

WHAT IS ADVENTURE?

Is it harder to define it or live it?

by Willie Weir

Adventure. It is one of my favorite words in the English language. The mention of it conjures up vivid images and experiences. It gets my heart pumping and my adrenaline rushing. Sadly though, my favorite word is being used so often it is in danger of becoming a cliché. The automobile industry promises adventure with every SUV they sell. Dating services promise adventure and lifelong love, and the tourism industry uses adventure to charge more for a package deal. So what is adventure?

The American Heritage Dictionary defines the noun adventure as: 1.a. An undertaking or enterprise of a hazardous nature. b. An undertaking of a questionable nature, especially one involving intervention in another state's affairs.

Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary defines the verb adventure as: 1. To risk, or hazard; jeopard; to venture. 2. To venture upon; to run the risk of; to dare.

No dictionary I checked defined adventure without using the words risk or hazard.

If I accept dictionary definitions of adventure, I must then conclude that the adventure travel industry is rarely about adventure. It is about the exotic, the

extravagant. It is all about catered meals and scheduled events.

I worked as a bicycle tour guide for four years and I loved it. Loved the people, loved the scenery, loved the food (and had the extra pounds to prove it). Loved the cycling. Was it an adventure? In my opinion, undoubtedly, no.

My guests knew when they were going to get up, what they were going to have for breakfast, and how many miles they'd have to ride before eating. They knew that a cold beer would be waiting at the hotel or bed-and-breakfast, what pricey restaurant they'd be dining in that evening, and, if I had spare time, that their luggage would be waiting for them in a room with a view.

Most people want adventure without the risks, hazards, and



No matter how you define it, adventure may be waiting just a few peddle strokes away, around the next bend.

discomforts. In other words, most people want adventure without the adventure.

In the tourism industry, this type of travel is often referred to as "soft adventure" or "adventure lite." Guests are paying premium dollars for their adventure to be scheduled, organized, and safe.

I have heard more than one adventure travel guide joke that it is his or her job to make sure their guests don't have an adventure because if they do, more often than not, they want their money back. And, if they have an extreme adventure, they'll sue. How do you know when you're in the midst of an adventure? Ask yourself these questions:

Am I beyond my comfort zone? Am I pushing my physical

limits? And, am I taking a risk?

If you answer no to all of these questions, chances are you are not on an adventure. When was the last time you read a best-selling adventure travel narrative by someone who went on a guided or catered tour? If, on every night of your travels, you are drinking a cold beer, eating wonderful food, and sleeping in a comfortable bed, you're on vacation.

And that's okay. Sometimes a bike trip is simply just a wonderful vacation.

By the way, the American Heritage Dictionary defines vacation as: A period of time devoted to pleasure, rest, or relaxation, especially one with pay granted to an employee.

Adventure is hard to define and even harder to quantify. Adventure for one individual is routine for another. You can't categorize adventure by the activity. Is cycling packed and unsupported an adventure? Is riding unburdened on an organized trip a vacation? Not necessarily.

Years ago I was leading a cushy trip through the San Juan Islands. I had just finished fitting my last rider to his rental bike, and I noticed one of my guests was trying to get my attention. She waited for everyone to leave and then approached me. She looked up at me and asked, "How do you work this thing?"

I would have laughed, but I saw the fear in her eyes. She went on to explain that she hadn't been on a bike since she was five years old. She had taken this trip to force herself to leap over her fear.

I took her out to the parking lot of the bed-and-breakfast and taught her how to shift the gears and work the brakes. The next morning, I passed her in the van as she pedaled to the ferry dock. She was as exuberant as a five-year-old.

Same trip, different experiences. Her fellow guests were on vacation. She was on an adventure.

Many people say, "Every time I ride my bike, I'm on an adventure." Using the concept of adventure to describe every moment in the saddle cheapens it. See adventure as something that's not so easily attained, as something to strive for.

For many years, I have used facing a fear as my yardstick for adventure. I don't limit this to the physical fears of danger and travel, but to emotional fears, cultural fears, and spiritual fears as well.

In 1991, I was taking a train to San Diego to begin a bike trip across the southern United States. I had cycled across the northern United States in 1981 and had pedaled 6,400 miles across Canada in 1988. I was ready for another adventure.

But there was no fear. I knew I could do the mileage, climb the passes, and deal with the heat. How was this going to be an adventure?

I finally admitted to myself that my fear lay farther south — in Mexico. I was horrified of traveling in a country where I didn't know the language. I quickly changed my plans and pedaled across the border. My adventure ended five months later in Guatemala, and the rest of the world opened up.

If I had defined adventure as encompassing every moment I spent on the bike, I'd probably still not own a passport. I'd be perfectly content to pedal within the boundaries of North America.

My personal definition of adventure has pushed me to pedal into the homelands of South Africa when everyone told me a white man would lose his life there. It has caused me to push my cultural limits in small villages in India. It has chal-

lenged me to see Bosnia when troop trucks and tanks patrolled the countryside. And it has prodded me to spend three months in Cuba even though my government said I couldn't.

What is adventure? I'm sure my answer will change as I grow older and, hopefully, wiser. I hope my sense of adventure will continue to challenge me.

By definition, adventure isn't easy. Personally, I wouldn't have it any other way.

I know that many people will disagree with my take on adventure. What's yours? Want to share and discuss it with other members of the Adventure Cycling Association? It is our first name after all. Log on to www.adventurecycling.org and click on Forums/General Discussion. There you will find the discussion topic, "What is adventure?" Add your opinions. Let's have an enormous cyber conversation about adventure. You might agree with me one hundred percent, or you might think this should be the last column I write for this magazine.

There are over 40,000 members in the Adventure Cycling Association, and I'll bet there are just as many definitions of adventure. Let's hear yours. **AC**

Willie Weir is over forty, has written over forty articles for Adventure Cyclist, and plans to continue travelling by bike for at least another forty years.

GREG SIPLE