

# ZOOBOMBING

AND OTHER URBAN BIKE TOURING ADVENTURES  
IN PORTLAND OREGON

Story and photos by Willie Weir

I lie awake on a summer night pondering my travel options. I need something new, creative, different, exotic ... and cheap. I also need something short. A week, tops. You see, I'm one of the many Americans who hasn't had a stellar financial year — but I still want to squeeze in a bicycle trip. There isn't enough time or money for any of the top destinations on my list: Madagascar, Ethiopia, Spain/Portugal, or Bolivia.

Then I think, "What about Portland?" Not Maine, but Oregon. Sure. I could pull off a short and cheap trip to Portland. With the decision made, only the new,

creative, different, and exotic aspects are missing.

I have to think outside the box. No. Maybe the answer is inside the box. What if instead of a trip to Portland, I convince my wife to go for a bike journey in Portland — within the city limits. And what if, rather than the normal way of visiting a city on a bike (getting a hotel and going day rides), we approach it like all our other trips — fully-loaded touring bikes, tent, stove, the works. No hotels. No reservations. No itinerary.

I'm not sure who thinks I'm crazier, my wife, Kat, or my editor. It doesn't matter. They both agree.

## The Beginning

The trip begins the way I wish every trip would — on a train. I love trains. Maybe even more than bikes. If they weren't so damned expensive, I'd buy one.

I've always joked that you can set your watch by a German or Japanese train, while with Amtrak you can only set your calendar. But the Amtrak Cascades route from Seattle to Portland is uncharacteristically reliable. And they have racks for bikes. That's right, no nightmare bike-box scenarios. (Just remember to make a reservation for yourself and your bike.)

So Kat and I sipped coffee, relaxed,

and read the Sunday New York Times while we rolled along the tracks for the three and a half hour journey.

The Portland train station greets you in European fashion. It doesn't assume you have a car or someone with a car to pick you up. The Greyhound bus terminal and a streetcar stop are 500 feet away.



our urban adventure. We head straight for one of the gems — a scenic bike/pedestrian loop



between the Broadway and Sellwood bridges along both sides of the Willamette River.

The sky is blue. The temperature mild. Portlanders are out in force to recreate. The downtown Saturday market is in full swing. Dragon Boats race near the Hawthorne Bridge. Cyclists of all types and ages are riding the full catalog of bikes — fixies, recumbents, beach cruisers, mountain bikes, racers, and tricycles.

We gaze out across the sparkling river at the downtown skyline, and I think, "Where are we going to stay tonight." Cities are always the hardest part of a bike trip. They tend to be impersonal compared to small-town America.

"Willie?"

It's a young couple, Kelly and Ben. I don't know them, but Kelly went to the University of Oregon in Eugene and attended several of my presentations.

They live in an apartment, but assure us their fellow tenants won't mind if we pitch our tent in the courtyard. With lodging secured and new friends found we ask, "Ever been Zoobombing?"

They haven't, but are eager to try.

Zoobomb occurs in Portland on Sunday nights after 10:00 p.m. It is not a city-sanctioned event, and it's not particularly safe, but in the opinions of Willie, Kat, Kelly, and Ben, it's a blast.

Zoobombers board the light rail with their bikes and ride to Washington Park Station which, at 260 feet below the surface, is the deepest train station in North America. Elevators whisk you up to the surface.

A group of at least 75 people has already gathered at the top of the hill above the Oregon Zoo when we arrive. With our “regular” bikes, we are a bit out of place. Kids bikes are the norm. Mostly ones with coasterbrakes. Some have been modified to look more like crotch rockets.

Except for the headlights and red flashing taillights, it’s dark. Safety instructions are given and then a count-down from 10 begins, with “Zoobomb” replacing “Blast Off.”

Laughter and short yips of delight and an occasional “on your left” mix with the magical whirring of bike wheels as the group bombs (or glides) back down to the city.

The entire group gets on the next train for round two. The elevators are packed like those 1950s scenes of human telephone-booth stuffing. “Hell Run” is announced, and the second bomb includes a quick U-turn onto Highway 26.

