

# RIDING ARIZONA

## Adventure Cycling's Southern Arizona Road Adventure

by Patrick O'Grady

Photos by Michael Chansley

*"It's a most interesting road, birds and trees, I've no doubt, and wayside flowers, and there's nothing I should enjoy more than watching them. But I can't. Get me on that machine, and I have to go."*

— H.G. Wells, *The Wheels of Chance*

"Ever done any touring?" asked Mike Deme, editor of *Adventure Cyclist* magazine.

Uh, no. I have done lots of things with bicycles — delivered newspapers; ridden to swim practice, classes, and jobs; raced on road and off. But touring? That always conjured up the image of a hairy-legged stink bomb in saggy woolen kit and stained Campy cap extolling the virtues of triple cranksets, friction shifting, and cassettes with more teeth than a shark tank.

Nevertheless,



I will do almost anything save work, and when Mike proposed that I ride Adventure Cycling's Southern Arizona Road Adventure and then write about it — for money — I replied that he could sign me up.

As usually happens when greed and sloth intertwine like baby snakes, the downside soon manifested itself. The tour was to cover 220 miles over a week in March, and while I routinely

logged that sort of mileage when I was still racing, it occurred to me that I hadn't pinned on a number since 2004 and was riding kind of, well, casually

is the adverb that comes to mind, along with infrequently, briefly, and slowly.

And then suddenly I wasn't riding at all after crashing on a patch of

ice during a casual cyclo-cross outing in mid-November and severely dislocating the middle finger on my left hand.

When I got back in the saddle two weeks later, I was sporting a splint swathed in bottle-blue tape and timidly riding a flat-bar, single-chain-ring, thumb-shifting cyclo-cross bike with some cushy cork grips and absurdly low tire pressures. I still had to lift the injured paw from the cork for the gnarly bits, like scary shadows or hairline cracks in the pavement. I stayed out for all of 45 minutes, and the only thing that elevated my heart rate was fear.

Immediately thereafter the weather went south — or maybe north would be more like it, a long stretch of bitterly cold days that reminded me of living on a wind-scoured hillside outside Westcliffe, Colorado, where the wife and I passed many a winter day huddled in our bear-skins by a red-hot woodstove, sipping whiskey from CamelBaks and subsisting on simple carbohydrates, fat, and salt.

Then Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Eve followed in the usual order, and I began to feel distinctly overfed and undertrained. I resolved to ring in 2010 with my second outdoor ride since the crash — this time, on a mountain bike, because conditions had not improved.

I lasted an hour. A happy new year it was not.

**Ride 'em, cowboy**

Event director Tammy Schurr had warned us that while support vehicles would be available for emergency use, everyone on the tour should be "physically prepared to



ride the entire route." She recommended a training base of 100 to 200 mile weeks, with occasional forays into the hills, plus a few rides that equaled or exceeded the tour's longest outing, the 54.2-mile leg from Patagonia to Tombstone.

So, yeah, mileage: If you haven't ridden any lately, it's a bitch. And I hadn't. And it was. I logged all of 42.5 miles the first week of January. The next week, I managed 45. Ever the professional journalist, I noted in my training log: "Boy, do I suck."

It's true what they say about riding a bicycle, though. You really don't forget how to make one roll — what tends to slip away are the carrying charges if you haven't been making regular payments on your oxygen debt. Happily, by mid-February, with the help of a few sympathetic training partners, I had worked my way up to the recommended mileage and down to three figures weight-wise, and was starting to think in terms of technology, no matter what Old Whatshisface says about it not being about the bike.

After 20-odd years of getting swell deals through cycling journalism, I own an alarming collection of bicycles, most of them cyclo-cross bikes, and I had grown accustomed to their

gentle gearing and comparatively wide tires. One of them, a Soma Double Cross with eyelets for racks and fenders, was as close to a touring bike as I could field without inflicting grave damage on our Visa card.

