

Tours and Triumphs: The Best Bike Events

By Jim Moore

A panoramic vista after a monumental climb. Dancing at a raucous finish-line party. The delicious exhaustion that follows extreme effort. A sinuous rainbow line of riders extending out to the horizon. Standing peacefully next to a bike in the middle of a freeway bridge that's cars-only the other 364 days a year.

I've experienced these moments, and countless more, on event rides in Oregon. Our state offers a cornucopia of riding bliss, and organized rides can be a great way to experience different aspects of that bliss. For me, riding is most enjoyable as a group activity. Whether it's a small group of friends, a medium-size bike gang or a huge mob of garish jerseys, there's a basic appeal to event rides: They're all about a shared activity, power in numbers and guilt-free food after. Oh, and sometimes they're even for a good cause.

So, the question for the discerning cyclist is, which rides are for me? By one count, there are nearly 4,000 organized bike events a year in Portland, including dozens of annual event rides held within a few hours' drive. Long or short, large or small, brutally hard or laughably easy? As you pore over the ride menu in the dark days of winter, looking for the right balance of challenge, scenery and amenities, you want to make an informed choice. So here's an insider's guide to what I'll call the Big Six – a half-dozen nearby rides that span the spectrum from populist to perverse – along with notes on a few others I've ridden, too.

Top Tour: Cycle Oregon

It's the Club Med approach to bike touring: Show up, and they take care of the rest. This week-long tour of Oregon's back roads and small towns has taken a different route every year for 21 straight Septembers, and they've got the details down. Yes, you're sleeping in a tent, and yes, you have to put in the miles. But other than that, it's pretty plush – a well-oiled transition to a new town each night that feels like a cross between a traveling circus and touring with the Stones. Beer garden with pizza. Good live entertainment on stage every night. Massage, yoga and hot showers. Three huge meals a day, plus rest stop snacks. Gourmet coffee and an ice cream truck on the side. The overall ambience: ride hard all day, party hard (or kick back) every night.

And did we mention it's for a good cause? The Cycle Oregon Fund has contributed millions to the communities it rides through as well as a wide variety of cycling and other projects. People who ride this event will tell you it's a great way to see places you might not ever drive to, and hanging with the locals is part of the appeal. You haven't done it all until you've grooved to a foot-stomping Cajun jam on a street corner in Oakridge – just hours after you've climbed up and over a mountain pass on a smoothly paved Forest Service road in the middle of nowhere.

Details: September 12-19, 2009 (2009 route announced Feb. 5); normally 450-500 miles over seven days. \$850 registration in 2008. www.cycleoregon.com

Appropriate for: A range, from hammerheads to novice tour-ists. But riding seven days in a row means training first.

Inside tip: The 2,000 spots available filled up in four weeks this year; registration opens in late January, so be ready. And spring for the Tent & Porter service if you can.

Downside: Not everyone likes camping for a week, and motels are hard to find in the hinterlands.

Also: Cycle Oregon also offers a two-day weekend event each summer, for a smaller taste of the same fun atmosphere.

Best Routes: Reach the Beach

Who knew you could get to the beach without climbing any big hills? Reach the Beach, a benefit for the American Lung Association, offers you a variety of routes for this early-season ride, from 26 to 100 miles, and none of them is particularly strenuous.

That fact, combined with the rockin' beach party at the finish in Pacific City, makes for a populist event that's a good choice for almost any rider. And that's what you'll see on this ride: almost any rider. Teens on moto-cross bikes wearing jeans, prim ladies with very upright posture and a basket on the front, impossibly large people who make you feel like never whining on a ride again – plus the usual assortment of on-your-lefts, fit seniors who are faster than you, social teams with matching jerseys, and the like.

This ride is one of the best-supported ones out there, with two hot lunch stops, baggage transport and good organization at the finish line. The one variable that you need to remember is weather: this is the coast. The Oregon coast. In May. If you're lucky you'll get a picture-perfect day. (It happens – really.) Mildly lucky means good weather but a strong headwind once you bust out of the forest. Unlucky means you're going to have an "I made it through..." adventure story to tell.

Details: Saturday, May 16, 2009. Registration fee plus \$50 required fundraising; benefit for American Lung Association. www.rtb.kintera.org.

Appropriate for: Anyone in reasonable shape.

