

Chasing Summer

By Kerri Rosenstein and Tom Robertson



Kerri: I wanted to go on a bicycle adventure. The idea was there without any context.

Years ago, I learned that a college friend once rode from Alaska to Argentina. I often think of something she wrote about the importance of looking back. She emphasized that we are often encouraged to look forward and keep our focus on the goals ahead of us. She described the value of stopping every now and then to see the distance that we've come. She said we should remember to celebrate the steps along the way and honor how we got where we are.

Inspired by her story, I set out on my clunky mountain bike and rode from Lolo to Victor, Montana, and back, a distance of 50 miles or so. I spent that evening soaking my virgin riding legs in a hot bath with a sense of fulfillment that marked a significant beginning.

Some days later, I was browsing the table of free magazines at the Missoula Public Library. I brought home an old issue of *Adventure Cyclist* (a publication I didn't know existed, let alone was based in my hometown). I read it front to back, mostly fixated on the "Companions Wanted" page.

I didn't own a road bike. I'd never ridden a road bike. I was too intimidated to even walk into a bike shop. But I carried that issue of *Adventure Cyclist* with me for



Getting gear. Kerri grabs some items at Island Bicycles and Skateboards in Key West.

a couple more years.

I was teaching at the Rocky Mountain School of Photography. One day, a student approached me after class and introduced himself as Tom Robertson. He told me he had recently resigned from Adventure Cycling Association, and was excitedly pursuing photography. I helped him develop his creative work. A year later, he

helped me purchase my first road bike, which I broke in on a three-day excursion on the Trail of the Couer d'Alenes. Within a couple months, we would ride together down the coast of Florida to Key West and across the peninsula.

The law of attraction is a beautiful thing. I couldn't have attracted a more patient, kind, enthusiastic and experienced friend, rider, and lover of life into my world to so sweetly open the door for me to bicycle touring.

Tom: During 14 years of working at Adventure Cycling, I helped plan and map thousands of miles of bike routes around the country. One of my favorite routes was the stretch down to Key West, Florida. It both excited and scared me. I was excited because it extended Adventure Cycling's routes to the tip of the country, and well, Key West just seemed so exotic. I was scared because, like many bike travelers, I had read Barbara Savage's book *Miles from Nowhere*. A passage that stood out was about cycling in Florida. Barbara and her husband had stopped to talk to a ranger in the Keys. This is the advice he gave them:

"No, I'd advise you to skip bicycling to Key West. It's too dangerous. People don't just get hurt doing it; they get killed. There have been some cyclers hit recently. Personally, I won't bicycle anywhere in southern or central Florida anymore. I used to do it, but I've had too many bad experiences. The way I figure it, the people in central and southern Florida make up the largest collection of bicycle haters to be found anywhere on the face of the Earth.

If you want to bike in Florida, stick to the north. I do."

Dale Lally, who helped me put this route together, assured me that times had changed. Barbara and her husband rode there in the 1970s, and, he said, it was much safer now. He even said that Key West was one of the safest places he'd ever ridden.

Kerri really wanted to do a bike tour. It was one of the first things she talked about when I met her. It was also wintertime, and she wanted to chase summer and follow the birds south. It was her first tour, and she had only ridden a loaded bike once before, on a paved path without traffic. Was it smart for me to take her on the Florida route? I wasn't entirely sure.

Kerri: We met up at my mom's house near West Palm Beach in early December. Tom provided most of the gear and took on logistics. I outfitted us at a second-hand store with stylish, non-cotton clothing (superhero spandex uniforms not required.) We started out in formal wear: black silk tank top and black and pink tutu skirt for me, and black polyester dress shirt and black shorts for Tom.



We mounted our loaded bikes on December 12 in Delray Beach. I was anxious and had no idea how this was about to go. I took comfort in seeing other cyclists. Kitted up, they all looked pretty professional. No other touring folks would be spotted for 100 miles or so.

The highway took us south along the ocean. The waters were full of surfers. I was in joy-overload, too distracted by my bliss to remotely evaluate if the riding was difficult or easy. I only knew was I was ready to embark on a life of bike travel and adventure. Of course, warm weather and flat land can easily win hearts and disillusion any potential cyclist.

Tom's whole life has been built around cycling and touring, but I found myself keeping stride with him. Either I was a natural badass or he was a remarkably humble teacher empowering me with ownership and confidence. He challenged and encouraged me without ever pushing me — keeping me capable and able without a word.

Once in Miami, we met up with some old friends and spent the night in a stunning South Beach apartment with balcony views of the ocean, city, and bay. We looked through old photos, shared stories, ate, showered, stretched, and slept. I was beaming.

Day one: 45 miles.