But I was starting to enjoy riding my long-neglected road bike, a 1994 DBR Prevail TT titanium rig. The drivetrain felt a bit much for a 56-year-old ex-racer — 175mm Ultegra cranks with 53/39 chain rings turning an 11-25 cassette — so I went to a compact crankset, a Ritchey 50/34 with 172.5mm arms. I also pulled off the 700x23 racing rubber, slapped on a pair of 700x25 Continental Ultra GatorSkins, and dropped the pressure to around 85psi.

Suddenly I was spinning up the hills instead of trying to stomp them into submission with legs that existed mostly in my unreliable memory. The miles flew by, and when I hit the road for Tucson, I had nearly 1,200 of them stuffed under my bibs, which had loosened a bit. They say that first ton is the hardest.

**Saharo you doing?**

I met my first road buddies before logging a single mile of the Southern Arizona Road Adventure as we set up the first night's camp at the Cactus Country RV Resort outside Tucson. When

Peggy Sax, a 57-year-old psychologist from Cornwall, Vermont, found herself missing the stakes for her tent, staff suggested



she use her neighbors as a resource, and veteran cyclo-tourist Frank Moritz (himself a veteran Adventure Cycling tour leader and instructor) dug up some spares while I contributed moral support.

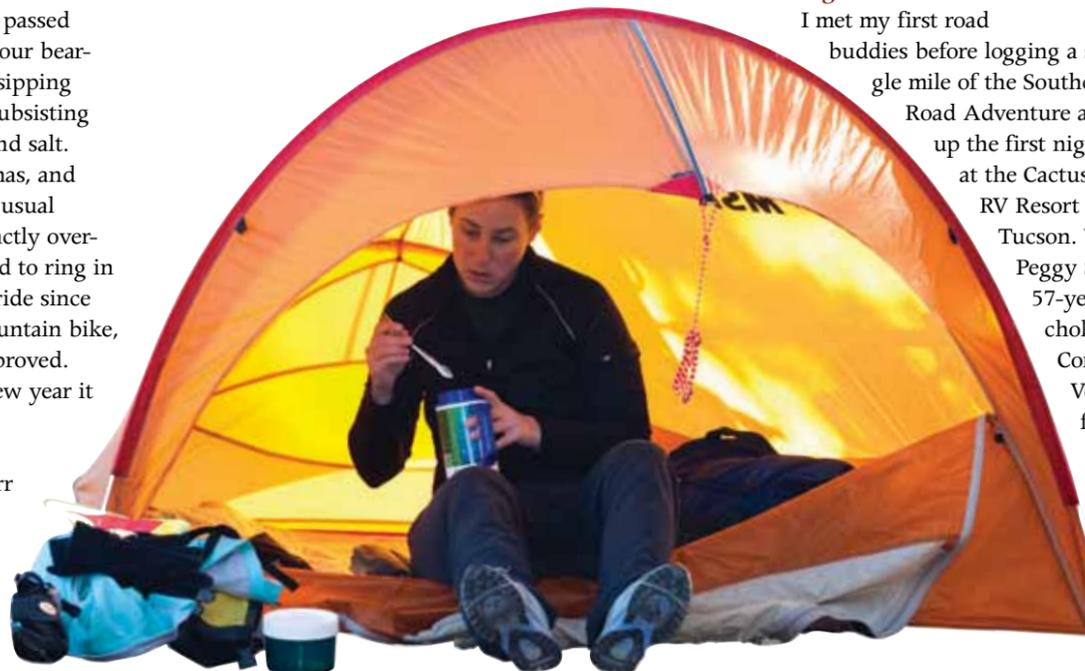
The next morning, Peggy and I teamed up with Christine Carragee, a 25-year-old pricing analyst and competitive rower from Minneapolis-St. Paul, to tackle the first day of riding, a 48-mile



jaunt to Patagonia with 3,400 feet of vertical gain. I hadn't ridden that far in training and had been a little worried about this first leg, but I needn't have been. I had forgotten that Tucson sits at 2,584 feet above sea level, while I live at 6,035 in Colorado Springs. As a consequence, I felt as though I'd paid a visit to the medicine cabinet of Dr. Ferrari.

