



# Gravel KS

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**LeLan Dains**

Visit Emporia

lelan@visitemporia.com

620-757-3264

## Overview

Gravel cycling has been booming for the better part of the last decade. Emporia, KS has been at the epicenter of an International movement, namely with the world-renowned “Super Bowl of Gravel”, UNBOUND Gravel (formerly Dirty Kanza). This event began humbly with 34 riders in 2006 and is now the world’s most famous event of its kind and draws nearly 4,000 participants and over 10,000 riders and spectators annually. Because of this event, and the community support it draws upon, Emporia is known as the “Gravel Grinding Capital of the World.”

The impact of gravel reaches far beyond Emporia of course. The entire cycling industry has taken hold of this movement. Cycling in general is booming. That growth, however, is on the back of only two sectors of cycling; Gravel and E-bikes. Even though the cycling industry is global, Emporia continues to be at the forefront of the industry's attention. This is seen in products being tested and developed here and even utilizing the iconic community’s name for product models.

While it is wonderful to have an asset with such the reputation that Emporia brings in the world of cycling, I believe the entire state of Kansas can share in this surge of economic boom in the cycling sector. There are more than 98,000 miles of unpaved roads in the state of Kansas. While not all unpaved roads are created equal, the vast majority of these roads have a story to tell and can provide a potential backdrop for year-round gravel cycling tourism.

## Goals

- 1. Develop a unified system of routes throughout the state of Kansas.**
- 2. Kansas to be recognized as the premiere gravel cyclo-tourism destination in the world.**

## Specifications

### 1. Develop a unified system of routes throughout the state of Kansas.

Routes will need to be accessible for entry level riders, yet challenging for seasoned cyclists. I propose utilizing a familiar grading scale such as that used to rate ski slope difficulty ((green for beginners, blue for intermediate, and black for advanced). The creation of each route should take into account the following:

- A host community that contains basic amenities such as a gas station and food establishment. Attractions and/or historic districts are a plus. Don't forget to think about where your route begins and ends. Is parking available? Are restrooms readily available, etc?
- Routes should highlight the best gravel roads and features that these areas have to offer. Roadside attractions should be considered to give riders things to engage with along the route.
- While distances of routes will vary, distances should aim to be in the following ranges:
  - Green: 10-20 miles
  - Blue - 30-50 miles
  - Black - 60-80 miles
    - Although many gravel cycling events tend to be at minimum 100 miles or longer, I think that would be a bad approach for most standing routes. Events can be longer because there is often support. There is some way for a rider to receive aid to assist them in covering the distance. Another problem would be that 100+ miles would take even a seasoned rider a considerable amount of time to complete and at a great expense of energy. They may be too tired to continue exploring your community after their ride! That said, if you choose to create a route of 100 miles or more, make sure to incorporate other communities in the route so that the rider has opportunities to refuel.
- Routes over 50 miles should attempt to pass through a community that can provide a gas station or food establishment if available.
- Other factors will need to be considered in addition to distance, such as elevation gain and difficulty of gravel surfaces, when making an assessment on the difficulty of a route.
- A gravel guide was created to help better understand the different levels and challenges of gravel out there. [ISGG - Industry Standard Gravel Guide](#)

- **Category 1** - Smooth, well-maintained dirt roads that have either very small gravel chunks or none at all, and are very road bike friendly. These roads are in better condition than many paved roads in the U.S. and are hard packed, offering little more difficulty than riding on tarmac. There are a number of roads like this in Colorado onto which a magnesium chloride treatment is applied to keep the dust down and harden the top layer of dirt. Cat 1 roads are found in a number of gran fondos and add a little more adventure to the event.
- **Category 2** - Expect potholes, washboard and probably loose, blown-out corners. There is likely to be gravel outside of the main tire tracks that could cause an extra challenge if your line deviates. A road bike can still cut it, ideally one with greater tire clearance, but more skill is needed when cornering at speed. Increasing the tire size beyond your everyday road set-up is recommended to reduce the risk of pinch-flatting and to benefit from the smoothness of a larger air chamber.
- **Category 3** - Infrequently maintained roads that require a high level of skill, made difficult by exposed rocks, rain ruts, sand bogs, and many other unexpected challenges that could arise. Unless a route's only Cat 3 gravel section is merely a short connector, it's recommended to step up to a gravel bike on 35-40mm tires with side knobs for the best speed and safety.
- **Category 4** - Non-maintained surfaces with deep ruts, rock gardens, and potential landslides left for the next gravel rider to stumble-upon make these the most challenging of gravel roads. Sticking with high volume tires will help to cushion the ride, reduce the risk of a pinch-flat, and provide greater traction in the corners as well as on steep, loose climbs.
- As you will recall, the distances leave some room for interpretation when determining what color they may be assessed. For example, you may conclude with a distance of around 55 miles, which slots right in between Blue and Black. This is where other factors will need to be considered when determining the color coding. If it has low elevation gain and the majority of the gravel is category 1& 2, with minimal or no Cat 3 and 4, then we can safely mark it as an intermediate ride.
  - For those of you not in the cycling world, I will be more than happy to review routes and provide feedback if you are uncertain!
- How many routes you create is ultimately up to you, and the last thing I would want to do is stifle your creativity. But, I might offer these suggestions:
  - At minimum - 1-2 routes in each color (3-6 total across green, blue, black).

