

BICYCLING THE OREGON COAST
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The first resident of the Oregon Coast I met was not in Oregon at all. The year was 1978. I had come West for the first time and was camped on Shaw Island in Puget Sound, Washington. A tall broad man vacationing from Coos Bay put his big rough hand on my shoulder and insisted I eat another hamburger from his wife's grill. His eyes grew soft as he and I watched the sun drop into the lake-like water at dusk.

"You bicycled all the way from Ohio?" he asked. "And now you're going up to Vancouver Island?"

"Yes," I answered.

"I wouldn't do that," he said. "I'd ride down where I live. You want to see something wild and rugged? You want to see a sensational sunset? Ride down the Oregon Coast."

I didn't take his advice right away. I rode to Canada that summer. But I came back in 1980 and let the strong north wind blow me and my bike the 360 miles from Washington to California. I liked the coast so much that during the summer of 1993 I rode down for the eighth time.

During the early days of the ride I noticed how some features of the coast had changed and others had not. Dark foggy clouds hugged the promontories from Astoria to Cape Lookout and brought drizzle that drenched my rain gear and numbed my knuckles and feet. That was the same. The drizzle had grown no warmer and felt just as hard as it had in other years.

But as I looked along the highway for my favorite refuges—dingy cafes with plain plate-glass windows and worn-out booths, serving strong hot coffee to locals in wool shirts and suspenders—I saw instead delis and convenience stores and supermarkets with orange and red neon signs advertising espresso and cafe mocha.

I rode on without the warm-up, wondering why I was resisting the change. Near Garibaldi I pedaled past a windswept spruce leaning from the top of a bare basalt seastack and thought of a local who had epitomized the tough coastal spirit for me. In 1985 on a beach near Bandon a 30mph wind had caused me to hunker down in a shelter of drift logs. As sand blew through cracks in the shelter, I saw a man wearing a dark flannel jacket and watch cap walk out along the surf, holding his head bent down. He looked about 75 and walked with the wind, then against gusts of sand for more than an hour.

"Doesn't that sting your eyes?" I asked him.

The man shook his head and smiled. He pulled a hand out of his coat and showed off a palm full of what looked like dull pebbles.

“Agates,” he said. “They’re there if you know how to look for them.”

The man is a romantic memory, I admit. Maybe his ruggedness is unfair to compare to the luxury of cafe mocha, but bicycling Oregon has brought me a lot of similar encounters. In 1984 there was Dan, a balding Vietnam vet, who had quit his job selling Oldsmobiles. His was pedaling north from Los Angeles and stopping in small towns to paint window signs to pay for his trip. In northern California Dan met Vonnie, a clerk in a thrift store, who missed her estranged children in Portland. Dan had hung around the store a few days and then had asked Vonnie to come riding with him. When I saw the two in North Bend, they were bucking the wind and heading to Portland to see if Vonnie could regain custody of her kids. The couple had known each other less than 500 miles, and the two were talking about getting married.

Three years earlier I was at Battle Rock Wayside in Port Orford, visiting with a cyclist from Indiana, and a pickup with Wyoming license plates pulled in beside us. A broad-faced woman leaned out of the truck and kissed the Indiana cyclist and drove off with a happy wave, planning to meet him that night at Humbug Mountain State Park.

I never learned the cyclist’s name, but Liz, a woman I had started to ride with, told me his story. He had been cycling across Wyoming two months earlier, and a passing tractor-trailer truck had blown him down. A broken nose and badly bruised wrist forced him to stay in Rawlins for six weeks, and now the nurse he had met was carrying his gear as he biked down the Oregon Coast.

Meanwhile my new friend Liz and her sister Janette had retired from teaching at ages 25 and 27. They were starting “new free lives,” as they neared the end of a ride that took them from Santa Barbara to Idaho to Vancouver Island and then back to southern California.

The three of us met at the hiker-biker camp at Cape Lookout and never missed a sunset together afterward. In the evenings we perched on seaside cliffs or sat against drift logs and talked about clouds turning pink, salmon-colored and gold; rays of sun streaming up from beneath the horizon; howling sounds of undercurrents; and seals poking their heads out of waves.

Liz’s voice jumped; her eyes beamed when she pointed at rock formations. “There. That one’s the fin of a giant fish. And that one’s like the face of a dragon, see it? And that one has the beak of a hawk.”

But her voice grew low and her eyes turned dark whenever Janette wondered out loud what the two sisters would do when they stopped biking. “I can’t picture anything for myself,” said Liz. “When I try to think about that, nothing seems right

really. Nothing seems definite.”

