

Why My Mom (and Yours) Should Not Worry About Our Bike Tours

Your guide to making a convincing argument for leaving today

When Nancy and I began to plan our Babes On Wheels '01 Cycling Extravaganza — two girls, two bikes, self-supported, Vancouver to San Diego and possibly beyond in five weeks — I knew it wasn't going to be easy to get my mom on board with the plan.

I'm 28 years old, live on my own, and yes, I still feel beholden to tell my parents my various adventure plans. You think I would have worn them down by now, but my mom still gets that look in her eye, that "it's my duty to stop my daughter from endangering her own life because she apparently doesn't have the survival instincts to do it herself" look, when I tell her about some of my adventurous schemes. I thought this would be one of the more difficult discussions.

"Mom, Nancy and I are going to ride our bikes from Vancouver to San Diego," I said.

"Oh, won't that be nice," she replied. She didn't hear me correctly, I thought. She must be distracted. I'll talk to her about it again later, when she can focus on being worried about me.

The next day ... "Mom, Nancy and I are going to ride our bikes from Vancouver to San Diego," I tried again, mentally

preparing my elegant, eloquent reasons why she needn't have me committed.

"Yes, that just sounds lovely," she answered.

Hmmmm. Still not getting through.

Some wires are getting crossed and the mom-radar identifying demented thought-processes from her children is on the fritz. Let's try one more time. Later that same day, while drying the after-dinner dishes, I began conversationally, "You know, Mom, Nancy and I are going to ride our bikes from Vancouver to San Diego together."

"WHAT???! Are you crazy? You can't do that, two young girls out there all alone, riding your bikes in the middle of nowhere, have you lost your mind? Do you know what could happen to you? Bad drivers, escaped lunatics hiding in the bushes, blizzards, tsunamis, botulism, grizzly bears, great white sharks..."

Ah good, I thought, she finally gets what I am going to do.

I can't be the only person who has to explain (and maybe cajole or plead or beg for tolerance of) my long-distance bicycle touring dreams to other people who are not immediately supportive or understanding of these dreams. There must be a fair

number of you out there, of all ages, who have a mom or dad, husband or wife, daughter or son, significant other, employer, hairdresser, pet, to whom you are obligated to tell your bike adventure plans (so they know why you haven't shown up for work for three weeks, so they can pick up your mail for six months, so they remember to make dinner for themselves while you are gone). And you know it isn't going to be easy to have them accept it.

When I was planning this trip in September 2001, I ordered the Pacific Coast route maps from Adventure Cycling. I also inquired as to whether Adventure Cycling had a "Mom, Don't Worry About Me On My Bike Trip Because..." publication available to distribute to loved ones to set their minds at ease about the inherent reasonableness of a bike tour.

Tom Robertson at Adventure Cycling replied that no such publication was yet available, but that he'd like a copy if I wrote one. So here it is. At the moment, my list only covers the major rationalization highlights for U.S. road riding, but as soon as I ride in some other country or start doing

By Christina Uss



off-road, I will let you all know of any updates.

May this be put to good use by all of you! Customize it to fit your situation, send it out to all family and friends, pack those panniers, and get riding right away!

HELLO, NON-CYCLE PERSON IN MY LIFE. I AM GOING ON A LONG-DISTANCE BICYCLE TOUR. I am of sound mind and body, and I do think this sounds like fun. I'm going to be carrying my own gear, clothes, sleeping bag, and peanut butter, fixing my own flat tires, occasionally getting rained upon, and riding much longer distances than may sound prudent to the ordinary car-propelled person. But you should not worry about me, because:

Practical Reasons

Technology means there's no such place as far away.

Nancy and I brought a cell phone. This turned out to be a terribly worthless expenditure of pannier space, as the elderly phone would only hold a charge for about an hour and we managed to lose the charger at the Oasis Motel on a rainy day just over the Oregon-California border.

But telling our families we were bringing it and giving out the number put their minds enough at ease for us to begin the trip with fewer objections, so it achieved its essential goal. You could bring a good, functional, non-elderly cell phone with you, which would make this idea even more persuasive.

I promised to call or email home every day, until Nancy started calling me a momma's girl. So I cut back to every third day, which worked just fine. I had a calling card, and made brief calls from nightly motels or convenient lunchstop pay phones, just to say I was still alive and, astonishingly, having a great time.

Sometimes, this was also a handy excuse to get out of the Pacific Northwest rain for a little while. Hi mom! No, no tsunamis yet. Yes, I have enough clean underwear. I am eating my vegetables. Can you put Dad on?

Thanks to the wonderful forethought of Andrew Carnegie, there are a lot of

sweet little libraries with even sweeter little librarians out there on any long-distance road ride you will take, nearly all of them with free Internet access. Any Kinko's is also a reliable 24-hour spot to find inexpensive Internet.