A seasoned Zoobomb veteran passes me at over 55 MPH.

The group gathers up on the hill above the zoo, chatting and listening to bad 1980’s music from a small boom box, before zipping down for the third and final run.

We arrive back at Kelly and Ben’s apartment at 1:30 AM. Too tired to set up a tent, we crash on the floor.

**Coffee. Must have coffee**

The next morning, we breakfast at Cup & Saucer (one of the approximately three million places to drink coffee in Portland). After our late night Zoobomb experience, we decide on a flatter, mellower ride and head east on Tillamook, one of the many “bicycle boulevards” in Portland. These streets are signed as bike routes and have traffic-calming devices and an occasional dead end for cars with a pass-through for bikes.

We merge onto the I-205 bike path and out to the Marine Drive path along the Columbia River (this is also the bike route to the airport), before swinging around through St. George and pedaling out to Sauvie Island. At 33 square miles (Manhattan is 23 square miles), Sauvie Is-



**Easy access.** Portland’s Amtrak station was developed with car-free travel in mind.

land is a developer’s dream come true. Yet instead of housing tracts and malls, the island is home to organic farms and wild-life refuges. The little-trafficked roads make Sauvie a local cyclist’s favorite.

We camp at Island Cove Park — \$17 for a tent site, discounted to \$12 because we arrive on bikes. Mt. Hood looms to the east. Stars twinkle. Owls hoot. We are 10 miles from downtown Portland.

**Multi-modal day**

We put our bikes on the No. 17 bus at the Sauvie Island Park and Ride the next morning. The bus driver sees our panniers and gives us “Larry’s special” (a free day pass).

We take light rail out to the burbs. Yes, you can hang two fully-loaded bikes in a light rail car. We arrive to wide roads and strip malls — Anywhere, USA. Where are the bike boulevards and bike route signs? We quickly pedal back into the city, descending via one of the Zoobomb routes. It’s much easier in the daylight.

Our pub stop of the day is the Rogue Brewery. It’s beers and Blue Balls — meat balls stuffed with bleu cheese. Both are delicious.

Our new friends Albert and Eecole provide us with our urban campsite — the concrete driveway behind their place, a couple of blocks from a Fred Meyer

## Nuts & Bolts: Portland

**Transportation:**

Amtrak (round trip from Seattle): \$56. I used a friend-travels-free coupon. Bikes are \$5 each way. Total: \$76.

**Lodging:**

One paid campsite. Three nights pitched in backyards/gardens. One night on floor of apartment. One night on futon. Total: \$12.

**Food/Beverage:**

Here is where costs can run the gamut. Eat out every meal and go out for drinks and you can top \$100 a day easily. Shop in local grocery stores, eat at the occasional food cart, and limit your coffee consumption, \$25 to 30 a day.

No budget constraints ... Portland has many fine hotels, restaurants, and some of the best pubs anywhere to tempt your palate and whet your whistle.

Our trip total: approximately \$315.

**By Train or Bus:**

The Amtrak and Greyhound stations are as convenient as it gets. Roll off the train and into downtown Portland.

**By Plane:**

There are bicycle paths from Portland’s airport to downtown (about 13 miles), so no need to take a cab. You can also take MAX light rail into downtown. Bikes are allowed and the fare for adults is \$2.30, or you can spring for the all-day pass at \$4.75.

**Lodging:**

Not everyone is going to want to do a



**Urban camping.** Who says you can’t find a campsite in the city?

full-on urban adventure, including tent and stove, in Portland. Here are a few options for those on a limited budget:

**Camping:** Wild camping is not allowed on Sauvie Island. There is one campground option. Island Cove Park ([sauvieisland.org/2007/07/29/island-cove-park](http://sauvieisland.org/2007/07/29/island-cove-park)). Tent site for bicycle travelers, \$12 (this campground fills quickly in the summer months). It is then a 10-mile bike ride to the Sauvie Island Park and Ride. You can catch the No. 17 Bus into downtown or take the bus to a light rail station and transfer.

