

THE LONG HAUL

Turn in your resignation — it's time to ride around the world

Globetrotting cyclists have experiences that just don't happen on week-long jaunts, or even cross-country treks.

Charles and Lisa Chancellor were pedaling their loaded Ibis tandem through a tidy town in the Netherlands when an elderly man walking his dog cried, "Hello! Are you Americans?"

"Yes," they replied.

"Then you're going to my house," the man said.

Charles and Lisa looked at each other. It hadn't been that long since they'd put their stuff in storage, moved out of their apartment, and left their friends and young lives in North Carolina to ride around the world. They'd pedaled to Washington, D.C., flown to England, and headed to the continent. Ahead lay Greece, Turkey, India, Thailand, Malaysia, New Zealand, Australia, Alaska — 14,000 miles and 18 months of ... what? Life-altering adventures and challenges, wondrous sights and cultures and people — they hoped.

But right now this Dutch stranger stood before them, insisting they come with him. What did he want? Where was he going to take them? Was it safe? Charles and Lisa shrugged. Nothing ventured ...

The man whisked them to his home, where he lavished food and gifts on them. He gave them cycling jerseys from the race team he sponsored. He took them on a grand tour of his hometown. He acted like they were long-lost relatives.

"Do you know why I'm treating you this way?" he finally asked. "When I was five, the Germans invaded. They took everything we had — our food, our money. When the Americans liberated us, they hugged me and fed me. They treated me like a real person. I know you weren't here then, but you probably have a grandfather or a great-uncle who

was in World War II. Now when I see an American, I thank them. They gave me my freedom, my dignity."

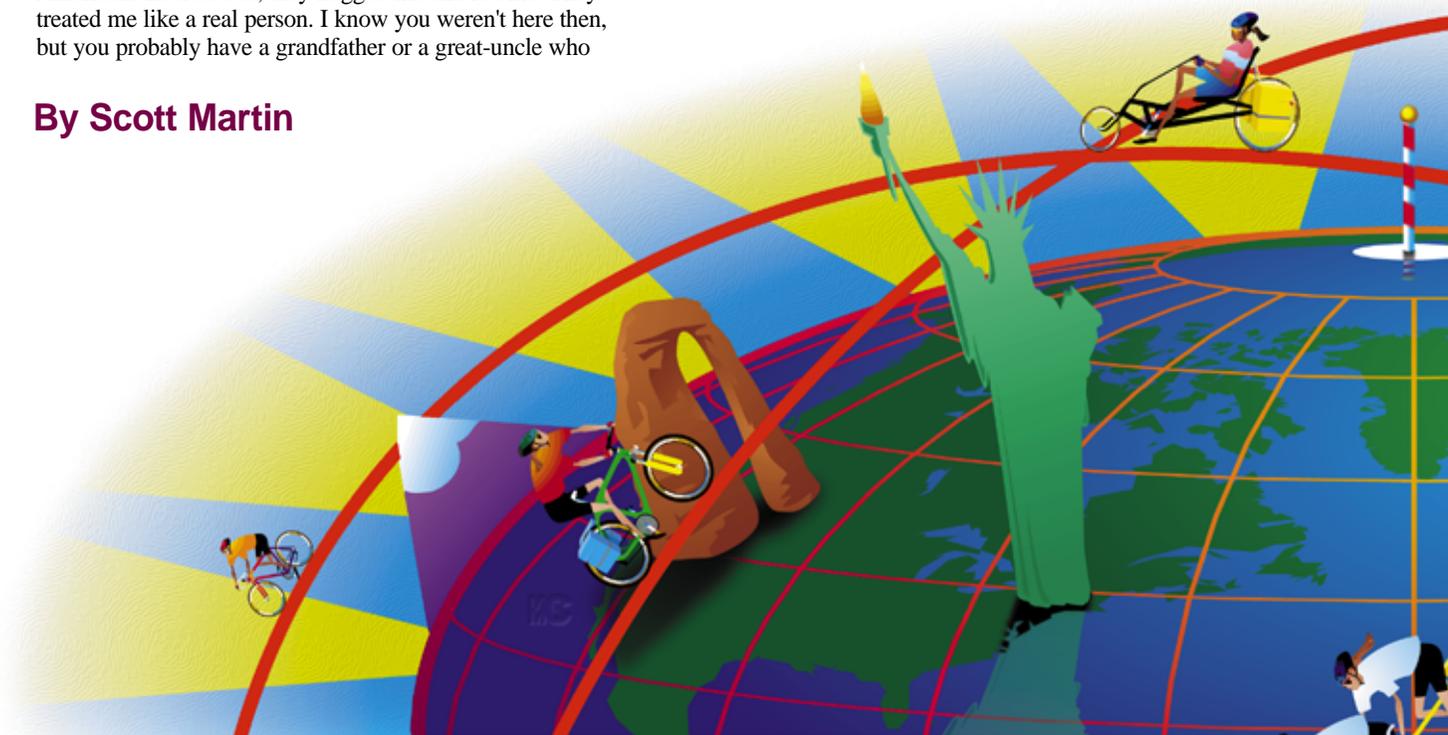
For Charles, who has several relatives who fought in that war, it was a moment he'll never forget.

