

Off the Clock

by Carol Ranachowski

While growing up in Chicago, I was not very athletic. I was not interested in sports, nor was I very good at any of them. As a child, I had an old Schwinn 10-speed which I used solely as means of transportation. Once I was old enough to get a driver's license, my bike was left to rust in the garage.

It was not until I was in my late 30's before I ever got on a bike again. A friend of mine, who lived in the St Charles area, invited me to join him on a Sunday bike ride with a few of his neighbors. They were going to bike to a Sunday brunch. It sounded like a fun and novel idea to me, and after a very long, cold, snowy and dismal winter I had a bad case of cabin fever and was anxious to get outside and enjoy the spring weather.

The Sunday of the ride was a perfect sunny late April day. We started from my friend's house at a very casual pace and I was surprised how quickly felt at ease on the borrowed bike. Along the way we met up with the five other individuals who were joining us for brunch. I was quickly put at ease by the members of the group that I had nothing to worry about being a novice and wouldn't be holding them back. I was assured this was a social group and no one was left behind. So our jovial and casual group continued the ride in the countryside, chatting and joking as we rode along. I didn't begin to become anxious again until I started hearing snippets of conversations referencing "35 or 40 mile days". I was beginning to wonder what I had gotten myself into, especially since we were so far out in the country with no cabs to hail down and take me back to my car.

Before I knew it, we were stopping for a water break. I was shocked to discover from the other riders, who had computers on their bikes, that we had already ridden 15 miles. After that I knew I could at least finish the ride. I spent the remainder of the day enjoying the sunny day with the chirping birds, and the fields with the wonderful smell of freshly cut grass.

The day after my big ride, I was patting myself on the back for riding the entire 36.4 miles ... even though my body reminded me of it every time I stood up. I took a few Advil, forgot the aches and pains and remembered the good times. I don't know if it was the company, the lack of the city noise and congestion, or the beauty of the Fox River area but I had thoroughly enjoyed myself.

I didn't realize it then, but I was slowly getting hooked on the whole biking experience. Riding on occasional weekends with my new biking friends soon became rather routine for me. We started riding to different destinations and traveling further and further on the bikes. With the extra miles though, came extra pains in numerous areas of my body.

I was given a lot of pointers from the other more experienced riders on how to make the most of the experience with the least amount of discomfort. One of the best ways not to get sore on long rides, I was told, was to do a couple shorter rides during the week I started riding my borrowed bike around the neighborhood in the evenings after work. I rode for about an hour and a half twice a week. The problem for me was the boredom from covering the same few miles; I was anxious to explore the surrounding areas around my home in Mount Prospect. While riding one evening, I happened upon another biker who I struck up a conversation with and soon discovered that Mount Prospect had its very own bike club.

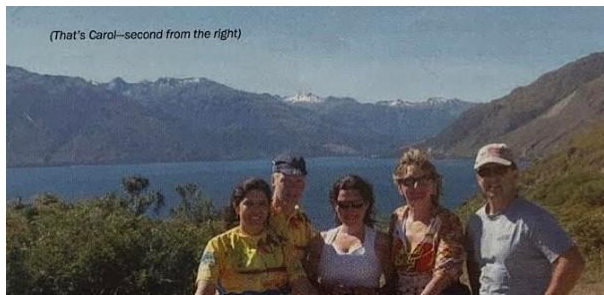
The lure of a biking club so close to my home helped me overcome my initial shyness and I showed up for my first

Show and Go ride on a Tuesday evening after work. I found that the club members were just as friendly and supportive as my friends out in the Fox Valley. I received all kinds of support and advice on proper cycling training techniques.

Although I couldn't believe it, the 10-20 mile weeknight bike rides helped me build up my endurance. I started venturing on longer group rides with the club and within a couple of months I was riding 50-75 miles on the weekends.

Over the course of the summer, our biking group would venture to various areas in Illinois and Wisconsin. I have to say that even though I was born in the Chicago area, it is only when I started biking that I saw many areas in a different perspective and got to appreciate them even more. This revelation soon got me to thinking about taking a cycling vacation.

I had heard snippets of biking trips across Iowa or through the wine country of California from fellow bike club members and decided to explore the possibility on the internet. There were numerous biking vacation tour groups and I settled on one which a few acquaintances had used in the past.



My first biking trip was a seven day adventure which explored the waterfalls, mountains and forest of the Columbia River Gorge in Portland, Oregon. The other 12 cyclists came from California, New Jersey, New York and Illinois. Although our backgrounds and cycling skills were very different we quickly bonded as a group by the end of the first day.

We cycled the beautifully restored scenic highways along the Columbia Gorge, stopped for lunch at a state park, took a magnificent hike to the base of one of the waterfalls, and continued our afternoon ride to the tallest and most famous waterfall in the Gorge at Multnomah Falls. The accommodations on the trip were at extraordinary luxurious resorts. A hot tub never felt better than after a 50 mile bike ride in the mountains.

The week came to an end much too quickly. When I initially booked the trip, I thought perhaps after seven days in a row on a bike, I wouldn't want to ever get on a bike again.

I guess you could say I was wrong about that. After spending seven days with others just as enamored with biking as myself, I managed to get great suggestions about other cycling vacations that shouldn't be missed. This would explain the three week cycling vacation this past January to the South Island of New Zealand.

My involvement in biking started out by chance, but over the last five years it has evolved to become part of my life.