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The Great European Tour of 1963

by Scott McElmury

In 1961, my girlfriend Audrey and I joined the American Youth Hostel organization in San Diego, after noticing how much fun my brother Peter was having, riding his 10-speed Atala bicycle with them. The group had many well-organized rides and trips. It was led by a local doctor named Clifford Graves. Little did we know that he was a world-renowned

cyclotourist and founder of the "International Bicycle Touring Society." We just knew him as a surgeon in his 60s, an avid cyclist who lived a few blocks from my brother and me in La Jolla, who rode his bicycle back and forth to his office every day. He had a garage full of René Herse bicycles, including a chrome tandem, which everybody rode except him.

I think my first ride with AYH was a 50 miler. Thankfully I was wearing tennis shoes, because I walked all the hills. It took me all day, but I was hooked. Eventually all three of us – my brother Peter, Audrey and I – completed our first century in the hilly north San Diego area. As we became more involved with AYH, and our riding abilities improved, we began leading

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From the Editor

It was an exciting summer. Paris-Brest-Paris was a great event. Rain and wind added to the challenge of riding 1228 km (768 miles) over billy terrain. While many riders excelled in the face of adversity, the unfortunate result was that as many as 30% of the participants did not finish the ride. For me, the crosswinds in both directions made it a very hard ride, allowing little rest. My ride report will be published in the Randonneurs USA newsletter, and it will be available online at the Bicycle Quarterly web site under "Samples."

PBP was fascinating not only because of the ride and the people you meet, but also because of the Kaleidoscope of bicycles. Some riders used ultralight racing bikes, while others preferred sturdy touring bikes or even mountain bikes. There were classic randonneur bikes and some fascinating new custom-built machines. Recumbents, trikes and even a tandem recumbent with back-to-back seating rounded out the picture. Clearly, opinions among randonneurs vary about the optimal machine for such a long event. Bicycle Quarterly conducted a survey to see what types of equipment randonneurs use, and which equipment worked best. Is it true that riders with fenders are more likely to finish a rainy ride? Are wheels with fewer spokes less durable? You will find the results starting on p. 19.

Careful choice of equipment is important not only for randonneurs. In 1963, a group of 25 young Americans went on a 10-week bicycle tour through northern Europe, organized by Dr. Clifford Graves of the International Bicycle Touring Society. Dr. Graves did not want to have his tours interrupted by mechanical problems, so every participant ordered a custom cyclotouring bike before leaving for Europe. Their trip took them north of the Arctic Circle in weather that resembled the conditions of this year's PBP, yet there were no mechanical problems. Read their amazing story starting on p. 1.

With the holidays coming up, many children will get their first bicycle. On p. 48, we look into choosing a children's bike and provide hints about easy ways to help your child to learn to ride.

This also is a good time to make travel plans for 2008. There are two dates on my calendar: The North American Handmade Bicycle Show on February 8-10, in Portland, Oregon, is worth the trip. There you can meet many of the custom builders whose bikes you have seen in Bicycle Quarterly. Another exciting event, the Cirque du Cyclisme, for classic bikes old and new, will be held in Virginia, on June 6-8.



Photo: Scott McElmury

Rain, mud and steep hills were part of cyclotouring in Norway in 1963. With the right bikes, these conditions did not present a problem.

The Great European Tour of 1963 (continued from p. 1)

rides and going on multi-day trips in the area, usually involving long daily mileages.

In late 1962, we heard that the Doctor was planning a 10-week European trip for local AYH members. The three of us immediately applied. The Doctor selected 25 participants from a long list of applicants. The plan was to fly to London, where we would split into two groups, one going north through England and Norway, the other heading across the channel to tour the Continent. We would meet in Paris after 10 weeks. All of the people selected were experienced cyclists.

The Norway trip was going to be the most difficult, with long miles, dirt roads, and lots of climbing. The group going north included Peter, Audrey, myself, and 9 other riders. Most of us were students, ranging in age from 15 to 30, with 9 boys and 3 girls. The Doctor would lead us on the first half (England and Norway), then I would take over as leader. Being 21 years old, I was one of the senior members of the group! I was going to be responsible for paying all the bills and doling out lunch money to the group. This was before the days of ATMs and credit cards, so I would have to carry several thousand dollars worth of traveler's checks.

