

It's *not* about the **MILES**

By Trudy E. Bell



AUSTRALIA



NORWAY



NICARAGUA



PERU



FRANCE



WALES



NEW ZEALAND



PORTUGAL



MEXICO

By age 80

—July, 2002—John Rakowski has pedaled a quarter of a million miles around six continents. So what?

“How fast can you go on that thing?” asked a skeptical bystander, eyeing the muddy bicycle laden with four travel-worn panniers, sleeping bag, tent, mosquito netting, and other necessities.

“Too fast, unfortunately,” remarked John Rakowski, trundling his steed back onto the cobblestoned street.

A quip, yes. But also his quiet philosophy, as related in his 1982 book *Adventure Cycling in Europe: A Practical Guide to Low-Cost Bicycle Touring in 27 Countries*, as well as in other articles.

If anyone is entitled to have a philosophy about two-wheeled travel, certainly it's John Rakowski. After all, since retiring from civil service at age 51 in 1973, he's logged more than 250,000 miles meandering around six continents – the equivalent of 10 times around the equatorial circumference of the Earth, or farther than the distance from the Earth to the Moon. (For his unparalleled riding resume, see “John Rakowski: Around the World in 400 Days,” by Joe Glickman, *Adventure*

Cyclist, March 1999, pp. 16-19.)

And after a quarter of a million miles in the saddle, what does John Rakowski view as the point of bicycle touring?

It's not about hourly or daily or lifetime miles. Or hills. Or efficiency. Or fancy equipment. Or any of the other competitive compulsions he sees that Americans (in particular) seem to transfer from work to leisure.

Rather, it's about learning to linger.

Teachings from the tortoise

You must watch and listen carefully to John to discern this. Preaching, or even talking much, is not his tranquil style. But read his lyrical essays, or even his how-to books, or, better yet, sit with him a spell on a gently swaying front-porch swing, imbued with silence except for the clinking of ice in frosty tea, until he's ready to speak.

Too fast – a fully loaded bicycle?

“A bike tour should never be allowed to become a mad ride,” he observes mildly. He just shakes his head at reading “companions wanted” ads specifying an intention to pedal 80 miles a day over the Rocky Mountains or through scenic parts of Europe. An “affliction,” he calls it, nothing more, he suspects, than an extension of American materialistic obsession with possession, this time of land miles rather than

of things. John, on the other hand, has seldom averaged more than 40 miles a day, and in later years has come to feel even that is rushing.

In contrast to Americans who wearisomely ply him with questions about measurable numbers, “Asians and Europeans usually ask me whether I'm enjoying my trip.”

Enjoyment...

Enjoying a trip, he's learned, is not about everything on the trip being perfect, but about relishing the way everything on the trip just happens to *be*.

Take rain—a gritty, slippery, treacherous, dispiriting nuisance most cyclists would sooner forgo. But John? “I often find a light shower delightful,” an unbidden opportunity for “a dalliance with nature.” When it's warm, “I strip down to minimal decency and make myself one with the elements,” reveling in how “the rain cools and washes my skin, the wet smell of plowed earth or cut grass permeates the air, and the lack of shadows allows colors to be seen in a new light.”

It's not about the miles. It's about the moment.

This realization settled in him fully one noontime in the 1970s when he was in India on his round-the-world ride. He was weaving through bullock-pulled carts



Pulp fact. John was featured in this Superman comic book ad.

and exhaust-belching buses along a dusty road, just wanting to get the day's unpleasantness over with, when a young man on a heavy one-speed fell in beside him. "Come to my home for tea," he asked. John declined, feeling harried by the heat and the artificial schedule he'd set himself.

The young man persisted: "It would mean very little to you to lose an hour, but for me it would be memorable."

That plea John couldn't resist. He fol-

lowed the young man to his home in a cluster of villages several miles off the main road. There he spent a long afternoon, "having teas and conversations with people of all ages and castes: I visited schools, home industries, shops, and farms in the extended village complex." He snorted. "Memorable indeed, mostly for me. I saw an India denied to most travelers," which, indeed, he himself would have missed had he kept to his arbitrary schedule.

Childhood epiphanies

Born July 22, 1922, John's boyhood passion was exploration. His favorite readings included Robinson Crusoe, Howard Pyle's stories of knights, Robert Louis Stevenson's pirates, the *Leatherstocking Tales*, *Arabian Nights*, or "anything exotic." He recreated those book adventures in New York City's parks, beaches, and dumps, in fact, part of the grand adventure was getting there by bicycle through "foreign" neighborhoods. Even when bullying toughs chased him off on his 50-pound Iver-Johnson, he imagined he was being attacked by wild Turkish horsemen.

As a youth in the Army and later as a civilian Army employee at Fort Monmouth, N.J., he bicycle-commuted 10 miles each way to work "unless there was deep snow or a deluge." On Army business around Europe or the United States, he carried his bicycle with him to explore a locale or even to pedal home (once from Mexico City).

Around 1964, when he acquired his first lightweight derailleur bicycle, he began long-distance bicycle touring. Each year he endured the tedium of his civil service job, living for the few precious weeks of vacation when he could pedal around the northeastern U.S., sometimes solo, sometimes with one or more of his sons.

