Dear members,

I hope that you are safe and well. It’s been a crazy couple of months. Adventure Cycling works hard to provide both grounding and inspiration through adventures shared in these pages and those that you are planning. We know that the bicycle provides both stability and aspiration; it’s an interesting combination, isn’t it? You’ve got to go forward or you risk falling over.

We are going forward. I’m glad you’re joining us. Welcome!

The world continues to need all of what Adventure Cycling provides: connection, identity, belonging, and fitness — mental and physical. We provide the information and the community to explore, have fun, and make yourself and the world better. This is our True North.

Much to celebrate amid challenges

While our cyclist-specific maps, such as this panel from our new Parks, Peaks, and Prairies Route, feature a variable north arrow to help get more panels on every map, our vision to make the transformational power of bicycle travel accessible to everyone promises a fixed “True North.”

We’re still in soft-launch mode because Yellowstone only recently opened to tourists, but we’re dancing in the office because this linkage of Minneapolis to Yellowstone National Park is awesome and puts the Adventure Cycling Route Network at 50,000 miles, a huge accomplishment.

Looking out over the next year, we’re going to build out long weekend bike travel routes — both on and off pavement — close to metropolitan areas. We’ll invest in our digital mapping platforms, the app, the maps, and technology to help connect people to travel by bicycle.
THE WORLD IS YOUR CANVAS.
Adventure Cycling’s newest route was always going to be memorable — the 1,374-mile Parks, Peaks, and Prairies Bicycle Route (PPP) brings the total cycling route network to 50,000 miles — but 2020 has tacked on another, unexpected layer.

Guiding cyclists from Yellowstone National Park, through Wyoming’s plains and Devils Tower National Monument, past Mount Rushmore and the Badlands and Black Hills of South Dakota, on to the continent’s biggest rivers and some of the 10,000 lakes of Minnesota before finishing in bike-friendly Minneapolis, the PPP traverses iconic terrain, even in uncertain times.

“Obviously we never imagined Yellowstone might be closed when the route launched,” said Director of Routes & Mapping Carla Majernik, who rode across the country in 1976 with Bikecentennial and has helmed Adventure Cycling’s Routes & Mapping Department for decades. “So while 2020 might not be the right time to ride Parks, Peaks, and Prairies, it’s a great time to plan for riding in 2021 and beyond.”

The three-map PPP also offers a connecting option between the TransAmerica Trail and the Northern Tier bicycle routes, as well as crossing over the Lewis & Clark Trail near the new route’s midpoint.

Like all Adventure Cycling routes, the new Parks, Peaks, and Prairies Route was extensively researched by volunteers and the organization’s cartography staff before being distilled into cyclist-specific maps in print and digital form. PPP is available in print and GPX data format at adventurecycling.org/store, and via the Bicycle Route Navigator app on Apple and Google Play stores.

**ADVENTURE CYCLING ROUTE NETWORK HITS 50K MILES**

Beginning with the TransAmerica Trail in 1976, Adventure Cycling Association has steadily grown its route network to criss-cross the country in every direction, plus a number of loop routes in some of the continent’s most compelling landscapes.

The Adventure Cycling Route Network includes the world’s premier bikepacking route, the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route, four east-west corridors (Southern Tier, Northern Tier, TransAm, and Bicycle Route 66/Chicago to New York City), four more north-south routes (Atlantic and Pacific Coast routes, Sierra Cascades, and Underground Railroad) and loops in Arkansas, Idaho, Texas, New York, and others.

Visit Adventure Cycling’s Interactive Route Map for an overview of the network, and see adventurecycling.org/routes-and-maps for more about the organization’s history guiding cyclists on two-wheeled adventure.

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On October 11, 2019, Brendan Walsh arrived at Key West, Florida, the southernmost point of the continental U.S., having pedaled along the Atlantic Coast from the Canadian border at Madawaska, Maine. He completed his ride in just 11 days, 9 hours, and 33 minutes—a new Guinness World Record for the fastest north-to-south crossing of the U.S. by bicycle. And he raised over $6,000 for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) in doing so.

It wasn’t an easy journey. While on a training ride in May last year, a driver hit Walsh in a high-speed collision, sending him flying to the ground and into the emergency room. Somehow, he walked away (well, limped) with a concussion and damage to his knee and ankle. His bike, of course, was destroyed. But he scrounged up a new bike and got back on the saddle, and the rest is Guinness World Record history.

NAMI is the nation’s largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to improving the lives of all those affected by mental illness. If you’d like to donate to NAMI and help Walsh reach his goal of $10,000 to help those with mental illness, go to donate.nami.org/fundraiser/1993907.

Bicycling is Traffic, Too

Starting in 2021, seven universities in Germany will offer master’s degree programs in a new subject: bicycle traffic. Yes, that’s right — until now, traffic engineering for bicycles was not a course of professional study in Germany, a country where it seems everything else is engineered to within a centimeter of its life.

If all traffic engineers ever learn is how to design for the flow of motorized vehicles, then it’s no wonder that the resulting infrastructure doesn’t suit bicycles. But, given the need for a change in how we move about the world to account for climate change, to reduce traffic, and to improve health, it’s increasingly important that roads are designed to allow for the most efficient vehicles: bicycles.

Looking to study bicycle traffic, but don’t plan on being in Germany next year? You can take “Unraveling the Cycling City” through the University of Amsterdam online at coursera.org/learn/unraveling-the-cycling-city.

GUINNESS WORLD RECORD
BRENDAN WALSH SETS NEW RECORD FOR U.S. CROSSING

On October 11, 2019, Brendan Walsh arrived at Key West, Florida, the southernmost point of the continental U.S., having pedaled along the Atlantic Coast from the Canadian border at Madawaska, Maine. He completed his ride in just 11 days, 9 hours, and 33 minutes—a new Guinness World Record for the fastest north-to-south crossing of the U.S. by bicycle. And he raised over $6,000 for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) in doing so.

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DHL DELIVERING BY CARGO BIKE

DHL Express, the German shipping company, is partnering with REEF Technology, a Florida-based parking and logistics company, for a new pilot project: delivering packages in Miami using electric cargo trikes. DHL is deploying four electric-assist cargo trikes, each of which can pull up to 400 pounds and take the place of one conventional delivery van. The pilot project is part of DHL’s GoGreen initiative to implement clean pickup and delivery solutions for 70 percent of its operations by 2025. DHL has been delivering by cargo bike in the Netherlands and Germany since 2015, but this is its first venture in the U.S.
revisiting the
Pacific Coast Highway

story and photos by
Noémie Looker-Anselme
In August 2018, Adam and I were camping and rock climbing in Squamish, a climber’s paradise just north of Vancouver, British Columbia, having flown into Canada from South Korea over a month prior. We were sharpening up our skills for multiday big-wall climbing in Yosemite. All that was left to do was to ride our bikes there. Heading south, Adam wanted to ride along the coast, but I’d already “done” it.

In 2014, I cycled from Vancouver to San Francisco with my dad, then carried on to Cancun, Mexico, on my own. Back then, my schedule was tight. There was no time for detours or rest days. To leave Canada, my dad and I had taken the ferry from Victoria to Port Angeles. We rode the western coastline of the Olympic Peninsula before following the official Pacific Coast Route.

There’s so much to see in the U.S. that, this time, I preferred to take another route. To compromise, we agreed to follow the coast from Vancouver to Tacoma, Washington, before cutting inland to the Sierra Cascades Route. This itinerary would be unknown for both Adam and me for the entire way. With 50 days to reach Yosemite, we planned our favorite rhythm of three days on, one day off.

Back then, my mind was tormented. So much was going on in my personal life that I often found myself lost in thought rather than fully taking in the beauty of my surroundings. I wished I could have buried the worries I had. In retrospect, I just want to remember the fun times, the intense conversations, and the deep emotions that the road provides. Laughing about getting soaked in the tent. Watching whales at sunset. Finding new friends on the road. Crossing the Golden Gate Bridge together with my dad.
Looking at the map, Adam and I didn’t know what to expect. The coastline from Vancouver to Seattle seemed very densely populated. We were pleasantly surprised, then, to find the narrow backcountry roads peaceful and the few drivers we met very considerate. The small towns on the way were charming, the locals welcoming. Thanks to an offline app and the Adventure Cycling maps, we found quiet gravel paths winding through green and fragrant mossy rainforest, peaceful farmland, and a strikingly beautiful coastline. The gorgeous Larrabee State Park delivered our first evening swim in the Pacific Ocean and a classic West Coast sunset. What a place to eat dinner!

