

Cycling in Hoosier Heaven

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The road unrolls straight before me on a crisp Indiana morning. Sun glints on silver silos beside a red barn, and dry grasses along a fence hint of autumn. Fields in green and russet fill the distance to a wooded knob. By the fifth day of the 2003 [Touring Ride in Rural Indiana](#), September Escapade (TRIRI SE), I have fallen in love with the rolling, no-billboards countryside of southeastern Indiana.

But there's much more to like on this six-day tour, where I've joined about 230 cyclists--other first-timers and lots of veterans. As I pedal into the promise of this day, I mull over my own "top ten reasons" to ride the September Escapade...

Park inns, a sweet deal.

Every event has its own personality, and TRIRI SE's is shaped by the three state parks that host its overnights. Imagine turning in at the brown park sign at the end of a 60- or 80-mile day. You pedal a wooded road past markers for hiking trails and campgrounds, up to the park's impressive stone lodge, knowing--if you signed up in time--that you have a room in these cushy digs with your own real bed and a private bath.

Equally important, the inns are the hub of this event. They're where everyone eats. They're where the route rap happens the first night, the owl walk meets the next, and folksingers perform the following evening.

That came as a surprise to me. On other event rides of my experience, motels, if there are any, have been out on the fringes, and the catered catfish fries, spaghetti dinners, group photos and evening singalongs take place at the campground. So I didn't think twice when my husband Joe and I signed up late and the inns were full.

The beauty of the inn option dawned on me as I realized the campgrounds were two or three miles from the lodges. While inn guests just walked downstairs to meals, we campers got in some extra mileage commuting back and forth to breakfast and dinner. At night, I can tell you, those park roads are dark. Nothing is lit--not the turns or the signs for the turns. We didn't bother to take tail lights, and I almost T-boned Joe one night when I didn't see him turn in front of me.

So if you like your comfort, the inn option is easier. At \$440 per person (double occupancy) for the full package it's a sweet deal, and a big attraction for TRIRI SE veterans.



Organization woman.

Most participants I talked to credit the husband-and-wife team behind this event with superior organization. Although the Bloomington Bicycle Club, State Parks & Reservoirs, and State Park Inns sponsor TRIRI SE, Barbara and Joe Anderson run it with a small, dedicated, congenial cadre of volunteers. As Barbara says, "They call us 'The Barb and Joe Show.' Joe is the cyclist in the family, and I'm the organizer."

A native Iowan-turned-Hoosier, Joe discovered bicycle touring in 1981 when he rode RAGBRAI, the granddaddy of all cross-state rides, at age 37. Two years later, a friend of the Andersons planned, marked and led the first TRIRI, even cooking the breakfast oatmeal for its 25 participants. In 1984 he coaxed the Andersons on board as assistant directors. Joe administrated from the seat of his bike while Barbara drove the baggage truck for the all-camping summer event.



The following year their friend moved out of state and turned the reins over to Barbara and Joe. Lots of things have changed since then, as TRIRI grew and Barbara brought it into the black. Oh, and Joe now drives the luggage truck. He still cycles on layover days, leading 90-milers to get the kinks out.

In 1989 Barbara and Joe recruited the Indiana State Parks as a host sponsor. "The state parks provide us with sag vehicles, a truck to haul our gear, they set up tents and picnic tables for catering breakfasts and dinners, and give us a place to camp," she says. "For the September Escapade (started in 1998) we fill the inns while we are there and eat a lot of meals in the inn, so we make money for them, too."

Joe plans the route and, two weeks in advance, marks turns and hazards clearly with spray paint. The ride runs smoothly and more simply than some. Cyclists who need to hitch part of the way are encouraged to use sag services early in the day. Sag vehicles carrying water and a supply of emergency granola bars follow the route and set up at a few points, but generally everybody is on their own for snack stops and lunches. This saves a ton of organization and brings riders into the local businesses, who get a heads-up about the event from the Andersons. All restaurants, groceries and general stores are marked on the day's map.

"Besides," says Barbara, "setting up regular rest stops the way most bike events do tends to remove participants from the essence of touring. We want everyone to stop and sightsee, to interact with locals along the route, and take time to get involved with Indiana."

