



REFLECTIONS OF A BIKE TOUR GUIDE: THE JOB

“**W**hy did she get a blue bike and I get a yellow bike? I want a blue bike too!”

I’ve worked with primary school kids. The color of one’s bike can be THE most important factor bar none — way more important than skinny vs. fat tires, aluminum vs. steel, straight or dropped handlebars. The wrong color bike can ruin your day — no, your life.

Of course it’s important ... they’re kids.

Except that the person whining wasn’t five, or seven, or 10 years old. She was in her 50s. She was an attorney. She made more money in a week than I made in a year. She was my guest. And I was soon to find out that she wasn’t joking ... not even close.

This scenario never entered my mind when I took the position as a bicycle tour guide.

What a dream job! You ride your bike. Show others where to ride their bikes. Fix a flat or two. Drink a beer at sunset. Repeat.

How naive I was.

I learned *the* most important lesson about guiding even before I was offered the job.

I’d sent in an application for a bike touring company that led trips in the Pacific Northwest.

After an interview, I was invited (along with a dozen other prospective guides) for a day ride that mimicked the guest experience.

There was a mixture of men and women and a wide range of ages, with mid-20s being the majority. I knew I was being observed, and I was immediately concerned that I wasn’t a strong enough cyclist.

There were a couple of guys who led the pack the whole ride and raced into lunch. I mentioned to Richard, who was leading the trial ride, that I could never keep up with those guys.

He beamed a smile, “That’s good, because they just both lost the job. A good guide is never concerned with arriving first.”

I was hired and worked four seasons in the early ’90s.

The company offered several destinations, but the bread-and-butter excursions were the San Juan Islands and the Oregon Coast. Seasonal guides worked from mid-May to as late as mid-October.

I soon discovered that to be a great tour guide, especially if you work for a higher-end company that caters to clients who mostly work high-stress, high-paying jobs, you need to be the Swiss Army Knife of employees — van driver, bike mechanic, camp counselor, mind reader, caterer, naturalist, performer, dishwasher, accountant, confidant, gofer, hand holder, and, less often than most would think, bike rider.

CATERER

We ate breakfast and dinner in restaurants, so the guides were responsible for snack breaks and lunches. Shopping was up to the guides, and there was no list of items or brand names you needed to buy or avoid. We always tried to stock up on the essentials (potato chips, energy bars, condiments, bread, meats, cheeses, sparkling water, etc.) at Costco or the equivalent, and wait to buy beer or other treats once we sussed out our guests. Is this a Miller Lite crowd or a microbrew bunch?

In my four seasons, I only had one disaster lunch ... and it was my first. It was on quiet Lopez Island, and I was nervous and in a rush. I’d taken the time to fix a flat tire for a guest and then rushed to get to the park and set up my lunch spread. I’d set out the fixings for sandwiches and walked back to the trailer to haul out the cooler of drinks. I emerged to a cacophony of birdcalls — a dozen gulls had descended on the picnic table. As I ran toward the table shouting, I witnessed one gull lift a chunk of sliced turkey half the size of its body, lift it skyward, and swallow it whole. The gull could barely take off for flight.

By the time I’d reached my table spread, every speck of four pounds of sliced meat was gone. Ten seconds later, my first guest arrived for lunch.



The author, right, at the top of Mt. Constitution on Orcas Island in 1991.

*In his world, there was more **beauty and diversity**
in that one square foot of tree bark than in
anything we'd experience for the rest of the trip.*

I've looked more closely at the natural world ever since.

Fortunately, it was a forgiving crew. They all had peanut butter and jam sandwiches, while I snacked on chips and a bit of my pride.

DRIVER

Driving a van — how hard can that be? Driving a van with a trailer is perhaps a bit more difficult but easily mastered. But there was one maneuver that brought pangs of anxiety to any tour guide: the Island Backup.

Anyone who has backed up a trailer using a rearview mirror knows that you have to train your reflexes to do the opposite of what your brain is screaming at you to do. Once you steer left when you should have steered right, you're toast. You have to pull forward and start over.

Not a big deal if you are leading a trip in Montana or the Oregon Coast.

The San Juan Islands are navigated by a fleet of Washington State Ferries. Summer traffic means the ferries are filled to capacity. Depending on which island you are headed to, it's sometimes necessary to back your van and trailer on to the ferry.

