



REFLECTIONS OF A BIKE TOUR GUIDE: THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

I gasped the moment I saw him. He was one of five guests walking toward our bike touring company's van at SeaTac airport.

He stood six, feet six inches. Tall, but not gasp-worthy. It was his legs that put me in a state of shock. They were incredible short. When he stood next to me, our waists were the same height ... and I'm just shy of five feet, six inches.

Why did this cause me such consternation? Well, because I didn't have a rental bike that would fit him. Why? Because I worked for the only bike touring company in the universe that only requested a guest's height when renting a bike for their dream vacation.

Imagine selling a pair of pants to someone over the phone by asking them how tall they are.

So because our boss wasn't willing to ask for our guest's inseams on the rental form (was that too much information?), the guides lived in fear of having bikes that wouldn't fit our guests who had paid oh-so-much money for them. I'd loaded three extra rental bikes on top of the van to hedge my bets. But all of those bikes were variations of big. None of the bikes I'd brought would fit this guy.

After our pretrip meeting and dinner, everyone headed off to their down-comforter-covered beds, while I hopped in the van and drove three and a half hours back to our warehouse in Olympia. By the time I'd grabbed and

tuned up a couple of bikes that would, hopefully, fit my uniquely proportioned guest, it was almost 2:00 AM.

I made the drive back up to La Conner with the aid of 80-odd ounces of coffee while singing along to the Talking Heads blaring on the stereo.

I arrived at 5:30 AM, just in time to greet three of my guests heading out for a run.

"Good morning. You're up early," one of them commented.

No worries. I could catch up on my sleep ... in a week.

As a bike tour guide, your job is to fix the problems as well as the flats; to smooth out the proverbial bumps in the road.

But sometimes there are situations beyond your control, when you just have to observe the damage being done.

I was coleading an Oregon Coast South trip. This option had higher miles than most of our trips and attracted experienced cyclists. A group of our guests had arrived early so we went out on a 20-mile warm-up ride.

There were a husband and wife who had high-end bikes, and you could tell immediately that they were competitive. As we pedaled along the hilly route, the woman kept saying to her husband, "I think something's wrong with my bike."

His reply: "You know what's wrong with your bike? You're out of shape. That's what's wrong."

She kept insisting there was a problem. He kept up the digs.

"I told you to get in more riding before we came. You might be the slowest rider in the group."

It was painful to listen to. I wanted to scream at this guy, but I chose not to.

When we finished the 20-mile loop, she was spent.

"I'm done. Can you give me a lift to the hotel?" she asked me.

I took her bike. It was hard to roll. The front wheel was skidding. I picked it up and attempted to give it a spin. It barely budged.

"I see your problem," I said. I loosened the quick-release, centered it, and the tire spun like a dream.

From the look she shot her husband, I knew who had assembled the bikes.

They were finally speaking to each other again by the third day.

It's easy to blame the office or the guests, but many calamities were self-inflicted.

One early morning on Orcas Island, I was up picking blackberries to include with our lunch. The best berries are always just out of reach, but I went there anyway, lost my balance, and fell face-first into the thicket of thorns. I arrived at breakfast looking like I'd been attacked by a cougar.

On another island trip, I took an evening ferry to the mainland to fill the van with gas and do some shopping.

The author
(in recline)
during a
1992 trip on
Washington's
Olympic
Peninsula.



We were driving on the freeway at 65 MPH when I glanced over just in time to see a bike go airborne off the top of the other van, rotating almost 360 degrees before it hit the pavement and shattered into a thousand pieces. My first thought was, “Please let that be one of our rental bikes.”

I misread the ferry schedule — there was no return sailing until the next morning. I slept in the van.

On an Olympic Peninsula trip, I took several guests out for a hike. We were marveling at the magnificent forest when a guest blew her nose and then tossed the tissue on the ground.

I looked at her incredulously. She said, “It’s biodegradable.”

I blurted, “So is a Buick, but I wouldn’t throw one out into the forest.”

The situation could have been handled a dozen different ways ... all of them better.

I had an Oregon Coast trip that had gone as close to perfectly as possible. Everyone had a good time. Great weather. No accidents. Not a single flat. Guests loved the food, the scenery, the lodging.

We had one last short ride before we loaded up the bikes on the roof rack of our 15-passenger van. It was a tight fit up there, and we’d often lift a bunch of bikes up and secure them afterward. Since we had a group of guests who had combined two trips, we needed a second van to transport everyone back up north.

