



**BATHE
IN A
RIVER
AND
DON'T
GIVE A
SHIT**

**THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN
A PAMPERED RACER FROM CALIFORNIA
DROPS HER CUSHY LIFE
TO RIDE ACROSS THE COUNTRY.**

BY JENNIFER KYLE WHALEN
PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE SEARCH BRIGADE

SICK BRAG: I RODE MY BIKE ACROSS THE ENTIRE UNITED STATES.

IT ALL STARTED when I saw an Instagram post from Search and State, a cycling apparel company based in New York City. The caption said, “If you’ve always wanted to ride across the US, now is your time. Join us.” The self-supported, cross-country bike tour was called the Search Brigade and was designed in a relay style—different ride leaders would plan and lead segments. Anyone could join at any time, for however long they wanted. Perfect for an inexperienced newbie to touring, like me.

The invitation scared the hell out of me, and when I get that feeling about something,

I know I’m probably going to do it. The ride started from New York City in a week, so I had to decide and make moves quick.

Still, I spent the next few days hypothesizing the effects of suddenly leaving my life and job in Los Angeles. When I told people about the trip, many immediately asked if I was “running away from something.” I didn’t blame them. The past year had been trying. I had some health issues that took me off my bike for a while. And, after nearly a decade of back-to-back relationships, I suddenly found myself single for the first time. I welcomed the independence, but the modern dating landscape was unrecognizable to me. (Humans had become swipeable?) But this still wasn’t the reason I wanted to leave.

My life was good. I had a great job working for Warner Bros. Television, a vibrant social life, and was competing in pro bike races on a domestic elite road cycling team. But after five years of devoting myself to the sport, I was beginning to grow disenchanted with the lack of support and visibility for women’s racing. And the

rest of my life just felt a little too perfectly structured and routine. On a bike tour, there would be no post-workout smoothies, foam rollers, or comfy bed to melt into. It would be unregimented, free, and animalistic.

I also couldn’t think of any reasons not to go. I asked myself, *what the hell is even keeping me here?* I’m not married, have no kids, live alone in a studio apartment, and consistently have chocolate and wine stains on my bedsheets. The world I live in can’t possibly change that much while I’m gone. The delusional fame monsters and thirsty

pseudo-bohemians will all still be here—smugly sipping \$5 iced coffees, breadcrumbing each other on dating apps, and spiraling in the endless quest for validation—when I return. (I love LA, seriously.) Like Albert Brooks in *Lost in America*, I was simply ready to “drop out of society” for a while.



READY FOR TAKEOFF

When I got to New York, I stayed with my friend Christina, a plus-size model who has tried tirelessly, to no avail, to teach me the “light smile,” amongst other modeling facial expressions I will never be able to do. I brought her to the kickoff dinner for the trip. When we arrived at the Italian restaurant in Midtown Manhattan I thought we were late because there were only three people at the table, two of them being the owners of Search and State. The third was a Colombian yogi from Brooklyn named Alex. Over mushroom ravioli, I was informed that, while others would join us for parts of the trip, Alex and I were the only riders going all the way to LA. Christina and I erupted into screaming laughter. *Of course!*

Alex was the tiniest man I had ever seen. Up to this point, he had mostly used his bike to commute around New York, to and from yoga and Trader Joe’s. Someone was actually less prepared than I was for the next two months of back-to-back century rides!

Leading up to the trip, the riding was the only part I was confident about. The rest stressed me out. I hadn’t been camping since I was in the Girl Scouts. To prepare for the tour, I had made a to-do list. But if you look closely, there’s an important item that was never checked off.



A BABE IN THE WOODS

On the first day, I got my period—because, why not? The cramps were horrible, and I also had to deal with the challenge of trying to find places to empty out and wash my menstrual cup every couple of hours. I was so jealous of my male riding companions—Alex and a seasoned bike tourer named Joe Cruz, who was leading the first leg of the trip. They would never know this inconvenience.

It poured for that entire first week through New Jersey and Pennsylvania. We slogged through it, riding 10 hours a day, morning to night, getting to camp in the dark, soaked to the bone. My catchphrase quickly became

“What is this, RAAM?”

I’m certain Alex’s meditative yogi mind power got him through that initial phase of physical adaptation. He got dropped almost every day for the first few weeks, and would show up hours after the rest of us. One time he was so behind he couldn’t make it to the campsite and had to pitch his tent in front of a church. The priest came out and prayed over him. He told us this story enthusiastically the next day. The guy was manically positive.