On Whidbey Island, we found a beach for a perfect wild bivy. The rising tide was soothing as its sound washed over us. Beach nights are the most relaxing ones. Leaving Adam sleeping, I tiptoed out of the tent before sunrise. The seagulls were putting on a show. The flock danced above the waves, celebrating the coming of a new day together. As soon as the sun poked out from behind the hills, they settled on the sand and stood in silence enjoying the warmth of the sun’s first rays. What a spectacle for breakfast!

Following the “official” Pacific Coast Route, we’d rejoined the Olympic Peninsula in Port Townsend. Soon we would head inland. Having been so pleasantly surprised by this first section along the coast, I started to doubt our plan. I knew how beautiful the rest of the coast was, so why not carry on this way? Sometimes there are things you can’t explain.

After a month on the road with my dad, he flew home to France. Alone, I allowed myself the first detour of the trip. Following advice from some climbing friends, I spent a week in Yosemite National Park. What a place! In Camp 4, I met Adam, a British climber on a mission to fulfill his childhood dream to climb El Capitan. There was something in the air, but the road was calling. I returned to the coast well rested and well confused. Detours can change your life.

The Pacific Coast Highway means so much to me. Still, I refused to entertain the idea of returning. What if it brought back bad memories? Could it alter the good memories I had? What if I became bored because I already knew everything? It might have been silly, but I couldn’t help it. Although the latest news broadcasts were reporting an unstable fire situation in southern Oregon’s interior, I was too stubborn to change my mind. Inland we went.

Two days after leaving the coast, we rejoined the Sierra Cascades Route in Gifford Pinchot National Forest. When we set off on our first mountain pass in a while, we quickly realized we wouldn’t see the landscape, never mind enjoy the view. The blue skies had disappeared behind a white curtain of smoke. Ascending slowly, we started to feel uncomfortable — painful throats, itchy noses, watery eyes. Doubt and worry began to grow in our minds. For the smoke to come here from southern Oregon, there must be some pretty serious fires. With no cell service to receive updates, it was hard to make an informed decision. We carried on.

Upon reaching a lookout over Mount St. Helens, all we could see was a ball of pink light muted by ashen clouds. We tried to remain hopeful. Who knows, it might clear out soon. Sleeping was difficult. The air was too thick. Sunrise came slowly and still no mountain in sight. What’s the point of climbing passes without the reward of the view? Boxed in by enormous pines, the air became thicker and thicker. Freewheeling down to the Columbia River Gorge, we caught up with a couple of cyclists revisiting a loop around Portland they’d cycled some 10 years ago. As locals, they were used to the fire season. Clear summers were a memory of the past. In their opinion, the Sierra Cascades Route had become an early season endeavor. August is not a good time; these fires were only going to get worse. They were convinced we’d be better on the coast. As they headed off in another direction, we stopped and looked at each other. Once again, Adam knew what I was about to say before I started speaking.

Soon after I came back from Mexico, Adam and I moved into a tiny camper van in Chamonix-Mont-Blanc in the French Alps. We worked seasonal jobs and spent most of our free time adventuring in the mountains. Between seasons, we’d organize cyclo-climbing trips in the European Alps. Cycle touring between climbing destinations while carrying all of our equipment was a perfect combination for us. So much so that we came up with the idea of returning to Yosemite on bikes to climb there together. We’d take the long way around, heading east from Europe.
The resignation in my eyes had given me away. “I know, I’m sorry,” I said. “The best option is the coast.” Once we passed Portland, we headed to Lincoln City. I know the 101 is beautiful, but I couldn't help it; every pedal stroke made my heart feel heavier. The past I wanted to forget haunted me. What was I going to discover about myself?

**THE PACIFIC COAST ROUTE:**

**THE GREATEST FORGOTTEN RIDE**

Here it was again, the Pacific Ocean. As I started to recognize sights along the road, I felt a spark of excitement. My anxiety was still present but fading, slowly but surely. We’d left the smoke clouds behind and become reunited with their rainy brethren. At least breathing wasn't painful anymore. After a rather humid rest day in the tent, we were ready to hit the road again.

As soon as we left the campsite, I felt relief. My fears had dissipated. I shouldn’t have been so afraid. The past remains the past. If anything, being back here was the best thing to do. I was happy, the worries in the back of my mind evaporated. I was here with the best adventure partner I could have dreamed of, cycling on the road that brought us together, heading toward one of the most magical places on earth. It was a chance to enjoy this epic route in a new way. Suddenly, I remembered crossing this bridge. I remembered my dad getting his bungie cord stuck in his rear wheel. I remembered laughing uncontrollably as he tried frantically to keep up with his pedals on descents, the bike no longer able to coast.

The sky was low and gray. It was much colder than I had expected for mid-August. Somehow it made me even happier. It felt wilder. Capricious weather and gigantic waves breaking against the coast reminded us of nature's raw power. As we entered the town of Depoe Bay, Oregon, I had another flashback. I recalled spotting a gray whale from the sidewalk. I waved at Adam to stop. Just a few meters off the shore, we saw not one but two whales. I had forgotten how massive they are, how impressive. As the day went by, the list of animals we saw kept getting longer: dozens of seals reclining on isolated rocky outcrops, spectacular brown pelicans diving headfirst into the waves, curious squirrels checking us out as we passed, eagles and vultures circling in the sky, and herons standing perfectly still in wait of prey despite the brutal wind. There can't be many roads like this in the world. Never on our two-year cycle trip had we seen so much concentrated wildlife.
In October 2016, we started to cycle “toward” Yosemite. Riding through Amsterdam, curious cyclists asked us where we were going. When we said “America,” people looked at us funny.

During my first ride down the coast, my dad and I had enjoyed a perfect highway all the way. I used to dislike uneven surfaces and saw them as uncomfortable and inefficient. Riding through Central Asia had changed me.

Yes, getting to America by cycling across Europe and Asia is a long way. A big detour — 19 months. We suffered a cold and wet winter in Germany, Austria, and Slovenia. We slowed down for a couple of months meandering along the Adriatic Coast, exploring Croatia, Montenegro, and Albania. We enjoyed the spring season climbing in Greece. Discovered the marvels of the Turkish countryside. Stepped back in time in Georgia and Azerbaijan. Crossed the Caspian Sea on an older-than-ideal ex-Soviet ferry. Survived the heat of the Kazakh and Uzbek deserts. We rode on the mythical high-altitude Pamir Highway in Tajikistan. Cycled past herds of yak and drank fermented mare’s milk in Kyrgyzstan. Turned away from China due to our suspicious passport stamps. Landed in Thailand for a warm winter of climbing. Blown away by people’s generosity in Laos and Vietnam. Fell in love with South Korea’s kimchi, climbing, and country roads.

I’d learned to love bone-rattling roads for their sense of adventure in addition to the wilderness and challenge they provide. Tarmac had become something we’d avoid if there was an alternative. As much as we were established on the renowned Pacific Highway, looking for any small gravel...
detours or shortcuts was exhilarating. Revisiting this popular route and turning it into our own off-the-cuff, tailored adventure felt very exciting. We found a few hidden gems well worth mentioning. In Redwoods National Park, we spotted a little trail coming off Newton B. Drury Scenic Parkway. Instead of going to Elk Prairie Campground, we headed down to the coast on the Ossagon Loop. It added elevation to the regular itinerary and was rough in places but so worth it. Coasting downhill on singletrack among giant trees was a unique experience. The feeling of the tires smoothly and silently rolling over the forest floor surrounded by these ginormous guardians really quiets the mind. The presence of these ancient organisms fills you with a peaceful joy, and the cherry on top? The beach campsite. It was the first coastal campground we’d been to that provided a view of the sea from our tent. We were quite literally sleeping on the beach, in front of the amazing Golden Bluffs. There was running water and even hot showers. What a treat!

