



TRAIL OF BONES

A TWO-WHEELED JOURNEY THROUGH TIME

Words by **Ben Giese**

Photography by **Jimmy Bowron**

The story of life on Earth is almost as old as Earth itself, spanning across time horizons so vast the human brain can hardly fathom it. For the first billion or so years, the planet was a fiery hellscape of searing ash and molten rock. Lightning electrified the skies in thundering chaos as asteroids rained down from the heavens. Volcanic eruptions were frequent and violent, spewing gasses and water vapor from the mantle up into the atmosphere. Those gasses would help produce our oxygen-rich environment, and that water vapor would eventually cool and condense to form our oceans: a primordial

soup rich in carbon-based chemicals that would give birth to the first forms of life over 3.6 billion years ago.

Following those dramatic beginnings, life on Earth was pretty simple. Bacteria and single-celled organisms ruled this tiny blue dot for billions of years, and it was only relatively recently that more complex creatures rose up from the sea and began to evolve on land on the supercontinent of Pangaea. The most famous of those creatures existed for 180 million years, from approximately 250 to 65 million years ago during a period we call the Mesozoic Era — otherwise known as the age of the dinosaurs.



It might have been the animated series *The Land Before Time*, released in 1988, that initially sparked my interest in dinosaurs as a young child, but after the original *Jurassic Park* came out in 1993, I was totally hooked. Imagining those fantastic beasts roaming the land was incredible to me, and for the next several years I became completely obsessed. I was convinced that one day when I grew up I would become a paleontologist, spending my career out in the desert meticulously uncovering the secrets of history in the fossilized remnants of giant prehistoric reptiles.

I never did become a paleontologist, but my fascination with the dinosaurs is still alive and well, and it would become the inspiration for our next great motorcycle adventure. The destination: Dinosaur National Monument, a hidden gem tucked away at the northern border of Utah and Colorado. Initially preserved in 1915 to protect the 80 acres surrounding its world-

famous dinosaur quarry, the monument was later expanded in 1938 to include and preserve the 210,844 acres of desert, canyons, rivers and wilderness that would guide us on a two-wheeled journey through time.

Joining me on this ride would be my longtime friends Jimmy Bowron and Derek Mayberry. The three of us have shared many roads together over the last several years, and we've become great partners in adventure. We've logged countless miles with just as many stories to tell, and there's countless more to come, I'm sure.

For this particular journey we assembled an eclectic group of bikes. Derek would saddle up on an '80s model NX650 that he's been fixing up. I would be riding the XR650L I recently built with technology born in the '90s, and Jimmy would be on his sleek, modern Triumph T100. Different beasts from different eras, like the various dinosaurs of the Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous periods.





We hit the road in mid-July at the peak of summer. The days were long and hot, and we'd be facing triple-digit temperatures in the afternoons. The wind felt like riding straight into a furnace, and the heat coming up from our air-cooled machines only added to the steady stream of sweat beading down our backs. At one point in the middle of the Utah desert, I laughed in my helmet and thought to myself, "This must be how the dinosaurs felt when an asteroid came down and scorched them to a crisp."

To beat the heat, I plotted a route that would guide us along the Yampa River and the Green River so that we could plan our stops around various places to cool down. From watering hole to watering hole, life source to life source, our need for H₂O on this trip became a vivid illustration of its incredible importance for life. It has been an essential element for all living things for the

last 3.6 billion years, and humans need it for survival just as the dinosaurs once did.

On night one we found the perfect spot to set up our tents in a soft, grassy patch under some trees at the edge of the Yampa River. After a quick dip in the water to clean up and cool off, Jimmy and Derek zipped up their tents and went to bed. The sun sets late this time of year west of the Rockies, and I stayed up for a few more minutes to watch the sky fade to a deep purple. I looked out on the horizon and imagined what it would be like to see some Brontosaurus grazing on the trees in the distance. I thought about how different the world might have looked back then, and how strange it is that we can gaze up and see the same stars as those incredible creatures that lived here millions of years ago.