The ramps are long and narrow. The ferries are running a tight schedule. Now add the pressure of an audience of hundreds of summer travelers, including all of your guests.

The ferry workers suffer no fools. You get one screw up. If you have to pull forward to adjust for an error a second time, a ferry worker screams, getting everyone's attention, yanks you out of the van, and quickly (and expertly) completes the task, to the cheers of the crowd.

I watched a fellow guide humiliated on my first trip and later spent hours

practicing in the parking lot. I never got "yanked," but I always sweat a gallon doing the Island Backup.

DISHWASHER

Alright, this one's on me. Dishwashing was not required. I was aghast at how much we threw away on a trip. At every snack and every lunch stop, paper plates, plastic forks, and Styrofoam cups went into the trash. The owner of the company was the worst. He would grab a Styrofoam cup and drink some ice water, and then toss the cup in the trash. He would then proceed to have three more drinks of water during his snack stop ... and use **THREE MORE CUPS**. It was seriously bumming me out.

So I convinced him that we could save money by getting silverware and washable plastic plates and cups. Brilliant. Except it all needed to be washed each day. This did not make me Mister Popular with the other guides, who were already über-busy and now had to add "dishwasher" to their job list. I'll admit there was more than one occasion in which I drug our bin of soiled picnicware into the shower in my hotel room to save time. I apologize to all involved.

NATURALIST

One of the joys of being a regional guide was sharing local knowledge about the flora and fauna: pointing out a Dall's porpoise from the deck of a ferry; helping a guest see the difference between a Douglas fir and a western hemlock; knowing a barred owl or a Swainson's thrush, not only by sight, but by their call.

On an Olympic Peninsula trip, we were on a morning hike in the

rainforest before getting on the bikes for the day. My chatty group fell silent. The canopy was akin to wandering in the world's largest cathedral. A guest walked up and whispered, "What's up with Phil?" I glanced over to see Phil standing three inches away from a giant cedar tree, motionless, staring at the trunk. After a couple of minutes I walked over and asked, "What's up, Phil?" Phil was a lichenologist. In his world, there was more beauty and diversity in that one square foot of tree bark than in anything we'd experience for the rest of the trip. I've looked more closely at the natural world ever since.

IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS

Do the bare minimum as a guide and your job will get boring quickly — schlepping luggage, laying out lunches, fixing flats, making dinner reservations.

It's the extras that make the job fun and fulfilling and the experience memorable for your guests:

- Getting up at 5:00 AM to pick blackberries for the day's first rest stop
- Sitting with the obnoxious guest that everyone else is avoiding at the dinner table
- Knowing everyone by name by the time you go to bed the first night
- Writing silly limericks about every guest and reading them at your last dinner together
- Taking your night-owl guests on a midnight full moon hike

These little things are always valuable, but they're priceless when things aren't going well.

I was coleading a mountain bike trip near Mount St. Helens. The June weather

ADVENTURE CYCLING CORPORATE MEMBERS

was rainy and cold, and the guests were doing their best to keep their spirits up, but it was pretty miserable.

As the van driver that day, I'd left everyone at a muddy trailhead. Instead of just parking the van at the designated rest stop, I sprang into action. I packed up a portable table, a stove, water, snacks, and hot chocolate mix and hiked it a half mile up the trail to a clearing. I managed to set it all up in a drizzle, get the water boiling, and be there smiling with hot cups of cocoa as each guest came around the corner.

Each bike rider arrived muddy and miserable, looked up startled, and then beamed with delight. This act of silliness lifted everyone's spirits.

Little things matter.

We began each trip with an information meeting. It was a time for everyone to introduce themselves and get their trip packet. During introductions I asked everyone to name their favorite breakfast cereal and why. It was a silly question that wasn't too personal for a group that had just met. I always took notes. This was valuable information.

On one trip, there was a woman who wasn't an experienced cyclist and who had taken a fall. No broken bones — just road rash and embarrassment. The next morning at breakfast, I walked up to her table and set down a quart of whole milk and a box of Lucky Charms.

HIGH STAKES

It took me several trips to understand where many of my guests were coming from. For them (like the woman who wanted a blue bike), this was it! Five or seven days of vacation in a year full of stress. A magical respite dreamt about for months or years.

