



simon bosman

pushes the boundaries between peril and potential

over drive

by devon o'neil

photography by anthony smith



The perpetually scouting Bosman explores a new line near Sedona's famous Hangover trail.



THE CATHEDRAL ROCK TRAIL IN SEDONA, ARIZONA, IS SEVEN-TENTHS OF A mile of ugly, trenched, exposed red rock and dirt, some of it so steep and slick you can barely hike up it, let alone ride a bike down it.

On an overcast day in early January, Simon Bosman is giving me a tour of the route's hardest points if one were to attempt it on two wheels, self-preservation be damned. He stops at a 6-foot drop below a 100-foot-long cleft in the rock. "Even people who can do the rest," Bosman says with a smirk, "this is what gets 'em."

Understandably so: To nail the move, as Bosman has done roughly a dozen times, you must pull your front wheel off the ground, then pedal forward just enough to jump while turning 90 degrees to the right, down to a pizza-size landing pad, which today amounts to a 2-inch-deep muddy hole. After landing on your rear wheel, surrounded by so many sharp rocks that a fall almost certainly would break multiple bones, you must keep turning, trials-style, until you've rotated 120 degrees from takeoff. Then you can continue the descent down a series of boulder steps.

Cathedral is not meant to be a mountain biking route, of course. But as the only bike-legal trail in this bike-crazed town that had yet to be ridden, it attracted the interest of a uniquely qualified demographic. Members of the local 'Gnarly Crew,' Bosman included, scouted it for more than a decade. A handful tried to ride it. Bosman is still the only one who has.

He first cleaned Cathedral two years ago, at age 53. A slightly built South African who grew up in the Rhodesian bush, Bosman had long been known around town for his skills on steep lines. Mountain Bike Hall of Fame member Joe Murray, who lives in Flagstaff and sometimes rides with Bosman in Sedona, compares his bike handling to that of trials legend Hans Rey. "People need to know who Simon is," Murray says. Until he rode Cathedral, very few did. Most still don't.

Bosman's renown locally stems from his ability to manage fear in highly consequential situations, and Cathedral epitomized that—though not immediately. He says he had nightmares for three weeks before he rode it. During one early failed attempt, he freefell 8 feet onto a boulder with his wife and daughter watching—then hiked back up and tried it another half dozen times, broken ribs and all.

His physical keys are basic: pressure both pedals equally, stay light on the handlebars and gently feather the brakes. To control his emotions, he walks the line and breaks it down to 10-foot sections until each is as routine as his lunch loop. "I don't ever just hope I can make it," he says. "I know without a doubt I can make it if I apply all my principles."

Today, however, Bosman pauses atop the crack—so steep that tourists scale it on all fours—leading to the crux move. He wrinkles his brow. "It's kind of weird," he says, eyeing the line. "You gotta see it. Right now, I'm not seeing it. I know where I went, but I'm not seeing it." He shakes his head. "I would not ride it for a million dollars right now."

SEDONA WAS A HIKING TOWN WHEN BOSMAN MOVED UP FROM PHOENIX IN 1984. He calls himself the first resident mountain biker, a distinction two other early riders, Ramajon Cogan and Dave Cichan, confirm. He fell into cactus a lot early on, he says. But eventually he came to run with the Gnarly Crew out of Cogan's shop, Mountain Bike Heaven. Almost everyone had a nickname—Dangerous Dave, Billy Idol, Tex, Amp, Hard Time, Trouble—but not Bosman. Only recently did people start calling him 'Boss Man.'

The Gnarly Crew pioneered all the hard trails in town—some of them legal, some not. Around 2005, a dreadlocked Irishman named Chewy Aitken upped the ante. He rode a narrow white ledge, later dubbed White Line, across a giant red wall, descended straight down a ramp for 30 feet over a certain-death cliff, then turned and rode back on another ledge. White Line quickly earned daredevil status as eye-popping images raced around the internet.

Bosman rode the ledge two years after Aitken and repeated it often, until it "got kind of, not to sound bad, but I just found it getting kind of lame." So he invented White Line Plus, which adds 100 feet of descending, including two super-steep waterfalls. He first rode Plus seven years ago and estimates he's ridden it approximately 20 times since. A professional film crew made a video that has been viewed more than 100,000 times—a fraction of what a crash would have drawn. "I never want to ride it again," Bosman says.