Tom: There is a natural anxiety before every trip, but once I'm actually pedaling, it seems to almost instantly dissipate. This trip was no exception, and I went from being anxious to confident on the first day. Riding the coastline on Highway A1A through Fort Lauderdale and into South Beach was an amazing and surprisingly safe experience. A bike lane under our wheels most of the day and other cyclists on the roads added to my sense of security. Watching Kerri handle her bike in Miami traffic brought me joy. Not only was she able to ride a loaded bike comfortably, she seemed to be having fun.

Kerri: We departed South Beach with an urban ride through downtown Miami among sky-rises, traffic lights, drawbridges, bumper-to-bumper cars, cabs, and buses. I didn't feel quite as strong as I had the day before. I struggled to get my feet in and out of the cages without toppling over. Weaving through the city required a different sort of vigilance. I felt vulnerable and fragile, although at the same time somewhat indestructible just because I was so stoked to be doing what I was doing.

As we went over the Venetian Causeway, surrounded by islands and boats, our day drastically changed. We rolled through charming back streets in Coconut Grove. We bumped over relentless tree roots that busted through the canopied sidewalks, and were awed by the magnificence of peacocks. I'd been here in a dream.

By the afternoon we were in desolate marshlands. I felt as though we suddenly landed somewhere in remote Southeast Asia or Central America, a tropical jungle. It was late afternoon, and we had a good distance to go. Tom was ahead, out of sight. I saw something in the ditch out of the corner of my eye. I didn't want to see what I saw — a dog stuck neck deep in mud. His dying eyes locked with mine in quiet des-

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peration. I yelled to Tom with no answer. I talked to the dog as I tried to figure out what to do. Eventually, Tom circled back. We attempted to free it with help from a few passersby. Although we finally got the dog out, our efforts were useless. Wildly crazed and unpredictable, the dog forced us to stand back as he weakly wobbled around on the street. Denying food and clearly out of sorts, he stumbled back into the flooded ditch. I called Animal Services and Wildlife Rescue, but neither offered assistance. There was nothing more we could do. He would die within a day or two.

We rode away in silence, feeling a pang of helplessness and humbled by this demonstration of the cycle of life. I had to let it go. We raced the darkness through quiet swamplands, soothed by birds backlit by the sunset. We rolled into Florida City with our flashing lights and missed the road to the campground. A sighting of the Ramada Inn won our favor.

Day two: 47 miles.

Tom: While Kerri was entranced with balcony views, peacocks, and saving dogs, my thoughts were on logistics and food. Once through Miami, I realized I was hungry and that we needed to pick up the pace. I started to realize that although the temper-

atures and sunshine made it feel like summer, the daylight hours indicated winter. Once we were out of downtown, we were on pace to be at the campground before dark until the dog incident. We hurried to pedal to our destination after the failed rescue attempt. Dusk can last a while in South Florida, though when it changes, darkness comes fast. Looking back, it is unforeseen events such as these that make these trips so memorable.

Kerri: As we rode to the edge of the mainland, approaching the bridge to the Keys, a dark cloud swooped in. Within minutes, we were drenched. I laughed out loud in the wild, exhilarating and refreshing torrential downpour. After eating and drying out in the sun, we crossed over onto Key Largo. Life on the Keys truly was dreamy and tropical. We took an outdoor shower, were entertained by iguanas, cooked a feast with our new Canadian friends, laughed lots, and slept hard.

Day 3: 34 miles.

Tom: Running into the Quebec family was great. They had been riding down the coast for several months — young boys on mountain bikes, dad pulling a trailer with boogie boards and a makeshift kitchen, mom hauling gear. Their setup made me smile. We ran into them after the rainstorm as they

were headed to John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park on Key Largo. They had reservations (which apparently are a necessity for camping on the Keys) and invited us to join them and another Canadian cycling couple they'd encountered along the way. We enjoyed these connections with the only other touring cyclists we would see. Thanks to them, I'm eating Nutella again.

Kerri: Every day was an adventure of a different sort. While the bliss continued to build along the winding miles, so did my reflections. I grew awake in every moment, seeing every passing tree, bird, body of water, car, person, and cloud, with the openness of meeting a stranger and old friend simultaneously. I felt the preciousness of days, of life, of being in this body.

I was aware of our dialogs and realized this trip was both a solo and team experience. For long stretches of riding, I would talk in my head, think about things, hold a silent mind or be in complete observation — a wildly expansive internal and solitary experience. And to think Tom was having an entirely different experience in his own mind. Then we would stop and connect. How are you doing? Did you see that? Do you want to eat?

From Key Largo, we rode 57 miles to

Marathon on and off of bike paths, shoulders, construction zones, bridges, and waterway paths. The scents of exotic flowers and rotting sea life alternated. We rode hard under a hot, strong sun. I was spent. But between the pelicans, the infinite blue water, the adrenaline of survival, and honey buns for dinner, I was jazzed.

From Marathon it was 51 miles to Key West. The early morning was filled with apprehension about riding over the seven-mile bridge. Seemingly endless, both the bridge and the expanse of ocean were beautiful.

