

Cycling Across America

by Jerry Soverinsky



There's something about round-number birthdays that prompt me to action. Like the college kid who after a semester spent drinking far too many Jaeger Bombs and Buds at the expense of memorizing the Krebs Cycle and Yeats locks himself in the undergrad library for 96 hours prior to midterms, I awoke in a panicked sweat three months shy of my 40th birthday. With a bucket list of nagging to-do's weighing on my mind, I determined that my 41st year would be one of accomplishment.

And so it was that within a five-hour span the next day, three months shy of beginning my fifth decade, I gathered the courage to ask out my *très*-pretty French neighbor, registered for a sculpting class at a local art school, and announced to my family in a mass email (and to my friends later that night over too many scotches), "I'm biking across the country."

A lot on my plate to be sure, but my bucket list was reduced to a manageable size of one in very short order. I received an instantaneous and giggle-infused, "Non, merci," from Jeanette. An unfortunate incident with my water bottle and a 1,600-degree kiln precipitated my humiliated withdrawal from the sculpting course during its introductory session. And because sky diving (fear of heights) and buying a comically small sports car (fear of acting like a jackass) were impractical alternatives to either, it left me with just one turning-40 aspiration: cycling across the U.S.

Getting Started

Soon after my trip announcement, I began logging 65-hour work-weeks at a temporary job, piling up hours in order to save money. The monotonous routine left me little time to focus on trip-planning logistics, a dereliction that bred hesitation.

May came and went, as did June. Was the trip going to happen? Clearly, sculpting and Jeanette were not in my post-40 future, and I needed to become proactive to attain at least one of my midlife goals. So I took action.

Just before Independence Day, I purchased a one-way airline ticket to Portland, Oregon. It was a non-refundable fare, the \$240 financial motivation I needed to push my trip departure to the point of no return (figuratively — I sincerely hoped not literally).

Next, I purchased an armful of Adventure Cycling maps, piecing together a route that began in Seaside, Oregon, and finished near Portland, Maine. There was nothing magical about the itinerary. I wanted merely to travel through states I had never seen, cycling west to east to take advantage of what a friend assured me were the prevailing wind directions. (NOTE: The west-east wind advantage theory has been disproven. No matter which direction you travel, expect localized and unpredictable wind patterns.)

While I had extensive trip planning experience and could have built a custom route by contacting state bike coordinators, bike clubs, and bike advocacy organizations (which can all be found in Adventure Cycling's online Cyclists' Yellow Pages), I chose to follow Adventure Cycling maps. Their comprehensiveness saves tons of research time and effort. (And in my opinion, they're grossly under-priced, too — shhhh.)

Pace Yourself

Based on my previous self-contained touring experience, I had a vague idea of my trip's pace — 70 to 80 miles per day — but I was not bound by a schedule. (Did I mention I was 40, single, and unemployed?) Armed with Adventure Cycling maps that included detailed lodging notes, I would plan each day's ride the evening prior, taking into consideration weather, terrain, and my energy level.

While to some, this might come across as annoyingly laid-back, finalizing overnight stops weeks in advance is impractical. Too many factors — weather, your health, mechanical problems — can affect each day's ride, so it's nearly impossible to fix a long-term itinerary (a broad timeline, yes; a daily itinerary for two months, no).

As for daily riding distances, this is of course personal and will reflect your fitness level, pace, and touring objectives. Many people find 50 to 70 miles per day to be a comfortable daily distance, though I've met other cyclists who, owing to time constraints or competitive motivations, averaged a century ride or more each day.

When to Go

I began my trip in late July, though many cyclists who follow the Northern Tier or TransAm routes leave far earlier,

taking advantage of cooler May and June temperatures. While I indeed encountered extremely hot weather when I set out in late July, I didn't reach New England until the early fall, which presented exceptionally beautiful colors accompanied by nearly ideal cycling temperatures.

If you're following a southern route, avoid the summer months, as oppressive heat and humidity will make bike travel uncomfortable if not dangerous.

