



A Strange Request

BY WILLIE WEIR

A precocious young bike traveler sends the author along memory lane to the golden age of cycle touring: right now

→ WHEN WAS THE GOLDEN AGE of cycle touring? The penny farthing era? The summer of '76 with the birth of the Adventure Cycling Association (then Bikecentennial)? The advent of mountain bikes and beyond?

Ask any number of bicycle travelers that question and odds are their answers will coincide with the year they did their first big tour. Nostalgia is a powerful force. With time, it can color everything rosy in spite of reality.

I'm a perfect example of this phenomenon. My first big adventure was in 1981 with my best friend. Waterproof panniers meant wrapping everything in plastic. Cages were for your toes. Warm showers were a dream, not a nonprofit hosting service. Checking your mail meant pedaling out of your way to a post office. A call home was a once-a-month luxury. Cycling shorts were, well, cotton shorts that you cycled in. Map my ride referred to using a pen to highlight the approximate route on a paper map. A large amount of pannier space was reserved for books and rolls of film.

Cycle touring was never better. Why? Well, for all sorts of reasons. The expense and hardship of communicating with folks back home made for a better adventure. I learned to be more self-reliant because I couldn't afford to phone home every day. I was more in the moment because I didn't have to upload my photos, tweets, Instagrams, Facebook status, and

blog postings every other hour. There was no "couch surfing" or "warm showers," so I learned to be bold and ask help from strangers who were from very different walks of life.

It was just a better and more valuable experience then — period.

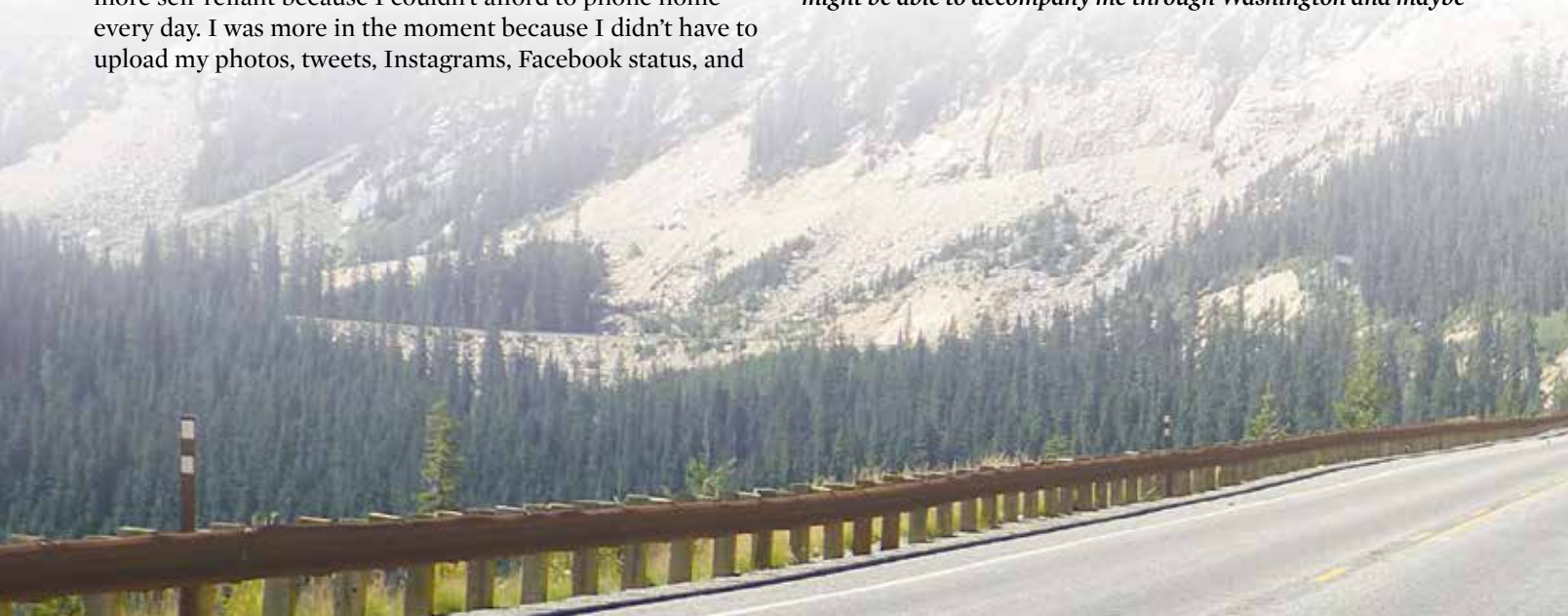
Nostalgia (noun): *a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past.*