Bosman sometimes scouted terrain after eating psilocybin mushrooms to help him spot lines he might otherwise miss. "With Simon, there was no line that couldn't be ridden," Cogan says. "Not that he rode everything, but that was his



From left: Bosman, his wife Juanita and their dogs kick back at Fat Tire Bike Shop, a regular family hangout; Midas, one of the couple's three rescue dogs; Bosman drops into the crux of his notorious Cathedral Rock line, the same place where he once broke three ribs.



approach: to look at everything that had possibility.”

He was not immune to mishap. One day in the early '90s while riding on the edge of a 90-foot cliff, he hit a rock and bumped his back wheel off the trail. The jolt sent him tumbling; just before he flew off the edge, he grabbed a bush. He clung to it with one arm until someone pulled him to safety.

Bosman, now 56, relates that story matter-of-factly at the top of the Hilina trail, where we are about to plunge down the corkscrewed backside. I have never ridden it, so Bosman gives me a quick breakdown: “That right there, for its length, is one of the most technical, continuously gnarly trails anywhere.” He grins. “And it’s something you can go super fast on ... with a bit of practice.”

After we reach the bottom, Bosman having dropped me in the first 10 seconds, he looks like he has just drunk from a pleasure spring. This, I realize later, relates to something Cichan told me. Cichan, a Sedona mountain biker since 1991 and the owner of Fat Tire Bike Shop, was talking about Bosman’s drive to keep riding new lines and testing himself, nine years shy of collecting Social Security. “I think a lot of the older guys are like, ‘Why are you still doing that

stuff? You’re not 20 anymore,’” Cichan says. “And a lot of guys who are 20 say, ‘That’s who I want to be when I’m 55.’”

BOSMAN LEARNED TO BE TRUE TO HIMSELF BY WATCHING HIS parents. His father, Paul, was a famous South African artist who donated half of what he made to wildlife causes and national parks; his mother was a translator for the British embassy. Bosman and his two siblings, an older brother and younger sister, grew up in an upper-middle-class home. As members of the Progressive Party, his parents opposed apartheid; people often threw rocks at them while they put up posters. Rivals called the party a communist group, which Bosman calls ridiculous. “Quite simply, they just wanted everybody to have a vote. They thought it would be better in the future if you weren’t oppressing three quarters of the population,” he says.

In 1969, when Bosman was 8, the family moved to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and built a safari lodge from the ground up in Gonarezhou National Park. They named it Malapati, which means ‘the place of the elephants.’ Just outside their front door, every spe-



cies you could imagine roamed free, from hippos and crocodiles to lions and rhinos. Bosman remembers once bringing a python he'd caught in the bush to show-and-tell at school.

