



Byways via Bicycle: Seeing the United States on Two Wheels

by Heidi Beierle

Each year, a remarkable number of ebicycle tourists pedal for at least three weeks at a time, logging well over a thousand miles. Even more cyclists undertake shorter rides of a week or two, totaling between 300 and 900 miles. We're not crazy; we love how our bodies feel in motion, clean air rushing through our lungs, scents of the world dancing in our noses, the sounds of nature funneled to our ears, our minds clear of clutter with tangible discoveries and wonder-filled exploration fueling our curiosity. Touring makes our world real; it embodies stories through experience.

An increasing number of heritage-curious people opt for slow-speed, low-impact byway visits riding their bicycles. They value culturally enriched, mentally and physically rejuvenating activities that are environmentally sustainable and that suit their health-conscious life style. As

U.S. population demographics change, cyclists are older (ages 45-65)¹, and travel more often and more leisurely. And these cyclists pedal on byways near you.

Bicycle tourism, historic preservation, and rural economic development are not only compatible but can also be symbiotic for those byway organizations that recognize these relationships in their planning and event scheduling. Many contemporary projects that seek to restore rural community functionality across regions involve bicycling events. By participating in rural ride events, cyclists can appreciate rural character and resources while benefitting the communities economically when they eat and rest. Bicycle tourism on its own may not generate enough visitation over the course of a riding season or year to economically sustain a rural community. However, when bicycle touring is paired



BICYCLISTS RIDE THE MIDTOWN GREENWAY, AN IDEAL URBAN-CYCLING ROUTE THAT CONNECTS THE GREAT RIVER ROAD NATIONAL SCENIC BYWAY AND GRAND ROUNDS NATIONAL SCENIC BYWAY IN MINNESOTA.

with heritage tourism—an economically attractive visitor market—opportunities to attract both markets to a community exist. Heritage visitors may not consider themselves cyclists, but they could have measurable interest in heritage tours that involve cycling.

In essence, by combining what is known about historic preservation/economic development with bicycle transportation/economic development, a strategy for rural communities and regions is created. Bicycle travel in scenic and historic resource corridors boosts community and economic development opportunities and enhances rural livability.

Astute byway planners will consider cyclists as part of their byway programs, especially since cyclists' numbers may increase as gasoline prices rise.

NOT ALL BICYCLE TOURISTS ARE ALIKE

There are four kinds of bicycle tourists, according to marketer David Lowe-Rogstad, and while they share some characteristics, they often travel in differing ways.²

- Urban-cycling travelers arrive in a community and spend some or all of their time in the community traveling by bicycle. These travelers may also sightsee locally by bicycle.
- Ride-centered travelers tend to stay overnight in one location and go riding during the day. They enjoy socializing when they're done riding for the day and are often Baby Boomers.
- Event-centered travelers participate in organized or event rides; this group includes spectators at racing events.

- Self-contained travelers take their gear along on the ride and mainly need camping, grocery, and Internet access.

Ride- and event-centered travelers, generally use one community as a base camp from which the cyclists initiate a number of different daily rides. For the most part, the economic benefit remains in the base-camp community. Consequently, the more opportunities for cyclists to engage in a number of different rides or activities from one community, the more time and money they will spend in that community.

Self-contained cyclists tend to travel along a linear path. They generally stay in a new town each day, but occasionally stay in one place for a couple of nights. Self-contained cyclists almost always require another form of transportation apart from their bicycle to complete their trip. They may travel to one end of their cycling route and make the journey their ride home. They may pedal to a particular destination and return home using another travel mode. They may travel to and from a cycling route that neither originates nor completes at their home. Lastly, they may use other

transportation during their travel for accessory travel to the bike tour or for unexpected occurrences.

Self-contained cyclists generally fall into one of three categories, based on average daily spending habits: Shoestring, Economy, and Comfort cyclists. Lodging accounts for the largest expense item and food is the second largest cost. All self-contained cyclists spend money on food, but only about half of them spend a substantial portion of their budget on lodging.

Shoestring cyclists tend to be young and spend a maximum of \$15-\$30 per day. Shoestring cyclists form a substantial portion of total touring cyclists. They travel in the most economical ways possible by necessity.

