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March 2007

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ARE ABOUT
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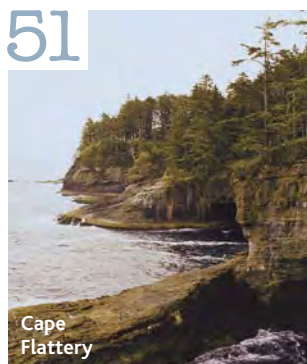


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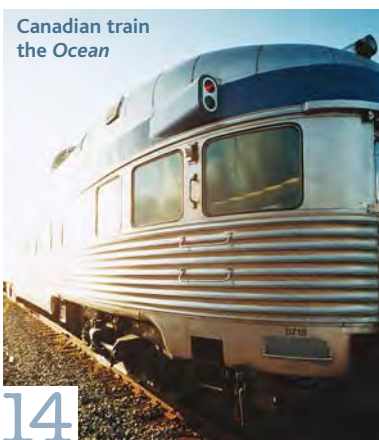
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Unlike most magazines and newspapers, *Budget Travel* will not allow its writers and editors to take free trips or discounts. We believe it's impossible to be objective if someone else is paying the way.

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Clockwise from top: David Matheson; Eden Batki; Lorne Bridgman; Nathan Kirkman; Evan Kafka

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The author resting at Minnesota's Otter Tail Lake

TRIPS THAT CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE From Oregon to Maine by Way of the Emergency Room

NO MATTER WHERE YOU LIVE, YOU'VE LIKELY THOUGHT ABOUT HITTING THE OPEN ROAD AND SEEING WHAT ELSE IS OUT THERE. EVER CONSIDER DOING IT ON A BIKE? BY JERRY SOVERINSKY

Two things happen when I drink Scotch with old friends: Believing I can speak Spanish, I attempt to do so at completely inappropriate times (such as to a Birmingham, Ala., policeman after hours of tailgating); and I say things I often end up regretting, like "I cried during the final episode of *Friends*." And so it was in 2005 that I found myself in a dimly lit sushi joint asking my confused waitress for a dessert menu—"¿Cuál está para el postre?"—and then blurting out to all within earshot, "I'm thinking of cycling cross-country. By myself."

Alcohol aside, the idea had appealed to me for as long as I could remember. And I'd just sold my tour company after 20 years of guiding bike trips in Europe, so I finally had the time to embark on the

journey. But my declaration on that particular night in May meant that in order to take advantage of summer weather, I'd have six weeks to plan the trip. Not to mention train. I wasn't in great shape, but I was confident that I could ease my way into the tour, strengthening the requisite muscles en route.

I bought an armful of maps (detailing food, lodging, and bike repair shops) from Adventure Cycling Association, a nonprofit, bicycle-travel advocacy group, and pieced together a route that began in Seaside, Ore., and finished near Portland, Maine. While I had

a rough idea of my trip's pace—70 to 80 miles per day for roughly two months—I wasn't locked in to any kind of schedule, having purchased only the one-way plane ticket from Chicago to Portland, Ore. If I became tired, I'd rest; if I got hungry and could find a store, I'd eat. (Noting the scarcity of facilities along certain stretches of road, I did pack a jar of peanut butter and a dozen energy bars.) Weather would be a factor, so I'd follow

the forecasts closely. Other than that, I had no preconceived notions of who—or what—I'd encounter along the way. I simply looked forward to a grand adventure.



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Photographs by Evan Kalfia. Bottom: Reena Bamm

I arrived in Oregon with more than 200 pounds of gear. For those without experience in bike touring, there's one word for this: stupid. After a week of masochistic punishment, my thighs bulged to weight-lifter proportions, so I shipped 80 pounds of stuff home—including 17 pairs of underwear.

Two weeks into the ride, I celebrated my birthday outside The Dalles, Ore., near the Columbia River Gorge, a majestic canyon that carves through the Cascade Mountains. Temperatures that day peaked at 107 degrees, and it wasn't until I had cycled 80 miles that I found somewhere to sleep. As I paid for my room, the innkeeper, Pam, mentioned a wine-tasting dinner scheduled for later that evening. Nearly three dozen people were coming to the inn to sample cuts of grilled Washington beef that would be paired with the Northwest's finest vintages. "Count me in," I said, hardly believing my luck as I dragged my weary body upstairs for a nap.

