

Trailblazing Dixie

A guerilla-style trip along the East Coast Greenway's southern half

By Matt Wittmer

I taxied my boxed bicycle from Union Station to a prime vantage point in front of the United States Capitol. It would be my last ride on anything more than two wheels for over two months. It was time to put Bianchi back together again. Handlebars? Check. Pedals? Check. Saddle? Check. Rack? Check.

I'd been hired by the East Coast Greenway Alliance (ECGA) as a "trail field analyst." Dream job? You bet. It fit me like a custom-made frame. It wouldn't be long before I began calling myself an explorer-in-residence. Riding solo, the mind unspools like the road.

I had nabbed what the Greenway calls its southern tier. My ride would begin on the other end of the National Mall under the marble gaze of Lincoln himself. With no fanfare save my own, I semi-circled the Great Emancipator to head over the Potomac into Virginia, and there I was, a lone Midwesterner loose on colonial roads.

The ECGA has an audacious plan, and so did I. It wants to link existing and yet-to-be trails all the way down the East Coast. I wanted not only to enjoy my ride and fulfill my contracted duties, but I wanted, I needed, to do it rough-style, camping as often as conditions allowed. I wouldn't stay in state parks either, but along the roads and inside urban zones. I'd knock on doors and solicit a few square feet. I'd let daylight and dusk, sun and

rain be my guide. I would rely solely on wit and the whims of the big world for my entire 1,800 miles.

An excerpt from my journal underlines the point. "By hardcore I mean long, and minimal to an extreme. No frills, no fat. Hotels are a scourge. There's beauty living close to the bone." That last sentence is a sure rip-off of Thoreau, but it was guiding signage for me at the time.

Funny thing is, the passage isn't entirely true. I love hotels, be they fleabag or five-star. I guess I was just getting myself into character, for if there's one thing I believe most fervently about travel, it's the idea that every trip offers the chance for an extreme makeover. This journey would launch Wittmer Hardcore 2.0, Sleep

Where the Day Takes You.

I had stumbled on an ancient Roman concept that became a guiding principle — *usufruct* is the right to use and derive benefit from property that belongs to another person, as long as that property is not damaged or altered in any way. A combination of the Latin words for "use" and "enjoyment," the idea, regardless of its present obscurity or legal viability, served to broaden my philosophical scope. It encouraged me to replace "trespasser"

with "benign transient" and gave me license to play pioneer for a while. I like the borderline homeless feeling of long-distance bike travel. In general,

I plan to make no plans, and would rather roam like a stray dog follows his nose. This ride, however, was a little different. I did have a job to do.

The ECGA sagely markets itself as the urban equivalent of that most august of American trails, the Appalachian. It brings you straight through the downtowns of the biggest cities along the Eastern Corridor. My segment included Richmond, Virginia, Raleigh-Durham and Wilmington, North Carolina; Myrtle Beach, South Carolina; those lovely southern sisters Charleston and Savannah; as well as Jacksonville, Florida and on down the coast to Fort Lauderdale and Miami Beach.

The ECGA publishes cue sheets of the route. By the time I was hired they had a passable set. It was my job to update those 35-odd southern route maps, some running to three pages. First, I checked the distances of each existing cue down to one-tenth of a mile. I embellished them as well with whatever I felt would be most useful to future riders, adding state parks, campsites, hotels, and more, all the while attempting to appeal to travelers of all stripes.

I also added specific comments, urging people to use the sidewalk here or take advantage of a certain crosswalk there. I remarked on terrain, advised on snack stops and daily endpoints, warned of merging traffic, and tried to anticipate the needs of the hoped-for hordes that would one day follow.

Meanwhile, I relished the road, in whatever guise it took, like a prisoner on furlough. I think if we break it down, bicycle travel, whether to the corner store or the Four Corners, is about freedom. The bike invokes, for me, a kind of rolling meditation. Something happens between 12 and 20 miles an hour, a speed just fast enough to get somewhere, just slow enough to really see what's in between where you are and where you are going.

