Elaine Parker, a 67-year-old bicycle tour guide/carpenter/artist, was on a ride with friends from Telluride to Moab, fully loaded, when she lost her balance on a downhill run and fell off her bike.

“I injured myself so badly, it was awful,” Parker said. “I broke five ribs.”

Parker couldn’t understand it. She had been riding and leading tours — beginning with Vermont Bicycle Touring — for 25 years, all over the world.

“After I started to recover, I realized I would never have fallen down like that,” Parker said. “What happened?”

Adding to the mystery, not long before her crash, Parker had been in a telemark ski class in Colorado where she struggled to an inexplicable degree, given her long experience as a skier.

“I could not stay on my skis,” Parker said. “I kept falling down. Everybody else was doing fine. What is wrong with me?”

It took a year and a half to find out. Parker was diagnosed with an acoustic neuroma, a tumor inside a nerve that carries information from the outer ear to the brain stem, a nerve that not only carries hearing, but is also “all about balance,” Parker explained.

“How to move your body through space goes through that nerve,” she said.

Parker endured a 12-hour surgery in 2012 to remove the tumor, which unfortunately did not go well.

“It wouldn’t have been so bad if they hadn’t screwed up and had to go back in a week later for a six-hour surgery,” Parker said. “All of this really did a number on me. I was working as a tour guide in Vermont. I had to take those months off.”

The following year, Parker was back to work guiding.

“If you work on your movement and balance all the time, it gets better,” she said. “It was a hell of a recovery. For the next five years, I got better. I was able to work, able to ski and all of that.”

After she recovered, Parker and her wife of 31 years, Meg Davis, also an experienced cyclist, did a tour in Patagonia. Her life was back on track.

That life with Davis had been one of adventure and discovery, including a three-year stint working and living at McMurdo Station in Antarctica, the U.S. government scientific research facility on the southern tip of Ross Island.

McMurdo has a population of about 1,000 people in the summer, which drops to barely 100 people during the winter, Parker said. Antarctica has four months of darkness and four months of sun, with another four months behaving more like a normal day, with both light and dark.

“It’s challenging on your hormones,” Parker said. “It does mess you up, but it was so worth it. I would not trade it.”

One of Parker’s fondest memories is the time she spent with McMurdo’s scientists.
"You can volunteer on the weekend to go to these far-flung science stations where they're experimenting, eating beans out of a can every day," Parker said. "You take fresh food with you, feed them, and spend the night. They show you all their experiments, which they can't wait to show you. I did it all the time. It was a perk."

Parker ended up riding a bike even in Antarctica. Motorized transportation was very limited at McMurdo. There were a few World War II–era trucks that were usually spoken for by staff with more seniority than Parker. She ended up walking most of the time to get where she needed to go, until one day she had a chance conversation with a mechanic in the heavy equipment shop.

"He said, 'There are a couple of bicycles in the storage room somewhere,'" Parker remembered. "We pulled a bike out, got it together, and I rode it all over the place."

Antarctica was an interlude in Parker's life, but bicycle touring has been a constant. In addition to guiding for Vermont Bicycle Touring, now known as VBT, she helped launch Sojourn Bicycling & Active Vacations, based in Shelburne, Vermont.

Parker also guided for Bike Vermont, a rival to VBT, for years.

"They had lower-priced tours for the common person," Parker said. "They were great."

Bike Vermont changed its name to Discovery Bicycle Tours and is now based in Woodstock, Vermont.

"I'm just crazy about Vermont," Parker said. "We went everywhere — Hawaii, Alaska, New Zealand, Arizona, California — and led tours all over the country, and Vermont has always been my favorite place, even though these other places are just astounding."

After her trip to Patagonia, Parker's condition slowly began to deteriorate again. Her problems with balance returned.

"I felt I knew I had to quit working, it was just devastating to me," Parker said. "I went into a deep depression. I felt like my life was being jerked out from under me."

Parker got so low she was terrified.

"I hit bottom about three years ago," she said. "It was so serious, so scary, so deep I was unable to pull myself out of it."

Davis was still leading tours, going to places like Ireland for a month in the summer.

"She had to quit working and take care of me," Parker said. "We both lost our jobs. That's important to talk about when you talk about what happens when somebody is disabled, when somebody needs to adapt."

Parker and Davis had led the life they loved. They built a house together. They rode together and skied together. They introduced others to the wonders of bicycle touring as guides.

"You assume that you're always going to be able to go to Patagonia and bike around, but you're not," Parker said. "You assume you're always going to be able to ski through Yellowstone, but you're not. It wasn't just me who was devastated, but (also Davis)."

So Parker and Davis adapted. On skis, they go at their separate paces.

"We went skiing at Craftsbury (Vermont), at an outdoor center," Parker said. "We had our lunch together in the warming hut, but we didn't ski together because she skis fast and I have to be careful. I fell six times. I got up and kept skiing. She does not have to help me through that."

Cycling was a different story.

"I'm no longer feeling totally safe bicycling," Parker said. "I've fallen several times. It was dangerous for me to ride with a big full load again. That's when I decided to start looking for a tandem."

Not only a tandem, but an electric tandem — a Flyer made in Switzerland.

"Meg is in front of course," Parker said. "She has all the control, the brakes, the gears, the steering. What I'm doing is pedaling my ass off. We're both really demanding cyclists."

Parker said she and Davis don't use the electric assist much, but they're glad it's there when they need it on a mile-long climb along the Rio Grande, for example.

"This bike cost $10,000, it's worth every penny," Parker said. "I don't know what I would have done if I couldn't have kept riding."

Parker and Davis are planning a tour along the Oregon coast this year, and in a year and a half, a tour of South Africa. Thanks to the tandem and the support of her wife, Parker is still living the life she loves. She does credit one other source of support during her travails.

"I read Adventure Cyclist all the way through this, and that was important to me," Parker said. "When I started deteriorating noticeably five years ago, I renewed my subscription because I didn't want to forget. Sometimes people don't want to go there — 'I used to be this person' — I did want to be reminded."

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