

# ZEB

My Other Travel Companion

by Willie Weir

For over ten years, I've traveled by bicycle with my wife Kat. I've shared our travels in this magazine, on public radio, and to thousands of folks around the country who have come to my travel presentations. I'm not sure why I haven't admitted it before, but there has been a third party on many of our adventures. Maybe it's because certain things should remain a secret — or that two traveling the lonesome back roads is more dramatic than three — or just maybe

it's due to the fact that I'm 46 years old and the traveling companion I'm eluding to is a stuffed animal.

Zeb joined us in a roundabout way. Kat was going to attend a friend's baby shower and purchased a small stuffed animal to attach atop the gift she was giving. But by the time she got home from the store, she was having second thoughts.

"That is the damn cutest zebra I have ever seen."

Next came the justification.

"He is way too cute for a little kid to truly appreciate. I mean, this poor little zebra is just going to get chewed and drooled on and then have his head bitten off by their dog. It would be a crime to send him off to what amounts to a death sentence."

The baby-shower gift was delivered sans zebra. Zeb stayed with us.

He lived on top of Kat's computer monitor for almost a year. He developed quite the personality. He didn't like long workdays (zebras prefer sipping cappuccinos at outdoor cafes), he cursed at the stupidity of some of Kat's clients, and he demanded to know when we were going on our next trip.

How could we refuse? At six inches



tall and weighing in at eight ounces, he was born to ride.

Zeb (he also answers to "Zebediah" and "Zebles") lounges most of the time, attached to the handlebar of Kat's bike with a small bungee cord so he can enjoy the view. Except when we pedal into small villages. He usually hides out inside the front handlebar bag (Zeb has always been paranoid about being kidnapped by gang of four-year-olds).

I might not have been willing to admit to traveling with a cute little mascot if I hadn't met so many other travelers toting one along as well.

Stuffed monkeys, teddy bears,

Gumbys, even a traveling Barbie. All carried by bicycle travelers ranging from 18 to 72 years old.

Some travelers carry them openly — proudly displaying their fuzzy travel companions on their back racks. One gentleman even had a small helmet for his stuffed Secret Squirrel, of television fame. Others are more discreet, not admitting to having a "little friend" until late night drinks around a campfire. It makes me wonder how many other travelers I've encountered have undeclared travel companions.

Why would a group of intrepid adult travelers be prone to carry a child's toy?

I suppose for those of us who come from auto-centric cultures ... why wouldn't we? The establishment claims we're already riding a child's vehicle. There is also something about the simple, vulnerable, and carefree nature of a bicycle journey that has its roots in childhood.

Trip mascots can also play an important social role.

Zeb serves as a go between. Kat and I often communicate with each other through Zeb. On a multi-month journey, sometimes a third party (stuffed or not) can be of help.

Our little stuffed mascot is often attributed with saying things that need to be said, but would otherwise remain unspoken.

For example:

"Zeb thinks we pedaled over one too many passes yesterday." Translation: "Willie, this is a bicycle trip, not a death march. A little less testosterone please."

"Zeb wants to see the sunrise." Translation: "Kat. We've been oversleeping and are missing the cool part of the day to ride."

"Zeb requests that we splurge on a nice room in Istanbul." Translation: "Willie, you cheap bastard. If you want to stay married, get out the credit card."

"Zeb says you should put on some deodorant. Pronto!" Translation: (none needed).

He is also a little link to home. A connection to what we've left behind — and a heck of a lot cheaper than a cell phone.

I don't mean to demean the little guy. He has worked his way into our hearts. I didn't realize just how much until a cold, rainy night in the Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia.

Kat and I were in our tent at the state-park campground, surrounded by motor homes and campers.

I heard an uncharacteristically loud rummaging in our panniers.

"Oh, my God. Where's Zeb? I can't find Zeb." Kat frantically exclaimed.

We dug through every bag and pannier. Nothing. There are only so many places you can look in a four-by-six tent.

"I took him off the front of the bike when it started to rain this afternoon. Did I put him on the back rack and forget to pack him away?"

Kat was despondent. I, fortunately, refrained from saying, "It's just a stuffed toy."

I couldn't believe that Kat could be so upset. But at 2 a.m., with a cold drizzle still pattering away at our tent, I was awake. It tore me up. Yes, he was just a little stuffed animal, but I was genuinely unnerved. My heart was racing. My gut felt queasy.

I tried to put the whole thing out of my mind. But hours later I lay there thinking about the cute little guy, wet and muddy, in some ditch along the side of the road, staring up into a bleak Georgia winter's night and thinking, "They'll come get me."

In the morning, Kat and I packed up camp in silence. We both knew that trying to retrace the last 40 miles of our route looking for Zeb was a futile exercise.

Kat went digging in her rear pannier for a bandana and let out a scream.

"Zeb!"

Kat thrust her hand with Zeb tightly

clutched in it up toward the sky.

Somehow our little buddy had managed to remain undiscovered during hours of searching, only to miraculously reappear.

After hugs and celebrations, Zeb was secured with an extra bungee cord to Kat's handlebars. It made his stomach pooch out in a rather unflattering manner, but he didn't seem to mind.

We were back on the road. The three of us. All was right with the world.

I know that some people will read this and think, "Wow. Those two need to have a kid, or at least a few sessions of psychoanalysis."

But there are others — travelers with stuffed mascots, cyclists with small inanimate friends that connect them to home while they explore foreign places — who know exactly how we felt.

Zeb currently sits on his perch on top of Kat's computer monitor. He is our constant reminder that anyone, or thing, that stays put too long gathers dust.

It's time to start packing. Zeb's ready for another adventure ... and so are we.

AC

Willie Weir has been writing a column for Adventure Cyclist since 1997. Willie and Kat (and Zeb, of course) are currently cycling in Colombia and Venezuela.

WILLIE WEIR



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