

LIFTOFF

Escaping the gravitational force of home
by Willie Weir

I remember vividly watching the launch of the space shuttle Discovery. The camera zoomed in as the rockets ignited. The billowing fireballs, its sheer power and energy, were awesome. But the shuttle just sat there. Was something wrong? Then there was movement, almost undetectable movement, as the shuttle struggled. It was hard to believe that this lumbering, struggling vehicle would soon be up in space and free from the force of Earth's gravity. I love travel

— the open road, the undiscovered nooks and crannies off the tourist track. There are moments on a bicycle journey when I believe I've discovered true bliss. Yet, in order for me to take that bike trip, I must break free from the gravitational pull of home.

Actually, we struggle with it. My partner shares my passion for travel and is willing to do it by bike.

The list of things to do before we go has increased with time — getting a house sitter (and one who likes cats), finishing up work projects, getting rid of enough stuff that the house sitter has room to live in our house, finishing house projects so a house sitter would actually like to live in our house, paying bills, paying other bills in advance, finding people willing to fill in with several nonprofit projects we work on, shoveling a layer of compost on the garden, filing for an extension for our taxes, going to the dentist.

It wasn't always this complicated, was it? 20 years ago, I lived in a dumpy basement apartment.

My bedroom had no windows. My roommates and I couldn't afford to turn on the heat, so you could see your breath inside the apartment from November through February. I had no furniture to speak of, unless you count a cardboard apple box used as a bedside table.

I didn't have a cat, but my roommate did. The cat had fleas, and the fleas liked me a lot.

When I embarked on a bicycle journey, instead of pulling free of gravity like Discovery, leaving was more like

being a hummingbird sitting on a branch and then instantly and effortlessly zooming into the sky.

I didn't leave ... I escaped.

Discussions about bike touring always seem to revolve around gear, routes, and repairs. Yet the process of leaving is the hardest step.

Over 90 percent of the weight of the space shuttle at liftoff is fuel that will be burned in the first 8½ minutes of flight. Almost all of its resources are used solely to break free from the pull of Earth's gravity. Leaving the earth is hard — outer space is a breeze in comparison.

It's the same for many a bicycle journey; leaving home is the hard part — the actual trip is easy in comparison.

I've known people who have been planning trips for years (decades even) and still haven't started out.

They keep asking the same questions and search for the perfect bike. They go on countless training rides and take a language course. They buy maps and tour guides, but they never take the trip.

For some the emotional pull of home is too great.

Traveling means leaving friends, family, and pets.

For most of us, there truly is "no place like home."

Then there's the money issue.

The financial pull of home can be even stronger than the emotional one. Finances can be the black hole of bike-travel dreams.

Once I had a guy in his late 20s come up to me after I'd given a presentation

about my five-month journey in India. Someone in the audience had asked me how much the trip had cost, and I'd stated that, aside from airfare, the journey had cost \$1,000.

This guy said, "Look. I want to travel like you do. I'll buy you dinner if I can bend your car."

Sure.

At a nearby restaurant, he took out a pad and pen and said, "\$1,000? I can't believe you could travel for five months on that. Tell me how."

"Well, first I need to ask you some questions."

I took out my own notebook.

"Are you currently employed?"

"Yeah, I work for Boeing."

"Do you have a car?"

"Yes."

"Is it paid off?"

"No."

"What is your payment?"

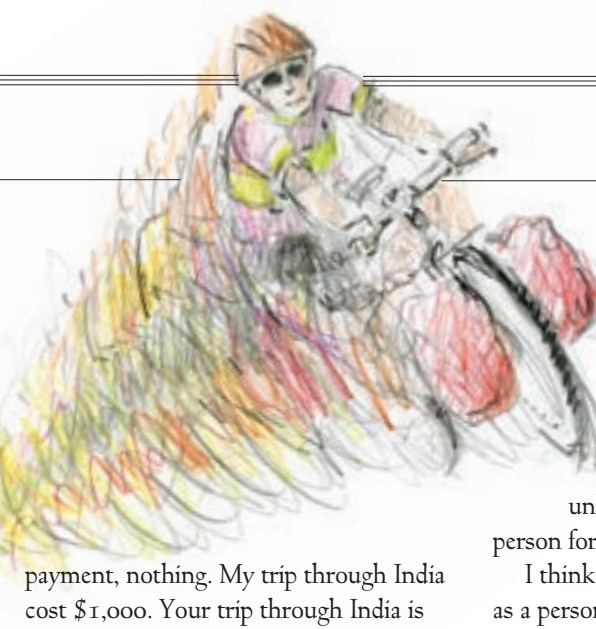
I tried not to gasp when I heard his reply. I wrote the figure down.