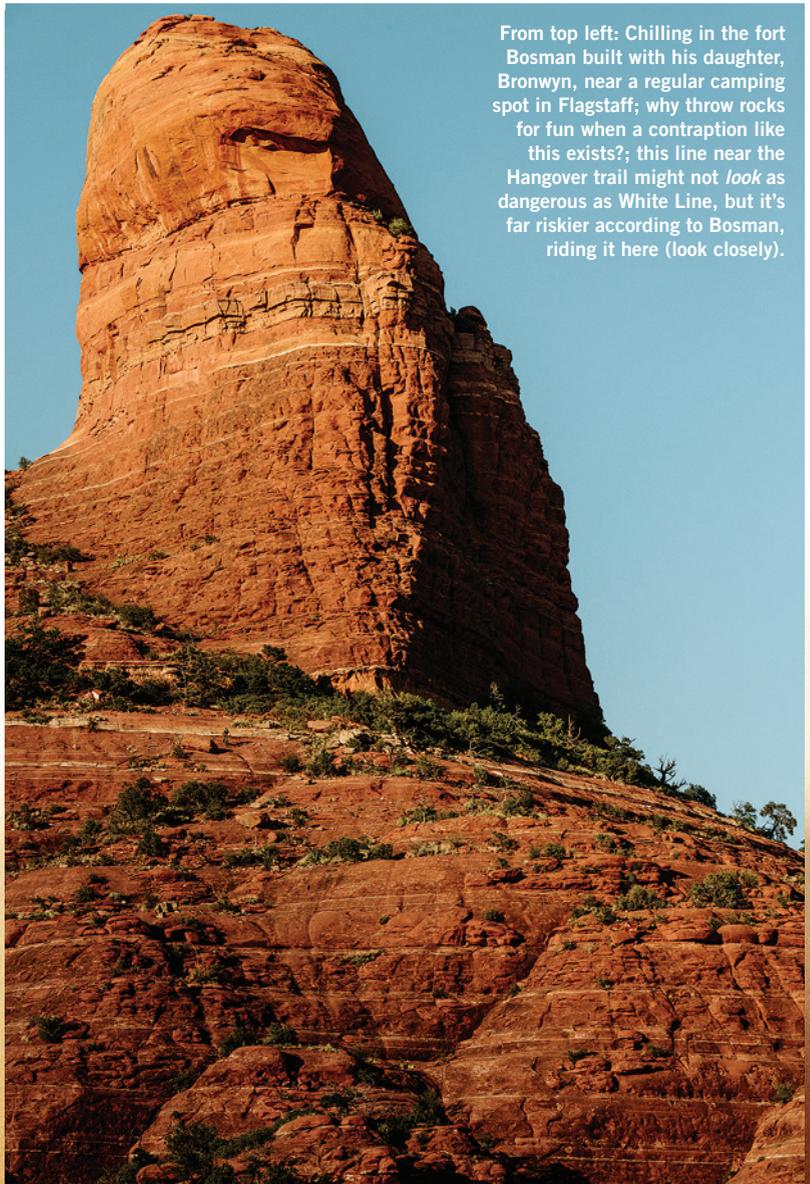
The family kept a pet leopard at one point, as well as four monkeys that one of their dogs raised. When the latter claim raises an eyebrow, Bosman whips out a photo album of small black-and-white prints to show me. And there it is: a monkey wrapped around the back of a dog, sitting upright on the prairie. To guard against the greatest threat, a black mamba bite, Bosman's parents staged anti-venom like most families stage fire extinguishers.

It was a happy if unorthodox childhood, playing behind the house with lions on a ridge 150 yards away. But by the mid-'70s, a civil war that had been confined to the north slowly crept toward their lodge in the southeast. Insurgents would come over from Mozambique and Zambia, gather intelligence from local tribesmen and strike unsuspecting targets. "They'd lock families in their huts and set them on fire to burn them alive, cut their lips off—just the most atrocious stuff you can imagine," Bosman says.

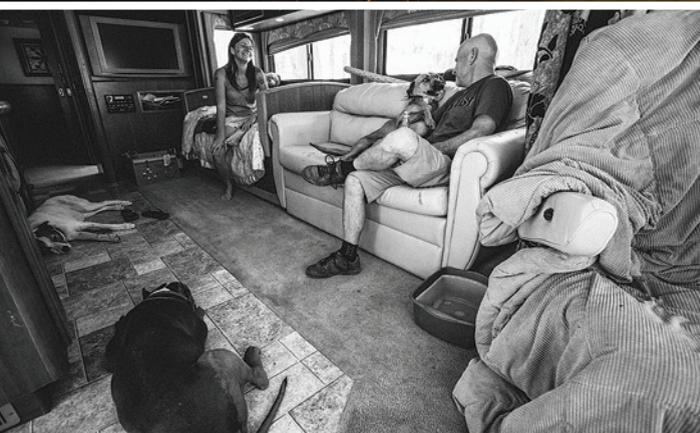
One day in 1976, his parents found a note tacked to their door warning them to "go back to England" or they'd be killed. They took it seriously. "We packed up the Land Rover and left, literally the next day," Bosman says. Given that warnings were unheard of, he and his family suspect that one of their local workers posted the note to save them from a coming attack. "We believe," says Bosman, "and I think we're right, that they were going to kill us."

The family went home to South Africa and started over. Bosman's father resumed his career and again enjoyed great success; they had every material possession they wanted. But as the political climate worsened, they no longer felt safe there, either. So in March 1982, when Bosman was 20, the family left Africa and moved 10,000 miles away to Phoenix, never to return.

Bosman begins to weep when he describes what



From top left: Chilling in the fort Bosman built with his daughter, Bronwyn, near a regular camping spot in Flagstaff; why throw rocks for fun when a contraption like this exists?; this line near the Hangover trail might not look as dangerous as White Line, but it's far riskier according to Bosman, riding it here (look closely).



