

UNCOMFORTABLE

A case for skipping the warm shower and B&B

by Willie Weir

Don't get me wrong, I like comfort. Comfort is, well, comfortable. But over the last 30 years of bicycle travels, my most memorable and most valued moments have happened when I've been uncomfortable. Over the recent years, bike tours have trended more toward the comfy and luxurious. Which isn't surprising in a country where parking a 43-foot-long

recreational vehicle complete with bump-outs, satellite television, and leather recliners on an asphalt pad in the forest is considered camping.

For every route across the country, there are numerous organizations and companies that will cater to your every need. They'll carry your bags. They'll cook your meals. They'll arrange for a soft bed, or, if you have to camp, they'll go to great lengths to bring a hot shower to the field where you will pitch your tent.

I've lost track of the number of bicycle travelers I've heard announce, "Oh, I could never go a day without a shower!" Really?

I feel sorry for them in a way. How can someone truly appreciate the joy of a warm shower if they've never gone without one?

My wife Kat and I have been cycling and traveling together since 1996. Our first trip was a summer journey through the Balkans. We camped most of the time. If we had spent every night in a hotel, our money would have run out in three weeks. Our journey lasted over four months.

There were times that we were invited into people's homes, and they offered a bath and a feather bed, and other creature comforts. Getting clean and



lying on top of a down comforter was sheer joy. But that joy was intensified because, more often than not, the nights prior had been spent sweating in a tent pitched next to a corn field or haystack after sponge bathing with a warm pot of water.

Then there was the night when there was no water source, so we lay next to each other, exhausted, the day's dust and road grit clinging to our bodies. We stank. We were laughably filthy. I looked over at Kat and realized just how beautiful she was and how much I adored her. I took her salty, sweaty hand in mine and kissed it. In its own odd way, it was the ultimate romantic moment. No candlelit table. No expensive bottle of wine. No

violins playing. Just us. We didn't need anything more.

If someone had offered us a free fully-supported luxury bike tour of the Balkans, complete with five-star hotels, would we have accepted it? You bet!

It would have been fun. But it wouldn't have been the intense, visceral, gritty journey that bound us together as a couple.

But one person's uncomfortable is another person's routine. Going on a bike-camping trip might be an adventure for someone who works a desk job and the norm for another who works as a field biologist.

There is a place for luxury tours, of course. Sometimes you just want to pamper yourself. Sometimes you just want a vacation. I know. I used to lead those luxury tours.

I worked for a bike touring company in the Pacific Northwest. One of the more popular tours was a six-day trip in the San Juan Islands off the coast of Washington. We stayed in nice hotels and ate at fabulous restaurants. My guests were an amazing mix of lawyers, doctors, university professors, accountants, and every other profession under the sun.

One beautiful summer morning, we had a short pedal from our inn to the ferry on Orcas Island. I was riding sag and most of my guests were long gone before I pedaled out of the parking lot. One man lingered, pedaling slowly. I just figure he was hanging back so I'd have some company.

Once all of the other guests were out of sight, he looked at me and said, "Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Go ahead."

"What do you ..."

There was an awkward pause.

"What do you do if you have to ... to

urinate?"

My immediate reaction was to burst out laughing. This was a joke. But the tour guide in me held back my guffaw and my brain went into overdrive.

What is this guy really asking? This is awkward. Wait. Wait.

I managed to keep a neutral expression on my face.

He continued.

"I mean how do you go about it? Can you get arrested or get a ticket for indecent exposure?"

Was this man pulling off a practical joke that would be shared with the rest of the group at lunch?

My mind flew to the guest list: One couple from Nebraska. A family from Illinois. A doctor and his wife from Florida. Two couples from California, and this man was from New York City.

If this 47-year-old man was born and raised in the Big Apple, it was quite possible that he had never peed outdoors.

I now could see from his look of embarrassment that it had taken a lot of courage to bring this up. This man was way beyond his comfort level.

"No. It's no big deal out here," I said. "Why don't you go behind that tree and I'll keep a look out."

"Thanks," he said, with a look of gratitude and relief.

I didn't follow up the conversation with him. Didn't ask him how it went. But I'll bet that his life has since been a little richer for having finally peed outdoors.

I guess what I'm trying to point out is you don't have to go on an epic journey to step out of your comfort zone.

Like lifting weights, you don't get much benefit until you go beyond what is comfortable. Lifting a barbell with 20 pounds of weight is a workout for some and not even close for others.

Kat and my journey in the Balkans was a leap, but both of us had prior experience of being away from the shower head and comfy bed. But Kat had never been on a long-distance bike trip and I'd never gone wild camping with someone I'd just asked to marry me.

If you've never been more than 18 hours without a shower, planning to ride the Adventure Cycling Association's off road Great Divide Mountain Bike Trail from Canada to Mexico is perhaps a leap too far. I'd recommend a weekend camping trip first.

Take advantage of Adventure Cycling's bikeovernights.org — a site developed

to highlight and promote short out-and-back bike tours.

If you've done organized bike camping tours, consider heading out on your own. If you are a veteran bike camper here in the U.S., take the leap and tour in a foreign country.

Discover what is beyond your comfort zone. Go out and pedal. Get sweaty and grimy. Pee outdoors. Forgo the shower. Then sleep on the ground, underneath the stars. Feel this world on your skin and don't wash it off right away. Travel in a country where you don't speak the language. Eat food you can't identify. Be uncomfortable.

Then, if you want, reward yourself with a meal at a restaurant and a room with a king-size bed.

You'll be amazed out how much better that food tastes, how blessedly warm that shower feels, and you might rediscover how decadently comfortable it is to sleep in a bed.

And if you're like me, you will treasure those uncomfortable moments as the great joys and wonders of your life. **AC**

Adventure Cyclist columnist Willie Weir has been wild camping and traveling by bike for 30 years. He enjoys the benefits of being uncomfortable, but will admit to not heeding his own advice.

GREG SIPPLE

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London 2012 Olympic Road Race Route



Adventure Cycling Association is auctioning a 10 night home stay for 2 in North Holmwood, England, during the London 2012 Olympic Games. The house is located in the beautiful Surrey countryside along the route for the Men's and Women's Olympic Cycling Road Races.

In addition to the games, auction winners can cycle the Surrey Hills, day-trip to Dorking or London, explore the history of North Holmwood, and visit the Denbies Estate Vineyard and other local attractions.

This auction is only open to Adventure Cycling members. For auction details and to place your bid, visit the website below.

The winner of the auction will stay in the home pictured to the right.



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