Flying from South Korea to Canada, we realized how close we were to Yosemite and how this trip had changed us. We’d encountered kindness and mind-blowing landscapes everywhere we rode. An old cliché, but it was no longer about the destination. All that mattered was the here and now, this slow journey that was teaching us about the world day in, day out. Detours can change your life.

Our last day on the coast before turning east to Yosemite was full of surprises. Near Point Reyes, California, we took the Olema Valley Trail that runs parallel to the highway — well-suited for a quiet morning warmup. Farther on, I began to feel nostalgic. A nostalgia devoid of sadness, brimming with gratitude. I remembered that day with my dad. It had never crossed his mind that he might one day return to San Francisco, where he’d lived 30 years prior. Yet here he was arriving on a bicycle, with his daughter, after an unforgettable 30-day ride. The memory of the emotions we shared that day filled me up with even more excitement.
Left: Walking among giants in Redwoods National Park.
Right: We had to get a classic Golden Gate Bridge photo!
To maintain the enthusiasm that Adam and I felt, we wanted to avoid the narrow and busy winding highway leading to Sausalito. From Muir Beach, there was a service road climbing behind the Golden Gate Park. We weren't sure it would be rideable, but we took a chance. What we found was better than we could have ever imagined: a steep, uneven mountain bike trail baking in the afternoon sun with 360-degree views over the ocean and the Bay Area. Slow progress, hard work, and the satisfaction of entering the city via a hidden and most unexpected back door.

It didn't take me long to realize the advantages of revisiting a route. Bike touring makes me feel so involved in the scenery, I was convinced that I would remember everything. I thought I would get bored. It never happened, even for a second. I had the memories, but I was a different person. The smells, the noises, the sights — everything was so familiar yet still different. The weather was different. The light was different. Places that seemed perhaps dull on a rainy day were a wonder for the eye on a sunny afternoon. A boring avenue I wasn't looking forward to became an otherworldly experience in thick fog. Our pace being much slower than the one I had with my dad meant we camped mostly in places I hadn't stopped. Cooking dinner at sunset next to Coquille River Lighthouse was well worth the three-mile detour. Spending a rest day in Redwoods National Park gave us the opportunity to explore this magical forest on foot. If I hadn't gone back, Salt Point State Park would have remained this roadside campground where a gaze of racoons stole my granola and ruined my breakfast. I wouldn't have known that down by the coast lay some of the weirdest and most intriguing rock features I've ever seen. I would have missed the pod of humpback whales jumping in the waves and the jaw-dropping coastal trail.

It blew my mind to remember thinking that there was no point in repeating a route. So many secrets were left to be discovered. It seems like the more you explore a place, the more you realize you've only just scraped the surface. All you need is an open mind and endless curiosity. It might be time to rethink my relationship to travelling. My tick list won't get any longer, but so what? I love this special sort of excitement that comes from the deeper exploration of a known area. Perhaps familiarity breeds a particular form of interest, one where we see new details and perspectives. It just so happens that cycle touring is a wonderful way to do it. Surprises do indeed lie where you want to find them.

Noémie Looker-Anselme grew up in a small town in eastern France, where cycling was always synonymous with freedom. Cycling the Pacific Coast turned her life around. On the way, she met her husband Adam and began her journey of becoming a bike mechanic. When she's not at work fixing bikes, she's either out on adventures, writing about previous excursions, or planning the next trip.
We were walking in Prague on our first morning in the Czech Republic. The streets were bustling with locals and tourists. The sky was achingly blue, and the air had a cold September snap to it.

We turned a corner and I gasped as if someone had jumped out of a dark alley. I was experiencing sensory overload from the beauty and immensity of the Old Town Square — a complex of connected medieval buildings that elicit awe and delight from over eight million visitors each year.

My partner Kat had a huge smile on her face. She knew this reaction was coming. She had lived in Prague for four months back in the ’90s.

We spent the next four days sans bikes because my bike had not arrived with us (see “Beginning Trip Blues,” February 2020). We visited a couple of the 80 museums in the city and at least 20 of the bazillion cafés, bars, and bakeries (you have to have priorities). We rode the efficient and affordable streetcars and walked until our feet were sore.

We pedaled out of Prague early on a Sunday morning. The traffic was light as we climbed up and out of the city. Within 10 miles we were in full-on lush, rolling farm country.

We pedaled north to Kokořínsko, a landscape protected region north of Prague in Central Bohemia. We overnighted at a local campground. There were a few Czech families there for a day trip, but come sunset we were the only ones there. The route was winding and hilly with massive sandstone formations jutting up through the forest. We couldn’t believe we had the roads to ourselves. It was such a contrast to Prague. But we weren’t complaining.

We wound up northeast to Český Ráj (Bohemian Paradise), which was the first nature reserve in the country. We got a tiny cabin at a massive campground complex. It has to be crazy in peak season, but it was just Kat and me … and 200 Danish students, who all congregated just outside our cabin at night.

We stayed for a couple of days to hike the trails among sandstone towers and a castle or two, taking in the breathtaking vistas and dining on sausages and pilsner.

Riding along the narrow backroads of the Czech Republic, I should have been smiling ear-to-ear, but I wasn’t. What was wrong? The sky was blue, there was little to no traffic, and there were small, quaint villages everywhere.

But my mind was focused on what it wasn’t — it wasn’t epic. There were no enormous passes to cross. No vast plains to conquer. It wasn’t extremely hot or cold. Even the wind was dressed up as a gentle breeze. It was simply beautiful.

I was trapped by my own expectations of what every bike trip should be: an “adventure” (a loaded word I attempted to define in long-ago columns).

So if this wasn’t an adventure, what was it? I’d soon get my answer.
In the city of Žďár, we met Jean and Pam, a couple of New Zealanders who were also cycle touring. Jean was a longtime cyclist who traveled extensively with her husband before he passed away. Pam was a “farmer’s wife” who discovered cycle touring later in life. The two had done several bike trips together. This was their second in the Czech Republic.

The two of them were “a hoot,” as my mother would say.

As we carried our panniers up to our room adjacent to theirs, Jean asked, “You don’t make much noise, do you? The Asian girls last night talked until 2:00 am. I had to bang on the wall.”

We invited them to join us for dinner at a local restaurant. Kat and I feasted on a meat platter, washed down with large mugs of beer. Jean and Pam had soup and bottled water. When we offered to pay the tab, Pam leaned over and quietly said, “We’re loaded, honey. We just travel frugal.”

The next morning, we cycled out of town, headed toward Třebíř. Pam and Jean stuck to the paved roads, while Kat and I chose a combination of roads and dirt tracks.

We met up with Pam and Jean that evening. As we walked the cobbled streets of the Jewish Quarter, we chatted about our rides.

Pam exclaimed, “Well, that was a lovely coddwomple.”

“What is coddwomple?” I asked.

“To travel in a purposeful manner towards a vague destination,” she answered with a tone that suggested I should know better.

I loved it. It described our day in one word. It defined our newfound friendship perfectly. Which made them … coddwomplers.

It was a lightbulb moment.

Travel is a mindset, and your mind can turn what should be an incredible experience into a disastrous, or frustrating, or (even worse) a boring one.

By focusing on what the trip “should be” (an adventure), I was missing what it could be: a coddwomple.

That’s what we’d do — that’s what we were already doing — coddwompling our way through the Czech Republic.

And by manipulating the definition by just two letters, it suited our bike trip perfectly: “To travel in a purposeful manner towards a Prague destination.” If you will pardon my pun, it was a brilliant PR move.
Český Krumlov, population 14,000 receives over 800,000 tourists annually.
So what was our purpose on this coddiwomple? It didn’t matter, as long as we revelled in it. Once you adjust your attitude and downplay your expectations, it’s all good.

So rather than having a plan, a mileage goal, or even a particular destination, we just coddiwompled. We’d wake up in the morning, check the weather and the wind direction, and adjust accordingly.

On one stretch of road, on an exceptionally beautiful day, we layed down our bikes and climbed up into a hunter’s blind, and just gazed out at the rolling farmland.

If a particular town square struck our fancy, we’d order lunch and a beer and linger as long as we liked. Beer was born in this country. Beer isn’t just a beverage, it’s an experience. There are 40 breweries in the Czech Republic. Each beer has its own glassware — from thick, heavy glass mugs with wide handles to tall, curved glasses. The beer was fresh. I never saw a can of beer in a month of travel. Maybe that was one of the reasons that the Czech roads were litter-free. This was not a takeout culture, and we were completely charmed by it.