We were driving on the freeway at 65 MPH when I glanced over just in time to see a bike go airborne off the top of the other van, rotating almost 360 degrees before it hit the pavement and shattered into a thousand pieces. My first thought was, “Please let that be one of our rental bikes.”

But I knew it wasn’t. All of our rentals were steel. THAT was carbon fiber.

Murphy’s Law was in effect — not only was it a guest’s bike, but it was the most expensive bike on the trip.

I learned some empathy for the folks back at the office who would have to deal with a problem they had no part in creating.

Which makes me wonder if this next scenario was a bit of revenge.

In the early ’90s, “singles” trips had become popular. I enjoyed leading them because people signed up who really wanted to socialize. It made mealtime conversations lively and interesting.

I remember asking one group why they had all signed up for a singles trip, and the most frequent response was “I didn’t want to end up on a bike trip surrounded by married couples.”

My third season with the company opened up with a singles trip. I went into the office and got the paperwork, which included my guest list. There were only five people on it. No big deal. But on second glance I realized there were two couples signed up.

“How did two couples end up on a singles trip?”

“Well, you see, this couple only had this week available, and they called several times, so we signed them up figuring one couple in a large group would be okay. Then we signed up another couple and ...”

“You called the single guy and told him, right?”

There was a long pause.

“Oh my God! You didn’t call him?”

I’d dealt with lost reservations for 20 at a restaurant and managed to pull off a successful grocery store dinner at a park. I’d led a trip where the rain never stopped and squeezed out smiles and laughter from my guests.

But this was bad. This was deceit. My stomach hurt.

When I pulled the van into “Arrivals” at SeaTac airport, five smiling guests were waiting. I identified the two couples instantly, and the other guy had to be George. Poor George. His smile was genuine, not stressed. Ready to have a good time.

There was plenty of room in the van. George sat in the middle of the back seat. The two couples sat next to one another with that familiarity you don’t see with a van full of singles.

We pulled onto Interstate 5, and I kept glancing at George in the rearview mirror. He appeared confused. He finally asked one of the couples, “Are you married?”

“Yes. But they made an exception for us.”

“They did for us too,” the other couple injected.

George looked like he had been sucker punched.

The van was silent, and now I avoided the rearview mirror. My heart was pounding.

George finally broke the silence. “Are the rest of the guests meeting us at the hotel?”

I took a deep breath and said with as much enthusiasm as I could muster.

“We’re all here.”

I looked back at anger and betrayal in George’s eyes. He didn’t speak. He didn’t move. He just stared. I felt like the next victim in a horror film. This wouldn’t end well.

I’m not sure he spoke another word. He was silent throughout dinner. Didn’t say goodnight.

To add insult to injury, the office called and reminded me that I needed to collect the rest of George’s payment before we started cycling. I said I’d get it in the morning. I didn’t.

At breakfast George took me aside and told me he was leaving the trip.

I looked at him and said, “I am SO sorry.”

He turned and walked away.

It was the low point of four seasons of work. On the bright side, the rest of the “singles” trip was a blast.

From 1990–93, I guided 43 trips with 489 guests. The part of the job that I both loved and hated was the

unpredictability. Every time I thought I had it down pat, I was proven wrong. And every time I thought I had my guests completely figured out, they’d surprise the hell out of me.

I was having a pleasant conversation with one of my 18 guests as we pedaled from La Conner to Anacortes to catch the ferry to the San Juan Islands. We were talking about wildflowers and whales, and then out of the blue, in a delightful Texas twang, she asked, “It doesn’t get hillier than this, does it?”

There was a long silence because I couldn’t verbalize what my brain was screaming. “Oh my God. This is the absolute flattest section of this trip. You should turn around now and book a trip to the Netherlands.”

After the uncomfortable pause, what came out of my mouth was “Well ... there are some hills.”

I quickly changed the subject, “Did you get to the top of the Space Needle while you were in Seattle?”

When we arrived on the ferry to Lopez Island, she took one look at the hill winding up the forested road and said, “Nope.” I put her bike on the front rack of the van.

Just what I needed. A disgruntled guest as my constant companion. I mentally prepared for the longest six days of my tour guiding career.

She proved me wrong at the first snack stop. She hopped out of the van and clapped and cheered for everyone who arrived.

She was the best coguide I ever had. She helped put out sandwich fixings. She helped do dishes. She told jokes. She became the tour den mother everyone loved. Her smile and laughter infected us all.

Her bike never came off the rack. And at the end of the week, she gave me a huge hug. “Darlin’, I had a ball.” **AC**

Willie Weir lives in Seattle, rides a Rodriguez, and loves pedaling the squiggly lines on a map.





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