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## **An Alternative Sports Mecca: Bike Trails in the Cherokee National Forest**

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The 1996 Olympic Canoe and Kayak Competition brought world recognition to the Ocoee River in the Cherokee National Forest as some of the best whitewater rafting in the world. Normally, whitewater adventure runs from late March through October in the Cherokee National Forest, when releases from Lake Blue Ridge dam increase the flow of the water on the Ocoee River. Rafters, canoeists and kayakers all journey to the Ocoee River Gorge to enjoy the whitewater. And while the region is also known for having exceptional hiking, camping and fishing, the Cherokee National Forest has developed a new identity-as an alternative sports mecca with some of the finest off-road bike trails to be found.

“The Tanasi Trail System,” proudly remarks Sherry Hicks, Assistant Director of the Ocoee Whitewater Center, “can easily be touted as the premier trail system in the Southeast.” She added, “ It even has a top-of-the-line titanium frame mountain bike named after it.” Along with the incredible beauty of the Cherokee National Forest, the Tanasi Trail System has the unique feature of originating from the banks of the Olympic whitewater course at the Ocoee River. Since the Olympics in 1996, several miles of bike trails have been added at the Whitewater Center with over thirty miles of trails completed so far as part of the Tanasi Trail System. There are trails for every skill level and plenty of variety including a paved riverside trail, which winds around the Whitewater facility itself to the “epic rides” that wind up and over beautiful Chestnut Mountain. The International Mountain Biking Association describes the Tanasi as “fast, flowing singletrack that riders of all levels will savor.”

The most recent addition to the trail system, the Thunder Rock Express, has received a lot of positive comments from bikers such as “ripping downhill rides” and “awesome jumps.” This 1.5 mile section of the Tanasi System along with the original 20-mile course at the Center is included as part of the South Eastern Regional Championship Series, which will be held for a fourth year at the Whitewater Center April 24, 2005.

An easier paced adventure for cyclists can be found along the Historic Old Copper Road Trail, which follows the restored path that was used to transport copper by wagon from Ducktown, TN to Cleveland, TN before the arrival of the railroad from Blue Ridge. In addition, the Center has a one-mile hiking trail that crosses a 330-foot suspension bridge and circles the Center. Scenic US Highway 64 through the gorge offers many photographic opportunities and there are swimming holes, picnic areas, a native garden, gift shop and much more. Including the Tanasi there are over 250 miles of bike trails within the Cherokee National Forest,

making it possible to never ride the same stretch of trail twice. Nearby the Whitewater Center, along the banks of Parksville Lake, is Chilhowee Mountain with a trail system that is said to rival the Tsali course in North Carolina for some of the best single-track mountain biking in the Southeast. Many whitewater outfitters in the Overhill are expanding to offer mountain bike riding excursions suitable for all age groups and abilities and provide experienced guides, shuttle service and bike rentals including all the gear needed for a great experience.

A cyclist's dream can be found near Tellico Plains, Tennessee along the Cherohala Skyway. The Cherohala was completed in the fall of 1996 after being under construction for some thirty-four years. Winding up and over for 15 miles in North Carolina and descending another 21 miles in the deeply forested backcountry in Tennessee it crosses the Cherokee and Nantahala Forests. This stretch of road with its hard switchbacks is a challenge and is not for beginners as the Skyway has the highest average elevation of any road its length east of the Mississippi.

One of the Southeast's premier bicycle events, the Cherohala Challenge takes place along the Cherohala and will be held for its sixth year on June 11, 2005 with a ride of over one hundred miles (with shorter easier options) and 500 participants that will pass through the Cherohala wilderness. This ride starts at 900 feet, but reaches more than 5,300 feet above sea level (and back, for 9,000+ total climb) and includes the infamous Tail of the Dragon, a road with 318 curves over eleven miles. This century ride is considered by many to be more impressive than the Harpeth River Ride in Franklin, Tennessee or the 3-State 3-Mountain Ride in Chattanooga, Tennessee from a scenery and climbing standpoint.

For more information or trail maps, contact the Tennessee Overhill Heritage Association at 423-263-7232 or online at [www.tennesseeoverhill.com](http://www.tennesseeoverhill.com).

Photos available on request.