It was at least 120 degrees in my third-floor room, and I nearly wept with joy when I saw an air conditioner in the window. I flipped its switch to high, and instantly the power went out. Pam came running up the stairs and knocked on my door: "I told you not to turn on the A/C! We've been having major circuit problems!"

"I didn't touch it," I lied, glancing down at my hand, which was now turning the knob silently to the off position. "I'm not sure what happened." (So that's what she was telling me as I filled out the registration card and daydreamed about milk shakes.) Pam hustled downstairs to find candles and flashlights, which she distributed to the other guests; the wine-tasting event was canceled. Sheepishly, I walked to a nearby gas station and shopped for dinner—a can of Beefaroni, which I ate while standing in the parking lot. Happy birthday to me.

I quickly fell into a routine, waking up sometime between 6:30 A.M. and 8:00 A.M. Breakfast was simple, usually no more than a banana or energy bar bought the

night before. I was sometimes tempted to linger near the motel's continental breakfast spread, especially when it offered waffles. But more often than not, 90 minutes after opening my eyes, I was packed and on the road.

Not long into the trip, two things started to stand out: the endless roadside traffic-death memorials, and the many FOR SALE signs scattered among front yards, storefronts, and farms. Although the memorials made me shiver—I tried not to dwell on the risks inherent in a solo bicycle trip—it was the FOR SALE signs that I found most depressing. Anyone who watches the news knows that today's economy is

It's amazing how many people stop to chat when they see you dripping sweat and leaning against a bike

tough on family farmers and small-town shopkeepers. But you tend to forget that sometimes when you live in a city where lots of people with BlackBerrys permanently attached to their palms order

\$5 cups of coffee without batting an eye.

In a rural Minnesota bar, I met a 55-year-old man whose shoe store had gone bankrupt several years back. He'd drifted through odd jobs, and his wife left him after he defaulted on their mortgage. He was earning

\$6 an hour as a farmhand—and he paid the same \$3 for a gallon of gasoline that you and I pay, in order to drive 50 miles round trip to work six days a week.

Despite all of this, he seemed genuinely interested to hear about my journey and even insisted on buying me a beer—not allowing me to return the favor. "Welcome to Minnesota," he said, raising his can to mine.

I'd break for lunch in the late morning or early afternoon, at whatever facility was most convenient. I tended to favor gas stations, as they allowed me to watch my bike while I shopped—a concern when all of your belongings are visible to passersby—and to talk freely with locals. (It's amazing how many people stop to chat when they

see you dripping sweat, gulping Gatorade, and leaning against a bike that's stuffed with over 100 pounds of gear.) Sandwiches or SpaghettiOs were convenient and carb-filled, and relatively easy on my stomach. I once ate a four-burrito lunch at a Montana Taco John's—though I regretted it exactly 42 minutes later. It's safe to say I'll never be allowed anywhere near the E-Z Mart in Havre, Mont., again.

Sadly, that wasn't the last of my health problems. At about the 1,500-mile mark, somewhere in North Dakota, I decided to tackle my trip's first century ride—100 miles in a single day. The



Outside Pelican Rapids, Minn. Below: Battle Lake, Minn.



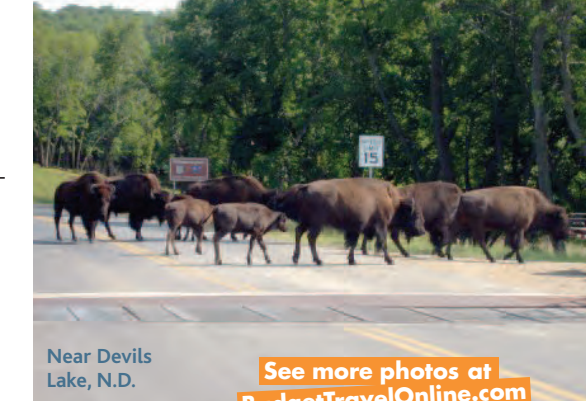
WHERE

route was flat and uncomplicated, and I was anxious to gauge my fitness level.

After 70 miles, I stopped to rest in the parking lot of a diner. *What a great day*, I thought to myself, looking out onto the open prairie. I wanted a photograph to capture the moment, so I grabbed my camera and began framing the shot. As I took a step forward, a surge of pain shot up my side. I looked down and saw that a planter, its edges trimmed in razor-sharp rusted metal, had gouged my leg. When you can see muscle and tendon, you know you need a doctor.

