



REFLECTIONS OF A BIKE TOUR GUIDE: THE LIFE

There was a knock on the door. “Just a minute,” I called out. That was a lie.

I was standing buck naked in the restroom of a supermarket in Olympia, Washington, lathered up to shave, having just completed a sponge bath.

Who uses the supermarket bathroom at 5:00 AM?

You see, the living place I shared with Leo, a friend and fellow bike tour guide, was a garage that didn’t have heat or a bathroom. We normally used the restroom at the nearby park, but it closed on October 1 each year. So we’d have to walk the five blocks to Ralph’s Thriftway.

I emerged seven minutes later to the glare of a disgruntled potato chip delivery dude.

I hopped in the company van and drove to the warehouse to finish loading bikes and gear. Then it was off to SeaTac airport to pick up my guests.

Five hours later, I would check into a plush room at a swanky hotel and have to decide whether I’d be having the salmon or the halibut for dinner.

My life as a bike tour guide was a blend of opulence and frugality.

I loved this job. It didn’t pay a whole lot — a base fee of \$250 to \$600 per trip, plus tips. It was wonderfully seasonal.

Frugality bought me time.

Time to be on the road on my own. I dreamed of foreign bike travels in exotic lands. As many have discovered, bike

travel can be incredibly inexpensive when you carry your own gear and don’t pay a company a premium price to plan and guide your experience.

The guests on my trips paid as much money to ride their bikes for six to nine days as I would spend for five months of bike travel on my own.

Yet I still needed to save enough of my small earnings to make my world travels possible.

When I accepted the job, I looked at apartments in Olympia. But it seemed crazy to spend a good chunk of my earnings on a place I’d be living less than half the time. Leo and I found, through a friend, a woman who was willing to rent us her garage for \$25 each per month.

It was your standard one-car garage — with a hard cement floor covered by a shag carpet. We’d spread our sleeping bags out and use the washer/dryer as a headboard.

I remember guests asking me where I lived. When I replied, “A garage,” they would often respond, “Oh, you mean a garage apartment. How cute.”

I loved watching their reactions when I explained that, no, it was just a garage, minus the car. Some never believed me. That information was out of their comfort zone.

It’s all a matter of perspective. I remember being offered a warm, dry garage to sleep in on my first cross-country bike trip. Compared to setting

up my tent in a mosquito-infested bog, that garage was the Ritz-Carlton.

I’m pretty sure this garage-living thing is not the norm with bike tour guides. Many of my fellow guides lived in actual homes when they weren’t on the job. Some had kids and pets and gardens. A few were guiding after retiring from prior professions.

But Leo and I weren’t the only extreme “frugals.” There were some couch surfers, and one guide had lived rent-free for years squatting in an abandoned house in the woods.

So my lodging expenses for a five-month season were \$125. Not bad at all. Meals were covered while I was guiding so I just had to focus on keeping my food cost low between trips.

On all of our trips, we provided lunch and an endless supply of snacks. It is amazing how much food was wasted. I couldn’t bring myself to throw it away so I began to set aside food for later consumption.

I would stash away cheese ends and partial loaves of bread. I came home (to the garage) with a dozen partially eaten bags of potato chips, half-full jars of peanut butter, and partial blocks of cream cheese.

Oh, and condiments.

Open the refrigerator of a bike tour guide and you’ll find it stuffed with partial jars, tubs, and squeeze bottles of mustard, mayo, relish, and ketchup.



When clouds obscure the view at the top of Hurricane Ridge, a great guide creates another summit-worthy sight.

Below: From fancy hotels to one-car garages, guides experience a range of accommodation.



So a pattern was established — I'd guide bike tours in the Pacific Northwest for five months, take a couple of months to visit friends and family, and then take off on a solo bike trip for four to five months in the off-season.

When guests are paying top dollar, you can't lay out your first lunch with the last trip's condiments. So they're either tossed or end up slowly rotting away in the dark corners of guides' fridges and pantries. I ate a lot of cheese and condiment sandwiches.

You burn a lot of calories working and riding sunrise to sunset. Yet a universal concern among guides was weight gain, especially in the shoulder seasons when the groups were small and required only one guide. That meant you drove the van every day. The van was stuffed with snacks — potato chips, granola bars, cookies. Sure, there was fruit, but every time you reached for a banana or an apple, your hand came back with a fistful of peanut M&M's.

Add to that calorie bonanza breakfasts and dinners in restaurants. Even if they are driving a van, what cyclist can resist a sweet roll or two in the morning and cheesecake at night?

A month into the season and you'd swear someone put your bike shorts in the dryer overnight.

One year, the entire guide staff had a "no dessert" challenge. Guides would see each other and without speaking hold up fingers to indicate how many desserts they'd eaten over the course of a season. It was cruel but effective.

With my lodging and food budgets at a bare minimum, I had to tackle one more expense category: transportation. Not during the working season, but for my own travels. The most expensive part of an international tour is often the airfare to get you to the starting point.