With all that air to breathe, I bid the ladies farewell as the ground tipped upward on the Sonoita Highway and forged on ahead, trying to see how many of the early risers I could reel in. And that's how I met my next riding buddy — Chris Lloyd, a 65-year-old retiree from San Antonio.

I caught Chris just outside of Patagonia, grinding along into a headwind aboard his Orbea Opal. I was feeling



chilly despite arm and knee warmers, and he was bare-armed and bare-legged, so as I passed, I yelled, "Aren't you cold?" He replied, "No, but I've had just about enough of this wind!"

After showering at the local high school (where the boys' lockers inexplicably sport names like Joy, Missy, and Diane), we got acquainted over beer and delicious slices of thin-crust pizza at Velvet Elvis in Patagonia. Chriss was doing the tour with an old running pal from Lincoln, Nebraska, Lyle Vannier — who was riding a fixed gear, an equipment choice he would come to regret — and the three of us, Peggy, and Christine hooked up later to trade first-day war stories at the Wagon Wheel Saloon, conveniently located just across the street from our campsite at Patagonia City Park.

**Devil, take the hindmost**

I was the last guy out of camp the next day — not from overindulgence in drink, but from a pre-existing addiction to sloth and chatter, both occupational hazards in journalism. Peggy and Christine waited for me at Gathering Grounds, the local java shop, Peggy being something of a coffee aficionado. I repaid them for their patience by towing them into what turned out to be a pretty stiff headwind along the rolling 54.2-mile leg past the wineries of Elgin and into Tombstone.

En route we encountered 60-year-old Ken Wargo, a veteran of the Connecticut correctional system (early buyout, not parole), who was training for a much longer trip — 44 days on the Lewis & Clark Bicycle Trail, a 2,800-mile ride from St. Louis, Missouri, to Seaside, Oregon. Impervious to the wind, he was herding a Koga-Miyata touring bike with loaded panniers front and rear and bellowing "On to Elgin!" with one fist thrust forward.

"That was a great thing to have," he told me afterward. "Great training."

But that day's winds were only an aperitif. The next day's ride, which should have been a relatively easy 45.4-mile spin to the old mining town of Bisbee, served up the full meal, a heaping helping of blistering headwinds and crosswinds that turned every descent into a flat, every flat into a hill.

"Like going from the penthouse to the outhouse," quipped Lyle, who may have been longing for his traditionally geared



Litespeed.

During our first night's lecture in Supported Touring 101, I got the distinct impression that drafting was frowned upon on Adventure Cycling excursions. But riding solo into that maelstrom would have made Sisyphus' rock rolling look like a stoner playing hacky sack. With sandstorms smearing the southern sky, I was reminded of *Lawrence of Arabia*, only with pavement and large motor vehicles operated by the

insane. So I kept Christine company on that leg while Chriss shepherded Peggy. It was the sort of day that made a guy think about flagging down the first nihilist who came along, trading his bike for a bowling ball, and hunting up The Dude and Walter to see if you could replace Donny on the team (See *The Big Lebowski*.)

The wind finally turned in our favor just before the lunch stop at Double Adobe Road and Highway 80. Christine, who was riding a burly Salsa Vaya with widely flared Woodchipper bars, decided to rest a while. So I gobbled a sandwich and then big-ringed it up the final climb into Bisbee, where I took an unscheduled lap of the roundabout at the intersection of 80, Old Douglas Road, and Highway 92, not having paid much attention during the map meeting, and promptly got confused again on Tombstone Canyon Road.

Happily, the Adventure Cycling van was rolling down the hill about the same time I was grinding up and set me straight. In a matter of minutes, I was in Higgins Park, enjoying another in what would be a series of cold showers.