On this day I discovered the birds had a sense of humor, a playful whimsicality in their dance and lightness of being. Upon arrival in Key West, we headed straight to the ocean. Clear, soft sand reflected through the warm aquamarine water. I washed the salty sweat from my body and lathered myself with the salt of the sea. Then I lay on the beach, watched the clouds, and smiled at the sound of the lapping waves.

Three days in Key West provided an abundance of goodness: clean, pure food; live blues music; smiling, generous people; and countless magical spots, including Fort Zachary beaches, sunset rooftops, Island Bicycles bike shop, The Café, the Butterfly

Conservatory, the Hemingway House, Reef Relief Center, Help Yourself restaurant, The Avalon, and so on. We were blessed with

There were services everywhere, beautiful scenery, a consistent tailwind, and temperatures in the 80s. Reaching Key West



Florida fauna. Along with other critters, lizards and iguanas abound in the Keys.

the sweetest of encounters in Key West, and when the ferry to Fort Myers Beach was delayed due to torrential rains and turbulent waters, we were just as delighted to stay.

Tom: From a logistics standpoint, our trip really could not have gone any better. The Keys turned out to be remarkably safe with bike paths, lanes, and shoulders.

added the proverbial cherry on top with indulgent rest days. A well-earned treat, Key West seemed to specialize in just that — indulgence.

Kerri: On December 20, we headed to the ferry. We were in for a turbulent ride as the boat flew, crashed, and bounced over white caps. I spent the four-hour trip with my head on the table, begging for sleep to

make it pass. We arrived on the west coast of the mainland at about 9:30 PM. We rode a few miles in search of a place to sleep. The dreaminess of our tropical vacation had shifted.

We woke up early to temperatures in the low 40s. We bundled up and did jumping jacks to get warm. Our ride through urban Fort Myers Beach was hardly smooth, with limited bike paths and minimal shoulders, construction, and headwinds. Some long, slow days of hard riding were ahead. Strange and curious towns emanated a sense of history. Amid a bounty of citrus orchards, I feasted on fresh oranges.

A couple days of 50-plus-mile riding took us through LaBelle and Clewiston. One of the highlights was Flora and Ella's – a local spot for breakfast in LaBelle. Aside from excellent service, care, and company, we were highly entertained by a crew of local elders. There was a woman flexing her muscles, passing around her body-building photos, and enticing the gang to get fit at the local gym. We all got some good belly laughs. From there, we entered the rural and remote wilderness areas of the Everglades. Riding across the entrancing Keri Road, we saw only an occasional citrus truck (leaving invigorating smells in



Urban view. Kerri rearranges the gear on her bike as Miami sparkles in the background.

its wake) and a few old ranches. Circuses of birds enchanted the tall grasses in the safari-like landscape. Other noted company included horses, cows, donkeys, a dead snake, a dead turtle, and a live alligator as we rode through 40 miles of uninterrupted, unchanging land. A constant headwind tried my mental endurance.

Then we had the excitement of a turn, although it was onto Highway 50. With

the high traffic and rough road, I felt more uneasy than I had yet. We rolled into Clewiston, showered, stretched, ate, and relaxed as we mulled over maps and forecasts for the next day.

Tom: The ride across the state was a pleasant surprise. I expected headwinds, traffic, and sprawl. While that was the case at

continued on page 43

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continued from page 22

times, the trip along the north edge of the Everglades was filled with exciting views, wildlife, and people. It seemed that most people in south Florida had moved there from somewhere else, and the folks in this part of the state were no exception. A favorite topic of conversation was how much snow was on the ground wherever they had moved from.

On all levels, our trip had been an overwhelming success. A highlight for me was experiencing it through Kerri's eyes. It had been her first tour, her first experience of the riding, lifestyle, highs and lows, and the satisfaction of traveling under one's own power — a complement to her history of backpacking. I could see she was hooked. Sharing my love of riding and being a part of her realizing a dream was a rush. And as far as chasing summer, we'd tagged it.

Kerri: It had not occurred to me that this would be our last day of riding. We humbly hung our heads, feeling good about the decision we had made, given the winds and the roads. We loaded up the car when Mom arrived. On the drive home, I happily looked back and celebrated every bit of the adventure. I reveled in my wakefulness with an appreciation for the fragility of life and the mindfulness to take it with a light heart. I tried to balance the strength of will with humility, and bow down to the power of Earth and its forces. I was reminded of what a gift it is to live.

Total riding days: Seven. Miles: approximately 350.

A couple months later, I visited with a friend in New Orleans. He spoke of his long-time desire to do a bike trip. I gave him the old *Adventure Cyclist* magazine I'd kept with me all those years. "Here," I said. "This is yours now." A short time after, he took off on a long solo journey in the southeast U.S. And so the cycle continues. **AC**

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