



FROM COMMUTER TO TOURIST

by Brendan Leonard

I was not joking when I told my friend Tony that I “wasn’t really that into long bike rides.” We were nearing Plaster City, California, on a bumpy asphalt two-lane road, which was deserted on Super Bowl Sunday. We had 2,985 miles left to ride on the Adventure Cycling Association’s Southern Tier Route, from San Diego to St. Augustine, Florida, in 45 days. The math said I’d be learning to like long bike rides. There are so many other things I like to do in Colorado, it’s just hard to talk myself into using a Saturday for a 50-mile ride when I’m already on my bike five days a week, I told Tony. He continued to laugh.

I love my bicycle and all the places it takes me in my hometown of Denver, but that’s as far as it went. I had never owned a pair of cycling shorts or a jersey until a few weeks before our tour started. I do my daily commute to work and almost everything else within a three-mile radius of my apartment on an old steel Raleigh, wearing jeans, a backpack, and mountain-bike shoes. The round-trip ride to my office is about three miles, so why not try 3,000? I suppose you could call that naiveté.

When I told my family and friends that Tony and I were planning to attempt a cross-country ride, half of them eventually said something like, “You’ll have a lot of thinking time out there.” This, along with the opportunity to eat 6,000 calories per day, was a big draw for me. There are few places to really relax in the saddle for more than a few seconds when riding in a city like Denver. Almost every street in Capitol Hill and downtown holds all kinds of potential for an accident: car doors swinging open into your path, pedestrians crossing the street against the signal, cars simply not seeing cyclists and turning left into them from the opposite lane or “right hooking” them across the bike lane. Then there are potholes and ice.

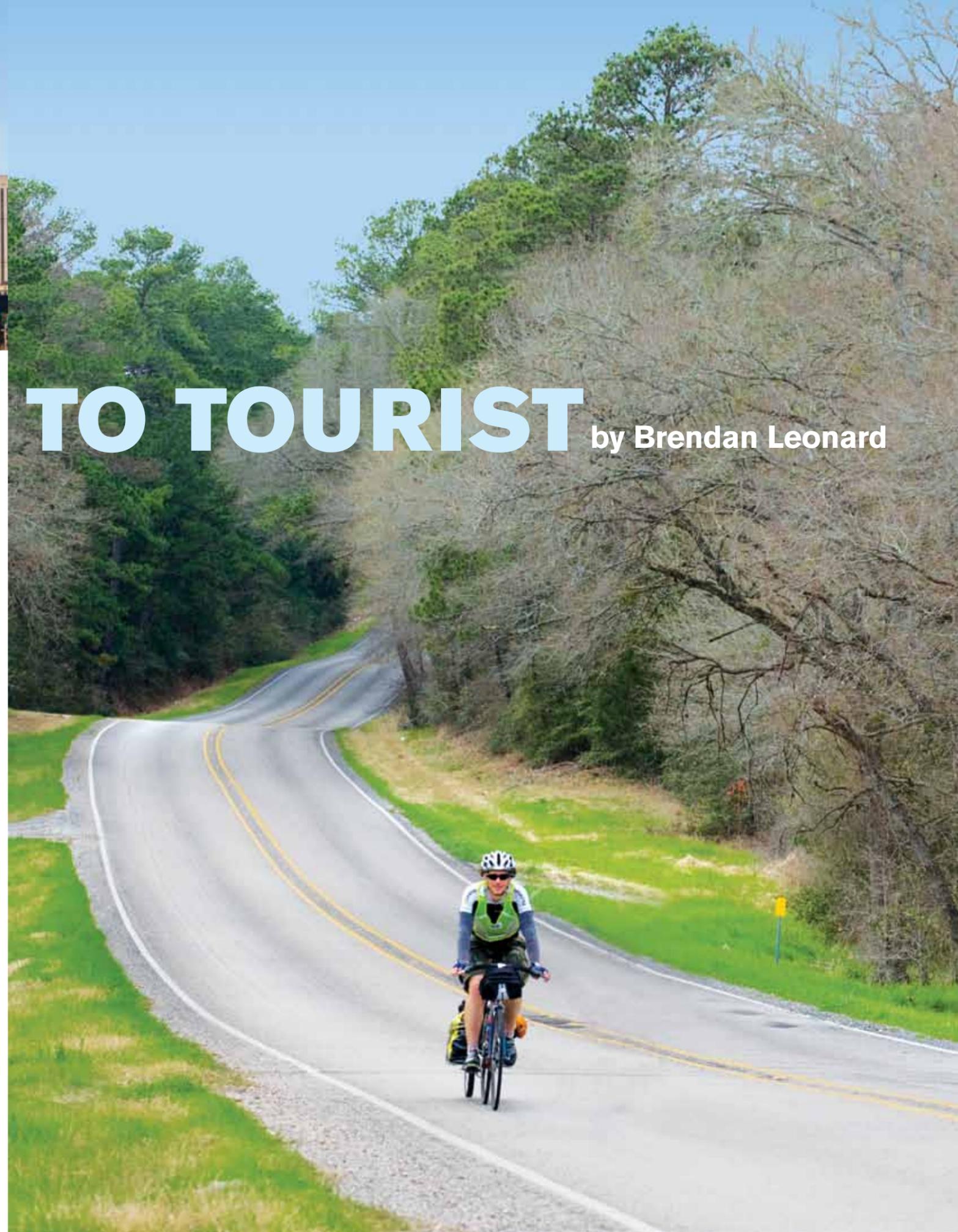
You learn to keep your brake calipers tight. In four years of daily commuting, I’ve been taken out by a pedestrian, cut off by cab drivers and bus drivers, confronted by a dozen motorists and buzzed by dozens more, gotten pinch flats from four-inch-deep potholes, and crumpled one bike frame when a car backed out of a blind parking spot in an alley and I crashed into its rear quarter panel at full speed.

