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Cycling Hawaii: A Survival Story

We just got back from ten days in Hawaii and I don't even have a tan.

How is that possible, you ask? We had more than our fair share of rain on the east side of the big island, but even if there had been brilliant sunshine the entire time, this body did not see a beach.

That's because it was parked upon a bicycle for hours and hours and hours—or so it seemed—eight of those days.

Six months ago it sounded like a good idea to circumnavigate the island now spewing lava like I sweated on this trip—excessively, into uninvited places. That's when we signed up, along with a contingent of friends from Kelowna, for a tour with Gabriola Kayak and Cycle.

Other than a wickedly steep climb in ascending heat, the first day was welcoming; a mostly coastal ride, from Kona to Captain Cook, with optional swimming at Kealahou Bay.

Dinner at the Manago Hotel was a cultural experience. Crammed into a sold-out, cafeteria-style dining room, we wondered aloud what all the fuss was about as waitresses came by with hospital trolleys loaded with the house specialty: pork chops and gravy, some Green Giant vegetables tossed in butter alongside.

Deceptively delicious, I was pretty sure shake-n-bake was the secret ingredient on those chops, bringing back warm memories of mom's meals. Surely a Maclean's deep dish frozen cake would follow. But it was not to be. The restaurant didn't serve dessert.

“That's not like mom!” I complained. My dear friend (and instigator of the trip), Laura, was even more desperate. Spotting a long table where a group of elderly folks were enjoying what appeared to be a birthday party, she threw a glass of wine down her gullet and walked on over, offering to buy their cake. They said it was priceless.

Reviewing the itinerary the night before our second day, I was highly encouraged when I read: “The ride from Captain Cook to Volcano is long, so make sure to carry enough snacks and stay hydrated: 89.2 k.”

I will say this: the itinerary didn't lie. It was long. Really long and really wet. We were soaked and thirsty by the time we reached what turned out to be, a place of shared accommodation.

I really felt for the young German couple, their romantic get-away thwarted, when the rowdy riders rolled through their door and poured stiff drinks. Once the woman peeked out their bedroom door and made a beeline for bathroom seven of us sought to share. Once secured inside, she locked the door so even her underwear-clad partner could not get in. Standing in his boxers, furiously knocking at the door, he turned to sheepishly smile as we all looked on in drunken wonder. When he started yelling in German, she must have ascertained it was not one of us, and finally let him in.

The following day we actually got out of the saddle and hiked Hawaii Volcano National Park. The Thurston Lava Tube is pretty cool and the cratered, steaming landscape well worth seeing.

The ride to Hilo was pleasant and sunny and considerably easier as I drafted behind my husband. Then something truly wonderful happened: I spotted a Ross Dress for Less outlet enroute. With the option to take the next day off, I organized a tour of a different kind.

While the menfolk (and a few brave women) biked another 70 kilometers, first in the scorching heat, which then turned to torrential rain, four of us went shopping. My husband was so tired; he skipped dinner. Meanwhile I toasted my good fortune (six dresses for \$90) with crisp wine and fresh seafood—now I ask you, who had the better day?

Thinking these biking trips were pretty doable, I was set for the Hilo to Honokaa leg, especially after refueling at the smoothie spot, 15 kilometers into the ride. But then there was no bathroom for another 60 k—and the lunch spot was closed on Mondays—and it got really, really hot and the hills got really, really long—and that's when my sunny attitude turned cloudy.

“I want off the bike,” I called to my husband, about 20 K short of our hotel.

He patiently pulled over, pointing to some shrubbery on the side of the highway, when I said I had to go to the bathroom. He gave me his power bar when I said I was hungry. He told me I could stop riding if I wanted but he wasn't sure where I would sleep.

When we—finally—arrived, my lower lip began to quiver. The

hostel—a decrepit, sort of a Hotel California where the basement floor was dirt, the windows had no curtains, the shower was held together with duct tape, and a Zoomba class was being held where happy hour was supposed to start—was not the pay off I’d expected. I had to take half a sleeping pill for fear of what might be living in the bed.

The good news is I couldn’t wait to get out of there—and back on my bike. My expectations were low but I was in for a big surprise on our second to last day of cycling. The trip from Honaokaa to Hawi—all 60 k of it—was my favourite of the trip. After refueling with a snowman cookie in the hot sunshine at the Waimea Starbucks, we climbed the Kohala Mountain—a tough but rewarding grind. The descent was simply spectacular through canopy covered country roads past roaming horse ranches.

And then it was our last day. The final ride from Honokaa to Hawi to was predictably challenging. Nearly 90 K, we battled headwinds, endless stretches of black asphalt that reflected back the heat of the scorching lava laden fields on either side, to finally—finally—reach the point where it all began. Our very basic hotel never looked so good and the frosty margarita never tasted so delicious.

Every night was full of laughter and good food—every day was challenging but fun. One of my friends remarked, “It’ll be like having a baby...you’ll forget the pain and do it all again.”

She’s probably right.