At lunchtime in Delaware, on one of these early tours, a chance encounter changed his life. John was biting into a sandwich outside a deli when a 10- or 11-year-old coasted up on a balloon-tire bike. As a laden-for-touring 10-speed was then quite a novelty, the boy was fascinated, eventually asking bashfully: "Is that what you do all the time — just ride around the world on your bicycle?"

"The ingenious question hit me like a bolt. 'Why not?'" John asked himself.

In 1973, his chance finally came: he was offered early retirement. By that time, his three sons were grown and John had saved a secret cache of funds. "So I took my

Grand Tour, playing out the biggest boyhood fantasy of all."

For the next three decades and counting.

Life begins at 50

John's first long trip was two months of pedaling 1800 miles behind the Iron Curtain, in search of his maternal roots in Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. But that was really just a shakedown cruise for his epic journey beginning in 1974: fulfilling his decade-long dream to bicycle around the world — taking 401 days to pedal 16,000 miles, ground costs averaging only \$4 per day (oops, all those measurable numbers). In 1976, the United States' bicentennial year, he rode from coast to coast...and then, a year later, around the nation's entire perimeter, this "Edge" tour traversing 13,500 miles through 32 states in nine months. Then through Europe, then from San Francisco to Guatemala, then...well, you get the idea. His 60th birthday he celebrated during eight months of wandering around Australia and New Zealand, and his 70th birthday while pedaling from Louisiana to California.

While in the 1990s he often found himself riding solo, on the whole he's preferred traveling with companions. Some have been strangers he's chanced to meet on the road; others have been long-time friends with whom he planned an expedition from the start. While for some ventures, such as his early Edge trip, he's ridden with as many as eight, on most later trips he's preferred to travel with just one — preferably a woman.

Why a woman? "No macho bravado, no undercurrent of implicit competitiveness too typical of relationships among men," John said thoughtfully, finding in general that female cyclists welcomed his lingering style of touring more than males. "Plus I like women," he declared. And, clearly, they like him. Over the decades, his short- and long-term female traveling companions have included Bonnie Wong (later a leader of bicycle tours in Baja California and author of *Bicycling Baja* [Sunbelt Publishers, 1988]), Maureen Bonness (for a few states on his Edge trip), Gretchen MacKenzie (around Spain), and

even a former "Bunny" for Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* magazine, Nancy Kavorkian ("She was a bit slow at the beginning, but by the time we ended our Ireland-to-Switzerland ride she was great.") However, for his longest voyages in the 1980s, his steadiest riding companion was Rosemary Smith; with her, John meandered through Europe, Turkey, the United States, Mexico, Central, and South America, and

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to her he dedicated *Adventure Cycling in Europe*.

There were practical advantages to traveling in female company, John added with sly humor: "A man and a woman are more apt to be invited into homes than two men." Whenever caught in a cold rain on his Edge tour in 1977, for example, John always had Maureen, shivering, "hair wet and lips purple, stand just behind me when I knocked to ask permission to camp on someone's property." Worked every time.

Thieves and threats

Over three decades of grand touring, what about those boyhood imaginings of being chased by wild Turkish horsemen? "I was at least stoned by nomad shepherds and cheated by merchants — be thankful for little things!" John demurred, not one to brag.

Still, when pressed, he'll relate some close shaves. Once in eastern Turkey, when several boys in their late teens dragged a heavy marine rope across a road and tried to charge him a "road tax," John recognized the situation for a shakedown that could turn ugly. In defense, "I started acting like an idiot, drooling, spluttering," and when the boys let the rope down in surprise, he sprinted across to freedom.

Also, not once but three separate times, when momentarily distracted, an ingenious thief whipped off one of his panniers and disappeared with all his photographic equipment. Since then, he noted ruefully, he's learned to store his exposed film separately from his camera (the memories being harder to replace than the shut-

ter and lenses). He's also had his wristwatch slipped off his very wrist (twice), endured thrown beer bottles, suffered petty pilferage from camp, and even had his entire bicycle stolen — and later returned. So he came to rely on traveler's checks, and to stash what little cash he carried rolled up inside his handlebars. Still, peaceable man that he is, he refuses to carry any kind of weapon aside from "a slingshot for when

traveling through dog country."

More common have been incidents he's simply perceived as threatening. One blazing hot summer day, he was pedaling solo through the King Estate, a cow-grazing tract "as big as Connecticut" in northeastern Texas along a 55-mile stretch between towns when, believing himself to be alone, he stopped to relieve himself next to a barbed-wire fence. "You! Get off this property!" blared a loudspeaker "like from the sky," as a shotgun-laden pickup roared up behind him with two Dobermans barking "like crazy" in the back.

But does the possibility of real peril faze him?

"A possibility of some danger, at least of unexpected encounters, of a poised breath at a sharp turn in the road, is what makes bike touring electric," John wrote in *Adventure Cycling in Europe*. "The traveler of a conducted tour is soon jaded, but never I. Let others be herded through the Casbahs on their 'adventure holidays.' I'll take mine clean, on my own." **AC**

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