Inside tip: Have your squeeze meet you in Pacific City and make a beach weekend of it. Hey, romance *and* a ride home.

Downside: A headwind can make the last 10 miles not much fun.

Most Iconic Event: Seattle to Portland (STP)

Years ago, before I rode very much, a friend offered me his spot in STP. It sounded cool until he casually mentioned the 200-miles part. At that time I couldn't comprehend riding that distance in a week, much less one or two days. But I'm here to tell you it's not only possible, but pretty much a cultural requirement if you've got a chamois pad in your shorts.

Ask anyone you meet on a ride in Portland, and odds are quite high they've done STP – at least once. And there's a good reason for that. For starters, where else can you go on a long ride with 9,000 people? And then there's the delicious-but-subtle subtext that all those riders are leaving Seattle to come to Portland, which of course is as it should be.

But back to why you might want to do it. First of all, it's doable. With the exception of some extended rollers in the last part of the Washington segment, this route is so flat that the bridge across the Columbia is about the most strenuous climb. Most (meaning, sensible) people do the ride in two days; you can pick where you spend the night based on your lodging preferences. (Doing it in one day is a commendable feat, but it means 12-15 hours in the saddle for an average-strong rider.) Second, you'll be surrounded by other riders pretty much at all times, which can feel safer than a solo or small-group ride. And telling people you rode 200 miles in two days feels really good.

Details: July 11-12, 2009. \$85 registration in 2008. www.cascade.org.

Appropriate for: Based on visual experience, an unbelievable variety of riders can pedal 200 miles in two days.

Inside tip: Logistics are the big challenge. Figure out early on how you're going to get to Seattle and where you'll stay there. Two-dayers, stay with a "host family" in Centralia/Chehalis – two meals, a hot shower and a bed for a good price.

Downside: Not the most inspired scenery, and extended time on Highway 30 to the finish.

Biggest Question Mark: Tour de Cure

After 13 years of running Summit to Surf – one of the most scenic routes imaginable, with alpine climbs and screaming downhill, and forests and streams and the Gorge, and enough mileage options to challenge even the hard-cores – the American Diabetes Organization had to make a change. Their beloved ride, while revered by the bright-lycra crowd, wasn't serving their core audience of diabetics and their families. And the nationwide series of Tour de Cure rides *is* first and foremost about fundraising, so... 2009 will see an entirely new direction, one that aims to be more inclusive – and lucrative.

The four routes (10, 28, 65 and 100) will all begin and end at Hillsboro Stadium, and they will generally be much flatter – with the exception of the century, which will wind through wine country before scaling Chehalem Mountain. (It ain't Timberline, but it'll still make you breathe hard.) The advantages of the new site are numerous from the organizers' point of view – more room to operate, better infrastructure, no shuttling back over the mountain, closer to the population base.

The good news for riders and their families is that it can actually be a family event – there will be kiddie and family activities at the stadium (think bike decorating, trike races, rock walls and bouncy houses), and riding the event doesn't have to be the dawn-to-dusk endeavor Summit to Surf was. And as far as organization, for my money S2S was the best one-day event around for food and drink, volunteers, registration and finish-line details. Hey, there'll still be guilt-free fast food from Burgerville! Bottom line: There's no way to match the old course, but the new direction might be worth checking out.

Details: July 25. \$50 registration plus required \$100 in fundraising; benefits American Diabetes Association. www.tour.diabetes.org.

Appropriate for: Just about everyone – just choose the right mileage option.

Inside tips: It can be a drag hitting up your friends for money so you can ride your bike, but I've found if you ask for a mere \$5, most will give you \$10 and a couple will pop for \$20 – six or seven responses and you're there.

Downside: An unknown quantity, and it might cover some familiar territory for anyone who rides the Westside.

Biggest Populist Event: BridgePedal

The Providence BridgePedal has had its problems, but it has an undeniably cool hook: For one day a year, you can ride over virtually all the main bridges in Portland, in bikes-only bliss. And in the bike-advocating Mecca of Portland, that's reason to ride right there.

Let's address the problems: The ride has become so popular that it's had growing pains. For several years it was a joyless slog of walking, waiting and pedaling in unfortunately equal measure, with bottlenecks galore. But I was lured back this year by promises of better logistics, and the event delivered. With multiple routes and lengths for different groups, starting at different times, it works again.