"Do you have another car? Own a house? What's the mortgage payment?"

I kept asking questions and writing down the figures from his responses.

Obviously frustrated he asked, "But what does this have to do with my taking a bike trip to India?"

"Everything. When I left for India, I put all, and I mean all, my possessions in a friend's closet. I had no car, no house



derers. Traveling without a purpose or goal can become just as mind-numbing as the world's worst desk job.

A man in a small village in South Africa once told me, "Travel is worth nothing unless you return home a better person for it."

I think he is right. Each trip shapes me as a person. So much of what I believe and who I am comes from the combined experiences of my bicycle journeys.

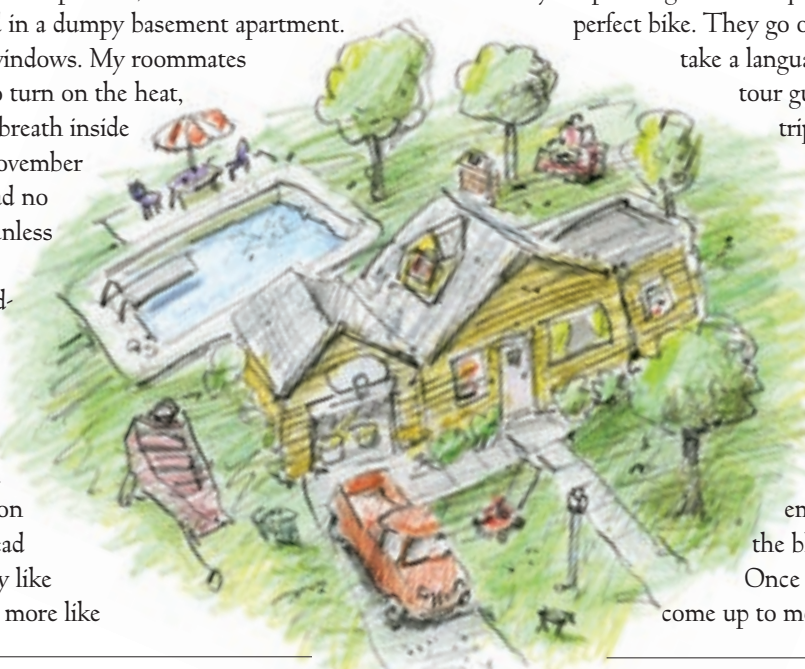
Do I long to return to the days of basement apartment living with no heat? Not a chance. I love my city, my neighborhood, my garden, and my cat. But I also love to get on the bicycle and go.

That's why we're packing and storing and running a thousand errands in preparation for another trip.

I can't change gravity. The physical, financial, and emotional pull of home is there, and I am a fool to try and ignore it. It's better to acknowledge it, celebrate it. How fortunate am I to love home as much as the open road? I don't escape anymore. I lift off.

It takes a lot more time and energy than it did 20 years ago, but the ride is still worth it. **AC**

Willie Weir has been writing a column for Adventure Cyclist since 1997. Willie, Kat, and Zeb are currently cycling in Colombia and Venezuela.



GREG SIPLÉ

www.TopperRacks.com (800) ATOC-021 ATOC (800) 659-3569 www.Draftmaster.com

TOPPER RACKS www.Atoc.com

A NEW DIVISION OF ATOC **DRAFTMASTER**

Roof top carriers for singles tandems recumbents Pivoting & non-pivoting styles available

Receiver hitch carriers for singles tandems trikes recumbents