During the hot Arizona summer, Bosman and his family live part-time in their motorhome (left), which they regularly park at a Flagstaff campsite, and part-time at their home in Sedona, which the Bosmans have purposefully created as an open, artistic space.

that move did to his parents. His father, unable to sell his art back to South Africa due to U.S. trade sanctions, struggled to make ends meet. He grew depressed and considered suicide before dying of Parkinson's disease three years ago. "They did it just for us kids," Bosman says, choking up. "I can't express how much gratitude I have for that." He pauses. "My driving force in my life has always been to make my parents proud."

Yet while Bosman's roots are as much a part of him now as ever, he rarely talks about them. Most people in town have no idea. "I stopped telling people because I think they thought I was full of shit," he says. "Like I was trying to one-up them by talking about the time I got charged by an elephant and escaped by climbing a tree. I just say I'm from Africa."

BOSMAN WAS IN DESPAIR WHEN HE GOT TO ARIZONA. HE drank too much and often went for long dirt-bike rides in the desert to get away from the world. "I missed the African smell," he says. "I was completely different in the way I thought, the way I dressed, everything about me." Not until he started mountain biking did he emerge from his depression. "That's when I found who I was supposed to be."

His competitive career peaked with a third-place finish at the Master's Downhill World Championships in 2006, a mere 10 weeks after spiral fracturing his tib-fib. After that, he mostly rode for fun and taught clinics and private lessons to supplement his income as a landscaper.

His more hazardous exploits have never thrilled his wife, Juanita, a performance artist who grew up in Maui and, like Bosman, came to Sedona by way of Phoenix. They met 14 years ago at a local restaurant where she worked, when Bosman was 41 and she was 22. After they moved in together, she realized she had "sister wives": the bicycles that Bosman kept in their bedroom.

It's a sunny afternoon at their modest adobe home in Oak Creek, and Juanita and their 12-year-old daughter, Bronwyn, are practicing poi, a Maori art from New Zealand that involves swinging weighted balls around your head and body in rhythmic patterns. Bosman has been learning poi but doesn't love it. "I think it's dangerous," he mumbles.

"You think this is dangerous?" Juanita scoffs from across the room.

Bosman, who is 5-foot-9 and 150 pounds, chuckles at her reply. He has a bald head and average build, with gray stubble and a silver hoop earring dangling from each ear. His soft voice and

frequent stutter belie his wit. When a friend calls to say he missed a call from an unidentified number and wondered if it was Bosman, Bosman takes a serious tone. “That”—pause for effect—“was the FBI,” he deadpans. “They came to my house first. I didn’t tell them anything.”

His green Ibis Mojo HD leans against a bookshelf in the hallway. Some of his father’s paintings hang on the wall. Mitis, a hulking gray Staffordshire terrier with a head as big as a watermelon, ambles up to cuddle. Bosman scrubs his ear.

When I ask how his family factors into his calculation on technical lines, Bosman stops just short of getting defensive. It is not the first time he has fielded this question, and though his history could suggest otherwise, his close friends and riding partners know him as a family man first. “I’ve never met a father who has love for his family like Simon,” says Sadhu Low, 28, who was mentored by Bosman growing up.

Neither Juanita nor Bosman’s mother or brother, Christopher, a former special forces operative for South Africa, will watch him ride something of consequence in person. “I’m very vocal about my fear for what he does,” Juanita says.

Says Bosman, “I have to think of my family, but I also have to think of my family the other way”—meaning he has to ride technical terrain to stay credible as a coach and make money. He gets modest sponsor support from Zoi Clothing and a pair of local shops, relying on his videos and word of mouth to attract clients. “I’m shitty in marketing,” he says.

Still, this spring, he phased out his landscaping business and focused on building his coaching into a full-time gig. For the first time in his life, he told people he rides a bike for a living—something

that had always been his dream.

The evening before I stopped by his house, Bosman led me to a zone near the Hangover trail where he had been searching for his next film run. I watched in the fading light as he dismissed lines one by one for being too tame. The red rock rolled out of view below us, holding both peril and potential.

Christopher, who is two years older, warned Bosman last year: “I told him he’s a husband and father of a young daughter, and there’s consequences if he goes over the edge, because he’s not going to be injured, he’s going to be done. He said, ‘You’re right. I’m probably going to retire.’”

“But then I hear he’s going to ride another line.”

Christopher sighs.

“It’s in his blood. It’s what he does. As long as he’s able, he’s going to keep doing it.” 🍷



Bosman rides in the shadow of Cathedral Rock, the imposing location of his most daring feat on a mountain bike.