

THE PACIFIC COAST *Retirement Tour*

AFTER RETIRING AS A TEACHER, DAVE BERTRAND CYCLED THE PACIFIC COAST ON TWO WHEELS, MAKING FRIENDSHIPS AND MEMORIES THAT WILL LAST A LIFETIME. BY DOUG ARCHER



by Doug Archer

For most, the first weeks of retirement consist of little more than sleeping in, enjoying a second cup of coffee over the morning news and doing odd jobs around the house — generally just getting used to the fact that every day is now a Saturday. Not so for Dave Bertrand. The Saugeen Shores resident celebrated his retirement last summer by immediately setting out on a two-month trek down the Pacific Coast, from Vancouver to the Mexico border — a 3,100-kilometre adventure on his bicycle!

He blames it on aging.

“I had a moment about 10 years ago, when I was in my late-40s,” he said. “The reality of turning half-a-century-old was staring me in the face, and it suddenly struck me that I had no plans for what I was going to do in my senior years.”

That’s when the idea of cycle touring came to him.

“I’ve always had a keen interest in biking,” he said. “I like the physicality of it, and the independence. When you’re out there cycling, it’s just you and your bike — there’s a real sense of freedom. So I thought, ‘Why not start travelling the world on my bike?’”

That decision led to a two-wheel journey through Ireland and Scotland. Over the years it has continued. Norway, France, Nova Scotia... the list goes on. And the more cycle touring he did, the more passionate Dave became about it. His wife Maria has even caught the bug, and the two of them now take biking vacations together.

Then, about a year ago, some fellow cyclists mentioned they’d biked the Pacific Coast. Actually, they didn’t simply mention it, they raved about it. Next thing he knew, Dave was in contact with the American Cycling Association, an organization devoted to helping people experience the joys of bicycle travel. He obtained maps of cycling routes, got hostel and campground recommendations, and discussed rain patterns along the west coast. Suddenly, a solo bike ride down the length of the U.S. was at the top of his Bucket List.

Of course, you don’t set off on a 3,100-kilometre bicycle trip without some preparation. So Dave started going for training rides, logging 30 to 50 kilometres a day. He mapped out the bike-friendliest route he could, and



he began assembling the equipment he’d need for the journey, such as a steel-frame bike strong enough to carry him and two months worth of supplies. Tools and a tent. Pots and pans. Plates, cups and even a tiny stove. Then there was rain gear for bad weather, food for the road, water jugs, and panniers (saddle bags for bikes) to lug everything around in.

Dave will tell you that, by far, the most important things to pack for a cycle tour are spare tires, which he learned the hard way. On one of his first biking experiences in Europe, he wore a tire down to its threads and found himself without an extra. “Never again,” he told himself. “Never again.”

by Doug Archer



Finally, in August 2019, just weeks after retiring from his career as a teacher, Dave was ready. He stepped off a plane at the Vancouver airport and set out on his Pacific Coast Retirement Tour. But first, there was a little matter of reassembling his bicycle.

“I had to take my bike apart and pack it in a box for shipping on the plane,” Dave explained. “So when we landed, there I was in the middle of the baggage claim area, screwdriver and wrench in my hands, bike parts spread all over the floor, trying to put it back together again.”

Fortunately, it did go back together, and after a short visit with some family and friends in Vancouver and Victoria, Dave crossed into the U.S. That’s when his adventure truly began.

Cycling an average of 70 km a day, he pedalled the lengths of Washington State, Oregon and California, travelling bike routes that took him along coastal roads, through seaside towns, and, “Past some of the most spectacular scenery I’d ever seen,” Dave said.

Scenery like Ruby Beach in Washington’s Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary, with its lighthouse and endless stretches of pristine sand. Also, Cape Meares in Oregon, home to lofty cliffside lookouts. And then there were places like Morro Bay in California, home of Morro Rock, which has been called the Gibraltar of the Pacific; Haystack Rock in Oregon, a sea stack jutting 235 feet out of the ocean; and Oregon’s Boiler Bay, where the Pacific crashes and foams against the coastline with such fury, it has the appearance of constantly boiling.

Not that it was all blissful pedalling and breathtaking vistas. For one thing, the terrain was anything but flat. In fact, at the end of a long day, some of it seemed downright vertical, Dave said. To get through the steep climbs, he imagined the panoramic outlooks he’d have once he got to the top.

“I just kept telling myself, ‘Killer climbs for killer views,’” he said with a smile.

Then there were the three or four days he lost to rain, and the day he took a wrong turn and ended up cycling over



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120 km trying to find his way back. And that’s without mentioning the mountain tunnel in Oregon.

“It was three or four kilometres through the middle of a mountain, on a stretch of road barely wide enough for a car, with only a few bulbs strung along the route to light the way,” said Dave. “I was scared to death biking through that.”

But the worst had to be the logging trucks. Travelling through Washington, Dave was almost run off the road by a 30-wheel timber lorry on more than one occasion.

