revisiting the
Pacific Coast Highway

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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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?

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.