These cyclists ride many miles each day (seventy-five to more than one hundred) thereby reducing the number of lodging nights during their trip. They prefer low-cost camping and home-stays to other types of accommodations. Food is their main expense, and they often reduce costs by shopping at grocery stores and cooking their own meals.





ECONOMY CYCLIST MATT.
PHOTO BY HEIDI BEIERLE.



COMFORT CYCLIST JOHN.
PHOTO BY HEIDI BEIERLE.

Economy cyclists do not exhibit age/income correlations to their travel and spending patterns. These cyclists could have comfortable means or not, but something about this particular style of journey captures their interest and matters more to them than where they stay or what they eat. Economy cyclists travel in economically conservative ways out of choice rather than necessity. Economy cyclists ride about fifty to ninety miles per day.

Spending for these cyclists averages approximately fifty dollars per day but may vary considerably. These cyclists may choose to spend the least amount of money possible for their particular kind of journey, although they may also spend more in a particular community if conditions or interest encourage them to do so. For example, some of these cyclists may travel by bicycle to go camping and appreciate nature. In this scenario, if they are rained out, they may choose to find a room somewhere to clean up and dry off. Or, if they were headed to a particular event or destination and wanted to camp along the way, they would be able to have two different kinds of vacations during the same time.

They often travel with cooking gear and shop for food at grocery stores, although they eat at restaurants more often than Shoestring cyclists. Economy cyclists are worth noting as a type of traveler who may arrive in a community, but their behavior may be indistinguishable from Shoestring or Comfort cyclists in a given location.

Comfort cyclists represent about half of self-supported cyclists. They tend to be older and spend an average of seventy-five to one hundred dollars per day. They ride fifty to seventy-five miles per day and prefer to stay in motel, hotel, or bed-and-breakfast lodging. They may travel fewer than fifty miles per day to stay in preferred lodging types. They may stay in less comfortable accommodations if there is no other choice, but they generally do not travel with shelter. Comfort cyclists rely on restaurants and cafes as their primary eating options. Comfort cyclists spend about two thirds of their funds on lodging with about twenty-five percent allocated for food. Comfort cyclists are more likely to spend money on entertainment and other forms of non-cycling recreation and visitation.

ROUTE AND PATH CHARACTERISTICS

Bicycle tour routes' landscapes, road conditions, and local culture contribute to the quality of cycling experience for visitors. These factors determine whether a route or area feels "bicycle friendly." Of course, those areas where cyclists feel welcome are more likely to derive greater economic benefits from cyclists' visits.

Routes are comprised of different kinds of roadways and infrastructure. Attractive cycling routes possess scenic qualities or may be historic roadways.

These routes follow quiet, low-traffic-volume roads without shoulders. Routes that feature regularly spaced towns and/or services (water, restrooms, food/restaurants, accommodations) are also functional touring routes. Regions without abundant natural or scenic assets may want to promote the communities' uniqueness, friendliness, history, culture, events, or local products. Touring routes with topographical variation offer cyclists challenging and appealing interactions with terrain.



Bicycle paths

Paved, off-street pathways for nonmotorized use.



Roads without shoulders

Roadways with fewer than twelve inches between the white fog line and the roadway edge.



Bicycle-only roads

Routes that open seasonally with periods of bicycle-only access.



Roads with shoulders

Roadways with more than twelve inches between the white fog line and the rideable pavement edge.

PHOTOS BY HEIDI BEIERLE.

Roads or paved paths where touring cyclists ride, fall into four categories. Each also has a combination of elements that enhance or detract from ride enjoyment. Each road type has elements that can enhance or detract from the riding experience.

Road surface

Smooth road surfaces make for pleasant riding experiences. Cracks, holes, patches, and unpaved roads can cause falls, flat tires, and other damage to bicycles or gear, particularly bicycles loaded for touring. Freshly oiled or tarred roadways are unpleasant and can damage bicycles. They also pose risks for slips. Chip seal creates rough road surfaces. The seals often reach the middle of the rideable shoulder and make the shoulder an undesirable place to ride. Loose, flying rocks can injure cyclists.