Moments like these happen all the time when you roam the planet by bike. Because it's such a gorgeously simple, slow and naked way to travel, cycletouring instantly connects you to people whose language and culture are utterly different from ours. A bicycle transports you to experiences no other vehicle can reach.

You might live for two weeks on a 5,500-acre family farm in Zimbabwe, complete with pet lions, like Marc Freedman, who spent eight years circling the world. You might get invited to stay at a former maharaja's palace in India and join a wedding where you carry \$16,000 worth of jewels, like Betsy Hune Kalter on her 5-year-long trip with her husband Roger.

Globetrotters experience things that just don't happen when you take a weeklong cycling vacation in Napa or Vermont; or even a summer-long, cross-country trip. Sure, those jaunts are fun and memorable. But the sense of exploring the unknown and living by your wits — truly not knowing what's around that bend in the road — isn't nearly as powerful when you stay within the safety and familiarity of your native land. Something's lost when you know that

By Scott Martin



the next person you meet will speak English, the next town on your map will actually be there, the bank will be open, and the fast-food joint will be selling burgers made "your way."

To ride around the world is to take a journey inward as much as it is to go from Point A to Point B. Everyone who does it comes back a changed person. More tolerant, more self-reliant, more able to live in the moment and less willing to accept the endless pursuit of money and possessions typical of modern society, more inclined to believe in humankind's capacity for basic kindness.

Why do people do it? After all, it's a huge commitment. You put your life on hold: store your furniture, sell your car, stop your mail, move out of your home, say goodbye to loved ones who may not understand your compulsion. For some, the answer is simple wanderlust. They're happier traveling than staying put. Others do it to learn about the world and about themselves. And some need a fresh start in life, a chance to re-examine priorities and figure out what comes next. But talk to any round-the-world cyclist long enough and virtually all will say something like, "I didn't want to be lying on my deathbed saying, 'What if?'"