The blessings that befall the long-distance rider are, dare I say, part and parcel of the experience. While there was poetry in every sunset, this southern swing was heavy on people. Any trip is a journey through landscape. Only the

The East Coast Greenway is an ambitious long-distance urban greenway project that will encompass a nearly 3,000-mile path from the Canadian border at Calais, Maine to Key West, Florida. Passing through 15 states and the District of Columbia, it links all 25 major Eastern Seaboard cities. The ultimate vision is for a 100-percent off-road trail that is safe and inviting for people of all ages and abilities, as well as varying methods of transport. Currently, the route is a 21 percent traffic-free, off-road trail. Visit greenway.org to become an organization member, sign up for its bi-monthly newsletter, or plan a trip by downloading north and southbound cue sheets and maps.





locals, though, can unlock it. I can observe the Gullah women of Low Country South Carolina making their sweetgrass baskets, but if I don't engage them, I'm left with a pretty picture and no caption.

A loaded touring bike draws people like deer to corn. Often, upon exiting restaurants or libraries, I'd find somebody's curiosity covering Bianchi as heavy as morning dew. They wanted to know. They had concerns. It offered me the chance to take that crack in their courtesy and politely pry it open with questions of my own.

The sweetest stretch started with the Fort Fisher to Southport, North Carolina ferry captain. Bianchi effectively got me up on the bridge and into the steering room. Turns out Mary Beth was a rider born in the Bahamas who had never lived more than a shell's throw from the sea. Her husband George was a sailor too. They had a den full of nautical books and a comfortable guest bed.

Then came Judy. She cruised by with her little Pekinese prince in the passenger seat and wondered where I was staying that night. She had been a biker (the other kind), and knew all-too-well the worn look of the road. She washed my clothes and put some fillets on the grill.



Emery was next. He short-stepped, drunk, out of a bar in Georgetown, South Carolina with white circles for eyes and a face red as ripe watermelon. He'd caught 60 pounds of fish that Saturday. Before I knew it, I was at his place helping him clean them. I ended up on his couch. After an early breakfast of shrimp and grits, we were out on Winyah Bay, the third-largest estuary on the Eastern Seaboard.

In a special and certain way, bicycle travelers are so altogether innocuous, so genuinely disarming, people just want to know what the hell they're up to. Let's face it, most of us are dressed so silly we'd get laughed out of a convenience store even if we pulled a gun out of our banana pouch.

I also chanced upon a bike summit in Charleston, and, in Savannah, a Coastal Georgia Greenways meeting. I met landscape architects, urban planners, city council members, and numerous advocates and activists. I learned a ton and got to play ambassador for two days. I let them know how to put smiles on the faces of through-riders, specifically tasking them to help us get safely in and out of their cities.

80 percent of the existent ECGA is no more traffic-free than the road that takes

you to your local supermarket, or the one that brings you to the largest town in your region. There are stretches that will harry your nerves. In fairness, there are gloriously long segments as well, where all you hear is the bicyclist's favorite sound, that beautiful buzz of flowing chain.

The process of knitting together existing trails through a swath of country as populated as the East Coast is momentous. Because it aims to link cities instead of avoid them, the Greenway has bitten off a nearly unchewable task.

Unsurprisingly, the ECGA has revised its longheld goal of completing a 3,000-mile, off-road trail by 2010. It just isn't possible. But as the momentum continues to build for the nearly 20-year effort, the trail continues to grow. I'm proud to have bolstered its legacy, and grateful it took a chance on me. **AC**

Matt Wittmer likes riding solo and only recently bought his first pair of bike shorts. He once slept in a gutted Jaguar in upstate New York on a weeklong blast from Norfolk, Virginia to Portland, Maine. He is currently a visiting professor of English at the Universidad de Piura in Northern Peru. You can reach him at matt.wittmer@gmail.com.

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