

My First Bike Camping Adventure

by TANEIKA DUHANEY



rowing up in New York City, I saw the bike as a means to an end. The thing that allowed me to mosey outside the two-block confinement my parents allowed me to travel with little regard. On the bike, I was allowed to ride five blocks in any direction, but I never went very far. In the car-centric borough of Queens, city buses, dollar vans, and taxis were cheap and plentiful, so traveling by bike soon lost its novelty. Then I became an adult, and a culmination of life events led me back to the very thing that had given me my first taste of freedom: the bike. Now that I can explore without boundaries, where would I go, and what would I do?

The idea of riding again was exciting. Shifting from the road to riding off the beaten path was liberating, mesmerizing, and calming. My weekend rides usually started at Fletcher's Boathouse at mile marker three on the C&O Canal towpath.

One Saturday, after stopping for a break at Great Falls, I decided to see how far I could go. I rode until the towpath changed from bumpy, compact gravel to fine, crushed black limestone. Within a few miles, I encountered the first of many hiker/biker campsites. The campsite offered a porta-john, two picnic benches, and a water pump. This was the perfect place to stop.

I greeted a couple sitting on a bench. We chatted as the duo unpacked their bike camping gear and proceeded to pitch a tent. They orchestrated their setup effortlessly, gushed about their bike travel plans, and encouraged me to try bike camping. Riding my bike is one thing; riding and camping is another. "Just do it," they quipped. "Do some research, start slow, and have fun. We ride and camp along the trail at least once a year," they said. As I prepared to leave, the lady turned to me and said, "Take the time to notice everything; it changes you."

Riding back, I was intrigued by our chance meeting. As soon as I got home, I Googled bike camping. After sorting through stories and recommendations about days-long bike camping trips, I found what I needed: bike camping for beginners.

With the camper's words fresh in my mind, I searched for local parks with

campsites, bike-friendly routes from home, and emergency options. I made checklists for everything: food, bike and sleeping equipment, toiletries, and emergency care. This was the easy part — getting camping gear was another situation.

I started with my local Facebook Buy Nothing group. Someone offered a tent and sleeping bag; unfortunately, both were too big and heavy to transport by bike. Next, I scoured Facebook Marketplace and found a pocket stove, coffee press, and a repaired lightweight tent. A seller sold me a once-used camping hammock for half price. I rounded out my search at the REI Garage, which offered several wallet-friendly sleeping systems. With these staples in hand, the remaining items like toiletries, bike repair tools, food, headlamp, and first aid supplies were purchased on sale, taken from my pantry, or pillaged from my garage.

After searching the Old Farmer's Almanac for the best weather opportunity, I reserved my camping spot at a local park about 10 miles from home. One Friday afternoon after work, dressed in cycling bibs and a T-shirt, I navigated through evening traffic to the park. Riding my bike with camping gear, food, and water was more challenging than I anticipated. After checking in for my campsite, I located the potable water source, restroom, and approved campfire areas. To my surprise, there were no other campers nearby. As the breeze blew across my face, I heard birds chirping and children laughing in the distance. Though the parkway was relatively close, I felt like I'd been transported to another world: no sirens, car horns, nothing. Pitching my tent was quite the feat. I was significantly slower than the campers on the C&O. This was going to take some practice. However, hanging the hammock was relatively easy.

As night fell, I was a mosquito magnet. I ditched the hammock and found refuge inside the tent. After dinner, I gazed at the stars as I shuffled into my sleeping bag. With no other campers around, the solitude was welcomed but also worrying. What if something went "bump" in the night? I awoke the next morning feeling rested and clear-headed. My worries about lions, tigers, and bears were unfounded.

That morning I rode around the lake, stopped to watch birds, and found



meandering paths from the trail to parts of the park that I never knew existed. Upon returning to the campsite, I met two campers from the other side of town. I lounged in the hammock, read a book, and drifted in and out of sleep. That evening, the other campers and I shared a fire and many laughs as fireflies flew about. I abandoned the hammock and shuffled into my sleeping bag like the night before.

On Sunday morning, I awoke restless and hungry. Breaking down the tent was an evolution. My camping neighbors saw my struggle and offered some much-needed assistance. After packing the gear on my bike, we bid farewell, and as I rode to exit the park, the 10 percent chance of rain turned into a torrential downpour. Note to self: pack rain gear.

My first bike camping trip was nothing like I'd feared and everything that I hadn't expected. Staying close to home gave me the confidence to venture beyond my own confines. Now, I have an epic cycling adventure in my sights. Where will I go, and will I make it? Stay tuned. ⚠️



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