

“Hey, Stranger! Ride with the Locals when you Travel”

By Jim Moore

In the classic cycling movie “Breaking Away,” the character of Dave Stoller is a 19-year-old bike-obsessive with a tribe of three friends: Mike, Cyril and Moocher. Of the four, only Mike has a car, and so Mike’s car has a bike rack up top – because where Dave goes, his bike goes. His friends accept this about him.

That’s all I ask of my wife when we go on vacation.

And, honestly, she’s great about it. So in most cases the three of us arrive together at our destination: her, me, my bike. But having a bike is just the first step to good vacation riding. The big question: Where to ride?

Of course, there’s something to be said for just venturing out in a direction and seeing what happens. But our domestic arrangement is that I ride early in the morning, while she sleeps in and savors some coffee-and-robe time. After that we head out together. So I don’t have all day on the bike; I want efficiency in my routing.

Local bike shops are often a good source of recommendations, but you do run into the occasional sadist who sends you unwittingly out on the local death ride (“Oh, yeah, there’s a bit of climbing”), or locals who think they’re better at directions than they are. Online resources like MapMyRide may offer routes that look interesting, but I’ve learned the hard way that ambiguous route cues and varying interpretations of “paved road” can wreak havoc on your ride.

Besides, I don’t particularly like riding alone. Plus I’m the kind of tourist who likes to mix it up with the locals. So I’ve found that a great way to ride on vacation is to hook up with a local bike club. Often it’s as easy as a Web search combining the name of your destination and “bike club.”

The advantages are numerous. As long as you keep up, you won’t get lost. The ride mileage is usually posted on the site. The routes tend to cover the primo riding in the area. And if you do anything really embarrassing, you’ll probably never see these people again.

I’ve tried this approach in metropolitan spots like Seattle and in remote outposts like Fruita, Colorado. Based on my experiences, I’ve developed a few guidelines for success, and a recent trip to the Monterey Peninsula provided a good illustration.

Research the ride. Take the time to check out the club’s Web site to see exactly how they rate their rides. I’ve found out the hard way that hammerhead rides in other places are just as tough as those in Portland (and do *not* forget to factor in elevation if you’re ever riding in Colorado). On our first day in Monterey, I opted to sleep in a bit and join the Saturday morning “S&L (“slow and late”) ride. It was perfect for a mellow ride – an

ambling, chatty group that welcomed me to their ride and into their conversations. By the end of the leisurely 30-miler I had a tip for the best time to hit the aquarium, the name of a really good Mexican restaurant, a lead on a writing assignment, and an invitation to a beach party that night – plus some advice on which of the club’s faster rides would be best for me.

Show up early. When the Web site says, “Meet at the anchor in the town square,” the locals know exactly where that is. You don’t. Allow plenty of time for getting turned around, and once you get close, keep a sharp eye peeled for clumps of garish clothing in the area. Also, when you’re one of the first ones there, the locals are more likely to talk to you. Which leads to...

Ride humbly. Don’t start out trying to prove how fit you are, or how cool the Portland riding scene is. For example, Monterey has more beautiful riding than anywhere I’ve been; if I’d started spouting off about Multnomah Falls or Skyline, I would have felt really stupid as we wheeled along sun-splashed 17-Mile Drive between the golf links and the crashing waves. And remember, for all these people know, you’re a total pedal-poser who can’t hold 15 mph. When I showed up for a tougher ride Sunday morning, no one volunteered a word to me until I had hung with the leaders up the big climb. Then they were friendly as long-lost cousins at a family reunion.

Make the first move. Socially, I mean. Everyone here knows each other except you, and it can be a long and silent ride if you don’t break the ice. This seems incrementally more true the faster the riding group. It’s usually best to wait until you hit the road, because before the start all the talk is about the last local race or yesterday’s club ride. Once you’re rolling, look over at whoever you find yourself next to and open with “How you doin?” “Nice morning” or “So, where we headed?” It usually goes fine from there.

Pick some brains. If you’re going to be around for a few days, it’s likely your schedule won’t always mesh with the club’s, and you’d do well to get some tips on other local rides to check out. Being in Monterey, I just had to ask about riding the coastline down to Big Sur. Interestingly, I got the same response from both guys I asked: “Oh, yeah, I rode that when I first moved here. Once.” Of course, as a tourist, I rode it anyway. I mean, it’s Big Sur. And it wasn’t that bad – if shoulders aren’t that important to you and the sound of RVs rushing up from behind doesn’t make you nervous.

As it turned out, I rode with the locals three times that week, sampling 17-Mile Drive on Saturday, the punishing Laureles Grade and Carmel Valley on Sunday, and the car-free, rolling expanse of Fort Ord Thursday. I got a couple really good workouts, saw unmatched scenery, and confirmed that riders everywhere are generally cool people. And that Mexican restaurant rocked.