Fast Times on the California Exp

A diehard bike tourist gets blown way out of his comfort zone when he hooks up with a squadron of hardcore racers on his dream tour from San Jose to Las Vegas

by Roy M. Wallack
Two hours into a spectacular, five-day, 674-mile bike trip from San Jose to Las Vegas that would pass through Yosemite and Death Valley, just as I crested San Jose's legendary Quimby Road, a four-mile, 2,100-foot climb with wheel-stopping 18-percent switchback grades and was psyching up for the descent, a van pulled up and rocked my world.

“Get in.”

“What?” I gasped, blindsided. “No, thanks. I don’t need any help. I’m just getting warmed up. I ride double centuries all the time. I’ve toured tens of thousands of miles all over the world and pedaled every inch. I’ll finish this way before the sun goes down.”

“Doesn’t matter;” snapped the driver. “You’re too slow. Falling too far behind the group. Get in.”

That was my rude introduction to fully-supported bike touring — bike-racer style.

When a few other journalists and I were invited to join a group of managers and dealers from Specialized Bicycles on a bike tour from the company headquarters in Morgan Hill, California, to the 2008 Interbike show in Las Vegas, I was beside myself with glee. I’m a dyed-in-the-wool bike tourist. To me, cycling is touring, which has virtually shaped my life. I’ve toured all over the world, became a journalist due to writing about touring, did my honeymoon on a tandem trip from Nice to Rome, fathered my kid on that tour, even wrote a book about touring. Nearly all the pictures on my walls are of the places and people I’ve encountered while on bike tours. There’s no sight that I won’t ride to, no motorized assistance that I haven’t turned down. No asterisks for me; I ride every mile. Seattle to Maine to Key West; Anchorage to Vancouver; London to Moscow; Budapest to Portugal, New Zealand, Mexico, Brazil … the list goes on. Even when it’s an organized event — Paris-Brest-Paris or a mountain-bike stage race — I treat it like a bike tour with time cut-offs. I ride as fast as needed to insure plenty of time to shoot pictures and stop for souvenirs.

Some of my best bike trips have been close to home: the Pacific Coast four times, Crater Lake to Sacramento, and almost all of the back roads of southern California.

But there was a gaping hole in my Golden State touring resume: the Crown Jewels — Yosemite, the Sierras, and Death Valley.

And now, what luck! Specialized lays my dream trip right in my lap, carries all my gear, and even provides the justification to my wife. After all, this is business — literally a 700-mile commute to work, the Interbike International Bicycle Convention. I just have to leave a couple days early.

So off I happily go on my dream Tour of California, only to quickly discover it is more like the Tour de France. The same as in, say, the Tour de France. Not a tour as I know it. A race.

Half-speed and Half Dome

Right from the company parking lot, the Specialized express bolted off in a paceline, maybe the only realistic way to do something as ambitious as 674 miles in five days. The attraction-rich route through California’s mid-section wouldn’t be easy for a loaded tourist in double this time. Not only are there three mountain ranges — the Diablos, the Sierra Nevada, and the Inyos — but it’s remarkably empty of civilization, with more cows and cacti than people and hardly any 7-Eleven–style food and water stops. And with 49,000 feet of climbing, it’s a vertical nightmare even without 40-pound panniers.

On the other hand, it’s a dream if you’re a racer like most of the Specialized crew. Robert Choi, light-
ing and accessories manager, had actually lobbied for more climbing when the route was being designed, no surprise for a three-time winner of the California Triple Crown stage race, which includes three double centuries totaling 56,500 feet of climbing.

Road bike product manager Don Langley is such a legend at the Hellyer veloclode in San Jose that the company named a track bike after him: the S-Works Langster. President Mike Sinyard, the oldest participant at 62, isn’t a racer per se, but has ridden 200- plus mile weeks for 40 years and hangs comfortably in the middle of the pack. Ben Capron, the global marketing manager, is the reigning 35 to 39 Western U.S. mountain biking champion. Chris D’Aluisio, an industrial design specialist, described as a “fanatic among fanatics” in a recent Outside magazine article, he’s a top masters rider who’s won, among other things, the prestigious Mt. Hamilton Road Race.

Then there’s me, Mr. Bike Tour. I’m waiting for all of them after the van ferries me down a one-mile, 600-foot descent on the back side of Quimby Road and up an 11-mile, 2,800-ft. climb to the famed Lick Observatory at the top of Mt. Hamilton. There I meet up with the man who will become my father confessor and partner in sloth, Mark Sani, non-racer and publisher of Bicycle Industry and Retailer News. He was yanked off Quimby before me, but doesn’t seem too bothered by it.