Rumble strips

Rumble strips alert drivers when they have strayed beyond the designated lane of travel. For cyclists, rumble strips can alert them to vehicles approaching from behind. Center-lane rumble strips can signal cyclists that vehicles are giving room and passing. Shoulder strips can audibly warn cyclists if vehicles are approaching too closely. Sometimes, rumble strips consume the cycling shoulder, which renders it unrideable and forces cyclists to ride in the auto-travel lane.

Signage

Bicycle-specific signage makes cyclists feel welcome in a region or community. Wayshowing signage helps cyclists

locate communities, services, and trails. Historic roadway and scenic byway signage often also indicates desirable cycling facilities. Bicycle-specific signage catches cyclists' attention. Communities or regions that emphasize their cycling assets will attract cyclist revenues.

Debris

Debris such as glass, dirt, rocks, metal, tires, trash, and road kill can damage bicycles and gear and cause slips and falls. Cyclists may swerve or move into the roadway to avoid debris, putting themselves at risk for falls or collisions.

In addition, routes that employ strategies to alert drivers of cyclists' presence on the roadway considerably increase cycling safety and comfort. Alerts coupled with education for shared-road courtesy also improve visitor experiences.

THE VIEW OF BYWAYS FROM THE BICYCLE SEAT

My first bicycle tour was in August 2009 on the Pacific Coast Scenic Byway in Oregon. There I noticed that the driving focus of this All-American Road eclipsed the popularity of cycling on it. I learned that concern for cyclists' safety along the road stood as a main reason why tourism marketers did not mention bicycles on this roadway. Part of me understood the strategy and another part took issue: If they are concerned for cyclists' safety, they should at least let drivers know they could expect to encounter bikes on the road and to give some room.

The Pacific Coast Scenic Byway offers a

considerable amount of built and natural beauty along its length; however, it often lacks a cyclist-friendly shoulder. With no shoulder, the road offers a fine, scenic view of the coast and rugged terrain without disruptions from an obtrusively wide roadway. To the spectacular views, add curves, short hills, RVs, and trucks pulling wide recreational trailers, and you quickly have a recipe for cyclist discomfort if not full-on danger. I traveled light on that two-week trip, maintaining a relatively narrow vehicle profile, but I still had quite a few uncomfortably close encounters with trucks, trailers, and RVs. The Pacific Coast Scenic Byway illustrates the conundrum of how to balance the popularity of byways with the needs of different users.

I also participated in the annual Gorge Ride, a bike ride along another of Oregon's All-American Roads, the Historic Columbia River Highway Scenic Byway. The presence of a National Historic Landmark roadway undergoing restoration adjacent to an interstate

provides a unique opportunity for cyclists. Restoration is constrained in places by the cliffy terrain of the Columbia Gorge. Roadway restorers addressed at least one of these topographical bottlenecks by limiting access to segments of the restored roadway exclusively to pedestrians and cyclists. I appreciate that this byway invites cycling and includes roadway dedicated to people-powered experience.

My regional bike tours eventually led me to undertake a cross-country bicycle journey to attend the national Preserving the Historic Road conference in September 2010. I started my ride in late June from Eugene, Oregon, using the TransAmerica (TransAm) Bicycle Trail and pedaled into Washington, DC, in early September. My adventure took me on numerous state and national scenic byways. Here are some highlights and observations from that trip.

My second day on the road began with a twenty-two-mile climb over the Cascades on Highway 242. This National Scenic Byway, McKenzie Pass—Santiam Pass



Scenic Byway, remains closed for much of the year due to the unsafe combination of driving conditions and wintry weather at the roadway's higher elevations. The long road closure creates a wonderful opportunity for cycling, because the road is open for bicycle travel weeks in advance of opening to auto travel. The road seemed to have been created exclusively for the slow and effortful pace that reinforces the transportation challenges and achievement presented by crossing the Cascade Range. Despite the work demanded by the climb, the austere lava landscape engaged my awe, wonder, and imagination.

A SIDE NOTE ABOUT PATH AND ROAD HAZARDS

Dedicated cycling and pedestrian paths and welcoming bicycle-only access points encourage cyclists to explore an area. Paths are not without their challenges, but on the whole they speak volumes for a community's or a region's support of cycling as a valid mode of transportation.