We made a point to pedal to two specific towns south of Prague. Český Krumlov and Tábor. One is a guidebook favorite, and the other was recommended by the owner of a little breakfast restaurant in Prague.

Český Krumlov’s town center is a UNESCO World Heritage site. If you get anywhere near it, you should go. The settlement beneath a castle, built beginning in 1240, might be the most picturesque town square on earth. The cobblestone streets, the bridges, the churches, and the river that winds through it are right out of a fairy tale. But a fairy tale packed with tourists.

So much so that you should leave your bike at whatever accommodation you’ve booked. That’s how crowded the streets are.

It’s like the Grand Canyon: it doesn’t matter how many people you see it with, it’s still worth a look.

We stayed in a funky farmhouse five kilometers outside the city and walked or took the bus in. I don’t need to return. But, wow, I’m glad we went.

Tábor is a town of 35,000. Guidebooks will tell you it is worth, maybe, a lunch stop. We spent three days there. If you want to experience a delightful Czech town, this is it. It has local shops and galleries and restaurants and pubs and a quaint town square with a clock tower you can climb the 200 steps to the top of for a small fee. And, most importantly, it has an award-winning gelato shop. This town won our coddiwomple destination award.

Unlike many of our other trips, we had fewer personal exchanges overall with locals. The frequent use of informants during Communist rule from 1948 to 1989 could explain some of the hesitation to embrace strangers.

Also, it was a colder September than most. Not as many people out in their gardens. And much of the work is in the cities so many of the streets of smaller towns and villages were empty. Locals rarely approached us.

The Czechs might be standoffish, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t helpful and kind.

At the end of one day, we pulled into this tiny town that had a campground listed. Although it was only September 20, the campground was already closed for the season.

We decided to pedal on to a larger town in hopes of finding a small hotel.
After a short but hilly ride, made “hillier” by headwinds, we arrived and discovered there were no hotels, inns, or campgrounds.

Kat approached a portly man in the town square. When she began talking in English, he put up his hands and shook his head. Kat whipped out her phone and brought up Google Translate and spoke, “This will translate for us.” His eyes widened and he smiled. Kat explained our predicament and the app translated it into Czech.

His smile grew wider and he gave us directions on how to get to the campground … that we’d just come from. Kat thanked him. We decided to head back and take our chances in the smaller town.

We pedaled back to the locked-up campground and spied two men out working in a garden. We approached them and asked if we could camp.

“No,” came the reply. There was a campground that might or might not be open about 20 kilometers away.

There was enough room in the garden to pitch a tent so, via some sign...
language, I got my point across. The man paused awhile and then turned and headed toward his house.

My guess was he wanted to ask his wife first before offering. He emerged with a set of keys and motioned for us to follow.

It turned out he was the caretaker of the closed campground. Without speaking a word, he unlocked the gate. He motioned to a grassy area near some of the camp huts for pitching our tent. He then proceeded to unlock the kitchen facilities and showed us where we could cook and make tea. Then he unlocked the women’s restroom and turned on the gas to the water heater. He reached in his pocket and handed us four metal tokens for the showers.

We were delighted and thanked him profusely.

He simply put up his hands in a gesture that communicated, “No thanks were necessary.” Then he walked away.

Aside from the touristy locations (Prague, Ęeský Krumlov), we had the backroads to ourselves. In addition to our favorite New Zealanders, we met two other cycling tourists, a German couple from Berlin (except for the one time we intersected the popular bike route that runs from Vienna to Prague, where we encountered over 25 cycle tourists at a lunch stop).

After three weeks on the road, we made our way back to Prague. The bike trail system provided a wondrously stress-free experience as we wound through greenways and parks, and then along the Danube back to the city center.

We spent some more days exploring the city — visiting galleries, wandering the nooks and crannies of neighborhoods, and meeting up with Pam and Jean, who just happened to be flying out of Prague the same day as us.

We had dinner together and then took the tram up to the Prague Castle complex that dates back to the ninth century and soaked in the view of the city one last time … and had one last beer.

Willie Weir has been writing for Adventure Cyclist since 1997. He’s been riding a bicycle since 1966.
The mountains of Vangvieng offer all manner of adventure sports.
In Southeast Asia, Laos is unique. Landlocked and without any major cities, it is the poorest country in the region and suffered the worst bombings (albeit secretly) during the Vietnam War. Much of its population fared even worse during the years that followed when those who supported the CIA’s secret war against the communists were punished by the new Vietnam-backed government.

While the country has suffered greatly, today it’s seeing better times, including a growth in tourism. Its hilly north has increasingly drawn adventure tourists, including cyclists, to its quiet roads, rugged landscape, and lush scenery. It’s been a place long on my riding radar. And in late 2018, I suddenly realized I’d better get there soon.

That year, I read about a $6 billion railroad that China was building across Laos, linking the world’s most populous country with Thailand. It was part of China’s trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative, which calls for spreading a web of transportation infrastructure across Asia to benefit commerce.

The Laos railroad, which began in 2016, is 250 miles long and expected to be completed in 2021. The railroad could be a boon to Laos’s seven million citizens. Or, depending on which critics you listen to, it could leave Laos in debt while its richer neighbors benefit from access to its raw materials and cheap labor.

One thing is for sure: when China, a nation with a middle class of 550 million people, suddenly has easy access to this scenic, rural paradise, Laos is going to change. I envisioned a huge growth in resorts, second homes, casinos, and other outlets catering to the Chinese. If I wanted to see the country’s rural splendor, I realized, now was the time.
That’s why I decided, at the last minute, to book a two-week trip in February of 2019.

My route was relatively short: 271 miles from Laos’s capital of Vientiane north to Louangphrabang, a city popular for its French colonial architecture, gastronomic delights, and scenic location on the banks of the Mekong River. I planned for five to six days of riding, knowing the northern half would be hilly.

Since it was a short trip, I barely gave my bike and gear the once-over one should always do before a tour. Also, being winter back in New York, I didn’t do any cycling to get in shape. Both decisions would later come back to haunt me.

I flew with my rigid steel KHS mountain bike (no extra charge) on Cathay Pacific, 16 hours from JFK to Hong Kong and then another three and a half to Bangkok. From there, I would catch a local flight on Lao Airlines to Vientiane.

At least that was the plan. When I arrived in Bangkok, I had about two hours to retrieve my gear, check in for the new flight, pass through security, and find my gate. The customs man laughed when he saw my itinerary. “You might make it,” he said doubtfully.

It took way too long for my bike box to show up at the oversized luggage desk. When it finally did, I threw my gear onto a luggage trolley and fairly ran through Southeast Asia’s biggest air terminal with my bike sticking out both ends like a cardboard snowplow. I nearly took out several children and at least one elderly monk before I found the check-in desk.

I did make the plane, though it was close. And less than two hours later, I was at my first hotel in Laos.

Vientiane is Laos’s biggest city, but it’s small by Asian standards — about 800,000 residents. I spent the morning assembling my bike, then I wandered through town visiting Buddhist temples, watching the novice monks, and admiring the many gold Buddha statues. In the evening, I headed to the banks of the Mekong.

There, when work is done and temperatures go down, the locals flock to enjoy the evening. Entrepreneurs set up carnival games, women in tights do aerobics set to Asian pop songs, and tourists and locals alike dine al fresco at pop-up sidewalk eateries. I wandered from stall to stall, sampling barbecued squid and a noodle dish. It was a good first day.

I woke up the next morning ready to ride. I loaded my bike, anxious to get as many miles as possible before the afternoon heat, and pedaled off.

I got four blocks before disaster struck. First, one of my panniers popped off. It turned out that, since the last time I had used them, the bungee cord that binds it to the rack had lost its elasticity. When the pannier came off, it fell into my wheel and snapped off my tube’s valve. I had brought one spare tube for the short tour, which meant I now had none. And when I pulled off my tire, I discovered it was dry-rotted and falling apart.

No spares, no functioning tires,
no working panniers. This is what happens when you don’t check your gear before a trip!