I quickly bandaged myself and cycled 30 miles to my overnight destination—Williston, N.D.—where I found a hospital. “Quite a flapper you’ve got there,” announced the ER doctor as he surveyed the deep V shape carved into my shin. He expressed interest in my trip, and we chatted as he attended to the wound. One tetanus shot, 10 stitches, and a 14-hour nap later, I was back in business.

My appetite, thanks to all the cycling, was limitless. In Walla Walla, Wash., for example, I ate two large pizzas—plus a salad, a pitcher of Coke, and a slice of apple pie—in one sitting. At the next table were four teenagers who shared a medium pizza. One of them asked me to



Near Devils Lake, N.D.

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“Quite a flapper you’ve got there,” announced the ER doctor as he surveyed the deep V shape carved into my shin

autograph his menu after I’d finished. I loved the all-you-can-eat Chinese buffets that popped up everywhere (I stopped at two in North Dakota alone), but with the quantity of food I was consuming, I’m not sure the restau-

rant managers loved me back. Almost every night, I treated myself to an ice cream at a Dairy Queen or convenience store. And believe it or not, I was still losing weight.

Labor Day morning, in Petoskey, Mich., I awoke

with searing abdominal cramps, my body scrunched in the fetal position. No amount of bad shrimp lo mein could produce this kind of discomfort.

“Kidney stone,” explained the doctor at the local hospital. “A big one, too.”

My bike trip came to a temporary halt; I’d need to pass the stone. Based on its size and location, this could happen in one of two ways: Either I’d pee it out, or I’d undergo surgery. When I learned that the latter would require a “fiber-optic instrument inserted into the penis,” I asked directions to the nearest drinking fountain—I’d pass the stone myself. As

far as I’m concerned, my urethra is exit-only.

One week and 400 gallons of water later, nothing. Another exam indicated that I was developing a mild kidney infection, so surgery was necessary. Fortunately, the stone was retrieved easily. But I still had to recover for another week before getting back in the saddle. Being waylaid in Michigan for two weeks turned out to



Pelican Rapids, Minn.

Top: courtesy Jerry Soverinsky (2)

be a blessing. It recharged my batteries, providing me with an even greater appreciation for the remainder of my trip—not to mention Class II narcotics.

I reached the Atlantic Ocean just south of Portland, Maine, on the 73rd day of my journey, roughly 3,800 miles from my starting point. (My odometer had broken somewhere in Minnesota.) I laid my bike down near the surf, my mind racing. I'd anticipated the moment for weeks, wondering how I'd feel upon seeing the Atlantic. Despite more than 10 weeks of cycling by myself day after day, standing on the deserted stretch of beach was the first time I truly felt alone.

My mind immediately flooded with memories. I thought about the young woman I had met at an archery range in rural Wisconsin who was sharpening her bow-handling skills in preparation for hunting season (I had stopped to watch, intrigued). And the Oregon man traveling with his young grandsons, whom I met at a state park campground. We dined together under the stars, and his grandsons helped me load my gear the following morning, running after my bike for hundreds of yards, shouting encouragement as I pulled away.

Of course there was also the drunk Montana guy who, while sitting next to me at a ramshackle saloon, decided to lecture me about race and religion. I surreptitiously made sure my necklace



was tucked safely under my T-shirt. It had a pendant on it representing the Jewish symbol for life. If he had asked about it, I'd have pretended to be a mathematician and claimed it was the symbol for pi. The America I'd seen included a patchwork of faces and stories that continues, even 18 months after my return home, to make an impression. I was welcomed wherever I went and never heard a harsh word directed my way—though God knows how hard people may have laughed when I was out of earshot. ■



Sibiu, as seen from the top of Council Tower

WHY HAVEN'T YOU HEARD OF...

Sibiu, Romania

FORGOTTEN FOR THE LAST TWO DECADES, TRANSYLVANIA'S PRETTIEST CITY IS ENJOYING A YEAR IN THE SPOTLIGHT. BY BENJAMIN MOSER

"The Communists saw these things as subversive and bourgeois," says the owner of a shop named **Antik**, describing a Latin and German manuscript, written by a Hungarian nobleman in 1814, that synthesizes everything that was known about the world's languages. "So the intellectual families took them into the forests and buried them in wooden crates. They stayed buried for almost 20 years. Then Nicolae Ceaușescu decided that culture was good for the nation, and they dug them up."

