



EXTRA ORDINARY

Zeke Part 2

Story and Photos by Willie Weir

Editors' Note: *If you haven't read Willie's introduction to Zeke in the June issue of Adventure Cyclist, it's a good first stop. We'll wait.*



I drove slowly around the Ohanapecosh campsite loop at Mt. Rainier National Park. My bike was on the roof rack and my loaded panniers were on the back seat. I was looking for a travel companion I'd never met. I sighted the bikes first. The picnic table at the site was strewn with plastic bags, panniers, damp clothes, and camping gear. Zeke and his dad Joel greeted me.

Joel had accompanied his son, who had begun his trip at the border of Mexico, from Crater Lake to Mt. Rainier. I was the next leg of the tag team of 11 individuals who would help an underage kid attain his goal of riding Adventure Cycling Association's Sierra Cascades Route from Mexico to Canada.

We barely got through introductions when Joel had to leave. He put his bike up on my Subaru, thanked me for being willing to be part of the adventure, and left for Seattle. He would be flying back to Berkeley early the next morning.

I was left sitting next to a kid who had contacted me via email four and a half months earlier.

Zeke is 13, but his size makes him appear younger. He weighs 77 pounds soaking wet. His hormones haven't kicked in so, despite his thousands of miles of cycling, his legs are sticks. He doesn't have the upper body strength to successfully use a floor pump. I had to help him push down on the plunger.

But anyone who meets Zeke and concludes that he is just a typical, Xbox-addicted, couch-dwelling, middle-school kid would be in for a mind-blowing surprise.

My first experience with Zeke's stamina came not on the bike but on a trail not far from our Mt. Rainier campsite. Zeke took off on a steeply pitched trail, walking at a pace that had me periodically breaking into a jog to keep up. He engaged me in conversation while I tried to cover up the fact that I was breathing heavily. Two miles straight up the mountain and he still hadn't slowed down. We turned around "because it was getting late." In truth, I was running out of gas.

I lay in my tent that evening — after Zeke and I had dined on the kosher

hot dogs he had requested I bring from Seattle — and fell asleep to the soothing aroma of the forest. We woke up just before dawn, ate some figs, nuts, cream cheese, and bread, and hit the road.

Zeke rides a humble GT Transeo 4.0 cross bike with front and rear panniers stuffed with gear equal to 75 percent of his body weight. No fancy clipless system, no cages and toe clips, just plain flat pedals. He often rides in sandals.

Zeke, often out of the saddle, rocks back and forth on those pedals like a possessed gym rat on a Stairmaster. When I first saw him ride, it made me nervous. Then I remembered that he'd managed just fine with this unique style for thousands of miles. It seems as though he can maintain this herky-jerky style forever.

When Zeke was 12 — you know, ages ago — he and his best friend Jacob decided that they were going to walk all the paths in Berkeley ... in one day. That's 36 miles and over 5,000 feet of elevation gain. They mapped it all out, even organizing the adults who would meet them at major intersections to help them cross.

Before we met, I worried that I wouldn't be able to relate to a 13-year-old. What would we talk about? I would soon learn not to worry.

We talked politics, theatre, literature, and the environment (Zeke was raising money for the San Francisco Bay chapter of the Sierra Club on this ride).

I learned that Zeke loved to read. That's a bit of an understatement. Zeke reads — no, absorbs — hundreds of books each year.

As we pedaled along the canyon road between Yakima and Ellensburg, Washington, Zeke asked me, "What's your favorite book by Hemingway?"

My mind stumbled to think of which of Hemingway's books I'd read. To stall, I threw back a question.

"Which books have you read?"

"All of them. Twice."

This was early enough in my time with Zeke that I was skeptical. Really?

Except that somewhere along one of our many climbs, Zeke rattled off some of his favorite passages from Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Shakespeare.

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gree-plus heat in eastern Washington, Zeke recited Macbeth's dagger speech with a twist. He had rewritten it to the theme of cycling up a false summit.

At one point, he quoted a paragraph from another book, and, embarrassingly, he was halfway through before I realized it was mine.

His ability to capture and retain details is astounding.

"Zeke, how many mountain passes have you climbed on this trip?"

"Thirty-one."

Then, without pause, he listed them in order.

I quickly fell into Zeke's routine. It's probably not one I'd choose at this point in my travel career, but it was one I was comfortable with.