“Take it easy. We’re not trained for this,” he says, trying to soothe my bruised ego. “Besides, you can shoot more pictures this way.”

On a normal bike tour, I’d have taken an hour and toured the observatory, come in. In real life, I never hitch. Now, in this alternate reality, I’m forced to.

So before I go to sleep, I vow to keep up on Day 2, an otherworldly 126-mile assault on Yosemite and Tioga Pass that has 14,000 feet of elevation gain.

That vow lasts about 25 minutes. Slow to warm-up in the morning and uncomfortable in a paceline, I drop off the pack to catch my breath. Then, at my own pace, I begin climbing into a wonder world that every cyclist — traveler or racer — must do once in this life: the southwest approach to Yosemite, Highway 140.

The Merced River, which starts high in Yosemite and tumbles over the park’s Vernal and Nevada Falls on its 9,000-foot drop to the Central Valley, is a federally designated wild and scenic waterway framed by granite cliffs and waterfalls. Tracking it upstream, I climb past rafters

and rainbow trout fishermen. After three hours, I’m in a zone of evergreen trees and pure bliss, hammering out of the saddle, nourished by nature, and psyching up for the single descent of the route — when I see the van.

“Get in.”

Mark and I high-five. I use the 90 minutes of down-time to fatten up for my secret afternoon quest for bike-touring gold — a photo of myself posing in front of Half Dome, the very symbol of Yosemite itself.

I’ve got a picture of me and my dad posing in front of Half Dome when I was six. I’ve got one of me and my own son with Half Dome when he was 10. But I don’t have one with me and my bike. If I’m sagging, I won’t either, because it’ll be in a roof rack. So with some of the riders struggling on the long, brutal climb to the entrance to Yosemite Valley, I make my plan — stay ahead of them. They’ve been weakened by 4,000 feet of climbing. I didn’t have to do, so I have no excuses now. I get on my bike a few miles before the Highway 120 turnoff. Tioga Pass, the highest road through the Sierra at 9,943 feet, is closed most of the year by snow. A sign reads “Next Gas 59 Miles.” Another reads, “Speeding Kills Bears.” I stand out of the saddle and never sit down through four hours and 5,000 feet of elevation gain. No one passes me until the last 15 minutes. I see a parking lot crowded with cars. It’s the viewpoint to Half Dome!

30 minutes later, after having my picture taken every which way by other tourists, I have my magnificent digital treasure. Beaming, I hop on the saddle and start to pedal — right at the van.

“Get in.”

I was bummed — I wanted to ride to the top — until I saw that the van was filled with riders, all wasted by the relentless ascent. With the day running short, we picked up more riders as we crested Tioga Pass. The 14,000 feet of climbing had taken its toll. Only four supermen — Choi, D’Aluisio, and two bike shop owners — made it past Tioga and descended the harrowing 13 miles down the Sierra eastern slope to Highway 395. I only rode 85 miles and climbed 10,000 feet, but I took home a prize no one else saw — or cared about.

Yes, I understand that speed is paramount to a racer, that seconds count. But going through Yosemite and not stopping there for the night? Not even stopping to see Half Dome? That is sacrilege.
Death Valley and the redemption of my manhood

The small bit of pride I had built on Day 2 evaporated on Day 3, a relatively easy 130-miler through the stark, cold, high-elevation desert and forests east of 395, then south on the highway into the little town of Independence. Feeling sick in the morning, I voluntarily vanned and rode just 70 miles total.

I barely spoke at dinner, retreating into a shell. I couldn’t engage, wouldn’t draw any attention to myself. The guys continued telling their dramatic racer tales of breakaways and sprint finishes. But I was getting too hung up to share my crazy bike-touring stories. I wasn’t worthy. I still hadn’t finished a full day without riding in the van.

I awoke on Day 4, an epic ride into the bowels of Death Valley, with an anti-van plan. No matter how much it hurt, I would stick with the group. Ride the paceline long enough to stay out of pick-up range. Get close enough to the terminus that they’d leave me be.

Fitness and geography was in my favor. Having ridden into shape in Yosemite and gotten active rest via the Day 3 fiasco, I gamely hung with the paceline on the flat to rolling Highway 190, which heads east through the desert into Panamint and Death valleys. With no photo ops to speak of, I could focus on thanking the several riders who graciously and repeatedly pointed out various flaws in my paceline skills, such as overlapping wheels and not keeping a steady cadence. They suggested that I could ride a lot faster with clipless pedals (yeah, I know, but I like toe clips) and without a handlebar bag (where else do I put my food and camera?). To my relief, (and probably everyone else’s) after two and a half hours, miles ahead of the van, I disengaged from the racer train.