And it's truly for everyone. It's a great family event, with a separate route that looks like a parade of trailers, kids' seats and tag-alongs (my 3-year-old still calls the Fremont Bridge "the picnic bridge" after a memorable crackers-and-juice stop this summer). And for everyone else, there are plenty of delights. The view of a miles-long Chinese dragon of bikes and jerseys snaking across the river crossings is unlike anything else you'll see all year. And just see if you can stop yourself from saying "Wheee!" as you fearlessly fly down a freeway on-ramp on two wheels.

Details: Sunday, August 9, 2009. Various registration levels, including a family deal.
www.providence.org/bridgepedal.

Appropriate for: Schwinn and sneakers, trailers and tag-alongs, once-a-year riders.

Inside tip: Watch out for the once-a-year riders. If you want to make any speed at all, start as early as possible.

Downside: Even with improved organization, it's not a quick ride. Claustrophobes should avoid this one.

Top Challenge: Race Across Oregon

So you think you're tough... well, let's find out. If a routine century or even a one-day STP just doesn't release enough endorphins for you anymore, tackle this baby. Born from a bar bet (founder George Thomas wagered that he could beat four biking buddies across the state, riding solo against their relay team), this has evolved into what is widely considered the toughest event of its kind in the U.S.

The concept: ride 500-miles-plus as fast as you can. You can do it solo, on a tandem or as a relay team of two or four riders, but the challenge doesn't change. There's a new route for 2009, starting in Hood River and looping out through the lightly populated areas of north-central Oregon, coming back to an uphill finish on Mt. Hood. Not that you won't have enough hills by then; there's about 40,000 feet of climbing all told.

So, why would anyone but the bike-deranged do this? I can't speak for soloists, but as a relay team member it's actually pretty fun, not to mention a great challenge. You can switch riders anytime, so there's a big element of strategy – long pulls all the way, or break up the climbs? – and, as Hood-to-Coasters know, nothing breeds camaraderie like hours and hours with sweaty teammates in a van. (The fastest four-person teams finish in just under 30 hours, so you'll be on the road all day, all night and part of the next day.) And I'll tell you that I've rarely felt as serene in the real world as I have cranking down a lonely road in the silence of 5 a.m. as the sky starts to lighten.

Details: July 11-12, 2009; \$250-\$950 registration based on solo or team configuration.
www.raceacrossoregon.com.

Appropriate for: Masochists, mostly, but any four serious recreational riders can finish it as a team.

Inside tips: You'll need a support crew and vehicle – and they're the key to a positive experience. For relays, find teammates you're sure you can count on. Train very, very hard.

Downside: If you can't function without sleep, two days and a night is a long time.

Others

Here are a few other selected rides you might want to check out:

Ride Around Clark County (RACC) – This early-season ride is infamous for rain, but I rode it in 2007 on a beautiful day. The rural scenery on the longer routes is fantastic – it goes places you don't on your local rides. May. <http://vbc-usa.com/RACC.html>.

Mt. Hood Hoo-Ha – Bad name, great route. This ride started as a one-off adventure with a group of friends and ended up replacing the Torture 10,000 as the Portland Wheelmen's signature summer ride. Starts 25 miles up from Estacada and goes around Timothy Lake on secluded Forest Service roads, with a ton of climbing early and a sublime seven-mile descent late. August. www.pwtc.com.

Tour de Blast – This ride up to the Johnston Observatory overlooking Mt. St. Helens offers plenty of climbing, not to mention unparalleled views. The first and last 10 miles are boring, but the middle makes it worthwhile. June. www.tourdeblast.com.

Vine Ride – A late-season roll through the bucolic orchards, farms and vineyards of wine country, starting in Newberg. A beast of a climb in the middle, but it's not that long. August. www.vineride.com.

Monster Cookie – Another early-season ride, a metric-century loop from Salem north to Champoeg Park and back. It's not the most interesting route ever, but it's a good ride to get the winter kinks out. April. www.salembicycleclub.org.

Blackberry bRamble – This Eugene-area ride into the Coast Range features a great century route on obscure roads that climb and drop in splendid seclusion. A pretty tough ride, but worth it. August. www.eugenegears.org.

Strawberry Century – A Willamette Valley ride out of Lebanon that has some nicely forested roads early on but less inspiring scenery later. They've added a short family route, and everyone gets strawberry shortcake at the end. June. www.santiamspokes.org.