**Hostel:** Hostelling International, Hawthorne Hostel ([portlandhostel.org](http://portlandhostel.org)). This hostel is perfectly located in the Hawthorne District, one of the most bike-friendly places in a bike-friendly city. Dorm beds run \$19 (\$23 during the high season — May through October) Rooms run \$48 (\$55 during high season).

**Other information:** Bicycle Transportation Alliance ([bta4bikes.org](http://bta4bikes.org)): The driving force behind many of the bike improvements in Portland.

**BikePortland.org:** Most everything you need to know about Portland bike events, culture, and advocacy.

**Portland Bike Maps:** To download Portland’s excellent neighborhood bike maps go to [www.portlandonline.com/TRANSPORTATION/index.cfm?a=70221&c=34809](http://www.portlandonline.com/TRANSPORTATION/index.cfm?a=70221&c=34809), or you can order them over the phone at: 503-823-2925, ext. 2.



**Midnight ride.** Kat checks out a Zoobomb veteran’s bike while riding MAX.

grocery store. No owls, but plenty of city sounds to lull us to sleep.

**Downtown Bound**

We’re up early to pedal down to the Hawthorne Street Bridge and witness the commute. A must do if you visit Portland. We position ourselves mid-span and watch in delight. A steady stream of cyclists pass by for two hours. This is not Bike to Work Day. This is not staged. This is simply Portland going to work. Over 7,000 cyclists use the bridge each day. Our faces hurt from smiling.

We cook eggs on our camp stove in Waterfront Park then head into downtown for a stop at Powell’s Bookstore,

the largest independent bookstore in the country. We eat lunch at Portland’s famous food carts. There are over 20 carts to choose from in a city block including Thai, Vietnamese, Mexican, Brazilian, gyros, Philly cheese steaks, barbecue, and vegetarian. We wonder, “Can we camp here?”

Nope. Too bad. So we pedal back over the river and climb up to Mt. Tabor Park, which is built

on an extinct volcano. A splendid ride made all the better because Wednesdays, today, are car-free.

We swing around and hook up with the Springwater Trail, wander around the Reed College campus, which looks more like



a wildlife preserve, and end up at the Hedge House, a local pub, for happy hour and chili.

That night we crash at Ruben's house, whom we met on Mt. Tabor. He leaves a note for his housemates attached to the

door which reads, "We have guests on the futon. They're friendly." Ruben is an ultra-marathoner. The next morning, he runs 20 miles before we wake up.

#### Into the reserve

After breakfast downtown, it's back



**Bridging the gap.** Over 7,000 people on bikes cross the Hawthorne Bridge each day.

to the woods. Forest Park is one of the country's largest urban forest reserves, easily accessed by foot or bike from Portland's city center. We pedal over 12 miles through second growth forest of alder, maple, and fir.

We exit the park and continue climbing up Skyline Road. We camp on the property of Eric and Mary, a couple who moved from Iowa to Portland, bought 10 acres of heavily logged land, planted over 2,000 trees, and spent the next 12 years fighting back invasive species. Their work has paid off as their house is now surrounded by a new forest. They have since purchased the adjacent lots and now have 40 acres of undeveloped land they plan to keep that way. A well worn path through their land was created by elk herds. We are still in Portland.

#### Urban miles

We return to downtown and seek out bike paths and bike boulevards we've missed. We won't come close to riding them all. After a day of riding, we pitch our tent in the yard of Bruce and Andrea. Their garden is a standout in a city known for its gardens.

The next day, we browse the Portland Saturday Market and then attend the



**Riverside bliss.** Smooth pedaling along Portland's Willamette River waterfront.

Biketober Fest at the Urban Hopworks Brewery. Music, bikes, and beer. Hundreds of bicycles fill the racks. Just a normal Saturday in Portland.

We have cycled over 200 miles on Portland's streets, paths, boulevards, and parkways, but we have time for one more

stop at Voodoo Doughnut before catching our train back to Seattle. It's a downtown fixture. How else to celebrate a quirky adventure than with a maple bar — with two strips of bacon on it?

