

# BETTER OFF PEDALING

*They say stubbornness is a bad trait, but when it prevails, good things can happen*  
by Jeff Dick

On the same day my riding companion Nomad and I were lubing our chains in Moab, his girlfriend back in the Midwest found a new postcard from an old girlfriend — and she wasn't happy. She called just before midnight and their conversation lasted deep into the night. The next morning, Nomad offered a few details before we quietly reloaded our bikes for the long drive back east. He dropped me off in Colorado where I wished

him luck patching up the relationship and pushed my disappointed Univega into the garage. After years of planning, our grand tour would have to wait a little longer.

Three inches of fresh snow the next morning only intensified my disappointment. It was the end of May and I knew the sun was shining in Utah. What the heck? My gear was still packed and no one knew of the scuttled trip but my wife and dog. With snowflakes disappearing in the rearview mirror, I drove back to Utah and by 6:00 p.m. was pedaling west out of Hanksville.

On cue, the rain started 20 minutes later. I unpacked my rain shell, covered my bags, and pedaled on, grateful that it wasn't snow. I pitched my tent at a UFO-themed campground where aliens had either scared off or abducted the caretaker. By morning, all my gear was soaked and my sandals were caked with gray clay. Easing onto the road, I forced myself to turn away from my truck less than 20 miles away.

This was my first tour in too many years and I realized (again) that road maps don't have contour lines. After three hard hours riding upstream beside a muddy river, I seemed only marginally



closer to my destination. I stopped for lunch and sliced oily cheese onto slices of distorted bread.

"What was I doing out here? Couldn't I take a hint?" I asked myself. There was a reason we had abandoned the trip. I shouldn't be here. Snow or no snow, I thought longingly of my bed and home.

Too stubborn to turn back, I packed away the food and fought up another long series of grades before a short downhill mercifully delivered me to the town of Torrey. At the edge of town, I was heartened by the sight of another

loaded cyclist sporting knickers, a newsboy cap, and lamb-chop sideburns.

Christopher offered a hearty handshake and assessment of my route ahead in a confident German accent. "There is no water and no place to camp. And the road is very steep."

He passed me a business card with his website address and a glossy map of his proposed route — 3,000 kilometers from Phoenix to Vancouver. I told him how much I admired his ambition and fitness.

"It's nothing," he said. "Look for the French guys I rode with the last two days. They're going to Alaska — and they started in Cancun."

Unsure whether to be inspired or further depressed by these long-distance voyagers, I wished Christopher well and checked into a \$10 per night hostel. After drying out my tent and changing my front tire, which was on the verge of exploding from dry rot, I ventured into Torrey and promptly ran into the Frenchmen, Florian and Pascal.

Their mountain bikes were barely visible beneath an array of strapped on pads, tents, tarps, and water bottles. A flag hung from each of their pachyder-

mous rear racks warning away cars and advertising, "We need a place to sleep."

"It didn't work too good in Mexico," said Pascal. "But it was great in Flagstaff. We had beds for three nights."

I told them about the ridiculously affordable hostel where I was staying but they said, "No merci." They were on a budget and it was a point of pride that they never paid for a place to sleep. Florian scribbled their website address on the back of Christopher's card and they headed to a campsite unknown while I slept like a king with the hostel to myself.

The next morning, energized by a monster burrito, I attacked the postponed climb. Within a few miles, I was a touring cyclist again. I was no longer watching my average speed but pushing a low gear as the miles passed beneath my wheels and my mind wandered out over the red desert below. Without a moment of anxiety, I was soon standing among alpine snowfields pulling on my rain shell.

For the next 30 minutes, sleet pinged off my helmet and my toes went pleasantly numb as I leaned through an endless serpentine descent. Five miles outside of Boulder, Colorado, I saw yet another overloaded cyclist grinding toward me. My neglected brakes howled as I stopped to give the rider a weather report for the high crossing.

Carlos, a computer programmer from Spain, cursed as he dug into his panniers for tights and arm warmers that looked more like pajamas than cycling wear.

There was nothing positive I could tell him about the climb as the low clouds obscured whatever view there might have been. He seemed undaunted and resigned to the climb — one of hundreds he'd done since leaving the southern tip of Argentina 16 months before, and one more on his way to Alaska, where he intended to be in four months.

As Carlos girded for the climb, I wondered if he was overdressing but took the opportunity to hear about his adventure. His bike was holding up wonderfully but day after day of washboard roads in Bolivia nearly finished him. He'd spent a month in La Paz letting his legs and mind recover. The only miles he hadn't pedaled were on a boat between Columbia and Panama to avoid guerillas.

I told him I dreamt of taking such a trip.

"It's great, but it's hard," Carlos said. "You have to quit your job, leave your friends. I think I'll be glad to finish."

He donned a safari hat, thanked me for the weather report, and was off again as I snapped a photo. I was disappointed to learn he didn't have a website but was confident he would reach Alaska.

As I finished the descent on a frightening 14 percent grade, my admiration for the Europeans — who had all passed this way going uphill — only grew. In the mental games which accompany a solo ride, I was tempted to belittle my piddling loop alongside their intercontinental odysseys. Why did I have the crappy job with two weeks of vacation? I should be riding from Alaska to Cancun.

But rather than feeling diminished by my one-week tour, I was emboldened and proud to be part of this international community crossing paths in the middle of nowhere. We each had our own doubts, struggles, and challenges, but better to be out in the rain fixing a flat and meeting the world than lying in bed depressed by snow in May.

After meeting Carlos, I didn't encounter another rider. However, I rode a historic cattle-drive route without a centerline, convenience store, or human being alongside it for 60 miles. I soaked my muscles in the cool water of Lake Powell and warmed myself on its surrounding Jurassic sandstone. On the last night of my tour, I was still pedaling at sunset when a truckload of jovial Navajos pulled alongside and offered me a ride. When I declined, they just laughed and said, "Be careful or the coyotes will get you."

Back in Hanksville, I celebrated the journey with a monster burger and a shake at Stan's Burger Shack. I looked over my map one more time, tidied up my journal, and penned a postcard to Nomad. I wrote about the dauntless Europeans. I noted a few highlights, but not all as I figured he was still hurting. Most importantly, I wrote, we couldn't wait another three years before hitting the road. **AC**

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