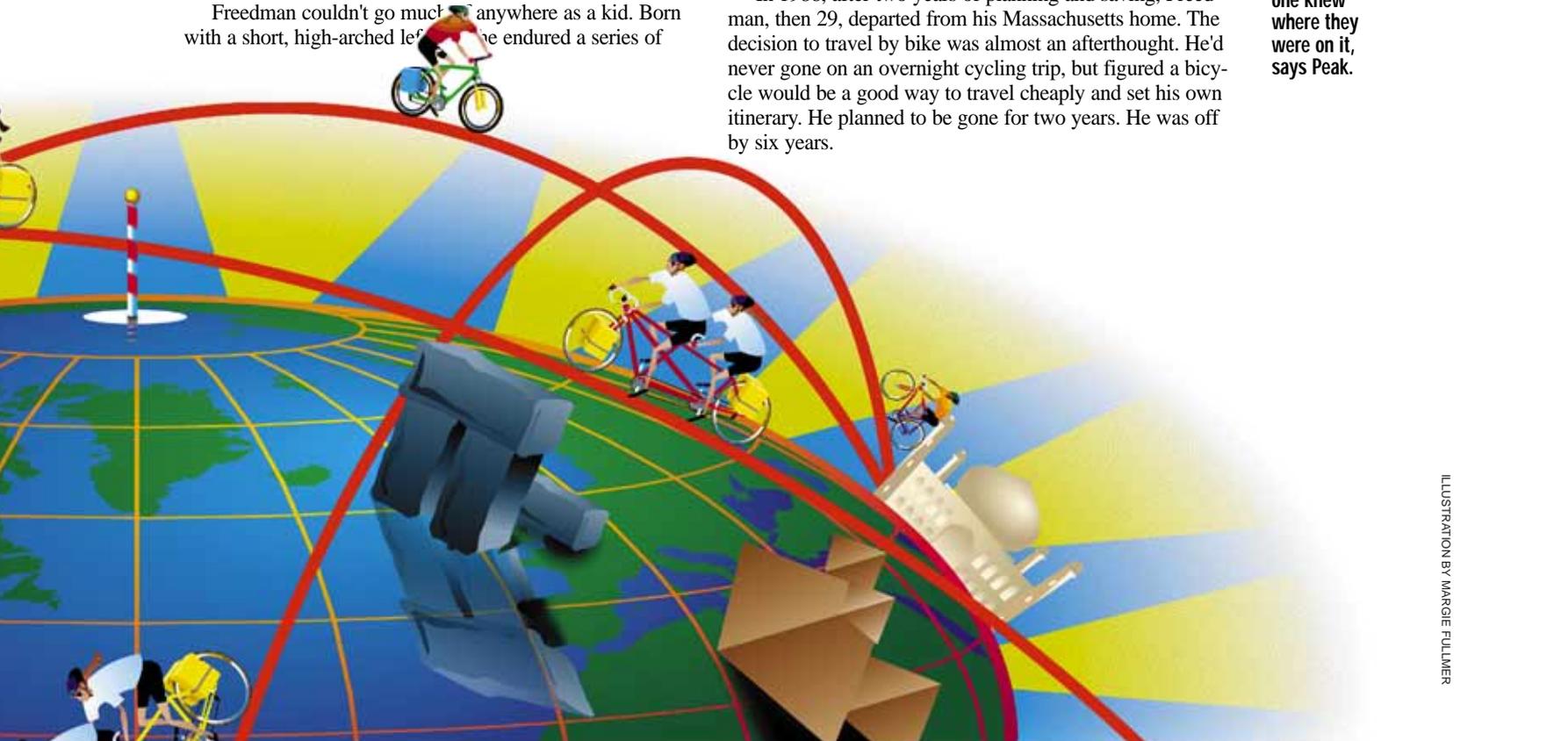
Freedman couldn't go much anywhere as a kid. Born with a short, high-arched left foot, he endured a series of



operations and twice had to wear a cast for six months. He considered himself handicapped and didn't fit in with other children. While growing up, he remembers hearing his parents' friends talk about their retirement dreams. But time passed and they never did any those things. Somehow, health or money problems always interfered. Already denied a normal childhood, Freedman vowed not to defer his dreams until it was too late. He would travel around the world.

In 1986, after two years of planning and saving, Freedman, then 29, departed from his Massachusetts home. The decision to travel by bike was almost an afterthought. He'd never gone on an overnight cycling trip, but figured a bicycle would be a good way to travel cheaply and set his own itinerary. He planned to be gone for two years. He was off by six years.

Round-the-world cyclist Jennifer Peak pores over a map with Sumatran villagers. Everyone loved looking at the map, but no one knew where they were on it, says Peak.



Schoolchildren throughout the world enthusiastically greeted Jennifer and her husband Bob on their four-year journey.

"I traveled to have adventure," says Freedman, who ended up cycling 35,000 miles through 53 countries on six continents. "I had no preconceived ideas or guidebooks. You can take a trip or let a trip take you. I prefer the latter. My mentality was: This is an expedition, not a vacation.

"I almost gave up after six or seven years on the road. All I had was a broken-down bicycle, two t-shirts and two pair of smelly socks. But then I realized that not having anything was very powerful. I could do anything I wanted. All the keys I'd had before I left — for my car, my apartment, and so on — I'd paid a heavy price for them. I felt



free without them."

For Sally Vantress-Lodato, a round-the-world bike trip was a quest to find herself. At age 29, she had a good career, a nice home in California, a car, even an airplane. Life was stable, secure, predictable. But something gnawed at her.

"What could be the purpose in always achieving a higher level of success when that success would only be measured

by the accumulation of even more material possessions?" she later wrote in "Seeing Myself Seeing the World," a book about her trip. "It was a gamble to put everything on hold and interrupt a successful career, but I suspected if I could learn more about myself, then my life might be more fulfilling."

Shedding her comfortable life, Vantress-Lodato embarked on a journey that would take her to some 20 countries in 19 months, covering 21,000 miles by bike, much of the time dealing with the special challenges of traveling as a woman alone.