**Parking it**

After two blustery days in a row, the Lycra herd was thinning a bit. A few riders afflicted with mental health issues sagged it for at least part of the Tombstone-to-Bisbee leg, and others decided to skip the sleeping-on-the-ground bit in favor of indoor

lodging during our two nights in Bisbee.

For my part, I stuck to my beat-up tent. This was not bravado but self-preservation, having spent more than a few dollars upgrading the bike and skipping my wife's birthday to go cycling around southern Arizona. She knew what she was getting when she married me 20 years ago in Santa Fe — for our honeymoon, I took her to a stage race in Glenwood Springs, Colorado (and, yes, I was racing) — but just because the fuse is long doesn't mean the bomb will never go off.

The next day I bowed out of the optional 40-mile ride to the Whitewater Draw Wildlife Area (as did nearly everyone else) and instead checked email and did a bit of bloggery at the Bisbee Coffee Company. Then I visited with Albert Hopper, longtime promoter of La Vuelta de Bisbee, a stage race I first covered for *VeloNews* back in 1994, and learned that for geezers like us the Internet has not made promoting races any easier than covering them.

That evening, I joined a couple of tour staffers — "Marker Bob" Kaphammer and mechanic Kevin MacAfee — for a reconnaissance of Bisbee's ale-houses, taverns, and grog shops, laying the groundwork for a St. Patrick's Day pub crawl. At the Old Bisbee Brewing Company, which had just opened the previous Sunday, co-owner Dale Fountaine presented us with a sampler of his brews. So that's where we decided to wrap up the St. Paddy's Day festivities.

On the big night, Tammy asked if I knew any good Irish songs, which I do, but I kept them to myself. A guy who starts singing "The Broad Black Brimmer of the IRA" in a strange mining-town bar may find himself taking his Gatorade through a straw in the local emergency room, and we still had 73 miles to ride — to say nothing of the two staircases with 184 steps between them that we had to climb to get back to Higgins Park and our tents.

**An ill wind no more**

My favorite leg of the tour may



have been the fourth, a C-shaped route through the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area from Bisbee to Tombstone. I got the usual late start, then with a massive tailwind assist worked my way through the bunch, catching Chriss at the lunch stop, just past the San Pedro River.

A leathery gent with the air of the dingbat about him and a holstered side-arm on one hip turned out to be a brother cyclist photographing the desert wildlife. He unlimbered his Canon digital camera to show me a few shots of coatimundi and then warned us against the local motorists. According to him, they were not very respectful of two-wheeled traffic.

"Just bang on their doors with a tire iron," he advised.

Chriss rolled off with another rider while I was chatting with the photographer, so I grabbed a half sandwich and set off in pursuit, finally making contact on the rollers just outside of Tombstone. We did a three-man team time trial into town, taking full advantage of the favorable winds, and when I checked my cyclo-computer, I was surprised to see I'd covered the 49.8 miles in just under two and a half hours, averaging 20.2 mph. Not bad for an old fart.

After the seemingly endless ride from Tombstone to Bisbee, the return trip felt all too short — especially since it took us back to the Tombstone Hills RV Park, which lacks many of the amenities commonly offered by tank-town jails — locked bathrooms without toilet paper, a tent site full of stones and goat-head thorns, and "cabins" that made a Tuff Shed look like the Taj Mahal. Parking a \$250,000 RV here must feel like wearing a diamond tiara to a dogfight, I thought. Hell, pitching a tent here does.

**Hasta la vista, muchachos**

The final day went even more quickly — just 23 miles from Tombstone to Benson via St. David, home to the Holy Trinity Monastery. Ken stopped to buy a memento honoring Gertrude of Nivelles, the patron saint of cats, but the rest of us kept spinning along. No hurry, just savoring the tailwind.

At Benson, we changed into street clothes at the visitor's center, handed our bikes over to Kevin for transport, and clambered aboard a motor coach, taking the easy way back to Tucson. Well, most of us, anyway — Frank cycled in, getting a few extra miles under his belt.

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