Romania betrays little evidence of Ceaușescu's affection for culture. To

construct a single monstrous building in Bucharest in 1984—the House of the People, today known as the Palace of the Parliament—he razed a historic area roughly the size of Venice. Even places like the beautiful Transylvanian city of Sibiu, spared the wrecking ball, were so neglected during the tyrant's 24-year rule that the town may as well have been destroyed: Churches rotted, palaces crumbled, and museums were looted. Ceaușescu was overthrown (and shot by a firing squad) in 1989; Romania joined the European Union on January 1, 2007.

To prepare for a stint as European Capital of Culture, Sibiu has spruced up everything from its squares to its sewers

LODGING
Casa Luxemburg Piata Mica 16, reserve with Kultours, 011-40/269-216-854, casa luxemburg.ro, \$75

Hotel Ela Str. Noua 43, 011-40/269-215-197, ela-hotels.ro, \$43

FOOD
Butoiul de Aur Pasajul Scarilor 3, 011-40/269-214-575

Ciao Italia Piata Mica 23, 011-40/744-210-769

La Turn Piata Mare 1, 011-40/269-213-985

ACTIVITIES
National Brukenthal Museum Piata Mare 4-5, 011-40/269-217-691, brukenthalmuseum.ro, \$2.25

SHOPPING
Antik Str. Nicolae Balescu 23, 011-40/269-211-604

RESOURCES
Tourist Info Center S. Brukenthal 2, 011-40/269-208-800, sibiu.ro

The Romanians couldn't be more excited. The word *Europe*, which in luckier parts has a tinge of meddling bureaucrats and high taxes, here means a chance to recover the culture and identity that, in Romania's terrible last century, were so violently blown up and bulldozed.

Each year, the EU chooses one or two member cities to showcase—with exhibitions and performances—to the rest of the union. This is meant to foster a greater understanding between the many cultures. To prepare for its stint as a European Capital of Culture for 2007, Sibiu spruced up everything from its public squares to its sewers. The city's baroque architecture has been restored, and the treasures that these buildings once housed have been returned to their rightful places. Jan van Eyck's masterpiece, *Man with Ring*, is back in the art galleries of the **National Brukenthal Museum**—the Communists had taken it to Bucharest—as is a stolen Titian, *Ecce Homo*, that was recovered by customs agents in Miami.

Casa Luxemburg is a small symbol of the European solidarity that has given Sibiu a new chance. The city of Luxembourg is also a Capital of Culture for 2007, and its government has taken the opportunity to fund the renovation of this historic building on one of Sibiu's main squares. It now holds the Luxembourg consulate, a tourist information center, and a small guesthouse with six bedrooms. The country's relationship with



Folk dancers. Left: Mayor Klaus Johann

the town dates back centuries. Migrants from the Moselle River Valley—part of which is in modern-day Luxembourg—founded Sibiu in the late 1100s.

Near one of Romania's oldest restaurants, the 500-year-old **Butoiul de Aur**, there are plenty of places that boast of Sibiu's connections to other parts of Europe, like **Ciao Italia** pizzeria and the British-pub-style **La Turn**.

Even though it's had a serious face-lift, Sibiu is still Romania. In the mostly

unrestored lower section of the city—where you can walk past faded pastel facades (such as that of homey **Hotel Ela**) and wizened old women selling vegetables on bedsheets spread on the cracked pavements—you'll feel as if you've wandered into a sepia picture of the Old Country from an immigrant grandparent's scrapbook: a piece of the past, dug up and returned miraculously to life. ■

Supermarket Souvenir

In Greece, people tend to eat dinner at 10 p.m. or later, which explains the large number of light mezes (small plates) on most taverna menus. Thessaloniki-based Zanae has been canning traditional appetizers—such as grape leaves stuffed with rice, and giant butter beans or meatballs in tomato sauce—for nearly 70 years (\$2). —Laurie Kuntz



From top: Zuder/Laif/Redux; Sandoz Haaz/epa/Corbis; Robyn Lehr