



## On the Road Again . . . with Zeke

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY **WILLIE WEIR**

→ I HUFFED and puffed my way toward the third summit of the day, with one more to go (I'd find out later it was two). It was over 100 degrees. The sun beat down on me like a big bass drum. The climb might have broken my spirit, but my mind was elsewhere. I was being transported to Scotland by the words of William Shakespeare. My traveling companion, pedaling with less effort than me, was quoting — from memory — the first three scenes of *Macbeth*.

Never in a million years would I choose to pedal across Nevada in August. I have gained *some* wisdom with age. Yet I had willingly volunteered to go on this trek, simply because it allowed me to travel once again with Zeke — my friend and bike touring prodigy, who continues to push the envelope.

The summer before, when he was 13, he had asked me to be part of his bike journey from the Mexican border to Canada (*Adventure Cyclist*, June 2015). I had jumped at the chance because I couldn't believe someone his age had the gumption to do it and it sounded like a good story.

When I found out that this year during his summer vacation he would be cycling coast to coast, I asked if I could ride the final leg with him.

I had done my best to train in Seattle — loading up my panniers and riding the hills of my city over and over again. But, once again, I was meeting up with Zeke after he had thousands of miles on me. I was the last in the string of adult companions: Margaret, Lindsey, and his grandfather had pedaled sections from the East Coast to Colorado. His father Joel met up with him in Mancos, Colorado, and they rode through Utah to Zion National Park.

And that's where I arrived via a shuttle bus from Las Vegas with my bike in a box. Zeke's mom Katya and his younger brother Jesse had driven out from California to meet up with Zeke and Joel.

This is a family that loves good food, bad jokes, nature, and singing. I was serenaded with everything from pop tunes to Hebrew folk songs.

It was my task to accompany Zeke from Zion to the Pacific. At my current relaxed pace of 50 to 60 miles a day, with a couple (or four) days off, it would take me two and a half or three weeks to get to the Bay Area. But we rode at Zeke's pace. We covered the 750 miles to his family's home in Berkeley, California, in nine days.

Zeke hadn't changed a whole lot since I'd last seen him. He'd gained a couple of pounds to push the scale past 80, and he'd let his hair grow past his shoulders. He no longer had to wear his retainer, and his skin was a dark olive "I've-pedaled-across-the-Plains" brown.

He had heard of a good back road from Zion to Cedar City, Utah, so we spent our first day together on and off pavement, climbing hills with steep grades and numerous false summits. But it was worth it — towering columns of sandstone in reds and pinks, meadows of wildflowers, juniper and pine groves, then aspens above 9,000 feet.

We arrived worn out at the home of



*Zeke rolling alongside San Francisco Bay after crossing the U.S.*

our Warmshowers host, Joe Gregory — a true trail angel who had already hosted his 30th touring cyclist of the season. Joe had read about Zeke so he was excited to meet him. He took us out to dinner and even pedaled 10 miles with us the next morning before turning back to go to work.

We pedaled an additional 86 miles that day, fighting heat and winds to cross over into Nevada.

Nevada has a hard, stark beauty to it. We crossed a good portion of it along the "Extraterrestrial Highway." They call Highway 50 "the Loneliest Highway." Well, Nevada State Route 375 is a damned fine runner-up.

I remember Nevada as a series of 4:00 AM wake-ups, as long slow climbs up straight-as-an-arrow roads, as vast cinematic vistas pocked with small dead and dying towns.

They were long, hot, hard days in the saddle. I would never again be able to say I'd never suffered saddle sores. Not once did Zeke whine or complain. We loaded up with 15 liters of water one morning

for a 109-mile stretch with “no services.” Zeke’s panniers were already loaded, but he strapped on Big Bad Boy (his water bag) to his back rack. Zeke deemed my water bladder “Ortlieb.” He insisted we drink from my water stash first, lightening my load before his.

In the long monotonous stretches, we’d play a game where one person would come up with a word. Then we’d each take turns coming up with a song that contained that word until one of us ran out of songs.

On breaks Zeke would pull out his Kindle and read to me. Or he’d quote something he’d memorized, like Lewis Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark* or *Jabberwocky*.

People we met in towns or on the side of the road would always ask where we began. I loved seeing their jaws drop when Zeke said, “Delaware.” Then they’d look over and I’d confirm Zeke’s launch point and add, “Not me.”