“Those guys were aggressive,” Dave said. “They certainly had no concept about sharing the road. It got to the point where, as soon as I heard them coming up behind me, I’d stop pedalling and get way over on the shoulder until they went by.”

Yet through it all, our intrepid cyclist only experienced

one mishap. You guessed it: a tire blowout. “Good thing I brought those spares,” he laughed.

Needless to say, Dave was happy to finally get off his bike at the end of each day. In cities like San Francisco, Santa Monica and San Diego, he treated himself to hotels with plush mattresses and room service. Some nights he was billeted by biking enthusiasts who make their homes available to fellow cyclists travelling the world. But for the most part, Dave camped. That’s where the Hiker-Biker Sites came in. The American Cycling Association has arranged with State Parks throughout the U.S. to reserve areas just for cyclists.

“No reservations required,” Dave said. “I would just show up at the park — hungry, dirty and exhausted, pay no more than five or 10 bucks, and they let me pitch a tent and have a hot shower. There was even a fire pit to cook my meals.”

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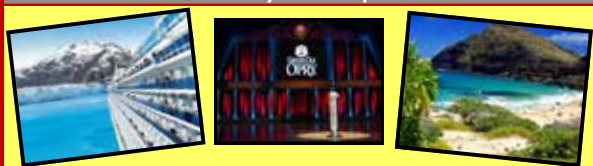
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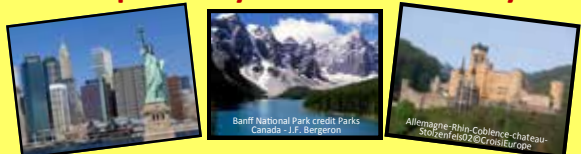
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THE BUCKET LIST

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Not that the meals were anything to write home about. According to Dave, they usually consisted of a can of chowder, a slice of bread, maybe a boiled egg. As a treat, he'd stop at a grocery store on occasion and splurge on a rotisserie chicken, but some nights he got to enjoy a potluck dinner and a nice Chianti.

"There was often a fraternity of cyclists in the campground," Dave explained. "We'd have all our tents pitched in the same area and we'd start passing around whatever we were cooking." With a smile he added, "And someone would invariably pull out a bottle of wine."

The odd glass of wine wasn't the only luxury Dave enjoyed. Not one to forsake all creature comforts, he travelled with a spacious, three-person tent and a comfy fold-up chair as well. At the end of a rough day on the road he'd kick back in his condo-sized shelter and lounge on his travelling chair, sipping a coffee - or something stronger - while his fellow cyclists were squashed inside one-person pup tents with barely enough head room to lay down, let alone sit up. Needless to say, the air in the campground was often thick with envy.

When Dave crossed into California, the biking got even better. He travelled the famous Pacific Coast Highway; traversed forest roads bordered by ancient redwood trees rising majestically into the heavens - Dave called it the Land of the Giants - and crossed the Golden Gate Bridge on two wheels. He even took in Beverley Hills, hobnobbing with the rich and famous as he biked Hollywood Boulevard.

"But pedalling Big Sur had to be my favourite," Dave raved. "It had these rugged cliffs and a coastline littered with herds of sun-bathing elephant seals. I loved it!"

More than the seascapes, though, and the exhilaration of cycling the Pacific Coast, it's the people he met on his retirement tour that stand out for Dave.

"Some of my best memories are of sitting around campfires in the evenings, reliving the day's adventures with other cyclists," he admitted. "You bond with them - they become instant best friends."

He even met a cycling family of five from France - mom, dad and three boys, aged seven, eight and 10.

"I was amazed. The youngest one rode tandem with his father, but the other two boys rode their own bikes. I cycled with them for a day and I had a tough time keeping up.

"When we pulled into our campground in the evening, all I wanted to do was flop down and rest - but they still had school! Their mom tutored them while their dad cooked dinner."

There were also the two girls from Austria who couldn't afford to rent a car to drive down the Pacific Coast, so they bought a couple of cheap bikes on Kijiji and headed off.

"They'd never cycled before - and were obviously having a rough time of it," he said. "But there they were, out on the road, fulfilling a dream."

And Dave will never forget 'Arizona Shane.' Another retiree, Shane had travelled from Arizona to Alaska and was heading back home along the Pacific Coast. He and Dave rode together for several days, sharing food and swapping stories.

On Oct. 20, after almost two months on the road and over 3,000 km on the odometer, Dave reached the border of Mexico. The pacific coast ride was over - but what a ride it had been!

"Pursuing this Bucket List adventure turned out to be the experience of a lifetime, and one I'll remember forever. It was the perfect way to kick start my retirement!"

If you'd like to view a video replay of Dave's Pacific Coast Retirement Tour, search 'Dave Bertrand bicycle trip' on YouTube. ■

Doug Archer is a local writer and speaker who enjoys celebrating the multifaceted lives of the 50-plus generation. He is also the author of two locally set mystery-adventure novels for readers ages eight to 99 - because you're never too old for an adventure. Learn more at www.coldcasekids.com or contact him at archer@bmts.com.

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