

TOURING THE COMMUTE

The call of the bike trip is finally answered

by Audrey Medina

You know spring has finally arrived in Northern California when the cyclotourists begin to appear along the American River Parkway. “Where are you going with all that stuff?” I ask them. “New York.” “Georgia.” “Seattle,” they say. “Have fun,” I say. And “Good luck!” I want to go with them — to all of those places. Today, though, I have a meeting at 9:00 AM. But it’s getting harder and harder to make that turnoff to my office across the Guy West Bridge.

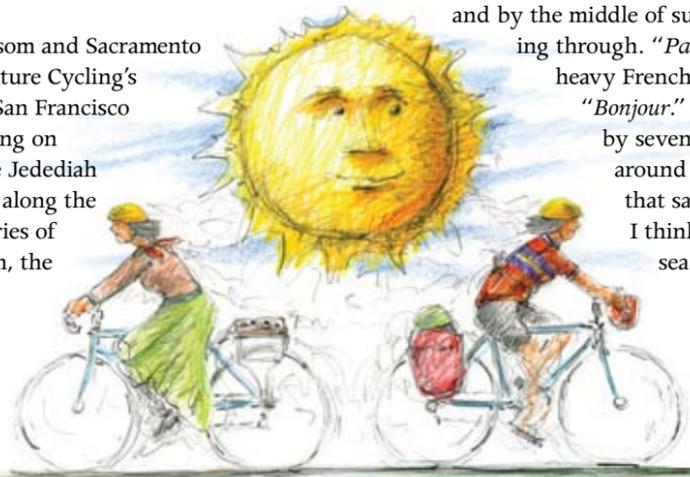
My commute between Folsom and Sacramento State is a small slice of Adventure Cycling’s Western Express route from San Francisco to Pueblo, Colorado. Depending on where I start, I can follow the Jedediah Smith Trail for 15 to 22 miles along the American River through a series of connected parks. Downstream, the trail winds through the pine- and cottonwood-covered hillocks of cobblestones left over from gold-dredging operations. There are big stands of riparian oak and open fields filled with deer, wild turkey, quail, hawks, and another hundred species of birdlife. I’ve seen coyotes, rattlesnakes, beaver, a river otter, and even a bobcat. It’s a year-round thrill ride, with new surprises every time I ride.

In winter, drops of fog zing through my headlight beam like meteors. Approaching riders are halogen sprites, meandering toward me, then shooting by, then vanishing.

One foggy Sunday morning, a congregation of about 50 people dressed in white gowns gathered in the mist. As the preacher prayed and dunked the new members, the congregation swayed and cried “Hallelujah!” For the rest of the day, the baptism scene from *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* and Alison Krauss singing “Down to the River to Pray” ran nonstop in my head.

Yellow rafts float down the river on hot summer afternoons, filled with sunburned teenagers and life-jacketed families. One day, from a bridge between two parks, I saw an enormous woman standing hip deep in the river. She splashed around with abandon, joyous among the anglers, rafters, sunbathers, kids, and dogs. She was completely naked.

The cyclotourists increase their presence as spring unfolds,



and by the middle of summer, group tours are passing through. “*Pardón*,” says a man with a heavy French accent behind me, and then, “*Bonjour*.” A man on a recumbent, followed by seven or eight other riders, cruises around me. Some of them wear jerseys that say “Sierra to the Sea.” Next year, I think, maybe I’ll follow them to the sea. My wanderlust grows stronger;

I want to keep pedaling past the end of the trail to the edge of the continent, turn right, and keep pedaling. I want to be one of the cyclotourists. But not today. Not this year. Maybe next year. Maybe after I retire. Maybe

never. How could I, really, with no money, no time, and no one to go with? I’m too old. My friends already think I’m nuts, and wow, the excuses just don’t stop, do they?

I’ve been on a few group tours — and loved them all. The food is good, the company great, the route sheets have all the rest stops highlighted, and there is always a SAG wagon. But recently I’ve been craving cycling at my own pace, making my own route, and my own rest stops.

Bike-travel books kept piling up on the coffee table, and finally, Anne Mustoe knocked some sense into me. From a tour bus in India, she spotted a lone European man cycling across the Great Thar Desert in India and decided to pedal around the world. At the beginning of *A Bike Ride*, she wrote, “I was not athletic. I was not young. I had never been a keen cyclist. I had no idea how to mend a puncture. I hated camping, picnics, and discomfort. In fact, my qualifications for an arduous cycle-ride were minimal.” After a year — and nearly 10,000 miles — she wrote, “Fear is a state of mind, not a building you hide in.” She still had no idea how to fix a flat. I feel ridiculous. I put some backpacking gear into my commuter panniers and off I go.

I’ve made no reservations. There are no logistics. I’m riding to Lake Solano County Park, from the foot of the Sierra to the foot of the Coast Ranges, a flat, 120-mile round trip. It’s not an epic cross-country, world-girdling book-worthy tour, but it’s what I can do right now, where I am, with what I have.

I can hear the traffic as I start out, but after a few minutes all I can hear is the river and some acorn woodpeckers squabbling overhead. The air is still, and the first anglers are casting their lines. 22 miles later, I pass my turnoff at the bridge. Just like that, easy as pie, I’m a cyclotourist.

After few more miles, I take a little bridge that leads into downtown Sacramento. I stop at the Old Soul Bakery and have a nice visit with some neighborhood folks over coffee and the paper. Now that I’m a cyclotourist, I have that kind of time.

On my way once again, I pass through Capital Park and across Tower Bridge. I catch a nice view of the *Delta King* and *Delta Queen* paddle-wheelers dockside in Old Sacramento. I’ve never moved slowly enough to see them from the bridge

before, and they look elegant along the old waterfront.

Cruising the cobweb of bike paths through Davis, I find a nice spot for lunch in the shaded garden at Baggin’s End, a 70’s-era patch of communal dome-dwellers on the UCD campus.

“Oh, hello. Where are you traveling to?” One of the hobbits has emerged from the fig trees to ask me.

“Lake Solano. Just a little trip.” A little trip that no serious cyclotourist would admit to.

The hobbit laughs, “Oh, right up the road?”

Yeah, *that* Lake Solano. “It’s just for one night.”

“That sounds like fun. Have a good time.” He crosses the garden and heads toward one of the domes. Who knows, maybe he’s fondling a small golden ring in his pocket.

I get to the campground in the early afternoon and set up my tent. I make a cup of tea and sit at the picnic table reading and watching the other campers unload enough supplies to last through the winter. I take my binoculars to the lake for a while to look at the flycatchers

and other birds. There are coin-operated dispensers to feed the rogue band of peacocks that has lived here for decades. Good news: If you ever camp there and you want to wake up at dawn, you won’t need an alarm clock.

The next day I ride home, varying my route through Sacramento. From now on my commute will be a little tour, a tiny vacation a few days a week. Bike touring is a state of mind, not a route sheet to hide in.

“Hey, where you going?” It was Al, a retired bike club buddy, pulling up beside me on the trail just a couple of miles from my car. Al logs more riding miles than just about anyone else in the club.

“I just got back,” I said, “from an overnighter to Lake Solano.”

“By yourself? Good for you,” he says, “I’ve always wanted to do that.” **AC**

Audrey Medina lives in Placerville, California, and works in Sacramento. Her cubicle walls are covered with cloth patches for riding in circles 65 to 100 miles around. Her dream is to be picked up by the cops for speeding on her bicycle.

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