"The trip taught me how to view my life differently, how to overcome my fear," she says today. "It gave me the foundation to go back to do anything I want to with my life. And the strength to endure to follow my dreams."

Of course a two-wheeled circumnavigation isn't all cross-cultural revelations and golden flashes of self-discovery. On the surface, at least, it's a lot like any extended bike trip in the United States. You soon establish a routine: get up, make breakfast, strike the tent, pack your gear, hit the road, admire the scenery, stop for lunch, chat with a local, ride some more, find a campsite, make dinner, write in your journal, crash for the night.

But when you leave North America, things change — and change radically in that vast part of Earth known as the Third World. The language is indecipherable, the customs baffling, the food weird, the border guards intimidating, the currency adorned with funny colors and pictures of strange people. Maybe that map you picked up is accurate, and maybe it's not. Maybe that rumor of machete-wielding banditos is fiction, and maybe it's all too true. Maybe that water was safe to drink, and, well, you don't want to think about how your gut's going to feel if it wasn't.

"In the Third World, you always have to think about how much water to carry, where to buy food, or finding a safe place to stop," says Freedman. "It's not tension, but there are always decisions."

Happily, traveling by bike smashes barriers everywhere. The locals figure no American would pedal around the world unless he or she were crazy or poor, so they tend to treat you at worst as a curiosity, and at best with the great generosity of people who don't have much. Either way, a bike saddle is the perfect front-row seat from which to view the human spectacle.

"Everybody always said the place I was going to was dangerous, that I'd be killed or robbed," Freedman recalls. "Then I'd go there and it would always be great. In so many places, I'd just hold out a handful of coins and people would take only what something cost. In Tanzania I met some tourists who were traveling by bus. They hated the country. I loved it."

"At first I considered carrying a gun on my trip," says Seattle resident John Verd, 33, who rode about 7,000 miles in 1995-'96 before a

Nuts and Bolts

GETTING STARTED: Ready for the ultimate adventure of riding around the world? Here are some practical tips from veteran globetrotters:

BUDGET: The cost of a round-the-world bike trip varies widely, depending on how long you'll be gone and how cheaply you want to travel. But figures supplied by several world travelers suggest a range from about \$4,000 to \$9,000 per year (based on prices from trips taken in the late-1980s to mid-'90s).

For example: Marc Freedman figures his eight-year trip cost about \$32,000 (roughly \$10 per day); John and Lisa Chancellor together spent \$18,000 for their 18-month trip (not

including another \$5,000 for a tandem and tent); and Sally Vantress-Lodato's 19-month trip cost about \$13,000. (Keep in mind that many riders earn part of the money by working en route.)

RESOURCES: John Chancellor, a self-described "information-gatherer" and "closet geographer," researched much of his trip through "Lonely Planet" and "Rough Guide" guidebooks, National Geographic magazines, even encyclopedias. Conversely, Marc

Freedman says: "I didn't listen to guidebooks. Guidebooks have expectations, but having expectations sets you up for disappointment. And guidebooks tell you not to go to certain places, but things change." On the road, youth hostels are great sources of travel information. John Verd also found language schools excellent places to make contacts, learn about accommodations, and find work.

GEAR: You'll find the essentials in gear lists from sources such as Adventure Cycling and Sally Vantress-Lodato's book about her trip, "Seeing Myself Seeing the World," which is available from online bookseller Amazon.com (written under her maiden name, Sally Vantress). But here are a few hard-won tips: Get a freestanding tent so you can pitch it in, say, a filthy barn or a pavilion with a cement-slab floor. A tent big enough to hold your bike comes in handy, too. A multi-purpose tool such as a Leatherman can be a life-saver. "I used it for everything from cooking, to putting in spokes, to fabricating fenders," says Verd. For bike maintenance, focus on bringing tools rather than spare parts. "The thing you didn't bring is going to break," advises Freedman.