Nostalgia met reality in the form of a message in my inbox:

Subject: crazy request from a thirteen year old fan

Dear Mr. Weir,

I am a thirteen year old avid cyclist and an avid reader of your excellent books (let's just say that I've lost count of how many times I've read them!) and have recently gotten into cyclotouring. This summer I am planning a tour up the crest of the Sierras, and Cascades, then down the Pacific Coast, to the fair city of Berkeley, where I live. I am also trying to raise money for the local chapter of the Sierra Club by doing this. Since I am only thirteen, I need an adult riding with me. I already have riders to Seattle. I know this is a long shot, but I was wondering if you might be able to accompany me through Washington and maybe



even the Oregon Coast for a couple days. It is all expenses paid and that includes the 17% of our budget that will probably go to ice cream!

Yours truly, Zeke

P.S. below is the tentative itinerary (no reservations made so we could always knock on someone's door!).

Attached was an Excel spreadsheet with Zeke's itinerary. It included the daily mileage, every night's destination (campground or wild-camping location), rest days, and the names of the adult touring cyclists Zeke had already signed up.

"Seventeen percent of our budget on ice cream" was a line right out of one of my columns. And the reference to "knocking on someone's door" comes from my bicycle travel theory of "initiating kindness".

Thirteen years old? Really?

This was either the email message of an incredibly unique young man or I was being set up for a practical joke. I decided to believe the message was true until proven otherwise.

I did my best to remember my 13-year-old self.

I didn't have that kind of motivation when I was Zeke's age. I considered it an adventure to pedal across town to see friends in my old neighborhood. But even if I did have his gumption, how would I have gone about planning a similar trip? Go to the library and search for bike travelers in magazines and newspapers? Then try and contact them? What about a route?

The Internet age had allowed Zeke to be more adventurous, not less. The possibilities and adventures were endless, with information and inspiration available at the click of a mouse. The Web was filled with thousands of journals and blogs of bike travelers. Search engines, email, and über-connectedness made it possible for Zeke to search and contact bike travelers who might be willing to join him in his travels.

Maybe the golden age of bike travel is now.

I read Zeke's email to my wife Kat.

"What do you think? Should I do this?" I asked.

"How could you not?" she replied without hesitation.

I mulled it over. It sounded like a great opportunity, but I'd never planned to travel with someone sight unseen. I'm the youngest in my family so I don't have any experience with younger siblings. What if Zeke and I didn't get along?

I emailed Zeke and then called Berkeley, California, and spoke with his dad. He confirmed that his son was capable and

very motivated. Zeke had already cycled from Mexico to Seattle the year before. Not only that, at 12 years old, Zeke had organized a marathon walking trip with his best friend to traverse all the paths of Berkeley in one day. Thirteen hours and 36 miles later, they had accomplished their goal. When I was 12 years old, the only comparable feat I had accomplished was to eat 36 chocolate-chip cookies in one day.

I decided that if this incredible young person had chosen me to be part of his adventure, I'd be an absolute fool not to take him up on it.

After more conversations and emails, I agreed to meet Zeke at Mt. Rainier National Park (almost 2,000 miles into his journey along Adventure Cycling's Sierra Cascades Route) and be one of the 11 adults who would accompany him on at least one leg of his trip. We would cycle together to the Canadian border, then pedal to my house in Seattle via Bellingham and Whidbey Island where Zeke would then pick up his next travel companion.

I'd been thinking that true adventure wasn't possible in our über-connected world. How foolish of me! It took an email from a 13-year-old kid to make me realize just how wrong I was.

While Zeke was busy preparing for his bike journey, I was busy being incredibly sedentary. Flying around the country speaking about bike travel does nothing to physically prepare you for an actual journey. I was woefully out of shape but figured I'd make it up quickly once I got on the road with Zeke. No worries. Then news came that the first adult who had accompanied Zeke hadn't been able to keep up with him and had resorted to renting a car.

I thought — if I can't keep up with this kid, I will never hear the end of this. It will be on my gravestone: *Here lies Willie Weir — he rented a car.*

In a panic, I loaded my panniers with 60 pounds of water-filled containers and proceeded to huff and puff my way up every hill in Seattle again and again and again. It was a painful week of riding, but by the end of it, I had confidence that I wouldn't need the services of Budget or Avis on my journey with Zeke.

The night before, I checked off my packing list as I filled my panniers. It reminded me of the night before I left on my first journey across the U.S. I had similar dueling feelings — I was excited and nervous at the same time. Those are two sure signs that you are about to have an adventure.

To be continued. **AC**

Willie Weir shares a birthday with Louis Armstrong, but rarely toots his own horn.