Fortunately, Vientiane has one decent bike shop. And it was only a short roll away. When I got there, “Tiger,” as he called himself, was happy to help. He soon set me up with new tires and two new spare tubes (I learned my lesson about taking just one), and he fixed the tension in the bungees by removing the bolts and shortening them with a knot. For good measure, I picked up some boot laces from a nearby store and lashed the panniers to the rack. There would not be a repeat of that incident!

By now it was mid-morning and the temperature was creeping up. I rode as fast as possible through the city’s busy streets, enjoying the last of the morning shadows and looking forward to escaping the diesel exhaust. An hour after departing, I was in the country cycling past traditional Lao houses built on stilts and locals selling tropical fruit at roadside stands.

I had chosen my route from several sources: an out-of-print Lonely Planet guide to cycling in Southeast Asia, an excellent website describing the route created by a Canadian couple, and a digital Hobo Map. What is a Hobo Map? They are drawn digitally and sold online by a retired American who has been cycling through Southeast Asia since 2005. These fantastic mile-by-mile maps can be downloaded onto a phone for one American dollar each, and they list everything from restaurants to direction of climbs and quality of roads.

I rode for about four hours on Highway 10, a much more low-key route than the congested main highway, stopping only to refuel on a 30-cent bunch of tiny bananas. By 2:00 PM, I was ready to escape the heat. I found a small motel with A/C near Nam Ngum Lake, a reservoir that is home to a new resort. No one spoke English, but I was able to claim a room and then wandered across the street to a shaded, open-air café get some food.

Laos’s staple meal is much like Vietnamese pho — a large bowl of broth with noodles and vegetables. It makes a fine lunch, and the salty dish has the

“Surely, of all the wonders of the world, the horizon is the greatest”
-Freya Stark

—-
added benefit of providing electrolytes to a sweaty cyclist.

In the evening, I climbed a steep hill to view the lake and then stopped at a pub where a man was barbecuing chicken outside. It turned out to be a karaoke bar, and I listened to locals belting out Asian melodies as I ate my meat, wrapped like a taco in leaves of lettuce. I noticed the waitress pointing her phone at me. She was showing me off to her father, who waved to me over the tiny screen. No doubt they were marveling at this strange, pale-skinned man who had wandered into her shop.

I left at dawn the next morning and rode several hours before stopping for a meaty breakfast sandwich served on the ubiquitous baguettes that are a vestige of the former French colonization. As I slowly climbed in elevation, I saw the first traces of the Chinese railroad — concrete abutments for bridges that had not yet been built, level beds for track that had not yet been laid. The tracks, if nothing else, could be a boon for Laotian construction workers. Except, according to some critics, many of the workers are Chinese. Indeed, I would pass several large Chinese work camps during the ride.

I stopped for a fish lunch at a café at the north end of Nam Ngum Lake, where I chatted briefly with a Chinese engineer who spoke perfect English (“And French,” he added). From there the last two hours to Vangvieng were torturous.

Vangvieng is surrounded by tower karst and riddled with caves and streams. All that limestone has attracted a large cement industry, and the road in this area was covered in dust and filled with noisy trucks. Definitely the worst section of the tour.

Vangvieng lies on the banks of a cool, clear river and is a popular stop for backpackers. In the past, a popular pastime for party-minded tourists was to get loaded and then ride tubes down the river. Some tourists drowned this way so the town has been moving away from the party scene and embracing ecotourism in its place.
GETTING TO LAOS

Flights for around $1,000 are available from the U.S. to Hong Kong, Bangkok, and China, where you can pick up a regional flight to Vientiane. Bikes fly free on most Asian airlines. Plan for extra days to see Vientiane, Vangvieng, and Louangphrabang.

WHEN TO GO

December and January are the best months for cycling, although people ride all year long. From March to May, the temperature is at its hottest and smoke often obscures the scenery. The rainy season over the summer helps cool things down, but the roads will be muddy.

WHAT TO BRING

Wide cyclocross, hybrid, or mountain bike tires are your friends. Food is readily available for the southern half of the route, but from Kasi north, you’ll want to carry more snacks and lunch between towns. Most of the larger villages have decent food selections, and you can always buy fruit from roadside stands. Bottled water is widely available, with springs and streams along the way (purify first). Decent bike shops are found in Vientiane and Louangphrabang, with nothing in between (however, bikes can be rented for the day in Vangvieng). With numerous hotels en route, camping is not necessary, but there are rural areas where a tent could be set up.

OTHER DETAILS

English is widely spoken in tourist towns but rare elsewhere. A printed sheet with English-Lao words is helpful, but I mostly got by with a smile, sign language, and the words “khop jai” (thank you) and “sai bai dee” (hello). Translation phone apps would also work, although I didn’t use them. Food and lodging is quite cheap — a cyclist on a low budget could get by on $20 to $40 per day. Most of the route has low traffic, and drivers are courteous. There are significant climbs on this route, so cyclists should be physically prepared (there is also a less-scenic, lower-altitude route between Kasi and Louangphrabang).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Guidebooks like Lonely Planet, Moon, or Rough Guide contain information on Vientiane, Vangvieng, and Louangphrabang. For ride info, check out travellingtwo.com, a wonderful blog written by Canadian couple Friedel and Andrew, who describe the route in great detail. Be sure to download route maps from hobomaps.com.

Today one can kayak, mountain bike, swim, cave, rock climb, hike, and ride hot-air balloons. There are loads of decent restaurants and cheap lodging.

I spent an extra day here, but the crowded river scene convinced me to skip tubing. Instead I got up at dawn to hike up a nearby hill. On the way, a stray dog befriended me. I named him Karst. He followed me to the peak, even up several wooden ladders (which I later had to help him down). He even waited at the mouth of a cave as I explored the subterranean world. But when I got to the edge of town, he left me for another tourist who was headed off into the hills. Man’s best friend indeed.

Up early again the next morning, I joined a sort of bicycle rush hour of students heading to class and monks heading to temples. But soon all was quiet. This was the riding I was looking for — small farms, narrow roads, and little traffic. I stopped for lunch in Kasi and then rode an additional five miles to a small hot springs resort.

There I was lucky enough to snag the last of five simple bungalows. “I just varnished it,” the hostess told me. “Are you sure it’s okay?” It did smell a bit, but it suited me fine.

I spent the afternoon soaking in the springs and enjoying the views of the hilly grasslands greet riders at the start of the huge climb to Phou Khoun.
green peaks soaring above us, walls too vertical for any man to scale. Tomorrow I would face the biggest climb of the trip.

The road from Kasi to Phou Khoun climbs nearly 3,000 feet. It’s a reasonable pitch, with streams and occasional springs for water (be sure to purify before drinking). It’s a hot climb, but a good part of it is shady in the morning, and the temperature cools the higher you get. At the top, there’s a restaurant with a world-class view — a good place to stop and refuel.

By the time I reached Phou Khoun in the early afternoon, I was done. I had originally planned to ride on to the next town, but I decided to take an extra day to recover. I found a basic guest house and lay down under a fan to recuperate. In the evening, I was joined for dinner by a young British lady who had cycled all the way up from Phonsavan, home to the world-famous Plain of Jars, more than 80 miles to the east and mostly uphill. An impressive accomplishment in this heat.

It was a hilly but short ride to the next destination, Kiu Kacham. On the way, I passed numerous tiny villages. Girls wrapped in sarongs bathed under communal taps while grandmothers cut grass in the field and carried it back home on their backs. Families, members of the minority Hmong tribe, sat in front of their one-room huts, waving. Several times I stopped to take photos of a young child, but each time the kid burst into tears.

At Kiu Kacham, I was wandering through town when a man emerged from his one-room house and beckoned me inside. The room was carpeted but empty, save for two things: a stereo and a bottle of rice wine sitting on the floor. The man picked up the bottle, filled a glass with liquor, and offered it to me. What could I do? Hoping the alcohol would kill any germs, I smiled and downed the fiery drink. When it became clear the man was well into his cups, I thanked him and excused myself.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 49

Above: The author takes a break at the top of a grueling climb.
Below: A novice monk sweeps the grounds outside a Buddhist temple in downtown Vientiane.
Whole Meal, Whole Ingredients.