I looked at all the discount airline

sites, but the tickets were still expensive. Over beers at the warehouse (where we worked on rental bikes and loaded gear into the vans and trailers for our trips), one of the veteran guides looked at me and gave me a piece of advice.

"Miles," she said. "Get yourself a credit card that earns airline miles."

As a lead guide, you were in charge of the finances. The owner preferred to give the guides a check to cover the expenses for each trip rather than issue company credit cards.

A lead guide could rack up 30,000 to 40,000 airline miles in a season this way.

With my past earnings record as an actor, I barely managed to get a credit card. I scored one with a whopping \$1,500 limit. I often had to borrow money to send in a check to the credit card company in advance so I wouldn't go over my limit. Having your credit card rejected in front of 20 guests at a restaurant doesn't go over well. It was a hassle, but those airline miles were gold.

By my third season, all kinds of banks wanted my business, and my credit limit had increased to \$12,000, which was more than my annual income.

In four seasons, I racked up over 80,000 frequent-flier miles — enough for a round-trip ticket to India.

So a pattern was established — I'd guide bike tours in the Pacific Northwest for five months, take a couple of months to visit friends and family, and then take off on a solo bike trip for four to five months in the off-season.

I'd come back from a solo journey in great shape with plenty of stories to tell. The guiding season,

thankfully, ramped up slowly. In late spring, the groups were smaller and the vibe more mellow. There was ample time to enjoy my surroundings without that panicked feeling that I had a hundred tasks to complete.

Then in July and August, I was running at full throttle.

The groups were bigger, the airport was busier, and the restaurants were more likely to lose my reservation for 20. The front office asked guides to do back-to-back trips. Nerves began to fray.

It's hard to get enough sleep as a guide. I was often up before the first guest appeared and still awake hours after the last guest went to bed. On some trips, I got an average of four hours a night.

Because, tired as I was at the end of a long day of frenzied activity, I just needed to wind down. Sometimes that was heading to the bar for a beer sans guests. Sometimes it was grabbing the Rollerblades I brought along and gliding down the empty streets of Victoria, British Columbia, at 2:00 AM.

Some trips were definitely harder to work than others. Trips on the San Juan Islands in peak summer were crazy. I had to deal with ferry schedules and herding the guests (graciously) to the ferry dock without them knowing the panic welling up inside me that if I missed the ferry it would be six hours until the next one. Guests got lost. Stores closed early. Orcas did not show up as scheduled.

After leading a series of island trips, guiding an Oregon coast ride was a vacation. After breakfast, I'd gather the guests and announce,

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“Ride south. See you at lunch.” Then, after lunch, I’d gather the guests and announce, “Pedal south. See you at the hotel.” It was blissful. And yet, due to the challenges, when I pulled off a great San Juan Islands trip, the satisfaction couldn’t be beat.

Then, after Labor Day, the crowds would mellow, the groups would shrink, and the cold rains would begin to fall, signaling it was time to head off on my own bicycle adventure — somewhere warm and exotic — with the time I’d purchased with frugal garage-living and condiment sandwiches.

Come spring I’d return to guide trips again and ponder the question — salmon or halibut? And the cycle would continue. **AC**

Willie Weir’s guiding and bike travel experiences led to an opportunity to write commentaries for public radio station KUOW in Seattle. He was later invited to be a columnist for Adventure Cyclist magazine by then-editor Dan D’Ambrosio. That was over 20 years ago.

any town, it should be this one. Prince Albert is a tourist hub in the middle of the desert, full of restaurants and art galleries, superb cheap wine, and ice cream. Although we appreciated the decadence, in truth the culture and grit of the rural areas held more appeal for us.

We pulled out of Prince Albert at 4:00 AM, leaving early both to avoid the worst of the heat and to allow extra time for the climb. We had one more pass to traverse: Meiringspoort Pass, a paved road through a river-carved canyon connecting the two main subsections of the Karoo. In prehistoric times, the whole of the northerly Great Karoo was an inland lake, with the Swartberg Mountains acting as a natural dam to the south. On the southern side of the mountains was, and remains today, the comparatively minuscule Little Karoo, a strip of land running east to west. Over millions of years, the lake lapped against the mountains, eventually eroding a pathway uniting the Karoo.

Construction of the serpentine road through the river valley was a major feat of engineering and was instrumental in opening up the Cape Colony to inland trade routes.

Pedaling alongside the river, we had two hours under our belts before seeing a single car. The road curved past vineyards and lush, expansive farms; it felt like Eden. The verdant foothills of the Swartberg range were a stark contrast to the desert-like conditions we’d experienced for most of the trip. Traveling over Meiringspoort Pass from north to south meant we had more downhill than up, and if that wasn’t enough, there was a steady wind at our backs carrying us through this paradise.

As we continued to the coastal town of George over the next few days, we marveled at what great riding, and touring, the Western Cape has to offer: limitless roads, friendly people, and an abundance of history, culture, and wine. Nearing the coastline, we spotted a touring cyclist approaching from the opposite direction, the first bike traveler we’d encountered on our trip.



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