And we did. On Day 5 in Fort Ritner (pop. 70) the freckled, redheaded Taffy of Taffy's Grocery had made up lots of baggies of grapes and orange slices to sell us at 50 cents apiece. Just past Hillbilly Hollar Road, her old-fashioned front porch, picnic table and double outhouse in the side yard made a great rest stop after coming down off Devil's Backbone. As we munched our grapes, another rider filled me in on the local lore of that precipitous downhill. "At night," he said, "I've read that you can hear the cries of the victims of wagon accidents on the steep descents."

Of course, even for modern day travelers, there's the occasional glitch. A few days before TRIRI SE the state highway department stripped the top off 12 miles of pavement on the first day's route, resulting in a very bumpy ride. My Avocet Cross tires held up well, but there were many flats, a few falls, and plenty of business for the accommodating Joe Faulkinbury of Custom Velo, official tour wrench. At that

evening's rider meeting, Barb expressed regret but allowed that that is "the essence of touring."

Seeing the real Indiana.

If Barbara has kept the ride solvent and organized, Joe Anderson brings to route planning a love for hills and a quirky fondness for Indiana's history and down-home attractions.

Imagine a compact, athletic Midwesterner with a thatch of gray hair, a dry sense of humor, and a delivery a little like Garrison Keillor's. At the first night's meeting Joe took the mike and explained that towns and services can be few and far between in this land of tall corn and yellowing soybean fields. Check behind the little country churches, he advised.



"A few years ago," he deadpanned, "we discovered that the Baptists name their churches for the kind of outhouses they have. In Heltonville, for example, the Gilgal Primitive Baptist Church had the most primitive outhouse. The next day," he went on, "the Separate Baptist Church had two separate outhouses. Only the ladies' had carpet on the toilet seat."

Joe's enthusiasm for each day's attractions is contagious, whether it's his preferred pie stops or amusing signs to watch for. His favorite on this tour is a single sign that reads: "Entering Gatesville/Leaving Gatesville."

From the first night Joe had us anticipating the particularly oddball attractions of a 94-mile loop ride on Day 4. At mile 25, we must watch for the Chainsaw Cemetery, just over the crest of a big hill. "A man--I assume he repairs chainsaws--has a field with four or five rows of 'em planted with the blades stuck straight down," said Joe. Pure Hoosier folk art.

Joe progressed to The Shoe Tree at mile 40. "Somebody showed me a book with three interesting things you should see in Indiana, and the Shoe Tree is one of 'em. Maybe thirty years old, thousands of shoes hang from it."

Last, Joe talked up Punkin Center, a country store that closed in 1971 and has been caught in a time warp ever since. "DON'T MISS!!! Ring bell and talk to Mabel, 91 years young," our cue sheet read, referring to the wife of the store's deceased proprietor.

"She sells cheese," Joe said, "and from her machine you can buy Cokes in those little old-fashioned bottles." But the store's real attraction is Mabel and the items that aren't for sale. Its merchandise has never been removed, and the garage is like a dusty museum, crammed with things that Mabel and her husband collected.

Two layover days, lots of options.

In 1995 the Andersons incorporated a layover day in both TRIRIs, and now each event stays two nights at two of the state parks. The layover days allow flexibility and give everyone two days off from packing and unpacking, a break that we campers especially appreciated.



Plus, it's hard to overstate the attractions of these scenic state parks. Some people seeking a change of activity put their bikes aside and hiked the trails at Clifty Falls or rode horseback at Spring Mill.

For cyclists wanting the best of both worlds, there were shorter loop rides on those days. At Clifty Falls the 24-mile loop took in Madison on the Ohio River. Nicknamed Porkopolis back in riverboat days for its livestock exports, Madison must be the best-preserved and prettiest town in Indiana. We found plenty of shops, eateries, and historic buildings open for visiting to while away a few hours before climbing the steep, switchbacked hill that leads back to the park--due penance for those who took Joe's tip and tried the Hoosier Pie (pecan with chocolate chips) at The Celtic.

At Spring Mill an attractive compromise was the 28-mile out-and-back route to meet Mabel at Punkin Center, returning in time to see the park's reconstructed Pioneer Village in daylight.