Pack Rat

Less than a week before my departure, I purchased a new touring bike and panniers and began assembling gear and equipment. The magnitude of my adventure began to dawn on me, and a wave of anxiety at being alone over such a great distance prompted me to overcompensate a desire to be self-sufficient. I wanted to have everything on hand — just in case.

Just in case I couldn't find a store. Just in case my bike broke down in a desert (not that my route came within 1,000 miles of one).

Just, well, in case. So I packed. And I packed. And when I couldn't pack any more into my panniers, I purchased a bike cargo trailer, and I packed some more.

When I arrived at Chicago's Midway Airport, my gear and equipment tipped the scales at 212 pounds. That included a nine-pound laptop computer, 21 changes of clothes, four pairs of shoes, and a mobile bike shop (complete with frame and floor pump, hub and headset wrenches, and 12 tubes).

It's not that I shouldn't have known better. I had guided more than 100 cycling trips over the past 20 years (I was a bike tour company owner!), so I understood the logistics of bike travel. But when you combine intense anxiety with a loathing for doing laundry, that's what you get: 212 pounds.

After 10 days of masochistic punishment culminating with a terrifying downhill (375 pounds — bike plus me — creates a lot of momentum that's difficult to stop when it's screaming down a mountain at 30 miles per hour), I shipped more than 80 pounds of gear and my bike trailer home. It eased my riding considerably, though my thighs had already reached East German weightlifter proportions.

My resulting load included five changes of clothing, rain gear, toiletries, basic bike-repair equipment (three tubes, tire tools, a multi-tool, extra brake shoe, four spokes, and a frame pump), a cell phone and charger, first-aid kit, front and rear panniers, a handlebar bag, and bike maps. (Note: a suggested packing list at www.adventurecycling.org/features/packing.cfm will spare you my trial-by-error approach.)

Despite what I wanted, it turned out to be all that I needed.

Up to the Task

From a physical perspective, I believe that most reasonably active people can

shape, I was fairly active so I was confident — especially with my bike-touring experience — that I could ease my way into the tour, strengthening the requisite muscles en route.

Bad mistake

Proper preparation should include several weeks of cycling with a bike loaded with gear — as close to touring conditions as possible. There's no prescribed distance or duration; just ride enough that you feel completely confident in your ability to handle your bike and awake the next morning refreshed and strong enough to do it all over again.

use the cream for my personal use.

After two days of intensive use, my butt was recovering nicely. And to ensure that my rash didn't return, I obsessively applied the thick, white zinc oxide several times daily. Finally, nearly three weeks into my trip, after shedding more than 50 percent of my gear and with a bottom that was now baby-smooth (if not calloused), cycling was non-excruciating.

Tending to your bottom region should be a huge priority on a cross-country trip, and you can do much to diminish the risk of discomfort. That includes adequate pre-tour training, making sure you're comfortable with your bike seat before setting out, and applying chamois butter liberally before every ride, especially in warm weather (though having used both chamois butter and diaper-rash cream, I can attest that both get the job done).

Eat. Sleep. Repeat.

Where you sleep and eat will be your trip's primary logistical concerns, driven by your budget and comfort preferences. (Adventure Cycling maps detail facilities along every route, including both camping and indoor lodging options.)

Commercial campgrounds can range from rustic plots of land that lack running water to commercial venues offering every conceivable amenity, with per-person pricing that averages roughly \$10 per night.

Indoor options are plentiful along the majority of routes, though variety and choices are nearly always modest. As such, you'll find ample Super 8 motels and EconoLodges, not Hiltons and Marriotts. Costs range from \$45 to \$75 per night and are usually assessed per room, which means you'll bear the entire cost if traveling alone, but half that when traveling with a companion.

You'll have the option of preparing your own meals or dining at restaurants nearly every day, though like lodging, variety is often limited. Restaurants are nearly all local diners or fast-food chains, with the occasional Applebee's or Chili's as you approach larger towns.