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(Only $3 Shipping)

Go to: sansmealbar.com/aca to get your bars.
“That’s a green bike,” my wife noted.
When she’s right, she’s right. Man, is this Surly Disc Trucker ever green. Greener than Slimer in *Ghostbusters*. Greener than Father Karras after Regan barfed on him in *The Exorcist*. Greener than the Incredible Hulk and the Jolly Green Giant arm-wrestling across a pool table in County Clare on St. Patrick’s Day.

Did I mention it’s green?
The color is officially called Pea Lime Soup. But when I rode the bike wearing my red Gore jersey, the dish that sprang to mind was a Christmas enchilada platter (which in New Mexico means both red and green chile).

Hot plate, señores!
This new Disc Trucker marks my first professional involvement with Surly, which seems odd, given my personality. You’d think they’d be using my mug shot as a head badge.

But I’m not unfamiliar with the brand, having known cyclists who swore by their Surlys as reliable, affordable bikes. One friend in Colorado used to flog me and my Steelman Eurocross with his Surly Cross-Check. Two others have owned Long Haul Truckers, one in 26in., the other in 700c. The latter got stolen here in Albuquerque, and the owner misses it terribly.

Both the rim brake Long Haul Trucker, introduced in 2004, and the Disc Trucker, which dates to 2012, are billed as “suitable for traveling

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**SURLY DISC TRUCKER**

**Price:** $1,675

**Sizes available:** 56cm, 58cm, 60cm, 62cm, 64cm (700c); 42cm, 46cm, 50cm, 52cm, 54cm, 56cm (26in)

**Size tested:** 56cm (700c)

**Weight:** 27.9 lbs. (without pedals)

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**TEST BIKE MEASUREMENTS**

- **Stack:** 613mm
- **Reach:** 387.5mm
- **Head tube length:** 175mm
- **Head tube angle:** 72°
- **Seat tube length:** 560mm (center to top)
- **Seat tube angle:** 73°
- **Top tube:** 575mm (effective)
- **Chainstays:** 450mm
- **Bottom bracket drop:** 80mm
- **Bottom bracket height:** 279mm
- **Fork Offset:** 45mm
- **Wheelbase:** 1051mm
- **Standover height:** 813mm

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**SPECIFICATIONS**

- **Frame:** Surly 4130 chromoly, rack and fender mounts, three sets of bottle bosses, spoke holder
- **Fork:** Surly 4130 chromoly, internal wire routing for dynamo hub, mounts for fender/rack at fork crown and dropouts, three-pack bosses on blades
- **Handlebar:** Surly Truck Stop, 450mm, 30mm rise
- **Stem:** ProMax, 6061 alloy, 100mm, +/-7°, 31.8mm clamp
- **Front derailer:** Shimano Sora R3030
- **Rear derailer:** Shimano Alivio M4000 SGS
- **Brake/shift levers:** Shimano Sora STI 3x9
- **Brakes:** TRP Spyre C mechanical disc
anywhere in the world on mostly paved roads."

The 2020 Disc Trucker takes that a little further afield, aiming for “all-day, everyday comfort with all kinds of loads on all kinds of roads.”

Can you say … “gravel?”

Sure you can.

Thus the freshly updated Disc Trucker sports more mounts for hydration, storage, and other bikepacking accessories; more tire clearance on the 700c platform; shortened chainstays for greater maneuverability; and more standover clearance in case the kind of road you’re on mostly is not one.

There have been tradeoffs. The previous Disc Trucker was a 10-speed, with MicroSHIFT bar-cons; now it’s a 9-speed, with Shimano Sora STI. I like 9-speed, but I also like bar-cons; five of my own bikes are so equipped.

Braking got a nudge upward, from Avid BB7 to TRP Spyre flat-mounts. The Shimano Deore hubs and derailleurs gave way to Novatec, Alivio, and Sora. And an Alivio triple crank replaced the Andel triple, though the number of teeth remains the same (48/36/26T).

Finally, the price has risen slightly, from $1,550 to $1,675.

The complete package reminds me of my disc brake Soma Saga, a review bike I liked enough to buy. Their geometry and weights are similar, and so is the spec, because I’ve made a couple of changes to the Soma since that review (see the May 2015 edition of Adventure Cyclist). The Saga now has Spyres and Schwalbe Little Big Ben tires, which look a good deal like the Disc Trucker’s tubeless-ready Surly ExtraTerrestrials, only without the U-shaped side blocks.

But the Surly has that sweet low end of 21 gear inches, three better than the Soma. And boy, was I glad

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Contact: Surly Bikes, 6400 W. 105th St., Bloomington, MN 55438; (877) 743-3191; surlybikes.com, derby@surlybikes.com.
to have it when I broke my right ankle running before I could even throw a leg over the bike.

I spent the next few weeks test-riding crutches and a clunky removable boot, occasionally taking short, slow spins on the stationary trainer. When I traded the boot for a brace that let me wear low-rise hikers, I braved the great outdoors on an old mountain bike with flat pedals. A few weeks after that, I moved the flats to the Surly, and off we went.

So when I tell you that the Disc Trucker is geared so nicely that a stove-up old rounder with a hitch in his gitalong can ride it in hiking boots, well — for a change, it’s not just hyperbole.

Being judicious about recovery and nonessential outings kept my “tours” down to about 90 minutes at a crack — the equivalent of a bike overnight ride to a Central Avenue no-tell motel and back again.

Still, the Disc Trucker and I have covered some rough ground in those short rides, paved and unpaved, hard and loose, up, down, and all around. And if I were hunting a new touring bike for when (and if) my ankle and the rest of the world return to business as usual, the Disc Trucker would definitely be on my shopping list.

With that 21-inch low gear you don’t have to muscle the bike up a steep grade, and it’s not at all stodgy on curvy downhills. Even with the ExtraTerrestrials pumped to 50/55 psi, it slaps all the ugly out of a bad road, though you might consider something with a little more grab if you spend a lot of time away from hard surfaces. The other day I left a hardpack climb for a short stretch of singletrack to avoid a cluster of hikers and promptly washed out the front wheel in a loose uphill corner.

If you’re an old roadie who likes to slam the stem, the tall head tube and Truck Stop handlebar with its 30mm rise — yes, rise — will give you a bird’s-eye view of the road ahead without a thick stack of spacers. I did most of my riding with hands on the tops as though I were riding a mountain bike with a riser bar. But I would do that on a regular bar too.
Another interesting twist: the thru-axles. The axle is captured in the usual fashion on the drive-side dropout, but there's a vertical slot in the other dropout.

The idea is to ease removal of the rear wheel, according to product manager Amy Kippley. The slot lets the wheel drop straight down when the axle is removed, and the setup helps make sure the frame “feels stiff and nimble when fully loaded,” she said.

Speaking of fully loaded, the racks-and-sacks crowd should find plenty to like in the new Disc Trucker. Mounts abound at front and rear — for racks I used a Tubus Tara and Logo Evo — and the frame has three sets of bottle bosses, plus a spoke holder. No pump peg, though.

More of a bikepacker, are you? That’s one reason there’s no pump peg to rub a hole in your framebag, and why you’ll find three-pack mounts on each fork leg, plus two more at the crown in case you want to add a carrier like Surly’s 8-Pack Rack.

“With the growth in popularity of framebags, we found many folks were no longer taking advantage of the pump pegs,” said Kippley. “Additionally, many folks are swapping to wider tires and not running as high of a pressure, so smaller pumps have become more common for quick fixes on the fly.”

When you’re ready to fly, you’ll find a Disc Trucker for nearly every size and style of tourist. It can be had as a complete ready-to-ride bike or as a frameset, with six sizes available in the 26in. model and five in the 700c.

And as Henry Ford once said, you can have it in any color you like, as long as it’s green.

Or was that Kermit the Frog? ☹️

Patrick O'Grady is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist.
GEARED UP

Handup Gloves, $29
Have you ever had a piece of gear that makes you smile every time you use it? For me, it’s these gloves. They’re super high quality, made with bright and fun fabrics, and have irreverent and silly words on the palms — Party Time, Stoked, Get Rad, Braaaaap, Send It, etc. They’re made from a lightweight four-way stretch mesh fabric on the back, with a thin, ultra-durable faux leather Clarino palm that gave me a good grip on the bars every ride and never got soggy. The meshy back and the microporous palm did a great job of wicking sweat, but the gloves also provided some protection in cool temps. They pull on easily and are tight enough to stay on without a Lycra-shredding Velcro wrist tab.