Cyclists come in many varieties; it's helpful for byway planners to understand which kinds of cyclists you hope to attract. Are they touring road cyclists, mountain bikers, racers out for training runs, families pedaling on vacation, or commuting cyclists? If your target market includes touring cyclists, consider how you can minimize path and road hazards that are especially troublesome for touring bicycles with relatively skinny tires and bags on either side. This equipment gives the cyclists a fairly wide profile on the roadway and can make them susceptible

to flat tires on uneven surfaces. Cracks in the roadway, potholes, uneven joints between roadways and bridges, and brick, cobblestone, or dirt surfaces cause problems for touring cyclists. Frequently, road shoulders contain debris, including gravel, glass, rocks, dead animals, and metal alligators (small sections of metal cable from auto tire blowouts).



THE MCKENZIE PASS—SANTIAM PASS NATIONAL SCENIC BYWAY WELCOMES BICYCLISTS BEFORE THE ROAD IS OPENED TO AUTOMOBILES. PHOTO BY HEIDI BEIERLE.

In Kansas, I picked up a shard of metal in a tire from riding over a metal alligator. The metal didn't cause problems until I rode over a brick-paved road. Four flat fixes later, I found the piece of metal.

Often, needed bike shops or service are far away. In my case, I managed to ride on my two bad tubes for three days until I reached a bicycle shop for replacements.

After leaving the McKenzie Pass—Santiam Pass Scenic Byway in Sisters, Oregon, I pedaled into Prineville at

nightfall. The next day, I rode 87 miles to Dayville where I encountered the Journey Through Time Oregon Scenic Byway. In Dayville's Presbyterian Church, I enjoyed rural luxury at the biker hostel, a common form of lodging in many eastern states.

A SIDE NOTE

ABOUT SLEEPING ACCOMMODATIONS

The fine hiker-biker campground at the Clyde Holliday State Park east of Mt. Vernon offered awesome shower facilities at an affordable fee of two dollars for a shower or five dollars for unlimited showers. I stayed overnight at Austin Junction, a T-intersection of two highways, with a café-convenience store and camping for cyclists behind the store.

Camping in parking lots or in people's yards is not uncommon, particularly when no other services are available. Consider Muddy Gap, Wyoming, where the windswept scrub around the convenience store served as the only lodging in "town," or Eminence, Missouri, where all rooms at the inn were full, but the kind proprietor of the Hutchins House Bed & Breakfast hosted me in the backyard. I learned that in Kansas, the city park is often made available to camping cyclists.

In addition to camping and staying at motels, touring cyclists make use of home-stays for lodging, and an online resource, www.warmshowers.org, provides a database of people willing to host cyclists in their homes. Surprisingly, I found warm-shower options even in remote areas.

While I rode the Journey Through Time Scenic Byway for over 110 miles, there were few opportunities to pull off the road or read interpretative displays. The scenery spoke volumes and provided multiple pass climbs and descents each day along with dramatic vistas of mountain ranges, aromatic wildflower-accented forests, and open lowlands.

A portion of Journey Through Time Scenic Byway parallels another state scenic byway, Elkhorn Drive Scenic Byway, from the small town of Sumpter to Baker City. The Elkhorn area traverses lush forested areas and bygone mining communities. I pulled off the road at Whitney to read a decaying sign that explained how mining opportunities ended and this once-bustling company town closed.

In Baker City, Oregon, I rode another segment of an All-American Road, Hells Canyon Scenic Byway. Few cars travel the Hells Canyon Scenic Byway east of Baker City, and the shoulders provided ample room for vehicles to pass. The road showcases remarkable scenery from the fragrant syringa (the Idaho state flower) and sage-filled volcanic deserts to moisture-laden evergreen mountainsides and fertile valleys. Although segments of the Hells Canyon Scenic Byway are relentlessly devoid of shade and tortuously absent of watering places, they were also amazingly instructive. The Oregon Trail passes through here, and I found myself empathizing with the conditions pioneers endured on their way to the verdant Willamette Valley. I rode on the Trail again through Wyoming where water stops were even further apart. Near



COVERED WAGONS AT VIRTUE FLAT GIVE VISITORS A CHANCE TO SEE A REENACTMENT OF THE OREGON TRAIL JOURNEY. © 2001 BAKER COUNTY VCB.