The cost of staying overnight in a European hostel in those days was \$1.50, which included dinner and breakfast. Thanks to the favorable exchange rate at the time, the entire 10-week trip cost about \$ 850. About

half of that was for the airfare, which was very expensive back then.

The fee for the trip even included a René Herse bicycle! Indeed, early in the planning stages of the trip, all but one of us ordered a custom René Herse touring bicycle. You couldn't go cyclotouring with Dr. Graves on anything else! He had a long history with René Herse, and many of the cyclists in San Diego, and La Jolla in particular, rode them. There were often several Herse tandems on the weekend rides. Two of the girls on the Continental Trip ordered a tandem for the tour.

The 25 of us arrived in London early that summer of 1963. Our René Herse bicycles were waiting for us at the airport. The bikes were all the same, except for their color and size. Cotted steel cranks, wingnuts on the hubs and non-Herse stems had been specified to keep the cost down, but all bikes were equipped with aluminum fenders and Herse's signature front and rear racks. The bikes served us well on the trip. Apart from flat tires, we encountered no bike problems at all.

After unpacking the bicycles, the two groups split up, with 12 of us, plus Dr. Graves, heading north. The two weeks in England involved 14 straight days of intermittent rain. The standard joke in the group was about how you didn't have to stop for water, just hold your open water bottle out while you were riding.

Audrey and I took a one-day side trip to Manchester, where we visited a framebuilder

named Johnny Berry. His business card indicated he had been the official mechanic for the 1948 British Olympic cycling team. I had been corresponding with him about a track frame and wanted to finalize the order. It was rumored that he built about one frame per year. Mine finally arrived 10 months later, by ship, after going through the Panama Canal. The cost for the frameset, including Campy headset, bottom bracket, plus shipping was \$65. He later built a road frame for Audrey, which she rode for many years.

In the Lake District in northern England, we first encountered lots and lots of hills. In this area, the roads go straight up and over hills, instead of going around or using switchbacks. Every hill had a sign at the start indicating how steep it was. We encountered grades of 1 in 10 (10%) to 1 in 4 (25%) several times a day. At the top of one particular 1 in 4 grade was a sign indicating that it was 1 in 4 going down the other side, and that cyclists should dismount and walk their bikes. On one occasion, a few of us decided to try a shortcut that looked good on the map. It ended up being a dirt cow path with the sign indicating 1 in 3 (33%)! We took turns helping each other push our loaded bicycles to the top. When we got to the hostel that evening the rest of our group had already eaten dinner and were sitting around the fireplace.

The England leg of the trip ended in Liverpool, where we took a ship across the North Sea to Bergen, Norway. From there, we started a two-week loop into northern Norway and back south, ending in Oslo. Things were different here. We encountered very few cars. The hostels were parts of homes with rooms converted into boys' and girls' dorms. There was lots of great food. The only other cyclotourists we saw during this entire trip were a couple of English riders. A lot of the riding was on hard-packed dirt. You were either riding on a flat road along a fjord, or you were going over a mountain to get from one fjord to another. On the day that took us to the northernmost location of our trip, we left the hostel in the morning and immediately began to climb. At the end of the day, as we were approaching the next hostel, we still were going up the same hill. There was snow on the side of the road. We later checked the map and discovered that we were inside the



◁ *Glacier-carved fjords make for steep terrain when cycling in Norway.*



Arctic Circle. The next day was going to be a long and twisting descent down to a fiord. It was very cold, snowing, and the road was muddy. None of us had leg warmers, tights, or even full finger gloves. The best we could do was wrap our extra socks around our hands. Most cyclists know what it is like to brake on long descents with cold hands. I remember Dr. Graves watching us as we prepared to start the long downhill. A slight smile was on his face. Years later, as I thought about that day, I understood the smile. This was what cyclotouring is all about, riding in a foreign country, with a group of friends, and in all conditions. This is what he loved. I am sure he was also thinking, as he watched us, these young people will remember this day for the rest of their lives. He was right.

