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Travel

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PUTTING THE PEDALS TO HER METTLE

FOR DEEP AND DETAILED EXPLORATION,

A SPIRITED ROAD-TRIPPER PREFERS TO BIKE AROUND A DESTINATION



APRIL GREER FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

BY MELANIE KAPLAN
Special to The Washington Post

Some folks cross the country on a bike. I prefer to drive with a bike in my car.

Over several road trips with a two-wheeler in my SUV, I've come to appreciate driving to faraway places but exploring them on a human-powered vehicle. At my destination and along the way, I hop on a bike to breathe fresh air, get my bearings, stretch my limbs and act like a local for a spell. Cycling allows you to access routes impractical or unreachable by automobile; and unfailingly, getting out of the car on a road trip sets the stage for serendipity. When you slow from 70 mph to 15, the joy is in the unexpected.

I've learned some lessons on my six-wheel adventures. Here are 10 of them.

Carry a bike survival kit

Last summer, on a 7,400-mile road trip, I was halfway into a 30-mile rainy bike ride in Portland, Ore., when I realized that I had been



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TOP: Cyclists often transport their bicycles to trailheads and cycling meetup points with an SUV or a truck.

ABOVE: The author, with her beagle Hammy in tow. His rig adds 50 pounds to the journey but lightens the trip.

negligent. I rode my steel-framed commuter, towed my beagle Hammy in a trailer, and wore a helmet and padded biking skort. But inexplicably, I had left my travel bike pump at the hotel and my extra tube and patch kit back home. I was lucky that I hadn't blown a tire. During that ride, I vowed to never again bike without emergency gear at hand.

REI stores offer free bike maintenance classes, even if you don't buy your bike there. Your local mechanic can teach you basics, such as how to care for your chain and brakes and how to remove wheels and pedals if you are transporting your bike inside your vehicle. Once you know how to change a tube and use a patch kit, carry those along with a multi-tool (like a Swiss Army Knife of bike tools) and a pump or disposable CO₂ cartridges. Always bring a bike lock, phone, money, local map and more water and food than you think you'll need.

Learn from the locals

Often, my first stop when I get to a town is

BIKE CONTINUED ON F5



PHOTOS BY MELANIE KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

For the effort, bicycling offers a sense of belonging

BIKE FROM F1

the bike shop, where I can ask for ride suggestions. In Portland, I stopped in at West End Bikes and explained that I would be towing 50 pounds (beagle plus trailer); could they recommend a couple-hour ride that erred on the side of flat? The shop folks sent me on two routes: one across the Gothic-style St. Johns Bridge and another along the east side of the Willamette River, where I discovered a path called Springwater Corridor. Near the beginning of the latter route, I glimpsed the new car-free Tilikum Crossing Bridge. I biked by the Portland Puppet Museum, heard chickens in several backyards and passed a food-cart enclave called Cartlandia.

In Madison, Wis., I queried strangers when the circuitous bike route around Lake Mendota left me confused. In Buffalo, I joined an after-work group ride with the Campus Cycling Collective; the ride stopped at an ice cream store and ended at an impromptu party of potluck appetizers and canned beer.

Work it whenever you can

Before, after or in the middle of a long day of driving, nothing feels better than giving your muscles a workout. At the beginning of last summer's road trip, which began on the Jersey Shore, I rode at sunrise through a couple of beach towns before driving straight through to Chicago. A couple of days later, I stopped in Big Timber, Mont. — a speck of a town between Billings and Bozeman where Robert Redford filmed "The Horse Whisperer." While dining at the Grand, a hotel restaurant with a moose head on the wall, I asked my local acquaintance to suggest a cycling route. The next morning, I started at an elevation of 4,000 feet and climbed steadily higher into the mountains, with Hammy behind me. Other than the occasional pickup whizzing by, I had the two-lane road to myself. Back in town, a well-earned hearty breakfast awaited me at the Grand, and the endorphins from my ride ensured that my feeling of euphoria would last well into that day's long drive on the interstate.

Stay in bike-friendly towns

And while you're staying there, get out of your car for good. In McCall, Idaho, last summer, I began my week-long visit with a 20-mile ride around town and Payette Lake. My friend Dave

showed me where to rent a paddleboard and where to look for moose. We pedaled to a yard sale and a hidden haven called Charlie's Garden, as well as Alpine Pantry for blackberry turnovers. As the days went by, I got around completely by bike — a picnic at Legacy Park, ice cream at Scoops, a tour at the smoke-jumper base, fish tacos at Mile High Marina and live music at Crusty's.

A few years back, I got into a similar rhythm with a fold-up bike during a week in Marfa, Tex. After my first ride around town, I was overcome with a sense of belonging: I looked at my bike, locked up outside, and saw parts of a tumbleweed in the spokes.

Identify what's not friendly

In Astoria, Ore., which sits on the Pacific coast at the mouth of the Columbia River, I was set on avoiding the car during my visit, despite the daunting hills. The staff at Bikes & Beyond gave me the lay of the land. In town, I biked along the Riverwalk, a path along the old Burlington Northern Railroad tracks, complete with a live soundtrack of barking sea lions. Along the way, I parked at Pier 39 and ordered a cool drink at Coffee Girl, next to an old Bumble Bee tuna cannery.

