Hidden Valleys and Plain Folk

By John Rakowski

Some cyclists tour for magnificent scenery, like Norway’s fjords, Czechoslovakia’s hidden valleys, or America’s Rockies. Others cycle mostly to meet people. They seek excitement in different cultures. Since bike travel is a universal leveler, contact with others becomes easy and natural. Plain folk everywhere relate to a tourist on a bicycle. Places and people are happily combined in bike-friendly countries like France or Italy. Even in an otherwise nondescript town, using high school French to discuss Roman artifacts with a museum guard can be memorable.

Cycletouring for exercise rates a poor third. The seasoned bike traveler regards it as a given, a bonus but not the purpose of the trip. If exercise were your chief aim, you could simply ride a few hundred times around your block. This would provide both fitness and a familiar bed and home cooking at the end of the day.

But my Australian friend and experienced cycletourist, Rosemary Smith, maintains that the element of surprise is what makes for adventurous cycling. She says, “You need to get away from what you know and take chances. For the adrenalin to flow freely you need a new culture, new scenery, even another language. Mind you, it does add to the difficulties. You need to be tough and determined; you need to extend yourself.”

A case can also be made for touring locally, to encounter life on the byways that are seldom seen from a car. These discoveries can be as valid as those of foreign places. Thoreau must have had such a microcosmic view of the world in mind when he said he traveled far by visiting Concord.

Bike touring is like browsing in a library or sampling a smorgasbord; one wanders among a cornucopia of delights, pausing to enjoy this or that delectable — here a busy marketplace or a religious procession, there a hilltop view or a taste of wild strawberries along the road.

Holland Peterson, a Canadian contributor to international bike publications, put it more rhapsodically: “The purpose of cycling is to achieve euphoria, to yield to the mystic allure of the open road . . . to savor sensuous pleasures of the constantly changing scene. Cycling is more than exercise, a sport, a pastime. Cycling is a religion.”

Cycling actually results in permanent changes for a few. Some meet on the road are so taken by their new lifestyle that they lay up savings and follow the seasons and their moods for years at a time — no car, no job stress or competition. That kind of life is undoubtedly too radical for most of us, tied by Gulliver strings to our TV sets, suburban lots and affluence.

I ask, then, if bike touring is so liberating, why do many of us rush through it? Why pile on miles, try to best companions to campground or motel, or rate our progress by what we read on electronic pacers?

Both the bicycling industry and press do contribute to this manic mentality, through a preoccupation with equipment and efficiency. Gadgets, racing clothes, and the latest theories on attaining “a personal best” abound in the pages of bike literature. Cyclists speak much of the pain and little of the euphoria.

But mostly it’s in ourselves. We Americans tend to transfer our competitive market values to our leisure life. We start in childhood by making it in the Little League and graduate to adult aggression on the tennis court.

“How many miles an hour do you go?” is the frequent question asked of me in the United States. Europeans and Asians tend to ask instead how I enjoy their country. I get letters often from aspiring tourists who plan to average 80 or more miles a day across the Rockies or through scenic parts of Europe. They will draft each other and see only backside. What are they thinking of?

I recall a road in India a few decades ago, when a young man on a heavy one-speed fell in beside me. “Come to my home for tea,” he urged. I declined. I was in a hurry and a bit harried with the heat, the busy road and the schedule I had arbitrarily set for myself.

He persisted, “It would mean very little to you to lose an hour, but for me it would be memorable.”

I couldn’t resist that plea and I followed him to a cluster of villages some miles off the highway. I spent a long afternoon there, having teas and conversations with people of all ages and castes. My host took me to the schools, home industries, shops and farms in the extended village complex. Memorable indeed, mostly for me. I saw an India unknown to most travelers.

I wondered later why my schedule had seemed so important, and I realized how it would have denied me that unique experience — merely to get somewhere by the end of that day. A pity. I would have missed those places and people.

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