the five-star Stein Eriksen Lodge at Deer Valley. This elegant lodge takes its name from legendary Norwegian ski champion Stein Eriksen who put Deer Valley on the map as its director of skiing and designed the lodge in a classic European style. One of four properties in the Stein Collection and the only Forbes five-star hotel and spa in Utah, the Stein Eriksen boasts a \$2.5m wine cellar, spacious spa and private cinema that gets used during the annual Sundance Film Festival. My suite is the ultimate in comfort with tree-top views and a private bath tub on the balcony. Most importantly, the Stein Eriksen is bike in, bike out. Each morning, I enjoy breakfast on the terrace at the Troll Hallen restaurant, then grab my bike and head straight to the trails via chairlift.

I ride into the beginner zone with Julie Salmi from White Pine Touring. A mountain bike instructor in summer and ski guide in winter, she takes the session at my remedial pace. Julie takes me to Round Valley, a family and beginner-friendly route with 80 kilometres of high alpine desert trails.

GETTING THERE

- **Delta Airlines flies Heathrow to Salt Lake City.** [delta.com](https://www.delta.com)
- **Catherine stayed at Stein Eriksen Lodge; double rooms from \$499 per night.** [steinlodge.com](https://www.steinlodge.com)
- **Park City Mountain Resort ([canyontransport.com](https://www.canyontransport.com)) is a 40-minute shuttle from Salt Lake City airport. Visit [mountainbikingparkcity.com](https://www.mountainbikingparkcity.com). To pick up mtb skills indoors, try Woodward Park City. For high ropes, zipline and bobsleigh, visit Utah Olympic Park. A private mtb lesson at Deer Valley resort costs from \$210 (for up to five people).** [deervalley.com](https://www.deervalley.com)
- **Park City is great for eats: Riverhorse on Main; Tupelo; Firewood; Butcher's Chop House; 350 Main; Hearth and Hill (for post-mtb lunch). No Name Saloon is a must-visit for après-bike drinks.** [visitparkcity.com](https://www.visitparkcity.com)

There's no need for novices to be nervous in this area as other riders will politely ask permission to pass by on the trails. When I gasp for breath on short uphill sections, she reminds me that Round Valley sits at around 7,000ft (2,200m) altitude which might affect my breathing, especially straight after a transatlantic flight. Many of Park City's trails are at around 3,000m – fitness, rest and hydration are important when riding at this altitude. Noting my Absolute Beginner status, Julie goes through mountain bike basics like even (or level/parallel) brakes, even pedals for stability and mobility, stance, control and roll and getting rid of my handlebar death grip by going "heavy on the feet, light on the hands". Like many beginners, my biggest fear is of braking too heavily and going over the handlebars but I manage to ride the trail without falling off. I'm quietly relieved to stop for a healthy and tasty vegetarian lunch at Salt Box restaurant.

Over lunch I chat to local pro rider Eric Porter and his son Milo who rides like a pro at the age of 14. Both are great ambassadors for Park City. "Mountain biking has a reputation for injuries and you can get in over your head," says Eric, "but it doesn't have to be like that. If you show restraint, work on your skills base and grow your confidence, riding the trails will become fun." Milo's top tip is to get "time on the bike" and lots of practice. After a morning of handlebar tension, I spend the afternoon in the Zen zone, learning the art of fly fishing with instructor "Danger" Dave Mihalik ([juns.com](https://www.juns.com)). Wading into the Provo River and hanging out there for hours on end is easy-going and a great antidote to the spills and thrills of downhill mountain biking. Dave teaches me how to cast and mend my line, then follow the bob around before casting again. He says there are 3,800 fish per mile here, but can I catch one? No. All I catch is a sympathetic glance from Dave but luckily, he's great fun as well as a fly fishing expert and the afternoon passes full of laughter.



For my second mtb lesson, top Deer Valley ski and mountain bike instructor Doug Gormley cleverly leverages my ski knowledge to help me learn on the bike. Momentum, control, balance, timing, co-ordination and centred position are key to both sports. He gets me into the neutral/ready standing stance that I will use to ride downhill and teaches me how to move my body back on the bike to counter braking forces when I want to stop. "Wanna get into the dirt?" he asks. We spend the session working on control and roll, level pedals, smooth braking and the micro-adjustments that have a big impact on the trails. My basic skills are good but lack of confidence is an issue – like many novices, I need to relax into learning and move from fear to enjoyment. As with skiing, mastering speed and control will lead to the moment when it all clicks. **One of the great things about Park City is that there are lots of things to do for visitors who don't want to ride trails or talk about "dirt pow" (favourable trail conditions following rain or snow).** Park City has a fascinating mining history and as well as exploring its excellent museum ([parkcityhistory.org](https://www.parkcityhistory.org)), I could take a historic hiking tour – or hike and yoga tour



Tyre'd out – Catherine Murphy with instructor Doug Gormley at Deer Valley Resort

– with a local guide. I opt to spend a day exploring main street's shops, art galleries and restaurants, checking out the Park Silly Sunday Market before having lunch at the High West distillery. Another stop-off is at Alpine Distilling where, fresh from winning a major international award, owner Sarah Sergent teaches me how to make gin and sends me home with my very own bottle. On day three, I take a break from instruction and go hiking in the Uintas range, walking uphill on a rocky single track trail that mountain bikers ride down. All trails in this region are multi-use, meaning hikers and bikers sometimes share them. **In winter, Deer Valley is one of only three US ski resorts that doesn't allow snowboarders.** In summer, the region guards its deep culture of traditional mountain biking by insisting that e-bike users must have a permit to ride single track trails. There's a vast network of trails to suit all levels from families to experts with a million dollars a year spent on trail maintenance and daily trail patrols. Easiest trails include Royal Street and Tour de Homes while names like Nail Driver strike fear into my beginner's heart. The one trail that everyone keeps telling me about is Holy Roller, a 7km double track flow trail that's marked green on the map. Armed with a solid set of skills, my plan is to ride it with instructor Dan Grolley during my final lesson but a substantial snow storm scuppers that idea. Instead, Dan puts me to work on downhill control and roll drills, cornering skills and bouncing the bike for feel and balance. I watch eager riders circling a closed lift like animals circling prey and I want the passion for mountain biking that they have. I want to progress and that's a big part of the learning battle. I might have a long way to go before I'm riding rocky downhill trails or planning a dream mountain biking road trip from Park City to Moab, but I've had the best instruction possible and have lived to ride another day.



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