I, on the other hand, was having a shaky time. I learned the hard way not to leave anything out overnight when there’s a chance of rain. The first morning I woke up in Washington Crossing, Pennsylvania, I found my bib shorts, jerseys, and towel—which I had hung to dry—soaked. I had also left out my seat bag, where I kept all of my clothes, which turned out to be only water “resistant.” From then on, I brought everything inside the tent.

We didn’t have a shower for three days, and our campsites had no potable water. I had to ride in a dirty chamois. I was a real downer to be around. I realized that bike racing and living in LA had turned me into a pampered prima donna with a good VO₂ max, accustomed to my scientific smoothie powders and regular manicures.

Another issue was my gear. I had started the tour on my carbon road-racing bike because it was the only bike I had that was ready to go. It was a bad choice. My bags rubbed my tires from lack of clearance. My back ached. Also, the cleat on one of my road shoes broke on a rocky road. After a week, I put a plea out on social media for a better bike. Specialized set me up with a Dolce Evo, an adventure bike with wider tires and a more upright position. I also switched to mountain bike shoes and pedals, and swapped my grumpy attitude for a more positive one.

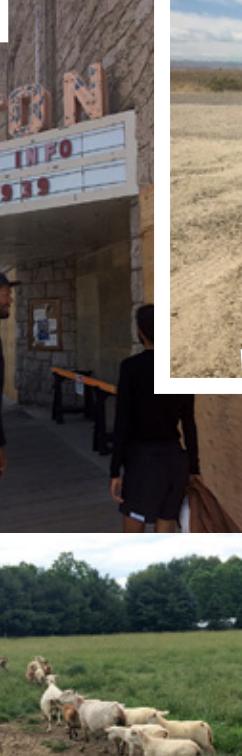
Fortunately, one good thing I had learned

- upload new content 2 weeks
- practice bike packing
- Buy headlamp, new tire
- get camera → daniel
- make 1st aid kit
- make tool kit
- memory cards
- change cranks
- vote
- put feet in mail

ALEX (LEFT), ERIC, AND I DOING THE MALASANA YOGA STRETCH ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD IN NEVADA. THIS WAS A REGULAR OCCURRENCE. ERIC WAS SO TIGHT HE'D SOMETIMES FALL OVER BACKWARDS DOING IT.



HONKY TONK





LYING ON SOMEONE'S LAWN IN MINNESOTA, TAKING A BREAK FROM THE WIND. THIS WAS WHERE JOHN FOUND US AFTER HE MOSEYED OUT OF HIS DITCH.

through bike racing was the ability to humble myself enough to learn from others. Over the next few weeks, I took all the tips I got, even the mansplaining.

Alex and I were growing close too. At first I was nervous about traveling for so long with someone I didn't know, but soon we were giving each other massages and eating off the same plate. Every morning, I would braid his hair before getting on the bike.

By the time we reached Pittsburgh a week later, I had surrendered to life on the road. I knew I had broken in a cathartic way when, one night in the dark, I accidentally touched poo, then ate stromboli with my poo hands and wasn't even bothered. I thought, "What is becoming of me?"



**RIDE
FORREST,
RIDE**

Because of the Forrest Gump format of the ride, with new leaders and people joining here and there, rider dynamics were always reshuffling.

There were cool, interesting people and a lot of weirdos—which Alex blamed on my Instagram following. Dave, a 72-year-old man on a recumbent, rode with us for two weeks! Another memorable character was John, a young teacher who joined us outside of Chicago. He looked like Tobey Maguire, and we literally picked him up in a field.

John was mysterious. He wore vintage kits from the '80s with blown-out chamois, to the dismay of his undercarriage no doubt. He was vegan and rode on Oreo cookies and peanut butter. One time he bonked and chugged a jar of salsa at a gas station. Another day, in Minnesota, we were getting blown off the road by 30mph crosswinds and thought we had lost him. We pulled over to rest in a patch of grass, and John casually emerged from a neighboring ditch,

chomping on a bunch of raw kale leaves.

It wasn't until one crazy long day on the bike, followed by a lot of beer, that John opened up and revealed he was headed to Seattle to meet up with his ex-girlfriend as a grand gesture. "Do you think she'll take you back?" I pressed.

"Probably not," he replied with a sad laugh.



THE MIDDLE AND A LITTLE TO THE RIGHT

For a month, we rode through real Middle America (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Dakota) and into the West (Wyoming and Idaho).

