

Circumnavigation of SF Bay by bicycle

Tuesday, 22 December 2009

What/When?

December 19->21 2009, I circumnavigated the Bay of San Francisco (a tad under a couple of hundred miles) on nothing but a bicycle.

Where?

[View SF Bay Circumnavigation in a larger map](#)

Why?

A pikey's midlife crisis. Cheaper/Healthier/EnvironmentallyFriendlier than a Porsche. I was faintly considering Ride the Rockies but that was just too far, too many hills and too many days. So this was the cut-price bargain basement trip.

While on a jaunt from Oakland to Richmond Marina, my esteemed friend Andy 'Prof' Doran said he'd like to go the whole way around the Bay some day, which planted the seed. That seed sort of grew legs (there's a mixed metaphor i can run with) when i typed it into google and it came back with this geezer's effort. Not exactly a ringing endorsement of why anyone would want to accomplish this feat, I nevertheless detected that it was an easy longish distance ride. 2.5 days was about as much time as I would want to be solo on a bike. One of the main downers for this dude was that he had attempted the ride in searing heat; I would be doing it the week before Christmas.

So I purchased a used spiffy bike (Specialized Allez Double, nary a couple of years old, 335\$) off eBay. Compared to my venerable dumpster bike I felt as though I had been freed from the confines of gravity, such was the friction-free nature of pedaling the beast. In preparation I did a couple of 30 mile rides, more or less twice as far as I had (or could have) gone on the other bike.

Route Planning

I used a few different sites to scout out the route. There were a zillion different roads/paths that could be taken. Being lazy in nature, I mostly chose the flattest, shortest path around the Bay although safety was an occasional concern too. Luckily there are a ton of sites to assist and google maps/satellite view could always verify the existence of a path. Figuring it out and transcribing the whole lot was a surprisingly cumbersome affair. I suspect there can be easier ways, but google's trace-road capability doesn't work for bike paths so I couldn't use it :(

The following sites are de rigeur for a cycling tour around the SF Bay:

- <http://bicycling.511.org/bikemapper.htm> for overall lanes etc
- <http://www.sfbike.org/download/map.pdf> for SF
- <http://www.marinbike.org/Map/SideA2008.jpg> for Marin
- <http://www.sf2g.com/> for Palo Alto to SF

The basic plan was to go around clockwise, starting in SF, stopping in Richmond Marina and somewhere in the South Bay.

Without doubt the biggest concern was the 37 from Novato to Vallejo, aka "Blood Alley". This is a beautiful 20 mile stretch along the north side of the Bay, surrounded by wetland. There are no traffic lights to impede progress. But the road, all 20 miles of it, is more or less a freeway, albeit legal for cycles. There really is no way around it without riding an extra 40 miles via Napa, which would have required an extra half-day, and ruined my plan to stay with friends in Richmond Marina.

In case of phone death I had to write out the whole route with a series of l/r/straight statements.

Trip Planning

Thankfully I have an old friend, Mike Wilburn, who has done all sorts of long-distance biking nonsense e.g. 120 mile daylong races. He gave me a rundown of things I would need to bring:

- chamois cream / anti-chafe, without which I was reliably informed parts of my flesh would start to disintegrate at 40-50 miles
- poncey yellow glasses (never actually got these, so I was wearing sunnies on dark, dreary days)
- pump/innertubes/allan key

- cycle gloves
- gatorade/power bars
- bike lock for dunny/toilet trips. The lightest one I could find.
- most important, by far, was a gps-enabled phone with google maps. I didn't bother with paper maps, figuring the internet connection on my phone would suffice (even though it is ATT).

Without this prep-list I would guess that any number of disasters would have occurred. I tried not to look like a total nodder -- so no lycra shorts and no luminous skin-tight top.

Urine Alley

One of the things haunting me was the image Michael had given me of myself dead on the BART, after failing to consume enough liquid and karking it of dehydration. So I overcompensated and drank like a fish, under his orders of 22 FL (600ml?) per hour. This slowed me down as I was constantly in search of dunnies, but whenever I was in need there was another Safeway in front of me. This presented challenges in itself, skating through the aisles in my cycling shoes in search of the toilet. My desire to fuel myself solely with milkshakes & creampuffs was a apparently one-way ticket to chundercity, so I stuck to the carbs thing pretty exclusively.