One of my favorite moments had to be on the side of the road. We had crossed over to California and were on our way to Mono Lake. We stopped to have a snack, and a car pulled up and parked behind us. A family of four hopped out — mom, dad, son, daughter. They were from Barcelona, Spain. Their son looked 16. He was grinning as he checked out Zeke’s bike. He introduced himself as Guillermo. He asked Zeke what he was carrying in the bags, what kind of food and camping gear he had. It wasn’t me he was interested in, it was Zeke. Here was this American kid, younger than him, who had pedaled thousands of miles. I saw a future bike traveler emerge right before me. Even before Guillermo climbed back into his family’s rental car, he was planning his own bike trip, I guarantee it.

From Lee Vining on the shores of Mono Lake, Tioga Pass winds 14 miles up to 9,968 feet and the gateway to Yosemite Park. At the time, we didn’t know how fortunate we were. Tioga Pass closed nine hours after we summited due to a fire.

We both wanted to believe that it was all downhill from there to the coast, but we knew that was far from the case. The campgrounds in the park were bursting at the seams. We soon discovered that every U.S. Forest Service campground outside the park was full as well.

But we found a young man, Christian

Gonzales, originally from Nicaragua, who was camping with his two nephews. Not only did he offer us room to pitch our tents on his site but pulled out ice-cold water and cooked us dinner as well.

The next morning, it was up and down through the foothills and out into the Central Valley. When we pulled into a mini-mart outside of Stockton,

## What about Zeke’s parents?

Most people who hear about Zeke’s adventures ask about his parents. In a world full of fear and bad news, how can parents let their young son be so independently adventurous? I sat down and chatted

individually with both Joel and Katya Gerwein. If I could distill their thoughts into one statement, it would be: “When your child discovers something that brings them joy — as a parent, you’ll do every-

thing you can to allow them to experience that joy.” You can find excerpts of those interviews at [adventurecycling.org/adventureparenting](http://adventurecycling.org/adventureparenting). They are well worth a listen.

the temperature hung at 105 degrees. I sat down and drank 250 ounces of cold beverages and still wanted more.

The following day, we officially entered the Bay Area and the cooling breezes that come with it. Zeke pedaled the last stretch to home with his dad, his best friend Jacob, and Jonas (Jacob’s dad).

But the journey wasn’t over. We still needed to get Zeke’s front tire in the Pacific.

We had a day off before the final short ride to the coast. Of course, a day off for Zeke meant meeting up with Jacob and taking me on a 13-mile walk up and down many of the steepest paths of Berkeley. In comparison to the annual 34-mile walk covering every signed path in Berkeley that Zeke and Jacob lead, this was just a walk in the park. Last year, 30 adults joined them — Zeke and Jacob finished, 29 of the adults did not.

The final day was a beautiful — and wonderfully short — ride of 20 miles. We were accompanied by Zeke’s friends, Sam and Julie. Also riding with us were my best friend Thomas (who pedaled across the U.S. with me 34 years ago), and one of his former students, Derek, who had just completed a west-to-east bike trip and had met Zeke in the middle of Kansas — the day after he read about Zeke in *Adventure Cyclist*.

The six of us pedaled through Oakland, caught the ferry to San Francisco, cycled across the Golden Gate Bridge, then

traveled up and over Hawk Hill, and coasted down to Rodeo Beach.


Family and friends were there to cheer Zeke on. So were members of the Bay Chapter of the Sierra Club — Zeke had raised money for them on his trip. His mom had organized the potluck. His brother had baked him a cake. His dad had rewritten the lyrics to Paul Simon’s

“America” and led the crowd in singing it.

“Abba,” he said as we pedaled through canyons in Utah, Delaware seems like a dream to me now. It took me 40 days to cycle from Bethany. I’ve come to bike ‘cross America.”

While Zeke was dipping his tire in the ocean, a flock of over 10,000 shearwaters (a pelagic bird that rarely comes this close to shore) swirled in a giant undulating cloud. Even nature was celebrating this young man’s achievements. At the age of 14, Zeke had already completed three major bicycle journeys — pedaling from San Diego to Seattle when he was 12, from the border of Mexico to Canada via the Sierra Cascades Route when he was 13, and now a cross-country trip. That’s close to 10,000 miles of self-supported touring before entering high school.

I handed Zeke a card signed by the staff at Adventure Cycling, congratulating him on his accomplishments and gifting him a membership until he is 21. Then he gathered with family and friends to sit on the beach, eat, and tell tales. It was good to be home.

The following day, I lounged by the pool at my brother’s house in Sacramento. Zeke left to climb Mt. Whitney with his grandfather. 

*Willie Weir is a columnist and contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist. His books, Travels with Willie and Spokesongs, have been read, but not yet memorized, by Zeke.*