Coming from the progressive bubble of California, getting chased by angry dogs didn't scare me half as much as when I saw my first Trump campaign sign. My initial thought was that it must be satirical, like *Saturday Night Live*. But then I saw another one, and another. When the election results came in four months later, I didn't have the same disbelief as my friends. I already knew.

There were a few other jarring experiences too. At a vintage-car garage in Ohio, the owner kindly invited us in to use his bathroom—where I encountered a poster: "Top 10 Reasons Men Prefer Guns Over Women." (Number one: "You can buy a silencer for a gun.")

But what made a bigger impression on me was the generosity and hospitality we experienced in the Midwest. People would sometimes offer us a place to stay before we even asked them. They let us use their washing machines, and cooked for us.

One of my favorite memories was from Idaho. At a convenience store, I struck up a conversation with a former touring musician named Joe. He said we could stay at his place on the Snake River that night and gave us directions, telling us to look for the sign that says, "Joe's Place."

During our hot, six-hour slog through a headwind, we started fantasizing about Joe's Place. Eric Brunt, our ride leader for the last chunk of the trip, thought it was a restaurant. Zack, a tall and handsome photographer who had joined us in Minnesota, imagined it was a giant mansion.

We were all wrong. Joe's Place was like that one neglected house on the fancy street that's bringing down everyone's property value. The "Joe's Place" sign was a

paper plate duct-taped to a stick.

Our mansion dreams may have been quashed, but Joe won our hearts with his charming hospitality. After eating the fresh-caught, beer-battered fish he made for us and making an impressive dent in the Keystone Lights in the cooler, we splayed out on an air mattress in the middle of his living room. We were watching *Dirty Dancing*, when I heard the loud strum of a guitar. Joe had plugged in his amp and mic and begun to play songs about fishing on the river, while “I’ve Had the Time of My Life” competed in the background.

Lying on that air mattress, on top of an old pilled-up blanket, I couldn’t have been happier. It wasn’t the luxury items in life

that brought me joy, I realized. It was the feeling of accomplishment, and new bonds formed with people.

At some point, Joe stopped playing and

announced blankly, “I’m f’d up, I’m going to bed.” Shortly after, Eric took the air mattress, Zack passed out on the couch, and I went to find the room Joe had told Alex and me to stay in. I wandered into the wrong bedroom, and found Joe lying in the dark, limbs hanging over a tiny bed he kept for when his granddaughter stayed with him. It hit me that he had given up his bed for us. I was touched, and overwhelmed with gratitude.

▼
JUST A COUPLE
DIRTY DOGS (ALEX
AND I) CHILLING
HARD BEFORE
HEADING INTO
YELLOWSTONE
PARK. WE HAD
RIDDEN 50 MILES
THAT DAY, STILL
HAD 60 TO GO, AND
WERE ALREADY
TOAST. I HAVE A
ROOT BEER IN ONE
HAND, AND ICE
CREAM IN A CUP
IN THE OTHER.



NOT SEXY (BUT HAPPY)

As the tour progressed, my actual appetite raged, while my sexual appetite shrank. I was so tired, I couldn’t even think about the act of sex. And bike touring was doing nothing for my looks. My skin, severely damaged from wind and sun, broke out in red, itchy blotches. I was dirty, my discolored jerseys looked like cut-up napkins, and my legs were hairy. The more time that went

by, the more I looked like Charlize Theron in *Monster*.

While lying on a picnic table at a rest stop in Yellowstone Park, I hollered at a motorcycle dude. He looked at me for a second and then turned his head. I got straight-up curbed. The guys lost it. It felt great to laugh at my own rejection. Living in LA, voted “#1 Look at Me City” 100 years in a row, it’s easy for evil thoughts about body image to seep into your psyche. Bike racing is also a sport that can put people on the verge of eating disorders, as riders seek the maximum power-to-weight ratio. It wasn’t hard to stay within my target weight range when I was training and eating healthy.

But on this trip, I spent about \$2,000 over two months on gas station food. The guys lost weight. I became muscle covered in fat. I was upset about this at first, but after a while, I realized how much stronger I was. My face wasn’t all hollowed out, and I had an ass for the first time. Letting go of caring about my appearance was freeing. Besides, relying on looks will get you only so far in life, and I’ve passed that age cutoff for LA. Thank God for my great personality!

By the end of the trip I was doing things I never would’ve imagined. In one journal entry, I wrote simply, “I bathe in a river and don’t give a shit. After all, we are all just animals.”