They were stressed about destressing.

It was my job to put them at ease, get them on a bike, and let exercise and beauty work their magic.

These people I dined with every night were successful — they were doctors, lawyers, contractors, professors, and an assortment of successful business owners.

In all the dinner conversations, not once did a guest mention they wished they had started their careers earlier.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 48

Adventure Cycling's business partners play a significant role in the success of our nonprofit organization. Our Corporate Membership Program is designed to spotlight these key supporters. Corporate Members are companies that believe in what we do and wish to provide additional assistance through a higher level of support. These corporate membership funds go toward special projects and the creation of new programs. To learn more about how your business can become a corporate supporter of Adventure Cycling, go to adventurecycling.org/corporate or call 800.755.2453.

TITANIUM



GOLD



SILVER

Ciclismo Classico
In Situ Travel
Litespeed Titanium Bicycles

Noble Invention Bike Touring
Showers Pass
Swift Industries

BRONZE

Buffalo Lodge Bicycle Resort
Fold n Visit - Bike Tours Portugal
ParkON Airport Parking

Red Roof Inn
Rocky Mountain Print Solutions
VeloTopo - Custom Cycling Tours

But time and time again I heard people wish they had taken time off to travel.

I was 30 years old, making what amounted to poverty wages ... and I loved my life. I saw magical places several times a year that many people dreamed of visiting once in their lifetime, and I had plenty of time to travel solo on my bike the rest of the year.

I'd announced to skeptical guests that they'd be climbing 5,000 feet up the pass to Hurricane Ridge in Olympic National Park, and a week later I greeted them as they summited. Then I coasted with them all the way back down.

I'd watched Orcas breach the diamond-studded waters of Puget Sound. I'd soaked in enough ocean sunsets to nourish my soul for a lifetime.

One thing I never did? I never sprinted to arrive first for lunch. **AC**

Willie Weir has been a columnist/contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist for over 20 years. His first epic bike ride was 12 miles along the newly opened American River Bikeway in Sacramento when he was 10 years old.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 41
AN AMERICAN PILGRIMAGE

Trail brings an extra dimension to the remembrance of 9/11. She sees the trail as a place where teachers in towns along the trail can educate their students about tragedy and resilience.

"All they have to do is stand on the path and they can then talk about 9/11, and all they're doing is standing on the trail but they can feel like they've done something to remember that day," Borza said. "I really want to acknowledge the men and women who built this trail. I'm in their debt for all

the work they do. They're producing an amazing experience for anyone who puts their foot on that path."

David Brickley summed it up this way: "Our goal is to have a wonderful hiking and cycling corridor, but equally important is to ensure that America never forgets the tragedy of 9/11 and what makes America important. That's our resilience, our patriotism, our get-up-off-our-knees-and-do-it." **AC**

Dan D'Ambrosio is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist magazine.

New Jones Plus SWB...

COMPLETE BICYCLE

This bike distills all of Jeff's thinking into a complete bike – ready to ride (and for every type of riding). Jeff has created a bike here that performs superbly in all areas, at a very affordable price. Now more riders than ever will be able to discover the Jones experience. No longer do they need a bike for each type of ride, or select the build they want. Jeff has thought of everything – the Jones Complete bike does it all, straight out the box.

The high-performance bicycle



READY TO RIDE!
Three sizes – for riders 5' to 6'6"
**ON ROAD AND OFF...
GREAT FOR TOURING!**

\$1,799

SEE OUR WEBSITE FOR ALL THE INFORMATION AND WATCH A VIDEO EXPLAINING EVERYTHING.

Jeff's groundbreaking designs have inspired a strong following throughout his more than 15 years of making custom bicycles and parts. His innovations have led the way on many new developments in the industry.



And there's the Jones Loop H-Bar™

The H-Bar is the perfect upgrade for a drop, flat, or riser bar on a road, touring, or mountain bike. It gives you the hand and body positions to ride better, longer, and more comfortably. Double Butted and Straight Gauge – new 2.5" rise version available!



Note: H-grips, tape (and controls) not included with bars (but crucial).

Ample space for bags, lights, GPS's, etc. 45° sweep for natural hand positions. Fits standard flat bar controls.

Jones Bikes.com



JONES Est. 2002