It’s ridiculous that these gloves make me smile every time I wear them, but I ride bikes because it makes me happy. In the middle of a huge climb or on a tour day when nothing’s going quite right, I look at these gloves and they remind me how lucky I am to be out on my bike. –BB

Archer Components D1x Trail, $369
Is a hybrid electric/cable shifting solution the best of all worlds or an unholy abomination? Archer isn’t afraid to ask — the D1x Trail kit is a retrofittable electronic shifter mounted to the chainstay that connects to an existing derailer via a short length of cable. A bar-mounted remote connects to the shifter via Bluetooth, and the whole thing is powered by high-capacity lithium-ion rechargeable AA (shifter) and AAA (remote) batteries. Archer claims the unit is compatible with any derailer and any number of speeds (obviously it will only shift the rear derailer on a 2x or 3x setup). I tested the D1x on a SRAM GX 1x11 drivetrain, and using the accompanying iPhone app I was able to quickly dial in very accurate shifts. The app allows for tiny adjustments in each gear during initial setup in lieu of indexed cable shifting. It’s a fairly straightforward process, except that each gear step requires individual setup unlike a cable-based shifter.

On the road and trail, the D1x is a beat slower than a cable shifter, which made for a few rough shifts under too much power early on, but I quickly adjusted. The buttons on the remote had a nice positive “click” feel to each shift (left for moving up the cassette, right for down), and the touch required was far lighter than required for a trigger shifter.

So why would you make the trade? Well, folks with hand issues will find the light action a godsend, and the shifter’s ability to adapt to any derailer opens some interesting possibilities for drivetrain mix and match. The remote uses SRAM’s Matchmaker mount, which is officially for flat bars, but it doesn’t take a ton of imagination to see how this could be rigged up to dropbars. A claimed 80-hour ride time would be manageable for most situations, and the “Get Home Gear” feature shifts you to a preselected gear when the battery reaches a critical level. –AS
**Lauf Smoothie Handlebar, $220**

The Lauf Smoothie may look like any other premium carbon dropbar, but the devil is in the details. It's available in 400mm, 420mm, and 440mm widths (I tested the widest), with a short 125mm drop, 80mm reach, and a moderate 16° flare. Where it differs is in the top's 3° backsweep and, unusually, a very sharp turn to the hoods. That hard angle makes for some interesting hand positions — I found myself hooking my thumbs in the corners while climbing. It adds a degree of difficulty when taping the bar though, and at first that sharp corner seemed to be in the way when riding in the drops, but I quickly got used to it.

What sets the Smoothie apart is its flex. Like the leaf springs in its suspension forks, Lauf employs glass fibers to design “smooth zones” into the bar to dampen vibrations and absorb bumps. While riding along a rough road, I could move my hands from the tops to the hoods to the drops and feel the difference along the way. In fact, I could flex the drops with my hands alone. It's incredible. The Smoothie works so well that I would aim for cracks and railroad crossings, only to chuckle as I floated over them.

At $220, the Smoothie would appear to cost a pretty penny, but compared to other high-end carbon offerings, some of which run to well over $300, it's very nearly a bargain. Lauf markets the Smoothie as a gravel product, but it's a smart choice for anyone with sore hands. –DM

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**Velocio Women’s LUXE Bib Short, $259**

Let me give y'all the gift of discovering something so essential that you'll be mad you've never questioned why it didn't exist before. One word: FLYfree. Velocio's Women's LUXE Bib Short is the cycling product every female-bodied cyclist has been unknowingly waiting for — pee-break–friendly bibs. As the name implies, these bibs allow a quick behind-the-tree “nature break” without the hassle of removing every other clothing item first. Freedom, finally! This innovative technology is actually pretty simple in practice: the suspender straps cross like an X in the back and are so elastic that they allow the waist of the bibs to be pulled down and out of the way in a squat. If you're skeptical about how straps can be so stretchy and still snap back to fitting tight when you get back on the bike, you're not alone. But I can vouch — this elastic is otherworldly and always snaps back.

Along with the gift of FLYfree, the LUXE Bib Short has a glove-like fit with thick, uniform suspender straps that will never dig into your shoulders and soft compression material with legs that err on the longer side, which I really appreciate. Velocio designed these bibs with minimal seams, and I haven't experienced even a slight chafe yet. These are truly luxurious (you absolutely get what you pay for), and lately I've found myself reaching for them every time I go for a spin. –AM
The American Lung Association ride in Maine is the largest in the country sponsored by the nonprofit organization, typically drawing about 1,200 riders. That's a big ride, and it raises a lot of money — $1.3 million on average. Since 1985, the event has raised more than $25 million for lung health.

“The fact that we’re here in Maine, people wouldn’t consider this to be where you’d find such a large fundraiser,” said Kim Chamard, senior manager of development for the American Lung Association in Maine. “It’s such a longstanding event, it has become a real tradition for a lot of folks. We jokingly call it a large family reunion.”

Unfortunately, because of the coronavirus pandemic, that reunion will not be happening this year for the first time in the event’s 35-year history. In fact, virtually none of America’s big rides will be happening in 2020. It’s just too risky.

Julia Fitzgerald, chief marketing officer at the American Lung Association’s main headquarters in Chicago, said the organization raises more than $10 million annually from about 10 major rides, including the one in Maine. The rides are an important source of income for the research and advocacy the American Lung Association supports.

“We try to save lives by improving lung health and preventing lung disease,” she said.

Fitzgerald said the association has four strategies for achieving its mission. The first is to defeat lung cancer. The second is to champion clean air. She said there’s more and more evidence accumulating on how climate change is negatively impacting lung health.

The third is to create a tobacco-free future, and that includes vaping. And, finally, the American Lung Association is working to improve lung quality for those with lung disease and their families; diseases like COVID-19, caused by the coronavirus; and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or COPD as it is commonly known.

Fitzgerald said the association is not counting on any of its rides to take place in 2020. She’s hoping individual cyclists will take it upon themselves to ride and raise money for the nonprofit. She understands that will be a very different experience from normal.

“The essence of the treks is to do it as a community,” she said. “That really makes it not ideal in a world where we’re practicing social distancing.”

Back in Maine, Chamard said the local organization announced on April 13 that the 36th annual trek would be adjusting to a virtual event. The ride always takes place over Father’s Day weekend, covering 180 miles from Friday through Sunday.

For the first 34 years of its existence, the ride began at the Sunday River Ski Resort in Newry, Maine, and traveled...
to the fabled coast at Belfast. Last year, Chamard said, the organization "reimagined" the ride, putting on a loop route that started and ended in Brunswick, Maine, at the old naval air station. A loop made the logistics easier for everyone.

"We wanted to make sure we still had the ride, feel, and look of Maine," Chamard said. "We traveled through so many beautiful parts of the state, along some coastline, rural farmland, and along some rivers."

The ride last year also incorporated bike paths when it was feasible. The virtual event this year will give fundraisers eight weeks to reach the fundraising minimum, which has historically been $550. This year, in recognition of the pandemic, the minimum has been lowered to $250. The funds raised will go toward the American Lung Association's efforts to fight COVID-19.

"The only requirement to be a virtual trekker is to meet the minimum for fundraising," Chamard said. "Once that happens, you get the 'T-shirt, the accomplishment medal, and a commemorative bib number.'"

In other words, you don't have to actually ride as long as you raise the money. But Chamard said she hopes people do ride — safely.

"This is a cycling event," she said. "We want people to stay active while practicing social distancing. We have suggested goals of 60 miles each day. We're not encouraging group riding."

Chamard said the virtual event will work to the benefit of those people who perhaps weren't available to ride on Father's Day weekend or who found riding 180 miles in three days to be more than they could handle.

The response to the virtual event has been positive and supportive so far, Chamard said. People understand that the mass ride had to be canceled, given the circumstances.

"I don't have a projection as far as where we'll end up," Chamard said. "Certainly we understand that $1.3 million would be a very happy surprise. We may not get there — most likely won't — but hopefully we'll be able to at least make up some ground and support what the Lung Association is doing."

Fitzgerald admitted virtual events are an experiment. The Maine trek will likely be the first to give it a try. As for when or if the mass rides will return, Fitzgerald isn't making any bets.