Up at dawn, light breakfast, no stove. Pedal for 20 to 40 miles, then stop at a diner for "second breakfast." Go 30 to 50 more miles and stop somewhere for lunch. Finish the day at a campsite or "scampsite."

We camped in campgrounds most nights. But Zeke was eager to "initiate kindness," my term for knocking on doors to ask for a place to camp. Zeke's other companions had balked at the idea, so when Lake Chelan appeared too touristy for both of our likings, we pedaled on down the Columbia River looking for the opportunity to initiate. We spotted a trailer home up on a hill with a beautiful orchard below. We walked our bikes up the drive.

It was owned by a couple, originally from Mexico, who had bought the run-down property and developed the orchard. The woman's husband was away on one of his many shifts at Walmart.

When we asked about camping, she said the only places she knew were back at Lake Chelan. Then we asked about pitching our tents in their orchard. She hadn't even considered that, but the moment we asked, she offered their land with a big smile.

"Please pick as much fruit as you'd like. I hope our dog won't bother you."

Pachuca, their dog, was so excited to have guests that it took a concerted effort to keep her out of our tents.

Her husband — and Pachuca — came out to see us off early the next morning. It was gorgeous and still, the Columbia was glass.

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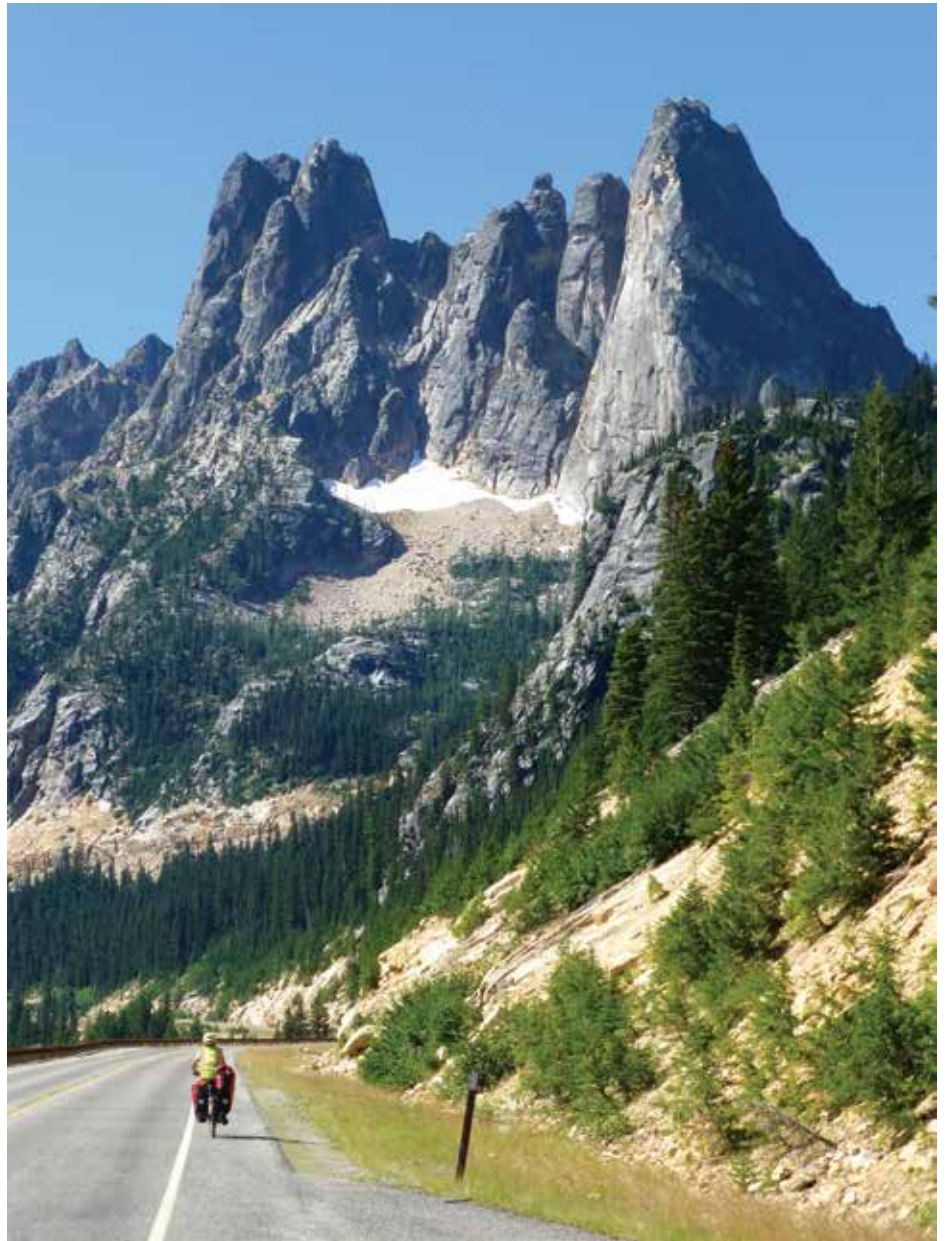
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Top left: Lunch? Or is that second breakfast?
Bottom left: Initiating kindness — relaxing at a beautiful orchard campsite.
Right: The North Cascades loom in the distance (the last of many mountain passes along the Sierra Cascades Route).



We often rode apart, but when traffic allowed, we'd ride side by side and inevitably Zeke would call out.

"I've got a joke for you. An interstate walks into a bar ..."

Zeke's jokes (many of which he learned from his father) are long, drawn out, and horrible — in a good way. When you have 60 to 90 miles to cover in a day, there's plenty of time for a 25-minute joke, or 10, with punch lines that elicit more groans than laughter.

Due to the Carlton Complex fire (the worst fire in Washington's recorded history), we didn't know if we'd be able to continue on the Sierra Cascades Route. But the winds subsided and the

fire had been controlled enough for the road through Twisp and beyond to open up.

Just beyond Winthrop on the North Cascades Highway is a wonderful stop, Bicycle Barn Camping, which allows bike travelers exclusively to pitch their tents. It was a grand stop for us both. It happened to fall on my birthday. Kat and our dog Tiva drove up from Seattle to meet us. She brought beer for me, ice cream and a frittata for all of us, and, most important of all, a Kindle for Zeke.

Zeke's Kindle had ceased functioning before we met up. This would have been an inconvenience for some. For a voracious reader, it was a full-on drive-train disaster. Zeke had been forced to

read and re-read the one physical book he was carrying, *The Third Chimpanzee* by Jared Diamond.

We immediately went back to Winthrop to locate wifi, and Zeke downloaded his current library of over 250 books. All was well.

I turned 53 in that campground and realized that I was four decades older than my travel companion. Zeke read a book. I read the back of my eyelids.

We cycled over Rainy Pass on the North Cascades Highway and camped at a rundown private campsite by the Cascade River. It was getting late, and I looked over and saw Zeke lying in the dirt. I thought, "Wow! We finally rode far enough to tire the kid out. He didn't

even have the energy to set up his tent.”

I walked over to wake him up and came upon Zeke with his eyes wide open — reading his Kindle. Ninety seconds before dark, Zeke got up, pitched his tent, and disappeared inside.

It was our final riding day before we hit the Canadian border, and Zeke knew of my love for ice cream so he made sure we stopped at the Acme Diner in Acme, Washington. It’s a 1950s-style diner with round stool seats along a tile-lined bar. They make their own ice cream. Zeke had a scoop. I had two. The perky server handed me the check, and I immediately handed it to Zeke. He got out his wallet, looked at the bill, and handed over his Visa card.

The server didn’t address Zeke. She spoke to me.

“Is that his?” she asked, referring to the credit card.

“Sure is.”

“That is *sooo* cute.”

Zeke didn’t react. He paid the bill, thanked her, and we walked out.

As we were unlocking our bikes, I looked at Zeke and said, “That has to get old.”

I’ll never forget his response.

“To be honest, Willie, I didn’t leave her the same tip I left the server at breakfast. Adequate, but not as much.”

We continued to the border town of Sumas, Washington

I asked Zeke “You have a passport, don’t you?”

“No. I forgot it. It’s okay though. You can just take a photo near customs.”

We pedaled up to the border. Several car lanes were open. There was a sign that had a Canadian flag so we parked our bikes and I snapped a couple of photos of Zeke.

It seemed so anticlimactic. If anyone deserved to cross the Canadian border that day, it was Zeke.

I glanced at nearly a hundred cars waiting in line and thought, “Maybe when there is a break I can jog over to the closest booth and explain our plight. I took two steps and the border official was already out the door of his booth, yelling over the idling cars.

“I saw you take several photos. What is your intention.”

I began to tell him Zeke’s story, but he cut me off, “Follow the walkway into

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that building and state your intention,” he directed. Zeke and I quickly obeyed his command.

The office was quiet and nearly empty. Only one window was open, and I approached the man behind the protective glass, told Zeke’s story, and explained our situation. We only wanted to cross the border to take a photo and then return to the U.S.

“What does your friend have as identification?” I was asked.

I said with as much conviction as I could muster, “Sir, he has an ID card from his middle school in Berkeley.” The man’s face fell. “I’m sorry. This is my first week on the job. It just isn’t possible.”

“That’s okay. We understand,” I said.

“Wait. I could get my supervisor.”

He called her out of her office, and in the most polite tone I’ve ever heard from a border official, she asked how she could help us.

I laid out the story with Zeke filling in details.

“You pedaled all the way from the border of Mexico? Of course we’ll get you across the border. But it can’t be very far.”

We walked out of the building, and she walked us across the border.

“Across the way, there is a sign that says Welcome to British Columbia. Will that do?”

Zeke and I walked our bikes over to the manicured lawn (everything is so neat and pristine in Canada). I snapped a bunch of photos of Zeke and his bike. I looked back, and here came our border official with another woman in uniform.

“We decided we wanted a photo too,” she called out. They positioned themselves on either side of Zeke.

I looked through my view finder. Now this was a photo worthy of the accomplishment: the smiling border officials in their crisp blue uniforms, complete with sidearms, batons, and radios posing next to a young man with his bike (gear spilling out of the panniers) dressed in a

white and teal long-sleeved shirt, covered in dirt stains from three states, his fist raised in triumph.

Amber, our border angel, asked us to wait a few minutes before crossing back over. She needed to call the U.S. border patrol and explain why they needed to let a young cyclist enter the U.S. with nothing more than a school ID card.

The guy who greeted us at the U.S. border office had the ex-Marine look:



Zeke celebrates with border patrol agents at the most pleasant crossing in history.

buzz cut, bulging biceps, chiseled jaw. It was immediately apparent that he had talked with Amber. With a huge grin on his face, he asked Zeke, “You rode that bike all the way from the border of Mexico?”

He asked Zeke a series of questions as he entered our information into his computer. He suddenly paused and chuckled. “You aren’t going to believe this, but you (meaning Zeke) just came up for a random search.”

So he escorted Zeke out to the parking lot for the search while I made comments from the sidelines.

“You don’t want to open that pannier! He has clothes in there that haven’t been washed since California.”

He cleared Zeke and walked back inside. I had to go in to retrieve my passport. Our rough-and-tumble border official was in the midst of telling the whole office Zeke’s story.

It was the most affable border crossing

I have ever been — or likely will ever be — involved in.

Zeke and I celebrated his accomplishment in a way we both felt was appropriate. We dined at a Mexican restaurant on the U.S./Canada border.

It took us two days to pedal to Seattle via Bellingham and Whidbey Island. We pedaled right up to my door where Kat and Tiva greeted us. Zeke spent the night, and in the morning after breakfast, Kat

sent Zeke off with clean clothes and a couple of loaves of good bread.

At 10:30 AM, Seth pulled up on his loaded touring bike, another bike companion Zeke had never met in person. There was barely time for introductions; they had a ferry to catch. (Zeke had opted to pedal back to California via the Oregon coast instead of taking the bus.) I watched as they both pedaled up the insanely steep hill near our home and disappeared over the crest.

Ten days earlier, I had worried that I wouldn’t be able to relate to this kid. Hell, I missed him already.

Zeke is one of the most well-read, well-rounded, passionate, ethical, intelligent human beings I’ve ever had the pleasure of traveling with. And now that I’ve met his father, mother, and younger brother (Kat and I later visited them in Berkeley), I have more of an idea about why Zeke is the person he is.

Where will life’s path take Zeke? I have no idea, but the sky’s the limit for this extraordinary young man. I look forward to following his journeys, whatever they are and wherever they take him.

The tables have turned. I’ve become the fan. **AC**

If all has gone according to plan (believe me, Zeke has a plan), as you read this article, Zeke is in the midst of his cross-country bike trip (east-to-west). You can follow it at crazyguyonabike.com/doc/15197. And believe me, he’s only getting started.

Willie Weir has written more than 80 pieces for Adventure Cyclist.