On the open road of the Southern Tier, which began just outside San Diego for us, it didn’t take too long for me to get bored enough to start talking to cows on the side of the road.

“Hellooooo,” I would moo at them as I pedaled by, and they watched me suspiciously while munching grass. Sometimes I would recite old hip-hop lyrics, or ad lib other song lyrics, out of tune. Sometimes they ran away, not sure what to think of a man on a bicycle towing a giant trailer. I reassured them that there was nothing to fear — I’m a vegetarian.

The Southern Tier is the shortest of the three Adventure Cycling cross-country routes. Compared to the 4,246-mile TransAmerica Trail and the 4,286-mile Northern Tier, it’s only 3,092 miles, but it’s the optimal cross-country tour for those who can’t take two months off during the summer. The route hugs the southern border of the U.S. all the way across, making early spring and fall the best times to ride. That way you’ll avoid the skin-baking heat of the desert Southwest and the oppressive humidity of the Gulf Coast.

There are only three large cities on the entire route: San Diego, Phoenix, and El Paso. Although we made a point to include San Antonio and Austin on our itinerary, for the most part, we were lulled into the rhythm of rural America — waitresses who called everybody “hon,” communities where everyone knew everyone else entering or leaving the corner store, and towns where every local person we talked to wanted to give us directions to the next town or tell us about a shortcut. The waitress at the restaurant in Descanso Junction, California, shook her head at us every time she came to our table, in disbelief that we were going to continue riding in the downpour. A retired couple at the Kofa Café near Hope, Arizona, interviewed us about our ride from their table, eventually mentioning that they had motorcycled to the “four corners” of the Lower 48, riding a ring around the country over four months back in the 1980s. They said it wasn’t the scenery they remembered most; it was the people they met. Joe, a Walmart associate in DeRidder, Louisiana, talked to me about bicycles for 15 minutes one morning while I tried to convince him to try RAGBRAI (The Register’s Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa) the next summer. He had seen and talked to lots of people on their way through



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DeRidder on the Southern Tier, and it had piqued his curiosity.

I found out almost immediately about some of the demons of touring — things that a utility cyclist would never think about. Numb pinky fingers, for instance, and the daily self-care regimen one must undertake to avoid saddle sores. My neck was so sore from holding up the weight of my head and helmet for eight hours a day that I began doing yoga poses every night after we finished riding.

A three-mile commute doesn't exactly prepare you for something called a headwind, either — a 30-MPH headwind on my morning commute might make me 90 seconds late to the office, if that. But we pulled into Langtry, Texas, on our 23rd day, hoping the easterly afternoon wind would let up before our next day's ride to Del Rio, the first place we'd see so much as a grocery store again. Langtry had two small stores selling candy and soda, but almost nothing else. If we didn't make it to Del Rio the next day, we wouldn't be eating dinner.

I slept for two hours and woke up to a howling wind and the push of the tent wall against my head. It didn't let up all night, and I struggled to work up the ambition to remember which stuff sack my earplugs were in. Then I worked up the ambition to unzip my sleeping bag and root around for them in my BOB trailer bag. I failed. That morning, we packed up, got on our bikes, put our heads down, and battled. At five miles, I stopped and pulled out a small American flag on a stick and had Tony snap a photo of me holding it in front of my face, the flag standing out at a 90-degree angle from the stick, blowing right at me.