EVERYTHING WAS BEAUTIFUL

Sometimes nature would put on a show and take my breath away: the sunsets in Minnesota; the endless brown, dried wheat fields changing suddenly to bold-red clay rock formations in South Dakota; the waterfalls and pines in Lake Tahoe; a quadruple rainbow in Sundance, Wyoming.

Still, nothing tops the moment we crested the Bighorn Mountains in Wyoming.

We were climbing 30 miles and 6,500 feet on our loaded, 50-pound bikes. We passed rocks that were billions of years old, and eventually our chosen climbing speeds created a natural separation. I was alone about five miles from the peak, out of water, when an angel—a mountain biker with sprigs of lavender in his helmet—appeared. He gave me water and a friendly smile, and told me I wasn’t far from the top. As I rode away, **CONTINUED ON P. 94**



I Bathe in a River and Don't Give a Shit

CONTINUED FROM P. 52

emotions barreled me: relief that I was near the end of this ride; pride that I had set my mind to this silly goal and was accomplishing it. I was really seeing how strong my mind and body were, and what I was capable of beyond racing. I thought of the challenges I faced in the last year, but how I was still marching on, as tears stung my sunburnt cheeks. At the top, I caught my breath, waited for the rest of the guys, and looked over the snowcapped peaks, thinking, *life is beautiful*.

That night, Zack, Alex, Daniel from Search and State, and I inhaled seven pizzas, drank 16 beers, and fell asleep in a field outside a brewery in Ten Sleep, Wyoming. Red clay rocks formed a fortress around us. I got out of my tent in the middle of the night. I didn't have my glasses on, and when I looked up at the stars, they were big and blurry in a way I had never seen before. Even though it was due to my poor vision, it was magnificent.

TELL ME IT'S NOT THE END

We hit California 50 days after leaving New York. Early in the

trip, I had loaned Alex my extra pair of sunglasses, because he hadn't brought any. At breakfast the morning we were departing from Lake Tahoe, he handed them back. I told him to use them for the day but he looked at me with an expression I immediately understood. He wasn't coming with us. We were one week away from the end but he just couldn't do it anymore. I bawled, hugging him hard and soaking his jersey with tears.

Apparently he couldn't handle it either, because a day after the "breakup" I got a text from him saying he had made a huge mistake. He rode close to 250 miles in one day to catch up with us at the Golden Gate Bridge. When I saw him, I sobbed again. We were like home to one another.

Two hundred miles down the coast, though, our group finally imploded. It could've been mental exhaustion, or maybe we were just plain old sick of each other by then. Eric, Zack, and Alex were pushing the pace. But I wanted to procrastinate my return to society. For the first time, going off the back felt right.

We never really got to say goodbye. There

was an argument on the roadside, and people rode off reactively. We had planned to still meet at a campground in Monterey that night, but then I decided to stay in Santa Cruz with my friend Colin, who had joined us to ride the Cali coast. We never rejoined the group. Maybe it was better that way. Nobody needed to see me ugly cry again.

As we approached LA, I got excited to see my friends and family. My friend Lexi had set up a welcome-home party for me at her house. Riding down her street, I saw her standing in the middle of the road with my friend Heather, holding a homemade finish line for me. Next to them was my dad. As I rode through, he sprayed me with a bottle of champagne. Any tears I had left came out then.

NOW WHAT?

After the initial joy of having achieved my goal and being reunited with my friends and family, I settled back into my life and began to realize that the things I cared about before I left weren't as important to me anymore. Riding through poverty-stricken towns had made me extra grateful for what I have. Traveling so closely with other people gave me more compassion and empathy for others. And being so broken down physically and mentally left me with less self-importance.

Suddenly, the idea of spending so much time and energy trying to pedal a bike fast had lost its purpose to me. So I hit pause on racing and didn't renew my responsibility with my team.

This gave me more time to spend on my cycling comedy video series, "California Girls," (the episode "Tanlines" is in the International Bicycle Film Festival this year!) and start performing with an improv team, JUNK. Jumping on stage gives me the same rush of adrenaline as lining up for a bike race.

In April, I entered the 2017 California State Championship Road Race, just to test the sea legs. I hadn't done an interval in almost a year, but I ended up winning the title. Seems like happy Jen is fast Jen. While it reminded me that I still love racing, I'm enjoying remaining unattached to it for now.

I wanted to share the magic of this transformative experience, so I recently led a women's beginner bikepacking clinic that culminated in a night of wild campfire confessions. It's been great helping more people do something that scares the hell out of them too. I guess what you throw out into the world makes its way back to you. **B**