That day's near-century ride struck me as the most rewarding day of the 2003 Tour. I liked the weirdness of the Chainsaw Cemetery (I could imagine them coming to life like the brooms in *Fantasia*) and The Shoe Tree, its lower branches draped with shoes like so much tinsel. Nearing Punkin Center, with farm fields as far as we could see, my husband and I stopped to watch an Amish farmer cut dried cornstalks with a team of three horses. Across the road a windmill turned beside a red barn; three men in a horse and wagon pulled out of the driveway and clip-clopped down the road.



"This day's ride is so beautiful," said a woman seated near me at the Overlook, a good lunch spot at mid-point with an unrivaled view of the Ohio River. "It's so quiet on the road, you can hear the acorns drop. Anybody who didn't ride today made a mistake."

I didn't say the choice was easy, but there are options.

The September schedule.

You don't swelter in September; plus there's all summer to train.

For being on the road all day, September's cooler cycling weather is warm enough for me. As it turned out, we had a single rainy day out of six, and four gorgeous sunny days with highs in the 80s. At noon on one of them, we were lunching outside Fox's Country Corner Store at the top of a deceptively long hill when one lanky woman hopped off her bike. Laughing, she stripped down to her sport bra and twirled her sweaty jersey above her head. Behind her was a cloudless blue sky. Who could complain?

Compared to June's TRIRI, the September event draws a smaller and older crowd--average age about 50. Not that there's anything wrong with that. "The kids are all in school and you don't have to compete with them," a middle-aged rider cracked as we dug into the buffet one evening. "The mean age of this group is higher than on any other tour I've been on, but these people are driven! Some older woman with white hair passed me today!"

Great grub, a priority.

On the official 2003 t-shirt “We Ride To Eat” is the motto below a cartoony cyclist, bent over the drops with his tongue hanging out. He speeds past an “Eat at Joe’s Just Ahead” sign toward another touting “Bikers Special--Pie A-la-mode.”

Fueling up on the road is part of the fun of TRIRI. Stop at the soda fountain on Courthouse Square in venerable Salem for a lemon yogurt cone with bits of lemon peel or a chocolate ice cream soda. Later, with 14 of the 80 miles still to go, why not stoke up on blackberry cobbler at TJ’s Country Cafe in tiny Campbellsburg?

But don’t be late for dinner on TRIRI SE, because the inn’s comfortable dining room awaits. It has tables enough for everyone and, at most, a 5-minute line for the ample buffet and salad bar. Clifty and Spring Mill Inns offered several yummy entrees, and the night Clifty Inn served baked salmon it tasted made-to-order.

One morning I was enjoying the breakfast buffet when I met Steve Lemen, southern regional supervisor for Indiana’s State Parks. To my surprise, he told me that all of their park dining facilities are “in development.” I couldn’t imagine any room for improvement until dinner at the third inn, Abe Martin Lodge, where there was less choice in dinner entrees. But that’s being picky. We ate very well and apparently it’s just going to get better.

Friendly people, Hoosier humor.

One morning, toothbrush in hand, Phyl Michel, a tall woman with bicycle earrings and a veteran of twenty RAGBRAIs, was sharing her impressions. “Everybody is so friendly! This is my first TRIRI. It’s the smallest ride I’ve ever done, and I love it.”

I had to agree. Generally, I think bike event folks are an affable sort, and on this small ride I got to know many of the participants and volunteers.

There was Jill, whom I met at our motel before the ride even started. She rode with me one afternoon and took my picture coming through the double-barrel covered bridge at Brown County State Park. There were Katherine and Steve, who welcomed me, dripping, into their van the first rainy evening for a ride to dinner, and their friends, Chris and Wayne, who met and fell in love on a cross-America bike tour. There was Joan the volunteer who spent part of a day driving me and my husband around to take photographs and acted as if we were doing her a favor. And so it went. Nobody stayed a stranger very long.

Even the locals opened up, if we gave them a chance. One morning our friends Katherine and Steve were cycling through the one-horse town of Saluda when they stopped to investigate a general-store-turned-antiques-shop. Three men and a woman had been sitting out front for some time, watching the cyclists go by. It was probably the most action this little burg had seen in awhile.

“They thought it was really neat,” Katherine recalled. “One guy mentioned how large and muscular some of the men’s legs were. They pulled up chairs for us to sit down and drink sodas with them. One man in his 60s with tan, weathered skin--a typical farmer--said he was the mayor of Saluda. It had probably less than a hundred people.

“So I said, ‘Who’s the sheriff?’