In addition to an energy bar or fruit every couple of hours on my ride, I would stop for lunch in the late morning or early afternoon at whatever facility was most convenient. Over time, I tended to favor gas stations because they allowed me to watch my bike when I shopped (always a concern when all of your belongings are visible to passersby) and talk freely with the locals

(amazing how many people stop to chat at a gas-station entrance when they see you dripping sweat and gulping a Gatorade, leaning against a bike loaded with gear).

Sandwiches or cans of SpaghettiOs were convenient, carb-intensive, and relatively easy on my stomach. I once ate a four-burrito lunch at a Montana Taco John's — although I regretted it less than one hour later (safe to say I'll never be allowed to use the restroom at the Havre, Montana, EZ Mart again).

I recommend carrying at least a day's supply of emergency food, a strategy that served me well one day in Montana, where 105-degree heat forced me to stop unexpectedly for the night at a remote campground. The campground lacked a store and I was unable to cover the 25 miles to the nearest market, so a can of spaghetti, two oranges, and four energy bars comprised a basic but very welcomed dinner.

For overall trip budgeting, expect to pay \$20 to \$35 per day total if you're camping and preparing your own food, and \$65 to \$125 per day if sleeping indoors and eating dinners at restaurants.

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Own the road. Cross-country riders get used to this view when pedaling the heartland.

complete a cross-country bike trip. I base this conclusion on more than 20 years of experience guiding bike trips and working as a group fitness instructor for several years.

However, and here's the qualifier: to maximize your enjoyment — or more accurately, to minimize your physical discomfort — you should adequately prepare for the challenge. Take it from me, I learned the hard way.

Altogether in the month prior to my departure, I cycled 24 miles. And that includes the four miles that I test-rode my cargo-trailer-equipped new bike.

Although I wasn't in great cycling

In my case, while most of my muscles indeed adjusted quickly, my biggest muscle, alas, required weeks of acclimation.

Taking a Seat

And so it was that I found myself browsing the aisles of a small-town Montana Safeway less than two weeks into my trip, searching for an ointment that would relieve my chaffed rear end.

After much deliberation, I settled discreetly on diaper-rash cream. "Is this suitable for a teething two-year old," I asked the check-out clerk, a 24-year-old woman I would never meet again but who I desperately hoped would not think I planned to

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Safety First

One of my biggest pre-trip anxieties involved personal safety. No matter how advanced your cycling abilities, you'll be sharing more than 3,000 miles of road with thousands of vehicles (hopefully, not all at once). As I was traveling alone, I purchased a \$15 identification tag from an army surplus store and wore it while riding. It was a bit unsettling, I concede, having the store clerk engrave my blood type onto the shiny, aluminum tag, but I wanted to ensure that my complete contact details and a vital piece of medical information were accessible if I were unable to offer them in a time of need. (The custom bracelets from xtreme sportsid.com are another good choice. If you have an important medical condition or serious allergies, consider MedicAlert jewelry, www.medicalert.org.)

No matter the size limitations of your panniers, a quality first-aid kit should receive priority space. And if at all possible, take a first-aid class prior to departure. Understanding how to treat basic wounds and injuries is always helpful, especially as you'll be traveling along roads where facilities can be scarce.

A Clear View

Including a weeklong kidney stone outbreak just after Labor Day, I reached Maine's coastline the first week in October, 72 days after departing from Oregon.

Heavy construction lined the road as I approached the Atlantic, though for the last mile or two of my journey I heard nothing but the sound of my worn tires rolling across pavement as a flurry of trip memories flashed through my mind.

Ask any passionate bike traveler, and the physically active pursuit of adventure and exploration is best described as a need, an endless pursuit that continually seeks greater rewards. I'm no different. Since my first bike trip a quarter of a century ago, the question was not whether I would one day cycle across America, but when.

And in my case, all it took was a round number to get me started. **AC**

Jerry Soverinsky guided European bike trips for 20 years and is now a freelance writer living in Chicago. He is the author of Cycle Europe: 20 Tours, 12 Countries.