The sisters and I bicycled to Santa Rosa, California; then our routes split. We failed to meet at the store we had agreed upon in Santa Rosa and did not say good-bye. Two days later a girl with an empty six-pack in her car swerved onto a shoulder near Half Moon Bay and hit Liz, who later died of head injuries.

I returned to Cape Lookout the next summer, intending to perform our old rituals of watching the sunset and making a fire afterward. I rolled my bike to the hiker-biker camp where Liz and I met, and a coffee can full of wildflowers waited on a picnic table, and a balled-up newspaper lay beneath a tepee of dry twigs in the fire pit.

A few days later I sat by a fire at sunset and held a vigil for Liz at a hiker-biker camp near Crescent City, California. I ran short of wood, but down the beach I saw a deep shadow in the crack of a huge rock that looked like the fin of a giant fish. I went to the shadow in the rock, and a neat armload of sticks was lodged there.

The coincidences were mysteries that passed. I like to think they taught me, opened me, made me stronger like so many aspects of any year’s bike trip.

Now in the summer of 1993, I rode toward Cape Lookout, and drizzle fell hard on me. The disappearance of favorite old cafes depressed me, perhaps because I am set in my ways, or maybe because I fell in love with a wild and rugged coast, and I want it to stay that way. Or maybe my mood derived from the fond memory of a lost friend.

I didn’t know. I rode on, and the sun came out. I made sure I stopped at my favorite resting place, Strawberry Hill, near Cape Perpetua. At low tide hundreds of seals lie on rocks there and utter grunts and groans and long burping noises that sound unspeakable lazy. They blink doggish eyes in sleepy pleasure and twist their sluggish bodies in countless positions of sublime repose. They are perfect role models for a tired cyclist worrying about how many more miles to make before twilight—or about where to find a jolt of caffeine.

The hiker-biker camps were filled with determined individuals as usual. By the time I reached Humbug Mountain 280 miles south of Washington, I had met a man who had hoped to be on his “first of seven different trips on seven different continents;” a woman who had won a long battle with anorexia and was cycling the West Coast for the second time; a schoolteacher who had previously spent 10 years living in the back of his pickup truck in San Diego; a medical doctor; a father and 21-year-old son on their ninth bike trip together; and a musician who carried his banjo in a low-lying trailer as he rode up and down the coast.

Needless to say, I was singing as I pedaled away from Humbug Mountain at dawn, 10 days into my ride. Whole fresh strawberries heaped on steaming pancakes in a hole-in-the-wall cafe in Gold Beach gave me a further boost, and pretty soon I was climbing one of my two favorite hills in Oregon.

The hill rises from the Pistol River and ascends 2 or 3 miles in long steep straightaways. It climbs mostly along the seashore, and halfway up, the ocean breeze mixes with an icy draft and a strange dry smell. Suddenly I saw there were open hillsides of straw-colored grass and that the bottom of a pure white cloud of fog was scraping the tops of sand pines near the summit.

The fog gave me goose bumps. It made me sad; it was so different from the fog that wrapped my other favorite hill, the 2 miles of sinuous switchbacks at the start of my ride, up from Cape Lookout. The higher I went up that promontory of twisted spruce trees, the thicker and grayer and warmer the fog became. On the Cape Lookout hill the fog dripped like pearls from the blossoms of foxgloves. It dulled the greens of salal and blackberry bushes, left balls of mist on my wool sweater, dampened the sound of the surf below, and turned the waves the color of dusk.

But on the Pistol River hill the fog did not muffle the sound of the sea. The fog hovered above the water but somehow left its surface glistening with sunlight that looked intensely warm, and then I knew I was riding through redwood fog, through the combination of heat and moisture that have supported the giant trees for millennia.

And because only a few redwoods grow north of California, I grew even sadder, for the fog told me I had only 50 miles left of Oregon. I stopped at the top of the hill and looked back at a curve on Highway 101, at a beach, at seals sleeping, saw back to Liz and Janette, and to the sun turning soft at the edge of the horizon. I saw deer running through surf, sea stars floating through tidepools, sea otters bounding on sand, pelicans flying in strung-out lines in yellowing skies, and tents on open beds of needles beneath cedar and spruce. I looked back through eight rides down the coast and saw Puget Sound and felt the big rough hand on my shoulder again.

“You want to see something wild and rugged?” the man had asked.

I turned away from the curve in the highway and guessed that was it. I wanted the coast to stay rugged and wild as much as possible, and I wondered if I was ready to move over, go somewhere else, let another cyclist take my place, make things a little less busy on the coastal road.

I looked back again and checked for oncoming traffic. None was coming, and I slid into my toe clips and soared downhill to a long beach dotted with seastacks. I pedaled on with the wind behind me and never doubted I would come back for a ninth try.