Even on the downhills, I was in my granny gear. Three days before, we had been ripping along at 22 MPH with a tailwind, sailing into Marathon, Texas. After we left Langtry, it took us 10 hours to pedal 55 miles. We rode the last five miles in complete darkness, then we split three large pizzas at a hotel in Del Rio. I estimated the headwind at 30 MPH, and that day became the answer to the question, "What was your worst day on the trip so far?"

There were days like that, which I knew in my heart were no fun. But I knew that our tour as a whole was fun, even if I wouldn't realize it until afterward. That's the case, I imagine, when you undertake something you've always thought about doing — one of those things that comes into your head every time you take a break from that spreadsheet and stare out the

window for 30 seconds.

For every endless hour in the saddle, when it felt like I had to stand up every 10 minutes to keep my butt from going numb, or every demoralizing flat tire we got — just as we were starting to make good time — there was a convenience-store customer or a café waitress to give us a little lift, just by taking a little interest in our trip.

People seem to be disarmed by two guys wearing funny clothes and riding fully-loaded bikes at 12 MPH. As Americans we would never walk up to another motorist at a gas station and ask where they were headed, would we? But if someone's foolish enough to travel by bicycle, many of us feel it's probably worth asking them what the heck they're up to. We chatted up all kinds of folks who asked the usual questions: Where are you headed? Where did you start? How many miles do you ride a day?

If people are disarmed by those on bicycles, they are further disarmed by a seven-foot-tall Chicago chiropractor on a bicycle. Tony would be asked how tall he was by a stranger at least five times a day. "Well, a seven-footer," a woman in the country store in the retirement community of Brenda, Arizona, said as Tony paid for our Gatorade. Sometimes they would wait until he was out of earshot and they'd ask me how tall he was. "Seven feet," I'd say, "and I'm five feet 11 inches," but no one cared.

A cowboy outside a gas station in Uvalde, Texas, said to me, "Man, I can't believe that big guy over there can even ride a bicycle. Look how tall he is!"

It only took us 35 miles of riding to meet our first friendly cyclists on the route — a shock to a Denverite used to cyclists divided into five cliques who almost never mix or even so much as acknowledge each other: roadies — recreational racers, recreational riders, and triathletes on new bicycles; hipsters — mid- to late-20s kids who use fixed-gear bikes and fixed-gear conversions as their only mode of transportation; messengers — the people who have been riding fixed-gear bikes to work long before hipsters adopted them; day laborers — who only ride bikes to work because they can't afford a car yet; and people like me, who just ride their bicycles everywhere and don't really fit in.

But, at our hotel in Alpine, California, an honest-to-goodness roadie pulled up in an SUV and started asking me about our very young bike tour. Ross was in town for the next day's Boulevard Road Race, put



Tall man, tall bike. Tony uses his long legs to crank out the miles along the Southern Tier Bicycle Route.

on every year by University of California, San Diego Cycling Team. He used roadie terms that I didn't know the definition of, such as "Cat 3." The next morning at the continental breakfast, Ross made our day, telling us we were his inspiration for the race that day.

tom of a hill. Suddenly, a few hundred feet ahead, a peloton of lycra-clad racers flew in from a side road. Trucking uphill with my 60-pound trailer, I felt like a John Deere tractor about to pull onto the Autobahn.

The faster riders jettied past us in silence, conserving all the oxygen they could inhale

Two weeks later at the Pepper Pot in Hatch, New Mexico, a group of seven or eight cyclists came in just as we were about to pay our bill. We had 38 miles left to get to Las Cruces and had spent the last 25 miles battling a crosswind so fierce it had ripped the flag out of my BOB trailer and deposited it in a farm field somewhere. We chatted with one woman in the group who was outside when we left.

15 or so miles from Hatch, I got a flat in my trailer tire. This necessitated taking the trailer off the bike and the wheel off the trailer. I sat down on the shoulder and applied two patches to two different holes in the tube, and I was happily interrupted by repeated offers for help, as the group of cyclists from the Pepper Pot passed me a

We rode the last five miles in complete darkness, then we split three large pizzas at a hotel in Del Rio.

Five hours later, Tony and I were soaking wet and tired when we saw the orange "Special Event Ahead" sign near the bot-

tom of a hill. Suddenly, a few hundred feet ahead, a peloton of lycra-clad racers flew in from a side road. Trucking uphill with my 60-pound trailer, I felt like a John Deere tractor about to pull onto the Autobahn.