Morning came quick and I brewed some coffee for the boys as we packed up the bikes and watched the sun rise over the Yampa. We hit the road early and made our way deeper into the desert. It felt like we were cowboys riding through the Old West on our steel ponies down a dusty trail of bones, drifting farther and farther into the desert abyss. Through sand and cacti and past the occasional animal carcass, the landscape was transforming into a barren nothingness, until eventually we arrived at one of the most unusual geologic formations in the world.

This 10-acre site was originally discovered by an early explorer and paleontologist named Earl Douglas, who published the first photographs of the area in 1909. He called it "The Devils Playground," but these days the Bureau of Land Management has named it "Fantasy Canyon." It's a great name because as you explore, your mind can't help but wander into fantasy. I thought the walls looked like a pile of dinosaur bones, and I told the boys

that it felt like we were walking around on Tatooine. But Derek had a more accurate description, saying that it felt to him like this place used to be an underwater oasis. It turns out he was right: This canyon was formed on the east bank of a massive 120-mile-wide lake called Lake Uinta. Formed around 50 million years ago, shortly after the dinosaurs went extinct, Fantasy Canyon is filled with widely scattered bones from various mammals and turtles dating back to the Eocene Epoch.

As we climbed up to the top of the canyon, Jimmy looked out on the horizon and spotted a group of wild horses walking atop a ridge in the distance. It was a picture-perfect moment to witness these majestic animals and just appreciate their natural power and beauty. But if we had happened to be standing here 80 million years ago, that could have easily been a group of velociraptors, and this moment would suddenly have felt much more terrifying.





After a quick pit stop to cool down in the Green River, we rode north another 40 miles to the world-famous wall of bones, located in the Quarry Exhibit Hall at Dinosaur National Monument. The rock wall contains over 1,500 exposed, fossilized dinosaur bones, including those of Allosaurus, Apatosaurus, Camarasaurus, Diplodocus, Stegosaurus and several others. This incredible wall of bones was also discovered by Earl Douglas in 1909 – the same paleontologist and explorer who discovered Fantasy Canyon in that same year.

Once upon a time, there was a river running through here where those dinosaurs would gather to drink water. But as the shrinking river slowly dried up, the animals died, and when the next monsoon came it washed their bones to this particular spot and preserved them in the mud. This wall of bones holds a map of Earth's history, and a glimpse into another world long before human life, millions of years of history sealed in the bedrock. We are extremely lucky to be able to observe this history, and it makes me wonder how many incredible creatures were never preserved in the mud, and what kind of fantastical beasts once lived on Earth that we will never know about?





These were some fun ideas to contemplate on our ride out to the next camp spot. Winding dirt roads guided us through a spectacular canyon lined with rock formations jutting up from the surface, with sharp and jagged features resembling the jaws of a Tyrannosaurus. I really enjoy these remote destinations because they give you the time and space to ponder deeper questions about life, who we are, what came before us and what might come after.

Then, a mile before reaching our final destination, we stumbled on a more recent artifact of history, only this time it came from humans. It was a beautiful wall of petroglyphs featuring ancient Native American artwork from over 12,000 years ago. The history of life on our planet is a mysterious puzzle, and the more artifacts we continue to discover, the more puzzle pieces we will have to paint a picture of the past.

Day two ended with another sunset swim in the river as the three of us laughed and howled, sending echoes for miles down the canyon. I'm thankful to be here with these boys, and I feel lucky that we get to exist together in the same tiny moment of history. The following morning would rise to a blood-red sun, and we would begin the long ride back to reality. But for now we can live here, in this moment.

If there's anything we can learn from the dinosaurs, it's that it can all end in an instant. Death comes like a freight train. Accidents, illness, natural disaster, self-destruction. The end comes for all things. But that's what makes our time so valuable. And as long as our wheels keep turning and we stay in motion doing the things that make us happy, we'll be alive and living, making the most of our brief time under the sun.