Still, I yearned for a longer ride and considered cycling across the bay to Fort Stevens State Park in Hammond, which seemed reasonable on the map. But a kind, soft-spoken local named Kurt, who makes bags from old canvas sails, cautioned me against it. He said the roads were too dangerous; drivers weren't necessarily mindful of cyclists. That was good advice. After reluctantly packing the bike in my car, I found heavy traffic along a narrow bridge and was happy for my four wheels. At Fort Stevens, I biked a dozen miles on paved trails, meandering through forests and bike tunnels.

Play commuter

Joining the throngs of commuting cyclists in a bike-friendly city is like linking up with a school of fish when you're in unfamiliar waters. For a week, I stayed with friends in West Seattle, but one Friday morning I needed to head downtown for a reporting assignment at the historic Panama Hotel. I left Alki Beach after breakfast, cycling along the Puget Sound and over the West Seattle Bridge. Along the way, I realized I was in the middle of heavy two-wheeler traffic; locals were headed to work. Following the flow meant avoiding awk-



ward, tourist-style stops to consult my map.

Late that afternoon, I returned to West Seattle. As I waited with other cyclists for a drawbridge to open and close, I suspected that the jaded commuters around me saw the delay as merely an obstruction between them and their weekend. But I could hardly suppress my glee at the moving bridge and boats.

Find nooks and crannies

When you get curious on a bike, you open yourself up to chance encounters and end up in some offbeat spots. Narrow alleys beckon. Shiny objects inspire detours. Commuting back to my friends' house in Seattle, I veered off the main drag along the port, mesmerized by the massive, colorful walls of shipping containers. I found myself in tiny Jack Perry Memorial Park. For some time, I stood with my bike on a snippet of shoreline and watched

tion. In my pocket, I carry a map. I try to remember landmarks. I query strangers when necessary.

In McCall one day, under clear, blue skies, I biked south of town and up a steep hill with Hammy in tow. I turned a few times, passed farms and found myself at a four-way intersection, which featured three dirt roads. I wanted to loop back to my starting point instead of backtracking, and I wasn't sure which way to go. Soon, I saw a man on a horse with three ranch dogs underfoot. He wore a cowboy hat. "I'm hoping you can tell me if this road will take me back to town," I said, pointing to the paved one.

His dogs approached Hammy in the trailer, apparently wondering how this dog rated wheels. To them, he said, "Be nice." To me: "Which town?"

I laughed. "McCall. Where are we now?"

"Lake Fork," he said. We chatted for a minute before he pointed us in the right direction and trotted off.

Go high-tech

For planning routes in unfamiliar territory, my endurance-athlete friend Sarah — who recently drove cross-country, took a few days off from driving for long training rides and competed in a half Ironman Triathlon along the way — turns to technology. She recommends Under Armour's MapMyRide, an app to map, record and share your workouts; Strava, a social network for athletes; and Ride with GPS, an app to find established routes or draw your own. After selecting a route (and checking the elevation), Sarah plots it on Google Maps and uses the satellite view to scrutinize course conditions — so by the time she's on wheels, she's not surprised by shoulderless roads or gnarly intersections.

Stop, look and listen

Bike computers can tell us our speed, distance, heart rate, cadence, elevation and trajectory. But just for kicks, bypass analytics and soak up your surroundings. Waiting for a train to pass at a railroad crossing, for instance, is a wholly different sensory experience on two wheels than it is from behind a windshield. Outside McCall, I pulled over by a farm to watch two bulls fight, kicking up dust and head-butting for 20 minutes.

Climbing a hill in Big Timber, I stopped to stare at four mule deer who stared back before they sprang over a fence and bounded across the road in front of me. Yet what I remember most distinctly about my time cycling in Montana is the absence of all but the faintest sounds. Off in the distance, water trickled. On the side of the road, wind rustled leaves. With each pedal, I could hear my breath.

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FROM TOP: The main drag of Marfa, Tex., with the Presidio County Courthouse in the distance; an inviting outlook along Payette Lake in McCall, Idaho; back on dry land in McCall, an impromptu bullfight — between two bulls, sans matador — breaks out.

the movement of cranes and trucks around me. Eventually, a bearded man got out of his pickup nearby. He told me that he was a Seattle native and liked this spot because it's secluded; I told him I was visiting from the other Washington. Between drags on his cigarette, he suggested some places to ride. After a few minutes of silently looking out to the water, he said: "Good thing you have your bike."

Go low-tech

Among the pleasures of riding in unknown places is what I like to call micro-disorientation: teetering on the edge of being utterly lost. I usually look at a map and have a vague sense of my direction and distance before I begin, but I don't have a smartphone. Each ride is like a game: How many turns can I make and still remember the way back? Usually, more than I think, but I also have ridden miles in the wrong direc-