"My crystal ball is the same as yours, and my Magic 8 Ball isn't much more help," she said. "But we follow the CDC's recommendations very closely, and we're also trying to follow guidance from the White House. We're trying to be really sensitive and move with what's healthy for the country."

"We're a very optimistic bunch of people," Fitzgerald added. The American Lung Association is one of the biggest players in the fundraising ride arena, but there are many more nonprofit organizations that rely on cycling events to raise money for their missions.

One of them is the Jett Foundation, founded in 2001 by Christine and Stephen McSherry after learning their five-year-old son Jett had developed Duchenne muscular dystrophy. Since then, the Jett Foundation has raised more than $16 million for biomedical Duchenne research and shifted its primary focus to direct service for families impacted by Duchenne and other neuromuscular disorders.

Christine McSherry started the Jett Ride in 2007 with a cross-country ride for siblings of those stricken with Duchenne. Eric Snyder, executive director of the Jett Foundation, said the ride fulfills two important missions.

"Duchenne impacts the whole family," Snyder said. "Often mothers and fathers have opportunities to reach out to each other and find support among friends and family. The siblings can be isolated. The intent of the ride was to bring awareness to the Jett Foundation, but also for siblings to come together and have a place where they can unite and share stories."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 48
The Guianas in South America — Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana — are not a well-known travel destination. And that is exactly why Barry Kaiser was planning a bicycle trip there this fall.

“I knew nothing about those three countries. I didn’t know anyone who had been there. But as I started to research, they became more interesting. I’m always looking for something different,” said Kaiser, an investment manager living in Edmonton, Alberta.

He describes himself as an “investment professional who cycles the world for its culture, insight, and food.” His penchant for any street food anywhere has gained him the moniker Barry “the Seagull” Kaiser.

Kaiser came to bike travel by way of competitive waterskiing. “All competitive water-skiers congregate in southern Florida in the winter,” Kaiser said. To stay in shape, he started cycling. A few years later, in 1989, he decided to ride around the world.

“Outside of a weekend tour, my first tour was a world tour,” he said. Starting in Europe, he learned to take obstacles in stride. But when a trio of American cyclists in Jerusalem said they planned to take the bus to Cairo rather than risk riding through the Sinai Desert, it made him think twice. As he cycled closer to the Israel-Egypt border, a group of Israeli men stopped him. When they heard his plan, they told him, “They will kill you out there.”

At the Gaza Strip, soldiers told him it was too dangerous to enter and redirected him. When he finally reached the Israel-Egypt boarder, the Israeli immigration officer told him that it had been six months since a cyclist had crossed the Sinai Desert.

“Apprehensive, I made my way to the other side where an armed Egyptian soldier met me,” said Kaiser. “Not sure what to expect, I braced myself for his response. He broke a big Egyptian smile to say, ‘Welcome to Egypt!’ I nearly fell off my bike. The remainder of my trip to Cairo was just as warm and inviting as that encounter. I learned that day that no border was too difficult to cross and no obstacle was too big to overcome.”

On his first bicycle tour, Kaiser traveled over 22,000 kilometers through four continents and 22 countries. Instead of satiating his desire to travel, the trip only stoked it. After 30 years of exploring the world by bike, there is hardly anywhere he won’t go. He admits that Southeast Asia can’t be equaled for its food, culture, and hospitality — he’s done five tours there.

The verdict on the Guianas’s street food is still out since COVID-19 has pushed the trip back until next year.

Kaiser will keep packing his bicycle because “it allows me to absorb a country, its people, and its culture. There is no other means of travel that allows one to do it quite that way. It has defined the person I am today. Cycle touring is the thing I am most proud of with my life.”
country, its people, and its culture. There is no other means of travel that allows one to do it quite that way. It has defined the person I am today. Cycle touring is the thing I am most proud of with my life.”

After his world tour, Kaiser joined Adventure Cycling. He recently became part of the Legacy Society and included Adventure Cycling in his will. “I see a real opportunity for people who have more than they need for retirement to give back to society and leave some kind of legacy,” Kaiser said. “We all have things we would like to see changed in this world. Cycle touring has given me so much over the past 30 years, and I want to pay that back partially through this planned giving program. I can’t find a better organization to do that with than Adventure Cycling.”

April Cypher is Adventure Cycling’s Assistant Development Director. In reading Barry’s blog (travelblog.org/Bloggers/Punchoy), she learned that escamoles is Spanish for ant larvae on your appetizer.
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This year’s ride was supposed to begin in Nashville, Tennessee, and end in Hersheypark in Hershey, Pennsylvania, an 850-mile ride over four states in 21 days. The siblings are mostly teens, who stop in the towns along the route to stay with families impacted by Duchenne. The event averages about 15 riders, although groups have been as small as nine and as large as 20.

“Think about teens from all areas uniting on a journey on bikes, stopping in different towns and homes of families along the way, sometimes sleeping over,” Snyder said. “It’s a unique ride.”

The Jett Ride has raised about $350,000 for the foundation since its inception, a significant amount for an organization that has an annual budget of $2.5 million. But Snyder said the ride is important for much more than the money it raises. It connects people from different families and communities who share the experience of dealing with Duchenne.

The ride had to be canceled this year, Snyder said.

“We made the decision based on the current environment,” he said. “You can imagine what we’re trying to do — bring a ride from Nashville to Pennsylvania, stopping at people’s houses and communities. The individuals we serve are very high risk. We couldn’t do it.”

As of early May, Snyder and his team were still trying to figure out what to do instead of the ride.

“Right now we’re looking for a virtual way to keep the spirit of the ride alive,” Snyder said.

Another ride dealing with the impact of COVID-19 is based in Missoula, Montana, hometown of Adventure Cycling Association. Caeli Quinn cofounded Climate Ride in 2008 after working for Backroads as a bicycling and hiking guide for many years.

Quinn said she was living in China in 2005, leading trips for Backroads, when she found herself astounded by the pollution that resulted from that country’s transition from a bike culture to a car culture.

“I was sick a lot from the pollution,” she said.

Quinn moved to Montana when she returned from China and decided to start Climate Ride. All of her friends were doing rides in support of various health- and disease-related causes, but no one was doing a bike ride to support the environment and active transportation.

Her first ride connected New York with Washington, DC, a high-visibility route that would bring attention to the cause.

“We put together a beautiful route,” Quinn said. “We went through gorgeous parts of New Jersey, along the Delaware River, through Amish country, coming into DC on a bike path.”

At the end of the ride, everyone met with their members of Congress to advocate for addressing climate change.

In 2010, Quinn put on a ride along the California coast from the redwoods down to San Francisco. The organization grew to the point where it is now putting on 11 events a year all over the world. Last year alone, a total of 600 people took part in those events, raising $800,000 for a collection of nonprofits dealing with climate change. Since it was founded, Climate Ride has raised more than $6.1 million for the cause.

So what about this year, in the time of the pandemic?

“It has been an extraordinary time for many nonprofits and small businesses,” Quinn said. “In a way we’re fortunate, because we run a variety of events. Some are small, 20 people, which we were able to reschedule for the fall in hopes they can run. Large-group events are questionable right now.”

Quinn had to cancel her California ride, which was scheduled for May 12, and is the organization’s biggest fundraiser of the year, averaging about $500,000. In late April, Climate Ride held a virtual event called Climate Rise.

“The idea was to rise together in support of fellow humans and nonprofits in crisis during this pandemic,” Quinn said. “So many nonprofits that support the environment are in trouble.”

You could do anything you wanted to raise money for Climate Rise. Some people played the piano or violin. Others did kayaking trips, and rode bikes in the redwoods.

“They did everything,” Quinn said.

The event raised more than $60,000 in a day.

Quinn received a federal grant through the U.S. Small Business Administration’s Paycheck Protection Program that will keep her small staff paid for several months. She’s planning another virtual event and focusing on 2021 rides.

“I am optimistic, I’m also pragmatic,” Quinn said. “I’ll take every opportunity to keep our staff. It’s important we care for each other to the best of our abilities. A lot depends on what happens in the fall. If small group travel can occur, we’ll be in a better place for sure. There’s no way to know.”

Dan D’Ambrosio is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist.