

## Biking Around the World

Poor me, being a biker instead of a runner. While runners only have to pack running shoes and clothes, I would need to bring along a cumbersome bike if I wanted to get any exercise while on mission. Around Rome, of course, biking is superb, with monuments and ruins at every turn in the road, challenging climbs and delicious descents, hilltop towns of the Castelli Romani, and Cucina Casareccia as a reward for a long ride into the hills or along the coast. Club rides with the Gruppo Ciclistico della FAO or one of the many cycling clubs provide companionship and a chance to talk cycling with other cyclists while spinning through the countryside of Lazio at 25 kms/hour or so. Longer GC-FAO club trips bring new panoramas from Udine to Sardina and Corsica.

I did take a bike along on a year-long TCP project in Malaysia. Biking brought a chance to see Malaysia from another angle. On one ride near Batu Pahat, I met a young racer and accepted his invitation to tea back at his kampong, sitting on the floor of his house-on-stilts. His father who had worked in the civil service prior to independence invited me to tea and hosted me perfect English; his son brought up after Matahir Mohamed's Bahasaisation campaign spoke only Bahasa Malaysia. On overseas assignments taking bikes is easy as they fit into the shipment of household goods.

However, my first attempt to take a bike along on a short mission to Haiti was more complicated. Three trips to the airport to pick up the bike and get it out of customs interfered with work. The hills around Port-au-Prince are challenging and water is scarce. I learned that fresh coconut milk is a good substitute when bottled water is not found.

After that mission, I lapsed into a long lament on the difficulties of being biker, didn't try to take a bike along, got out of shape from lack of exercise and gained weight. Then, on a trip to Egypt, the manager of the building where I found an apartment loaned me a stationary exercise bike which I set up on my balcony in Zamalek next to a small desk; I found that I could read reports while getting my exercise. (Hotel fitness centers usually have a stationary bicycle with handlebars that can be used as a prop for reports.)

I finally took my first mountain bike into Uganda where it was the first mountain bike ever, according to local bikers who'd never seen one in the flesh. Alitalia charged almost as much in excess baggage fees as the bike had cost; so much for bike-friendliness of the land of Coppi and Bartoli, but at least it got the bike there in one piece. Keeping a mountain bike working in a land where no spare parts were to be had was only possible thanks to a biker friend at a FAO who kept a stream of parts coming to replace those which broke. (Moral: on long assignments, bring those parts most likely to break with you, along with the tools needed to install them.) The chief mechanic of Uganda national bicycle team was ingenious in applying his knowledge of racing bikes to this new genre. It took me longer to understand the difference between racing bikes and mountain bikes than him to figure out how to fix them. My first thought as I careened down dirt tracks and foot paths was: *If you're not totally terrified, you're not going fast enough* and that rocks and rough patches were to be sought out to make the ride more exciting. I eventually realized that comfort and endurance were to be prized, and that there are enough rough patches in life that can't be avoided without seeking out those which can. I found that those who went before either on bike or on foot had already found the smoothest part of the road and, in most cases, it was best to follow in their footsteps, or tracks. Riding one footpath on the edge of a terrace, I carelessly let the wheel get into the weeds and thence into

thin air: a spectacular spill had me going ass-over-teakettle down to the next terrace. I sustained a serious injury to my pride as the ladies collecting water down in the valley cracked up at the sight of a *muzungu* picking himself and his bike up out of the sweet potato patch. They laughed every afternoon when I came by on the same path, and endured residual humiliation at my now slower pace.

I didn't bring a bike to Belize. Instead I bought the best bike I could find in Belize City and rode it all around Belmopan. Since the lone project vehicle died shortly after arrival, the bike also doubled as transport to meetings with the Permanent Secretary and other high officials, who said nothing about the helmet and sweaty gloves. I sold the bike for half-price at the end of the mission to a colleague at the Ministry.

I also got to Guyana without a bike. My regrets multiplied when the old project Land Rover threatened self-immolation with a leaky carburetor before dying. At the Saturday street market, I found a small woman's bike with decent parts and man's mountain bike of the right size frame; I cajoled the seller into cannibalizing the one to make me a bike out of the other. He also mounted a milk crate on the back for shopping. It was the appropriate technology for exercise (minus the milk crate), shopping and commuting to meetings in Georgetown. On one ride, I lost my (bird-watching) binoculars from the back pocket of my bike shirt. My loss and lamentations only lasted 24 hours, however; on the next morning's ride along the same route, a child appeared the one major bump in the road and handed me back my binoculars.

I fortunately brought along a nice mountain bike for a particularly difficult mission to eastern Uganda, I kept myself in shape and worked off daily frustrations with an hour's ride out to Lake Kyoga and back. On one ride, I encountered a man carrying a sheep on the back of his bicycle. I asked him where he was taking it and he said home first and then to market the next day. Instead, we agreed on a price and I gave him directions to my house. Unfortunately, he was off by 100 meters when he went to deliver the sheep and got to the wrong *muzungu* house, this one used by the Spanish NGO Veterinarians without Borders (whom I had interviewed to their shock in Spanish as part of my project work). Before giving the man directions, they examined the sheep from stem to stern, pronounced it fit for human consumption, and only then pointed him in the right direction for my house.

I arrived one morning in Mexico City without a bike and with a long wait at FAO to meet the Representative. His secretary took advantage of the wait to find me a nice apartment in Coyoacan. The next day, my landlady kindly loaned me her son's top-of-the-line mountain bike; her son, who hadn't been consulted, was kind enough to go along with the deal, at least most of the time). My daily commute to the Fisheries Secretariat was an 8 km climb and a welcome descent in the evening. Weekend jaunts around Coyoacan, included visits to Trotsky's house and to Frida Kalo's museum. The traffic was not really daunting but the smog was, worse than Santiago, Chile.

Now on most trips, I take along a mountain bike, except for Jakarta, where I guessed (correctly) that a racing bike was more appropriate. The airlines have gotten greedier and now charge an average of \$80 for transporting a bike in a bicycle box anywhere in the world (with pedals removed and handlebars turned but still connected by their cables); before a bike mostly went free in replacement of your second bag. In 10 years, I have had a 100% on-time arrival success rate; complain as you will about the airlines, they really do do a good job on getting the bikes there. And only one bent frame (Air France), soon resolved by bending it back into place. Bikes attract customs agents like flies but the situation is improving in most countries. In difficult countries, the easiest solution is to make some mud-paddies: it's been a while, but

it's like riding a bike: you never forget. Cake mud on the frame. Nothing gets rid of nosy customs agents faster than a dirty rag and dried mud falling out on their floor as you tell them you've had the bike since you were a kid; the driver meeting you will then get a kick out of it when he finds out that the bike is brand-new. At your hotel, you take out the set of allen keys you've carried along and tighten the headset and the 15 mm wrench to put on the pedals, and, voila, you've put the whole bike together yourself in about 30 minutes. Bikes fit well even in the smallest hotel elevators (vertically), and if the elevator stops between floors, you'll be glad you have water at least.

Unless they are bikers, I never believe the people who tell me how bad the traffic is and that it's not safe to ride in city X. (This advice is about on a par with mother's instructions to their children to eat all the food on your plate for the poor starving children in Europe, Biafra, Vietnam, ..... fill in the blank.). If you're up early (as you often must be if you want to squeeze in a ride on a busy mission), you'll be virtually alone on the road, and your flashing front and back lights will alert the few drivers up and about at an early hour. With careful hunting, you'll find safe and traffic-free places to ride. In Bamako, I ride from the Quartier Fleuve down the river path to the dam the French built across the Niger, or if on the other side of town, out through the suburbs up into the valley where I buy milk straight-from-the-cow for my breakfast. Schedule your bike ride and adhere to the schedule as if it were an important meeting (it is, if you value your mental and physical health). Carry plenty of water; in Mali for example, four water bottles are about right for an hour's ride when the temperature is over 40°. On field trips, make sure your 4WD vehicle has a roof rack and tie the bike on top (keeping the paint and critical parts of the bike off the rack); the handlebar also makes a good attachment for a short wire antenna so that you can keep up with the news (such as it is) on the BBC or RFI on your short-wave radio as you drive along. At the end of the mission, find a fellow biker to leave the bike with, as repeat missions to the same country frequently emerge; I think I have bikes stored and waiting for me in four countries. Or give it to a deserving driver who likes to bike as I've done on 2 occasions. Or sell it for half price. The way I now look at things, a decent mountain bike is a good investment in yourself. At a cost of \$250 for good basic mountain bike, you keep your body in shape and your mind clear of cobwebs on a month's mission for less than the price of a bottle of wine a day.

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