PERSONAL SAFETY:

Never take your wallet out in public. Consider using a money belt, plus a debit card. Always keep an eye on valuable items such as a camera. Project an image of confidence and assertiveness; don't act like a victim. As a woman traveling alone,

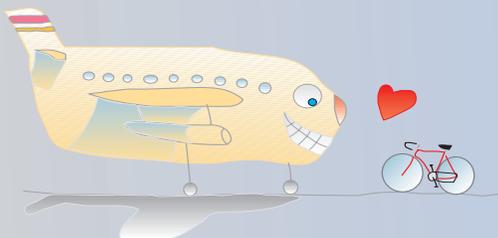
Vantress-Lodato learned several tricks: keeping her hair short and wearing a big T-shirt so her gender wasn't readily apparent; angrily confronting anyone who followed her; spitting and acting tough if she were being watched; and scouting out a campsite then waiting until dark before pitching her tent. "You've got to come across as 'Don't mess with me,'" she says. "If you come across as afraid, even if it's just on your face, you're going to have trouble."

SCHEDULING: Be flexible. If you have to be at a certain place at a certain time, you invariably run into problems. Particularly in the Third World, things don't always happen on time.

-S.M.



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traffic accident in Italy cut short his journey. "But I found that people were so cool and so receptive to a single person on a bike. It made the trip."

And because riding around the world usually means traveling on a tight budget, you end up living and eating and sleeping with poor people, and in most places that means most people. You experience life unfiltered by plate-glass windows, air conditioning and oh-so-helpful tour guides. Okay, so you sleep in some funky places and smell ripe at times. But you're seeing life the way it is, not the way Conrad Hilton framed it.

You come to appreciate what's really important, too. After days of slashing through the African bush or battling the howling winds of Chile's deserts, you understand the value of a roof that doesn't leak, a clean place to sleep and a light bulb to read by. A big-screen TV and a SUV with 14 cup-holders suddenly don't seem so essential.

Sometimes, though, those hardships are just hard. Sooner or later, life on the road gets ugly: bad weather, loneliness, sickness, exhaustion. All you can do is struggle on, one pedal stroke at a time.

Vantress-Lodato remembers one low point all too well. She'd caught a ferry to Ireland and it was raining so hard she could barely see. The ferry was running late and night had fallen when the boat docked. Drenched and freezing, she had no choice but to break one of her cardinal rules: Never ride in the dark. She stopped and pitched her tent on a piece of ground that by now was more bog than field. It was 4 a.m. Shivering, she wrapped herself in her sleeping bag and waited for dawn. By morning everything she had lay covered in muck. All she could do was pack up and keep riding.

For the Chancellors, bad times hit during Christmas 1995. Both from close-knit families, they'd been traveling for six months. They were in Thailand, where it was a muggy 95 degrees. The only sign of Christmas in this Buddhist country was a pathetic little plastic Santa Claus statue in a shop window. To top it off, they'd learned that back home, their niece had just been born. Torn with homesickness, Lisa began weeping. "Charles," she begged her husband, "please don't ask me to be gone for Christmas again."

Freedman's nadir came in India. It was New Year's Eve and he had the flu. For nearly a week he lay bedridden in a cold, dirty room, vomiting and going to the bathroom. No one around him cared; he was thousands of miles from anyone who did.

"What," he asked himself, "am I doing here?"

Still, the special moments outweigh the tough times. Imagine a life in which every day brings a completely fresh experience — new sights, sounds, tastes, people, adventures. A life in which your only responsibility is to head down the road. A life in which you're free to go almost anywhere, do practically anything; a rare, fantastic and sometimes frightening freedom. No wonder round-the-world



(it's a lug)

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cyclists all say that after the initial joy of coming home subsides, they have trouble adapting to everyday existence. Get up every morning and do the same things, schlep to the same places? How strange it seems, how dull and confining.

Far better to be on the move. Even in, say, war-torn El Salvador, where Freedman found himself part way through his trip. He was riding through abandoned villages pock-



marked with bullet holes, past guerillas armed Rambo-style with knives and big guns. They'd follow him, fingers twitching on triggers. One day, low on money and feeling nervous, he stopped at a market. There, amidst the poverty and destruction and violence, an old toothless woman in a brightly colored dress approached. Clearly life for her was hard, and she had no reason to look

kindly on this bike-riding gringo interloper. The old woman walked over to Freedman. And offered him an orange.

Only on a bicycle. ●

Scott Martin is a senior editor for Asimba, an online community for cyclists and other sports participants (www.asimba.com). Before that, he was a senior editor for Bicycling magazine.

Far left: Luckily, a strong tailwind swept Jennifer and Bob across the edge of the Sahara Desert in Tunisia, making for a 115-kilometer day; Left: Jennifer with typical traffic along the route from Kathmandu, Nepal to Varanassi, India.

