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.

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...
Childhood epiphanies

Born July 22, 1922, John’s boyhood passion was exploration. His favorite readings included Robinson Crusoe, the tales 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 9-speed Ivan 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 Monroe, John rode his bike to work, 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 in his vehicle or even his pedal home (once from Mexico City). 

Around 1964, when he acquired his first lightweight derailleur bicycle, he began long-distance bicycle touring. Even in 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 those early tours, a chance encounter changed his life. John was biting into a sandwich outside a deli and tried to charge him a “road tax,” John responded, “This traveling companion of yours is carrying enough food for himself plus anything he may need for his trip. You can’t charge me for what he’s carrying.” John promptly pedaled on. The young man persisted: “It would not be fair to me to let you continue your trip without some compensation.” John said, “Well, I’ll mollify you. I’ll give you 10 percent of my earnings to help you.”

Still, when pressed, he’d 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 cruise. He 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 ingenuously thief whipped off one of his pantiers and disappeared with all his photographic equipment. Then, he noted ruefully, he’s learned to store his exposed film separately from his camera (the memories being harder to replace than the shutter and lenses). He’s also had his wristwatch ripped off his wrist twice, enduring thrown beer bottles, suffered petty pilferage from camp, and even had his entire bicycle stolen and later returned. So he came to rely on travelar’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 “sling shot” for when traveling through dog country.

There have been more common incidents he’s simply perceived as threatening. One hot summer day, he was padding solo through the King Estate, a cow-grazing tract “as big as Connecticut” in northwestern Texas along a 55-mile stretch between towns when, believing himself to be alone, he stopped to release a rope he’d hooked to a barbed-wire fence. “You’ll 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 fazze him?

“There is no 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 jaded, but never I. Let others he heard through the Carabba on their ‘adventure holidays.’ I’ll take mine clean, on my own.”

—Trudy E. Bell (http://home.att.net/~trudy.bell), a lifelong member of the Adventure Cycling Association, is the author of Bicycle With Children (The Mountains, 1999), The Essential Bicycle Companion (Ragged Mountain Press, 1999), and several bicycling-guides. Other articles for Adventure Cyclist include: "Krakal, Fantasia" (July/August 1999), "Faded Glory" (Sept/Oct 1995), "Sky Riding" (March 1993), and "New-Side Touring" (Nov/Dec 1992). She and her 12-year-old daughter live and tandem-bicycle in Ohio; she welcomes comments at trud@jill.org