The Norway part of the trip ended in Oslo, where we were scheduled to take an 8-hour night ferry to Copenhagen, Denmark. Upon arriving at the dock, we noticed that the ferry was actually a large ship. We were uncertain as how to get our bikes on board. Pushing loaded touring bicycles up the long gangplank to the deck would have been very difficult. We asked the dock foreman if we should wheel them in through the large cargo opening, where cars were going. He said “No, just lean them against the building and go ahead and board. I will take care of the loading”. As we looked out over the railing, high up on the ship’s deck, we watched all the activity, and kept an eye on our bicycles. We observed a large crane on the ship swing over and lower a net onto the dock. Dockworkers spread the net out and began putting our bicycles in the center. Then the four corners of the net were attached to the crane and up and over they went into the hull of the ship. From the sound they made as they were lifted, we were convinced that the 12 bicycles were being permanently fused together. The damage turned out to be minor: numerous scratches, a dented fender, and one out-of-true front wheel. I wonder how one of today’s carbon fiber bicycles would have done

that day. The next morning, after eight hours of very, very rough seas, none of us even wanted to see our bicycles, let alone ride them.

The second half of the trip took us through lovely countryside in Denmark, Germany, Austria, Switzerland and France. The ride into Paris was particularly stressful. As the ride leader, I had to find the way, as well as keep us all together in the big city with traffic light after traffic light. In addition, none of us had ever been in Paris before. We finally all made it to where we were going to stay for the next four days. Here we unloaded our bikes and met up with the other group.

The following day, all 25 of us set out for René Herse’s shop on Rue du President-Wilson. The plan was to leave the bicycles there, so he could pack them up and transport them to the airport when it came time for us to fly home. The rest of the trip was going to be sight-seeing in Paris and traveling on the Metro. Little did we know that there would be one more bicycle ride.

Soon after arriving at René Herse’s, a photographer from the Paris newspaper, Le Figaro, showed up. He wanted a picture of the group riding along the Champs-Élysées in front of the Arc de Triomphe. I thought,

◁ **Clockwise from top: 1: The author leads the group in France, on the way to Paris. 2. Dr. Clifford Graves with a hostel owner in Norway. 3. Inside the Arctic Circle. 4. At a hostel in Norway.**

Touring in Germany: All riders are on René Herse bikes ordered for this trip, equipped with handlebar bag, rear panniers and saddlebags.



oh great, now I have to get the 25 of us from René Herse's to the Arc de Triomphe. Just then Lyli Herse, René's daughter, appeared with her bicycle and said: "Follow me!" We all scrambled to find our bikes and chase after her. We had just finished over 3000 miles of riding in the last 10 weeks, so our fitness levels were very good, and we were without our heavy gear. However, Lyli just had won her 6th French championship title, so even though she probably was taking it easy, the pace was fast. Fighting to stay on her wheel was all fun as we flew along the back streets of Paris. Getting dropped here meant not being in the picture, as several of the group found out.

Traffic was stopped across all the lanes of one of the large avenues, so we could ride eight abreast toward the camera with the Arc de Triomphe in the background. People on the sidewalk were cheering. Not only were we cyclists, whom the French love, but also Americans, and this was less than 20 years after American soldiers helped liberate them from the German occupation. We rode with USA emblems on our jerseys and American flags sewn onto our panniers. The French loved us.

After returning home, Audrey and I mar-

ried. I sold my René Herse for \$80 and got seriously into the competitive side of cycling, as did several other members of the group. Audrey and I both competed at the local, state, and national level for many years. Audrey won numerous national titles and set a US women's hour record on the track (24.8 miles). Each summer she went to Europe to race and compete in the World Championships. In 1969, riding her Johnny Berry, she became world champion, after an eventful race in pouring rain in Brno, Czechoslovakia.

Since that time, Audrey and I have gone our separate ways. However, my love of cycling has continued. My wife Elaine and I have logged over 60,000 miles on our tandems. We have ridden in England, Ireland, New Zealand, Italy, and all over the United States. It all started that summer of 1963. ●



American cyclotourists in Paris were big news in 1963.

