

You'll Be Staying Another Night

*Don't plan yourself out
of an adventure*

By Willie Weir

The most important piece of advice that I can give to someone heading out on an extended bicycle journey is: Don't over-plan. It is also the most difficult piece of advice to follow, especially for a first-time bicycle traveler. Planning gives one a sense of security. It helps suppress hyperventilation and anxiety attacks prior to leaping off into an adventure. But stare at that map long

enough, and I guarantee you'll go too far.

The brilliant idea will come to you that if you average only 96 miles a day, you'll be able to visit 15 major national parks, six museums, and still have time to catch the annual yellow zucchini festival. Or you'll alleviate all fear of not finding a place to stay by calling ahead and making reservations at 34 hotels and 53 campgrounds along your "carved-in-stone" route.

Adventures are many, many things ... but they are never planned. Trips are planned. Adventure is what happens when the

plan takes a detour. But detours take time, and if you've planned your journey down to the fine minutia, there is little or no wiggle room for adventure to squeeze into.

I've learned this lesson many times, but one time stands out. On my bicycle journey down through Mexico, I met three Canadian travelers who were driving a Volkswagen camper van. We shared a couple of days and a campsite in the mountains of Chiapas.

"Wouldn't it be great if we could meet up in Guatemala?" someone mentioned, in the combined brilliance of a full moon and a roaring campfire.

I hesitated at first, but promised them I'd meet them in six days at noon in the central park of the old city of

Antigua. I'd have to average about 75 miles a day over the mountains, but it was doable. They drove off the next morning.

"See you on Friday!" they called.

A couple of days later, I crossed the border into Guatemala, and in the first village I pedaled into I was instantly adopted by three charming Mayan sisters, all in their 50s. They fought over who would get to house the traveler. A compromise was reached and I ate dinner at one sister's house, stayed with the family of another, and had breakfast at the home of the third sister. I was surrounded by mountains, parrots, laughter and hospitality, and stuffed with homemade bread and fresh orange juice.

At breakfast, the husband of the eldest sister approached me and said that it would be an honor to show me their mountains. He was going up to check on some cattle — a three-day ride — and pointed to the horse he already had saddled for me.

It was just my luck. I had been pedaling for over four plan-free months and now the only plan I'd made was going to derail a magical adventure. I explained to him in my poor Spanish that I had promised to meet some friends in just three days time, and couldn't accept his most generous offer.

Fast forward a year and a hemisphere to New Zealand. I was seated at the bar in a pub in Dunedin on the South Island. Over a pint, I got to talking to a fellow cyclist from England. He was planning to head back up the coast, and then turn inland.

"Why don't we plan to meet up in ..." he began to ask.

I stopped him in mid-sentence.

"I'm trying to eliminate 'plan' from my travel vocabulary," I said. "How about, 'Maybe I'll see you, and maybe I won't.'"

He had enough of a wayward traveler's attitude not to be offended.

The next day, I pedaled into the town of Middlemarch in a drizzle. A group of men in Scottish garb were filing out of a meeting hall.

"You got a place to stay?" a man holding a bagpipe asked. "My name's Neal, and if you cycle down that road, I'll meet you out by our driveway."

About 20 minutes later, there was Neal, out by his mailbox as he had promised.

He greeted me with, "You'll be staying another night. Tomorrow's New Year's Eve. That's no night to be alone in a tent, now is it?"

Neal introduced me to his wife, Wendy, and his son, Toby, age 9, and his daughter, Megan, age 6, before showing me to my cozy guest room in their beautiful 1917 farmhouse.

I had a feeling I'd remember this particular holiday. Boy was I right. How many people can say they spent New Year's Eve touring around in a bus with a New Zealand highland pipe band. And not your average pipe band — this one was comprised of four bagpipes, two drums and two saxophones. But in a small town, you take what you can get.



PHOTO BY WILLIE WEIR

**When you're
a guest in
his home,
you don't
have to pay
the piper.**

The guys in the band were dressed to the hilt, or should I say kilt? They all looked authentic, except for those two saxophone players. I couldn't help calling them the "McBlues Brothers." The small school bus was driven by Wendy, chosen for her ability to drive a multi-passenger vehicle, and willingness to drink soda without the scotch.

The first stop was someone's garage. The handful of observers outnumbered the band, which assembled in a semi-circle around a table filled with munchies, beer and scotch. They blew out three or four numbers, and then it was time to drink and chat.

The next stop was the golf course, where only the proprietor was present.

"One more than last year," someone commented.

The band played in the small ceramic-tiled bar/clubhouse. A serious problem with bagpipes is their lack of volume control, so it was like being at a Celtic heavy metal concert. The audience of one took the time to take his fingers out of his ears and gave a round of hearty applause before handing round pitchers of beer and, yes, a bottle of scotch.

Wendy drove the band on to the Sun Club — a nudist camp. The members were all clothed. I'm not sure if it was out of sensitivity for their guests, or because it was bloody cold outside. More tunes, more beer, and more whiskey. The band actually appeared to be playing much better as the night went on. The president of the Sun Club gave them some extra money and requested Amazing Grace. She didn't have to pay though, because I believe a Scotsman is not allowed to turn down a request to play Amazing Grace (even if he's living in New Zealand).

Next stop — a private party: More tunes, more refreshments. Oh. And some trout. Very nice. By then, I was beginning to feel the urge to take off my clothes and play "Free Bird" on the pipes, but I remained the slightly tottering observer.

The last stop was the pub, where everybody in Middlemarch who wore clothes was drinking whiskey and beer. The band marched into the pub and squeezed their way into the back. It seemed to me they could have saved a lot of time and gas by simply playing at the pub all night.

At 11:59 p.m., I asked the woman in front of me what they did at midnight. She put down her beer and free sausage (provid-

ed by the pub in gratitude for a month's worth of business in one night) and said, "Not much."

She was right. The band was halfway through "Auld Lang Syne" for the second time before anyone noticed we were in a new year.

At 2:30 a.m., as the bus rocked and bumped its way down farm roads, Neal leaned over and said, "You'll be staying another night."

"I've got no plans," I replied.

We spent New Year's Day picnicking at the horse races with, I'd swear, every family within 100 miles. It may not have compared to a Guatemalan horse trek in the mountains, but it felt great not to have to turn down genuine hospitality because of pre-made plans.

By the way. The year prior, when I arrived in Antigua, Guatemala at the promised time and location — my travel friends were nowhere to be found. ●

This is Willie Weir's 20th column for Adventure Cyclist magazine. Here's to 20 more!