...I found myself empathizing with the conditions pioneers endured on their way to the verdant Willamette Valley.



MAPBOARDS AND SIGNS, LIKE THIS ONE, PLACED AT KEY INTERVALS ALONG THE THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE SCENIC BYWAY INTERPRETED THE AREA BEST FROM MY CYCLIST PERSPECTIVE. PHOTO © 2005 BY MARY JAHN.

Sweetwater, Wyoming, the water, shade, and restrooms were welcome sights for me just as the nearby Ice Slough must have been for the pioneers.

A SIDE NOTE ABOUT FOOD AND FRIENDLINESS

Cyclists need food to refuel, and many touring cyclists, like me, don't carry cooking gear. We rely on restaurants, cafes, and grocery and convenience stores, all of which contribute to the local economy. One particular café along the journey stands out as exceptionally bicycle-friendly. A man who took my picture at

the Missouri state line encouraged me to go to Cooky's Café in Golden City, Missouri. The staff at Cooky's graciously offered water and ice, a bathroom, and a friendly environment; they know that cyclists share travel information. The cafe also had a cyclist log book that had been signed by thousands of riders.

Cyclists look for bike-friendly communities. I chose accommodations in Dubois, Wyoming, and Granby, Colorado, because their signs said, "Bikers welcome." I stopped in Twin Bridges, Montana, because the community's welcome sign announced the town's bike

friendliness and featured a biker camp. What can your byway offer?

The Northwest Passage Scenic Byway interpreted the area best from my cyclist perspective. I found a large, byway-specific pullout and interpretive sign in Grangeville. Although there were no shoulders or pullouts to appreciate the dramatic visual texture in an area called Camas Prairie, stunning fields of yellow stood out against the abundant hay fields.

Beyond Grangeville and the smaller communities of Stites, Kooskia, and Lowell, the byway travels a remote, unpopulated area where I encountered many cyclists. Partly because of the rugged terrain, most of the historic resources and attractions along the byway remain quite close to the road, such as the historic Lochsa Ranger Station and the DeVoto Cedar Grove.

In Montana, a particular stretch of the Pioneer Mountains Scenic Byway between Wisdom and Jackson was one place where I may have enjoyed byway infrastructure and views more from inside a vehicle with the windows rolled up. This byway travels the Big Hole, a twenty-mile by sixty-mile plateau skirted on the west by the Continental Divide and popularly known as “Land of 10,000 Haystacks.” The Big Hole is flooded annually to irrigate the hayfields and becomes a weltering mosquito breeding ground. Even if there were interpretive signs or pullouts, I would not have paused to read them.

Perhaps more frightening than the vicious mosquito swarms, I unknowingly rode

between a mama red-tailed hawk perched on an electric pole and her fledgling baby on the ground. I soon lamented why no interpretive sign or brochure anywhere explains how to fend off raptor attack! Otherwise, I enjoyed riding slowly through the cattle herds as a two-wheeled cowgirl.

Through Wyoming, I rode the Centennial Scenic Byway from an epic scenic viewpoint of the Teton Range’s Mount Moran, over Togwotee Pass to Dubois. The abundant viewpoints provided space for me to observe bald eagles, elk, and other treasures in this unique environment. Construction over Togwotee Pass limited bicycle travel, and several of us loaded our bikes into pilot-car truck beds on three separate occasions for safe passage through the work zone. Toward Dubois, I stopped at a Centennial Scenic Byway road sign and appreciated the proliferation of blooming wildflowers and grasses.

On the western side of Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado, the Colorado River Headwaters Scenic Byway clings to craggy terrain where the mighty waters that shape the Grand Canyon originate. Between Granby and Kremmling, this road wedges between the headwaters—straight below—and the sheer cliff walls—straight above. A winding and wild road, byway signs appear in the infrequent places where the road edge widens enough to accommodate power poles. Gravel and grit on the roadway complicate navigation for bicyclists, and auto volumes on the road intensify the risk of their already-close proximity.



DERMOT AND MARY ALSO RODE THE TRANSAM.
PHOTO BY HEIDI BEIERLE.