After a few minor climbs, a seemingly endless 13-mile descent takes you into the Panamint Valley, which is separated from Death Valley to the east by the Inyo Mountains and the major challenge of the day, a 4,000-foot climb up Towne Pass. Conquering Towne early enough, I could make a strong case for the van to let me finish the remaining 40 miles — including a 16-mile downhill — into our hotel in Death Valley’s Furnace Creek.

Having not seen other riders or the van in hours, I stocked up with water and food at the Panamint Springs restaurant, a lone building and gas station in the middle of nowhere; crossed the eight-mile valley; and stood out of the saddle. Towne Pass is an awesome and difficult climb, a solid nine miles of nine percent grade. It was 90 degrees and rising. The road signs read, “Turn Off AC,” “Radiator Water 1/4 Mile Turnout Ahead,” “Caution! Extreme Heat Danger.” In minutes, I was soaked from head to toe, but I never sat down. I was energized, a man on a mission: finish this day, avoid the van, regain my manhood.

At 2:00 PM, I approached the peak. The green sign read “Towne Pass Elev 4956 Ft.” Parked next to it was the van. My heart racing, I did not let them

continued on page 39

There is no shortage of beautiful scenery in the Adirondacks. Whether you’re a seasoned cyclist into challenging mountain courses and off-road adventure, or a leisurely biker in search of rolling hills, rambling bike paths and quaint villages, biking opportunities abound. Annual events such as Ironman Lake Placid and the Whiteface Mountain Uphill Race draw crowds of competitors and spectators. Come find your ride.

LakePlacidRegion.com 800.758.0690
25 & 6 Hours in Frog Hollow

Road Bike pendant in cut stainless on Re- ply™ cord.

Tarma Designs.com

Halloween 2009
HURRICANE UTAH
Oct 31-Nov 1 - over the Time Change
Two Separate Courses, New Single Track Trails, Costume Contests and More...
REGISTER AT www.gropromotions.com
ATeam IMBA Event-Supports Local Trails

Learn
Bicycle Mechanics
Quality training for enthusiasts & professionals
BARNETT
BICYCLE
INSTITUTE
www.barnettbike.com
(719) 632-5173
2726 Ore Mill Dr. #23
Colorado Springs, CO 80904

Undiscovered Italy
Self-guided or small group tours with van support.
Enchanting bike tours at an affordable price.
sicilando.com 1-800-881-0484

Celebrate the Bicycle
100% cotton • $17 • Order from Adventure Cycling’s Online Store
www.adventurecycling/store

See America by Bicycle
1st Class, Fully Supported Long Distance BICYCLE TOURS.
Cycle Coast to Coast 33 Tours from 5 to 52 Days.
LET US TAKE CARE OF ALL THE DETAILS, YOU JUST RIDE YOUR BIKE.
www.abbike.com 888-797-7057

Continued from page 31

speak. “Great to see you guys — I’m feeling so great!” I practically screamed. “A 16-mile downhill from here, then 25 flat miles to the finish. I’ll be done by 3:30 at the latest. No need to worry about me. Hey, mind taking my picture with this sign?”

“Okay,” they said.

Yessss!

After 122 miles, I arrived in Furnace Creek at 4:00 pm, an hour after everyone else, having stopped to take time-exposure shots of myself with the “Furnace Creek Elevation -190 Feet” sign that no one else saw. Hey, it’s not every day you’re riding below sea level in 110-degree heat.

At the hotel, Sinyard and the racers congratulated me like I was a conquering hero, overdoing it as you might with a child who finally managed to tie his shoes for the first time. But that was okay. For the first time on the trip, I was the real me at dinner, happy and gabby. I had my manhood back — without having to give up my treasured bike-tour photographs.

The last day of the trip, I climbed out of Death Valley with Sani; took a shot of the clumsily spray-painted line on the highway that reads “Nevada State Line” (which no one else saw); did a huge downhill into Pahrump, and crossed paths with a couple of fully-loaded cyclists going the other way through the desert. They were Germans and had giant waterproof panniers and giant tanks of water. Did they really know what they were in for — that heat, that emptiness, those mountains? Did I envy them? Yeah, a little.

But every bike tour is a journey of discovery. On a trip 674 miles long, I may have only ridden 477 in total, but it felt like I’d traveled much farther. By the time all 17 of us except me posed with our bikes on the artificial turf at the iconic “Entering Las Vegas” sign (mine was in the van because I got a flat tire 10 miles out of town), I was a new man. I was still a die-hard bike tourist, but when I put my arm around those bike racers, I felt like I belonged.

Roy M. Wallack is the author of Bike for Life: How to Ride to 100 published by Da Capo Press.