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couple minutes apart. A couple miles later, we caught and began passing the members of the group. For a few minutes, I rode next to Chris, who was the only man in the group. Chris said he was Adventure Cycling Association Life Member number 10 and had ridden the TransAmerica Trail many years ago. We leapfrogged and chatted with the group all the way into Las Cruces, the end of their 78-mile Saturday ride. One of the ladies in the group said she was about to turn 67 and another group member had recently celebrated her 70th birthday. Now it was our turn to be inspired.

I don't know what causes a bicycle chain to split over the course of several hundred miles. I do know there are better places than seven miles outside of Wiggins, Mississippi, to look down and see half a chain link peeling off as it rolls over your chainring. We were 140 miles from the nearest bike shop listed on the Adventure Cycling map.

When the combined cost of your last three road bikes is \$640, you learn to fix and replace a few parts. Spokes, cables, housing, brake calipers, derailleurs — all these components have been replaced on the kitchen floor of my 450-square-foot



Runs like a Deere? Brendan's rig may not have been nimble but it chugged steadily along.

apartment. For our Southern Tier trip, I had spent an hour on a winter Saturday with a mechanic at my local bike shop, strategizing on what tools and spare parts I would need for the trip. After making a list, crossing items off, considering weight,

and what was likely to break and leave us stranded, I ended up with an exhaustive, but minimal, list: three tubes, tire levers, a small pump, an extra tire, two emergency tire boots, 21 tire patches and three tubes of adhesive, one tube for my BOB trailer, a

Crank Brothers multi-17 tool that included a chain breaker and spoke wrenches, a pedal wrench, a Park Tool 3-Way hex wrench, a Leatherman Kick multi-tool, two extra brake cables, an extra derailleur cable, a crescent wrench, freewheel pullers, two extra drive-side spokes, and two extra non-drive-side spokes, chain lube, duct tape, zip ties, and, at the bottom of the stuff sack that held my tools, a tiny Ziploc bag that held my extra chain links.

Replacing two chain links on the side of a country road in Mississippi using the chain-breaker on a multi-tool is a bit of a tense situation. A screwup can mean a day or two of lost riding and airline cancellation fees, not to mention 300 round-trip miles of hitchhiking. I felt a little bit like the action hero everyone trusts to defuse the bomb with only 60 seconds left until it detonates, trying to remember: Is it the green or blue wire I'm supposed to cut?

I popped out the busted link and its neighbor and frantically worked one pin and two new links into the rest of the chain. One pin to go, but either my filthy chain or the tool kept slipping out of my hands. Tony held my derailleur in place as I worked, giving the whole operation a

50-50 chance in my head. I mashed everything together in the chain tool, like a five-year-old trying to force in the wrong piece of a jigsaw puzzle. I gritted my teeth and spun the multi-tool. Then, pop! everything came together in my blackened hands. We high-fived and were off, racking up 83 more miles for a total of 105 that day. We then plopped exhaustedly into a booth at the Waffle House in Bayou La Batre, Alabama, and ate our fill.

At A1A Cycle Works in St. Augustine, Florida, I unclipped my trailer and had one last look at my bike. It was the last time I'd see it in its touring costume. We had finished the route, dipping our bikes in the Atlantic Ocean a few minutes before. Jeff and Joy at A1A boxed and shipped my bike to Denver, and the next time I'd ride it, it would be minus fenders, handlebar bag, touring tires, and three water bottles and cages.

Seven months earlier, I had crashed my only road bike and buckled the down tube. I was okay but in desperate need of a bike, both to ride to work every day and to ride across America in six months. After five days of searching Craigslist, I had found the perfect bike — a steel 1985 Raleigh Team

USA for \$100. It was indeed a \$100 bike when I bought it, and I stripped everything but the crank and built it up using parts from other bikes.

That's what many of us typically do in central Denver — find an old steel frame and build it up enough to survive the city. How cool would it be, I asked a couple of my friends, if I could ride a 25-year-old, \$100 bike across the country?

I told as many people as I could — from California all the way across Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida — about my \$100 bike. I didn't expect anyone to relate to it and I was happy when people were kind enough to act as if they were actually listening. I just wanted people to know they didn't have to spend thousands of dollars on Lance Armstrong's bike — or be anything like Lance Armstrong — to pedal across America. Hey, you know, I'm just a guy who rides his bike to work, and I can do it. And you could, too. **AC**

Brendan Leonard is a year-round urban cyclist and writer. He lives in Denver and rides his 1985 Raleigh Team USA everywhere he goes. More of his writing can be found at www.semi-rad.com.



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