Just be warned — it's easy to let a warm and sunny afternoon slip away while you email, unaware in your blissful recounting of some stunning climb or dreamy downhill that you will now need to ride past sundown for two hours to get to the next hostel down the coast. Did you pack enough batteries for your lights? I know I didn't. Learn from my mistakes!

Statistical Reasons

According to The Statistical Abstract of the United States 2001, you are nearly twice as likely to be injured either by "Stairs or Steps" or "Floors or Flooring Material" (1,976,070 injuries all told in 1998) than by riding your bicycle. This leads me to think that on a typical day at home, your stairs and floors are plotting against you. Conversely, your bike is frequently looking out for you, keeping you away from those undependable stairs and floors and out on the road where you belong.

If you combine the numbers of injuries caused by "Knives plus Other Tableware and Flatware" in 1998, you've got almost exactly the same number as

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bicycling. Would you rather get sympathy cards while recovering from a glorious downhill spill in southern Washington that implicated two raccoons, your rain jacket, and a Clif Bar, which you can sell to Reader's Digest to cover your medical bills, or for an embarrassing incident involving your cereal spoon?

Heart disease and cancer caused over 50 percent of U.S. deaths in 1998. Seems to me that riding your bike as much as you can will actually protect your body from the things most likely to kill you in this country.

You will not be alone out there if you don't want to be. Do you know how many people are out there doing the same trip you are planning? Not enough, I'm sure, but 42,406,000 people rode a bike six or more times in 1999. Some of them will show up on your road.

Nancy and I rode in a rainy, late autumn through the Pacific Northwest and met dozens of people on similar or even longer treks than ours. I am going to wildly estimate that you will meet at least 10 other people riding on the same trip, and since they are touring cyclists, they will all be terrifically nice, interesting, and lovely people.

If you run out of batteries in the dark, they will be there to help you. Also, if no friends will join you in your crazy schemes and don't feel comfortable traveling alone, call me. I don't have anywhere in particular to be for the next few weeks.

Road riding is the way to go if you are planning on having an emergency. The roads that give you access to great cycling also give you access to all the handy items you would need in an emergency — ambulances and other vehicles, hospitals, phones, bike shops, Dairy Queens.

Also, the current population density of the United States is about 80 people per square mile. According to the amount of free cookies, coffee, advice, and use of bike pumps that Nancy and I were given on our

trip, the majority of these 80 people are generous, kind human beings. So anytime you need a hand, look around for one of those 80 folks, and one of them should happen along the road to your rescue in no time.

Joshua Piven's best-seller "The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook" (Chronicle Books, 1999), describes survival techniques for the major catastrophes this world can throw your way. It mentions cars in seven separate scenarios, but long-distance bicycle tours not even once. Runaway camels even rate a scenario in the

follow-up book, "The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook: Travel (2001)," but bicycle tours remain at zero. This just goes to show that when you get started with statistics, it's hard to know when to stop.

Emotional/Philosophical Reasons

Point #1 above is wrong — there is such a place as far away, and you can prove it with postcards. Promise folks back home lots of postcards. I was able to write and mail one postcard per day during our trip, and got home to see a 35-card pile of scenic memories that had arrived in a truly entertaining disorder. People love postcards from faraway lands, and the only way they will receive them is to let you go on your merry way.

Henry David Thoreau summed up the motivation many of us touring cyclists carry around in our hearts in his Walden: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

Replace "went to the woods" with "am going on a bike tour," and what argument is going to work against that?

Anything can happen at any time to anyone. This, I'm rather sorry to say, was my most persuasive reason. This is a true story, not embellished to make this list more meaningful: my dear mother prepared to review with me all the reasons she thought my trip sounded like an invitation to personal disaster. She laid some groundwork one day — why couldn't I stop all this bike touring, settle down and get a nice full-time normal person job, maybe in a nice city like New York?

Then I actually happened to be in downtown Manhattan a few days later, doing some part-time consulting. The date was September 11. I was lucky to be about a mile from the World Trade Center, but could have easily been right at Ground Zero that morning. I don't care to make any jokes about that day.

Anything can happen to you, wherever you are, wherever you live, whatever you thought your plans were for

that day or for the rest of your life. You need to be who you are — today, now — and live the best way you want to live. If that means going on a long-distance bike tour (and I think there is a great deal to be said for the innate soundness of that idea), by golly, there's no better time to go!

My mom currently agrees with this philosophy, and Nancy and I ended up having a magnificent time — the trip of a lifetime — cycling down the West Coast, making it all the way to Tijuana before Thanksgiving. But that is another story. If this list didn't help you construct a viable argument of your own, I'll have my mom call yours — she can be very convincing.

Heck, if Nancy and I could pull it off and live to tell the tale, anyone can! **AC**

This is Christina Uss's first story for Adventure Cyclist.