Out of the mountains, Colorado's Gold Belt Tour explores areas where Spanish, Indian, and Pioneering cultures combined. This territory provides pull outs with shaded interpretive signs among pinon pines, red rock, and sudden, violent afternoon thunderstorms. Between Canon City and Florence where this tour parallels the TransAm, little of the mining and gaming town character exists that typifies other communities on the Gold Belt.

In Kansas, I crossed Flint Hills National Scenic Byway at the byway's southern terminus in Cassoday. At the convenience store in town, I chatted for the first time with Mary and Dermot, two other TransAm riders with whom I rode for a time and reencountered to our mutual delight in Elk Garden, Virginia, Washington, DC, and Eugene, Oregon.

While Cassoday has a scenic byway road sign and numerous "Bikers Welcome" signs, there is no interpretive material in town along the cycling route. Cassoday exemplifies one of the challenges of incorporating bicycle travel into byway planning: bicyclists travel on bicycling routes that also follow segments of

byways; however, byway signage and interpretation is not oriented to where cyclists enter and exit byways. Byway planners may want to consider bicycle-specific byway interpretation, services, or facilities at these cycling gateways in addition to the robust interpretive materials often present at driving gateways.

In Missouri, the TransAm crosses Historic Route 66 at Marshfield. Marshfield has a Route 66 RV Park just off I-44. The auto-centric orientation of roads and services at this major transportation interchange in Marshfield offered little more than this RV Park sign to excite cyclist curiosity about this byway.

In Virginia at the Kentucky state line, I rode a Virginia byway through Breaks, a scenic and water recreation area. Much of the TransAm through this far western portion of the state, which is also a designated U.S. Bicycle Route, follows a connector route to the scenic road.

On the other side of the state, the Colonial Parkway All-American Road takes cyclists from Jamestown through Williamsburg to Yorktown on a fairly heavily used auto route. The Parkway from Williamsburg to Yorktown maintains its 1930s paving materials. Yorktown marks the eastern terminus of the TransAm and U.S. Bicycle Route 76. Surprising to me, staff at the information desk at Colonial National Historical Park did not know about the TransAm or if a register or log book for cyclists existed anywhere at the park or in the community.

I traveled Adventure Cycling's Tidewater-Potomac Route to Washington, DC. At Mount Vernon, I rode the Mount Vernon

Trail, an off-street paved path that parallels the George Washington Memorial Parkway, one of America's Byways. The combination of Parkway and bicycle path presents a unique approach to byway infrastructure that I encountered nowhere else. I saw cyclists riding on the Parkway amid the traffic. I could understand why cyclists might prefer the road since the Mount Vernon Trail had a fair amount of bicycle and pedestrian congestion that essentially limited bicycling to a strolling speed. The narrow path, while scenic and enjoyable to ride, did not allow room for bicycles with panniers, many intersections were poorly signed, and the path itself had a rough asphalt surface. I felt that an absence of interpretive signage along the trail created an opportunity to connect George Washington Memorial Parkway directly to the Mount Vernon Trail.

AN EXPERIENCE UNLIKE ANY OTHER

Pedaling byways offers a markedly different engagement with topography, landscape, and scenery than appreciating it from an automobile. By riding the byways, I connected experientially with history. Not only could I read interpretive signs and stories about past road builders, pioneers, mail carriers, and explorers, but also I could move through landscapes as they did, completely open to the elements. While my transportation choice affected my vulnerability, that same vulnerability enabled me to hear the tapestry of stories that landscape and residents tell, to interact with the intrinsic, powerful qualities of environment, and to discover myself as an integral component of each byway. ★

The Author

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Notes

¹ An MRI Doublebase Study (GfK Mediamark Research & Intelligence, 2008) summarizes the American Cycling Tourist as:

- 52 percent ages 35-54
- 60 percent women
 - 78 percent annual income is greater than \$60,000
 - 42 percent annual household income is greater than \$100,000
- 70 percent married
- 2.4 domestic trips per year

² David Lowe-Rogstad, "Everything You Ever Thought You Needed to Know About Cycling Tourism...in a Nutshell," presentation at 2011 Oregon Governor's Conference on Tourism, April 12, 2011.