- At maximum - 3-4 in each color (9-12 total across green, blue, black).
  - This is for one singular community, not an area or region. It becomes difficult, and somewhat confusing if you get to having too many routes. After all, there are only so many directions you can send them out of town and you don't want too much overlap in your routes.
- I have found that it helps to try and keep each color close to equal. In other words, it's nice to have a couple of green options, a couple of blue, and a couple of black.
- Other examples - Before you dive in, I can offer you two good examples of communities that have listed routes well. These two will give you a glimpse of how routes were created, share a story, and are easy to utilize.
  - <https://gravelcityadventure.com/routes>
  - <https://visittrinidadcolorado.com/gravel-adventure/>

## **2. Kansas to be recognized as the premiere gravel cyclo-tourism destination in the world.**

When we dream, we go big, and the expectations are that this program will have a high impact on commerce and tourism throughout Kansas, and will be recognized as the gold standard to the rest of the gravel cycling world. Naturally, there will be many factors that will help formulate where potential visitors choose to go ride, but our objective will be to present everyone on the same field, or website, rather!

- Create a new website to house all of these gravel routes. The website will need to be highly interactive, attractive, and easy to use/navigate.
  - Much to still figure out here. What is the domain? What will this project ultimately be named? How will this be funded, etc?
- Leverage KS Tourism to help in the promotion of this program. This could be done via the website, social media, video creation, print ads, etc. Gravel cycling should be one of our strongest assets.
  - High quality, exceptional imagery will be needed for each community. The state can potentially help here as a cyclist will not be necessary in every photo. The state has many wonderful photos from all across the state.
- Leverage industry contacts (LeLan) to share the story with cycling enthusiasts. I feel very fortunate to have contacts with cycling media throughout the world. Many, many publications will be excited to talk about a project of this nature once complete. This will have an extraordinary impact on our reach at no cost!

## Worth Reading

I highly encourage you to do your own research on gravel cycling to better understand its impact today. However, that can be overwhelming and one might not even know where to start! This year's UNBOUND Gravel event generated more than 300 unique pieces of media (videos, news articles, mag articles, etc) with a reach in the billions all by itself! That's a lot of reading. I have tried to share what I think are a few of the more relevant articles that will hopefully provide insight into why a project like this could benefit your community and the state of Kansas.

- <https://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-gear/bikes-and-biking/pandemic-bike-boom-here-stay/>
- <https://www.npd.com/news/press-releases/2020/plot-twist-u-s-performance-bike-sales-rise-in-june-reports-the-npd-group/>
- <https://sgbonline.com/bike-companies-and-events-are-benefitting-from-gravel-craze/>
- <https://www.bicycleretailer.com/studies-reports/2018/04/17/first-quarter-wholesale-bike-sales-24-dollars#.YSj5F9NKhT4>

## Worth Watching

There are endless videos you could watch that show the heart and soul of gravel cycling. This brief documentary, however, does a great job at explaining what gravel cycling is doing, and will continue to do, for rural communities. If you are a visual person like myself, you will enjoy this video.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgUDW8qImwc>

## Where do we go next?

I'm glad you asked! The biggest thing you can be doing right now is dreaming about your gravel cycling routes. What picture will you paint for these prospective tourists? What story will you tell them? What attractions will you want to bring them to or by?

Beyond that, feel free to share your thoughts on just about any aspect of this project. While I do bring a lot of years of experience in this arena, that sometimes means I overlook things that are not so obvious to others. Your participation and feedback is greatly appreciated!