“Without cracking a smile, he said, ‘Roscoe’s the sheriff,’ pointing to the oldest guy, who must have been 80.” A little leg-pulling, Hoosier style.

They pointed out one of the churches in town that’s on the National Register, and Roscoe talked about being born and raised in Saluda.

There's camping, and there's the Pamper Zone.

New to the ways of TRIRI SE, my husband Joe and I, like about a hundred others, signed on for the no-frills camping option (\$265 in 2004). If you like to camp but you want more convenience, however, talk to Bubba. Because on this September ride you can upgrade to the Pamper Zone.

For a price, Bubba's Pampered Pedalers will do everything but put a mint on your pillow. Picture it: before you get to camp, Bubba has delivered your luggage and put an inflated air mattress and fluffy, clean towel inside your tent, which he has already pitched in the Pamper Zone. He also provides soft drinks, snacks, and a luxury camp chair (with footrests) which awaits you beside the campfire circle. And, a valuable perk, you get to ride to meals in his truck, which bears the Bubba-ism, "NO BULL--JUST BIKE."

None of this seems wimpy when you meet Bubba, a retired St. Louis homicide detective. Bubba is a big, solid man (nearly 6-foot-5 and pushing 350) with a clean-shaved pate, a booming voice, a ribald sense of humor, and a solo Virginia-to-Oregon bike tour under his substantial belt. The last day at breakfast I heard him holding forth at the table behind me: "Nothing like a sweet roll in the morning! Sticky buns aren't bad either..."

Bubba (www.BubbasPamperedPedalers.com) is taking reservations now for 2004.

History comes alive.

The past is not so distant on TRIRI. County seats seem set in the nineteenth century with their flat-faced Midwestern commercial buildings surrounding a proud courthouse. There's little suburban sprawl in the expansive, rolling farmlands, and general stores are tiny time capsules.

Outside Taffy's Grocery one of the riders wore a nostalgic smile. "My grandparents had a general store in Virginia," said Mary Ann Shields. "So I just walk into these general stores, inhale...and say 'Yes! That's how it smelled.'"

For me, one of the highlights of the tour was visiting the Pioneer Village at Spring Mill State Park. Dating from the time of its first settler in 1814, the Village has much to tell about the development of southern Indiana through the nineteenth century. Interestingly, the Village is about to gain National Historic Register status because its repairs and reconstruction were largely accomplished by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) during the 1930s.

My husband and I managed time to see the Village late in the day when most of its 21 buildings were still open to tour. We returned after supper that evening, when all ride participants were invited for a flashlight stroll through the Village with park naturalist Jeff Cummings, who gave an engaging talk on its economic history.

In a little settlement like this in the 1850s, he said, "you made money anyway you could. About a hundred head of swine ran loose in the village." He paused to point--down low on the corners of the three-story limestone grist mill--where the pigs (who loved a good back scratch) over time had rubbed the sharp corners of the building smooth. "In the fall," he continued, "they'd round up the swine and load them on a flatboat, along with hats (from the hattery), and liquor (from the distillery) and float it



downriver to New Orleans and sell everything, including the boat.”

The challenge.

For some riders southern Indiana is a great awakening. For the record, northern Indiana is flat and has richer, better farmland, but the state’s southern portion is plenty rolling.

In line for the port-o-pottie on TRIRI SE’s penultimate day, I asked another first-timer how she liked the ride. Looking a little flushed from the warmth of the afternoon, she said, “I’m having a great time! It’s killing me--” She laughed. “But I’m having a great time. I didn’t expect it to be so hilly.”

By now we both understood why riders on TRIRI like to kid Joe Anderson about his hilly routes. One day a hand-drawn cartoon was posted at the inn, illustrating Joe’s notion of hills. It read: “Joe’s flat,” followed by a decidedly undulating line. Then “Joe’s rollers,” with a very humpy line. Then “Joe’s hills,” and a line of impossible grades.

If it were too easy, well, it wouldn’t be TRIRI.

* **Susan Weaver** is the author of *A Woman’s Guide to Cycling* (Ten Speed Press, 1998, rev. ed.), an inspiring, practical how-to book for seasoned and beginning female riders. This article first appeared in *Adventure Cyclist* magazine (January-February 2004). To contact Susan: susanweaver@hotmail.com.

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