#### Reflections

We now know that Portland is not

only a great destination but a great journey as well. We could have easily spent another week or two traveling in the Rose City without repeating the routes we had already taken. Portland has a wondrous mix of urban and rural, paved and unpaved trails, bike lanes, bike boulevards, and enough cafés, bakeries, food carts, and pubs to satisfy the hungry and thirsty bike traveler.

Whether you like urban cycling or not, every cyclist in America owes it to themselves to visit Portland. You'll be delighted to see what can happen when a city focuses on moving people instead of moving cars. I can only hope and dream that Portland is a window into the future of our cities.

Sure, the fully-loaded touring bikes were a bit over the top. But we ended up meeting many locals who were curious about our adventure. Would we have been as well received bike touring in other American cities? I don't know. Perhaps we'll try some others. **AC**

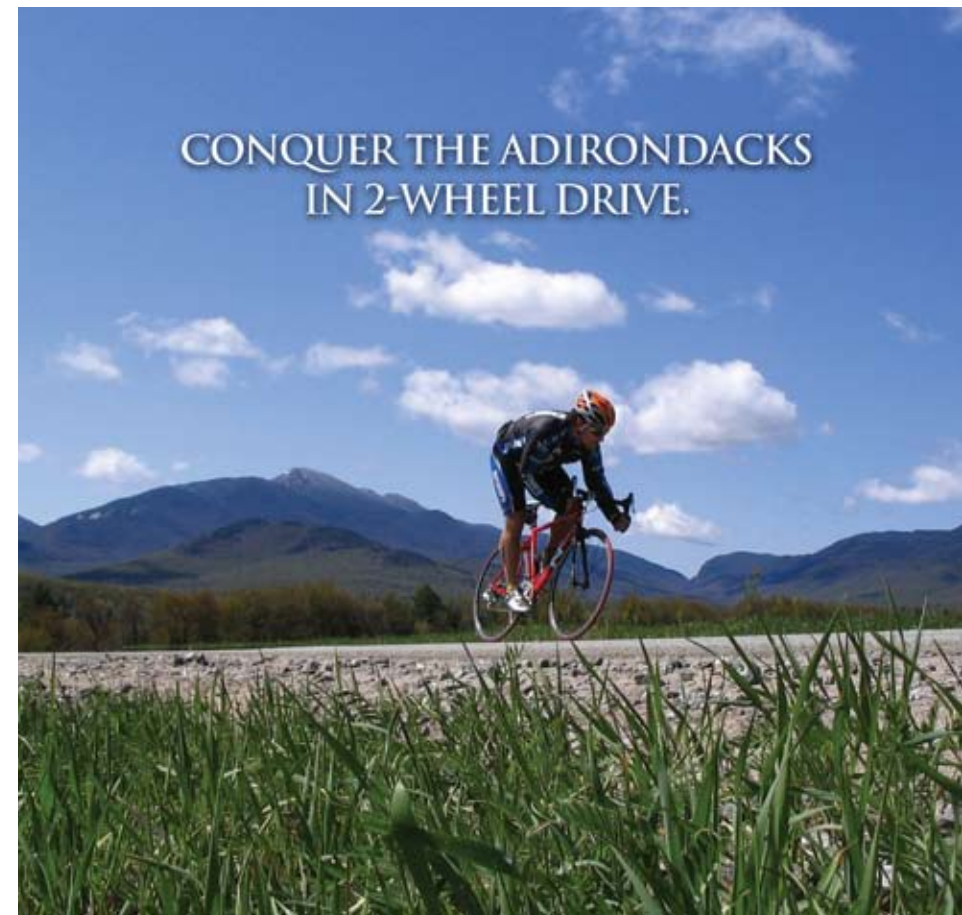
Willie Weir is a cyclist, author, public speaker, and champion lawn bowler. To read more of his writings, check out *Travels with Willie* — Adventure Cyclist and [www.willieweir.com](http://www.willieweir.com).

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