Day 1

Scarfig a couple of hardboiled eggs, I left at dawn, breezing through the atmospheric morning fog of the City, into the Presidio and upto the ever-impressive Golden Gate bridge where I was greeted by a 25 mph head-wind. After that hiccup, it was a pretty, trail-based trundle through Marin upto the point of no return. Heart was beating, head was pounding, this was it; Blood Alley.

The road itself proved fine to bike on with two exceptions; bridges, about 200 meters long, with no shoulder. I stopped before each, timing pauses between traffic and pedaling like badgery when things looked good. Though I can't say I'd want to do that again I wouldn't say it's insanity to do, especially in the morning when traffic isn't too bad. Once I got off the 37 I was transported into the twilight zone aka the bizarre world of the appropriately-named Mare Island. An ex-naval community, all that remains are abandoned apartment complexes, windows boarded up or smashed in, and ghostly roads with tumbleweed rolling across. Really should have taken more photies. In fact, this place deserves

consideration as a field trip for any Urban Decay 101 course.

Crossing the delightful Carquinez bridge, Rodeo was the first of a series of towns where I really hoped not to get a flat. In spite of cycling over about 3 dozen smashed bottles, endless shattered taillights and other debris, and despite using razor-blade thickness tires, I avoided punctures/flats the entire time. I guess that overinflating tires to 100 psi really works. The sketch factor was upped at San Pablo and kept on rising as I entered Richmond, only to utterly disappear upon entry to my port-of-call, Richmond Marina. By this time my body was about to shut down after 8+ hours in the saddle. I got into a hot bath, not to emerge for another hour. After snarfing a steak chez Doran, I slept for over 10 hours and could easily have gone longer.

Day 2

A hearty, home-prepared waffle & scrambler started the day and I was flying, wind-assisted, down the Bay Trail from Richmond Marina to Emeryville. Going into Oakland I crossed the first of what was to be about 1,000 railway tracks, many disused. This area may be an automobile heaven now but ye gads, it seemed like trains went down every road back in the day. Not too pleasant to bike over. Having left Oakland the road just turns into one long flat ride south, punctuated only by a diversion back to the Bay Trail in Hayward. After that it was "hammer time" all the way to Palo Alto.

Around about Milpitas, the road is pure Silicon Valley, or mirror-glassed buildings with equally shiny sounding names like Logitech. Software companies are indeed everywhere; Sun, Oracle, Webex etc. It brightened up the ride no end for a pseudo-techy like myself. I would guess that there were 20 consecutive buildings spanning two train stops for Cisco. Oh, the Office-Space amusement they must get up to!

After the beauty and drama of the first day, the rest of the trip was perhaps always going to struggle to compete. But I did have an ace up my sleeve. Katie found out that the luxurious W hotel had a special deal for its Silicon Valley location. So she & Ollie met me at my stop point in Palo Alto and we shimmied over the bridge and checked in for the night, making full use of the hot tub and the gigantic room where we could stash Ollie in the oversized bathroom. Score!

Day 3

Having cycled 150 miles in 2 days I actually felt quite fresh on day 3. Perhaps my body was acclimating...or perhaps I knew that I had a little under 40 miles to go. Despite the intermittent rain, I felt like I could sneeze this journey out, and so took in a little sightseeing at Stanford University, which was so manicured it looked like I could eat dinner off the sidewalk.

Around about SFO, I had my obligatory cycle-shoe-stuck-in-pedal moment. In front of several lanes of waiting traffic I provided Naked-Gun style slowmo flailing entertainment by coming to a stop, trying to get out of my pedals, failing, trying to keep going and, frame-by-frame, splatting before all. No damage done except to ego etc.

Before I knew it I was back in "the City", although Hunters Point does not exactly feel like SF. One dodgy near-miss under Cesar Chavez and I was back in Noe Valley, ready for a cupper and a hottub. Yay!

Conclusions

Would I recommend this ride? Well, if you are a masochist with a penchant for circumnavigation then, sure. There's something inherently satisfying about going the whole way around anything. Bill Drummond of the KLF once drove around the M25 for 25 hours. I once bought a round-the-world airline ticket, in similarly vain hope of finding some meaning to life. Existential musings aside, the SF/Marin/North Bay/Bay Trail sections are beautiful, and there is a slight tech-fascination in cycling around Silicon Valley. Is this the end of my long-distance biking career? TBD.

